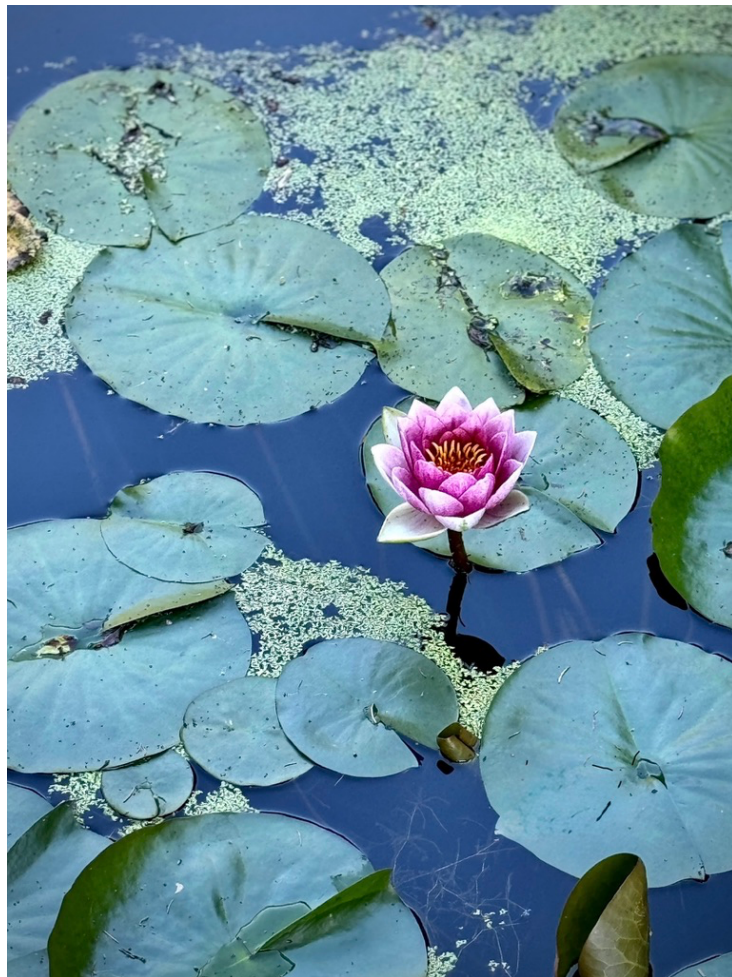


Island Writer

Zine

A LITERARY JOURNAL

of Vancouver Island and the Surrounding Islands
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Cover Art: *Water Lily – Japanese Garden, Gorge Park* by Margaret Lonsdale. I came upon this scene recently while walking through the Japanese Garden at Gorge Park. I was struck by the tranquil beauty of the water lily and the intricacy of its petals suspended there among the green pads. I call such experiences standing meditations. For a brief time, I thought of nothing else but being present in that peaceful space: an observer communing with the observed. It was a gift I attempted to capture in a photograph.

From the Editor

This is my second issue as Editor of *Island Writer Zine* scheduled for release online on the Victoria Writers' Society website in the fall of 2026. It will be followed by a print issue, to be released in December, containing a small selection of pieces from the 2026 Summer and Winter issues that the Editorial Team felt warranted highlighting. Clearly, not everybody's piece could be in the print issue as we deliberately made it small to reduce printing costs.

The web edition has advantages in that it can be more easily shared, is more accessible and therefore can be viewed by more people. A big advantage is that it also allows for much more artwork, and in colour, too. The link for the issue should be added to an author's resume.

This submission period was interesting in that, firstly, there was a substantial number of submissions (61), which is quite a number for our small organization. Secondly, there was a record number of Creative Nonfiction submissions (17), more than Fiction, making our CNF editor, Sage Strachan, very happy. She remarked that the quality was high and hopes that they keep on coming in the future.

There seemed to be no particular theme to the submissions overall; they touched on many topics, although there were several pieces rooted in memory, both personal and fictive. There were a few futuristic pieces, and some humour, a good mixture.

I just have one little quibble and that is that not all submitters read the Submission Guidelines and the Canadian Press Style "cheat sheet" which we crafted after the last submission period. These help guide the author when writing and make it easier for the volunteer editors when reviewing. If this volume of submissions continues, we cannot sustain the amount of time it takes to format pieces correctly and they will be returned to the author for correction and resubmission. This is similar to the process for most literary journals.

Thank you to all who submitted and I hope that you enjoy reading this great selection of pieces from members of the Victoria Writers' Society.

Valerie A. White
Editor, *Island Writer Zine*

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CREATIVE NONFICTION



Christine Havelka: *Dark-eyed Junco in snow*. Photography

THE NEW SCHOOL REPORT CARD

The New School for Ecological Gardening — Progress Report Card

Student: Jen

Teacher: Rose Gartner

Year: 2026

Dear Parent(s):

At The New School for Ecological Gardening, we want our students to develop an understanding of gardens as ecosystems and, with this perspective, to design and develop a visually pleasing garden using primarily native plants suited to the site.

A well-designed garden will support all manner of insects, including pollinators, such as bees and flies, and caterpillars, the larval form of butterflies and moths. Caterpillars are particularly important as they are the principal food for many songbirds to feed their young. Therefore, choosing a suite of plants that, as an ensemble, support both caterpillars and pollinators, both generalists and specialists, is desired. Native plants are best suited for these purposes.

The aesthetic appeal of the garden also is important, both in its overall presentation and in small details. This progress report is intended to inform you of Jen's progress toward both her garden creation goals, and to her own development as a learner and doer.

Overall Design

Gardens may take many forms, some more traditional, with featured plants and perennial beds, or as meadows, prairies, or even forests. In any particular location some forms will be easier to implement than others, owing to local variables, such as rainfall and temperature patterns. Jen has chosen to make a modified traditional form of garden, placing special emphasis on garden form, recognizing the size and shape of plants for creating garden spaces that elicit feelings of comfort and intrigue, that invite visiting and lingering. She states in her plan that she wants visitors to be drawn into the garden by its beauty, and when once inside to become entranced by the life there, the buzzing of insects and the activity of birds.

Jen's ability to visualize the intended outcome is excellent. She blends her own observations with reading about garden design. She clearly articulates her intentions. However, the progress of her garden toward her intended goal is hampered by Jen's sub-optimal effort in the garden. Jen's tendency to pick up books and get lost in her own head, rather than putting in the required time in the garden, slows her progress.

Subject Areas

Trees:

In ecological gardening, trees are among the most important plants. Owing to their large size and longevity, choosing the right tree can make a big difference for many years. The best tree choices will support hundreds of caterpillar species for decades, making an outsized contribution to the resulting garden ecosystem.

Jen clearly understands the importance of trees. She has made some excellent choices. Jen's project got a head-start when the municipality planted well-started Garry oaks on the boulevard.

She enclosed the front yard with trellis fences to keep deer out, creating the look of a courtyard outside the front door. In that "courtyard" she planted three Pacific crabapples on one side and a black hawthorn on the other. In time the front garden will be largely shaded. Jen has made less progress with trees in the back garden. After five years, Jen's project to grow domestic apples espaliered against fence has reached a point of giving up, just as the trees are reaching their desired form. Having spent many hours over several years, carefully pruning to create horizontal branches that will maximize fruit production, Jen has accepted that she may never be able to harvest ripe apples before rats and squirrels ruin the fruit. Given the urban location near a much-used baseball park, such pests are likely to be an insurmountable problem. Accordingly, Jen has decided to remove the espaliered apple trees, but to leave in place, for the time being, one free-standing apple, which may yield usable fruit.

Deciding to give up on a passion project can be difficult, but we applaud Jen's progress in learning how to quit when continuing no longer is the best choice.

Jen also planted hawthorns beneath an old cherry tree that still is living despite extensive trunk rot. In time the hawthorns will replace the dying cherry.

Jen has started several Garry oak seedlings from acorns, with the intention, as they grow, of thinning them to three trees. In time the resulting small copse will shade the west side of the house and yard on hot summer afternoons.

Trees assessment:

Jen has chosen excellent trees for supporting caterpillars: Garry oak (200 species); Pacific crabapple (181 species); hawthorn (98 species). Additionally, crabapples and the hawthorns produce attractive blooms in spring, fruit that birds eat, and colourful fall foliage. Garry oaks, owing to their open canopies, create a lovely dappled shade.

Jen demonstrates good understanding of how trees contribute to the whole, but progress to date is moderate.

Letter Grade: B

Shrubs:

Shrubs are Jen's weakest area. Jen has only recently recognized the importance of shrubs in gardens for both structure and ecological value. Some shrubs are particularly noteworthy for hosting large numbers of caterpillar species and providing bird nesting habitat.

The first shrub added was a June plum. Jen knew this plant as an attractive small shrub blooming in early spring beneath Douglas fir trees. Unfortunately, this plant is in full sun and has grown much too large for the intended design. The size, combined with the realization that June plums support only 10 caterpillar species, has prompted Jen to begin removing it. Its removal will allow the nearby hawthorn to better show as a garden feature.

Jen's next shrubs project was a "bird highway" hedge along a fence connecting the front and back yards. Although the idea is excellent, and small birds have indeed been using the hedge, including birds new to the garden (bushtits, a towhee and a ruby crowned kinglet), the hedge was poorly planned: too many plants too close together.

Originally, the hedge included a mix of mock orange, red-flowering currant and hazel, all native species. Only after the hedge was growing did Jen realize that although beautiful in spring

with its white blooms, mock orange supports only four caterpillar species, all of which use several other plants as well. Therefore, Jen has removed some.

The keystone plant in Jen's hedge is the native hazel, which supports 84 species of caterpillars. Hazel combines outstanding support for caterpillars with a plant that can be shaped, and even, if necessary, cut down, causing it to resprout. Such coppicing is a useful way of maintaining plants with excellent ecosystem function at a manageable size when they otherwise would grow too large. The hazels in Jen's hedge are becoming quite full: cutting back and shaping are due. Jen will need to be assertive with her saw and pruners, fighting her sometimes too-tentative nature.

Recently Jen added saskatoon berries, another keystone plant, to both front and back yards. Saskatoons support 90 species of caterpillars, are attractive in spring and fall, and support pollinators and birds. Jen reported seeing a red admiral butterfly laying eggs on a Saskatoon.

Shrubs assessment:

Jen is showing progress in developing her awareness of using shrubs in the garden, but has had to "course correct" several times. Her bird highway, a good idea as a concept, has suffered from inattention. The hedge's attractiveness will be improved when Jen shows more effort there. Recognizing which plants will underperform, taking steps to de-emphasize them, and adding better performers are good steps forward. More research ahead of time might have prevented some false starts, but Jen is adapting and learning.

Shrubs letter grade: C+

Flowering herbaceous plants:

Low growing herbaceous plants can make an important contribution to an ecological garden, despite low biomass. Some herbaceous plants are particularly important for both pollinators and caterpillars.

This has been the area of Jen's greatest effort. Jen's use of coastal strawberries as an extensive ground cover, in place of grass lawn, has been so successful that she is expanding the areas dedicated to it. Native strawberries support as many as 76 species of caterpillars, 10 of them specialists that use only strawberries. Additionally, the glossy leaves and red stems of coastal strawberries make them a particularly attractive ground cover.

Jen has developed "living carpets" of low-growing sedum around the front walkway. Sedums are attractive to pollinators when in bloom, and support a few caterpillar species, some of which are specialists.

Jen has established a sequence of flowering native plants in the front garden that is working quite well, from earliest blooming western buttercup, to fool's onion, woolly sunflower, native heuchera and red columbine, all to be superseded by entire-leaved gumweed. Gumweed grows tall and spreads, producing yellow "daisy" flowers highly attractive to pollinators, from mid-summer until frost. Gumweed is an unruly plant in the garden, but Jen is allowing it to grow in corners and borders where its size is acceptable.

Herbaceous plants assessment:

Jen has developed a collection of ground covers and flowering plants with excellent ecosystem potential combined with an attractive appearance.

However overall attractiveness of the strawberries, sedum, and heuchera areas is severely hampered by weeds, particularly thistles, which detract significantly from the attractiveness of the garden.

Letter Grade: B

Overall Assessment

Jen's garden ecosystem is developing well, showing an increasing variety of pollinators and birds. The proposed design is appealing, and the garden is clearly moving toward the intended form. However, Jen's tendency to let things go, knowing she can come back later to correct things, means that often-times the garden is not as attractive as it could be.

Overall Grade: B

DIVORCE HONEYMOON STYLE

“If it’s not sunny, I’m not getting married.”

That was the mantra that led up to our May 7 wedding in 1978. Perhaps John, my fiancé, should have taken this as a broad hint of our future life together and run, screaming, while he still had the chance. In his usual laid-back way, however, he assured me that the weather gods would, without a doubt, bow to my request and that we would be married as planned. He had no intention of letting me go on the whim of a dreary weather forecast. Propelled by his unwavering optimism, I continued the preparations for our wedding but stuck to my guns: no sun, no vows.

The day dawned perfectly clear and warm — an exceptional spring day. Indeed, it seemed that the weather deities intended this wedding to take place, and I had no desire to go against the dictates of the Cosmos. Moreover, I happened to truly love the guy. The whole idea of marriage scared me to death, but John seemed to be an exception to every marriage rule that I believed should be broken and buried under a huge mound of rock. If I could make this most flawed of institutions work, it would be with him.

Therefore, when 2 o’clock rolled around on that sunny Sunday afternoon, we — armed with the Universe’s approval — walked together down the short chapel aisle, as shafts of sunlight from the long, narrow skylights above bathed the simple stone altar ahead. Before friends and family, we vowed to *try* to be good and true to each other for the rest of our lives. It was the ’70s after all, and commitment was a nebulous concept.

The next morning, we left our hotel bright and early to catch the Coho ferry that would take us from Victoria to Port Angeles, in Washington State. I was exhausted from the hype and demands of the previous few months: the requirements of the second semester of my third year of university, the interminable details and decisions of wedding preparations, our search for a place to live as a newly married couple But now, a chance to rest. I spent the entire crossing scrolling through the collage of images in my mind from the day before: Father Leo placing his calming hand on mine during the ceremony; John and I singing a duet during Communion; my mother’s face at the reception as she looked down from the interior balcony of Father Leo’s home at the guests below; dancing to our favourite tunes, as we had so many times before in that same white-shag-carpeted living room; our best man trying to hide bottles of my dad’s potent homemade wine from my new father- and brother-in-law And super-imposed over all these memories, John’s gentle, clear eyes smiling at me, content and confident.

And as I re-lived all those special moments of the previous day, I wept.

Tears, sobs, snorting. In dizzying loops I went through the entire roster of crying manifestations. It was nothing I could control even though I knew how ridiculous I looked, how senseless it was. John simply held my hand and asked what was wrong, wondering what he had done.

How could I explain? A day I had dreaded, feared, tried to escape, a day I had to be talked into over and over again by John, by Leo, by my closest friends — had come and gone without a hitch. It had been a perfect day. And I had been moved, shaken to my core, by the

beauty and meaning of it. By the love. I hadn't expected the impact. At best I believed that at the end of the day I would be glad that it was over; that parents and my new husband would be satisfied with our "official" status; that John and I, having put this necessary ordeal behind us, having satisfied parental and societal conventions, could now continue as before. But it *had* meant something. The day had truly, unexpectedly, *meant* something, and I had been wholly unprepared for the wealth of feelings which had saddled me with this emotional hangover on our first day of married life.

And so I continued to cry — all the way to Port Angeles — amid the uncomfortable stares of the other passengers on the ferry and the varied, unflattering thought balloons jostling above their heads: *Has someone died? Has the poor young woman just lost a baby? Is she being kidnapped by the kindly-and-concerned-looking, deer-in-the-headlight-eyed young man? (Unlikely). Is he taking her to live in Utah, far away from friends and family???* Even as my tears flowed, I was aware of the spectacle I was providing. But still I cried.

The first week was one of discovery and of trying to rest from the ravages of wedding planning. It was a time for watching Washington, Oregon and then California roll by as we sang along to the hours of special music that John had recorded on cassette to mark the occasion. The soundtrack to our new movie, our new life. It was a time for exploring unknown streets in new cities, for walking into funky restaurants, holding hands, fingering our new wedding bands which felt so foreign, yet so right, on our fourth fingers. Lovers exploring a new world. And each other.

Eventually, we left the highways to pursue more quiet roads along the California coastline. In Carmel-by-the Sea we found a hotel not far from the beach and settled in for a couple of days. The next morning we were once more in the car heading down the Big Sur coast. It was a spectacular day. The sun-lover in me did somersaults of excitement at the prospect of walking barefoot on hot sand into a Pacific Ocean that would not lead to hypothermia and death in a scant few minutes as would our own Vancouver Island seawater.

The reality, of course, was significantly different. We stopped at several beaches along the meandering road south. At each stop, we were wind-whipped by stinging sand and forced to seek shelter in beach-log constructions built and left by previous sandblasted visitors. Under one such shelter we managed to consume — along with several handfuls of grit — the special picnic lunch we had brought with us. On another beach, I posed by an enormous cross erected in the middle of the sand for reasons unknown; we took it as a visual pun for the cross I would have to bear in my married life. Ha, ha! Two newlyweds, just having fun.

Eventually we turned back north toward Carmel. Upon our mid-afternoon arrival at the hotel, John needed to get out of the sun (he, being of pasty pallor thanks to his British ancestry) and went straight to our air-conditioned room for a nap. I, an olive-skinned Italian, deprived 10 months of the year of my life's-blood, headed for the beach. I was *not* going to miss out on any sun time. I lay on a blanket and read, napped and cooled off my feet in the bracing springtime waters of Central California. I was disappointed that I couldn't swim in the cold ocean, but was reconciled to the fact that I couldn't have swum in my home waters of Tuscany in early May, either. I shrugged and enjoyed what I could — the warmth and restorative powers of sunlight.

After a couple of hours I headed back to the hotel to shower and dress for dinner. John had decided we should splurge that evening and had picked an up-scale, romantic restaurant. When we entered, we saw a sleek grand piano on a raised platform in the center of the room. The

hostess led us to an intimate table for two, not far from the dais. We looked around, pleased with our surroundings, excitedly anticipating our special evening. As we sipped a cocktail and waited to order, the pianist played and sang lounge-y, easy-on-the-ears music carefully curated to put patrons at ease and to maintain the mood throughout the evening.

But it wasn't working for me. I did not feel at ease, and I'd been growing more on edge for the past hour. I didn't know what to attribute this to. After all, I had enjoyed my version of a perfect day: sun, beach and wonderful company. What was going on? Then, quite suddenly, while waiting for our appetizers to arrive, came the epiphany: with frightening clarity, I realized that our marriage was over. Of course. That was it! Why had I not been able to see that before? Why had it taken this long to understand that it had all been a mistake? What had we done! All the planning, all the worrying, all the loss of sleep as I tried simultaneously to finish an academic year and organize a homemade wedding All the beautiful food my mother had so lovingly prepared, the effort she had put into stitching my elegant wedding dress All the invitations John and I had personally, painstakingly written to over 100 people; the wedding vows we had carefully researched, composed and written out. All the trouble we had put Father Leo through, he who had so generously supported us with his time, his guidance, his friendship and the loan of his house. His faith in us.

All for nought. The wedding had somehow been a mistake, and our marriage could only fail. There was no other alternative. As tears rolled down my cheeks, I informed my freshly minted husband of six days that divorce was our only future.

John stared at me in disbelief. We had managed to survive the meteorological threat to the wedding, only to land in this new, unsavoury bog. He studiously attempted to draw out of me what my reasoning might be for this wholly unforeseen turn of events. What he got in response were more tears and the declaration that I was right, that going our separate ways was the only solution. On he tried and on I cried. It was of no use: the die had been cast, and our fate was sealed.

Eventually my tears subsided and we both made a show of picking unenthusiastically at our meals. In silence. Words seemed only to make things worse, especially in such a public space. As the mood music wafted painfully over us, we spoke not a word, both lost in our own sad, confused thoughts.

Later, in our hotel room as I changed for bed, I noticed a deep redness on my shoulders, back and arms, and cursed my great misfortune of having to add sunburn to a day already marred by early-onset divorce. Sleep was slow in coming and, when it did, was extremely fitful.

The next morning we packed and continued on to San Francisco. This was to have been the highlight of our trip, a city we had keenly looked forward to exploring together. We had decided to take the coastal road north — by all accounts a beautiful route — but as we began driving through fog the thickness of molasses, we realized that instead of being able to admire the ocean and coastline, we were going to have to fight just to stay on the road. At times it was a challenge to *find* the road. Newly bereft of my future and now of sunshine, sore and blistering from the sunburn, I sat in the passenger seat and wept silently. John, beyond caring by this point, tried to keep the car in the right lane.

After almost three hours, we made it to the outskirts of San Francisco. Our wretched feelings were deepened by the area in which we found ourselves: industrial, forbidding, grey. Upon spotting a roadside telephone booth, John parked the car and got out. In the booth, he stoically flipped through the tattered pages of the dangling telephone book, grumbling to himself about his lamentable predicament. Here he was, during what was supposed to be the best time of

his life, and what did he have? A red, puffy-eyed bride crying in the car and no place to stay; the two of us surrounded by grit and menace in an unknown city, waiting to be mugged. Or worse.

After several unsuccessful attempts, John managed to find and book a room at a hotel in the heart of Fisherman's Wharf. He returned to the car and, after consulting our map, drove us across the city. Still in the throes of despair, I didn't bother to note my surroundings or rejoice at finally being in a city that for years, I'd longed to visit.

At the hotel, we registered and brought our suitcases to our room. Deep inside my funk, I couldn't appreciate how lovely it was: spacious and clean, a king-size bed, and a wonderful view of Fisherman's Wharf. Perfect. I should have been thrilled. Instead, I shed my clothes, climbed painfully into bed and fell asleep.

I woke up a few hours later. Bright sunshine streamed in through the large windows, and I could see light dancing on San Francisco Bay, beyond the boats moored in front of the hotel. I turned around — a little less painfully now — and saw John sitting in an armchair on the other side of the room, keeping watch from that safe distance. I looked at those clear, green eyes I had loved so much for over three years and smiled. He smiled back. Cautious.

"Hi," he ventured.

"Hey, you. How long have I been sleeping?"

"About three hours." Still tentative.

"Wow ... I guess I needed that. But poor you — you must be so bored! I'll just take a quick shower and then we can go out while there is still some daylight."

John got up slowly and approached the bed. He sat down beside me and gingerly took my hand, which I left in his.

"But ... what about the divorce?" he stammered.

"Divorce?" And then it all flooded back to me — all the rumble-tumble of emotions I'd been riding for over a day. I could remember vividly what I'd felt, but not the reasons for it. That very real — almost physical — cloak of doom had been lifted, and I was back to normal. I could breathe again. Horrified at what I had put John through, I flung my arms around his neck and held him tight.

After a refreshing shower and change of clothes, I took my newly restored husband's hand and the two of us ventured out into the teeming streets of San Francisco. This time, at John's insistence, I was armed with plenty of sunscreen and a large, straw hat, the two items that we determined would be our best defense against another sunstroke-induced divorce.

ANDREW MOORE

ALL WASHED UP AT THE PENGUIN HOUSE

“While you are under my roof you do as I say.” This is what my exasperated father used to say not just to me but to all my brothers and sisters who had got to the age where we became desperate to lead an independent life. I was 19 and having been offered a place at an architectural school I had six months to wait to go to college. There I would have student and housing grants allowing independence at last. The only problem was that I needed independence now but had no source of income.

I had heard you could make good money working on daily contracts at the London Zoo. These jobs were nothing to do with looking after the wild animals but instead attending to the needs of the human sort in one of the 10 cafes and restaurants dotted around the zoo grounds. The day contracts were totally dependent on daily public attendance at the zoo which in turn was mainly dictated by the weather.

This involved making a superhuman effort to get up early in the mornings and cycle to the zoo in Regents Park in central London. Here I joined a whole queue of half awake, unemployed desperadoes and students waiting to be let into a courtyard just through the main entrance. We would wait for an official from the zoo to come out of his office, look at us, look at the sky, look at us again and then start picking a few who looked like favourites and then, at random, the rest of us. It took me three attempts and an unusually sunny day before I had the privilege of spending the whole day washing dishes in one of their “refreshment pavilions” as we were taught to call the rudimentary cafes.

I had heard that each café had equally difficult conditions but the “refreshment pavilion” next to the Penguin House had fewer visitors than the others, such as the Lion House and the Aquarium. I had always wanted to see the Penguin House as it was considered a masterpiece of architectural design. I asked if I could be allocated there when my name was called out. The opportunity to study the penguins and their home looked slim as I was put to work right away preparing for what my co-workers called the “public onslaught.”

My supervisor was a rather quirky teenage girl, slightly younger than me but seemed more mature because she was so serious and strange. She had clearly worked there before. She knew her way around and gave me a running commentary on how to set up my domain and prepare for chaos. “Sunny days are the worst,” she said. “So, look out.” For the first couple of hours hardly anything happened, just deliveries of supplies like milk, sandwiches, soups and cakes. After I had set up the round tables and chairs outside on the patio, I had time to sit in the sun and talk to my new supervisor. She was petite with very black hair shaped into a severe bob.

“Do you work here often?” I asked.

“Is this your pickup line? You have only been here a few minutes,” she quipped.

I laughed and tried again. “Do you ever get to see the animals?”

“Are you offering to take me to the zoo?”

Her responses to everything I said had a sexual innuendo.

When the public began trickling into the café, I was banished to my sinks to get ready for dirty teacups, teapots, glasses, water jugs, plates, cutlery — lots of it. There were two waitresses as well as my supervisor bringing me pile after pile of dirty crockery, which soon overloaded my system. After an hour the staff had run out of their cutlery and crockery stock and now needed my recycled clean ones, but unfortunately, before they had dried. I had to slow down my system,

stop my washing production and take up drying the still wet dishes to add to the pile of outgoing ones.

I had already had complaints from the waitresses that customer found the cutlery still wet. With extremely wrinkled fingers and increasing stress I sped up my system and started to cut corners in the process. This provoked a visit from my supervisor.

"I tried to tell you that it would be a ridiculously hard day, you are doing OK in the circumstances, but you are releasing the teapots before they are clean." The teapots were white porcelain, which were showing tannin stains after one wash. I thought I could get away with a rudimentary swish of the washing up brush but after three cycles the stain had built to a visible brown patch, not that anyone other than the waitresses or I could see it. My supervisor told me that it was zoo management policy for all crockery to appear as new.

"Look, I had better give you a hand or we won't be able to keep up with the pace." She rolled up her sleeves, took over one of my sinks and started on one of the enormous piles of dishes.

"You just have to focus, be thorough and don't skimp or you will have to start again."

I was still cleaning tannin from teapots when a zoo official came to collect the money at the end of a bonanza refreshments day. He wanted to know why I was still working, probably suspecting that I was slow or just lazy. My supervisor told him it was not my fault and that the hiring manager should have employed many more people on such a sunny day.

I was so impressed with my loyal, sexy supervisor. The next few days were sunny and busy but nowhere near as my first day's initiation and baptism into dirty crockery. She often helped me out, whether I needed it or not. I never knew something so mundane as washing up dishes together could be so sexy. I needed to give her a sign, hopefully not too obvious a one, that I was falling in love with her.

"Did you hear about the woman who started by sinking into her lover's arms but ended up with her arms in his sink? I wonder if the idea works backwards too. She starts with her arms in his sink and ends up sinking into ... " I let her work out the rest for herself.

"I wouldn't hold your breath in that department," she said, as she flicked soapy water at me.

Typically, emotionally, she did not give me an inch. Typically, I took it that she was giving me a mile. Sometimes we had time to sit around and talk. I found out her name was Alec. I would have to remember to avoid calling her Smart Alec, even though she was. I was becoming totally captivated by her and her strange ways.

By the end of the week, the weather had changed to cold and cloudy with plenty of showers; even Alec was not picked for work. We were stranded in the zoo courtyard waiting to go home when I remembered our first conversation.

"Can I take you to see the animals?" I said.

"Why not? Now that we are in, we can go straight through the turnstiles without paying." She said this as if saving money was the deciding factor, not the chance of spending the day with me. I had a list of animal houses I wanted to see, all designed by famous architects. It was when I was showing her the Elephant House designed in the "brutalist style" that she said: "Are you going to give me a lecture on each animal house's architecture? I am not sure I want to hear about wild animals getting better accommodation than most people living in this country's substandard homes."

"No" I said. "But can I kiss you instead."

She got hold of my jacket lapels and pulled me toward her. “Go ahead, I thought you would never ask!”

We kissed again in the aviary, where I didn’t tell her that Lord Snowden, Princess Margaret’s husband had designed it.

We even kissed in the pouring rain at the deserted Penguin House whose café was closed but where I did show her the beautifully curved sloping paths enabling the penguins to waddle and slide from their living quarters down to their pond. She clearly was not listening, as she unzipped her jacket, pulled up her blouse and flashed her bra at me. In those brief seconds I noticed that her bra was unexpectedly lacey, almost frilly, a side of herself she had not “exposed” before. Had she anticipated this moment? Had she bought it especially for me? Unlikely, but I could only hope. A hope well placed because of what she said next.

“Architect, would you like to see my etchings?”

“I definitely would. Where are they?”

“At home. We should go there now, or we will drown here.”

She lived with her mother, who she said was never at home during the day as she had a high-powered job working for a workers’ union in the centre of town. We arrived at a large council estate toward the end of the Northern Line. Her apartment was on the fourth floor of a block of flats built of brick and concrete surrounded by nine other identical blocks. As we climbed the flights of stairs, I told her that these days you can’t build family accommodation over three floors without an elevator — especially important for the elderly and children.

“I’ll face that problem when I get there as I am not expecting to have children or to get old.”

I could never tell whether she was joking or not.

We had no problem taking all our clothes off once we entered her apartment since we were soaked to the skin. She put all our clothes in a dryer, and we took towels with which to dry each other.

Making love in the afternoon seemed to me not only a luxury, but a bit subversive, as if we were really meant to be somewhere else. It felt as if we were kids skipping class. At least I could say that my supervisor approved. I was never so pleased to see the pouring rain that gave us our opportunity. We thought it a good idea for me to leave before her mother got home from work so that there would be less explaining to do.

“Hey! I never got to see your etchings,” I said as I was leaving.

“Then you had better come back tomorrow. And the next day!” she shouted down the public staircase.

The next few weeks I prayed for sleet and snow and hurricanes so that we could be sure that we would not be chosen on the zoo work line but could spend the whole day together. She liked to re-enact her work role as kitchen supervisor in our new intimate relationship.

“You just have to focus, be thorough and don’t skimp or you will have to start again.”

She laughed so loudly I am sure the neighbours could hear us. I was smitten all over again.

Her etchings weren’t etchings at all but strong charcoal drawings on huge pieces of art paper. It’s as if she had drawn the lead outlines of a stained glass window but without the colourful glass. They were as severe as her hair style and as complex as her character. She opened up about her private life, saying that she was not academic, but always did well in art, but had never had the confidence to properly apply to an art school; and anyway, did not want to be strait-jacketed into the latest arts school fads.

“Hence my job at the zoo with little or no future,” she laughed at the contradiction.

She had approached an arts school in central London which had given an encouraging response. All they were waiting for was a portfolio of drawings on a theme of her choice.

“What about the animals at the zoo?” I suggested.

“That’s not very healthy is it, drawing depressed animals in captivity that will never see their natural habitat again.”

“Exactly, that could be your theme!”

By the time I left that day I could see that she was warming to the idea. She did take time to draw “captive animals” and produced a powerful set of ironic drawings. They all had the same feature, black, vertical bars covering the whole page through which you could see exquisitely drawn frolicking animals, as if in the wild, unaware of their bars. She said her creations were a metaphor for all of humanity too. I was glad to see her deliver them to her school.

This idyllic summer had to come to an end. I had suddenly to sign into my new architectural college and find somewhere to live, now that I had steady money in the form of a tuition and living expenses grant. An earlier girlfriend asked if I would like to move into her parent’s basement in central London. I would have my own entrance. She had been offered a university place in Oxford and as her older sister had recently left too, her elderly parents were feeling bereft. I jumped at the chance as her house was walking distance to my new college. We took the opportunity to fan old flames between us before she left.

I had heard that Alec had been offered a place at the art college to which she had submitted her portfolio, and I asked if she would like to meet.

“I’ve got a new boyfriend,” she announced. “I wasn’t going to wait for you forever.”

“I was only away a month.”

“That was forever. I can meet you at your college.”

I could see that my fellow students were impressed as I introduced my stylish companion to them when Alec came to see me. When we reached the studio, she gasped.

“What are you doing with a drawing of my apartments on your wall and what’s that circular tower doing by the staircase?”

I explained that the tower enclosed an elevator to all the floors and was surrounded by a slide that you could helter-skelter down to the ground. “I got that idea from you, why should penguins have all the fun?”

“I can see that you will have a long and interesting life,” she said as we kissed on the cheeks before she left.

I couldn’t resist telling her that new improvements at the Penguin House proved to be literally too abrasive for the penguins’ feet and they all got “fungus feet” and had to be removed to another site. The zoo had replaced them with a water feature.

“Do you mean that it was not just us that got washed up at the Penguin House, but the penguins too?”

ROBERT BIRCH

JULY 1980

I peeked over the top of the abandoned CN railcar. Me and the LeCroix brothers air guitaring “Torpedo Girl”, we pranced around like wannabe musicians from the rock band, KISS. I pulled them to the edge to see Billy’s bare arse sticking out from under the caboose pretending to be Gene Simmons between Sharon Clarke’s legs. “Smelled like fish,” Billy said later. My last thought of Billy McLaren was, “Your younger brother has an even mousier head full of rotten teeth.”

Unsupervised kids learn survival skills early; this and how to get in and out of trouble. I was a young fey Robin Hood eager to escape the new sterile, the parentless village of suburbia. Urchins of the late ’70s, left to our own cul-de-sac eddying boredom and guinea pig subdivision intrigue, we spent our summers slurping daily lunches of chemical-orange Kraft dinner noodles floating atop pools of Heinz ketchup from Crazy Daisy Corelle bowls. Travelling as a pack of bald-faced, unchecked testosterone, we’d scamper down to our makeshift fort slapped together with an old farmer’s rotting castoffs to make-believe battle demons looking remarkably like our plastic-wrapped parents. I once leapt from a wooden platform like a future ballet star, toes-pointed, past splitting future, to land full glory onto my right foot where that upright nail had waited for the past four rusty decades to pierce through the sole of my hand-me-down Woodward’s brand runner. I screamed like the devil Herself. “Idiot!” my brother said. Peter, a year wiser and immune to my hysteria, half carried me to the neighborhood on-call nurse, Mrs. Gross. “Quiet now. Lie back. Put your foot in the air. Let me see . . . You’ll need a tetanus shot.” It was the onset of a lifetime of pleasure’s pursuit, resulting in bio-chemical interventions.

On less bloody days, wearing nothing but cutoff jeans, we would dash through our very own Sherwood Forest, bounding through its maze of staghorn sumac and white pine saplings, nodding in passing, not to ignore our cache of buried treasure both found and stolen, down wild paths worn familiar, past my first wizard’s staff secreted away inside the trunk of a cedar tree hanging over an appearance of a too calm undercurrent, we’d break out into an open rush of air to stand before the boom of a 1.6 megawatt-producing hydro-electric dam. Built in 1890, replaced in 1920, defunct by the early ’80s, it still boasted a barrage of river, the Otonabee, meaning “beats like a heart,” — our daredom for every indulgence, delivering us from our every unmet need. We cautiously slid through the rattle of a fallen section of fence, anticipating how water can pound us into the shape of freedom. Deaf to the bellows of the adult world, we snuck along the cracked cement cutoff wall to then hurdle our young bodies out of time. For mere heartbeats of pure abandon, we soared — barely long enough to get gangly arms wrapped around ganglier legs, tucked in, chin down, “Dive bomb!” — riptide sucked under, head to heels tossed, empty to all but breathlessness, to shoot out like a strawberry pop tart a quarter of a mile down river, adrenaline-sugared and dishevelled with joy.

My first near death experience was the most erotic. This summer of 13, I almost drowned but was saved by a young man, all of 16. He must have been visiting his grandpa across-river living in the dandruff-white house, equally flaky Kelly green trim, history’s wooden shack holding back the riverbank; squeezed between the new highway gas station and old world European bakery overly frequented by my stout immigrant oma. Seeing me splutter to the top only to get yanked down again, my teenage hero jumped in to swim crosscurrent to rescue me. His bronzed pectorals and biceps held my head above water. He left the rest of me in the middle

of the ten-minute-wide river on a long, narrow sandbar once he saw I was going to be stupid OK again. “You, OK?” He smelled of the Otonabee. “Are you, OK!”— a torrent of adrenaline and hormones, I just looked; still feeling the drag of his choke hold, him standing me upright, labourer’s hands to shaking shoulders; sun burst droplets pouring from his hair; trickling down the line of his jaw, cascading along the rise and fall of his peach-haired chest, pooling in the moat of his belly button, proud, before spilling over to rejoin the fast-moving swirl around our submerged hips

Overcoming fear by necessity, I was buoyed up by the intensity of encountering two primal teachers, Sex and Death, neither of which claimed me that day. Capsized, they left the greenwood of me to drift downriver. Aware of nothing but the heaving of my chest, I dog-paddled back to shore. I peeled myself out of the river.

I spent those last days of summer alone with feet submerged in the water along an eroding bank; winter had made a cubby hole of a beach, as if, out of which, I could more cautiously reemerge. A dawning awareness warming from pelvis to the chill of the skin’s surface; the onset of an early autumn, poplar leaves fluttering, shifting breezes always a sign, everything aching to catch a glimpse of my saviour; echoes of, “Be careful next time,” the last he spoke into my silence.

I dried my feet on my white tube socks and slipped them into my new, too white, slightly too big, green trimmed Adidas. Scuffing them along the bank, I turned to walk away before stopping to imprint him on my back. I raised my hands as if to caress the river breeze, as if I could root and sway here forever; but instead made a more final, sharper gesture. I never returned. Within months, I ran away to the theatre to find my own band of merry friends, confident enough to claim and stand at the helm of my own travelling roadshow.

THE PITS

“Life is a fairly well-written play, except for the third act.”

— Tennessee Williams

Prologue

In May 2014, at a celebration of the hundredth anniversary of the Victoria High School building, I visited the school with two of my sisters. There we attended a skit performed by students of the school, who enacted a group of students in a classroom of 1914. In the skit, one of the students, Mabel M., had a crush on a boy who had gone off to the War.

My husband had just finished writing our family genealogy, and I remembered Mabel was the name of my grandfather’s youngest sister. I whispered excitedly to my sisters that Mabel M. was our great-aunt. None of us had ever known her; she’d died before any of us were born.

Act 1

“Don’t go near the pit, Mamie!” Mabel’s mother called as she went out the door.

Every day before she went outside to play, her mother said the same thing. For as long as Mabel could remember, they’d lived beside a gravel pit as deep as a three-storey building. Because she was a little bit of a brat and always up to some devilment, and because it was forbidden to her, she could feel the pit pulling her toward its perilous edge. There she would look down into its awesome depth, hoping to see the fires of Hell that she’d learned about in Sunday School.

She was always a little disappointed to see that instead it was filled with muddy ponds. When school was out, the boys would play in the ponds on wooden rafts they’d made. It looked so much fun that she asked them if she could play, too. But boys, being boys, said no. It was for boys only. It was the first of many times she would feel the sting of being a girl.

Mabel was the youngest child in a family of eight children. The oldest, her sister Jennie, was 14 years older and almost a second mother to her. When Mabel started to go to school, Jennie had already graduated. She worked as a children’s nurse and then married when Mabel was 9 years old.

Mabel loved school. When she was little, she went to the little wooden Spring Ridge School. Then, when she was older, she proudly made the long walk with her brothers and sisters to Girls Central and Victoria High School. They’d skirt around the great pit and walk down to the end of Fernwood Road where the big brick schools were located. Her favourite subjects were literature and history, but she found arithmetic difficult. She loved sports as well. She played field hockey and basketball. She wanted to be a teacher, and Jennie encouraged her even though everyone else in the family thought she had ambitions above her station. Mabel’s father looked after horses at the Victoria Transfer Company, and they lived in the working-class neighbourhood of Fernwood, beside a gravel pit no less. Who was she to have ambitions?

It was not a very happy homelife. Mabel’s father was difficult to live with and things were so bad that her older brother Jack left home when he was 19, went to Nebraska, and never came back. When she was 14, the family moved a few blocks away from their house on Vining

to one on Pembroke Street. This new house was beside another pit where gravel had been excavated to fill in the James Bay mudflats in order to build the Empress Hotel.

The pit beside their old house was about to become the site of a new high school. The construction company of Mabel's Uncle John was in charge of building, and if all went well, it would be built before Mabel graduated and she could attend. Every day on her way to school, Mabel walked by the construction site and watched the progress. If it seemed to be going too slowly, she would prod her uncle to hurry it up.

The building was finally completed, and the high school opened for students in March, 1914, just in time for Mabel to complete her high school there. One of the first things she did in the new building was to take part in a debate with the Portia Society, the girls' debating club. Mabel argued that "moving pictures do more good than harm." Even though she lost the debate, movies would become a lifelong passion for Mabel. She had joined the club to improve her public speaking, which she would need as a teacher, because Mabel had not given up her dream.

She was only in the lovely new building for a few short months, as she graduated in June of that year. With the help of her parents and some of her older siblings who were already working, enough money was found for Mabel to enroll in the brand new Provincial Normal School, situated in the Young Building. Mabel had to take a streetcar to get there and the family had only enough money to pay for one year's tuition, which meant that she received a third-class certificate enabling her to teach only in a rural or small-town school in British Columbia.

Act 2

As the train travelled into the mountains, Mabel looked down and saw a "pit," a valley larger and deeper than she'd ever seen before. She was on her way to Kimberley, a tiny new town where a lead-zinc mine was being built. It was far from home and situated in the southeast corner of the province near the Rocky Mountains. To get there, Mabel traveled by ship to Vancouver and then by train. She'd never been so far from home before and she was all alone. As the beautiful mountain valley stretched out before her, she could scarcely express the excitement she felt at this new adventure.

The town high in the mountains was very different from Victoria: it was dry and cold in the winter. But the worst of it was that she was lonely and knew no one there. Friends and family were far away. With children of all ages in one classroom, it was difficult to keep them all busy and actively engaged. When she wasn't teaching in the schoolhouse, she was preparing the next day's lesson. At the end of the year, she was reassigned to a school in Field.

Field was an even smaller town even higher in the mountains and closer to Calgary than it was to Vancouver. It was a railway town with half of the property owned by the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway). This time Mabel stayed for three years, and each year became easier until she felt a little more at ease. She had lesson plans for every grade now and didn't need to spend so many hours preparing for classes. She realized she was a good teacher, especially with the students who were having difficulty. She understood them because she'd had to study hard herself in school to keep up with the bright students so she could attain her goal of being a teacher.

After three years, Mabel felt she needed a new challenge, and she applied for and received a position in Revelstoke. This was another railway town, but larger and with more opportunities. In addition to teaching, she had an active social life: dating, taking long walks, dancing, going to movies, playing golf and tennis. She belonged to the Canadian Club and was an active member of the PEO Sisterhood (Philanthropic Educational Organization), becoming a

chaplain. The Sisterhood's goal to promote educational opportunities for women was something that Mabel felt very strongly about. She thought of her older sisters back home who'd had menial jobs and then married and had children.

Mabel was not averse to the idea of marriage. She became engaged to a railway engineer several years older than her. But he was a Roman Catholic and neither of their families would have approved of the match and so a date for the wedding was never set.

Act 3

Mabel was standing at the front of the class writing on the board. In the middle of a word, she forgot what she was writing. She stood a moment, trying to remember, but nothing came to her. She walked back to her desk, but her legs weren't moving properly. In the middle of a step, she tripped, falling toward the desk. She hit her head on the corner of it. She lay there a moment, wondering what was happening to her.

"Your forehead is bleeding, Miss M.," one of the students said.

She said something, but the students just stared as if they didn't understand.

"I'll go get the principal," another student said.

Strange things like this were happening almost every day now. Just the other day, the principal had asked her if she was drunk. She couldn't walk straight and sometimes slurred her words. The doctors didn't know what was wrong with her. They told her to take a medical leave to recover. She took a month off and then came back, but it didn't get any better. The end of the school year in 1933 was also the end of her teaching career.

Her heart full of grief and anger, Mabel went back home to live with her mother. But after two years, her mother had a heart attack and died. Her sister Jennie found an apartment for her. Mabel tried, but she couldn't live on her own. For a while, Jennie took her in, but Mabel, so unlike herself, was abusive with the children. She couldn't understand what was happening to her. She went to stay with her brother William in Vancouver. But he too could not care for her, so she came back to Victoria and stayed at the Balmoral Hotel on Douglas Street.

Finally, in 1940, she ended up at the Lebanon Nursing Home on Yates Street. There, she was described as "irritable and subject to temper tantrums in addition to her grimaces... purposeless arm movements and irregular, hesitating speech." Also, she was documented as "discontented and rebellious."

Of course she was. All of her dreams had slid away from her. She had been so proud of her independence and her accomplishments. Now, she was an invalid and completely dependent on others and no one could tell her why. She wanted to die.

Mabel stood on the edge of the windowsill and looked out. It was the pit her mother had warned her about. But now, she would defy her mother. She would not be afraid of falling. Mabel jumped. The "pit" disappointed her again. It was only the second floor, so all she did was break her wrists. But the nursing home had had enough of this crazy woman. She was committed to the provincial mental asylum, Essondale in Vancouver. Her oldest brother Robert signed her committal papers. She arrived at the asylum in 1940 with one suitcase, a small black change purse containing \$3 in cash, and a fur coat from the Hudson's Bay Company valued at \$100.

At Essondale, Mabel was finally diagnosed with Huntington's Chorea. It was a small relief to know her disease had a name and she was not to blame for it. But there was no cure and she would slowly grow worse. She tried not to think about it. A few of her siblings sometimes visited her — the ones who lived in Vancouver, William, his wife Euphemia and her sister Kate. Her sister Jennie came as often as she could all the way from Victoria and cared for her as if she

was her own child. The others never came, and she knew they were ashamed of her for living in an insane asylum just as they had once been proud of her for being a teacher.

Five days before Christmas 1947, Mabel again stood at the precipice of a great pit where she fell once again. This time, she never came back.

Epilogue

Mabel M. was my grandfather's sister. In 2025, another Mabel M. was born. I am her grandfather's sister. I pray that the play of her life, yet unwritten, has a happier ending.

BILL ENGLESON
GRAD GUIGNOL

The Mid 1990s in Active Pass

I last saw Katie in the flesh sometime in the mid 1990s. It's hard to pin down the date. My wife and I were coming back from our cabin on Mayne Island, and Katie boarded at Galiano, the last stop before the Lower Mainland. Mind you, this was almost 30 years ago. And roughly a further 30 years after she was my Grade 12 graduation date.

As I watched her sitting three aisles over, it struck me that she had retained her slim shape and her self-assured poise. I also saw a few lines in the corners of her eyes. Crow's feet, I supposed. Interior light can perplex. Her not quite aquiline nose remained a pleasant feature. And her smile; I remember dreaming about that smile long after we were an item. As I took her in for a while, there in the forward ferry lounge, trying not to get caught staring, but recognizing that I was peering at her through the lens both of the callow 17-year-old I once was, and, perhaps, the callow almost 50-year-old I had become, I was reliving that youthful time with misty eyes.

Mostly, I was picturing a simpler time, an artless yet devastating interval, hearts being shredded by love's innumerable agonies, *our* mutual inability to master being young and in love. *My* inability for sure.

Finally, I couldn't stand my self-generated suspense and said to my wife, "*I see an old friend ...* ." Hedging our relationship bets, she stated, "*Well then, go ... say hello.* "

Easier said than done I thought. Katie and I had not parted well. That's not quite true. I was adrift then, failing Grade 12, and, in my descent, joined the Canadian Army. She didn't quite say she would wait. But she didn't quite not.

I bucked up and walked over to her, "*Katie?* " I queried, just in case I had only imagined it was her.

She looked up, smiled, offered a hand to shake, said, "*I thought it might be you.* "

"You'd be right... "

And there it was. Two old acquaintances briefly reuniting. We exchanged up-to-date curriculum vitae — she owned and operated a business of sorts on the Island, was happy in life and happy in love. I also shared that I too was in love but ran nothing but my middling social services career.

She had a daughter.

I was childless.

We both conceded that it was good seeing the other and that life was just jimdandy. I returned to my wife, the ferry docked, and the next time I would hear of her was the announcement of her death.

May 21, 2022

I thought about all this — Katie, the vanished years — as I initially planned both the bones of this essay and the day's adventure: venturing outside one spring day to start a bonfire. It was an approved burn day. The environment would tolerate smoke that day, according to the B.C. Ventilation Index Interactive Map.

We had ample blowdown that past year, twigs, limbs, branches that needed disposal. Most had fallen victim to a series of blustery storms, an increasingly vexed Mother Nature. Global Storming if you will.

I was procrastinating about the fire. Later, I googled her obituary again and captured the link. I have done this several times since. She had just turned 72 when she had died back in 2019. The obituary had described a marvelous woman — mother, world traveller, excellent cook, adventurer, writer — so much more.

I was immersed in the memory of her. I didn't want to abandon it, abandon her, the memory, what little there is of it for me.

I was 75 that spring.

As I prepared the fire, more memories ignited.

I'm not sure why I mention all this other than it is all fact.

Spring, 1964

I have written before about one incident, or maybe I have just remarked on it to others, or maybe I had thought to note it but the conditions of the telling never seemed quite right. We were hiking by the Nanaimo River. Hiking. Petting. Playing. In the bramble, a tangling of adolescent trysting. The sun was shining fiercely so we rested, exhausted in our swimsuits for we must have been swimming in the sweet flowing water, cool but inviting. Suddenly I saw it, an orangish demon, stuck just below her left breast. "Christ, what is that?" I yelled. "What?" Katie yelled back. "That," I said, pointing. She could barely see it, went to feel it and I screamed, "Wait ... " and for some reason I remembered what it might be though I couldn't remember ever having seen one.

"It's a friggin' tick"

And there we were, mostly naked, me touching her tender breasts, soft, small, the tick clearly opposed to any successful human extrication hijinks.

May 21, 2022

I began to assemble my fire paraphernalia that day: newspaper, a bag of dry scrap wood I'd saved, a few dead branches, cardboard, matches, an aging wheelbarrow

The day before, I'd had my first physical in over two years. Covid had seemed a good enough reason not to have the annual checkup I had religiously pursued over the years. The health system had enough challenges during the pandemic without me making my posterior available for a prostrate probe. My blood pressure though was high. A new wrinkle for me. I had embraced smugly a much earlier physician's comment that I had the blood pressure of a Japanese fisherman. Now, my current doctor was suggesting that I consider buying a blood pressure monitor.

I gave that some serious thought.

As I remembered that medical recommendation, the crows, or the ravens, — *who can tell the difference? I surely couldn't* — big beasts, anyway, who seem to be everywhere on our property, were yakking their "*Yak! Yak! Squawk!*"

What is the best way to describe that annoying, grating bleat?

Squawk, probably.

For some reason, I began to feel woozy. This was my first real fair-weather burn day that year, and maybe I was feeling my age. Playing the wobbly age card does come in handy when I am dallying, taking on a task that I would prefer to not do.

The memory of the tick rushed in with the swirling smoke.

Spring, 1964

I reached over to her, just under her breast. My fingers grazed the soft warmth of the exposed globe. Thumb and finger squeezed the intruder. I commenced to yank it out. Tried my damndest. My fingers were fat, even then. She started to whimper. Scared, I suppose. I tugged and had partial success.

"Did you get it out?" she hollered.

"I think so ... most of it anyway"

"Most ... ?"

We got dressed and headed home. She was distraught. I was feeling inept. Later, she called. Her parents had taken her to the hospital to remove the last little bit of the insect. All was apparently well.

May 21, 2022

The fire had started easily. A bit of old newspaper, a garbage bag of wood shavings hoarded from last year's wood delivery, visiting nephew wheelbarrowing oodles of cones, withered blackberry tendrils, broken and dried branches from the congestion of trees on our two and one-half acres. After a prolonged torrentially wet spell, it was a surprisingly sweltering day. The nephew's bicycle-riding Kermit the Frog windvane was twirling gently on the upper deck, smoke wisping straight up doing a jiggery-pokery dance into my eyes. I stoked the blaze and then rested on the small slope under our gnarled crabapple tree. From my plastic chair under the tree, I looked through a bent rectangle limb that framed the snow-capped mountains across the Sound.

I felt a bit like Brando's Don Corleone in his garden toward the end.

I should not have been having morbid thoughts about myself.

But I was.

Rae

As the bonfire burned, smoke funnelling skyward, I plummeted into wonky memory trying to remember, or forget, which of them, Katie, or Rae, I had first asked to my Grad. Katie and I had been on hiatus, for reasons I do not recall, so I had asked the next most electrifying girl I knew.

Rae.

Tawny-skinned Rae.

Cigar-smoking Rae.

Poetry-writing Rae.

I had refashioned her in a work of fiction recently. It was memoir without being labelled as such. It was not all truth. I hoped, though, that my admiration for Rae had come through. She lives south of me now. Or so I think. A retired teacher, and certainly a person with almost no social networking presence.

A private person.

In her early forties she had been arrested. Drugs! She and her partner.

A snippet of old news I once stumbled upon.

She was adventurous.

Her dalliance with the legal system didn't seem to have impacted her career in education.

I found that comforting.

Grad, June 1964

For a few weeks after the tick incident, Katie and I had drifted apart. That's how I remember it. We'd met in September of the previous year. I had spent that summer in Europe and morphed from a gangling adolescent into a pseudo-sophisticated gangling world traveller.

Full of myself.

In my swelled head.

At the same time, I was a questioning youth seeking renewed faith.

I had lost what little I had.

I was a failed Mormon.

I sought out fresh experiences. There was a Baptist church a block down from Katie's house. That's where we first saw the other in a different light. We danced to the Beatles. Their music had just arrived in Canada.

It was all so exciting.

Then the pause.

Enough that my pending graduation ceremony required a new companion.

Hence, Rae.

And then Katie and I were quickly recharged. I now had two dates to Grad. I froze in cowardly inertia. Days went by. I avoided Rae. Providentially, she was made of sterner stuff, cornered me at school, asked, "What gives?" That was that. I whimpered, apologized, scurried away.

It was the last time we spoke. She was done with me.

Grad went well. Katie and I frolicked, laughed, released the pressure of my dozen years of schooling. Afterward, six of us, three couples, left in high spirits in a 1955 Chevy, driving to parties, going on a long late night run Up-Island, just for the hell of it, returning, watching the sun rise at Piper's Lagoon, gathering with a host of others for breakfast at a classmate's parents' house, and then going home.

Awkwardly, I turned out to be the only member of the graduation organizers group who failed the year. It was a well-earned failure.

I had been too occupied with teenage tribulations.

And tempting trials.

Concurrently, I had spent much of the past year as a member of the local Canadian Scottish Reserve Regiment (Princess Mary's). There were elements of the military to which I was drawn. I knew I needed structure. I thought I should be, could be somewhat more orderly. I decided to join the regular armed forces and see the world. Katie said she would wait for me. A few weeks after I arrived in Kingston for basic training, her letter arrived. "We should see other people," she wrote.

It hurt, but it made sense.

A painful, long-distance hurt.

I was already there.

November 1964

My military career lasted five months. I was not good soldier material. There was a limit to my need for structure.

Then, anyway.

I returned home to Nanaimo, re-enrolled at the High School, and completed Grade 12.

There were, however, no romantic reunions.

We had all moved on.

May 2026

I have been putzing over this essay, this confession for almost four years. I have to let it go. The dwindling decades seem as one day to me now. I can't explain that. It's just a feeling.

Katie is no more. Gone seven years, joined by so many others. There is nothing to be done there.

Lingering stupidly in my Grad guilt though is an apology due Rae. I do have her number. I could easily call.

How would that go?

I think ... I know it would go badly.

I am still so cowardly.

As much as I am curious, I have to let this go as well.

I am now 79.

I'm not sure why I mention that.

It must mean something to me, the passing of the years.

Or maybe not.

CHRISTINE HAVELKA

ICELAND TO CANADA – THE GAUTI FAMILY SAGA

A special thanks to the relatives who provided letters, photos and obituaries to help form this snapshot of our family's history written to celebrate our Eleventh reunion in 2026

There is an Icelandic phrase *þetta reddast* (THET-ta RED-dast) that means “it will all work out OK.” While researching our family’s journey from Iceland to Canada, this motto seems to encapsulate their spirit. The challenges they faced to eke out a living in Iceland, and then as immigrants in North America, were unrelenting. But they possessed the pioneer spirit of hard-work and resilience, accompanied by an easy-going attitude that grounded them in the notion that things would work out.



It started almost 140 years ago when Thorsteinn Jonsson, a young man of 20, contemplated leaving the land of his birth. He was born on April 17, 1866, at Lundarbrenki in the Bardardalur Valley, Northern Iceland. His father died a month after his birth, leaving his mother a widow, and Thorsteinn with a sister and many half-siblings.

Already life was a challenge for the family, made worse due to the Little Ice Age happening around this time. The family were farmers and cold temperatures resulted in failing crops. Polar sea ice had crept into inlets and ports, freezing them solid.

As temperatures dipped, devastation visited the island nation because fishing boats couldn't launch, temperatures were too cold to grow crops, and trade ships couldn't bring in vital supplies. On top of that, disease was ravaging sheep herds. These frigid conditions continued not only in winter, but for the summer months too. Families, like Thorsteinn's, struggled.

Such conditions were a part of life in Iceland and its infamous volcanoes were often the culprits. Iceland was born from lava with volcanic eruptions continuing to this day. In 1783, Laki erupted, one of the deadliest and most powerful volcanic eruptions ever recorded. It went on for eight months, spewing toxic gases and ash that resulted in famine and widespread death that impacted not just Iceland, but the world over. Laki caused harvest failure in Europe and some have claimed this volcanic eruption created the conditions that resulted in the French Revolution of 1789.

The Laki eruption was well before Thorsteinn's time, but another large eruption in 1875 would have been current news. When Thorsteinn was 9 years old, the Askja volcano erupted. It also spread poisonous gas and ash across Europe so that by the time Thorsteinn was 15, temperatures had cooled to such a degree that 1881 was noted as one of the coldest years in that period. Daily conditions were harsh and the future looked bleak. Emigration was on many Icelanders' minds.

Between 1870 and 1914, more than 16,000 Icelanders, or roughly 20 per cent of Iceland's population, emigrated to North America. Widespread poverty, the sheep pestilence, the impact of the Askja eruption and the following years of harsh weather, drove these numbers. But what sort of life greeted them?

In 1887 Thorsteinn found out. The journey was arduous. He likely would have started by horse from Lundarbrekka to Reykjavik where he would have boarded a ship to Denmark. Another sea voyage would land him in Glasgow, Scotland. From there he'd sail across the Atlantic to finally dock in Quebec City. A train would provide the final leg of the voyage. What a trip! One can only imagine the crowded conditions, the lack of sanitation, water and proper food. But once in North America, Thorsteinn found community with other Icelanders in various settlements, including at Svold, North Dakota, where he homesteaded.

Not only did Thorsteinn gain a new country, he also gained a new name. Before he emigrated, he stayed with an aunt who lived in Gautlondum (which translates to "North of Iceland"). When he emigrated, he took *Gauti* as his family name. In doing so, he eschewed the tradition of adding "son" or "dottir" at the end of the family name.

Homesteading was a government policy that provided settlers with land to farm. Although owning your own property must have been a heady concept, it was not an easy life. In exchange for free land, the government required you to build a house, often of sod, and cultivate the soil for a set number of years. That required ploughing, planting crops, hunting game and sourcing potable water. Never mind the inhospitable weather that made it much worse. Settlers often gave up and returned to town. For Thorsteinn, it was a fire that ended the venture. He moved to Manitoba to join his mother and siblings who were settling on a farm there.

As the years passed, one wonders if Thorsteinn reminisced about the life he left behind in Iceland. Did he think about his friends at the nearby farm at Myri? Did he remember the time he visited and saw the latest little Jonsdottir in her cradle, the one named Aslaug? Did he remember his last visit before he emigrated, when they asked why he doesn't marry before he goes? Thorsteinn was known for his quick wit and that guided his response. He pointed at little Aslaug, now almost 4-years-old, and said "I'm waiting for her to grow up!"

Aslaug was too young to remember any of this. She was born on Sept 3, 1883, in Myri, a walk of about two hours from Thorsteinn's home at Lundarbrekka. Hers was also a farming family and the Jonssons at Myri similarly suffered under the severe conditions that made survival a constant struggle.

When Aslaug was 17, her mother died, and though her father, Jon Jonsson, continued to farm for a few more years, in 1903 he decided to emigrate to North America. His eldest daughter, Adalborg, would continue farming at Myri, along with her husband Jon Karlsson. Aslaug and five of her siblings emigrated with their father. Two other siblings had left for America with their aunt a few years prior. Two more siblings remained in Iceland, but they would move to North America later on.

In 2014 we had a family gathering in Iceland and visited the Myri farm. To this day it belongs to the descendants of Adalborg. The farm sits in an idyllic, if remote, wonderland. The white clapboard house is accompanied by a sprinkling of outbuildings. Rolling fields spread out from the buildings like a billowing skirt of green. The landscape is devoid of trees, but that allows you to see into the far distance where the hills fold down to a snaking chasm where churns the Skjalfandafljot River. Farther along you meet the raw beauty of the Aldeyjarfoss, a 20-metre waterfall formed from black basalt columns. It rages and froths along the narrow gorge, stunning your senses with its dramatic force.

What a country! I try to imagine the daily life of my grandparents, Aslaug and Thorsteinn, growing up at their respective farms of Myri and Lundarbrekka. I wonder what it was like to walk from one home to the other, perhaps taking a detour to watch the foaming Aldeyjarfoss. Iceland has a stark beauty where your imagination can run wild. But I was a

tourist, if with some provenance, and it was hard to grasp the harsh realities of living in the 1880s. Long winters, crop failure and disease were facts of life, a landslide of worries with few tools to shift it.

So we find Thorsteinn in Manitoba at the age of 39. In spite of many setbacks, he'd continued to make a go in this new land. In 1905 he was raising livestock at a farm in Stuartburn, Manitoba, when he met Aslaug. Of course, he'd met her in Iceland many years ago when she was little. Now she was a young woman of 23, living with her father where he homesteaded in the Winnipeg area. I like to think that it was love at first sight, or at second sight, as they were married later that year. As it was November in Manitoba, I can only imagine that it was a cold day, but embarking on a new life together was warmth enough.

Aslaug and Thorsteinn and their Marriage Certificate



The couple continued to farm at Stuartburn where their first child, Kristjana, was born in 1906. After a disappointing loss of some choice calves to blackleg, they moved to Pembina, North Dakota, for six years, where Thorsteinn worked for a railway company. Here Jennifer, John, Esther and Harold were born.

In 1914, they pulled up stakes again for Wynyard, Saskatchewan, where the “five little girls” were born: Margaret, Nanna, Kay, Edna and Erla. With eight girls and two boys, the family was complete. Their house in town had been moved four miles north and Thorsteinn took over his brother Paul’s dairy business. This became known as the Gauti farm from where the family delivered milk to Wynyard until 1939.

Although Aslaug and Thorsteinn were not early settlers, theirs was a daily struggle inherent to farm life at a time when there was no electricity and few amenities. Cans of milk were loaded onto democrat (a flatbed farm wagon) or sleigh and drawn by horses. Milk was kept cool in troughs in the milkhouse, which was built over the well. While Thorsteinn delivered milk four miles south in Wynyard, the children walked four miles north to Grandy school. On top of the long distances travelled, the day was filled with never-ending chores.

Aslaug, with the help of her children, sewed, often with recycled material. As she worked at mending, sewing or spinning, she entertained the children with Icelandic songs and verse. Her talent as a seamstress was remarkable; with a picture as her guide, she could duplicate any outfit

her daughters requested. They never really had to wear hand-me-downs because their mother could alter, remake, shorten or lengthen any garment.

Their momma was known for her keen sense of humour and boundless energy. Her garden was their pride and joy and sustained them all winter. “Flowers are for the soul and vegetables for the stomach” was one of her sayings. Helping others less fortunate was also a trait. Once, upon hearing the news of twins born to a neighbour, Aslaug quickly made and delivered quilts by the evening of the same day.

In 1924 Aslaug’s dad, Jon Jonsson from Myri, came to live with them. The children loved when he read to them (in Icelandic) in the evening. He also helped in the garden and was dedicated to keeping Aslaug’s supply of wool carded for spinning and quilt making.



**Gauti
Family 1925**

Back Row:
John, Esther,
Jenny,
Harold
Middle Row:
Jon Jonsson
(Aslaug’s
father)
Thorsteinn,
Edna on his
lap, Aslaug,
Erla on her
lap, Kris
Front Row:
Kay,
Margaret,
Nanna

As for Thorsteinn, he was well respected by friends and family alike. His children considered him slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and with a dry sense of humour. He was also a man of few words, much to the chagrin of one of Aslaug’s hired girls. Every day he went into town to deliver milk so he was in the perfect position to hear all the gossip. But that wasn’t his way. The hired girl used to say “I’d rather work for Mr. Smith (the waterman). He tells us the gossip at the end of every day!”

Though he may not have been prone to idle chatter, he was the topic of conversation. Nanna, one of the daughters, remembers delivering milk in town one day to a character of a lady, Ms. Solrun. She asked how many children were in her family. When Nanna told her, the lady said something in Icelandic that left Nanna feeling vaguely insulted. When she told her parents, they both started laughing, further annoying Nanna. She didn’t appreciate her dad being referred to as “a very sexy man”!

The years passed and life on the farm continued with its usual share of ups and downs.

One event they remember well was when their three-year-old sister Jennie was adopted by Jennie and Vidi Hallordson. Mrs. Hallordson was like a daughter to Thorsteinn because he

helped raise her and her sister. Jennie's siblings were quite distraught when their little sister left. However, her visits were happily anticipated and she entertained them by reciting poetry or singing in her beautiful voice. Even though she grew up in another home, the family always considered Jennie one of their own.

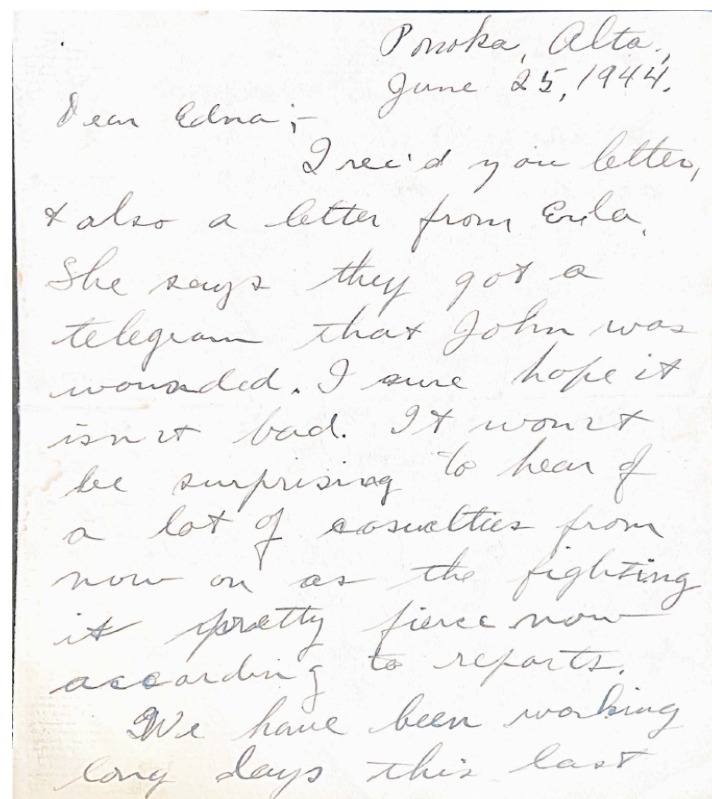
Illness and accidents also struck, as when many of the children contracted scarlet fever, or when Harold broke his leg while helping his dad deliver milk. The doctor's shoddy work botched it further and his leg had to be rebroken and set. They all remember Harold's homecoming and how their dad massaged his son's leg every evening. Due to Thorsteinn's intuitive use of therapy, Harold was able to walk again, though one of his legs would always be shorter than the other.

Then there were the good days, such as summer Sundays when the yard was full of friends and family, all engaging in ball games, bicycling, visiting, coffee drinking and enjoying lots of fine food.

Thorsteinn and Aslaug's children grew up and moved on, with most of them settling in the western provinces or states, except for Kristrun (Kay) who lived in Hamilton, Ontario. Harold lived in Iceland for two years and I still have the postcard, picturing a volcano billowing smoke, that he sent my mother.

Letter writing was a way of life back then and the Gauti siblings penned pages and pages of them. I have several in my possession; the paper yellowing, the ink fading. The letters often read like an in-person conversation, describing visits, children's health, etc., but there were also letters of historic note.

On June 25, 1944, Harold wrote my mom Edna with the news that their brother John had been wounded. He was one of 14,000 Canadians who landed at Juno Beach on D-Day. Fortunately, John was not critically injured and returned home to marry and raise six children.



Psmoka, Alta.
June 25, 1944.
Dear Edna;-
I rec'd your letter,
& also a letter from Eula.
She says they got a
telegram that John was
wounded. I sure hope it
isn't bad. It won't
be surprising to hear of
a lot of casualties from
now on as the fighting
is pretty fierce now
according to reports.
We have been working
long days this last

In 1935 Thorsteinn had a stroke and was semi-invalided. Aslaug dedicated her life to his care until he died in 1943 at the age of 77. Aslaug moved to B.C. in 1947 and when she was 79 she made a trip back to Iceland to visit family and friends. She died in Victoria in 1978 at the age of 94.

The 10 children of Thorsteinn and Aslaug are now all gone as well, but the next several generations live on and continue to grow. From Northern Iceland to the farm in Wynyard, Saskatchewan, Thorsteinn and Aslaug created a life that lived up to that Icelandic saying *þetta reddast*. Everything did work out OK in spite of all the hardships they endured. Perhaps they instinctively knew that winter is always followed by spring, even during a little Icelandic ice age, as long as we have loved ones at our side, sharing the good times and the bad, the warmth of loving kindness lighting the way.

Lundarbrekka and Myri farms



GEORGE JACKSON
A WHALE OF A TALE

I have sailed over 58,000 nautical miles (equivalent to two trips around the globe), documented in knotty detail in my logbooks. Most of the miles are best kept on the pages, but some bear retelling; perhaps you'll agree after reading this fantastical tale?

On this particular voyage I was crewing on the Sapphire, a 42-foot sailing vessel, for her crossing of the Atlantic from Gibraltar to the West Indies. My decades of sailing, much sought-after navigation skills, and friendship with the captain (and owner) Fred Hallas, had earned me a spot. Also joining the crew were three more of Fred's friends: Nils Florin, ex RCN/retired pilot, Jim Boyer, ex-marine/retired pilot, and Bill Faulkner, retired teacher. I include such details here for anyone wanting to fact-check the story.

According to my logbook, it was Saturday, November 14, 1998, that we dropped anchor off the harbour of Baia da Palmeira, on the island of Sal in the Cape Verdes. We were enroute out of the Canaries bound for Tortola making an unscheduled stop to pick up much needed parts for the boat's autopilot; we'd hoped the parts would be waiting for pick-up at the island's international airport.

We had arrived the evening before but waited for daybreak as it was a moonless night and the small harbour — as seen by the ship's radar — seemed congested. Daylight revealed the congestion to be many transiting European sailboats at anchor. We stopped at the quay to fuel up and to land Captain Fred and his scooter. His mission was to scoot to the airport to clear customs and pick up the autopilot parts.

After anchoring in the harbour to wait for Fred's return, we relaxed with a morning beer break and took in our surroundings. It wasn't what I had expected from a semi-tropical island: the landscape seemed more desert than tropical, more grey than green. With the one treeless block of habitation visible from the ship, it looked like we had landed in a Clint Eastwood Italian western. I had assumed that the island Sal would be sandy, mistakenly thinking that *sal* was Portuguese for sand, wrong! Sal means salt, the mineral for which the island had been settled, before it became part of the tourist trail. At the time of our visit the saltworks were still active: tourists not so much then, but many now.

Fred returned around noon without the spare parts, but instead some lovely fresh bread bought from the small town of Espargos. We were just sitting down to our lunch of beer and bread when a scene befitting an Italian western eased its way into the harbour. Being towed behind a small fishing boat was a sailboat — what I first noticed was the pitiful piece of sail hanging in tatters from a jury-rigged stump of a mast, then saw the rest of the mast, broken, and lashed to the deck. A lone figure released the sailboat from the tow and dropped anchor nearby as the fishing boat circled back out of the harbour.

Nils was in our Zodiac in an instant and on his way over to help any way he could. In a short time he brought the haggard sailor back for a shower and a meal. This was followed with a few more drinks while Don, the rescued, shared with us an unbelievable tale of survival.

Don Knowles had left England in September onboard his 1968, 26-foot Nicholson sloop on his annual pilgrimage to the West Indies via the Canary Islands. He would spend the winter there before returning to England via Bermuda and the Azores. Many Europeans still make this annual pilgrimage and there's even a race built around the event.

RORC, the Royal Ocean Racing Club, gets scores of entries for the 3,000-mile East to West Indies Ocean race. The annual trip was Don's routine of several years since retiring from international engineering projects. Note of interest: one of these projects was on Canada's portion of the Dew Line in our far North.

Shortly after departing the Canaries, he had gone below for what turned out to be an ill-timed rest with him being thrown from his bunk as the vessel was violently knocked down. She soon righted but he found himself knee-deep in water struggling his way through a soup of flotsam. After getting topside Don saw the broken mast and sails floating alongside. While the boat had taken on a lot of water, at least she was still floating. Don began bailing while waiting for the dawn to break.

With the morning light he manhandled the broken mast and sails onto the deck, then took inventory of the situation. His present position was well south of the nearest land to the north, with the prevailing current and trade winds drifting him away in a southerly direction. He had lots of potable water but very little food, his main diet underway being porridge and powdered milk, both of which were destroyed in the knock down. He had a small collection of fishing lures and some hand line. Most of his rudimentary navigation paraphernalia was also written off except for a basic handheld Radio Direction Finder (RDF) and a few batteries to power it.

Don was still in the main shipping route frequented by sailors transiting from the Canaries to the West Indies and his short-wave radio might work line of sight. For the first few days his hope was to see other yachts or commercial vessels, so during the daylight hours he kept a weather eye, but to no avail. At night he rested below between trips to the cockpit to do a sweep of the horizon. None of the navigation lights worked as the ship's 12-volt batteries had been shorted out during the knock down. He'd rigged a small light using a bulb from a broken flashlight and some batteries, not that this would function as much of a beacon for potential rescuers, but at least it was something. Alas, after several days of no sightings he had to face the realization that he and his disabled yacht were now well south of any shipping lanes and survival was up to him and him alone.

He was aware that the Cape Verde Islands were about 800 nautical miles to the south of his knock down position and that he was still drifting in that direction. He thought there might be an international airport on one of those islands, which meant RDF transmissions for approaching aircraft; his RDF should pick that signal up if he got close enough. That was his only hope other than a chance meeting with another vessel. He had managed to jury-rig a stump of a mast and by using his smallest jib was able to get a little way on; maybe a couple of knots at best. He had shelter, some water, and was moving, but still no food. He'd have to figure out how to fish with his minimal fishing kit in the deep ocean.

The long days passed with no sightings and no fish. Don knew the fish were there, but his lures weren't attracting any and he had nothing onboard for bait. Patiently he persevered, keeping watch on the empty horizon and jigging in what seemed to be an empty ocean. He slept fitfully at night with frequent visits topside hopeful for the lights of a passing vessel ... none to be seen.

This routine was interrupted one night when the boat was suddenly lifted and he woke with a start. It settled back down but he could feel there was something underneath the boat. He rigged his flashlight bulb and went on deck to peer into the black sea. Something as big as the boat was swimming alongside, so close it was rubbing against the

hull. A whale? Was it a Jonah's whale or an Ahab's whale? Friend or foe? The coming of dawn and Don's curiosity was put to rest; it was indeed a whale which soon disappeared.

After the visitor had departed there was finally some action with fish and he brought onboard several, enough to sate his hunger. The whale returned several times over the next few days, each time gently lifting the boat as it rubbed against the hull. After much thought, Don figured out where the fish were coming from; there were barnacles growing on the bottom of the boat and this must have given the whale some comfort hence the rubbing. In so doing he broke some of the barnacles, exposing and freeing their meat. This in turn attracted the fish some of which were caught by his lures. Don gave the whale a name which I can't recall and struck up several one-way conversations with his saviour. The whale's visits and the ensuing fishing bonanza lifted Don's hopes for survival while waiting for a rescue.

I also don't recall how much time Don said had passed before his broken sailboat had been spotted by local fishermen. By my calculations it would have been around two weeks, given that he had travelled approximately 800 nautical miles at a speed of two or three knots with a slight southern current, or around 50 to 60 nautical miles per day. I didn't learn if he had used his handheld RDF for a bearing of the airport or just been in the right place at the right time to be spotted by the fishing boat, but either way he was now safe in the small harbour. After sharing his story and a meal, Nils took Don back to his sailboat.

At lunch the next day we talked over what we could do to help Don with his recovery from the setback to his journey. For the moment he was short of cash, but his pension cheque would be waiting for him in Barbados. After much discussion and a few more cool ones it was decided that we would canvass the other 15 boats in the anchorage. Nils and I were dispatched in the Zodiac, caps in hand.

It was very interesting meeting everyone and to see the different reactions to our requests. The majority were French with Swiss, Italian, German and Belgians making up the rest. We managed to collect the equivalent of about \$300 US plus other goods in kind. One boat gave a bag of powdered milk and some oatmeal to go along with it upon hearing that was Don's regular fare while at sea. Another, the German, offered to help Don repair his rigging (and later helped us repair our autopilot) while others contributed to a care package of victuals. One French boat's crew gave Nils and me a bonus as she leaned over the lifelines to pass down some francs: topless! Vive la France.

We hung around the anchorage for another two days with Fred making daily trips to the airport for our spare parts; they never did arrive. The call was made to sail so I took the scooter to Espargos to stock up the food pantry. The old scooter had almost no compression and really struggled up the hills, but worked great downhill. I offered Fred \$100 for the scooter if he would leave it on the quay; it was such a nuisance when stowed on deck. I still have the \$100 and Fred still had his scooter.

Our new German friend helped Bill jury-rig the autopilot with some wire; smaller diameter than the original but luckily it lasted to our next destination, Tortola. We met up with Don later that day for lunch. He remarked that his life was getting back to normal except he missed his glasses that were lost in the knock down. I had a spare pair of bifocals which worked for him and with that we wished him smoother sailing and said our goodbyes. We weighed anchor and sailed after supper with a fair breeze on a broad reach

through the rest of the Cape Verde Islands. I had the middle watch with a nearly full moon. Ahh, this is what I joined for.

Epilogue

Several months later, back in Sidney, B.C., I received a postcard from Don, mailed from Antigua, with a run-down of his activities since we had left him at Ilya du Sal. He had spent a further five months there waiting for his small pension cheques to build up sufficient funds to cover the mast repairs. The German, true to his word, had helped him rig the boat for the sail; this involved stepping the shortened original mast with a reduced sail area, resulting in a loss of boat speed. Don finally departed on April 13, arriving at Antigua after a much longer than usual crossing of 35 days. With the looming hurricane season, he was busy preparing for another departure back to England. He also mentioned that it had long been a wish of his to one day sail up the Pacific West Coast to Canada and would return my bifocals at that time. I'm still waiting for that reunion.

NIGEL GREENWOOD
MILLTOWN SYMPHONY

Fanfare

Faint wail of a steam whistle, torn by the wind from a distant smoke stack
Heavy splutter of radial engines running down
Pinging creaks of the aged DC-3 cooling on the apron of a small-town airport
Tentative, tinny steps on a metal airport ladder
Gleeful gasps muffled by the close grasp of stuffed tigers and lions
Chugging taxis at the clapboard terminal overlooking the shimmering sea
Pattering splash of rainforest downpour overflowing the eaves of a roadside motel
Gentle shilly of small waves turning shingle alongside a beachside blackberry patch
Hearty crunch of cornflakes softened by the first native breakfast fruit
Chiding Victorian tones from English grandmothers
Excited shouts of short-trousered boys hunting black bears with pop-guns

Andante

Curling crash of winter storms on a rocky beach
Furious splatter of rain on west-facing windows
Dislocating jump of bicycle chains against the sprockets
Fearsome barks of paperboy-hating dogs
Popping spit and crackle of a hearth fire
Excited marvel at the revealed Christmas tree
Homesick Teutonic harmonies of remembered past Noels
Impatient rustle of presents unwrapped on Christmas morn
Muffling damper of snowfall on a winter's eve
Slick slither of toboggans on an iced hill in the dark
Crystalline echoes from an unseen ski-hill, muffled by surrounding boreal walls
Heavy-duty snip of pinking shears
Mechanical whirr of a Singer Featherweight through layers of woollen plaid
Pleasing puff of a steam iron flattening seams
Restless rustle of pleated taffeta over petticoats
Pleased pronunciations of the back-bedroom seamstress
Snivelling snuffle of a favorite stuffed bear's disappearing fur
Withering whine of a small dog wanting in
Heartsick cries of melancholy children ... for no reason at all

Allegro

Grinding rumble of the school bus
Taunting insult of a safely distant younger sibling
Swift-slamming, brotherly-bolting of all doors and windows
Smart-smacking discipline of a wooden spoon

Ear-ringing concussion of juvenile explosive experiments
Scattering chink of marbles in the dusty corner of a schoolyard
Tocsin of an antique bell, summoning the unlearned to a small rural schoolhouse
Jumbled cries in the crowded hallways
Hasty rumble of footsteps dashing for class
Monotonous, reluctant chant of the Lord's Prayer in home-room
Dissonant trilling of out-of-tune elementary school recorders
Breathless, off-tune hurrying of a first flute solo at the local music festival
Bell tones of amateur blacksmiths hammering in metal class
Confused vowels of a Scots-accented French teacher
Scribbling scratch of note-taking in a wood-panelled classroom
Orchestral exuberance of the senior concert band
Joyful chorus of *Bye Bye Birdie* in the High School gym
Processional strains of the graduation march
Echoing slam of school doors

Pastorale

Bright laughter in response to kissing an elementary-school sweetheart
Counter-rotating thump of a backyard tether-ball
Pretended protestations as a female captive is bound to the pole
Skipping footsteps along a line of beached logs
Wooden thump of discarded items among the berms of beach-combing debris
Depressing drizzle of rain on beach-side swimming lessons
Joyful splash of cannonballing from the bridge over the swimming hole
Subdued summertime confidences of swim-suited girls on the beach
Offended gasp after a teasing tug at bikini-strings
Teenage music playing on a salvaged radio in the basement
Inexperienced shuffling to *Hey Jude* in a darkened basement
Titillated giggles at a challenging "truth or dare" question
Greedy glugs from a gallon bottle of purloined Baby Duck
Choking coughs after surreptitious cigarettes
Shuffle of shoe-less feet at the sock-hop, drowned out by CCR
Hollow clinking of boot-legged beer bottles at a seaside firepit
Hallooing of teenaged drunks from down the beach
Sharp gasp at the first caress
Unrepeatable entreaties into the back-bedroom telephone
Whisper of private confidences beside the kitchen sink

Largo

Murmur of wind in the tops of giant cedars
Ethereal soundlessness of sunlight slanting through the trees
Invisible whine of disappeared distant outboards over a still, sunlight lake
Urgent whizz of an escaping salmon running line off a reel
Slide of a beeswax candle along the bowstring

Sudden “thwack” of an arrow striking a practice target
Satisfying rattle of feathered shafts crowding the bullseye
Slick of broad-headed arrows being whetted to a razor edge
Dusty scuff of hiking boots along an exposed power-line road
Wet slip of salal leaves against a hunter’s waist
Retreating rustle of small animals under a woodland carpet of sword-ferns
Pervasive hum of insects in the dozing Indian Summer bush
Alarmed huff and scatter of a white-tail deer
Airborne squeal of an overhead eagle
Excited whistle of a treebound squirrel advertising a warning
Stealthy steps of a grouse along an elevated branch, evading the hunter’s eye
Slither of an arrow being drawn from the quiver
Hush of bated breath before the shot
Resounding base twang of the archer’s string
Self-satisfied clucking of a disturbed but untouched fowl

Alla Marcia

Solemn clumping unison of veteran footsteps at Remembrance Parade
Martial commands forming a gaggle of teenagers in outdated naval uniform
Stifled giggles of two small girls in this unaccustomed attire
Solemn intoning of the Act of Remembrance
Trumpeted reveille reviving bowed heads
Extended shriek of the mill whistle signaling the end of memorial silence
Hubbub of beer talk at the Legion
Purposeful shouting of sailors berthing a visiting ship for Sea Fair
Fanfare of naval melodies along the Sea Fair parade route
Skreeling lilt of the local pipe-band
Cacophony of carnival sounds at the Fall Fair midway
Expectant hush awaiting the craft-judging results
Whistling applause of Sea Fair beauty queens

Mechanistic clack of punching paper-mill timecards
Accelerating clink and clunk of the mechanical conveyer
Balks of wood bonging on the end of the block-loader
Wet splatter of wood and teredos on the conveyor belt
Ripping whine of the distant sawmill
Ear-splitting hiss of high-pressure water between clogged steam tubes
Tedious crunch of shovels in piles of debris
Crinkling billow of “broke” hiding the paper-machine with clouds of newsprint
Industrious whirring of fork-trucks thumping over ship-side rails
Boiling, bubbling concoction of Kraft mill porridge
Salacious guffaws of older boys in the grubby lunch-room
Saving shriek of the shift-change whistle

Choking regurgitation of noxious vapours from last night's shift

Slatting flutter of sails luffing on Sunday morning
Chugging cough of motor sea-boats
Thrilling crack of bat on softball
Winning whumph of a penetrating penalty kick
Clattering of cutlery at Lions charity dinners
A live organ playing in the heritage cinema
Happy chatter of Down Syndrome kids on a group outing
Rumbling throb of muscle-cars cruising the main drag
Rolling slosh of wheels on wet pavement
Surreptitious murmur of idlers on the boardwalk railing
Babel of English, Irish, Scots, German, Italian, French and Scandinavian accents
Diverse foreign harmonies of the biannual Choral Festival

Requiem

Joyful procession of Mendelsohn's march ...
Sobs of sorrowful parting
Burbles of classmates at rare reunions
Repetitive themes from recollected teenage tunes ...
Keening sorrow at the passing of classmates
Wheezing effects of ill health
Keenly anticipated purr of infrequent returns by motorbike
Hoarse mumbling of inarticulate demands, urgent requests
Abide With Me ...
Murmured condolences
Painful silence of deserted streets
Absence of the mill whistle
Honking signals of ferries departing

BRITTA GUNDERSEN

FIRE IN PARADISE

“This is the officer of the watch. Officer of the watch. First aid team, report to the aft engine room. I repeat, first aid team, report to the aft engine room.”

I looked at my phone. It was 5:22 a.m., Thursday, March 5, 2026, and our ship was sailing through the vast expanse of French Polynesia, in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. We were expecting to dock in Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, in less than four hours.

“What was that?” my husband Jack asked, his voice still thick with sleep.

Before I could answer, the next announcement came.

“This is the captain. Fire-fighting team to the aft engine room. I repeat, fire-fighting team to the aft engine room.” The tall Dutchman sounded like he had just raced up the stairs to the bridge.

In quick succession, there were calls for all crew to stand by. For passengers, “Take no action at this time.”

Taking no action was not an option. We got dressed and quickly but carefully emptied our stateroom safe. We put our travel security pouches around our necks; they contained some cash but no passports. The ship’s crew had collected them the previous day, in preparation for clearing customs and immigration in Tahiti.

“Fire crew evacuate engine room ... Fire doors closed in aft engine room ... Crew to muster stations.”

Muster stations? That is where everyone goes if the life boats are lowered and crew and passengers alike abandon ship. At least that is the way it was on *Titanic*. This must be serious, I thought as I glanced at my phone. It was approaching 6 a.m.

We waited. And waited a bit more. We stepped out onto the balcony. The ship was not moving. We saw a smaller cruise ship was just off to port, creating only the smallest of wakes, seemingly waiting in case we needed help. Was this our *Carpathia*?

Back into the cabin. Ten more minutes. I wondered if Jack’s mind was racing as fast as mine.

The captain spoke once more. Cameras showed the fire suppression system had worked and there was no longer any sign of fire. Another wait. Another announcement to tell the fire team that they could re-enter the engine room to conduct a physical check.

Then, at 6:30 came “All clear.”

“Coffee?”

“Oh, yeah.”

The Lido (the buffet restaurant on modern cruise ships where passengers can find endless shrimp, pizza and soft-serve ice cream) was packed with people and abuzz with rumours. We found coffee but no chairs so we wandered out to the aft deck. I took photos of Tahiti, the island paradise so near but yet still so far away. As we finished our coffee, the captain announced that once technical checks of all systems were completed, we’d make our way to Papeete.

“Sounds good. Breakfast?”

“Sure.”

We preferred eating our meals in the ship’s dining room where we could have a small table to ourselves or sit at a larger table with a few other folks. This eventful morning, we chose to sit with others; we’d all just been through a common experience.

As we finished our final cup of coffee, the captain's voice assured all aboard that the ship's systems were fine. (Well, this was not exactly accurate. We, along with 2,000 other passengers and about 800 crew, all of whom now had finished breakfast and their morning coffee or tea, found that the vacuum toilet systems were not working but understandably, no one on the bridge had had time to worry about that.)

The captain continued. There was a catch. The local Tahitian fire department wanted to come aboard and do a double check. Our vessel would not be allowed to dock in Papeete's city centre until there was absolutely no chance a fire would be rekindled.

The captain explained that the fire department would arrive by helicopter. All passengers were to clear the decks and their balconies. Port side passengers were to close their drapes (might there be reflections from those windows?). No photography (might passengers inadvertently use their cameras' flash settings and distract the helicopter pilot? Or would images clog social media and damage the cruise line's reputation before lunchtime?).

As we left the dining room, Jack asked one of the waiters if this had happened to him before. Once he said, three years ago. I considered how worried most crew members must have been, especially those for whom this was their first voyage. Only officers had access to shipboard internet, all crew were far from home for months at a time and collectively they were responsible for almost 3,000 human beings.

By the time we were back in our cabin it had been more than three hours since the officer of the watch had called for the first aid team. We closed our curtains and sent email quips to friends. The experience was too unsettling to write to family yet.

We heard the helicopter whirr past our balcony and then realized the blades were still turning as the pilot hovered over the forward deck. Soon we heard the thrum of the blades speed up and the sound of the helicopter receded to the west.

The captain announced that the fire department team was aboard. He gave no indication of how long their inspection would take.

We have only been on a few cruise ships but they have all had media screens in each cabin. A few news channels and a host of second-run films are usually available, in addition to ship-specific information, including a map showing a line, tracing the ship's route and the ship's current location, in almost-real time. On this 35-day voyage, from San Diego to French Polynesia and back to San Diego, the small dot representing our ship was often in the middle of a blank, blue screen, a yellow line streaking out behind the dot, indicating where we had been. Nary an atoll was in sight. This morning, the map showed our ship literally making loops in the Pacific Ocean; the pattern resembled a poorly executed bow tie. It didn't look as if we were any closer to Tahiti than we'd been two hours earlier.

At 10 a.m. a gurgling sound drew our attention from the screen. The toilet! Hurray! This was a true measure of paradise and a reminder of how dependent we are on creature comforts.

Jack headed to the pool.

I stared at the latest arc of a circle on the screen. The yellow line was moving slowly and pointing toward port now. It was 10:30 — time for me to take a walk.

Green safety lighting was still on in the corridors but the promenade deck was open and the crew was putting blue-striped cushions on the deck chairs. Passengers were beginning to fill them. There were more people strolling the deck than usual. Several couples were holding hands. Maybe that was their "what if" or "thankfully" reaction.

I passed a British threesome we met our first day out of San Diego — a husband, his wife and his sister. The sister broke her foot just before the cruise and used a motorized scooter. That

made me think. Cruise passengers often skew older. There were dozens of canes, walkers, motorized scooters and full-blown wheelchairs on board. Not everyone on two legs could be called agile — and many of them were grossly oversized. Exactly how would staff wrestle some of these folks along the corridors, down several flights of stairs and into lifeboats? I couldn't imagine it going well.

My musing was interrupted at 10:45 by another announcement. We'd been cleared to enter the harbour and dock. Maybe we could hope for a nice croissant and cafe au lait ashore in this still-French territory. Maybe we could hunt for a crunchy baguette and some good French cheese to bring back to our cabin, as we'd done when we docked in Raiatea. Oh wait, I thought, it's a holiday, Missionary Day (a strange reminder of Tahiti's complex and continuing colonial history) so many shops will be closed.

It was well past noon before we moored in Papeete. From the deck we could see a grey Canadian navy supply vessel with a red maple leaf on the stack. Who would have guessed Canada had a presence in French Polynesia? But then again, when we left San Diego three weeks ago, who would have guessed that missiles would be whizzing across the Middle East as we sailed through paradise?

The city stretched along a rocky coastline and crept up green hillsides. We saw several medium-rise hotels and numerous luxury homes perched over the water. Between the ship's dock and the city centre was a marina filled with large, white catamarans. A pedestrian walkway flanked the marina and curved past a waterside restaurant. Six lanes of traffic lay between the pedestrian path and the city centre sidewalk. The sidewalk was dotted with makeshift stalls. Vendors had foregone their holiday and then waited extra hours for a chance to sell a few trinkets to cruise passengers. Directly across from our ship was a Burger King, oddly incongruous between the luxury yachts and vendors' stalls.

We disembarked. The heat and humidity demanded a measured pace. We crossed a stretch of blacktop and climbed a long flight of stairs to the passenger terminal. Once inside, we were grateful for the shade, overhead fans and the fact that the passports we had surrendered to the ship's purser several days before allowed us to by-pass customs and immigration formalities.

We dared to cross the six lanes of small sedans, large SUVs, enormous trucks and a few buses, wandered past shops with security doors rolled down and signs in French, and saw a small church with "1875" painted on the keystone above the entrance. We returned to our air-conditioned ship, pausing for only a moment to comment on the large, metal rat guards that had been placed on the mooring lines.

We agreed that we'd get off early the next morning, before the heat became overwhelming. We didn't mention the fire, though I gave it more than a passing thought as I drifted into a deep sleep.

After breakfast we found our way to the city's central market. On one side of the large space there were countless tables of black pearl jewelry: necklaces, bracelets, rings, earrings. How many tourists buy these uncertified and supposedly-rare baubles? There were some carved, wooden souvenirs, too, and a few fridge magnets. On the other side of the market there were food stands where locals were buying rice-based take-away meals or pastries or sandwiches on baguettes. There were some tables with tropical fruit and fresh vegetables. There was one fish vendor and one meat vendor, their wares in refrigerated display cases, the inside glass weeping water from the humidity.

We walked around the market's outside perimeter, under a sun-defying metal awning. Here stalls featured beautiful print fabric, resplendent in tropical colours and Polynesian design.

Around the corner, still under the awning, were the flower stalls. These colours, fragrances and the women crafting small bouquets and large arrangements were totally Tahitian.

Eventually, I succumbed. I bought a small, almost-black sphere attached to a short piece of thin, gold-coloured wire. For \$10US I had my Polynesian black pearl dinner ring. I'm pretty sure the orb is plastic and the wire is anything-but-gold but I now had something flashy to wear to dinner and the vendor made at least one sale that day. I could set sail in the morning, thinking we'd both won.

Papeete had been just another urban centre, with traffic, fast food and an obvious rich-poor divide. I was looking forward to our next port, Moorea, its name evoking thoughts of beautiful beaches, steep mountains, kind people and strains of "Bali Ha'i."

But alas, when the captain made his dinnertime announcement, he said all we'd be getting was a "Bali sail by". The Moorea port call was cancelled. Our ship would be spending the next two days in Papeete. Then we'd sail directly to Fakarava, a little atoll of littler note. We'd receive letters that evening, regarding a future cruise credit. It seemed clear that the fire had been more serious than passengers had been led to believe; the ship needed more days in a larger port, with access to spare parts and repair experts.

I admit I was disappointed. The distance between Tahiti and Moorea is 17 kilometres, less than half the distance between Victoria and Sooke. I could see Moorea's mountain peaks rising out of the ocean, their verdant slopes turning soft, smoky green as the sun set behind them. As night enveloped the island in its cloak, there was only a thin, broken line of pale, yellow lights along the coast. Poor weather had kept us out of two earlier ports and now, due to the fire, we'd miss Moorea, which had promised to be the tropical paradise I envisioned when I'd booked this trip.

I realized that missing a cruise port is of miniscule importance when much of the world is in a hot-damn mess but I allowed myself a few moments of "poor me".

We did have a letter in our cabin when we returned from dinner. We had a generous future cruise credit, to be used within the coming year (knowing full well the credit would only cover a portion of any future cruise we'd take). This was all pretty standard "sorry" procedure for cruise lines, I've discovered. But the final paragraph in the letter was probably not standard fare. Passengers who had booked shore excursions on Moorea would be taken to the local ferry the next day and meet up with their tour drivers on Moorea itself. That sounded fine to both of us.

The seas were calm and the ferry's snack bar had wonderful French pastries. As Vancouver islanders, Jack and I are used to B.C. ferries where French pastries would be a nice addition. We met our bus driver, a native of Moorea named Blanc, owing to his blondish hair, a genetic gift from a German great-grandfather. We had a wonderful tour up, down and around the island. Blanc was running for election as the island's mayor and used his politician's powers of persuasion to convince us that Moorea had unlimited potential to become a real paradise, not just some Hollywood fantasy island. He was very convincing and clearly passionate and optimistic about the future. I don't know whether Blanc is back in a bus driver's seat or sitting in the mayor's chair.

The sun set behind Moorea as the ferry made its way back to the dock in Papeete. The black velvet evening closed around us. All was well. In the space of three days paradise had been lost and found again.

WHERE OLD BOOKS SLUMBER

We couldn't see him, but the proprietor of the store called out the moment we crossed the threshold. He emerged, seemingly from a space too small for a man his size, then immediately apologized for the state of the place. He inferred that it was temporary — as though a new shipment of ancient, smelly books had just arrived — but evidence suggested otherwise. Shelves covered every wall, as you'd expect, but the scuffed wood floor was mostly obscured by books, too. Not that dishevelment and general chaos have ever deterred me from entering and losing my sense of time for an hour or two while exploring the contents of a secondhand bookstore. I love these kinds of places. I step over the piles and slip sideways to reach the farthest section at the back. The store, appearing the size of a matchbox upon entry, unfolds into a labyrinth of amazing endlessness once inside. There's even a spiral staircase leading to a dimly lit basement. Briefly, I consider the weird possibilities. I hear that Tom Waits song, “What's He Building in There?” Were there any witnesses to our entering this place?

Soon, curiosity overrides irrational suspicion and I'm kneeling on some flattened magazines attempting to read titles sideways in pale light. Where's a good flashlight when you need it?

Independent bookstores and the people who run them are becoming a rare find in many places. Like a once loved but now impractical possession, they have almost entered the status of fondly remembered nostalgia. Gabrielle Zevin's novel, *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*, is set almost entirely in a charming, albeit non-lucrative small-town bookshop. It's a vision of idyllic contentment — except for an empty cash register and the existential dissatisfaction of a lonely bookseller — a booklover's fantasy.

“What I say is, a town isn't a town without a bookstore. It may call itself a town, but unless it's got a bookstore it knows it's not fooling a soul,” declares Neil Gaiman's character Hinzelmann in his novel, *American Gods*.

I consider this as I do my best both to respond to the proprietor's comments and to dodge him and his informative verbosity so I can browse through his bookshelves in contemplative silence. His intentions are friendly, I think, but to some ears they could be interpreted as rants from a disgruntled cynic. He mimics what I guess are the voices of customers he's encountered or imagines having encountered, uttering things like: “Oh, I've got a degree and a phone, I don't have any need of old books! I don't even know how to read.” His voice gets all high-pitched and weedy, his London accent exaggerated in what I suppose is intended to accentuate the pomp, pretension, and stupidity of others who have stopped in to view, and ultimately spurn, his wares. Then he chuckles, returning to a more humble stance, hunching his shoulders as though in surrender to the fey ways of the modern world.

He's too old to keep things in good order. It's too much for a man his age, he says. But he keeps going because the bookstore is the one thing that keeps him going. I imagine a room somewhere inside the rambling structure with an unmade single bed and hot plate on a chipped counter.

I could find more, but we're travelling and I'm making an effort to keep the load relatively light. One book will do for today. He quotes a price that I think is probably high for a used book, but since I've been searching for this one, I acquiesce, hand him a bill. He reaches into pockets

and looks around, then advises that he might have to charge a little more because he doesn't seem to have enough change.

We work it out. He tries to gift me an old straw hat as we leave and, because I mostly adhere to the Path of Least Resistance principle where inconsequential events are concerned, I try it on even though it's a bit Driving Miss Daisy and I know it's unlikely to fit. (I am a descendant of a Big Head family.) It doesn't. We bid him our thanks and adieu. As we exit, he hands me a small green plastic soldier with half his left arm missing. "Wounded," he says. "You take care of him now."

KENN PERRIER

CRIME PAYS

I spent the first 10 years of my life in a border town, situated on the prairies with cold, windy and snowy winters comforted by hot, dry and dusty summers. Looking back, it seems it was a different time in the world, this world, but maybe a different world in so many ways; lazy, fresh, warm and safe, where time moved slower, days seemed to stretch into the distance, where people seemed sturdy in their shoes and in their minds, and right was right and wrong was wrong and we knew the difference. We all seemed to know where we stood. Those windswept, haphazardly lush and colourful summer days seemed to slide into each other effortlessly, interrupted only by necessary sleep and necessary bathing and necessary loving, full day after full day.

We would often, as kids, rise early in the morning and eat quickly, rushing out to begin each day, ready to accept anything that came crashing our way. We would often leave our homes on foot, or on our banana bikes, morning sun already baking onto the asphalt and onto our bike handlebars, to knowingly rendezvous with our cohorts, developing our daily, devious plans as our legs pumped the foot pedals and the wind tussled the edges of our hair under our caps. Days lasted forever; we only showed ourselves again to our parents and families when our stomachs could scream no more, our hands could get no dirtier, and our mouths were parched. We were often gone exploring all day. This practise could go on forever, or so we thought, until the crisp air of school season would ultimately call us, gently, back to some sort of organized existence.

One such school day arrived, shortly after the autumnal equinox. After the days' necessary learning was over, the air was still warm, though curling around the edges with a crisp after-note, and the afternoon seemed in a hurry to shorten. Still, time would slow during those hours, after school and before dinner and homework, and I often found myself hanging listlessly with friends, reacting to anything, initiating nothing, and happy just to be there. Jasper Market was sometimes our hangout, a lonely confectionary store hugging Highway 16 into town, situated a couple blocks and one field over from where I lived, and I found myself in the store that day with two of my friends, perusing the aisles. I cannot remember if it was our intent to actively thief then and there, if it was our driving force that afternoon, or if it was just a randomly foolish act to undertake, individually or as a group. But we stole that afternoon. Stole chocolate bars. Different kinds of chocolate bars. Crispy Crunch, Coffee Crisp, Kit Kat and Malted Milk were my godly treats of choice. I slowly moved up and down a couple of aisles, picking my poison and watching the store clerk, satisfying myself when he was not looking. But I had not counted on Glen Lacombe. Glen was a kid one year younger than me and was in my sister's grade. I went to school with his sister Linda Lacombe, so I knew the family — and for some reason I disregarded Glen. But Glen saw me stealing. Up and down each aisle. And when I left the Market, bulging with chocolate bars, Glen hurried to the front counter to inform the clerk of my misdeeds and my name. Meanwhile, my friends Dean and Greg had stolen bars as well, and we gleefully scuttled to the next lot over, the Massey-Ferguson dealership, to sit in a shiny red combine, filling our faces with sugary sweet, chocolatey delight. It was heaven, I remember. Freedom really. Eating four large chocolate bars. It was so easy I thought, so easy obtaining something I wanted.

Later that evening, at home around the dinner table, my parents asked me how my day was. Fine I said, school was great. Dad asked what I did after school, before I showed up at home. I casually mentioned that I was playing with my friends, not doing much of anything. Not

suspecting a thing. Not even thinking, considering my thieving. Until, that is, my dad said: “Well son, we got a call before dinner, from the owner of Jasper Market ... What he told us was quite surprising! Would you care to guess what he said?” I looked at Dad. He looked at me.

“What did he say?” I squeaked.

“Why don’t you tell your mother and I what he said?” Dad looked so big, so intimidating, so scary. Mom stared blankly at me, fork in hand, food slowly being chewed in mouth.

“He told you I was stealing?” I cringed.

“Yes! As a matter of fact, he did! What in the hell are you stealing for?” he screeched. I didn’t answer, staring stiffly at my feet cemented to the kitchen floor. “Pardon? I didn’t catch that?” he said.

“I stole a chocolate bar,” I confessed. A chocolate bar. Even then, in the throes of guilt, of admission, I was still able to deceive, trying to defend my integrity with yet another lie.

“As soon as you’re done eating, grab a dime from your change pouch; we’re going down to Jasper Market and you’re apologizing, and paying for what you’ve stolen.”

The drive to the Market, though short, was filled with the dread of God. I felt bad. Bad, but for the wrong reasons. Instead of feeling remorse for taking something that didn’t belong to me, I was scared and felt bad, cowardly really, because I had to face the clerk and own up.

We walked in. The clerk at the counter was different from earlier in the day, but seemed to sense why we were there. I walked up to the counter, with my father walking beside me, set the dime on the counter, and mumbled “Here is 10 cents for the chocolate bar I stole from you this afternoon; I’m sorry.” The clerk looked at me, nodded his head and smiled.

“Well, that is very brave of you to own up to this, to take responsibility for your mistake, and to apologize.” I stared at the ground. “Tell you what; in appreciation for what you’ve just done, you can pick a chocolate bar from this row on the counter,” he indicated with a wave of his hand. On the counter was a row of seven or eight chocolate bars. I glanced at Dad, who looked surprised, chose an Aero chocolate bar, and said thank you to the clerk. The man and my father shook hands, and we left the Market, swiftly, with a wave of relief sweeping over me as I settled in the passenger seat of my dad’s ’68 Ford Custom, gently fingering the treasured bar. I felt like my soul was beaming. My father said he was proud of me. But all I could think of was Humph! That was easy ... Crime Pays ...

KIM HARRISON
TRANSFERENCE

In the fall of 1986, I was hired as a teacher for the school program at Riverside Psychiatric Institution (RPI), the hospital for the criminally insane. The first two months were a probationary period, and I couldn't afford to screw things up. My cash flow was bare minimum from working at day labour jobs. I lived in a hammock on the side of Simon Fraser Mountain, trying to save for an apartment rental and a better car, spent most of my money on take-out food.

Ali Moss, the new Institute Director hired from New Zealand, sent me an education referral for patient Kelly C. She'd accepted Kelly's transfer from Alouette Valley Women's Prison, based on the young woman's "borderline personality disorder."

I didn't fully understand that label. I had few boundaries myself, which was why I spent most of my after-work time alone swinging in a hammock. After intense interactions with the patients all day, mental separation from people was essential for my sanity.

I arrived an hour and a half early to prepare for client Kelly C's education interview. Director Moss's referral read "We have a young woman who suffered trauma and a breakdown after pushing her mother down the fire escape at their apartment. Kelly would benefit from earning her high school diploma. She has trouble relating to people and needs a focus and a role model."

Melinda, a young nurse with owl glasses and the aroma of patchouli, introduced us, "Now, no funny stuff," she said to Kelly.

The girl sat quietly with her pink-lipsticked mouth half open, curly blonde hair hiding most of her rather puffy face. She used her stubby fingers to brush her long bangs down over her eyes. Her pupils darted about, then fixated on the wall behind me.

"Maybe she's shy too," I thought. "Don't look at her face."

"Hi Kelly, Let's talk about your goals," I began.

"I wanna get my Grade 12, maybe go into social work," she said. Her voice went high, with a nasal, baby-like cadence.

"That sounds good," I agreed.

Before I finished, she continued with the same childlike tone.

"Then again, maybe I'd like to do flower arranging. They had a good flower arranging program at the prison."

"On your referral it says you want to be an actress," I said.

She gazed past me. "It's not want, it's want-ed," she said. "And I've looked at going into carpentry."

She stopped talking, yawned, and said, "I hear you want me to do some tests."

I nodded and slightly smiled, and she slightly smiled, and then our smiles disappeared. I pushed the arithmetic test toward her. "This is the first one," I said.

She glanced at it. I flipped it right side up for her. She looked down at the test some more. Then she lifted her head. "I can give you a pencil," I said.

Kelly stared at me as if I'd asked for a drug sample. I looked up at the ceiling, then down to the floor. Things appeared a bit fuzzy; I hadn't slept much the night before up on the mountain and was prone to anxiety attacks.

"What do you do in your spare time?" Kelly asked in a loud voice.

A personal answer might be considered an inappropriate response, but it was real.

"I try to get through the day without problems," I said. "What about you?"

"What do you think?" she said. "I'm bored out of my tree."

When she said "tree" I thought of my hammock swinging on the side of the mountain. I thought of rolling out of it that morning and looking up to the tips of the trees and the sky beyond.

I tried for empathy.

"It must be tough to lose your freedom," I said.

Kelly lifted her face toward mine and made a chewing motion. Then she stopped and chewed again.

"Is that gum?" I asked.

"I've got a piece of glass in my mouth," she told me, her high baby voice rising. "Should I swallow it?"

"That's not a good idea," I said. "Can I see it?"

"That's my secret." She frowned. "You can't get a piece, either."

"I really don't want any," I said.

"Then why are you talking to me?" she asked.

I waved, caught Melinda's eye behind the nursing office plexiglass. This was maximum security. How did this girl get hold of a piece of glass? Melinda smiled. I stood up "I'll be right back," I told Kelly.

"So, you're going to rat?" she said. "You're going to be a tattletale?"

"I can't play around," I told her. "I'm just the teacher here. I give education assessments."

"You can't play around?" asked Kelly. "What the hell does that mean?"

I stepped into the nurse's office and told them about the glass in Kelly's mouth.

"She's probably faking, Jackson," Melinda said. "But we'll check it out."

"You smell weird, nurse," Kelly said as Melinda arrived. "This guy probably told you I have glass in my mouth, but that's a stinking lie."

A few days later, I sat in the schoolroom marking papers. The patients had returned to their wards for lunch hour. Director Moss arrived, thin and businesslike, her perfume the scent of pine trees. She led a group of eight or nine grey-haired business-suited people.

"These are psychiatrists from Sweden," she announced. "They're here to see how we operate this hospital. Our excellent reputation has spread all over the world."

A slim, trimly bearded fellow next to her smiled, "I'm Dr. Forsberg," he introduced himself. "University of Stockholm."

His blonde bangs kind of resembled Kelly's.

I gave my spiel about the hospital school program, how I assessed and co-operatively helped students reach their goals by focussing on their strengths, blah blah blah.

"How do you make your sharpened pencils safe?" asked a lady dressed all in white.

I was about to answer, but Dr. Moss interrupted. Her mouth had tightened up all during my speech, now she let loose with her unique New Zealand accent.

"You know that patient Kelly C.?" she said. "We have a big conference set up next week, to see how to move her through the system."

"Sounds like a good idea," I nodded.

"I talked with her yesterday," Moss stepped closer. "She said she wanted the whole treatment team there, except for you."

"Except for me? Did she say why?"

“She wouldn’t. She told us she never wanted to see “that teacher” again. What did you do to her?”

The Swedish doctors shuffled behind Director Moss, moving closer to hear my answer.

“Well,” I said, thinking of how I swung out of my hammock that morning, feeling the wet ground beneath my bare feet. I tried to think in Kelly mode. Should I mention the glass? The Director tapped her fingers on the table. “Well, I didn’t *do* anything,” I said.

“Well, what happened?” Moss asked. “She said she’d refuse to attend anywhere you showed up.”

“I think maybe I reminded her of somebody she knew, maybe in her younger life.” I babbled, talking faster as the explanation went on. “Somebody she didn’t like, maybe someone who did bad things to her. It’s probably totally unconscious but she projected that image from inside herself onto me. It could’ve been an expression on my face, my mannerisms, almost anything.”

The Director frowned. She picked up a pencil and tapped it against the palm of her hand.

Dr. Forsberg laughed out loud and slapped his knee. “Transference!” He shouted. “That’s exactly it!”

The woman all in white smiled, showing bleached teeth. “This is a very Freudian explanation,” she agreed.

“Where did you get your education?” asked Dr. Forsberg.

I grinned back at him. “Oh, a few universities here and there.” I rubbed my chin.

Dr. Forsberg continued chuckling.

“What are you going to do about Kelly?” I asked Director Moss, who stood under the doorway glowering in her black pant suit with matching shoes.

“We’ll recommend the flower arranging course in the community,” she said.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” I told her. “She’s pretty unpredictable.”

Dr. Moss’s voice rose. “We cannot unduly restrict people’s progress here. Kelly has the privileges to take a course outside the hospital.”

“I think you should wait,” I said. “There’s something really not right with her.”

“That’s the doctor’s call,” Dr. Moss said. “We know what we’re doing.”

The following day, the Director called me in to a meeting with the Nursing Supervisor, Sam Dilli, a square-jawed guy sporting a thin salt and pepper moustache. To him, I was still a faceless new employee. They sat me down in a small room with a ceiling fan whirring above.

“What’s this meeting about?” I began.

“Well, Jackson, we heard that you’ve been a psychiatric patient,” said Moss. “At Broadmead Hospital.”

Dilli gave me a serious stare.

“Where did you hear that?” I asked.

“We can’t reveal the source.”

“I’ve never been a patient at Broadmead.”

“You’ve only worked here a month,” said Dr. Moss. “And we’ve found you have some unusual behaviours, like with those Swedish doctors the other day.”

“The doctors liked me,” I said. “We joked around. You were there, Director. You saw us.”

“You seemed quite stressed,” she said. “The way you were moving your hands and reciting tropes from Psychology 101.”

“It was part of my humorous presentation to the Swedes,” I told her.

“We’ll have to do a bit of a look-see,” Dr. Moss pulled her chair back. “Maybe ask for your medical records.”

“That sounds a bit heavy duty,” I said.

“Then it’s likely you’re hiding information,” Dr. Moss replied. “From the first time I saw you I thought maybe you might have some psychiatric issues. It’s nothing to be ashamed about.”

“It’s not that we know for sure you were a mental patient,” Sam Dilli chimed in. “But that you didn’t tell us your psychiatric history when you applied to work here.”

“Psychiatric history?” I asked. “Was it patient Kelly C. who told you this stuff?”

“Like I said, we can’t reveal the source,” Dr. Moss said. “And we’re not talking about Kelly right now. We’re talking about you.”

After the meeting, I drove my old beater car with the front engine oil leak up to the mountain parking lot. Then I hiked into my hammock camp. I thought about Kelly. She saw right through me. She knew I was hanging on, trying to survive in my teacher niche, and she didn’t trust me. In fact, she wanted to get me in serious trouble. Maybe it was because I ratted on her about the alleged mouth glass, or, like I explained to the doctors, perhaps some transference from the past. Or maybe it was because she knew I was weak.

Funny thing was, Director Moss didn’t like me either. That was the problem with my getting to know people. They mistook me for someone else, someone flawed at best, mentally ill at worst.

Yes, maybe they were partially correct. Or very much so. I swung in my hammock and let the thoughts whirl and tumble. Would I be out of a job within the week?

Director Moss approved Kelly C. for the flower arranging course in the community, to be escorted by two hospital staff. A few days later, the glass munching girl wriggled though a washroom window at the program site and disappeared into the city. The police issued a bulletin, which made the news.

“On the loose! Psychotic daughter who pushed Mom over fire escape!” blared the headlines.

Dr. Moss appeared on TV, assuring the public that the hospital was completely safe, and this sort of thing happened rarely. In fact, this was the first time a prison transfer patient had bolted.

“I hope Kelly’s mother knows about this,” I told Melinda as we ate lunch together in the hospital cafeteria.

“Mom’s a human vegetable in a nursing home,” Melinda answered. “From landing on her head after her daughter’s big push. Or maybe Kelly’s actually the stepdaughter. In any case, two flights is a long way down, Jackson.”

Then she told me the escape story. “Yeah, Kelly used the old “I must use the john” trick at the flower arranging class. Lucky it wasn’t me escorting her that day. It was two rookies who didn’t check the size of the bathroom window.”

“Did you ever find out why she didn’t like me?”

Melinda ate a mouthful of sandwich, “She just said she thought you were really, really weird.”

“I like having lunch with you, Melinda,” I said.

The police caught Kelly a few days later, suntanning on Kitsilano Beach. According to Melinda, she told them “I’m not a bad person. See, I’m all nice and brown.”

Director Moss sent her back to the Alouette Valley Women's Prison.

Nursing supervisor Sam Dilli visited me at the school a few days after Kelly's capture. "You were right about that patient," he said. "I kind of underestimated you."

"That's understandable," I told him. "What's happening with the investigation into my background?"

"Oh, we stopped all that," he said. "Ali Moss wanted to go ahead, but because of the high profile escape she's stepping down for a bit."

"So, she's not the Director anymore?"

"For now. She's considering moving back to New Zealand."

"Was she the one who said I was a patient at Broadmead?"

"I can't tell you," said Sam. "Confidentiality. Sorry about that."

Six months later, I owned a relatively new Toyota Corolla and rented a basement apartment with a window that looked out onto a parking lot. I travelled back to my mountain camp a time or two to check how things were growing over, but I'd saved enough money to be done with living outside.

I ate lunch from time to time with Sam Dilli, who became the new RPI Director. He told me confidentially that after my initial job interview, Ali Moss was the only panel member who didn't want to hire me.

"She didn't like you, for some reason," he said.

"Maybe I reminded her of someone who'd treated her badly in the past," I told him.

I often thought of Kelly. Some of us cross borderlines much more easily than others. I wasn't caught out often after that wild interview, and I took great care to appear solid and steady at work. I willed my act into reality. From that time on, I hammocked only on summer holidays at the lake, just like all the other normal people.

TONY COND

RIGGED — A TRIP TO REMEMBER

Dad and I returned to the village of Rosseau, to sail our classic wooden sailboat, *Rufus*, back to the cottage at Strawberry Bay. Dad had planned that with a strong westerly wind, we could easily make the two-lake passage through the connecting Port Carling locks in one long day of sailing.

He was right about one thing: the wind was strong, westerly and steady.

It was an ambitious plan and I, his only crew, was up for the adventure, a total sailing distance of 32 miles. The wind being from astern, *Rufus* planed a good deal of the way down Lake Rosseau. It was really exciting! We really thrashed that first leg of the journey and I learned a lot about planing in *Rufus* that day! We arrived at Port Carling in plenty of time to get through the locks, or so we thought. This was our first problem, one which Dad had hoped wouldn't happen.

The vast majority of vessels traversing the locks were powerboats. Sailboats were a rare occurrence in the locks. It was the lockmaster practice to open the locks when he had full capacity in his first lock space, and he could allow all the powerboats through without having to go to the bother of manually opening the swing bridge for the road above. Having a low profile had its advantages, but *Rufus*'s 26-foot mast presented the opposite problem. The master of the swing bridge did not like sailboats and would typically, therefore, not open his bridge for one sailboat; we were faced with the prospect of having to de-rig the mast and realign our sailing schedule with the motorboats' progress ... a fact that really irked Dad.

After politely trying to sway the lockmaster's rigid operating procedure, Dad gave up and we went into one of the old dockside restaurants to get a bowl of hot soup and a sandwich while we waited for our opportunity. We chatted happily about the lock operation and watched the motorboats pass through flaunting their poor seamanship and complete disregard of boating manners. Nevertheless, we managed to get our supper, get through the lock and by about five o'clock Dad and I pushed off from the pier wall near the lock gate. We were behind schedule by a couple of hours!

Under an almost imperceptible following breeze, we eased into the Indian River, which connected Lake Rosseau to Lake Muskoka. The narrowness of the river and the surrounding trees severely restricted the unpredictable wind. We inched our way along, being regularly passed by the quick, effortless powerboats that had followed us into the locks. The continuous choppy waves created by the criss-crossing action of the motorboats' wakes spilled what little wind we had and made our progress laborious.

We entered Lake Muskoka soon after and managed to pick up a better breeze which whisked us down the lake and into the channel near the village of Beaumaris.

"Dad, I think we need to go ashore to take a leak," I announced.

"OK, there's a cottage on that little island over there. We'll ask the man on the dock if we can take a break there."

The gentleman invited us into his cottage where his wife offered us a drink and cookies. He showed me an ancient axe head with three Xs stamped into it that he had found on the island. He figured the axe had been lost by one of the early pioneers many decades previously.

We had kept a reasonably tight schedule up to this point, with the notable exception of the locks, but it was now late as we passed the village. The wind died to near nothing and our progress became a lethargic embarrassment. Our wake was now barely perceptible.

The *Mildred*, a beautiful white and mahogany-trimmed passenger steam yacht, cruised by us soundlessly as she departed the government dock at Beaumaris, now bound for her next and final port of call in the late evening. Dad and I marvelled at her sleekness, her majesty and her old-style sheer as she pulled away silently and effortlessly from our little *Rufus*, now rapidly losing way as the sun silently descended into the densely forested hills of the nearby islands.

The lake was rapidly becoming still, and I was unsure of myself in this setting. As a boy, I knew the lake as a dynamic friend I played in under sunny, blue skies on our familiar sandy beach.

This was new. This was different. This was unfriendly.

I peered about me with wide eyes and shivered. The lake grew quiet: there was no more motorboat traffic, no sound of distant engines. The birds cast about seeking perches for the night. The swallows silently dipped and dived, devouring mayflies, mosquitos, gnats and any other aerial insect. The shadows grew long, and the islands' rocks hid below the towering dark pines which had mysteriously lost their soft green colour. The blueness of the sky faded into a bold greyish hue that reminded me of my impending hunger and my warm bed, which seemed endless hours away. As the nearby islands' greenness dissolved into black silhouettes against the azure sky, all colour disappeared into the black hole called night. The sound of waves against the shore was conspicuously absent. The silence was eerily deafening! Not even a ripple! I shivered again unconsciously and looked all around hoping for a sign of life. There was none. This was a lonely situation. Luckily I wasn't alone. Dad was a solid comfort. I could always depend on my wonderful dad.

He noticed my unease and mustered a sweater for me. He fumbled in his coat pocket with his free hand and passed over a piece of a partly eaten chocolate bar. We weren't prepared to spend the night in the boat, but the sweet chocolate really helped.

The sails flapped uselessly to our slightest movement in the boat in the breezeless air. It was our habit to whisper under the calm, quiet conditions; we had always done that for some reason. Maybe it was the sudden closeness of our new, quiet environment? Was it because there was some unspoken superstition about scaring away the miserly wisp of wind? Or was it simply because sound travelled so easily and so far over the water, especially at night?

Later, Dad would tell me that he was thinking about how he would have liked to call Mum from Port Carling to assure her we were all right. Well, our cottage had no telephone and cell phones had not been invented, so that wasn't possible. He didn't want to shake my confidence, so he kept those ideas to himself.

"Look at that foggy mist over there," he whispered.

"I wonder what it is," I queried. "It's yellowish and scary."

"It's called swamp gas," Dad answered, a little unsure himself of its creation.

I cuddled closer to my big, protective dad, a man who knew how to sail; he would get us out of here and home, I was confident of that. We'd never dumped our boat before, and Dad had resolved all other boating situations we had ever been through without any problems. My sense of security suddenly increased as I thought about my dad being with me. *That's what dads are for*, I thought.

Again detecting my fears, Dad was determined to maintain my faith in him. Hours had passed. Using an old sailors' technique pulled from Davy Jones' locker, he whistled a short tune as though he was summoning Beaver.

"What are you doing, Daddy?" I asked.

“Oh, that’s called ‘whistling up a breeze,’” he answered brightly, trying to raise my spirits.

“Does it work?” I queried hopefully, not really believing him but wanting to know there was some relief to our situation. I needed hope at that desperate point.

“Absolutely!” He grinned in fatherly confidence. “Just watch.”

He whistled again. I felt some goosebumps and a thrill go up my spine. I shuddered. I wanted to believe in this silly tactic, but I had my doubts. A few long moments later, an imperceptible puff of wind created a magic ripple on the water. It disappeared.

We both saw it and felt it on our faces.

We gasped and looked at each other in the hopes that we weren’t imagining what we both dearly wanted to believe. Could that ripple have been a hint of a breeze? Was the whistling up a breeze myth true? We sat in silence waiting for a repeat performance to secure our belief. The long pause created doubt. When another wisp of wind finally puffed, I felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This was spooky. It faltered though, and everything went dead again. I was questioning everything at this point. I breathed a short sigh of relief to mask my fear, but Dad, sensing my disbelief, conjured up some more sailor magic.

“Tony, very slowly, without bumping or shaking the boat, reach over and just touch the paddle as if you’re going to pick it up and use it.”

“What’s that going to do, if we don’t use it?” I asked with a boyishly disbelieving tone.

“You’ll see,” came the soft reply through a wry smile while he repeated, “You’ll see.”

I leaned over and did as bid. Almost on cue, a light puff appeared on the water ahead of the boat. It was close to eleven o’clock and we had been drifting several hundred yards from the Beaumaris dock for about 90 minutes. The cold moon shone down through some clouds, allowing some visibility. We were cold, tired, hungry and discouraged. Were we destined to be here all night? *Rufus’s* Egyptian cotton sails shifted from their lifeless position into a slight fullness and the dinghy fairly responded with a barely perceptible wake. We were moving again! I was a believer.

“Hooray!” we cheered. We looked around sheepishly in case anyone had observed our silliness. It was black and the lake was empty of any human existence. It didn’t matter. I wouldn’t have to look at that spooky fog anymore: we were sailing again. Our wake grew with our hopes.

Under a broad reach, we approached the end of Browning Island about half an hour later, a landmark we knew well. I convinced myself things were going to be fine. As I was getting drowsy, Dad asked me if I wanted to lie down alongside the centreboard box where our German Shepherd Beaver usually lay. I looked around for something to stretch out on and found the old green adult-size life jacket. This cotton-stuffed thing was seriously out of date, but as padding for my tired body against *Rufus’s* oak ribs, it was perfect. Dad found one of his extra coats and draped it over me. It warmed me instantly, and I lay there looking skyward into the deep black universe that was punctuated by the moon and studded with millions of diamond-like stars.

“A shooting star,” I said, pointing skyward.

“Oh yes. Look at it go,” Dad said, trying to keep up the spirit of the moment. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

We both stared in awe at the phenomenon. It made me feel like a minuscule being in a large, lonely universe — and in a large, lonely lake. I’m sure my dad felt much the same, but he was keeping his thoughts to himself to avoid scaring me. I thought of the hundred or so feet of deep, black, cold water I was separated from by a quarter inch of cedar planking: scary idea. I

quickly turned my thoughts to our situation. Directly above my face was the solid ash tiller and my dad's big hand that guided *Rufus* so competently toward home and my warm bed. I closed my eyes. My dad was my saviour. He knew what he was doing. *Rufus* was my carrier. They would both deliver us home ... I believed it. I closed my eyes and dozed off with confidence as Dad guided *Rufus* in the light breeze. I was safe.

Well after midnight, we entered a more familiar part of the lake. Browning Island was on our starboard beam, and Bald Point was about a mile and a half in the distance to port. We stayed clear of the land even though we knew the lake held no underwater surprises. *Rufus* was really moving along nicely. After a short sleep, I woke up and moved forward to help Dad man the jib sheet as we headed toward the centre of the lake and aimed for our unlit home port of Strawberry Bay about two miles away. In the darkened, gloomy distance we could see the whitish glow of Mr. Frowe's clapboard boathouse, a fuzzy dot on the horizon which we used as a destination lighthouse.

By about 0100, there was no other boat activity on the lake and there were only a few cottage lights visible along the far shore. *Rufus*, being a small sailboat, had no running lights, so we were invisible with the exception of the partial moonlight on our white sails. We ghosted along, confident we would arrive home within an hour or two.

Suddenly there was a roar! We spun around in utter shock, searching madly for the source of the disturbance.

A motorboat?

None was visible!

What could this noise be? Our hearts fluttered momentarily ...

And then a seaplane zoomed past us overhead. The pilot had been searching for a landing place in the middle of the lake and had seen our white sails at the last second, so he hit the throttle to ascend and veered out of danger. A close call, indeed! We were visibly relieved. The plane circled, and then, reassured of our location and direction, the pilot managed to drop his plane safely onto the lake about a half mile aft of us.

"What was a plane doing out here at this time of night?" I wondered aloud.

The pilot undoubtedly asked himself the same question of us.

We had never sailed at night before, and having just experienced a true fright, we realized we should have had boat lights fitted. We should have had a flashlight to shine on the sails to warn other craft. In retrospect, we were just as guilty as the pilot.

As we approached Strawberry Bay, Dad cupped his hands and called out "Ruth!" in his customary manner to get Mum's attention. She told us later that she heard the familiar beckon and walked down to the water's edge to greet us and take me back to the cottage for a well-earned sleep. What a welcome sight she was. Dad put *Rufus* to bed at her mooring. I didn't stick around for that process: my bed was calling me. When Dad finally crept into the cottage almost an hour later, I was in the far distant land of nod. It had been a long night, but an adventure I would never forget.

TERMINAL HUMANISM

The term *idiot savant* (French for "learned idiot") was first used to describe the condition in 1887 by Dr. John Langdon Down and if you find yourself recoiling at the conflation of those two French nouns, you should remember that the doctor coined the term in 1887 and also that presently it is not a recognized disorder according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The term "savant syndrome" is now used to describe individuals with impaired cognitive functioning but who exhibit superior skills in a few areas, usually computational or calendric. It is rare, with only about one in a million persons affected.

Today, I believe there is a much higher incidence of a social disorder which I would term "idiot arrogant." They are the people George Burns had in mind when he quipped, "Too bad that all the people who know how to run the country are busy driving taxicabs and cutting hair." Our tolerance of such people leads, I say, to a form of terminal humanism, a collapse of the very compassionate culture that was too nice to tell them they really are idiots.

On the front lines of those suffering the attacks of such people are teachers, and the assault usually comes not from a cabbie but from a parent who is certain their child has superior intellect and is just not being taught well enough. It used to be only elementary school teachers who had to confront this sort of nonsense, but now it has become common at secondary schools and even universities. And they now have the additional ammunition of "trigger words" that will send these sensitive little intellects into panic attacks or just plain offend them. To ask that such dithering protesters actually use the conventions of the English language in their essay assignments and observe the agreed-upon due dates for those assignments will be taken as evidence of high-handed disregard for their unique form of intelligence. It all started out so well in the Age of Enlightenment but has gone maddeningly, even dangerously off track.

Erasmus and Voltaire and other humanist philosophers could see the end of the divine right of kings and they advocated for a rule of "rational sentiment" or social responsibility over blind adherence to church doctrine or royal whim. Well at some point that "sentiment" became the new religion, and the new ruler, and the school of Humanism became a terminal affliction. Sentiment has been perverted into the valorization of mere "feelings" such that what one "feels" to be true is more important than the evidence of reason and science. Our own John Ralston Saul has chronicled our fall from grace and graciousness in his *Voltaire's Bastards* [Voltaire's Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West], but the lesson didn't take.

"Terminal humanism" is my descriptor for one particularly cowardly type of media response by these idiot arrogants to recent evil events. Humanism now does not mean that "the proper study of mankind is man" as Pope would have it; rather, it suggests that anything one deems significant to oneself, really is or should be, significant to all in society at large. I call it "terminal" because of where it leads, individually and collectively. The Facebook posting of yesterday's restaurant meal may get a few "likes" from people not yet "unfriended" but at least the desire for recognition behind the post causes no harm beyond a slight lowering of societal IQ. Other acts are more serious, often deadly.

Cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo Corporation in Paris were massacred by gunmen claiming to be acting as agents of Islamic retribution for drawings created at that establishment and deemed blasphemous of the prophet Mohammed and the religion of Islam. Editorialists in a surprising number of Western newspapers gave the opinion that publications and cartoonists who

displayed such work were agents of their own calamity. They advised doing nothing that would incite such heinous acts. Others criticized the cartoonists themselves for the crude humour and tasteless quality of the cartoons. No Western newspapers reprinted any of the offending work in question. It was left to a commentator from a Middle Eastern university to chastise the editorialists for “the shameful burkha of silence that has descended over the free press of the Western nations.”

Yes, I thought the cartoons were crude by my personal standards — and I saw them all, posted on bulletin boards in Paris. Affronts to my aesthetic, even spiritual taste, however, do not excuse murder. When visual art becomes justification for killing, and media gatekeepers advise media producers to acquiesce to the agents of that slaughter, we have reached a point as a society where the shallow tweet or Facebook like have become the standard for value. And we in North America are not exempt from manifestation of this extreme need on the part of the idiot arrogant to achieve at all costs some form of media fame, and for some that is the only kind of fame in today’s world.

It was a thirst for fame that motivated a gunman who, in 1982, waited for John Lennon to exit his apartment and then killed him, because, as he said, he wanted his name to go down in history as the man who shot John Lennon. His name has come up six times since then in parole appeals, all of which have been denied. Two commentators on the event managed to write thought-provoking articles on his insane behaviour without ever mentioning his name. His clipping file in his cell must be the only reminder of his life’s brief intersection with fame.

Today, QAnon with all its reawakened antisemitism, anti-feminist, anti-communist, anti-everything-we-don’t-like distortions and lies is the most recent dangerous influence insinuated into our information, data-driven society. Well, factchecking can also be done at the speed of fingers on a keyboard and the effort to track down original sources is worth the effort. Humanism is not dead, only perverted for shallow purposes by shallow people who can, with today’s technology, be producers of their own news. Media literacy has never been more important in a world where our reputable sources of print and broadcast news must be rigorous in their fact checking, but social media knows no such restraint. It is where the most egregious lies can be retweeted thousands of times before breakfast and “travel halfway around the globe while truth is lacing up its boots.” And if you think Mark Twain coined that expression you have been as misinformed as I was until I checked to discover its attribution to Jonathan Swift, author of *Gulliver’s Travels* or more to the point of this topic, “A Modest Proposal.”

Still, humanism, that belief in the ability of *Homo sapiens* the sentient to use the evolved power of both sides of his thinking organ to temper logic with intuition and power with compassion is being sorely tested. It ~~needn’t be terminal if it pulls itself out of the slop of emotional trivia that drives so much of the bombast and fear of this time and~~ needs to reaffirm its roots to initiate a new age of reason. Although I can hear the tone of the zealot in my own language there, I hope and work for a world where we live in some harmony with our planet and all of its creatures, and the idiots may be left to gibber and boast and complain among themselves.

ANDREW RUSSO

DEATH OF AN ACADEMIC

Turning away. The thing my own father avoided when working. Never stopping the task before him to answer my question or play outside. Often met with anger, sometimes passivity, I instead turn to my son when he knocks. I want to say I turn with enthusiasm, as a father should in such instances. When their child wants advice, or comfort, or just a shared space. Instead, delay and passivity, eyes darting back toward the screen. Children are remarkable because they can register and remember such things. They lack the filters to hold their opinion inside.

“Can we do something, Dad?”

Before an answer left the recesses of my occupied mind, “You look tired, dad. It's OK. I'll grab you Snorlax.”

Snorlax. My son presented the stuffed Pokémon to me one Christmas. Saving in secret, he requested help wrapping the gift. His mother obliged. I never could wrap a gift. Nor, she explained, should Dad help in this instance. At seven, he reasoned that Snorlax was my favorite Pokémon. Snorlax leads a life devoid of complexity. Snorlax spends his days eating and sleeping, content within simple limits. Furthermore, Snorlax resembled the Buddha. I was a Buddhist. A struggling one at that, but a Buddhist all the same. Thus, in child logic, Snorlax would bring me back to the path of sleepy, satiated, enlightenment. The result of my son's logical strands appeared before me with pointy blue ears and sleep-infused smile that Christmas morning. The moment remains one of the most joyful of my life.

Yet the gift was not a mere polyester critter. What was actually in the box was the evidence that my son had been watching me carefully enough to know me. My 7-year-old son could see something about me that I had refused to see for years. He knew I was tired. He sensed pain. He knew, in the way children know things before they have language for them, a struggle afflicted Dad. His solution was to bring me a stuffed animal then, and retrieve it for me now. A companion, non-judgmental and supportive.

That evening, it all broke me. Not metaphorically. Something in the chest cavity; an actual structural failure. Snorlax offered irrefutable evidence that academia was killing me.

A purposeful series of barriers, academia challenges eager doctoral students from the start. Barriers that weed out rather than shore up. For instance, a committee member withdrawing support. Failing a qualifying exam. A research hypothesis shredded and rejected by a reviewer. If, in the unlikely chance the defense of an idea succeeds, a world of struggle awaits.

A committee assignment denied.

A request for first author declined.

A reviewer's critique retorted.

A paper never cited.

Ever-present, too, encounters with physical and mental afflictions. Badges of a sort worn around the eyes. Awarded for the transgressions of stress, overwork and meagre pay. Dehumanizing calculations dominate a budding academic. Cold and rational calculations determining if the free wine and finger foods justify the conference fee. I spent 10 years meandering through such tortuous tribulations. Trials leading to definitive answers to which conferences paid for themselves with free food. Which ones offered decent food? I share my findings with colleagues. Declaring with a confidence interval worthy of rapid publication in *The Lancet*, the best free conference fare is not at Oxford. It's in Montreal. But possessing such

profound understanding of academic gastronomy never soothes the sting of rejection. Nor the paper published that still lacks citations. When arriving at such a position, you don't worry about perishing. Everyone else perishes. Until, suddenly, it's you.

Returning to the critique on my article, Snorlax in lap, I retort. Fascism is, in fact happening. The phenomenon is broadly regarded as a net loss for society. With that aside, focus now turned to the unsolicited request for a journal review. My son remained in the room. Everything hurt.

In the morning I read the email twice. I questioned who had sent it. I questioned why. I wavered between surprise and disappointment. Then I got angry in a way that was, by any reasonable accounting, disproportionate to the offense. However, the response was reminiscent of earlier days. Another routine indignity to suffer through. A routine indignity absorbed hundreds of times over a decade. The disproportion is the part of the story I am trying to understand. Neither the journal, nor the editor, are terrible. Neither sought harm. Seeking reviewers, even unsolicited, is a honed and time-honoured tradition of monetization in academic circles. Offering a tiny scrap of credibility in exchange for free labour. One distasteful, but accepted, academic norm. As an academic, thriving requires swallowing one's pride. Ignoring the cavalcade of small bureaucratic rudenesses dispensed over a career. All remind you of where you belong. Rarely do you belong at the top. Your time, attention, expertise and ideas are not your own. They belong to the field. The field could draw on them at will. The field had a database and it needed tithing. The field discovered my insolvency. My response left no room for misinterpretation.

I asked why I had been registered as a journal reviewer without my consent. I asked whether the parties understood that peer review is, in principle, voluntary. I framed my argument carefully, politely, academically. I hit send. Then the panic set in. I committed academic *seppuku*: refusing a well-established peer on the subject of agency.

This is the part where most quit-lit essays declare an awakening and a clean break. No awakening here. No clean break. Instead, a small, polyester Snorlax in my lap. Three sleepless nights in which the actual question that surfaced was not whether to leave academia but whether I had any idea who I was outside of it. Trained for years under the understanding that the labour was meaningful and just compensation for the toil. Seventy-hour weeks, 30 to 40 of which were unpaid work that generated revenue for institutions, journals and conference organizers I had never met. Panels. Boards. Reviews. The endless small donations of expertise that the profession had learned to extract with the language of service. I had been giving my evenings and my mornings and my weekends to faceless organizations all over the world. My son had been watching. What my son had learned about his father from watching was that his father was tired all the time. Was he really a father? The answer was: not really. I had been a professor before I had a PhD. I had been a graduate student before I had been an adult. There was a person, a father, underneath all of it, but he was faint, and he had been faint for a long time.

My partner had been applying for jobs for over a year. The Dutch market had nothing for her, so she had quietly extended her search across the Atlantic, more in hope than in expectation. A week after Snorlax comforted my exhaustion and regret, she received an offer from a Canadian employer. Vancouver Island. A salary that would let one of us stop working for a while if we needed to. A real house, with rooms, in a place where the sky was not the colour of wet concrete eight months of the year.

Resist the temptation to label the turn of events as fate. It was not fate. It was a job offer that arrived at the only moment in our adult lives when we were both ready to accept what it

implied. If it had come a year earlier I would have asked her to turn it down. If it had come a year later I am not sure our marriage would have been around to celebrate it. It came when it came, and we said yes, and within two months it was over. No more committee positions. Collaborations ended. A small grant for wildfire research, given back. Ending it all in a whirlwind of apologies and inadequate emails to the few colleagues I had loved.

My son is enrolled in a school where he has, for the first time in his life, a grassy playground. He has made a friend. He has not yet asked me what I do for a job, which is a mercy, because I do not know how to answer. No longer the academic, the professor, the researcher. What he has noticed, and what he has told me, is the fatigue has faded from my eyes. Those badges reduced. He said it the way he says most important things, which is in passing, while doing something else, as if the observation were plainly factual and simple. No need to dwell further.

Snorlax resides on a shelf in the new house, near the writing desk. He still has the goofy sleeping smile. He still looks, frankly, like the Buddha. I have not yet decided whether he is a reminder of what I almost lost or a reminder of who saw me before I could see myself. I think he might be both. I think that is what objects given to us by the people who love us are for. My son was right about me. He was nine, and he was right about me, and the correct response to being seen that clearly by a child is not to write an essay about it. The correct response is to become, slowly and with great difficulty, the father he already believed I could be.

I am working on it.

FICTION

KIM BANNERMAN

MOON DANCE

The full globe of the moon is a scrumptious puffball mushroom, suspended over the pinnacles of swaying cedar trees. Cradled in the branches, its round face glistens as if daubed with dew. Along the boundary between forest and sky, ephemeral moon rays outline black needles with silver highlights.

To the moon, floating high above the forest: there is where I must go. I yearn to feast upon it. An impossible task for a little banana slug, perhaps, but I find myself driven by an impulse deeper than reason or fear.

In recent memory, I baked in the heat of summer afternoons and curled into a tight ball under crisp fern fronds as my entire body ached. When evening brought cooler temperatures, I sought the low spaces where moisture collects, but the earth was too dry and no dew appeared. My green-yellow skin threatened to crack. My single foot burned on the sun-seared earth. Mushrooms wizened into husks; there was hardly a morsel worth eating. I feared I'd shrivel up, too, into a tiny grey knot peppered with black dots.

When, finally, a scant fog arrived, the moss perked up and the witch's butter returned. Relief flooded my poor bruised heart. I ate my fill and then some! My skin grew supple again, and I stretched and swelled, flexed my limber foot. Then the first rains fell, trickling down through the speckled leaves and tiny twigs, coalescing into rejuvenating drops that tasted sweet. Silky mud returned. The heat of summer relented. Cool autumn revived.

For days, I munched on slippery jacks and fly agarics. I nibbled on lichens and lungwort. I delighted in deer droppings and wind-fallen salmonberries, felted with white mould. I found satisfaction in the raspy crunch against my radula as I scraped nutrition from the bountiful forest floor.

And then, the full moon took flight.
Has anything ever looked so dazzling?

It swells from the eastern horizon like a speckled bolete cap rising from damp soil. Mesmerized, I can barely tear my gaze away. It weaves through the upper canopy, hiding and peeking down at me, calling out through the breeze like a whispered, half-forgotten melody.

I set my foot upon the bark of a hemlock tree. What does the moon taste like? Is it musky, like a fresh chanterelle? Or does it have the rotting tang of an old oyster mushroom? The tree is as rough as sand under my foot, but once I soften the bark's surface with slime, the fringe of my skirt dances over the blessed imperfections, and clinging thusly, I climb.

Inch by inch, I rise above the forest floor. Soon I'm higher than the tops of the sword ferns and spindly huckleberry sprigs. Delicious scents envelop me. Is this the fragrance of the cosmos, sweeping down to encourage me? The moon continues its transit over the trees, then starts a graceful descent into the west. My path takes me out along a twisting branch, where the

surface is already blunted by a silvery trail of slime that tastes as familiar to me as the inside of my own cheek.

A friendly form waits near the tip of the tree limb. The body is stout, strong, and stalwart, covered with glossy yellow skin and patterned with comely black spots. The mantle is shapely, unblemished, and beautiful. Another pair of translucent eyestalks stretches toward the hypnotic moon, drawn by its sublime grace, just as I have been.

Side by side, we watch the sky in mutual admiration. Our mantles delicately touch, offering friendship in the midst of a lonely autumn night.

The moon makes us giddy. Slowly, we begin to dance. It is a silent waltz of two sinewy bodies, spiralling around each other, tasting each other's intentions with our sensitive feet. Skirts flicker like kisses. The beautiful moon is forgotten under a barrage of radulae nips — nothing so violent as to injure, of course, but just enough to thrill. Soon, flower structures as pale as ghost pipes emerge, slipping into each other's gonopore to deposit bodily gifts, deep within each spermatheca.

The moon sinks and, in satisfaction, so do we.

Our dance has manifested a froth of slime, and, safely encapsulated within this glistening bolus, we slip around the side of the branch and begin to dangle. Like all our motions, our descent is slow and controlled. We sink on a linguini string of thick mucus until, after only a few heartbeats, we hang above the forest floor in a passionate embrace. Like the moon, we are swaying in a black sky; our joining has transformed us into a cosmic orb of black and yellow, gleaming with silver moisture and starlight, and revolving slightly with each muscular contraction. We remain untouched by dirt, tree, gravity or concern. We exist outside of time, suspended in darkness.

Too soon, the moon sets.

Exhaustion overtakes us. Our chemical conversation of scent and slime finds agreement in parting, and we disentangle, breaking that linguini string and letting gravity claim us. The fall is not far enough to injure, but as our embrace cracks apart, the impact knocks a little sensation back into my boneless body. The forest floor feels hard and lonely under my aching foot.

The scent of a nearby mushroom promises a satisfying meal, if I choose to follow it down to the trickling spring in the hollow. With precious gifts traded, there's no further need for companionship, so we part ways, never to cross slime trails again. We both know winter is coming. When cold temperatures arrive, we will abandon our cares for mushrooms or moons: we are destined to return to that existence outside of time, afloat in comfortable darkness.

But under the snow, my eggs will lie protected by an insulating blanket of rotting leaves, and when the pale trilliums unfurl their fresh leaves, heralding the first blush of spring, the luscious fruits of our slow moon dance will emerge, hungry and wriggling and eager to live.

MICHAEL MAITLAND
YOGURT AND MAYONNAISE

She sensed Mark's unease the moment he picked her up at the halfway house. As he drove, his slate-blue eyes, glassy from the drive, focussed on the road. His thinning hair shone in the receding winter light. His gnarled hands clenched the steering wheel. As they neared home, Mark cursed and then shrugged apologetically. He'd taken the wrong turn. They both knew it was easier for them when they took the second exit. The closer they got to the centre of town, the more Delores fought to control her anxiety. She slouched into the passenger door, massaged her palm with her thumb. He reassured her with a pat of his right hand.

"It's going to be all right," he said, his hand cold.

She stared at his knuckles, chipped and calloused from decades of felling trees, the same hands that held hers through the daily walk to and from the courthouse, through the gamut of cameramen, photographers and reporters, each jostling to get in their daily news quota. Worst of all were the downcast eyes, or worse, the glares and looks of neighbours and former friends, the angry voices on the phone calling her a baby killer. Didn't they know? Delores sold homes for a living.

She lifts his hand, presses it against her cheek, kisses it in a quiet show of love and gratitude, a gesture so foreign, she can't remember when she last offered an act so simple yet so intimate. As he attempts to return his hand to the steering wheel, she presses it against her breast. Her breasts have always been a special part of who she is. In high school, when her father's drinking buddies or her brother's friends spoke to her, their eyes would inevitably drift to her chest. It made her feel special.

Their separation, while she was in provincial jail, followed by her release to a halfway house, has left them uncertain as to what lies ahead. Delores is cautiously optimistic that they will be able to stitch together what remains of their marriage. She's accepted the humiliation of living with small town guilt. She wonders if time does heal. The signs are encouraging. Mark has gained back the weight he lost from the stress of it all. He's smiling again and seems content building birdhouses in the basement.

Mark turns the truck onto Main Street, past the community park, the car dealerships and fast-food outlets. To the left, defying the cutting wind from the bay, plastic wreaths, laid during Remembrance Day ceremonies, stand erect on the municipal cenotaph. They were offered with small town sobriety, made even more poignant knowing the Island had lost two of their own in Afghanistan; the son of a Campbell River fisherman killed early in the war outside Kabul and the daughter of the local Presbyterian ministers who was shot in the back while handing candy out to children.

As they near the speed bump where Delores lost control of her car and her life, she takes a deep breath. The boy's impromptu memorial, once overflowing with flowers, cards and toys, has been reduced to a plastic bouquet, a kindergarten picture and a teddy bear taped to the light pole, all wrapped in cellophane as protection from the weather. The municipal workers dare not touch the shrine. The wound of losing a 5-year-old boy in this small town remains a raw memory.

Mark parks the truck outside the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment. As she opens the truck door, Delores turns to him. Mark, hunched over the steering wheel, stares at his cell phone. He looks up, blinks a blank stare and offers her a reassuring thumbs up.

Constable Martin lifts his eyes in a sombre greeting. She did not expect to see him still here. Constables with early posting in small towns view these as whistle stops before heading to Vancouver rather than a place to settle down and raise a family. Constable Martin was first on the scene, the first to try to breathe life into the dying boy, the first to interview Delores and lead her to his cruiser for the breathalyzer test. He'd been the first to testify against her in court.

She signs the registry and leaves.

Mark turns the truck in the direction of the house. Passing the elementary school, Delores cringes at the oversized photograph of Ted Green on the transit bench: *Ted Green Your #1 Up Island Realtor Integrity Honesty Trust*. The picture, streaked with rain, is that of a youthful Ted, before his second divorce and after his skin cancer scare. He'd sewed his wild oats at Queen's University before dropping out to work radio stations in small towns across Ontario. He returned to the Island and, with a leg up from family connections, started to make money in real estate.

Theirs is the only house on the block with a for sale sign on the lawn. Mark parks in front of the garage. Across the street, Mrs. McGinty stares at them through her picture window, a feather duster in her hand frozen mid-air like a conductor's baton. I'm not a monster, Delores thinks. There is no need to hide your grandchildren. Mrs. McGinty stabs the feather duster at an imaginary cloud of dust before turning away. Grunting with effort, Mark hauls the suitcase from the truck and pulls it through the front door. Delores pauses as she steps inside the house, breathing in the welcoming atmosphere of her home of 27 years. The house is a pool of memories: the elation of the purchase; raising children; welcoming their first grandchild; the ceremonial burning of the mortgage. Small town hopes and dreams that collapsed in a single moment.

The litigation, mired in the details of the final settlement while the lawyers bicker over costs and fees, is almost complete. Delores recalls the lawyer telling them, his voice factual, professional, how fortunate they were that it had been the son and not the mother who had died. The quantum damages — as if there were any physics to the value of death and injury — would have been insurmountable had it been the mother who had died. Delores and Mark are resigned to losing the house, their only consolation being that the court can't touch their pensions. There will be enough to get by on, hopefully with some money left over to maybe buy a double-wide trailer in the park overlooking the river.

The house is cold. Mark has a habit of turning down the thermostat when he leaves. Delores turns the dial and waits for the familiar click followed by the whirl of hot air rushing through the vents. The house is relatively clean. Not Delores clean. But clean enough. In her absence, Mark hired a cleaning lady to come once a week so that the Realtor, Margaret Lampson, could show the house on short notice. Knowing the situation, Margaret had offered to sell the house for less than her standard commission.

Mark pulls the suitcase into the bedroom. Delores, in need of a cup of tea, inhales the familiar kitchen air as she fills the kettle and places it on the stove. She's hopeful. Life seems to be returning to normal she thinks as the familiar routine that comes from being married for over a quarter-century begins to unfold. Delores pulls open the cupboard doors, making a mental note of things she needs to pick up at the grocery store. She stares at the small changes in the refrigerator — the yogurt, the generic brand of mayonnaise. She shakes her head at the sight of the yogurt. No logger in his right mind would be found with yogurt in his lunch box. Mark jokingly refers to it as hippie food, a symbol of tree huggers and environmentalists. She stares at the jar of mayonnaise. They've always been a Hellman's family. *Bring out the Hellman's and bring out the best.*

Mark steps behind Delores, pulls a beer from the refrigerator, and asks how she's doing. OK, she replies. Without another word, he returns to the living room, slumps into his La-Z-Boy and clicks on the television. Delores warms herself over the stove as she watches the kettle come to a boil. Tea soothes her weariness. She then makes the two of them a simple dinner — a cheese omelette with brown toast. She sits alone in the kitchen while Mark eats in front of the television.

While she was in jail, Delores learned to keep her misery to herself. The suffering of the female inmates varied only by degree with hardship. Delores wasn't anything like the institutionalized lesbians making the transition from federal prison to civilian life after doing time for manslaughter. Or the 20-something drug-addicted prostitutes trying to straighten out their lives while in jail. There was Belinda, now deaf in one ear from a punch, compliments of her former boyfriend; Lucy, doing time for stabbing her husband while he slept. There was the middle-aged bookkeeper who tried to convince the girls to find God after she was found guilty of stealing money from the non-profit charity she ran; Jane, who tried unsuccessfully to smuggle a car full of weed across the border. Reaction to Delores's story varied from a dismissive shit happens shrug to a how-could-you-do-such-a-thing look. Delores was popular with the girls. She was good listener with a sympathetic ear. Most of all, she wasn't a bible-thumper.

With dinner finished and the kitchen counters wiped down, she joins Mark in the living room. Delores lingers with the passivity of an old cat, waiting for a single word, a signal from Mark to stay. He's never been one for small talk, preferring to take things into his own hands. She suppresses the urge to come between him and the hockey game on the television, to tell him what they both know, that he is angry and has been angry ever since it happened. He is angry for what she has done to him and their quiet little life. He slides his gaze from the television to her, opens his mouth as if to speak. Instead, he reaches for his beer, his eyes re-focussed on men fighting over a puck. Delores wants, needs, to smooth over the resentment that tethers him. She's willing to do whatever it takes to rid him of his humiliation, mend his broken pride, and make peace or something as close to it as possible. He looks up at her.

"Margaret phoned. Ted Green wants to show the house."

The mere mention of his name makes her blood boil. The gall, she silently rails. First, you testify against me and then try to get your mollygrubs on a commission.

"When?"

"Tomorrow. At nine. A couple from Alberta looking to retire. You don't have to be here you know."

"I know."

He takes a swig and turns his attention back to the game.

"Suit yourself."

Later, with the game over, Mark joins her in the bedroom. He undresses, climbs into bed, and turns away. They had long ago pushed intimacy into the background like memories of past warm holidays. What remains of an ebbing sex life is limited to what others call maintenance sex. Maintenance maintaining maintenance. Like cleaning hair out of the bathroom sink.

Delores lies on her side, her teeth clenched. She stares at the bedroom clock, the wall. Her eyes settled on a cobweb hanging from the ceiling. She would have to remind herself in the morning to sweep it away before the Albertans come. She eyes the dresser drawer thinking of the brown paper bag. She closes her eyes, knowing it would be ludicrous to bring that thing out now.

Delores wasn't wildly in love when she married Mark. She did what most girls intent on staying in small towns do. She followed her mother's advice and found a man who loved her more than she loved him. Her mother told her that would be enough to keep him from straying.

She followed a pattern established by her mother and her mother's mother. There would be no need for certificates or degrees. Early in their marriage, misunderstandings between them were overcome, power struggles smoothed over. As the joy of their newlywed status fell to the wayside to the practicalities of married life, a predictable pattern evolved. She and Mark followed a dull, predictable life in a dull, predictable town. They raised a family and sustained their marriage more by what was left unsaid rather than said. Delores assumed the role of the dutiful wife and custodial mother of their two girls, Barbara and Beth. She held part-time jobs; waitress, cashier, the front desk of the local resorts, each designed so she could walk the girls to school, Girl Guides, soccer and music lessons. The money Delores earned was hers to be used as she pleased, usually for pet projects like re-decorating, painting bedrooms and buying new carpet on their twentieth wedding anniversary. This was the same year that their oldest daughter, Barbara, announced she was pregnant. The father, an itinerant logger and enthusiastic amateur hockey player, worked just long enough to collect unemployment insurance when hockey season rolled around. Her daughter's sometimes desperate situation, combined with the boom in construction, prompted Delores to go into real estate. After years as an anonymous housewife and part-time service worker with its banal rituals, the synthetic *how are you today* and *have a nice day*, greetings and farewells, she suddenly felt like she was a somebody. She was a Realtor with her very own park bench sign, a new car and a new sense of herself.

It wasn't long before Delores realized that what one heard about Realtors was essentially true. Everyone and everything of legal age is a potential commission. There are honest realtors and backstabbing Realtors. The goal is to make money and nothing more. Pens in hands, they leave the office in the morning intent on getting a listing or closing a deal. Some leave their ethics behind and with a knife in the pocket for backstabbing. Cellphones are weapons for arranging affairs, flings and whatever else is needed to close a deal. Delores accepted that she, like any self-employed sales commission person, was no more than a mannequin with a well-rehearsed sales pitch. Realtors are not out to cure cancer or write the next great novel. They are no more than people with a choice: sell or starve. Before long, Delores began to view life through the same lens. Everyone and anyone was a meal ticket. Whatever rolled off her tongue was whatever needed to be said. She learned how much or little cleavage she needed to show.

Delores sits in the kitchen, the grey morning light and a cup of coffee her companions. She's startled by car lights shining through the sheer curtains and into the living room. Only when she hears car doors opening and closing does she remember it is Ted Green. Glancing through the window, she watches as he huddles with the Albertans before approaching the door and knocking.

The husband steps through the door, wheezing from the ocean air. His beer belly hangs over his Wrangler jeans. The wife dressed like she's come from a Hutterite fashion show, follows obediently behind. Her muffin top rolls over her jeans like leavened dough. Delores sizes up the couple. Small town. Conservative. Traditional. Oozing of black gold. They're looking to buy a house or two as an investment until they retire. The greeting between Ted and Delores, the usual hellos and you're looking goods, hides their mutual enmity. Mark steps up from the basement. He and Ted exchange small-town vagaries; pleasant chitchat and rumours; news of people neither of them care about but will inevitably run into at the grocery store.

Ted leads the couple around the house. Mark follows them into the basement. Delores returns to the kitchen. Ted's radio announcer turned Realtor pitch man voice tells the Albertans about current market conditions — volumes, prices and the demand for a three bedroom detached home within walking distance to downtown.

Ted was the second person to testify at Delores's trial. He postured his holier than thou voice for full effect as he summed up their lunch together and stretched the truth as close to a contemptuous lie as possible, trying to deflect any responsibility as far away from him as possible.

Three years ago, life was good. Delores and Mark were nearing their twenty-fourth wedding anniversary a magical benchmark when divorce and separation is the norm. They owned their home. She was a grandmother twice over. Everyone was making money, the tradesmen, the hoteliers, the restaurant owners, but especially the Realtors. Deep-pocketed JAFAs — Just Another Fucking Albertan — as they were called behind their backs, rolled into town. These prairie blue-eyed oil sheiks, with their king of the road, I-wannabe-a-Texan-when-I-grow-up attitude, came to town with open chequebooks, buying condos and homes with the blink of an eye, sending prices into the stratosphere.

It was the day of her third sale in a month and the fourteenth of the year. Delores had scheduled a celebratory lunch with Ted Green, the selling Realtor. Even by Realtor standards, he was a sleaze. Delores rarely drank, particularly at lunch. Today, however, she threw caution to the wind. After all, lunch was on Ted's dime, although she knew his true motivation was to try to chat her into his bed. They shared a bottle of wine over real estate small talk about deals done and deals lost. When she left, she was a bit tizzy, but nothing she would consider over-the-limit. Besides, the office was less than a five minute drive away. As she passed the car dealership, she glanced enviously at a Cadillac Escalade on the lot.

Nothing but the best for me, she thought. Cranking the volume of the country tunes on the radio, she nailed the accelerator to the floor. She'd have just enough time to check into the office before heading to Toys R Us in Nanaimo to get a birthday present for her granddaughter's third birthday.

As Delores passed the cenotaph, her phone rang. She reached for the phone as the Lexus bounced over a speed bump. Her hand slipped off the wheel. The car veered to the right, skirting the rear fender of a red Toyota parked on the street, passing a young woman on the sidewalk, her face frozen in fear as metal on metal screeched like a nail on a chalkboard. The Lexus scraped along the side of a Ford Taurus, pushing it into the car parked in front of it. The impact triggered the airbag which hurled Delores back into her seat as the car jarred to a halt. Lifting herself up, brushing herself off, Delores checked herself in the mirror. Everything was intact. No blood. Make-up fine. Just a fender bender, she thought. Am I over the limit she wondered as she popped a breath mint into her mouth?

Then she heard the woman's piercing scream. *Someone help me. Someone help me, please.*

The woman clutched a small bundle of a boy wedged between the two cars. Stroking his hair, she whispered into his blood-soaked ear. *It's going to be all right Joey. Joey, Joey, hang in there. Mommy's right here. Mommy's here.* People gathered and stared. Sirens wailed. First responders arrived. In that cruel moment the boy died, irretrievable parts of Delores' life died too.

While she was incarcerated, Delores and Mark discussed possibly moving away, starting fresh where they could blend into the anonymity of a larger city. Stoic in his Scottish stock, he remained inflexible. Given a choice of principle over practical, he reasoned they were from here, had roots here. People would respect that Delores had done her time, had paid the price for her lack of judgment. It was a place that they thought forgave and forgot. But it didn't.

Later than day, after Ted and the couple had completed their tour, Margaret Lampson phoned. There was a clean offer, subject to an inspection. Mark and Delores greeted the news with ambivalent silence.

“I’m leaving you,” he said that night over dinner.

His words lacked triumph. It was as if he were gazing at a half-built birdhouse, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. For a brief moment, Delores’ panicked heart clenched his words into a fist. Then she remembered the yogurt and the mayonnaise. He had someone new, a woman whose past needed no cleansing. Mark had given for so long he no longer had anything left to give.

She could say something yet knew there was nothing more to say.

RED

"You can't stay long, Jackie," Grandma Jenny says, her voice almost a whisper. "It's not safe." We're sitting at the old picnic table in the back yard of her house in Prince George, the yellow one on Laurier Crescent that she and Grandpa Ben bought long before I was born. We sit in the warm evening air under the old birch tree, its leaves silver in the moonlight that makes my dirty grey singlet glow. Grandpa Ben's old dark red cardigan is wrapped around Grandma's shoulders, and my heart twinges as I think of him. We cradle mugs of tea in our hands and keep our voices low.

The kid in me wants to sit in the yard forever. Summer evenings when I was little, we'd sit at this same table and play crib or dominoes, and she'd knit between turns, needles clicking in the night air. I always felt safe and calm there, the way I never felt being dragged between Mom's house and Dad's apartment, listening to them slag each other.

"I've got nowhere else to go," I say, my voice shaking. "Everyone else in the Vancouver network's gone — dead or in jail, I don't know." I stop to catch my breath, pushing down a rising tide of blackness inside me, images of them being shot or waterboarded. Ali being gang-raped. I feel sick to my stomach. Maybe they think I double-crossed them.

"You blew up a pipeline," Grandma says, "and killed some Yank soldiers. What d'you expect? You got away at least. Thank God for that."

"I went to find Dad, but he wasn't home. Hadn't been there for a while, a neighbour said."

Grandma takes a deep breath. "He was here. Last week. Came through in the middle of the night."

"So where —"

"He's gone north again. Back up to Fort St. James. I asked him what he was up to, but he just said 'you don't want to know.' He's prob'ly trying to get people organized up there now. He just can't stop." She looks down at the table for a few seconds. "He should never have dragged you into all this business. You were just a kid, for God's sake."

I feel my jaw clenching. "I was old enough to fight back, not just let those bastards walk in and take over, like some people did. Look at them now, all comfortable and —"

Grandma shakes her head. "You sound just like your dad. Not everyone's like him — like us. They're scared, trying to keep their heads down. No point blaming them." She crosses her arms and hugs herself.

We sit there, Grandma looking intently at me with those dark, clever eyes. She's smaller and thinner than I remember, and moves more creakily, but those eyes haven't changed. And that broad forehead, under close-cropped white hair.

If Grandpa Ben was still alive, maybe he'd crack a little joke to ease the tension. But he's not.

"Your mom — you haven't heard from her?"

"Not since the day they arrested her. I think she's still in that work camp in Chilliwack. But no one knows."

"What is it — four years now?"

"More," I say, looking down at the picnic table.

That day. The images are all strung together in my mind, vivid but jumbled and jerky. We were standing on the sidewalk, Mom and me, part of the crowd, some silent and seething, some jeering at the American soldiers and tanks moving up Granville Street, while helicopters chattered way overhead and drones swarmed around us like giant mosquitos. I remember bricks and rocks flying, one brick lobbed from somewhere behind us hitting a soldier as he marched by, his face erupting in red plumes as he staggered and fell. Grim-faced troops waded into the crowd, one soldier coming right at me until Mom stood in his way and he struck out at her with his rifle butt one, two, and when she fell, he hit her again, and other soldiers picked her up by the arms and legs, her head hanging limp, blood dripping to the ground, a bone sticking out of her arm as they swung her into the back of a truck with olive-green canvas and a white star, and I backed away screaming as the crowd closed in between us.

"There was nothing you could do," Dad told me later that evening, typing furiously on his laptop while I sat on the couch and shook, hoping he'd at least look up at me.

"We gotta find Mom," I said.

"We have to get organized, that's what we have to do," he said, eyes still on the screen. "I'm going out. Don't open the door to anyone."

I remember going back to Mom's house to get my stuff a few days later. Wandering from room to room — to the kitchen where she wasn't cooking, to her office where she wasn't hunched over her laptop, to the garden where she wasn't cursing at weeds as she dug them up.

I dreamt about her arrest and the blood for years, but now my memory of her is more like when you lose your left hand, like how you carry on and don't notice its absence until you try to shovel dirt or open a book. I wonder what years of hard labour and gruel have done to her. I think about finding the soldier who took Mom, pounding his face in with a baseball bat while he screams and begs. About getting even with all of them.

"You still look a lot like her," Grandma says. "Even with all that red hair gone."

I run my hand over the bristles of my newly shaved scalp. "They're circulating a photo of me from the pipeline. CCTV. Blurry, but you can see the hair."

Grandma is silent for a few seconds. "Oh brother. I'd love to hide you here, but it's better if you keep moving. They may be watching me already because of your father."

Down the street a car door slams and we both jump. It's a sound we all dread now, like the tread of heavy boots and the Friendship Troops pounding on your door.

Grandma takes hold of my wrist. "Go hide out. Up north. Find Thomas and whoever else he's recruited. He has to keep you safe, for once. All of you. Lie low, keep out of trouble. Tell him I said so."

"OK."

"If he's gone to the Fort he'll be somewhere around that old cabin Ben's family used to own. In Walker Bay."

"That place," I say, my voice flat. Where Dad took me once without telling Mom. She'd responded by calling the cops on him. Like each of them was trying to stake their own claim on me.

Grandma peers at me for a few seconds, like she's looking through muddy water. "Yes, that place. If he's not there, well, I don't ..."

"Bishop Mountain lookout, maybe. There's a trail down the road from the old cabin. "When I was a kid he'd talk about hiding up there if the world went to hell."

"There's backpacks and camping gear in the garage," Grandma says. "Take what you need." She leans toward me. "Better go have a shower. You're pretty ripe."

I nod and make to get up.

“Sit down. I have something else for you. Wait here,” she says, and shuffles and puffs and twists herself up from the picnic table. She walks slowly back to the house and creaks up the stairs, her hand on the wall where Grandpa’s last paint job is coming off in pale yellow flakes. I jump at the sound of the screen door slamming shut behind her.

A siren wails faintly in the distance. In a few minutes she’s back with something long under her arm, wrapped in a worn grey blanket with pale blue stripes. “Your Grandpa got this from some guy — Tony, I think — and hid it in his workshop. I kept it there after he died.” She sets it on the table and twists back down onto her seat. “You still remember how to shoot? Like Ben taught you?”

“Sure. On that old rifle from a hundred years ago.”

She pulls the blanket aside.

“Jesus, that’s an M4! Where did that come from?”

Grandma shushes me. “I didn’t ask,” she says primly. “Some attack on the Friendlies, probably. This is for self-defence only, OK? Not for hunting them down. To protect yourself. It could get dangerous up there. There’s ammo in the garage.”

I wonder if Grandma’s losing her marbles, expecting me to walk around with a rifle on my back. Might as well say, hey fellas, come and arrest me. “It’s too long to fit in a pack.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” Grandma sighs, and takes hold of the rifle. Slowly, smoothly, she works the bolt, flips a lever, and removes the trigger and grip from the stock. Takes a breath, flexes her hands, then dismantles the rest of the rifle.

“Do you know how to put it back together?” she asks, as if I’m a girl again, back in her living room doing a puzzle. Without waiting for me to reply, she reassembles the rifle and carefully sets it back on the table. “You can roll the parts up in a sleeping bag.”

“Jesus, Grandma, where’d you learn to do that?”

“Book club,” she says.

It’s still dark the next morning when I set out, after a bony hug from Grandma, who stuffs a thick roll of 20s into my pocket. Her ancient green Jansport backpack is stuffed with food and some of Grandpa’s old shirts and faded jeans — the smaller ones that I can cinch around my waist. And the rifle, which has taken me three tries to dismantle, with clips of ammo and cleaning rags. I keep my hoodie up and my eyes on the sidewalk.

I take back streets and loop south and a little east. The city is run down, with pitted sidewalks and potholes in the asphalt, even on the main streets. I didn’t think anywhere had been bombed beyond the coast, but some city blocks here are just rubble, still blocked off with ragged, dirty orange fencing. The few people who are out look better fed than people in Vancouver, though, maybe because more of them have gardens. And there are no water stations anywhere. No water rationing here, at least.

A few women huddle at a corner in the early morning light, wearing long dresses and small white bonnets. Mennonites, in from their settlement, looking healthier than most.

I cut through an elementary school playground. The building’s at least 60 years old, one storey, concrete blocks painted blue. The Stars and Stripes flutters from a flagpole at the entrance, and a mural on a side wall shows the president — our president, they want us to call him — toothy smile and all, arms wide like Jesus suffering little children to come to him.

Outside the playground, the street is quiet in the morning air. I can hear my breathing, fast and shallow. Somewhere above me a crow squawks, and I jump. I'm about to hit the main road when I hear heavy boots behind me, followed by a loud voice.

"Hold 'er right there."

I turn around. A soldier in camouflage and a helmet is sauntering over to me from a doorway, rifle across his chest. He has a bulbous nose and big teeth, and wears sergeant's stripes on his shoulder, along with the Friendship Troops' symbol — the American and Canadian flags crossed. The only place you see the maple leaf now, apart from trees.

He takes off his sunglasses, squinting at me with eyes the colour of ice cubes. "Lemme see your ID," he says in a southern accent of some kind, maybe Texas.

He holds my fake ID at arm's length, as if he has eye problems.

"Elissa Wein-burg. Looks like a Jew name. You a Jew?"

"No," I say, hoping my voice sounds steady. "I'm just passing through, heading to Smithers," I say, picking the name of a town out West at random.

"It's the Jews and queers givin' us grief down on the coast. You on your own?" He looks me up and down, too slowly for my liking. "You wanna be careful, a girl travelling by herself." A cold smile ripples across his face.

I don't say anything.

"Need a man to keep you safe," he adds, as he hands back my card, holding onto it a second too long before releasing his grip. I force a smile as a black worm writhes in my belly.

It takes me until noon the next day to cover the hundred miles to Fort St. James. I walk for hours along the highway, stumbling along the gravel shoulder, straps digging into my shoulders, sticking my thumb out when I dare.

Somewhere in the night a semi picks me up and the driver, grey-haired with enormous black bags under his eyes, lets me ride part of the way in the sleeping berth behind the seats, covered with a blanket. As he stops to let me out, he reaches over to the passenger side and I shrink back, thinking he's going to grab me, but instead, he pulls a phone out of the glove box and shows me a photo of his daughter, white-faced and dark-haired, glowering at the camera. "They attacked her," he says flatly. "Three Friendlies, and she took off. Don't know where." It must be the only photo he has. Otherwise, why have a phone when they can track you?

I find a bench in a park in Vanderhoof, just off the main street, and sleep for a few hours. Heading north out of town in the mid-morning, a woman hides me in her load of hay, between the bales, in case they've set up a checkpoint. She lets me off at the Stuart River bridge, and I follow the road into town, through the reserve, passing abandoned machine shops and a small strip mall where everything's boarded up except a grimy-looking grocery and a restaurant with a battered handwritten sign advertising CHINESE AND WESTERN TAKE-OUT ONLY.

The road takes a sharp turn to the right, following the shore, where a one-pump gas station advertises ice cream and takeaway chicken.

"Where is everyone?" I ask the guy behind the counter. He's older, maybe 50, tall, wearing a heavy jean shirt and an old Oilers cap, the brim shading the lines in his brown face, long black hair to his collar. He gives me a wary glance and looks out at the lake, rolling the words around in his mouth before speaking.

"Mostly gone. Pretty much everyone left the rez, too," he says softly. "Headed up the lake to Tachie, or further up to Takla. Some townsfolk too. Friendlies don't go up there any more, since a couple of them disappeared." He stops, like he's said too much, and turns back to the counter.

"They still here? The Friendlies?" I ask.

"Yeah, a bunch of 'em at the old RCMP station. They mostly ride around waving their guns, flying their drones. Hey, you wanna buy something or not?" He starts digging around in the metal bins in the counter.

I order a roast chicken leg and fries. The cardboard box of chicken is warm in my hand and a little damp with grease. I can feel his eyes on me as I leave.

The road makes a sharp turn west at a faded green sign reading "Walker Bay 3km." That's when I see the soldiers. I feel myself stiffen and my heart starts racing.

They're standing around a jeep in a gravel parking lot in front of a one-storey concrete building with a sign that reads "Eagles Nest" in large blue letters. Grandma would tell them they're missing an apostrophe, I think wildly.

A couple of pickups are parked at the door of the building, and through the open door I can hear loud music, some kind of country rock, blasting. The hood of the jeep is open. One soldier is leaning over the engine and moving something with his hand while the other two stand around, looking bored. Until they see me. I feel for my ID in my back pocket and touch the knife on my hip.

"Hey, honey," one of the soldiers calls to me. "How about a beah?"

"No thanks," I call back, trying to smile. I keep walking, legs unsteady.

A few minutes later I hear the gravel crunching behind me. The soldier who invited me for a beer is jogging up along the side of the road, his two buddies sauntering behind him, further back. "Hey, you sure you don't want a drink?" Up close he looks about 17, cheeks still raw with acne, with a dark brush cut that makes his ears stick out.

"No," I say, stronger this time. "I'm meeting someone." I try to breathe normally, but my heart's hammering away inside my chest. Dizzy from the sun and fatigue, I try not to stumble.

"C'mon, one beah. Then I'll give you a ride. That's a big pack. Lot for you to carry." He smiles and grabs me by the left arm, hard. His buddies are catching up, grins on their faces.

I step back and reach under my hoodie, feeling for my knife, but what the hell will I do with it if I even manage to get it out? And then what? "Just leave me alone, OK?"

He tightens his grip, and tries to drag me back along the road, then one of his buddies says, "C'mon, Pete," and something shifts in his eyes. "Shit," he says, "Just tryna be nice. Everyone's so goddamn unfriendly here." He turns back, hurling "Dyke bitch" over his shoulder and kicking up gravel as the soldier boys stride back down the road.

I keep walking, looking back over my shoulder once in a while, jumping once when I hear a car coming up on me, but it passes by. After about 20 minutes the road rises then drops down a long hill, with the lake lying dark and grey below. I take a few wrong roads off to the left before I find an overgrown trail leading to a small clearing in the middle of a stand of Douglas fir. I stand at the entrance to the trail, thinking of the last time I was here, Dad silent and grim as he stared at the remains of Grandpa Ben's old cabin, and my body humming with anxiety because he'd taken me up north without calling Mom. I can feel the tension rising in me, like I'm that worried kid again.

When I get to the end of the trail I stand in the clearing, inhaling the scents of gravel and bark and leaf mould, listening to the waves rattling the gravel on the beach. The roof of the old cabin has fallen in now, except for the back porch, farthest from the lake. Half the floorboards are missing, likely torn up for firewood.

I make my way down the steep gravel trail to the beach, pry off my shoes and dip one foot in the icy water. Then a wave of fatigue washes over me and I lie back, thinking about how

safe I felt with my father sitting here, long ago, eating roasted wieners with bright yellow mustard. I close my eyes, listening to the waves as I drift off.

The buzz of a seaplane overhead startles me awake, and I curse myself for wasting time. The pack feels impossibly heavy as I lift it onto my shoulders. The gravel road leads farther down the lakeshore to a sign marked "Private Road," and beyond it a steep bank on the right. I scramble up, roots and poplar branches cutting into my hands, and find myself on a trail, half hidden by leaves and fallen branches.

The trail overlooks the shore for a stretch, before turning right up into the mountain. I climb steadily, sweating and puffing over fallen logs and brush, wishing I'd packed water and worrying about coming face to face with a bear. I try to make noise, singing to myself in a cracked voice. I wonder if Dad's even there, or if all of this is for nothing, if all I'll find is rotten old cabins and deer shit. After an hour, the trail drops behind the ridge, and then it's a long climb through pine and aspen, kicking up dust and gravel as I climb higher. Eventually I can see the peak ahead of me, the old lookout perched precariously at the top of a knob of grey rock.

In a clearing below the rock a tiny cabin with a green roof and peeling white walls sits with its door open. I hear a rustling off to the right and my father emerges cautiously from the bush, axe cocked in his hand as if he means to use it.

We don't know how to greet each other. He puts down the axe and stretches his arms to the side, tentatively, and just stands there. I put my pack down, stare back at him, and say, "Hi."

"You came. Figured you would, eventually."

He's aged a lot, shrunken in on himself, his face drawn and hair completely grey, pulled back in a thin ponytail. He dips a metal cup in a pail of water and limps a bit as he walks over and hands it to me. I drain it in a few gulps and fill it again.

"Yeah, I came." I don't know what else to say. His arms are thin but feel sinewy when he puts them around me.

"They're gone," I say, mashing my teary face into his shoulder and trying to stop the sobs wracking my frame. "My gang. They got them all." Even Ali.

"I know," he says. "I heard." He pulls away. "There's stew on the stove. Well, the dehydrated stuff. You must be hungry." His voice is calm, matter of fact, as if I'd just stepped out for a loaf of bread.

I follow him inside the cabin, and he moves to a low cast-iron stove, where a stew is bubbling in a blue-and-white pot. He stirs slowly and carefully, hands shaking slightly, and dishes it onto two metal plates. He's not looking at me, and something niggles at me in the back of my brain, but hunger pushes everything aside.

We sit on the front step of the cabin. The stew is pasty and muddy, but I wolf it down and wipe my plate with a piece of white bread. Shadows are just beginning to lengthen; I've forgotten how long the evenings are up here this time of year.

"There's another bed in the cabin," he says. "Or you can sleep up in the lookout. Great view of the lake."

"I'll sleep up there," I tell him. "We can talk about plans tomorrow." He doesn't say anything.

We hump my pack and a thin mattress from the cabin up the rock to the lookout, and I almost lose my balance a couple of times when I lean back too far. To the northwest, thick, grey storm clouds hang low over the lake, the water black and brooding in the weak evening light. Southeast, a few lights from Fort St. James pierce the evening gloom. I wonder if the soldiers have retreated to their station or are harassing other women at the bar.

I roll myself into a ball in my sleeping bag, holding my head and try to sleep, not think about Ali and the others, as the light disappears. In the middle of the night, the windows start rattling, and I say, “Who’s there?” into the inky darkness, but it’s just the wind.

The sun’s already blazing through the east windows of the lookout when I wake up. I sit alone up there for a few minutes, then stand on the rock and look down at the cabin, where my father passed the night. Alone. I scramble down the rock and find him hunched over a bowl of oatmeal.

“Where are the others?” I ask.

“What others?” he asks, spoon hanging in the air, halfway between the bowl and his mouth. A soggy lump drops back into his bowl and splashes milk onto his jeans.

“The others. The ones you’re organizing. The resistance.”

“Oh,” my father says. He puts the bowl down and some more slops onto the step. “Well.” “What?”

“There’s no one else.”

“What do you mean? You can’t get anyone to fight?”

He looks away and then back at me. “I’m not doing that anymore. Just keeping off their radar. You should too.” He turns back to his oatmeal.

My legs buckle and I sit down heavily on a log as the world spins. For a few seconds I have no words, no speech. Like I’ve been hit on the head.

“You’re just giving up? After what they did to Mom? To my friends, too?” I say at last. My voice sounds hollow and far away.

“I’ve been fighting for years. And for what? I thought people would rise up. Fight back. No one has. The fucking Yanks are still here.”

“We just stop fighting and let Mom rot?”

We sit there silent for a few seconds. The wind rustles the trees, and I hear a faint *tap-tap* of a woodpecker somewhere behind the cabin.

“At least I kept them away from you,” Dad mumbles. “Got you out of there in time.”

He looks up at me, his face set and hard.

“You made a deal, didn’t you?” I hear a roaring in my ears as I lurch to my feet. “Stop fighting. Trade the others for me? My friends?”

He glares at me. “I saved you. You’re welcome.”

“I wasn’t looking for you to save me!” At first, I want to grab him by his bony shoulders and shake him, my anger like lava. Then a coldness overtakes me, washing up my spine, filling my chest, my head, and pushing out the rage.

“You’ve given up.” I say levelly. “You’ve given up and you’ve betrayed my friends. Betrayed everyone.”

He jumps to his feet and for a second, I think he’s going to hit me. I almost reach for my knife, but instead I just stand there while he stalks into the cabin and slams the door. I follow him, pulling on the handle, but the door’s locked. No sound from inside.

I sit down on the step and catch my breath, then turn and scramble back up the rock to where I’ve left my pack. From up there I stare down at the cabin. I think about shooting him through the door, but I’d be shooting blind and that’d just waste ammo.

The hike back down the trail is almost as slow as the climb. I lean back so my pack doesn’t push me off balance and try not to run, bending my knees and kicking up dust and rock.

It's late afternoon by the time I get back to the old cabin. I set up my sleeping bag on the floor of the back porch, out of sight of the lake and the road. My hands shake as I assemble the rifle and raise it to my shoulder a couple of times before loading it.

I'm still sitting in the cabin when I hear the crunching of stones on the beach. I steady my breathing, then crouch down, rifle in hand, and creep through the trees until I can see the shore.

The young Friendly from the day before, the one who grabbed my arm, is standing there, fishing rod in hand. I can tell that he's fished all his life, the easy way he draws his arm back, the quick movement of the rod, the lure arcing out in the air, not too high, not too low, landing with a soft plop in the water. Then the low grinding of the reel as he winds it back in. It probably calms his mind, the way it used to calm mine, a long time ago.

I stand up quietly and lift my rifle, drawing a bead on him, aiming for the centre of his back. He's maybe 30 metres away — an easy shot. I imagine the spray of blood on the rocks, the rod splashing into the water, the crack of the shot echoing off the hills. I shift slightly and my feet kick up a few pebbles. He stops and looks sharply to his side, frowning.

Suddenly his rod bends and the drag squeals as his line goes out. He turns back, gives a sharp tug, and waits a few minutes as the trout plays itself out, dancing on the surface of the water, then diving deep, pulling the rod tip down.

The trigger is cold on my finger. I wonder how long it will take them to catch me. I sit there hidden and still, watching him immersed in the moment: the tug on his line, the warmth of the sun on his face, and the struggle of the trout as he reels it in.

P. J. SMITH
NEW BEGINNINGS

A breeze swipes Charley's face, jarring him from a stupor. Shuddering, he comes to, finding himself lying face down on sand.

Groaning, he hears thumping ocean, voices nearby. His crusted blue eyes are pried open by stabbing sunlight. Blurry. Head pounding. Shaking. His pants feel wet. Sand fleas hop about his face. The thought of moving sickens him. Through the blurriness he sees sun-bleached sand and shimmering sea. Lying sideways, all of what he sees is distorted, as if the sand and shoreline are tilted and rushing upwards toward the huge blistering orange sun lolling on a horizon that's veiled with wildfire smoke.

Air feels thick. The fleas bop. He closes his eyes and sweat trickles from his greasy tangled mop and red beard. Smacks his cracked, sun-fried lips. His mind sifts the entrails of the blackout, but there's nothing to recall and he shakes. A rank smell arises from inside the sleeping bag. He cries, trapped in his state by pain.

The voices, friendly, grow louder.

Charley keeps his eyes shut to slow the whirling. Coming closer, two voices. Then the familiar bickering. Old Pete and Mac, both gravelly voiced, heavy and thick-throated. Charley's relieved, knowing it's them who brought him here. He listens as they banter in their usual hammer-and-tong manner.

"Dylan is still the man," Mac declares, hacking and clearing his throat. "You know it."

"Young is better," Old Pete retorts, "for the soul. You just won't admit it."

Charley hears them rustling through their cargo, rattling tin cups.

Mac guffaws. "Look, man, I'm proud of Young, being Canadian and all. But Dylan's got him beat." More hacking. "Way better poet. C'mon brother. You know I'm right."

Propane burner, rattling cups. One of them lights a match and inhales, long and slow, then the other inhales.

"Look, man," Old Pete pauses, "Dylan gave us something to stand behind. I give you that." Old Pete hacks; both are old, with old coughs. "But Young, man, he's always street level, opening your eyes. Making it real."

Mac hacks. "I'd say Dylan's Nobel prize is pretty real."

Old Pete snorts. "Yeah, he deserves that," he pauses. "Heavy. His poetry is beautiful, man. Can't deny that."

"A balladeer."

"No doubt. And Young's the bellringer."

"Dylan woke us up."

"Young makes us feel," Old Pete wheezes, "the hurt."

"Dylan moved an entire generation."

"Young still moves us."

"Dylan got us on our feet."

"Yeah, I was there, remember? Haight-Ashbury?"

"Yeah, yeah. I still think Dylan's poetry is better."

"Get real. They're on different roads."

"Dylan made us look around."

"Young got us looking inside."
"Dylan unites."
"Young heals. Medicine music for me."
"That's real. You were in rough shape."
"Was," Old Pete chortles, "'a knock, knock, knockin'.'" "
"Pfft," Mac sniggers. "Right on, brother."

Charley shifts inside the bag. Left leg throbs. Slowly opens his eyes. Shudders. Fleas. Burning lips. It's all he can do, just to listen to their jibber-jabber. The bantering stops and footsteps crunch sand and he feels a gentle patting hand. Feels like Old Pete, stub-fingered from millwork.

"He's still out," Old Pete says.
"Let him sleep."
"He'll cook."
"Sweating's good."
Long pause. More cup rattling.
"Gee-zus chrise, he was stoned last night," Old Pete sighs. "Impossible."
"There's so much shit out there now."
"I'd be dead."
Charley hears more puffing. Mac clears his throat. "You seen his leg?"
"Isn't much there," says Old Pete. "Poor ol' Charley."
"Chunk of his hip, too."
"He's a good kid."
"We gotta' take care of him."
More puffing and rattling. Old Pete coughs. "How many tours did he do?"
"Three," Mac says. "The Taliban? They're f'ing crazy."
"Funny world," Old Pete pauses, "we protested war, he fought one. And here we are."
"He's torn to shreds and that's why we protested."
"Yeah, so it wouldn't happen again."
"He's a mess."
"Crippled now hooked. War fucks you up."
"Seems like we're doing it all over again."
Old Pete heavy sighs. "We say peace but it's bullshit. We plow it under fields of lies. Every generation."
"Yeah, more lies."

Pounding surf.

Charley hears clattering cups against the chorus of waves. He opens his eyes. Sun has moved but everything spins. Jumping fleas. All he can do is listen.

"Young took on Bush. Got right in his face."
"Dylan's been there, beating the drum."
"Nixon, too. Remember? Tin soldiers?"
"Dylan got us angry."
"Young makes us feel the harm."
"Dylan got us marching."
Old Pete sniggers. "Well, Young gets ya' dancin', too."
"Pshaw."

“Look man,” Old Pete pauses, “you ever tried to serenade a woman with Dylan? I mean, what?”

Mac snorts. “Serenade?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Not really.” Snickering. “Serenade. Is that what you called it?”

“Young gets you dancin’, rockin’, fightin’ or lovin’.”

Mac chortles. “Shall we dance, then? How about I serenade you?” He starts to mimic Dylan’s crooning.

“OK now, just stop that,” Old Pete warns, “or I’ll start doing Young, the one about King the dog.”

“No, no, no please don’t,” Mac pleads, “not your singing.”

The whirling slows.

Charley sees bobbing driftwood and surf-dancing sandpipers. He shivers, tugs his hoody tight. They ramble on, sallying in talk-radio mode, two banging drums.

“Grandfather of grunge,” says Old Pete.

“That won’t get you a Nobel.”

“Pfft. Listen to you, hung up on accolades. Old man.”

“Chrise-sakes,” Mac huffs. “You had to, eh? Look, just sayin’, his poetry is recited round the world.”

“Farm Aid. And just you watch. He’ll stop the pipelines. Young isn’t done.”

“Yeah, he gets in your face, no doubt.”

“Young sticks,” Old Pete sighs. “Needles and damage. Cold truth.”

The sun shifts and Charley momentarily drifts off. Flickering sand stings his face. A figure hovers. He senses Mac’s heavy breathing. “Good day, sunshine.”

Charley groans. A lead head, it bobbles as they help him stand up and out of the bag. “How long? What?”

“Cyrus brought you here, helped bundle you in the bag,” Old Pete explains.

Charley looks south across the bay. “I was downtown?”

“Yeah.” Mac too stares across the bay, bridged by a black steel-riveted span to downtown. On the downtown side, beneath the bridge, hooded dealers lurk about the tarp-and-pallet hovels of the city’s rough sleepers, offering cheap hits of supposed oxy and XTC.

Mac tries to make eye contact but Charley keeps his head down. “We’ll help you. We’ve both been there. It gets better.”

“As long as you want to live,” Old Pete says.

They sit him up on the log where they’d set up camp. Old Pete hands Charley a blanket, so he can undress, while Mac gives him a water bottle. Weathered and burned, his face scarred, he’s half their age yet looks as old.

They sit awhile, staring across the bay. Charley drinks water, gasps. Tells them he can’t recall anything. He feels dead tired, scared, sick, empty. He lifts his head, watches the ocean lift and swell, drops his head and shakes.

“It’ll stop, the disorientation,” Old Pete reassures him. “Take her slow, eh.”

Mac wanders to the surf to wash out the bag and Charley’s pants. Old Pete brews coffee, humming *Old Man* and fiddling with his beard rings. A one-time banjo picker, he still carries a

tune, though hoarsely. Gently, he hands Charley a cup, watches him cradle it, sipping and wincing. "That'll get you going."

Mac returns, lays the pants and bag to dry, then searches nearby for a stick to help Charley hobble about, as he's lost his walking pole. "We're meeting Cyrus here and then going to the park."

Charley stirs. "The park?"

"Not the bridge park," Mac gestures north. "The one by the river."

"Oh."

"He's asking the Nations if it's OK to camp there."

Charley's fazed. "The river. Yeah."

Noticing Charley's dazed look, Old Pete chimes in. "We had to move a couple of days ago. Remember?"

"Yeah." Charley looks down. "No. Sort of. I'm hazy."

Old Pete rolls and lights a couple of smokes, fills in the blanks. They've slept a couple of nights at the beach, the lot of them, after the barricades went up around the abandoned railyard buildings. The city ordered them to vacate, making room for condos. They left in a pack, watching the bulldozers knock down the old red-brick walls that had been their refuge from cold, heat and danger.

"We had our carts and we're on the move," Old Pete tells Charley. "You said you'd go look for shoes and meet us later, but you never showed."

Mac refills Charley's cup, nods to the bridge and downtown. "Cyrus found you."

Charley looks down and exhales smoke at the fleas hopping atop his dirty blistered feet.

"Getting off junk is hard work," Mac acknowledges. "You're scared of your own shadow."

"You'll feel the urges," Old Pete looks across the bay. "You just gotta' stay away."

"Give yourself a fighting chance, kid."

Mac and Old Pete head to a nearby public restroom to clean up.

Charley sits, grim faced. He lights another rollie, sips the joe, soon the nausea passes. Along the shoreline a murder of crows ignites a screeching brawl with gulls over a bread loaf and its paper bag.

The pair returns. Mac combs out his wet hair and Old Pete ties back his grey mane. They tell him they're heading off for food and returnables. "We'll be back soon," Mac says. "Just wait here."

Charley nods, lights another rollie and watches them stroll away with carts under the sun's hazy trek. Mac continues the taunt. "Cyrus likes Dylan."

"Shit," Old Pete shoves Mac. "Stop lyin'. You know he loves Young."

Charley grins, casts his eyes across the bay. Near the restrooms, a crow squawks and shuffles along a powerline, staring down at a garbage bin. At the side of the bin, Charley notices sneakers, broken-out and tossed looking. The pants are dry enough and he tugs them back on, stands using the stick and hobbles to the garbage bin to fetch the sneakers. He returns to the log and stares across the bay, feeling a stone's weight round his neck.

Clanging metal and rough voices bring him back from another freefall.

Charley shivers, finds himself huddled fetal position on a concrete floor. Hard. Cold. Familiar.

He lifts his head, sees the bars. Hears clanging and yelling. His head pounds, he trembles, teeth chatter. Floor puddled. Pants and shirt soaked. He shuts his terrified eyes and weeps. Near death, just like the war. Lost, adrift. Trapped. He hopes, though he doesn't know what for anymore. His skull feels like it'll crack apart.

A barred window lets in ribbons of daylight. Near the door he sees the sneakers with laces removed. He hears voices coming and under the bottom bar he sees their shiny black boots. He shuts his eyes.

"This one's getting picked up," he hears one of the turnkeys, "by that street worker."

"Oh, him. So, where'd we find this one?"

"Under the bridge."

"Figures."

"They gave him a paddy ride."

"Not sure why we bother with these people."

"A waste. Fucking useless."

The boots leave. Charley lifts his head, looks up at the barred window.

As daylight fills the cell, he hears Cyrus's gruff voice and hurried boots. He sees Cyrus, bear-like, gripping each side of the barred door with his massive hands. Cyrus is imposing, about six-five and 220. A street activist, he boxes for charity and doesn't pull punches, ever, when dealing with cops or jail guards.

"Open the door, now," Cyrus barks. "This person has rights."

Cyrus steps in the cell, leans over Charley, who looks up relieved. Cyrus turns and growls. "Has he been to the toilet, properly? Did you help him stand? Give him water?" Helping Charley up, Cyrus notices the drenched clothes and puddled floor. His nostrils flare. "You hosed him? And just left him?"

A young guard steps back. "He reeked."

Holding Charley, Cyrus glares at the guard.

"He served, just so you know."

An older guard scoffs. "Him?"

"His leg is half gone. He needed your help, asshole."

"Didn't know. Sorry."

"Well, now you do." Cyrus scowls: "He's a real person, man, living with pain you can't imagine. Be thankful it's not you."

The older guard shakes his head, smirks. "Maybe he can get a job or something." Charley jerks his head upward, lets go of Cyrus, stands on his own staring at the guard. Cyrus drapes an arm around Charley's shoulder. "Let's get you out of here, OK? Find somewhere safe."

A chittering crow startles him awake.

Charley also hears the crackle and pop of a fire. He's in an unfamiliar sleeping bag in a tent, wearing sweat pants and a hoodie. The tent's front flap flutters, a breeze brushes his face. Nearby, the sea rushes in calming rhythms. He breathes slowly. No head pounding. His stomach growls. He sees, through the tent flap, dark brown earth and a massive cedar with swaying green

boughs. High up on a sturdy long branch the crow stares back at Charley, cocking its head, and prattles back-and-forth along the branch.

He sees the fire and beside it a middle-aged woman sitting on a stump and humming something he's heard before. He sits up, listens to her. Lying next to the sleeping bag is a walking stick with bear bells, which tinkle as he pulls himself up with it and steps outside.

She stops humming and looks over. "Good morning, Charley. Good to see you." She stands up, tugs on a ball cap and steps over to Charley's tent. He looks around, bewildered, sees another tent. He feels like he's seen her before. "I'm Scarlet," she smiles, hazel eyes bright. "Cyrus asked me to stay with you."

Charley's stunned. He hobbles over to the fire and settles on a stump. "Thank you," he stumbles, "I'm sorry if there was any trouble. I'm so sorry." He stares at the fire, avoids eye contact.

She adds a log and sits near him. "None at all." She gestures with open hands and tries to make eye contact. "I'm just happy to help you, Charley." She opens a cooler and offers him water. "You slept a long time."

"Oh. Yeah," he hesitates. "So, so what happened?" He looks down at the pants, back at her.

"I met Cyrus here ..."

"Where?"

She points through the trees toward the ocean. "We're up the coast, about 50 kilometres north of the city."

"OK. The trails."

"Yeah. No one's around. It's quiet." She pulls canned stew and bread out of a canvas bag. "Hungry?"

His eyes light up. "I am." His eyes linger, watching her. "So, do I know you? The song. You were humming."

Scarlet grins. "I volunteer at the shelter."

"Ah, you know Old Pete."

"Sure do. He got me hooked on Young."

"No doubt."

"I've seen you there."

He looks shameful, avoids eye contact and says nothing.

"It's OK, Charley." She ladles hot stew into a bowl for him as he tugs nervously at the sweat pants. She senses his unease, likely about his leg, and gently presses the bowl into his hands.

"I'm a nurse, Charley. You're safe with me."

Cedar branches shake and the crow flies west to the sea.

Charley chews slowly, stares at the fire. She wanders over to her pickup, returns with more food bags, and goes over the plan, that Cyrus will be back in a couple of days. He keeps eating and she smiles. The fire is bright and welcome as the air chills and rain clouds hover. They sit awhile before she leaves.

Scarlet tells him that her father served and that she's seen Charley's wounded leg. "I can't imagine, what soldiers experience."

"It's hard."

“Horrible. I think in the end, it all seemed so futile to my dad.” She pauses, realizing what she’d said, looks worriedly at Charley. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be. Believe me, I know the futility. They tell you that you’re helping, but it’s all bullshit.”

“I hope I haven’t offended you.”

“No, no Scarlet. It’s all good.”

She looks relieved, opens her hands to him. “I’m happy to listen.”

They watch the fire, sip coffee. Scarlet doesn’t smoke but Cyrus gave her a pack for Charley. He takes them, gratefully, lights up. She stokes and adds a fire log. “We’re here, but only you can do this, Charley.”

“Sounds like experience talking.”

“My ex is an alcoholic. I watched helplessly. He’s better now. But we couldn’t be together.”

“I’m sorry.”

“We have a son. It wasn’t safe.”

“I get that,” Charley looks down. “I’m scared of myself.”

She offers a hand. “Give yourself a chance.”

He’d heard that before, though uncertain about what it means. Guardedly, he takes her hand.

“You’re a good person, Scarlet.”

“My dad said we’re at our best when we help others.”

Wind whips the fire.

With the walking stick, Charley hobbles about, down the trail away to a lanky arbutus, where he’ll sling up the food bags. He shuffles back up the trail as Scarlet packs her truck.

They linger at the driver’s door. Charley feels an urge, to hug her, but he’s uncertain about everything at the moment. Perhaps sensing his angst, she smiles warmly, rubbing his shoulder, before getting in. He closes the door, slowly. “I’ll miss the humming.”

Loneliness seeps through the tent flap.

Wind bellows through the night, rippling the tent. Charley succumbs to fatigue, drifts. He awakens, thinking he’s heard howling, or snarling, distant, shrill, a crying noise. It stops, he listens, figures it’s the wind or his mind, drifts.

Hard rain pelts the forest in West Coast fervour. Charley seizes a let-up to limp down to the food cache under blustering slate clouds. He hobbles back and slides into the bag to wait it out. Wind whistles in the cedars and boughs scrape the tent. Drumming rain, beating surf and he drifts into the night.

Howling. Distinct. Close by. Then longer yowls, lower tone, anguished. Or, not real. He shakes his head. The rain stops — dead. Ocean rushes, wind whistles, boughs creak. He drifts.

Growling. Snorting. Snuffling. The tent ruffles. He lifts his head, tenses. Exhales. I’m dreaming, he tells himself. More snorting. He sits upright, grips his stick, pulls himself up. A low growl, though mournful. Cautiously, he unzips the tent. Clouds drift like curtains, staging the night sky for a brisk moon.

In its light, he sees by the cedar’s trunk a hairy tailed lump. It moans, lifts its head, whimpers. He hobbles closer and sees that it’s a dog, distressed and panting, tongue hanging from bloodied mouth. Leaning over, he sees blood weeping from a large gash running down the

dog's face and across its snout. Large framed, brown fur mangy and bloody and smudged black with mud. The dog shakes and labours, wheezing.

Calmly, Charley opens a palm toward the dog's face, to let it sniff, but it struggles to lift its head. "You're hurt bad," Charley whispers. The dog looks up, red-eyed, defeated looking.

Limping about, Charley retrieves from the tent a spare blanket and towel, crackers and water. He lowers himself back to the ground, drips handfuls of water into the dog's mouth, gingerly tends the gash. The dog lifts its head to give Charley a wary look.

The wind stops and Charley looks up at the night sky, high up over the tall trees, and in the bright night he sees a ring of stars bracing the moon's full light. Stroking the dog, Charley sits and watches the brilliance fades into the still greyness that comes before the rising light of day. He prays they make it.

TERRANCE CLARKE

THE NEW CLINIC

All methadone clinics smell like sweet shops. The stench of that sugary pink drug seeps into the bricks, stains the city. That was the first thing that got my alarm bells ringing. I had just blown into Toronto. My time in outer Ottawa was cut short by a dealer who was happy to use a tire iron to collect. I found the local clinic early to establish myself before I got too sick to wait. This place had no licorice funk, and it was spotless. Fresh white paint on the old brick building, no street art telling you where to buy or who to buy from. Even the brown standing ashtrays were clean save a crust of salt from the plows.

I scratched the barely scabbed sore on my arm, releasing a little yellow-brown pus. A leftover from making do without my rig on the way here. First, I had to get my medicine, then I could sleep it off in the ER. But this place was giving me the creeps. I had to walk through Christian protestors like this was an abortion clinic. Maybe they did both? What church gets up at 6 a.m. on a Tuesday to hassle the mopes who need this poison?

Then there were the lines. There was a long one wrapping around the building, ending in a small side door with a rotund security guard. This line smoked like a chimney and was full of unfortunates; familiar enough to be painful. But through the clean storefront-style windows in the front, I could see other lines. Fast-moving switchback lines that wove around brushed-steel stanchions with blue nylon straps stretched tight. There were three of them moving to nurses in green scrubs who manned bank-teller-style windows set on a white formica counter that stretched the length of the clinic. Above each window was a large carved circular relief: a caribou, a schooner in flight and a beaver. Coin faces writ large: quarter, dime and nickel. There were 15 people in the quarter line and fewer than 10 in the dime. The nurse in the nickel line sat back in her office chair doing her nails.

My gut gurgled and a cramp hit me like a brick. Heroin had bound me up for three days, but jonesing would make you loose. I needed to get established. Shouldn't rush a new clinic, these places are dangerous. The right line buddies make all the difference. I clenched up and leaned on the dumpster of the nearby doughnut shop. It didn't take long before a likely guy came along. Dog tags outside the clothes, four-poster aluminum cane with sodden tennis balls on the feet and a "Dude abides" T-shirt with food stains under a canvas fleece. He joined the long outdoor line, lit a cigarette and used his cane to tap the skinny guy ahead of him. They shared a playful round of fake punching, then the gaunt one in a worn flannel broke out a flask to share. They wouldn't give me any trouble. I hurried into line behind the big guy, only shuffling a little. I had the sweats, the chills were coming. I hugged myself tight, clutching my hoodie against my skin.

The guy with the cane noticed me right away. "You hurting, man?" He was 30 years older than me, grey and thinning on top. He grabbed a pack of Players from his pocket and darted one forward. I leaned into his lighter cupping my hands against the chill breeze. The thick smoke filled my lungs, easing a little of what I was going through. People don't know that junkies are generous. We didn't get to the gutter by being greedy.

"Thanks," I muttered, flashing a smile and hating the quaver in my voice. Our line was hardly moving. I stared through the windows. Every so often someone from the outside would break off and join one the lines inside.

"You new?" Dog-tags walked with a limp. Maybe a prosthetic under his jeans? Regimental crest tattoo fading on his thick forearm.

"New here, been on some kind of clinic for the last five years. Never seen anything like this." I blew smoke; the cloud carried to the sidewalk where the sombre protesters clustered for warmth in the slush.

"I hear that." In a better world Dog-tags could have grown a beard and played Santa Claus for his kids. "This clinic, first of its kind. Two months ago they started a government trial program. You want to get right? Stick with me and Mack." He gestured to his buddy with the flask. In the time it took us to have this exchange, another guy in the dime line was taken in. We hadn't moved a step.

"You should tell him about the coins, Jimmy," said Mack. Peppery scars on his cheeks and nose spoke of a history of smoking meth.

"He's in the right line, Mack," Jimmy replied.

"I want to know, what's with this place?"

"This line we're in, same as it ever was for methadone. You wait, you get checked and they give you a dose. That's all you need to know."

"But it ain't all there is to know, Jimmy," Mack teased.

"What about the lines inside?" Another cramp rocked me and I had to hunch against the frigid brick wall.

Jimmy sighed and shrugged. "The quarter line, you go there, they dose you with methadone no questions asked, you don't even need an ID. High dose. You get a breakfast sandwich and you can sit in this big waiting room with a wide-screen TV until you're ready to leave."

"Yeah, and the nurse blows me." I spat on the ground and exhaled smoke. This was a bunch of bull . . .

"No lie. It's the new program. You gotta sign some forms, but they don't even check 'em."

I scanned my two new chums for any hint they were putting me on. If this was a gag, they were committed. I could play along. "And the dime line?"

"And the dime?" Mack mimicked the shiver in my voice. "He's hungry, Jimmy."

"Federally funded shooting room. You get clean needles, pharm-grade morphine and a nurse to Narcan you if you go too far. They got recliners in there in little cubicles. When you leave you get \$50 and a voucher for a night at the motor lodge down the way." Jimmy looked uncomfortable talking about it.

"And a ditty bag, so you can shave and brush your teeth," Mack crowed. "Don't forget the ditty bag."

"Yeah, name brands like Colgate too, not dollar-store shit," Jimmy mumbled.

"I don't get the joke . . ." The anger that I got from my father started welling up. Jimmy pointed. A guy a couple years younger than me busted out of the metal double doors of the clinic and put his arms up, smiling. His pupils were maxed. He was riding a real good high. Two or three people in the outdoor line whooped like he won something. Big pupils high-fived a woman who was old enough to be his mother on his way past. In his hand he had a clear plastic bag full of toiletries including Colgate toothpaste.

"No clinic lets you shoot up and gives you junk," I protested.

"New administration, new rules." Jimmy ashed his cigarette and took three steps forward as the slow line plodded ahead.

"What about nickel? That nurse is just sitting there." I sounded pathetic.

Mack caught my eye and sneered. "Another shooting room, morphine, the works. Then you get a week in the lodge, \$200 and you get to see a social worker. That lady can set you up on welfare, get you hooked up with a job, even get you in to see the doctor if you need meds filled."

"There's got to be a catch"

"It's all in the numbers. Quarter, nickel dime ..." Mack was having a good time.

"Of course there's a catch, man. Big damn catch. That's why we got them thumpers with the signs. It's all about saving money, yeah?" Jimmy had fire in his rheumy eyes.

"That's right kid, sometimes you don't come back. So, me and Jimmy, we stick to the long line."

"Quarter, like 25. One out of 25 of those methadone doses is mixed with some sort of nerve stuff. Painless, you go to sleep and don't wake up." A woman came out of the clinic holding another one of the baggies, grinning. Understanding washed over me.

"That's illegal, right?" I couldn't take my eyes off the nurse under the beaver. They just paid her to do nothing?

"You don't listen to the news, huh? New administration is trying to solve the fentanyl mess. Some tech guy figures this kind of a program can save a province millions. Turns out the drugs aren't the problem ..." Mack took another pull from his dented flask and gestured to the long line of peers "It's us baby! *On est vraiment chers.*"

"So, the nickel line is ..."

Jimmy's voice dropped into a growl. "One out of five. Those odds are better than craps. You get the hotshot and they cremate you in the basement. One-stop shopping for the unwanted." He put his warm calloused hand on my shoulder. For a moment my shaking stopped and I met his eyes. I could imagine him in fatigues, a young man in some arid foreign land. "You're in the right line son."

I was through the glass door before my feet knew they were moving. The nickel nurse saw me coming, stepping over the station straps. She put down her emery board. On the wall behind her was a sign that listed the perks Jimmy and Mack talked about. A huge warning with a skull and crossbones dominated the sign, English and French. "*Un sur cinq meurt.*" I stood under the beaver coin and let out a long breath. How long had it been since I spent a whole week under a roof, slept in a real bed? Maybe I could talk to a doc, get back on my meds. First I had to get right. The nurse smiled a sad smile and held out some papers for me to sign. I grinned back, really feeling it. Hope! I was gonna get my medicine.

BLIND DATE

"I almost didn't come" The comment just hung there, the inflection of her voice begging a concluding phrase that seemed, in this moment of arrested time, to be a no-show. The implicit yet ambiguous suggestion of wasted time hovered delicately between them. To either side, the clatter and burble of the café wrapped them in a cocoon of privacy.

Was it for him to fill this space? Or should he, in the manner of a skillful interrogator, just give her room to continue in her own time? The meeting had started awkwardly, as expected, but not so badly as to signal a failed encounter so early. He had lightly explained his unusual presence in her city and the reconnection provided by a mutual classmate. He even thought there had been some sincere delight in the initial mutual recognition. Perhaps, then, she had a sequential point to make?

"After all, it has been some time." With this she met his gaze directly, her dark brown eyes once more familiar, framed by straight black hair whose obsidian purity undoubtedly hid the grey that matched the lines of worry in her face.

He nodded ruefully. "Yes, it has," he confessed. "I've done a few things since we last met . . . it's kept me busy!" He smiled tentatively at this, an apologetic grimace that betrayed his own trepidation about this re-acquaintance. Reflexively, he ran a hand over his head as if pushing long disappeared locks out of his eyes. She noted the gesture, a recognized tell of anxiety from long ago when she had witnessed his beginning struggles with a demanding career. Clearly, he was expecting more.

"You never did explain why you stopped seeing me." That laid it down firmly between them, a taut smile emphasizing the serious playfulness of her challenge. The effort smoothed wrinkles and brought out a lingering youthfulness in her middle-aged visage.

"You are right there. I suppose that was unforgivable." His blue eyes, faded from the brilliant intensity of his youth, flinched a little in this admission but then rested upon her face as if welcoming any manner of recrimination. "But I don't think any explanation would have made it better. Do you?"

"I trust she was worth it?"

"We were married a long time. She died two years ago." That was brutal; he didn't want to rehash ancient choices. Thirty years was too long for post-mortems.

"I'm sorry," she replied tightly, suddenly ashamed of herself. She had known this of course, from his Facebook posts, but her mean streak had prompted this gratuitous act of revenge. Reason enough for him to have abandoned her then. Reason enough for him to leave her now . . . yet here he remained.

He let her stew on this a moment, not deliberately prolonging the evident embarrassment but wanting to be sure his next step was conciliatory. She rummaged in her bag, playing for time, not willing to make her apology any more abject. Yet he could see she was struggling to contain some indistinct emotion.

"We all make decisions in life," he explained finally, "that doesn't mean we have foreseen completely the alternatives and rejected them. It's a fork in the road; one makes a choice and carries on, not constantly questioning if it was the right or best choice. I have no regrets — I was very happy." She looked up quickly, nodded sharply and dipped her eyes again as he continued. "But I wouldn't have reached out to you if I had regarded our friendship as a throw-away experience."

“Friendship. That’s what it was?” The forceful stare returned to him.

“You were my first lover; I won’t forget that.” He hesitated, not sure if he wanted to risk a hurtful qualification to this statement. But her earlier challenge remained unaddressed, so he plowed on. “I am sorry it was not the enduring love you thought it was — that we both thought it was at first — but I wasn’t ready to make that commitment. With you.”

This last was an unfortunate coda, but it was honest. As honest as a well-honed blade; he wished he had tested it first, as this cut seemed too deep. He watched as she reddened, went rigid with her memories, and then exhaled a long, deliberate breath. That’s it, he thought, she’s done and is going to leave. This really was a totally shitty idea. He braced himself for her sudden departure.

But she just sat there, looking at her hands as she fidgeted with her rings — a large solitaire, a wedding band and an anniversary ring of significant proportion. Then she looked up with a smile of surprising friendliness, saying, “That’s my old Charlie: honest to a fault!” Her eyes now held him in a focused yet kindly stare that suggested perfect insight into his character. The thought warmed him with the sense of a recovered existence.

“What shall we do now, my “dear friend”?” she asked with ironic emphasis on the last two words. “What’s the purpose of this meeting? How did you imagine it would go ... what’s the desired ending of this little tête-à-tête?”

“Well,” he said, warming up to the prospect that this was not such a disaster, “I am a little curious about the “road not taken”; do you think we could approach this freshly and discover where our paths have taken us to arrive, as it were, just over the hill from each other?”

“And how shall we do this?”

“Perhaps we could pretend it is a blind date and start from the beginning again?” He regretted this as soon as it was out of his mouth. What a sophomoric suggestion! What was he thinking? He wasn’t looking to “date” her; he just wanted to catch up, to find out where life had taken her. But as he chewed on this, about to rescind his suggestion, he saw her smile and extend her hand...

“Hi, I’m Gabi ... it’s short for Gabrielle.”

“I’m Charles ... my friends call me Charlie.” He hesitated, then added, “Gabrielle: it’s French — do you speak the language?”

“No. I wish! It’s just an exotic affectation; my parents were francophiles!”

“Some of it must have washed off on you. This place you recommended has a Continental feel about it.”

“Well they do make a decent latte, and their *pain au chocolat* is excellent. There you have it — the limit of my French!” She waved the waiter over and after conferring briefly sent him away with the order. Then she picked up her train of thought with, “And you, do you speak French?”

“Yes, I had to learn it at college, and then maintain it as a condition of promotion.”

“What did you do?”

“I was in the Navy,” he responded curtly, evading a subject that begged a detailed and largely incomprehensible explanation.

“Thank you for your service,” she answered, in between the waiter delivering their coffees. At this he looked back at her sharply, to catch the expression accompanying this comment. He was used to this facile, unwittingly annoying, acknowledgment. But there was no

evidence of irony; she seemed to mean it sincerely. Then she continued, “I suppose you were a high-ranking officer, a real muckety-muck?” This lightened the tone again.

“Yes, you could say that — a real “company man”,” he conceded, “but I retired a few years ago.” That put a stop in the issue of status, he hoped.

“Didn’t that gall you, having that bilingualism policy shoved down your throat?”

“No,” he responded carefully, gauging the unexpected vehemence of her statement, “I visited France early in my career, and that gave me a taste for it. Then I lived in a linguistic minority for a while, so I saw the other side. It worked for me; I suppose we all rationalize things that work.” It was a weakly developed idea, but he was still uncertain as to where the conversation was going.

“How perfectly liberal of you. I thought all you military men were Conservative?”

“You would be surprised. Many of us are more democratic and collaborative than autocratic.”

“Democratic collaboration: that’s what’s got us legalized marijuana and a culture of perpetual apology,” she responded assertively, not altogether in a playful manner but with undisguised disdain.

“It’s reflective of societal changes ... we’ve all changed.” As he said this, he hoped that it was not altogether true.

He could see that she was mulling this over, and the conversation was still open to a political debate that he would rather not pursue. To change the subject, he asked the obvious, “You’re married?”

“Twenty-two years,” she volunteered tentatively, “ ’til last year. We’re separated. Seems he found a fork in the road too ... more saplings in his part of the forest.” She smiled weakly at this, then held out a hand to admire her rings. “I keep these to ward off creeps. See? I still get to wear my rank!”

“Do you have children?”

“No. He said he didn’t want any. Now it’s too late for me.” Here her voice faded a little before continuing almost inaudibly, “but not for someone new.”

Now it was his turn to mumble commiseration. The exchange faltered momentarily, then he revived it with a question about travel. She spoke of her preferences and experiences in sun-worshipping capitals of the world. Her husband’s job in international business had afforded them exotic and luxurious mobility. They had travelled in a well-moneyed crowd.

He let her ramble, taking the time to watch her, trying to fit her into the shape and colour of his memories. She was still in trim form and wore her Chanel-styled suit with elegance and confidence. He could see her younger self in this new acquaintance, but there was something different; something more brittle, fearful and inflexible.

“I am going to kill him in the divorce,” she explained, elaborating how his infidelities had outranked hers in scope of betrayal. It was a frigid description of harsh reprisal that took him aback.

Without knowing how, he then found that the discussion had rotated back to politics. She was expounding on the rise of anti-fascists, and the role of dark socialist forces that were fomenting unrest in democratic societies. All this required a strong “law and order” response from government.

“You can’t rely on the liberal establishment to protect your rights,” she continued, “they are giving it all away.” She looked away, as if disassociating herself from this comment. Then, looking directly at him, “I have my own pistol — they will want to take that away soon also.”

He was stunned at this onslaught, amazed that these arguments had come out of her mouth. His stomach reeled from the violent discordance with his memory of her.

"But you were a liberal arts major, you were all for civil liberties when we first met ... " his smile inviting her to drop the game.

"Whatever do you mean, sir? When we met just an hour ago? Do you think you know me so well already?" She now fixed him with an inscrutable stare, daring him to get back into character as the Blind Date.

"You can't possibly believe that socialism is undermining the state" he rebutted without appeal to precedent, "that is just an old ploy of fascists: to raise the bogey of communist influence in order to justify repressive actions."

He watched carefully to assess her response, hoping to catch some twitch that signalled that she was just playing with him. Nothing; just a hardening of the jaw line that suggested formation of a counter-argument.

This was really further than he wanted to go. A planned social coffee to catch up with an old love had degenerated into a weirdly inverted political debate. He was now taking her former side against the confirmed conservatism of his own youth. In ways that he could not quite put his finger on, he sensed that she was deliberately antagonizing him.

"You don't get it, do you?" she rejoined the argument, "Sharing and collaboration are not truly human nature, they are only unproven hypotheses of primate researchers. As we have evolved, we have only got more selfish. And more devious at cloaking this in apparent altruism."

She let that point sink in. She could see it eating at him, corroding the structure of his memories, undermining his carefully preserved keepsake of youthful love. He sagged a little in his chair, looking diminished and a little bewildered. In contrast, she felt a surge of strength and affirmation that she could control the situation and assert herself. It was winning that mattered, not necessarily what you thought.

"You see," she concluded, "it really is a zero-sum game. You take what you can, and the other person gets less. Men have been doing this for eons."

The conversation stalled at this point. Charles sat in dejection for a moment, trying to resolve the dissonance in his mind. He could see now that they were not just either side of the same hill, but had emigrated to different countries. And they had not got close to finding out about each other's voyages.

Gabrielle contemplated the ruins of her friend. He had not asked for such a beating. Indeed the invitation to coffee had come at a time when she needed a friend, and the prospect of a sympathetic ear had initially attracted her. Why then had she done this? What had inspired her to spout all that faux-Republican dogma? It had been going well enough before he asked about her marriage, and that had triggered a vicious diatribe that had only one purpose: to hurt him as a proxy for mankind.

They made a desultory effort to resume the conversation without the Blind Date artifice. It limped along sufficiently to exchange details of his children, passing references to mutual acquaintances, and current pastimes, but the spark of recognition was gone. Finally she excused herself with other commitments and rose to leave. She returned his kiss on the cheek with a brief squeeze of the shoulder, an ambiguous expression not of affection, but of regret.

He watched her go, stepping out of the café to look both ways before crossing the street to walk down the mall. In his mind he could see the younger Gabi, casually dressed with university carelessness, swinging down this street gaily proclaiming her bold life plans. The

woman slowly walking out of sight held the vestiges of this form, and was more expensively attired, but moved with the resignation of someone much poorer.

As Charles moved to leave, he recognized an acquaintance by the window and stopped to say hello.

“A nice-looking woman you were speaking to there,” his friend started, “you’re starting to get out again?”

“Yes, thank you, making an effort to socialize.”

“It looked like a deep conversation ... an old friend?” He inquired gently. Charles glance again down the street, to see if she was still visible. He pondered the response a moment before replying.

“No; a blind date. Don’t know her at all.”

BILL ENGLESON
SAY UNCLE: 1958

I hear my mother moan. I think of it as her “why am I married to this man who irritates me so” moan, a hard done by wifely whine. Patented. Used in moderation it’s much more effective. Her and my father’s footsteps tell me they are in the kitchen. I’m burrowed in the basement, reading *Red Ryder* in the spare bedroom, the summer room where I sleep when it’s too hot to sleep in my attic bed. They likely think I am outside playing somewhere. It is not often that I am privy to their private talks. My parents have not begun to suspect that I’m an indoor kid, one of those sad urban specimens drawn to interior spaces, square rooms, safe structures, dry, stale, walled, partitioned and defined.

Anyways, I am reading a *Red Ryder* comic in the lower bunk of the spare bedroom in the cellar. The door to the kitchen, at the top of the basement stairs, is open to allow some of the cold cellar air to drift up and cool the main floor of the house.

“Not again, Harry. We were having such a nice summer. Why now?”

My ears perk up, uncertain of the nature of the impending unpleasantness. There is little of my life that is disagreeable, so a groan of agony is a matter to be given a fair amount of weight.

“You know him. A day, two days at the most. That’s all he ever stays. It’s not like I have much truck with him, Milly.”

“Two smelly days, Harry. He’s going to have to take a bath before he steps inside. Otherwise, I’m going to see May.” My mother rarely uses the threat of going to stay with her older sister on the Mainland. Though she loves her sister, she doesn’t enjoy travel much. Hence, my father knows they are venturing into serious terrain.

“He’s a grown man, honey. How am I supposed to tell a grown man that he smells like a sewer?”

My father has a good point, I think. I have never dared consider the possibility that you can tell grown-ups anything.

“You better define grown-ups,” my mother admonishes him. “And he’s not an adult. He’s just a big smelly child who does what he wants and doesn’t care about anyone else but himself.”

I am 11. Smart as a whippersnapper. I know about smelly visitors. It can only be my uncle Calvin. All my other relatives are clean. Least ways, as far as I know. My father’s brother is the only one who has an odour that sticks to him like he lives with skunks. He is invariably rank, so smelly that even I, who is both intrigued and repelled by him, must gasp to be in his presence. He rarely visits. Once every couple of years. He claims that our town has the dandiest chiropractor on the West Coast. Calvin doesn’t just come to visit us; he also comes to have his bones cracked.

Most of the relatives we associate with are from my mother’s side of the family. She is the second youngest of six. We see many of her family throughout any given year, sometimes travelling together to camp out in some godforsaken spit of river sand but mostly on Christmas expeditions to their homes, struggling to broaden our celebratory numbers. All her siblings have kids, most older than me and my sister.

My father’s family is different. He has one sister from whom he seems detached. One of his two brothers, barely a teen, was cooked by a bolt of lightning. My father has little memory of him. Learning of his shocking demise has cured me of most of my boyish urges to go outside

more than is necessary. My departed uncle, fried to a cinder in the virginal explosion of his youth, remains a blackened parable which never quite leaves my brain. That leaves Calvin. Until this summer, he has been a cipher, a travelling ghost, not anyone who has any say in how I live my life. He belongs to that distant pack of family who occasionally pops up like weeds. Calvin is a tumbleweed; the others are rooted like hermits. My parents never make any secret of their inclination to live a private life without the scrutiny of others. They prefer their own company. This summer of my eleventh year, I am destined to learn a bit more than I want to about family, about old wounds and slights, about dreams that go nowhere.

Calvin arrives on an early August morning. My parents are in the garden at the back of the house. Weeding. I'm sitting in our chestnut tree which overhangs our short asphalt driveway. I'm pretty much asleep. I often climb the tree and disappear into a precarious snooze. It is a sunny day because otherwise I would have been anywhere but in a tree.

Backfire jangles me awake; an old panel truck drives in, just below my perch, and parks. I stay silent, uncertain of the protocol; the truck, which stops vibrating, is turned off. The driver opens the door and emerges.

I know right away who it is. He is wearing a sleeveless undershirt and worn out, brown corduroy pants. I see the patches of wear on the knees. He has a grease-stained ball cap, shifting slightly to the left. I hover above him, unseen, watching the cap. My father has similar hats but once they reach the soil level of the one my uncle wears to visit, they end up in a bag in the basement, dragged out only to wear during an oil change or renovation.

He takes off the cap with one hand, picks his nose with the other, then places the cap in the back pocket of his trousers and wipes the farmed nasal residue on his pants. He then flicks the congealed goop off into the bushes. He hauls out a red plaid handkerchief and blows a throttling chord from his nose into the material.

"Ain't no one ever told you it's bad manners to spy on family, boy?" he asks without looking up at me.

Outed, I slip along the limb where I have been roosting and swing down to the ground.

"You're a regular monkey boy, Billy. Agile!"

I grimace, uncertain of what to say.

"Come here for God's sake, boy, and give your old Unc a hug."

We are not a family of huggers. We barely entertain the concept of shaking hands. My mother's family believes in planting large wet kisses on the cheeks of babies and each other, if there is no alternative. But my father is not a man who enjoys the closeness of humans.

My uncle has never wanted to embrace me before. As I dawdle in indecision, he covers the brief ground between us and wraps me up in a massive bear hug. He's not a big man, but his arms encircle me like a blanket. I sink into the softness of his stomach. I want to seek release. My age works against me. Why should I not want to be encircled by this man, my father's brother? I ask myself this question in that moment of uncomfortable embrace. Before the answer comes, he lets me go.

"Need some meat, boy. They ain't feeding you enough."

I want to protest. My parents feed me plenty. I don't eat that much but I never have the growlies for long. My mother isn't the greatest cook, but she is as regular as clockwork. Her job is to feed her family. She knows that.

"So where are Ma and Pa Kettle, Willy?" he asks.

"In the garden," I reply.

“Your old man always liked the feel of dirt. Have to give him that. He was always up to his cojónes in muck. Let’s not disturb the farmers. You gonna get me a beer?”

I’m struck dumb again. I know where my father keeps his beer. There are always bottles of beer in the basement fridge. I came close to cracking one open not too long before. I sip beer occasionally, beer offered to me by my father, and only when he is a bit tipsy and his judgment is impaired. I have never been asked by an adult to get him beer. My uncle is breaking new ground for me.

“Show me where he keeps his cold ones, Willy. I’m thirsty.”

We go into the house, through the basement entrance under the carport. The basement fridge is bursting with brew. I reach in and hand him one.

He has his own church key. “Never know when you’ll need one, Willy.”

Years later, I will think of that resourceful gesture often. I carry a corkscrew in my car. The things we learn.

We go up the narrow inside steps and emerge in the kitchen. Calvin takes a deep swig. He is panting from the short climb. He’s a big-bellied man, bigger in the middle than my father, but not by much.

“Let’s surprise them, boy.” He walks to the back of the house, enters my sister’s bedroom, shunts the window open and yells out. “Party time, Kettles. Come on in.” I see beyond his ridiculous bellow that my mother is not pleased. She glares at me, not at my effervescent uncle, at me, as if I have somehow betrayed her.

He stays for dinner. My sister gives up her main floor bedroom; I get bumped to the attic as she moves to the basement. She doesn’t mind this because it is much cooler below. I’d gladly relinquish my attic sweatbox, but the matter’s decided.

We’re sent to bed early. The attic boils like the screeching mill furnace where my father works. I sleep on top of the covers. Windows at both ends of the long attic room are open. The screens are frayed. Flies buzz in. Downstairs, my parents and Calvin joke and drink, sweating in the warm August night air. They’re loud. Mother cackles. She’s enjoying herself. Why, if she hates her husband’s brother so much, does she seem to take pleasure in his company?

She likes rye and water. Sometimes I’m allowed to mix it. One half-jigger of rye and tap water. When she drinks rye, she glows. She’s beautiful. In summer her skin is reddish-brown, beginning to wrinkle, hinting of a furrowed face, lines of a hard, sun-spoiled time. When she dies an old woman, her skin will be withered, full of folds of canyoned skin, her petite body so parchment-like that she’ll seem like a prairie field stripped of soil by merciless wind. Then, lying in my bed, I know her wrinkles are just beginning to curl up like paper crinkling from flame. Eventually they wind down and go to bed. I sleep, a sweaty, light snooze. I turn and toss all night.

The shower pipes rattle early. My parents are not morning bathers. They never sing in the shower. Calvin belts out a boisterous rendition of “Oklahoma.”

He murders it.

He’s gone to the chiropractor by the time I crawl downstairs. Mother asks me what I want for breakfast. Canned chili con carne I say. With a hunk of Velveeta. She makes a face but always gives me what I ask for. There’s only one rule. If you ask for it, you must eat it. It’s my second favourite breakfast after canned ravioli which we are out of.

My parents are drinking coffee in the living room as I eat breakfast. My sister emerges from the cellar, rubbing her eyes. Father walks into the kitchen for a refill, speaks to mother,

half-turns but avoids a collision with my sister, the perpetual impediment. "It'll be an adventure. Good for him."

"I don't trust Calvin," Mother says.

"A couple of days with his uncle, seeing how the Yankees live. Look at him," Father says, pointing at me as I spoon in a highly sugared helping of chili from the can. "Bored. My son is bored. He needs a challenge."

My mouth is full so I cannot refute my father's assessment of my activity level. I am bored. I like boredom. Boredom is always full of possibilities. But my mouth is full. I am stuffed with boredom.

Another day comes to an end with another party of sorts.

We're up before dawn. Mother has made coffee and bacon and eggs for Calvin. For me she heats up a surprise can of Chef Boyardee canned ravioli. She has obviously secreted it away for an emergency. I love her for that.

As I shovel the food down, urged on by my uncle's wail that "We gotta hit the highway, bucko. Hit 'er hard and running" I'm choking on food and fear. I feel like I've been shipped out because I have failed. I'm 11 and I'm being tossed out on my ear, handed over to a snarly, smelly, grizzly old bugger who scares me spitless.

Everyone waves goodbye. My family looks like they never expect to see me again. Mother is grinning, or whimpering, her lips squirming like she has something caught in her teeth and needs to force it out. Both my parents have false teeth, so I'm privy to the awkwardness of the store-bought choppers.

In minutes we drive through the town and emerge on its southern edges. The highway's already full of morning traffic, travel trailers galore, summer travellers heading south, our direction and some fleeing north. The sun glimmers in past my uncle. It is barely 7:00 a.m.

He is a wheel clutcher. He grips the steering wheel with both hands, at ten and two o'clock. He leans forward as he drives, squinting in the morning light. A few miles out, we ascend a small hill. I watch him drive. He has a rough beard. He didn't shave and he looks grungy. Father always shaves in the morning. For special occasions, he lathers up and scrapes his face in the evening. Both my father and uncle have round faces. Their noses are large and similar. Father is a head taller than my uncle so in that sense, they look like they are from two quite different families. Smooth-faced and tall; stubbly-faced, sweaty and short.

Calvin catches me staring at him. "Noticing the family resemblance, buddy?" he asks.

I look away not really wanting to answer. "I was five when your Dada was born." He pauses. I am wondering about the word Dada. It sounds like baby talk. He knows I'm 11. Then I remember. Over the years, the story of my first word has been told a few too many times. Mother cringes when father boasts that my first word was Dada. Like she had failed at maternal bonding. To this day I shrink from tales of any baby's first words. The baby can't remember, can't explain why one word over another. Parental nonsense.

"Three months later, our mother was dead. Do you know what it felt like, me being five, and your old man so recently out of our mother and her in the ground three months later." I'm thinking as I hear this story, then for the first time though I have vaguely been aware that my grandmother, my father's mother, had died soon after his birth, I'm thinking, *What a peculiar subject for an uncle to kick off a road trip with.*

"I was five, so I blamed him ... for at least the first while. Natural thing, right?"

I nod, feeling that the bits of imaginary metal in my head are clanging loudly enough for him to hear. I'm 11. I hardly know the story.

"Your dad was always a talker. Squalling every flippin' night. It was the crying as much as the appendicitis that killed her."

He strikes a mild chord. "Appendicitis?"

"Yup! That's what killed her."

I get lost in thoughts of dead mothers.

In two hours, we are in Victoria. He drives straight to the ferry terminal. We have an hour to wait.

In the silence of the morning, in the wait for the ferry, I wonder what I can ask. I haven't often paid attention to the stories of my parents. I have not been interested in them; they have no meaning to the struggles I face.

Sometime before the ferry leaves, my uncle wanders away and returns with a coffee and muffins. "Snack time. Cheaper than on that tub."

Eventually we board the ferry. We wander about the outer deck. We do not talk. I'm thinking that this is the longest time I have spent alone with an adult in my 11 short years.

The ferry lands and we drive off.

I am in America.

The Wild West.

We drive at a clip. Through towns and countryside. I have no idea where we are going.

"Uncle," I venture at one point, "when will we get there?"

"Call me Calvin for Christ sakes. I'm usually Calvin. Don't often think much about being an uncle. Get where?"

"Where you live?"

"Sedro Woolley?"

"That's where you live?"

"Yup. No great mystery, buddy. We'll spend the night, pick up Glad and Julie and go back to your folks."

Almost as an afterthought, my father had told me that I am to accompany my uncle to his home where we will pick up his "woman friend and her daughter" and come right back. Calvin thinks that the girl might enjoy the trip more if there is someone her own age in the car.

"Glad's got a big old Lincoln town car. We'll come back in that. This heap has been through enough."

I sleep most of the next three hours and awake to Calvin jack-hammering my shoulder with his lumpy paws. His fingers are encrusted slick with grease. There is a lightning bolt scar down the length of the thumb of his left hand, the one that's roughing me up. "OK, sleepin' beauty," he mutters, as if sleep is against his rules, "We're home."

We're parked in a yard. There's half a dozen stripped down car and truck chassis off to the side, keeping company with the remains of abandoned washing machines and assorted other metal objects. The house is a one-storey affair, white in places, brown in others, with paint peeling from much of the siding. Two rusting metal chairs lounge below the window next to a door. A feeble breeze is blowing in the warm early afternoon air, puffing just enough to rattle the screen door, swinging loose against the outer wall. The fluttering wind blows in from the driver's open window.

I get out of the truck and am immediately set upon by a large, ragged dog with a long, wet tongue and the smell of rotting garbage clinging to its fur. Its front paws clamp onto my shoulder pinning me against the fender.

"Ease up, Lucifer. He ain't a dog lover. Get away! Beat it." Calvin slips off his boot and wings it at the mutt. His aim is off, and the boot heel clips my ear. Lucifer takes the hint and runs off into the nearby wood.

"Swear that creature is gettin' stupider every time I see it."

"He's big," I offer.

"Too bloody big. Eatin' me out of house and home."

After reclaiming his errant boot, Calvin goes in the house.

I follow.

The door leads directly to what I imagine the builder thought might be a good place for a kitchen. I can barely breathe. The smell is unfamiliar. Garbage, meshing with dog juices and foods left splattered on walls, I suppose. The first thing I notice after the assault of the smells is the motorbike leaning against a table. It is partially disassembled. Pieces of the machine and perhaps other appliances are scattered on the table. The sink catches my eye. It too is full of machine parts. And the odd dish or two.

He makes it to the fridge, opens it and retrieves two bottles. He cracks them open and hands me a Dr. Pepper. I take it and swallow the sweet cold liquid. Calvin chugalugs the beer and gets another.

"Takes me two to cool down. Help yourself to any pop you can find. Should be a couple more in there." He takes a swig of his second beer and moves into another room. His head pops around the corner and says, "I'll be on the phone so do what you need to do."

I'm not used to silence. My sister is always at home, squealing and pestering and just plain annoying me. I like the silence here. The kitchen mess is another matter. I sip the pop.

"Hey Glad. I'm back. Miss me?"

Silence!

"Aw shucks, I hoped you would. I missed you, baby."

Silence!

Calvin reaches around the corner, picks up a small fork and starts shoving the tines in his teeth with a practised ease. I run my tongue around my teeth to feel if there is some food residue on mine.

"Tell her to leave the room ... that you want to talk with your fella."

Silence!

I want to get out of ear and eye shot as I try to think of my uncle as someone's "fella". "Anyway, the boy's pretty quiet. Julie will talk his ear off, but she won't get much conversation out of him."

Silence!

"Right, they can play cards and leave us to enjoy the drive."

Silence!

"See you about ... whadda we say?"

Silence!

"Right! Nine!"

Night falls. For supper he barbecues some ribs and covers them in a gooey spicy sauce. The canned chili con carne I am familiar with, the mild brand usually because my parents have

the blandest of palates, has not prepared me for his southern cuisine. We sit outside and gnaw on the meat. Calvin has a jug of ice water at the ready and we pass it back and forth.

He laughs all night. Uncontrollably! Lucifer makes his way to us and is offered some of the larger bones. The dog is composed and chews the bones with some delicacy.

“Come here, Boy,” he says, hailing me over to where he is sitting, hailing me with a wide wave of arm. Once I’m nestled in a chair next to him, he pops open a beer and hands it to me. “Go on. Enjoy yourself. Your old man was a piss tank before he was 10. Loved his beer! I’m thinking you’re cut from the same cloth.”

This may be true, I think. My father never denies the struggles he once had with the Mormon faith that oozed all around him as he grew up. And my granddad was a drunk. That seemed to be a given.

I don’t like beer. All I’ve had until now was stale warm dregs left in bottles overnight after my parent’s parties. The beer Calvin hands me is cold and I am thirsty.

I take a swallow. It is bitter and cold. Good cold, good bitter.

“Take a look, boy,” he says, and hands me a postcard. I’m awash in forbidden fruit. As I sit there in the muggy night, sipping beer, wondering if I will ever arrive at age 12 sober and pure, I look at the card Calvin has handed me.

“Dew Line, Willy. Dew Line. Know about it?”

He’s slurring his words. I’ve no ideas what a dew line is.

I shake my head.

In the card, a younger Calvin stands before a large bulldozer. Two nude women stand on his left side and two equally naked women, breasts and all, stand to the right. He’s hugging them all. He’s fully dressed.

“Three bloody years I spent in the friggin’ north. Me and thousands of suckers. Freezing our asses in the winter, going buggy in the heat. Fighting the commies. Saving the world. Distant Early Warning ... that’s what it was. Biggest crock ever. The commies never came!”

“These honeys ... ” he grabs the card back. “They kept me going.”

He chugalugs. Then he looks at the card. “Love ‘em. Always will. Sleep under my pillow every night. Even if I’ve got some live action.”

I nod. And sip.

The flies buzz around the bulb, the bones and the meat. By bedtime, he’s had seven or eight more beers and can barely walk. At some point, Calvin gives me a wink and wanders off into the house. He comes back, wobbling in the muggy night air. He hands me his postcard mistresses. “You’re my guest. Take them to bed tonight, boy.”

I accept the gift.

He heads back into the house and out of sight. He slams into a wall, or at least that is what it sounds like, swears and disappears from the night airwaves. I wait awhile, hear loud snoring and go to bed in his second bedroom. The sheets smell and the whole room has a layer of dust. Eventually I drift off, my head resting on the pillow that shields the postcard of my uncle and four incredibly naked women.

In the middle of the night, a huge fur ball pounces on me. I scream and crawl under the covers. My pouncing attacker is Lucifer who appears to like the game of scrunching and sniffing out frightened visitors. I recover my courage and decide the dog should have the bed. I drag an old blanket with me into the living room and curl up on the couch.

I leave the Dew Line women sleeping with Lucifer. Before sunup, I retrieve the card and honour my uncle’s request.

“You hoo, Cal, we’re here.” The voice is scratchy, strong and tinged with a singsong quality. “You all better be decent cuz we’re a comin’!”

I look up and see two women. The older one is a skinny, vibrating concern and seems about my mother’s age. She’s wearing a yellow dress, knee length and has thin bright yellow hair, brighter than the sun on the hottest summer day imaginable.

She spots me and rushes up and gives me huge hug and a lip smack on the cheek. “Cal, he’s a fine-looking boy. What’s your name, my beauty?”

I squirm back and mention my name.

“I’m Gladys, Glad to most everyone, and this is my daughter Julie.” She reaches back with her right hand, waving to the quiet girl and tugs her forward.

Julie’s a beautiful girl. She stands a half a head above her mother. She’s dressed in green shorts and an oversized purple t-shirt. Her hair’s long and black and reaches down to her butt. She’s older than me and could be 12 or 15 or 20 for all I know. She carries herself with a grace I can barely acknowledge.

Calvin lumbers in, reaches out to Glad and gives her a hug. He’s quick about it and turns to the girl with outstretched arms. She steps back, clearly not ready for his embrace. “Oh, don’t be so finicky, Jules,” Glad says, and gives her a soft shove toward Calvin.

Julie digs in her heels. “Mom! Don’t!”

Calvin puts up his hands to halt the embrace. “Ease up, Glad. Lots of women want to cuddle with me. Never forced anyone before. Not startin’ now.”

With that qualification, the pressure of unwanted embraces is put onto the backburner. After some toast and jam, we pile into Glad’s car. It’s a huge, finned beast. Calvin gets behind the wheel. I sit in the spacious back seat with Julie, her on the far right and me on the far left. I barely look at her. I do sneak a guilty gander from time to time at her bare legs. She squirms a lot, complaining that the hard, plastic covering on the back seat makes her legs, uncovered and soft, stick and sweat. The car has air conditioning as Glad points out to me with a head-turning emphasis, but Calvin has the window rolled down and the hot morning air blasts in through the back. I am unfamiliar with air conditioning so the news that we have it means little. I *am* familiar with rolled down windows and the breezes that blow in through them.

Glad sits close to Calvin. He occasionally frees up his two o’clock grasp of the steering wheel to toss his right arm over her shoulder and draws her in closer. The warm whistling wind is loud so I cannot discern their front seat whispers. Julie stares out of the window on her side of the car.

We zoom through the morning. We are on a giant freeway.

From time to time, Calvin snaps his head back to report on the journey. His first pronouncement is “This baby’s moving so fast; we’ll have you home Willy before you’ve even been missed.” I imagine he says this to console me. I have said nothing to give him cause for concern. I suppose it is here that I first glimmer the notion that the face is a roadmap, that my expression is easily interpreted by my uncle.

The ride’s comfortable, aside from Julie’s stewing and the embarrassment I feel watching Calvin clutch at Glad. Each time he reaches out, Glad moves closer. I wonder how much closer she can go before they merge. Each of Calvin’s gestures toward her mother engenders a glare from Julie. I was not then experienced with divisive love, had no name for it.

The landscape rockets by. Slunk low in the back seat, I have no sense of our velocity. I am a child with no control of space or time or speed. I close my eyes and allow myself to be shot

through the galaxy. As I will do for the rest of my life, I seek to form just the right words to express, in this case to the beautiful girl sitting next to me, what I desperately want to say. But I have no words. She might as well be in a far-flung universe. For her, I do not exist.

THE GIRL IN THE HUDSON'S BAY

February 1983

Ten-year-old Benny sat restlessly in his treehouse, erected last summer by his father, at the base of one of the towering evergreen trees covering the backyard of the Queenswood Drive property. Above, a winter sky of thick grey clouds pressed through the timber. Some barren fruit trees on the sodden lawn, next to the house, stretched their long, bony branches through the misty air. Benny stared into the family room, where his grandma sat under a crochet blanket watching *The Price is Right*. She had arrived yesterday from Saskatoon for her biannual visit to Victoria. Her reading glasses perched at the end of her nose so that she could occasionally glance down at the TV Guide cradled in her soft, wrinkled hands. Benny knew she smelled of Tabu perfume and Aqua Net hairspray, which held her wiry, rose-hued hair in a perfect bob. She was his favorite person in the whole world. He glared as hard as he could, hoping to attract her attention — but she was too engrossed in her show.

Benny slipped in through the patio door, ignoring his mother's rule not to, and stood beside his grandma, willing her to notice him.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?" she asked.

Benny glanced up at the elevated kitchen, where his mother sat at the table reading the paper, smoking a cigarette and sipping a cup of coffee.

"Are you going to answer Grandma?" his mother asked, exhaling a plume of bluish smoke that spread out across the family room ceiling.

"Grandma, I need to show you something in my fort."

"OK sweetie, but Grandma wants to finish watching her show first, OK?"

Benny's mom, wearing a terry robe, stubbed out her cigarette and fetched another cup of coffee. "Benny for cryin' out loud, she was just out there less than a half hour ago, what could possibly have changed?"

Benny ignored her. "So, Grandma?"

His mother opened her mouth again, but Grandma waved her off. "It's fine Vera," she said as she slid her feet into the fuzzy slippers beside the couch. "OK Benny-kins, what is it you so desperately need to show me?"

Benny held her hand and led her across the wet lawn, helping her onto the first rung of the rope ladder that reached up to his treehouse.

"What is it, my dear?" Her knees creaked audibly as she sat down on the bench. "It's awfully chilly for Grandma to be out here."

"Do you like the new bench Dad built for me?"

"I do, but you already showed it to me." She dabbed at the corner of her mouth with a fingertip. "Tell Grandma what you really want, sweetheart?"

Benny glanced back inside at his mother placing a new cigarette between her lips, staring into space.

Grandma fiddled the wedding band she faithfully wore, despite Benny's grandfather having passed away nearly 10 years ago. "Benny spit it out for heaven's sake!"

"I thought you were going to take me shopping," Benny blurted. "You always take me to The Bay when you visit."

She let out a knowing laugh. “Benny-kins, why did you make Grandma come all the way out here to ask?” She peered into the house, smiling to herself. “Is that why you’re acting so strange?”

Benny nodded. Grandma’s forehead relaxed. “You’re right, we need to go to The Bay.” She patted his cheek. “Let’s you and I go downtown, sweetie-kins.”

Benny considered asking her about perogies too — because she always made them on her visits, but he decided not to push his luck.

The four-storey Georgian Revival building loomed like a palace over Douglas Street, spanning the block between Herald and Fiskard. Decorative friezes climbed the cream-white terra cotta façade, up to the stoic roofline, contrasting against the swirling leaden clouds. Benny’s grandmother clutched his hand as they crossed the road and entered The Bay through the grand arched doors. Instantly their nostrils were filled with the potpourri of factory-fresh clothing, delicate perfumes, and the savory aroma wafting up from the restaurant below.

His grandma removed her silk scarf and patted her hair into place with her palm. “Should we go for some lunch first sweetie?”

Benny’s heart swelled. “Yes.”

They descended the escalator. The Grill appeared, its mahogany-latticed entrance warm and welcoming. Behind, cooks in tall white hats bustled in the steaming kitchen. Shoppers rested their weary legs at booths and counters, shopping bags piled at their feet. Grandma requested a booth, as she always did. The hostess sat them, placing menus on the table.

“What are you thinking, my dear?”

“Grilled cheese and fries.”

She smiled, already knowing.

“You’re having the chef’s salad?” he asked.

“And a Tab,” she winked.

As soon as the food arrived Benny sank his teeth into the gooey grilled cheese. His grandma, as usual, pinched salt into her hand and tossed it over her shoulder.

“Why do you always do that, Grandma?”

She picked up her fork. “You know why Grandma does this Benny-kins.”

Benny took a sip of Pepsi and, in mid-swallow noticed a girl outside the restaurant playing hopscotch on an eight-grid court drawn in red crayon on the linoleum floor. He hadn’t noticed her before. She had long, dark hair braided into pigtails, a light blue dress like a pinafore, white stockings, and black patent leather shoes. She tossed a metal jack onto one of the squares and hopped after it. When she straightened, her gaze met Benny’s. For a moment she stared right through him.

He smiled — too late.

She turned away, tossing the jack again.

“So, Benny-kins your mom says you need some new trousers. Maybe some shirts too?”

Still thinking of the girl, Benny nodded — then quickly added that he’d also love a new Bobbsey Twins book ... and perhaps a new Star Wars figure.

Grandma dabbed her lips with a napkin, crinkling her eyes affectionately.

After paying the bill Benny and his grandma rode the escalator back to the main floor where the boys’ clothes were located. Loud music and flashing strobe lights greeted them as they approached, the Bay Teen Council performing a fashion show. A ring of adolescent models showed off the season’s newest attire. Benny and his grandma paused to watch. Across the

crowd, Benny spotted the girl again. She was absorbed by the flashing spectacle, her pigtails framing her small, serious face. Benny admired the smooth sheen of her hair and the slight pout on her lips.

“Shall we go get you some clothes, darling?” Grandma squeezed his hand.

Benny hesitated, not wanting to look away.

Grandma gave a second, firmer squeeze. “Benny? Grandma is talking to you.”

“Sorry Grandma.” He glanced up to her. When he looked back, the girl was gone. He looked right and left, but she had vanished.

Grandma gently steered him toward the quieter racks of boys’ clothing. She pulled out a striped, long-sleeved T-shirt and held it up. “This would look nice on you, sweetheart. Don’t you agree with Grandma?”

Benny nodded without looking, his mind still back at the fashion show.

Minutes later, arms full of shirts and pants, Grandma ushered him into one of the change rooms.

“Try those on while Grandma sits on this chair. Her ankles are killing her.” She slipped off one shoe and rubbed her foot, sighing with relief. “You come show me when you’re ready, OK?”

Benny closed the door. He could hear the crinkle of gum foil followed by the snap of his grandma chewing. A moment later he stepped out dressed in the first outfit.

Grandma’s brow furrowed. “My gosh boy, how much have you grown? Come over here.” She pulled him down by the arm, peeking at the size tag. “This is a 10, it should fit, but it’s too small.”

“It feels OK to me.”

“No, no, trust Grandma.” She squinted, looking around. “Looks like everyone is busy at that show. Go get the size 12 in the same color. You remember where we got it?”

“Yes Grandma, I remember.”

Benny navigated the maze of clothing. Searching for the shirt, he caught a glimpse of pigtails from the corner of his eye. The girl’s face popped around a rack. She giggled and then darted away like a ghost. Benny’s heart raced. He rounded the corner but there was no sign of her. There was a tap on his shoulder, but no one was there when he spun around. The laughter grew fainter, floating away like a dream. Benny circled the racks twice more but failed to find her. He gave up, found the size 12 shirt and hurried back.

“Benny what took you so long?” Her forehead scrunched.

“Sorry Grandma, I couldn’t find the right color.” He held up the shirt.

She smiled. “It’s fine. Now go try it.”

After choosing a few outfits, they joined the line at the register. Grandma shifted the bundle of clothes in her arms and let out a quiet sigh.

“Grandma, I’m just going to go look over there. OK?”

She frowned. “I suppose so but don’t go too far away.”

“I won’t.”

Benny wandered toward the fashion show, but the music had stopped and the crowd had thinned.

“Hi.”

He swung around. The girl stood behind him, smiling faintly. She smelled like fresh cherries.

"You're funny," she said.

"Why?"

"Is that your grandma?"

"Yeah. Who are you here with?"

She giggled without answering.

"How old are you?"

"How old do you think I am?"

"Ten?"

"Yup. You?"

"Ten."

"Wanna come see my secret place?"

Benny looked back at his grandma. The line had only inched forward. "I guess so. Is it close?"

She grabbed his hand and pulled him between the racks until she stopped at one, then yanked the hanging clothes apart like a curtain. "Go on in."

Benny crawled inside. It was like a little girl's fort — cozy, hidden and cluttered with treasures — an Etch-A-Sketch with a pony drawing, a toy tea set. There was also a scratch and sniff sticker book tucked under a worn, yellow Nancy Drew book, a Cabbage Patch doll wearing red lipstick smeared messily on its face, and a Payday board game, laid out, ready to be played.

"Sit," the girl said proudly.

"How did you get all this stuff in here?"

She grinned. "Want some tea?"

"I don't really like tea."

She pretended to pour anyway, handing him a tiny, empty plastic cup.

Benny accepted it, unsure how to respond.

"You don't like it?" she asked.

"It's fine." He set the cup down.

"You want to play Payday?"

"I don't think I have time. My Grandma is going to wonder where I am."

She smiled, but the disappointment on her face was obvious.

Benny picked up the Nancy Drew book and stared at the cover.

"That one is my favorite." She took the book from him and hugged it. "I have 15 Nancy Drews. This one's about a haunted house with a hidden staircase. Nancy figures everything out ... I wish I could be like her."

"I've never read any of them." He smiled. "I read Bobbsey Twins. My grandma is going to buy me one today."

She didn't react.

"I've read over 20 of them," he added.

She stared at him, unresponsive.

Benny heard footsteps nearby — grown-up feet moving past, oblivious.

"Don't worry," she patted his arm. "No one can hear us in here."

"Actually, I should probably go, my grandma will be wondering where I am."

She looked down. "I get it."

"Thanks for showing me this place. I really like it." He paused. "Maybe I'll see you around?"

“You might,” she said softly. “I’m almost always here.” She looked up, her eyes misty. “It’s better than being at home sometimes.”

Benny remained still. He wanted to ask her what she meant, but just then Grandma’s voice called out urgently.

“Benny!” Grandma’s voice cut through the store. She hurried over, eyes wide. “Where have you been, Benny-kins? I have been looking all over the place for you!”

“Sorry Grandma, I was just looking around. I got a little lost.”

She hoisted the bag of clothes on her shoulder. “You made Grandma sick with worry, you little rascal.”

Benny stared down. “I have half a mind to take you straight home.” She lifted his chin gently. “But you’re safe and that’s what matters. Right, Benny-kins?”

He nodded, looking back over his shoulder. Between two racks of pants, the girl watched.

“OK,” Grandma said. “Let’s go upstairs and see if we can find you a new Bobbsey Twins book.” She took his hand firmly.

They rode the escalator to the second floor. The book department smelled like a quiet, sunlit library. Beyond, the toy section shimmered in a rainbow of colors and cheerful sounds. Benny spotted the lavender spines lined neatly on the shelf.

“Grandma look; they have so many this time!”

“Yes sweetie-kins, I can see that,” she smiled with delight.

He grabbed *The Mystery Cave*, opened it and inhaled deeply. The smell reminded him of the very first one she’d ever bought him — *The Big River Mystery*, back when he didn’t know what the books were, but trusted her telling him how much he’d love them.

“Which one do you think you’ll choose, dear?” Grandma set the heavy shopping bag down and rubbed her lower back.

He put it back and pulled out *The Goldfish Mystery*. “Grandma, they finally have this one!”

She massaged her right hip. “Very lucky.”

Then Benny spotted another favourite — *The Secret of the Candy Castle*. He turned to tell her, but something flittered in the corner of his eye — a flick of pigtales. He turned but there was nothing. The scent of cherries hung in the air around him.

“Are you deciding between those two?” Grandma asked.

Benny clutched both books. “It’s such a hard choice.”

She tsked, smiling. “If you promise to be a good boy I will buy them both for you.”

Benny beamed. “Thanks, Grandma!”

After purchasing the books plus two Star Wars figurines, Grandma suggested they go to the upper floor for a treat. They rode the escalator to the top floor, where the iconic red stop logo of the Malt Shop came into view, right next to the entrance to the parkade. Benny watched the pink, taut-skinned hot dogs rotating on the heated silver rollers, their skins glossy under the heating lamp.

Grandma set the shopping bags on the counter. “Two medium sized malts please.” She dug into her change purse and laid a five-dollar bill on the counter.

They sat at a small round table, dipping spoons into the thick, frosty treats. Both closed their eyes in appreciation.

When Benny opened his eyes, she was there. The girl lay on one of the display beds in the nearby furniture department, clutching a teddy bear. She was staring straight at him. Her

eyes appeared glassy — like she had just been crying or might start to. Benny couldn't look away.

"These are so good aren't they, Grandma?"

Her eyes crinkled. "You know these are Grandma's favourite Benny-kins." She reached across and pinched his cheek. "You just love asking Grandma questions you already know the answers to, don't you?"

Benny gave a small smile and looked back — but the girl was gone.

They rode the escalator back down to the ground floor.

"Well honey," started Grandma, "I suppose we should head home now?"

Benny scanned the store one last time. The clothing rack with the girl's secret space stood still and quiet. He stared at her hidden spot and wondered: who was she? Why was she here, alone? Was she even real?

At the grand entrance his grandma paused. She set the bags down so that she could retie her scarf and pop a fresh stick of gum into her mouth. She handed a piece to Benny too. As he tucked the wrapper back into Grandma's palm, he heard something — faint giggling perhaps?

"Benny-kins what is it?"

"... Nothing Grandma."

As Grandma hoisted the shopping bags on her shoulder, the sound returned. He looked all around but could not see the girl anywhere.

"OK sweetie, let's go," said Grandma, grabbing hold of his hand.

Benny resisted for a short moment, needing to see or hear the girl one last time. Then he realized that it was sobbing he could hear, not giggling

They passed through the rotating glass doors, and the comforting scent of The Bay vanished, replaced by the damp chill of the February afternoon.

They drove home mostly in silence. As they turned onto Queenswood Drive, Benny looked over at Grandma.

"I can feel you looking at me, Benny-kins," she said warmly. "I know you want to ask me something."

He hesitated.

"Benny!" she exclaimed. "For heaven's sake, spit it out."

As they pulled into the driveway, he saw his mother through the window, still wearing her robe, smoking on the couch. He pressed his forehead against the cool glass and, for a moment, swore he could smell the sweet scent of cherries.

"Tell Grandma what it is you want my dearest." The shopping bags were piled between them on the front seat.

"Grandma," he began, "you haven't talked about making perogies yet. You always make them when you visit."

She looked over at him and smiled so warmly he could feel it in his chest. "Of course ... perogies. I will make them for you tomorrow Benny-kins. I promise."

KIM HARRISON

NINETEEN SEVENTY-FOUR

I vaulted a high metal railing at top speed. The car chasing me squealed to a stop. As I leaped, a guy with a hatchet jumped out of the opening passenger door. I glimpsed his runners hit the ground as I crossed the rail. I tore through a back yard, leaped the next fence to the other side, flashed across the street, over a stone wall. Pounded up the stairs to my own room in the vintage house on the corner with the two matching apple trees.

What, I wondered, happened to Bill? He couldn't run because of his screwed-up bones. If he got caught, would he talk? I didn't think so, but I didn't sleep.

"Those guys were after you, Jackson," Bill told me in Geography 101 the next day. "When I saw headlights, I stepped back into an open garage. Stayed there in the dark until it was all over."

"There's a giant gash on my leg," I told him. "Must've been from the top of the railing. Didn't even feel it at the time."

"Adrenalin," Bill said. "I bet your pants had the biscuit."

Indeed, they had. We'd been pranking. Moving up and down the back alleys shifting ladders and mowers and outdoor furniture into the road. We carried a lawn jockey a few blocks and set him up to his shoulders in the lake.

"Immature, very immature," said my roommate Steve when I told him, but he was 24 to my 18, and a committed Pentecostal. "You should do something useful with your life, like donate blood," he advised, after I showed him my leg gash.

"The lawn jockey thing was kind of stupid," I agreed. "But fun."

When I sat with Bill in Geography the next morning, I felt fortunate we hadn't been caught in that stupid fun.

"You're a smart guy, deking into that garage," I told Bill. "But you were lucky too."

He had a progressive bone disease and couldn't run. Impressive that he kept his cool during the high drama car chase. Bill stuck his stubby chin forward and smiled, showing his gapped front teeth and pointy incisors.

"Nobody knows how long he is going to live," he said.

I liked Bill. He was ugly and I thought I was too. We hiked to college together every morning and talked about death and mountains and people's walking styles.

"A city guy's noisy in his gait, he doesn't care what branches he breaks," Bill asserted, as he checked through his geography assignment and noted the instructor walking in. "That guy will never find an animal in the bush."

I glanced across the classroom to find out if exceedingly skinny elfin-faced Sharon Hanet was looking my way. I had a thing for bony girls. She sat by the world globe, twirling it around with one finger, then turned her head toward me, rested her thumb on her chin. The globe kept turning a time or two.

I forced my face down, focussed on the tip of my pencil eraser. I couldn't look back. Probably another form of immaturity. Besides, Sharon had a boyfriend, Gregg, a tall, fast-moving guy with a radio announcer voice who borrowed my library book on LSD.

"I'll turn it in before it's due," he said, his eyes darting to and fro. "I really need this for my psychology research."

Then he threw the book in the back of his tiny green convertible and sped off with Sharon.

I thought about Greg's promise and Sharon's look from beyond the globe as I scratched bits off the eraser with the edge of my bitten-down fingernails.

"Do you think city people can tell when someone's staring at them?" I asked Bill.

"When I was in the bush, I knew someone was coming for 20 minutes," he said. "I should be a sniper."

Everything was about the bush to this guy. He said he walked and camped for days in the White Goat Wilderness, "where few enter, and fewer return."

"To walk is to live," he said, though his speed was limited due to his bone deterioration issues. "By the time I'm 60 I'll look like a jellyfish."

His own gait was a constant hobble. I wondered how he kept it up, or if he was still able to find animals in the bush.

"I go slow, but I always reach the goal," he told me. "But if I break a leg I'm done."

We convened each morning at Ellis Street and Barnard and hiked to the college.

Bill — squeaky voice, thick glasses, long arms and short legs, kind of like a misshapen goblin. One of the first things he told me was "If you want to be my friend, never take my picture."

I asked him why and he pointed at the camera. "I hate to look at myself and I don't want anyone else to either."

Nobody else hung out with him. Sharon's boyfriend Greg even called him "The Goblin." I was away from my home and living on my own for the first time, and with most people we just skimmed the surface of friendship. Bill and I talked deep. I especially liked it when we spoke of death and mortality, referencing those as our life plan for action.

"I'm not going to be around for long," he told me. "So I want to do the best I can in the time I've got."

"You know, when I was 12, I thought 18 was old," I said. "And now I'm 18, everything's still young."

"Hopefully 80 will be the same for you if it comes," Bill said. "If you're lucky,"

My landlord, Mr. Selvey, was 84. I could be like him, complete with the bulging purple veins running over the top of his head.

"I probably won't reach 40," Bill said.

He wanted to move as much as he could in his limited time. We tramped and wandered around together after school, doing what Bill called "Adventuring."

Hoofed it up Knox Mountain to spy on alleged heroin dealers.

"I think they're making a drug exchange right now," Bill would say as we spied on some guys with long beards and backpacks flicking their flashlights on the hilltop at midnight. "Those packs probably hold several pounds of H."

"Maybe they're secret sage pickers," I said. "My roommate Steve says they can only pick by the light of the moon."

"Jackson, you're making that up," said Bill, although between us, what was real didn't really matter.

We hiked across the lake bridge to Bear Creek waterfalls and camped overnight next to the roaring waters. I never slept so well as under the roar of the cascade.

"This is what it's like every night in Rocky," Bill told me. "There's a giant waterfall just behind the town."

He always talked of his childhood home in Rocky Mountain House, Alberta, where he apparently lived in a log cabin with his dog Chief and an old guy with a twisted neck called Johnny Mant who crafted snowshoes in the winter and moccasins in the summer. I told Bill I came from Trout River, a ghost town still existing under a high and sacred mountain where I hiked and camped with my own dog, Tip.

We told these tales as we trod through the night with the scent of fresh sage and spring in the air, taking a shortcut to the college at 2 a.m., all doors locked. We wriggled through an unlocked window to the student social room, twirled the world globe and used the vending machines.

"Coca Cola tastes better in the wee hours," I told Bill.

"It will rot your teeth 24-7," he asserted in his high squeaky voice, and I laughed to hear him because he always spoke the truth.

We lay prone on the seven-foot-long couches and discussed the future.

"I'm going to work in a forestry watch tower out in the White Goat wilderness," Bill said. "Nobody there except my old dog Chief. Way quieter than this noisy town."

"I'd like to go to Mexico," I said, "And see where the Aztecs did their human sacrifices."

"How will you afford that?" Bill asked, and I told him I'd have to work in the sawmill again.

"The most boring job in the world, but it pays well."

We discussed the purpose of our existence as the clock reached 4 a.m. Why did we decide to go to college? Education? A deferral of work responsibilities? I didn't want to labour in the sawmill the rest of my life. I planned just one more summer working there, to save for Mexico.

"It's a short-term survival job," I said.

"Survival is the meaning of life," Bill replied. "Every day I have to fight to get out of that damn bed."

Sharon Hanet and her thin beauty gave me meaning, at least in dreams. Her boyfriend, Greg, and my zero-confidence stood in the way of meeting in reality. The student council organized a ping pong tournament in the recreation room. I signed up, won a series of single games and was up against Greg in the semi-final. The night before, I decided to donate blood.

My roommate Steve and my landlord Mr. Selvey convinced me. As I watched the veins bulge under the skin at the top of his giant head, Selvey told me he needed a complete blood transfusion every few months to sustain his life energy.

"You are young, you should donate," Mr. Selvey said. "After all, you're getting a great deal on your rent."

Steve agreed. "We must give back. That's the mature thing to do. In fact, I'll go with you."

That impressed me. Steve practised what he preached. We both headed for the Red Cross the next afternoon. But the giving made me weak, and the day of the ping pong semi-final, I was up against Greg and down a pint of blood.

I told Bill all this as we lay on the activity building couches after breaking in, reclining only metres from the ping-pong tables themselves.

"Before the game, I told everyone I was weakened due to my donation of life-giving fluids," I said. "I made it dramatic and spoke in a radio announcer voice. I also told them that my energy was sapped because I had to walk to school that morning rather than drive in like a rich kid."

I believe Greg knew I spoke of him and his green convertible. After the game, which he won, he walked over, put his face about six inches from mine and said “Thanatos, Jackson. You are Thanatos.”

His breath smelled like sausages.

I re-visualized the whole debacle as Bill and I breathed in the activity room darkness.

“What’s Thanatos anyway?” I asked Bill, and he said “Death.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I feel it. Hard to believe that 10 hours ago Sharon was sitting right in this room watching me lose.”

“Why don’t you talk to her some time?” Bill said. “Ask her some open-ended questions?”

“You know, I wonder if I just made the weakness thing up,” I mused. “And Greg borrowed a book from me,” I barrelled on. “About LSD. He said he’d return it to the library, but if he didn’t it’ll be a few weeks overdue. You know, I don’t think he likes me.”

“You think you have problems,” said Bill. “Do you think any girl will even look in my direction?”

I sat up. I never thought about what it would be like to be somebody like Bill. I always pictured being a person like Greg, confident, game-winning, with a winsome girlfriend and a fast car.

“They say it’s the personality that really counts,” I told my friend.

The next day I took his photo, whipped out my camera on our morning walk to college, and snapped the shot.

“From your look I will recall all our times together,” I said. “How we survived.”

I told him he was a smart guy, and his intelligence would take him far. I said he might be lonely working at the forestry watch tower outside of Rocky, and hoped he’d keep walking. I said I’d put his photo on my wall next to the one of the half-submerged lawn jockey in the lake, plus the pic of the waterfall where we camped at Bear Creek.

Bill stepped back and his voice rose high and shrill.

“I told you never to take my picture!”

He kept walking in the opposite direction. I figured he was stuck on being ugly and alone, although at least he was consistent about the photo and right about my maturity level. I couldn’t stop my impulse to take a photo of the guy. After he walked away, I hiked to the college grounds, where Greg sat with Sharon on his knee there on the big flat rock by the newly leafing apple trees.

I strode up and demanded “Have you returned my library book about LSD?”

He shrugged, then made a grimace behind Sharon’s hair.

“I was going to tell you but I’m afraid I totally permanently misplaced it.” His deep voice turned up at the end and he smiled. “Have you recovered from your red blood cell loss?”

“I’m weak,” I said. “Really weak. But some sick kid will live,” I continued.

Sharon looked up. “A person I knew has really low iron and needed blood once herself. So, thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” I waved and stumbled away, then stepped into the library where I found that I had a \$30 fine for losing the book.

In those days, \$30 was a lot of money, but all I thought was “Geez, I wondered why Sharon’s face was so thin and pale.”

I asked Greg for the funds. He said he’d pay me, but not just then.

“I’ve got some major car repairs.” Then he asked “How can you stand going around with Bill? He’s so sad and miserable, man. And maybe he’s making you that way, too.”

"He's not so bad," I said.

"You've got to get your mojo working," Greg added. "Put a smile on your face. Get with the happening people."

He told me about his uncle who sat in a room all by himself all day, drinking and looking out his single window at the street, which had no trees, watching people come and go in the heat and dust.

"I plan to be in Mexico next year," I told him. "Studying the Aztecs."

"That's where my uncle is," Greg said.

The last time I saw Bill we met in the shopping mall for one final talk. As usual, we analyzed people's gaits, deciding whether they'd be happier in the bush or in the city.

"I'm riding back to Rocky," Bill said, "Away from all this noise and haste."

I pulled his photo out of my pocket. I'd had it developed just for this last meeting.

"See? It doesn't look too bad."

Then I tore it up. Little bits of Bill's image fluttered into the garbage can beside us.

"I'm sorry I took it," I said. "I know you told me not to. Now you see I am sincere."

"I think you live in the moment, Jackson," Bill said, picking a piece of photo off his pants. "You like to see reaction, like when that car chased you and the guy jumped out of the side door with a hatchet."

All this information seemed disconcerting, but correct. I wanted to know more about what Bill really felt.

"What kind of gait do I have?" I shouted, walking in circles around the mall area.

"You're the gait personality expert."

"Don't worry," Bill answered. "You're just like everyone else."

"I'm not different?" I asked.

"You can do anything," he told me. "You're fortunate. You're not like me."

A half-smile lifted on his face, then fell into his usual frown. I couldn't tell if he was happy or sad. That was the last look of his that I remember.

At the downtown bus depot in the wee hours of the night, I rubbed my eyes and said goodbye as he started on his trip back to Rocky.

The next morning, I met Sharon Hanet in the college library. She stepped up and gave me 30 dollars.

"This is from Greg," she said. "He drove back up north for the summer. I was supposed to hand this over to you."

I thumbed through the fives, threw them on the chair beside me. As I did, I pictured pieces of Bill's image dropping onto the mall carpet. All our adventures and conversations together fell through my mind. No more pranking and breaking into places. That was fun for kids. Done and over. Yes, I was like everyone else. And like everyone else, I could try anything.

"Wow, Greg's not such a bad guy," I said to Sharon. "Why don't we go to a movie tonight, spend these 30 bucks together?"

Sharon moved her head to one side, then brushed her hair back with one slim hand.

"I'll think about it," she said. "If we can just be friends."

Her pixie face shone under the spring sun. Just friends? Not exactly what I wanted, but it was a start.

"Sure," I told her. "Anything's possible for people like us."

"What are we like?" she asked.

I shoved the 30 dollars in my pocket and told her "Lucky."

THE VISIT

Susan came running down the hill, as she screamed, with her eyes wide and arms out over her head.

“They’re here! They’re here!” She yelled to her twin brother Mark.

Mark turned to nudge his grandfather awake, who was asleep next to him in his rocking chair. The two sat together on a wide front porch that was decorated with pots of flowers and herbs, attached to a delapidated farmhouse that had belonged to the family for the past several generations.

His grandfather woke with a start and clutched the rifle in his hands close to his chest. He wasn’t prepared to use it but had clung to it like a safety blanket. From where they sat, they could see down the long dirt driveway and the rolling field that ran alongside it, where Susan had emerged.

It had just become dusk and the crickets were warming up for their evening performance. The sky was mostly clear, with a few wisps of clouds, and colours of pink and blue blending into one another on the horizon.

As Susan approached, her pace slowed and Mark stood to greet her. Through breaths she explained to her brother what she had seen just moments before.

“There were five of them in total, and not one of them saw me, I don’t think,” she said.

“And did you get it on video?” Mark replied.

“Ya, but it’s not great. My hand was shaking so fierce the entire time. How’s he holding up?” Susan said and motioned in the direction of her grandfather.

“Ah, I think he’s alright, a bit confused perhaps. Don’t worry, I took the ammo out of his rifle while he was sleeping a while back.” Mark said, knowing his grandfather wouldn’t be able to hear him with his back toward him.

“So, what now? Are we supposed to just go to bed tonight and act like there isn’t a clan of giant-sized warlocks on our property!?” Susan retorted, still in a state of disbelief that she was even having this conversation with her brother at all.

It had been nearly a week since they arrived. Mark had been out on a walk one night, checking the wooden perimeter fencing for need of repairs, when he saw a stream of light cast upward from within a wooded area on their property that stopped him in his tracks. He couldn’t make out what it was, so down through a small footpath he travelled into the woods, cautious with his steps so to not to draw attention to himself.

As he crept forward, he could hear a low hum, and up ahead he could see what looked like a gathering or meeting of sorts. The attendees looked like no one he had ever seen before. They were cloaked figures that stood in a circle, with long hoods draping down their backs. Each one of them was wearing a different coloured cloak with some kind of crest attached to the front. He could only make out a few of the symbols on the crests from behind the tree where he hid, but they seemed to reflect the different elements of earth, fire, water and air. However, it wasn’t so much what they wore that intrigued him, rather than their proportions! Each one must have stood at least eight feet tall. He saw no words exchanged and couldn’t figure out what drew these strange beings there. The next thing he knew, they vanished right in front of his eyes!

The following evening, after he recounted the mystical occurrence to his sister, they walked down toward the same spot. Susan didn’t believe her brother and demanded further

evidence, which Mark knew he might not be able to provide. Perhaps though they had left something behind, a footprint, or a snapped twig ... anything to prove he wasn't losing his mind. As they walked, a single beam of light came up through the trees, just like the night before, and Susan cupped her hands over her mouth in response. Mark grabbed her sleeve and urged her forward, the two creeping in closer, like Mark had done the night before.

Susan couldn't believe her eyes! Just as Mark had said, there stood a circle of glowing giant wizard-like men in the clearing of the woods.

"What in God's name?" She whispered to her brother.

"Shhh, just watch," he said.

Surely enough, within a few moments the giants vanished from their sight, as if they had never been there at all.

This went on for six days, much to the astonishment of Susan and Mark.

Their parents had gone overseas on a trip and had left their grandfather in their care; he would often just sit and stare out ahead with a look of bewilderment on his face. Although physically fit, he had gone mute a few years after the passing of his beloved wife, their Nan. His mind had mostly seemed to deteriorate somewhat thereafter. The man they knew, who once led their family, now felt so far away.

On the sixth night, Susan and Mark sat on their front porch with their grandfather next to them, as they contemplated what to do about their odd predicament.

"I reckon we had better get inside and start our preparations. They'll be wanting to come inside soon." Their grandfather said through a hoarse voice, much to the shock of the two.

"Grandad!?" Susan replied, "What in the hay are you talking about!? You talk now!?"

"They haven't been here since I was a little boy and my dad left. I didn't think I'd see them again. They're here to grant wishes, but they will want somewhere comfortable to stay once they decide to come in," he continued.

Susan looked over at Mark, who lifted his hands with a baffled expression.

The three went inside and Mark and Susan followed orders given to them by their grandfather. They made the spare beds. Shook out the dusty rugs. Plumped the pillows. Peeled the potatoes and defrosted a roast beef. No one asked any questions, for no one even knew what they'd ask.

Sure enough, the next evening, while Susan hunched over a large pot of soup in the kitchen, came a knock on the door.

"They're here," Grandad said, as he looked up from his armchair in the living room, toward the front door.

Mark rushed over to open the door and one by one the magnificent warlocks entered their home. As they did, each nodded their heads at them as they passed through the doorway. No words were said out loud, but the warlocks communicated their greetings to each of them telepathically and explained their intentions for their visit.

An event was to be planned, with the whole town invited. A banner would be prepared and displayed out front on their property fence, along with flyers to be put up around town. They also ordered that the video recording of them was to be erased as well, for when the event was over, they would be leaving along with all memories of them having ever been there. Except for the children, some would remember, but by the time they became adults their memories would be chalked up to imagination.

The next week was spent getting ready. The lawn was mown, lemonade was made, and the furniture was rearranged with extra chairs brought in to accommodate their visitors. At last, came the day of the event. By then the warlocks had nearly eaten the family out of house and home with their insatiable appetites and taken up most every corner of the house with their gargantuan size. This was a temporary inconvenience though, that they promised the family they'd be compensated for. In return, the family felt an immense amount of responsibility for being their hosts and did their best to ensure each of the warlocks were as content as possible.

One by one, the people of the community arrived. They lined up to make their wishes, full of hope for their fulfillment. Some waited on chairs, others stood, a few making small talk as they did. One little girl wished for a pony with beautiful chestnut brown hair. A man asked for a wife, wishing to find the girl of his dreams. An older woman said she needed companionship and later found a small dog waiting for her on her front porch when she got home. Although it was a small town, the line was long, as it seemed that every person who lived there came.

After several hours, most of the townsfolk had cleared out, leaving just Mark and Susan with the warlocks. Their grandfather had already made his wish and gone to bed.

"And what do you wish for?" they heard in their minds.

"For a home in good repair," Mark said.

"To be surrounded by love," Susan replied.

"As you wish."

The next morning Mark and Susan woke feeling rested in a home that smelled like apples and cinnamon and looked as though it had been thoroughly cleaned. The walls no longer were covered in bits of plaster but instead had been smoothed out and painted a fresh, light shade of yellow. The furniture, though the same, looked as though it had just been bought, and sun filtered into the living room, giving it an uplifting glow.

They ran outside, struggling to believe that their home had seemingly transformed overnight. They looked up at the house and saw that the roof had fresh shingles, the siding was scrubbed clean and the home no longer leaned to the left.

"Grandad! Where are you!? You'll never believe ..." Susan yelled, running upstairs.

Susan ran into his room only to find him not there. Instead, his clothes were laid as if he had just been sleeping in them, along with a note nearby that read "Don't fret. I've gone with the warlocks to be with my one true love, your Nan. I've gone home, so make sure to look after this one."

Mark hugged his sister, as tears streamed down her face. Neither could comprehend his message, with no recollection of the day before just yet, but felt strangely calm and sure that nothing was amiss. They would miss their dear grandfather but understood in their hearts that he was now happy and free from his earthly cage.

Upon their parents' arrival home, funeral arrangements were made and much to their surprise the whole town filled the seats, and a bountiful potluck was laid out. Their hearts opened at the sight of it all, and they were filled with love from the warm reception in honour of their late grandfather.

As the ceremony ended, almost too quick to notice, a rainbow beam of light shot up and over their heads.

"They were here," Mark said, looking at his sister.

Susan smiled back at him knowingly, as the memories came flooding in from the strange day when the warlocks came to visit, and their grandfather wished to go home. As she remembered, other memories arrived as well, of the many sweet moments with her brother,

mom, dad, Grandad and Nan, her favourite people in the entire world. Although she missed her Grandad, she felt glad to know that her Nan now had the company of her longtime partner and best friend with her.

“They took him home,” she replied to her brother.

Perhaps they weren’t warlocks after all.

THE PRIEST AND THE PAGAN

Father Moore's Story

"In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour open the gate and let the girl out!". I demanded.

"But Father Moore, the bishop gave us strict instructions to keep her here until the burning of her."

"Don't question my authority good man, you know this cathedral and all its buildings are my domain. Do as I tell you."

The prison guard took out his bunch of keys and made a point of fumbling through them all until finding the right one, hoping the bishop would return any moment. He opened the cell door to reveal a prone figure stretched out in a heap on a bed of straw. Only the smallest shaft of light shone through a crack in the brickwork illuminating the sparse stone-floored cell.

"Come with me dear soul and make haste," I implored.

Although she had previously only seen me in unfortunate circumstances she responded without questioning. Having been locked away in this prison for over a week with little or no food, water or comforts she was surprising agile. Sweeping off the straw from her hair and ragged cloak she stepped through the gate in her bare feet.

"Where are you taking her?" asked the guard.

"With me," I said.

"And where would that be?"

"I don't know yet but know that you have done well today and the Lord will repay you," I said to reassure him.

"Which Lord, the Lord bishop or the Lord above?"

"It's your choice," I said, as I took the girl's arm and helped her walk quickly through the double front doors of the large stone building and out into the busy street.

We stayed out of the centre of the bustling thoroughfare, slowed our pace and hugged the shop front walls so as not to attract attention. I was not sure where we were going. It was too dangerous to go back to my quarters which is where the bishop and his men would look for us first. I bought some bread and fruit from a stall in the street and stopped only to buy shoes, for good or for worse, for my now new companion. We had to get out of the town and into the countryside and byways to hide as fast as we could. The church establishment had been baying for our blood, literally in the case of the girl, and I imagined all hell would break loose when the bishop saw that we had gone. The least I could expect was excommunication.

At the outskirts of the town, still in sight of the cathedral towers and the sounds of the bells, we took mud pathways across the fields and through thickets of small trees as the least likely path for anyone trying to follow us. I imagined that the bishop's men would be checking all carriages going to London and other large cities. That night we sheltered in a barn that had the luxury of a water trough and a hay loft. We had hardly shared a word since we had left town as the girl appeared to have turned mute. This was hardly surprising as I imagined the horrors that she must have experienced these last few weeks.

In my rushed exit I had not had time to collect a spare set of clothes. As a priest I was used to few worldly comforts but we could have done with some blankets. As we finished eating the small amount of food I had bought, we settled down for the night amongst the soft hay. I

tried to make sense of what had led to our extraordinary situation and how the girl's and my fate now seemed to be inexorably linked for the foreseeable future.

As she slept, I remembered how I first became aware of her. She appeared to be hardly an adult and had a naivety and an unworldly quality which hid her growing reputation for bodily and spiritual healing. She seemed to be completely unaware of her special abilities and could not understand why so many people came long distances just to see or touch her. It was told that a few moments in her presence could reduce and sometimes eradicate lifelong physical and mental ailments and bring much peace of mind.

Her growing reputation and popularity brought her into direct competition with the church establishment who had their own "spiritual" healer" in the form of the bishop's brother who, when in the middle of one of his fits would identify witches and rogues, mostly from the family's enemies. The bishop's men blackmailed those unfortunate to be identified by him but who could clear their name by receiving his blessing at a substantial cost. The brothers' surname was Ratcliffe, a long standing family name of the area, but with God's gifts at work with the devil's deeds, the name gave them both appearance and social behaviour such that they were often just referred to as the Rats. It was only a matter of time before an unassuming, gifted girl would be seen to usurp the Ratcliffe's extortion plans. A protracted effort to taint her reputation coincided with a series of gruesome animal deaths amongst local farmer's stock which helped gather public opinion against her and pointed to what could only be her satanic guilt.

Unable to pay the fees required to clear her name she found herself unjustly in gaol. I became involved when the bishop instructed me, as head administrator of the diocese, to make a show of exorcizing her devil. I was to do this publicly and to show no mercy. At our first meeting I could immediately see that she was incapable of such crimes but was a person of a holy disposition doing God's work. From decades of hearing confessions and attending to my parishioner's spiritual needs I had an acute awareness of what constituted good and evil. I refused to ravage such a dear soul even though I expected to be accused of disobeying holy orders and encouraging the devil's work. This was sufficient, in the bishop's mind, to threaten me with excommunication from the Catholic Church. Burning at the stake for my companion was planned for the near future, which was why, using the opportunity of the bishop being away on business, I decided to act hastily and without proper preparation.

Once well outside the city we got into the routine of mostly walking at night and sleeping during the day. I had had the good sense to grab some money before leaving my quarters and could pay our way for the next few days. Keeping a low profile, we relied on the good will of farmers and fellow travellers to share food with us. In my priestly cassock and the girl in her torn cloak we must have set tongues wagging. For ease of movement, I suggested that we should pretend to be man and boy. Riddled with fleas and lice, without hesitation on her part, she let me cut her long, straggling hair. All I had were some sheep shears that I had found in a barn so the result was patchy but with a hood pulled over her head she passed as a boy.

I had a good knowledge of local churches and monasteries and their priors on whom I could rely to put us up for a night and provide a meal, but we were encouraged to move on the next day as our reputation had proceeded us and they did not want to attract the attention of the bishop.

Once we were successfully outside the jurisdiction of the cathedral city and the county, we were able to make our way safely to my family home still a hundred miles away but in reach by a speedy carriage. My family were more than pleased to pay for our carriage journey when we arrived and were overjoyed to see us. News had reached my family that we were no longer

thought to be the guilty party in the animal desecrations as the bishop's brother, Rat the younger, had been caught in the act and was now in exile. By so doing he had exposed the extortion rackets, destroyed the brothers' reputations and proved that the girl was not to blame.

My three sisters welcomed me and my companion with open arms. My mother had passed many years previously and unbeknownst to me my father had recently died too during our time in hiding. My sisters were assured, by my father's will, that they were safe to stay in the house for as long as they lived.

As the second born I had always been destined for the priesthood and my role was to look after the spiritual wellbeing of the family. It was assumed that my needs were spiritual rather than worldly but I was left the huge sum of 500 pounds. My three sisters adored my companion, taking her in hand, they gave her one of their bedrooms, helped her with bathing and clothed her in their best dresses. My sisters had so many questions for her that in this safe, homely environment she began to speak. Her name was Brigit and had lived a quiet life with her grandmother until her gifts were discovered. Ill-advisedly, she had moved to the city for her gifts to be made public but this had unfortunately brought her unwelcome attention.

After they made much needed improvement to Brigit's hair, my sisters began pampering her body with powders and cream, cutting her toe and fingernails and providing her with a new wardrobe. I realized that the girl I had been living with in such close quarters for the last few weeks was in fact a young woman. Brigit looked like a new person, still unassuming, kind and now I realized, beautiful.

Renewed and out of danger, I knew it would be soon time for me to move on. Excommunicated and no longer a priest and going by my Christian name John I was without a profession, status or anywhere permanent to live. Brigit was in a similar situation. No longer pursued we had freedom but no security. A prior from one of the monasteries we had stayed with told us of a dilapidated church, surrounded by a group of buildings and gardens that had been recently abandoned. It was in the West Country near the sea with a good climate and fertile fields.

I now had a good sum of money left by my father that would cover my living expenses for several years, including Brigit's too, if she would like to join me.

Brigit's Story

Oh no! Its him again, the priest. The last time he visited he tried to shake the devil out of me. I have just a few more days here, within this God forsaken place before I am burned at the stake. Can't they leave me alone? The last person to visit me was the bishop's brother, a rat of a man. He said that if I would marry him, he could stop the burning. When I turned him down, he tried to rape me but a well-aimed kick instantly reduced his ardour and left him limping.

What are the priest's intentions? I should just lie low and pretend to be asleep. "Make haste," he said pointing to the open gate gesturing for me to follow him. Is he really freeing me or taking me for another exorcism? Maybe he has had a change of heart, he did act strangely, first berating me and then asking for forgiveness. "There is nothing evil about you," he had said. "I can see that you are doing God's work in this godless place." Before he changes his mind about me, I'll go with him, surely it can't be worse than staying here.

By the time we reached the street, I could see that he was taking a huge risk in releasing me. Although he was in a hurry, he was very attentive to my needs. I had no idea of where we were going. I just followed him. He did ask if I was able to walk hastily but I had stopped talking for several weeks by now. Firstly, the Bishop's interrogators twisted my words and used them

against me and then I was literally dumbfounded by finding myself in gaol and prey to guards and soldiers.

The first night we stayed in a hay barn where I noticed a wooden V-shaped animal trough with plenty of water in it. If I could bathe in it for a while, I could rid myself of some of my fleas and lice. I was just nakedly submerging myself under the water when Father Moore came by looking for me. I stayed submerged with even my head under water, just showing my nose above the water line and God knows what else. I knew he must have taken a vow of chastity but I was sure my skinny body would not have aroused him even if he had not. Shortly afterwards he came looking for me again and saw me shivering behind my cloak trying to dry myself in the weak evening sun rays. He immediately searched inside his robe and pulled out his undershirt and handed it to me. It was of a white, warm, soft material and long enough to cover my nether regions. It had a sweet scent of incense; the type used at Mass. I made a mental note never to take it off.

“The Lord be with you,” he said as he wandered off into the barn.

Seeing my naked body must have disturbed him, not in the sense of any passionate way but in what might be seen by others as an inappropriate relationship. To this end he suggested cutting my hair with some sheep shears he had found. Having short hair would help rid my scalp of lice so I just nodded in acceptance. Hiding my physical sexual attributes, staying dumb, and now with short hair under my hood, I could easily pass as a boy. This meant we could walk during the day. After a few days and nights, we were able to hire a carriage going westwards in reach of his home.

His three sisters took me in hand. I had never been pampered like this before. When they wanted to try a new dress on me, they were surprised to find I was wearing Father John’s underclothes. “Where did you find these, you can’t wear a man’s underwear, we will gladly give you ours.”

“I’ve grown attached to these, they were given to me by your brother and I find them very comfortable.”

“Off with these at once,” they chorused. We all fell on top of each other in a pile on the floor as we struggled. I loved their soft skin, perfumed bodies and friendly embraces as they peeled off my underclothes, squealing and laughing.

“What a kerfuffle, what is going on in here?” Father John was standing in the doorway of his sisters’ bedroom, with perplexed expression. The sisters had formed a barrier in front of my nakedness, again.

“Are you alright?” he said to me anxiously. And then to his sisters, “You must be respectful of our guest; she has been badly treated on account of her good nature and her sacred gifts.”

“She can talk now, her name is Brigit, and we love her,” one sister said. “We adore her,” the other two said joining in. “She wants to continue wearing your underclothes, we don’t know why, but can she have them?”

“She is very welcome to them. I suggest you wash them and offer some alternative underclothes too.”

“May the Lord be with you all,” he said as he moved toward the door.

“And with your spirit,” I piped up from my place behind the sisters. I wanted him to know that I understood that I had contributed to his disquiet. For the first time he smiled at me. The sisters surprised at our brief encounter, looked at him then at me, then at each other, smiling too.

John Moore's Story

It has been a very worrying time but I am much rested in the loving arms of my family. I fear that Brigit, for that is my companion's name, and I, will put too much pressure on my household if we stay longer. For my part I have been going through "a long night of my soul" imagining a new life for myself now that connections to the church have been decisively broken. I would like to include Brigit in my future as I have grown quite attached to her.

I sat with her at breakfast, she was looking unexpectantly radiant in one of my sister's dresses showing no sign of the recent ravages that had befallen her. Her hair, now uniformly short, with the sun shining through it, unbelievably had the appearance of a halo.

"Brigit dear Soul," I started when we were alone together, "I am so pleased you appear to have recovered from your recent ordeals. You have also transformed my sisters, from how I remember them, depressed and anxious, to positively joyful souls. Is this your doing?"

"I am not sure how my healing works," she replied. "I make no intervention with another person's body or mind but I can activate their own powers of healing just by being physically or spiritually close. I have found that this includes not just people but animals and plants. Kind people call me a Sensitive.

"I have seen you in intimate playful embraces with my sisters. Is this how it works?" I asked.

"This is an unusual way, but yes, it works that way too."

Just as I had thought we had finished talking she added, "I am very sensitive to another's state including yours and am aware of your distress and would like to help you."

"How can you? I am caught between two worlds. Do I try and recover my good name or abandon the past and create a future path of spirituality? Being excommunicated from the church, what does this mean for my priestly vows? You can see I am discombobulated and you had better not call me Father anymore."

Brigit astounded me with the most welcome of speeches that immediately alleviated my sorrowful mind. "Many can see that the old religious orders are not working. We should leave the familiar and awaken to our sacred relationship to the earth and a spirituality that is within all of us. There is clearly some good in existing religions but they have become so powerful, led by fallible humans, that their teachings bear very little relationship to Christ's original word and actions. Even you, dear soul, through your bishop, had to assist your church in nefarious ways. We can choose to resurrect spirituality from the heavy weight of the church and follow more ancient spiritual practices that have a primal relationship to God and nature. I am convinced that our souls will light the way if we choose that path."

I was much encouraged by Brigit's wise words. I asked her if she would like to join me in investigating the small dilapidated monastery we had heard about as a possible place to start a new spiritual community, immersed in nature.

My sisters were sad to see us go and implored me, before we left, to look at a way to adopt Brigit into our family.

Brigit's Story

We found the abandoned priory overgrown but in good condition. We organized a temporary resting place in the main hall and realized it would not be too difficult to make it habitable again. John had enough money left by his deceased father to buy the estate and approached the owners with an offer that they were glad to accept.

Souls from the previous priory were made welcome to help build our new community both spiritually, through contemplation and holy works, and physically, by repairs to the buildings and preparing the surrounding fields for sowing.

Just as our work progressed a disturbing message from John's previous cathedral diocese arrived to request his presence at a deliberation to choose a new bishop. He was one of the possible candidates for the position. Despite my concerns, he decided there was no harm in finding out more. On the way he would visit the cardinal, who had overall responsibility for approving ecclesiastical appointments, to alert him to the issues.

One evening soon after John had left, I heard a scratching noise at the upper level at the back of the hall scurrying about the wooden benches. A humped figure skittered back and forth. The figure leaned over the railings stretching out as if looking for a way to reach one of our gold candlesticks.

"Don't do it Ratcliffe!" I screamed. Only to see him lose his footing and fall twenty feet to the stone floor. Ratcliffe could not move as blood seeped out of his head.

"What are you doing here and what damage have you done to yourself," I asked.

After being lifted onto a bed he was able to say he had nowhere else to go. "They tried to kill me instead of you but I escaped. I need somewhere to end my life."

"What makes you think you are about die?" I asked.

"My clairvoyance has returned clearer than ever, and I know what happens, not just to me, but to you too."

"Pray tell me Ratcliffe."

"I can see you getting married."

Uncharitable thoughts flittered across my mind: *Not to you I hope.*

"I can see you with two children."

I tried to suppress: *Never with you.*

As if able to read my mind Ratcliffe said "With your companion and earthly saviour John Moore whom you have known previously as Father Moore."

I was so surprised at my own joyful reaction that I said aloud. "Those are very welcome thoughts. Thank you Ratcliffe."

"I also came to tell you that an invitation John may have received, to discuss the possibility of his becoming the bishop, is a trap. They have no intention of offering him that position and will likely capture and kill him. In return for the trouble it has taken me to find and alert you, I only ask that you look after me for the few days I know I have left."

"Thank you again for your important news. We would be happy to attend to you. There are plenty of good souls here to comfort you in your last days. John has gone already and I have no way of alerting him to his peril. I will travel to the cathedral myself and try to interrupt his journey."

Confrontational as ever he asked, "What are you trying to do here in this dilapidated barn of a place? You do not even have an altar."

"Thanks to you we do not have a priest any longer. We have learned to do without one. We believe it is more important to be Christ-like than to follow the often self-serving Christian dogma that you and your brother the bishop are familiar with."

I left him for others to look after and took some of John's money to pay for a carriage to take me as quickly as possible to alert John before the start of the council. I was in good time as the horses seemed to understand my haste. I kept to the shadows of the cathedral as a hooded penitent in prayer until the council began.

The cardinal, now accompanied by John and an entourage of soldiers, had arrived early for the meeting to choose a new bishop. Firstly, they wanted to investigate reports of previous ecclesiastical misconduct. They were finding it difficult to find anyone brave enough to speak out.

The cardinal sounding annoyed exclaimed, "Speak now, if anyone has anything to say." Nobody moved or said a word. "For the last time speak, or forever hold your peace."

How could it be that nobody has the courage to expose the errant ways of the bishop and his men?

"I have something to say," I said loudly from the other end of the church. Everyone strained their eyes and ears to find out who it was that would dare challenge the council.

I took off my black cloak and hood which had done me good service hiding me so far. Now I had to show no fear. With the warmth of the sun on my back, in my white dress and shawl, I walked slowly down the whole length of the central aisle to just in front of the altar where the meeting was being held. In respect, I genuflected and crossed myself. I could see that they still had no idea of who I was. Some looked at me fearfully as if they were seeing a ghost. With my short hair and clean white habit, I looked very different from how they had seen me before throwing me into their diabolical prison.

In the middle of their council, facing the cardinal, I told them my name and carefully gave an account of the injustices that were made upon me with the names of the perpetrators, their horrific actions and their intent on killing an innocent person for their own gains.

Nobody opposed my version of events now that they knew who I was. Independent women in a religious setting run the risk of either being compared to witches or, in rare cases, to the Virgin Mary. I was not trying to imitate the Virgin Mary but I knew where their thoughts could go if I was brief. Others began to tell of their bad experiences and then a flood of stories emerged. It was the attempt to murder an innocent woman that was a step too far for the cardinal who instructed his armed guard to gather the assembled bishop and his men and take them to prison to await trial.

Immediately after my appearance I left for home not wanting the cardinal to know of my relationship to John in case he would think we had conspired against the previous bishop.

After John's return I tried to find the right moment to share my beating heart with my close friend and companion. "Ratcliffe tells me he has his clairvoyant powers back. He confided in me that he sees that you get married soon and can look forward to having children with your new wife."

"I have never trusted him and his powers which he uses for personal gain, but it is true that there is one person I would like to spend my life with, but I have treated her so badly in the past, I doubt if she would consider me."

"Have you thought of asking her how she feels about you?" I suggested, perhaps too eagerly.

"It is you, dear soul, I have thought about you every day while I was away. When I saw you in the cathedral with the sun creating an aura around you as you walked gently toward us, I knew I would long to discover my future with you even if it meant leaving the church forever."

This is what I wanted to hear. "Dear John, your words fill me with joy. You have been my earthly saviour. I owe you my life and I long to give you my love."

John Moore's Story

Brigit taught me that you do not have to have a Latin speaking priest, bishop, cardinal or pope to intervene between us and God, but that God is ever present in all parts of creation, even in a grain of sand.

Soon we grew into a small community, committed to our spiritual path and to expanding the community and garden, including women, children and animals, all in harmony with nature. Brigit discovered she was able to intuitively contact the intelligence of plants that gave her instructions on how to make the most of our fledgling garden. In the good soil we grew huge plants, herbs and flowers. Word spread and people came and were stunned by the size and health of our plants which were much in demand.

I have never been reinstated as a priest as I had not pursued the idea and was free to follow my heart. Our growing community acted as family and witness at our marriage and our sharing of vows.

I announced to my sisters that I have delivered on their request to bring Brigit into the family. They will indeed have a new sister but because she is also my wife, she is also their sister-in-law. Many gasps and congratulations followed. I also let them know that Brigit is pregnant and would like to stay with them for a period and for them to help with the birth. I offered to pay for them to become mid-wives and who knows, thanks to Brigit's attentions, my sisters' transformations are increasing their own chances of marriage and childbirth.

NEAL O'REILLY
THROWING SHADE

It's not a job. Not a "calling, leastways not in the laughable way you folks mean the word. I dunno what you humans would name it. It's right dull most nights, is what it is. It's ugly sometimes, right pretty others. Folks never pay much attention te the fellas on the garbage lorry do ye? Nah, it's a bit like that, you wouldn't think, but it is. And worse nowadays most nights, the godawful stuff yous leave out fer us. I'm not kiddin', lots of it I'd rather not look at, and so much of it out and spoilin' fer months before we can get to it and cart it away. Disgustin'.

None of us er sure how our kind started, but then can you say much more about yourselves, really? What were ye before you were born? Now that's a zen question right there, I know me zen. Show me yer face before you were born. Yessir. None of us have faces, but. So's I guess I'm the answer te that riddle. Now isn't that cute?

Now, yes, no none of us know where we're from. Most are older than any of yous but that's not sayin' much in a world of djinns and angels and faeries and ghouls. They're all out there too, right enough, and most are older by a damn sight than tottering codgers on park benches and locked up in care homes. We visit them too and lord don't they have a mess te clean sometime. Years of gunk clingin' te the walls and the floors. Them nurses changin' nappies got nothin' te whinge about.

I was there the night one of us showed up — Bright Charlie, he was stumblin' about like a new deer, he was, not a thought in his bright head. Not that there's too much now, that's how he got that name, can't keep a thing straight for the life of him. Didn't see where he come from, though, some of us have thoughts on that point but I don't give none of them credit. It's all bollocks as far as I'm concerned and don't none of us know fer sure.

Don't I go on. Alright, so. Shades we're called, though that's not quite on 'cause what we really do is collect the shade. Wassat?

The shade — the dream leavin's. You think all that junk and mess leaves all on it's own don't ye? It's all just stuff and dreams, but it ain't. It clings on te yer feet and yer clothes and yer bedsheets in an awful tumble less someun comes along te clean it up. There's an army of us out there every night bagging it up, sorting it out, putting it te good use. Can you feel that tug in yer belly? Ye know it's true don't ye?

From what I've been told we've been here as long as you and longer, dependin' on what ye'd consider human, and there's those of us cleanin' up the dreams of the rest of the animal folk but that's a right easy nick compared te the right twisted stuff you all are dreamin' much a the time. We'd be able te keep the time better but us folks don't have the talent you all do fer tellin' tales and makin' histories. So, like, could be we've been around forever. The faeries and the djinn are liars, and ye don't get near an angel nor a ghoul if ye want te stay around, so we've only got ourselves te tell and we're none too good at keeping tabs on it. So forever seems good enough to put a pin in it.

I said we bag the things up. Not so much, there's no human word fer it. We collect the things and clear you out so's you can get on with it, whatever it may be. And we take 'em and sort 'em out and feed 'em back te the world, like. She's a hungry world, ye can't take all that stuff from her breast and expect that nothing can get put back. She starves fer yer corpse when ye pass on and that need puttin' back in the ground and so do the corpses of the dreamin', like. Do ye get it?

So, we take it in the night and deep in the wild or out in the fields we sow it back, like night soil. You know what that is, don't ye? It's human manure, ye put it out with the carrots and if you've not been eatin' garbage they'll come up right big. Oh, yes, you're an animal jes' like a cow or a horse. Same with the dreams, and they sit in the soil and come back up with the pines and the parsnips. And when it's good they shine, don't they?

Only you're all sleeping in humming cities of light and electricity and a night that never descends, and some of ye never hardly sleep at all and it's all one frightful muck since we can't come around when it's like that. We circle the edges and dart in like cats on the prowl instead of proud and easy in the dark like we used to and damn if it doesn't break my heart. If I have one, I'm not so sure.

Have you had those dreams that feel like one just piled on another and everything spilling out over the sides and nothin' at all gets figured out and it's an awful mess? Or worse still night after night goes by and no dreams at all just the hummin' of everything in and around the house and you wouldn't know that's what's keeping the sani workers away would ye? It's so much simpler when we cart all that trash to where it belongs.

Yer head's a frightful mess isn't it? Can't keep a straight thought fer a whole minute, all that nonsense trapped up there and then they tell ye the soil's depleted and there's nothin' good left in the food and the planet's sick and dyin'. It's not all the shade, like, but the fact that the world is sick for want of dreaming ain't nothin'.

It weren't long ago by my thinkin' that we could wander, saunter up to a bedside. Whole packs of us as night came down rolling out from the woods and the fields. Ye used to worship us, some of ye did, had shrines, little rock piles and candles and all that right out in the fields and the woods and somehow the clever ones would know, they would know, just exactly where it was we were livin' and sometimes it was right devilish seemin' 'cause we knew ye couldn't see us nor hear us, but some of ye like, *smell* us when we come around. And ye'd smell the roots of the trees and the knots in the trunks and damned if ye didn't find us right where we stood. And ye were grateful.

Back then at night the villages dark as pitch, even cities lit right gloomy with hardly nothin' at all, mostly jes' the fireside cracklin' and I always found that right comfortable. I've taken the dreams of kings and queens, I have, right from their heads, spillin' out the sides and fresh as warm milk. Plant those in the dark soil and they talk right to the roots of the trees and don't it make them sing. The dreams of kings and paupers just the same.

We deal with yer darkness same as the sweet dreams. Yer horrors and yer fears, yer loneliness in the night. The things ye shouldn't have seen in the first place lived again and again in the hours outside of reason. If there were tears I'd have been dry long time ago, it's a right heavy load some days. There were years after the bigger wars that I had moments I'd rather have melted back to oblivion than spent another night even cartin' away such horrors but ye pick yerself up same as ever the next night and get to it.

Even those nights though, haulin' away the unhealed bloody nightmares of a thousand crippled hearts I stayed sure of what we were doin' and why. But now? The nightmares pile up under LED bulbs and I can't sneak in even like a thief to do a poor soul the favour of clearin' it out. You all look out blind eyes and see a clean house, if ye only knew, by god.

I was out with Bright Charlie last night and the poor fella had less than half a sack and they was meager things fer all that and didn't he have a sad mug on. I told him it would get better, that tonight would be better, but I was lyin' and even Charlie, with not much of a head on

him to call his own, could see that well enough and I couldn't look at him. What's to become of us, the Shades, the Shade Throwers, if we can't do the one thing we're here for?

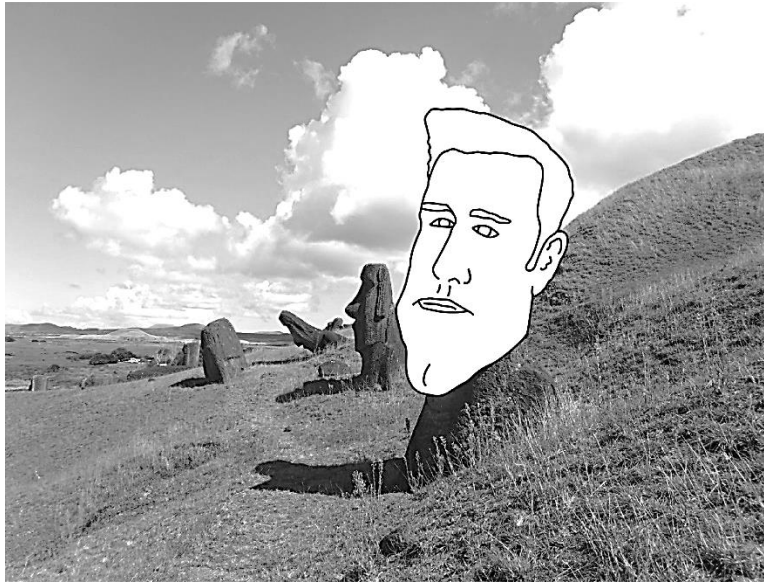
I know when yer born a human something like purpose doesn't show itself plain like that, but when you're a Shade it's simple; ye get thrown into this world and ye go te work. And while ye can work ye've got joy and purpose and ye don't sit on yer hands hopeless waiting fer something te change and I wish I had an answer 'cause it feels like that's most what I'm doin' these days.

Thing is I'm not fer certain but I have suspicions too that we're just around as long as we're useful. We disappear just the same as Bright Charlie popped into the world and fer nights after some might be askin' where old Jenny went what used ta collect along Midfield but then like I said we're not so good at the tellin' of stories and such and so after a while we stop askin' and someone picks up the slack on Midfield but of course Midfield's lit up like a Christmas tree and most on the street are playin' games an' checkin' in on famous folks' pictures long into the night so there's not much ta collect and I'm thinkin' maybe that's why Jenny went away and wonder ta myself if I'm not the last one thinkin' of her. But I couldn't be, 'cause even if the Shades aren't the kind ta be scared of nought, it is at least a bit unsettlin'.

Sometimes I finally make it to someone's bedside now and the hurt and pain and confusion is piled so high that ye can't see the person inside of it, and I'm so sorry that we aren't there to make it better the way we used to.

So that's what I'm here to say, I guess, and that's the long and the short of it, too. That I'm sorry, that we have a job te do and it's simple enough and I want te blame it on the world that you all have built that we jes' can't do it no more, but we can't, not the way we used te and I see how it makes ye suffer and I wish I could make it better, I truly do.

THE ISLAND THAT SHALL REMAIN NAMELESS



Afflecius Gargantua on TITSRN

“ISN'T LIFE A SERIES OF IMAGES THAT CHANGE AS THEY REPEAT THEMSELVES?”
– **Andy Warhol**

“THERE'S SOMETHING REALLY GREAT AND ROMANTIC ABOUT SLEEPING ON
COUCHES.”
– **Ben Affleck**

As portended, we come to the Pacific postscript to our Austral adventure and fly into Mataverí, the most remote airport in the world, on the island known variously as Rapa Nui (the name given by the Polynesian first settlers somewhere between the seventh and 12th century), and Isla De Pascua, (the Spanish translation when annexed by Chile in 1888), and my own personal favourite, “The Navel of the World.” However, this tiny paradise is more commonly known as Easter Island (the name given by Dutch Explorers in 1722, who had been sent to find Terra Australis). The Rapa Nui were no doubt mystified when the Dutch tried to explain why they had named their home Easter Island, given that they hadn't seen a tree in over two hundred years, let alone a crucifix.

So, what to say about this multi monikered motu? Well, it is hot though sub-tropical, you can't drink the water, it is a five-hour flight to the nearest Starbucks, there is no golf course, it is expensive, there isn't as much as a two-story house, you can rent a car, but you can't insure it. So maybe the less said the better, a rock to be avoided at all costs, left alone like some Pacific backwater only to be referred to as “The Island That Shall Remain Nameless,” TITSRN.

Having given TITSRN short shrift, I will fill you in on our sojourn to its second self, Affleck Island (the name given by Imbolo B. Driftwood, retired civil servant on a trip in March

2021. After reading this, I am sure that you will agree that it was a trip and not a holiday). It is an island similar in all respects to TITSRN. It lies approximately 3,700 kilometres west of Chile.

Affleck Island was created about 750 thousand years ago, when three volcanoes erupted out of the ocean, like three zits on the right cheek of the mighty Pacific, it must have been quite a show. The molten mass gelled into a single island roughly thirty-four kilometres long, the shape resembling a turtle facing eastward. The craters of the volcanoes, each four to five-hundred metres high define the eastern head, northern hump, and western tail, where the big city Hanga Roa lies, home to 95 percent of the island's six thousand inhabitants.

It is all very peaceful and rustic: our little cabana faces an empty ocean, no boats at sea, a dog might bark, a car may pass by every half hour or so, a rooster might crow at any time of day just to provide some conversation material, you might hear a distant nail being hammered in for a few minutes, just to prove that industry, though not a priority, is permissible, there are no traffic lights and the stop signs are merely a suggestion. The skies are also empty, unless you are unlucky and spot one of the two flights a day that bring the ninety thousand visitors a year to the island, less than arrive on a slow August day in Las Vegas. Internet is a community event here (signals are on island time), so the town has installed a free site in the town square. Good for a whopping fifty users at a time. It's an interesting social experiment. It remains to be seen if the folks continue to get more entertainment out of their neighbours than pleasuring themselves with their handheld devices. The old wisdom used to warn that if you overindulged in your handheld device, you would go blind. Given the ominous omnipresence of the new handhelds, is there anyone qualified left to caution about the potential dangers of going deaf, dumb and blind? In any event, the locals seem to have at least as much faculty with their senses as their Western contemporaries.

There are no Walmarts, no McDonalds, no chains of any kind and no trash (they usually travel as a package). There is no vandalism, unless you count the devastation caused by falling coconuts as they turn the boardwalks into kindling when they fall from the trees, or the toppling of moai. There is no graffiti, corporate or home grown. It is all very quaint. Little open-front restaurants dot the seafront, no plate glass or shining steel (this includes the cutlery); instead all they have are locally painted murals and carvings to invite you with their own individual albeit tumble-down charms.

OK, so this is a one-horse town, but a one-horse town with a difference. There are horses everywhere. The island has thousands — some say more horses than people — and are all apparently given the run of the place. Roads, farmland, archeological sites, downtown and in any phase of life/death. Foals/skeletons, yearlings/rotting corpses, pregnant mares and stallions with glints in their eyes and a spring in their step. It seems that the missionaries were so successful in converting the Rapa Nui to Catholicism, they had plenty of spare time to devote to breeding the horses they brought with them.

So enough of the Fodor's guide to the island prelude and on to the riddles of its alter ego. Of course, the 64,000 puka-shell question is, "How did Affleck Island get its name?" Come down the rabbit hole with me to have the mysteries of Affleck in Wonderland revealed.

As is usual with questions stretching back before written history, many mysteries, legends and scientific theories offer answers to the puzzle. But in a coconut shell, there are about nine hundred of the world-famous Moai dotted around the island and they are all carved in the image of Ben Affleck. These iconic Moai stone busts, measuring anywhere from two to ten metres in height and weighing up to eighty tonnes, (Stonehenge mere Lego bricks at less than half the weight) bear all the well-known indicia of Affleckism. Slightly defiantly upturned

lantern jaw, small forehead, deep set eyes, thin stern lips, largish ears, perfect nose, and flat head. But what about the top knot (Pukao), the rock that can add another two metres and twelve tonnes, to the edifice? “What does that have to do with Ben?” I hear you ask. I have a theory, but that will have to wait for now.

A more glaring non sequitur in this connection would seem to be in the timing of events. How could the Polynesians carving away between 1250 and 1500 have known what Ben, born in Berkley in 1972, would look like? The answer may be more obvious than you think ... the fifth dimension, time, and time travel. The Orono volcano crater at the west end of the island is more than just the navel of our world but a portal that leads to other time continuums and parallel universes.

It is unlikely that Ben himself travelled back in time to initiate this great endeavour, as he has demonstrated no artistic ability whatsoever, so would have been ill-suited to provide the islanders with the necessary skills to fulfill the task. All evidence leads to the conclusion that Andy Warhol had indeed spearheaded the venture. Andy and Ben met at a save-the-chicken conference in Kampala in 2097. Andrew, always the innovator, had pioneered the use of the Orono connector to get there, whereas the means of Ben’s transtemporal travel to the Ugandan capital remains but another unanswered question in this supernatural account.

All this was shortly after Andy had produced his famous diptych of Marilyn Monroe in our reality year of 1962. Andrew was at the peak of his creative talents and was hell-bent on delivering his next breakthrough work in three dimensions, 5D art still being in its theoretical infancy. The etymology of moai is scant, obviously Affleckius Gargantua would have been too highbrow a handle, and given the Polynesian language only has ten consonants, none of which are an F or a B. Andy probably went with the name the carvers repeatedly yelled out. The shouts usually caused when the chisellers hit their thumbs with their hammers. Moai!!!! Moai!!!!

Travelling back to Affleck Island in 1249, Andy got to work with its skilled and willing populace, numbering 16,000 in those days. Before long, Ben’s chiseled good looks were ubiquitous. He would be mounted on a plinth, or Ahu in the local lingo, which could be up to one hundred metres long. Sometimes singly, or in groups of up to fifteen. The feats of engineering required to transport eighty-tonne statues from the “nursery” (a quarry/mountainside near the centre of the island) to the perimeter of the coast, in some cases a distance of twenty kilometres, provide fertile ground for many wacky theories.

Anyway, back to the facts. So, the Moai direct their gaze inland and each site has its own name. We have one in front of our cottage, which faces directly into our bedroom. It is called Ahu Akapu, which translates into “Peeping Ben.” I have a staring contest with him every day, to no avail. I don’t feel bad, as he has had six hundred years more practice at it than me. Apparently, the Moai were erected facing inland so as to reassure the citizens that as long as they were under the watchful eyes of their ancestral leaders, no harm could come to them (we all know how that turned out), so it’s a bit like CCTV in more than one respect.

Andy wore out his welcome when he started putting the funny topknots on top of the hunky Ben. Eyebrows were certainly being raised, the islanders suspected that he was mocking the Moai. Things worsened, by the mid-1800s, food shortages and clan warfare gripped the island. The islanders, just recently introduced to the wheel, realized that they were rapidly coming off. Ben became as popular as reruns of Gigli. The Moai were toppled and the era of the birdman cult took over.

As a test of Andy’s godliness, the islanders made him participate in the “Birdman” competitions. The bravest and strongest of each tribe were challenged to climb the cliffs above

the crater of the Orono volcano in a challenge to be the first to bring back an egg from a nest of the returning sooty terns. Many fell to their deaths attempting this feat, Andy fell too, five hundred metres down into the pool of water that fills the cauldron of the cinder cone. It was quite a spill; his hair was a mess, lost his hallmark crystal Miltzen glasses and everything. Down and down he went, to the bottom of the crevasse, through the floor of the crater, through the navel itself (fortunately an inny). The portal, with its cosmic energy field just on the other side, pulled Andy through, like he was in the spin cycle of a top loader on the speed of light setting into the time-space umbilical cord.

He popped out into the parallel universe we call reality — if you can call East 47th Street, Manhattan, 1962, reality. Andy landed with a thump physically and artistically. Having tasted the delights of three-dimensional reproductive art, he was crestfallen by the banality of length by width. Sure, he probably had more devotees in reality than on Affleck Island, richer too, but they were lazy and showed no aptitude or appetite for chiseling volcanic tuff under the hot sun. Andy, however, was never the same. His work suffered, his art reflected his contempt for two-dimensional representation. He abandoned his quest for fifteen minutes of fame in every century. He resorted to painting Campbell's soup cans. Like his Moai, all were thematically the same, but everyone in one way unique, the label that described each of the thirty-two varieties available at the time. Revealingly, amongst the thirty-two, he included chicken noodle soup even though through the ages he had been a lifelong advocate for chicken rights (see Kampala 2097). When you are a genius of imagery and metaphor, you don't need to lop off an ear to get your point across.

Yes, that is the history, some would say stranger than fiction, but that's it in a cowrie shell. There is plenty of sightseeing to be done, including visiting the Tongariki Ahu at sunrise, the biggest collection of standing moai, at fifteen. An intimate affair as these things go, about two hundred or so other worshippers spread across a field of roughly ten acres. As the day warms up, we head for a refreshing dip at the beautiful white sand Akena beach, where seven Bens have their backs turned to us. Then we hike up one of the volcanoes, take picture after fabulous picture. This one is going to be the one I have on my computer as screensaver for the rest of my life, but then it is the next one and then the next and next. They say a picture never lies, but they don't feel like they tell the whole truth either; the images never fully measure up.

The hues and combinations of greens and blues and reds are unattainable, still I click away. They also say a picture is worth a thousand words, which in my case is hitting too close to home and yet even a thousand good words wouldn't begin to describe the vistas. Who would have guessed that ecological collapse would result in such amazing beauty?

Whether you believe this all to be a Rapanuan legend, children's bedtime story, alt truth, or a peep into a parallel universe, never utter the name of "The Island That Shall Remain Nameless," this is just between us, the secrets stop here.

POETRY



Rae DeFrane: *Rainbow over Nanaimo harbour*. Photography.

JAMIE BUCKLEY

THE PERSISTENCE OF THINGS

they drove to the edge of the quarry to listen to the wind
you wouldn't know it
he carried a folding chair under one arm like a prophecy
she had a thermos full of black coffee and an opinion about gravity
the rocks below held their cold all afternoon
foundations carrying the tremendous pressure of being forgotten

a child in a red coat spun in circles until she became a blur
then a theory
then a warning light
her mother watched from the hood of a car, eating salted almonds one at a time
everyone was trying to arrive at the correct size for their feelings

the man unfolded the chair
the chair unfolded its logic
sit here, it said
face outward

there are details I keep misplacing
things I keep getting wrong
there was a letter once
there was a kitchen with yellow curtains
there was an apology rehearsed so many times it became architecture
but language hardens around repetition
you touch it and it leaves fingerprints

meanwhile the quarry waited below
does waiting count as action?
he asked whether people change
she said the moon changes constantly and no one congratulates it

I'm trying to explain the sequence correctly
first a thing vanishes
then people build rituals around the absence
eventually the ritual becomes easier to visit than the thing itself
you think this is about loneliness because it's portable
but loneliness is only the envelope
inside it is weather
does he think the wind will explain itself?

the light began to leave in sections
the horizon folded itself carefully

he said sometimes he felt his thoughts arrive already translated from another language
inaccurate but confident
she nodded too quickly

down below, water gathered in the quarry basin
dark water
patient water
water with no interest in being a metaphor

I had intended for this to resolve elegantly
I had intended for someone to discover a principle they could live by
but the principle keeps backing away from them
the sentence keeps adding doors to the hallway

the girl in the red coat had stopped spinning
the thermos is empty now
the chair folds shut
the quarry remains open
but the argument continues beneath it

DEREK PEACH

SONNETS

Hamlet Act III Scene 4
Hubris

Our hubris is the curse of Icarus
still reenacted in the scripts of fools
and all who would with gravity dare fuss
in disregard of consequence's rules.
So wars begun with total disregard
for strength of opposition's will to win
may leave an army, field-of-battle scarred.
So General Winter mocked Napoleon.
So in our present age, the fascist clique
of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Trump
with money, blood and threats and doublespeak
all spent, will end in greed's ignoble sump,
to hear at last in autocratic hell,
"Thou wretched, rash, intruding fool, farewell."

Merchant of Venice Act III Scene 1
Generationalism

Where might makes right the arm that wields the sword
could grant an absolution to the man.
With conscience cowed and mass support avowed,
the despot, minus any complicated plan,
would cow the frightened media to reframe
colonial dominion over lands
where history never would support the claim.
Unjust incursion though the conquered sands
are soaked with an invading army's blood
while populations crushed appeal their cause
that global legislation stop the flood
of armaments beyond the reach of laws.
So this their cry such cruelty to avenge
"And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge."

The Tempest Act IV Scene 1
Encyclical

Rare age demanding all resourcefulness
t'ensure survival, granting entropy
eroding everything in raw distress,
enacting chaos where was certainty.
Our plans for happiness and some control
over the puzzle pieces of our lives
dissolve where intellect cannot console
the hope that random consequence deprives.
Before dispassionate and primal force
we plan and hope and try our best
though impotent to alter nature's course
though effort, with what skills we have, invest.
 Though destiny, at distance, we would keep
 "our little life is rounded with a sleep."

A Midsummer Night's Dream Act I Scene 1
Past the Centrefold

Playgirl or Playboy magazines, it's true
can cause a seismic shift in attitude.
You always knew they weren't built quite like you
but staring overlong was labelled rude.
Bodies centrefold, objectified
with all those nice and naughty bits displayed
will have you dream for hours, velectrified
by phantasies on inner stages played.
We're all indentured acolytes of lust
yet hope we'll find beyond hormonal urge
redemption in relationship, and trust
our baser teenage instincts we might purge,
 revealing this immortal truth, to find
 "love looks not with the eyes but with the mind."

Romeo & Juliet Act III Scene V
Last Will

Ah love, young love, ignore so earnestly
your servant-masters, gravity and time
in hope you can forestall the entropy
they will enact upon your beauty's prime.
Where potions will betray their promised cure,

where libraries of texts of protocols
or practices, adherents will assure,
will life extend and aging marks forestall.
Reserve unto yourself this final deed
when life is pain, incontinence and loss
to know you have the power if you should need
to spurn religion's promises as dross:
 Rememb'ring Juliet's last defiant cry:
 “If all else fail, myself have power to die.”

Julius Caesar Act III Scene IV
Prostation Explanation

I know that women are too often cursed
with problems anatomical seem hexed.
No wonder they so oftentimes have nursed
resentment, and unfeeling partners vexed.
First menstrual complications, then the age
of sudden heat insufferable and mates
who cannot comprehend nor ever gauge
emotions in their partner's mental states.
All these conditions complicate her life,
and yet in retribution, grinning fate
decreed that males would also suffer strife.
Possessed of failing prostates, soon or late
 they'll want those damned “Depends” for when
 “‘There is a tide in the affairs of men.”

RACHAEL HAWTHORNE
IN FRUIT FLESH & BLOOD

the lukewarm comforting stench
of damp diesel and rot
the discarded harvest's wrath

in the aftershock of summer's smoke
and Guthion's slaying wake
our blatant bounty bliss chases

us through the dense
shadows of the heavily laden trees
their tamed palms open to receive

from the thinning heavens
our little hands stretching to reach
the lowest fruit, eager for belonging

it's in our bloodline
to strip them clean
by the time the sumac turns crimson

bins brim with the flawless
falsely blushing gala spheres
their forced offering

my cousin and i ride behind my uncle's corroded
Case tractor, our small frames atop
his over-burdened load

of earnings, his booming
sanguine voice muffled
by the pervasive

engine's hum, flattening the windfallen
and strayed, disturbing and eroding
the narrow path, the machine suddenly halts

my cousin hurled
tossed onto the rusted shut hitch
i watched as her chin split

ripe red delicious juices running
down to congregate with the bruised below

the mealy metallic bite of iron still clings

and coats the upper corners of my mouth
we crushed, strained, and bottled them up
100% Pure Apple Juice

BILL ENGLESON

THE EYES OF MY HOMETOWN

They could see me then, the eyes of my hometown,
behind the doors, the windows when I walked
on their sidewalks, even then, grass, weeds
growing in the cracks, even then, hauling the wagon,
delivering the news, opening the gates,
the long walks into their private worlds,
springtime clematis, yellowing summer patches of lawn,
crisp leaves of autumn, fallen, drying, desolate,
crackling underfoot, icy flows, winter stains of snow,
and the icicles, drizzling in the faint glare of sun,
breaking off, a quick chilled run across the lips,
climbing up the steps, their red wooden steps, paint chipped,
rot woven, their red concrete steps, hole-pocked,
breathless on their decks, stand I, in pursuit.

And their eyes upon me behind the chimes,
the dusty venetian blinds, pressed down, pressed up,
twisting, milling, opening a fracture, peeking in, out,
eyes afraid to see beyond nearby wild woods,
wolves of lost civilizations,
musty accumulations of cloistered smells,
smells of bread, of muffins, of mould,
of death in the dust balls
under the sofa of the homes
of the eyes in my hometown.

REBECA DUNN-KRAHN

REJECTION

Thank you for trusting us — for taking the time — with your work
It is resonant — appreciate the chance — and important
We know — our current needs — you worked hard on it
We're grateful — doesn't align with the theme — you chose to share it
Thanks for — the best in placing it elsewhere — the look
Editorial decisions — bad timing! — are subjective
Our team has — unable to find a place — decided not to move the manuscript forward — not
right for the magazine — in our publishing program — passing on this submission — at this time
We'd like — the quality of your writing — to see more
We wish you — not a fit — the best with your writing
Thank you — we're going to pass — for your patience

P.J. SMITH

PORTRAIT OF A WEDDING

Ocean blue sky
pillowy clouds
lolling sunflowers with saffron ray
as tall trees sway
raven perches
hearkens all

while azure sea sways
light sparkles dance
atop rising tides
and pipers prance
shimmering shore
brushing
forest rich
of fawning cedars
draping
chocolate brown
hemlock boughs
entwined with
olive-skin arbutus
dangling the edge
of red-rock bluff

where upon lily garden
lushes with
white bird couplets
circling
wing-to-wing
dancing
dove tailing
a halo
above
oak arbor
bound with silky ivy,
on green of daisy and wildflower
baby blue, sunflower, rose, lavender
sun worshipping
poised,
waiting

as happy robins gather
around driftwood bench
where a couple
in sanctity
affirm
elegantly
seashell gown
emerald suit
rosy smiles bright
wedlocked eyes alight
gold-ringed
fingers interlaced
holding
sun glinted
crystal blue chalice
filled with
their promise

at the bench-atop-a-bluff
above the serenading sea
under the swaying tall trees,
a portrait of everlasting love.

LINDA BURTCH
SEAFOAM CIRCUS

Gorge Tillicum Narrows — Camosun — a ləkʷəŋən word
‘where different waters meet and are transformed’
A strong ebb tide creates a dense carpet of frothy seafoam
Bright white candy floss
 covers the water shore to shore in the small bay

The pounding current splits the carpet
 sheets of seafoam lift and fold back
Random shapes and sizes break off and
 propelled by a breeze coming up the Gorge
 trampoline wildly across the fluffy white surface

In the sky, the breeze is busy blowing bubbles
Small balls of frizz billow up into the air
 to drift lazily above the floor show below

Along the treed shoreline whitened by a fuzzy milk mustache
 hundreds of seafoam baby bits take flight
A bevy of white doves flying across the water escaping
 a magic top hat

The seafoam circus goes on for some time
At the whim of the breeze
 the foamy white acrobats somersault and leap across the bay
No planned program
 Strauss’s *Blue Danube* the imagined accompaniment

SARAH WEAVER
ROBIN'S EGG BLUE

delicate fragments of sky —
I'd find them scattered near the house,
satin flecks among dried needles and cones

every year, robins nested in the Douglas fir
their gift of tiny chicks
open mouths, beaks wide, constant chirps
as we watched through nearby window

one spring a robin attacked
his own reflection in the glass
wings fluttered and streaked the pane
with smears from feather dust
droppings whitened the deck rail
where the bird stopped to rest for mere moments
before starting again to beat his wings
fruitless attack upon his reflected rival

we were so innocent when we built
our house in the forest
thought it a minor intrusion
to be among the trees
that sweet spring smell of sap

we did not know
our simple panes of glass
mirrored
not the forest
but vain illusion
that we were separate

PATRICIA COTA

WHAT I DID ON A RAINY DAY

No sunshine for three weeks.

Skies cloudy grey and hushed as if in mourning.
A forgotten exterior light's beam fails to cut through the shroud
of this sombre day. Rain lashes the window pane while tree branches
bow low, bushed by the wind.

I step into the forest despite the chill. Wood-fire smoke hangs
like incense, pungent in the air. Bird voices silent. I breathe in stillness.

My clothes hang heavy as I trudge along a damp and duty-worn path.
Raindrops drop tear-shaped from my jacket's hood. Face lifted,
I lick wet lips and taste revival.

I see God smiling in every leaf.

AMBER WOODS
DAWN AND DUSK

I

Dawn Rises

stillness of the night
is cracked by dawn
grass sparkles
air perfumed with nature's damp bounty
cedar trees flank two giant Sequoias
each crowned with a raven
backs turned to the rising sun,
the birds trade raspy caws that pierce the air
and touch eternity
in unison they take to the wind

II

Roosting

just before dusk
starlings take to the air
one by one they gather
figure eights in the sky
groups magically merging
flocking and flickering
they swarm in the hundreds
wings beat in chaotic harmony

like leaves
falling in an autumn breeze
starlings drop from the sky
crowning the manicured trees
chattering and chattering
they disappear
into the branches
leaving only the dusk

FRANK WILSON

DIFFERENT SEA-SIDES

Back a long and short time ago
the sea was so far away
ninety slow miles from the difficult to leave farm
and we arrive impatient just in time for tea
at the family guest house with mum's strict instructions
as to how we should behave ...

then first look at the fun possibilities
as a fresh breeze edges in
across quietening sands and we plan the days ahead
and father pretends a need for candy-floss
so we all have one and sticky our promenade way
toward lights on the bay ...

and now I live in a place where the ocean
is at the end of the road
and a large country neighbour's mountain range
shines out on a clear day backdropping
tankers, container-piled vessels and cruise-ships
going about their business

and I have got used to the daily presence
of that once so scarce
and from which late at night I hear the shifting waves
and drink my morning coffee on a beach
where kids play just as I once did with no thought
for what tomorrow might bring

yet my eventual tomorrows brought me here
thousands of miles away
from where dad not even every year for a week
rolled up his trouser-leg bottoms
and paddled his enjoyment beside the seaside
before suitably salty fish and chips.

CHRISTINE HAVELKA

BAND-AIDS DON'T STICK ON SNAKES

I found a mess of snakes under a rock one youth-blessed day as I roamed the fields. I paused to heed the voice that said, *turn it over*. Sudden light on a dank hollow where churned a ball of racer-green reptiles. Fascinating in a worrying kind of way. Dad said it was a mating ball — made it worse.

Band-aids don't stick on snakes. No matter how I tried to press it on chafing scales. Two puncture wounds oozed wee eraser-like bulbs of flesh. Chastised my cat for the mark it left. I carried that garter snake around for a while. Waggled the hapless creature at my sister who ran screaming inside, locked all the doors.

Your fingers stink after holding a snake. It pooped on you, my sister taunted. Turns out its from glands *near* their poop-hole. It doesn't wash off too well. I surreptitiously sniffed my musky fingers at the dinner table.

A lizard scooted into my house the other day. One of those invasive types from Italy. The cat became very alert, very alive. She played it to death before I found them. I forgot cats like to do that; stretch and roll, one deadly paw out, lazily checking for movement. It stirred. Good faker. I put it out, wondered if it will survive. They don't belong, gardeners moan, yet they've claimed our backyard. I don't jump anymore when they rustle through the bushes.

What is the genesis of this reptilian invader? Where are all the garter snakes? My cat likes to chew on my plastic sandals left by the closed door. I feel her raw need to sink killing fangs into something soft. We live in the world we create.

SHAMANA ALI

RAINBEYES

My dad once gifted me rainbows,
better than the ones between white celestial feathers on
robin's-egg-blue skies
and even better than the lightning I had in my phone.

The rainbows were disguised
as dollar-store royal blue
sunglasses with cheap plastic frames.

The rainbows probably travelled from China, but who knows
where rainbows are born?
I haven't checked their passports.

All I know is the rainbows
were always ready,
I just had to put them on,
and I could spend a moment with
iridescent colour peeking out from
behind my dad's heart.

LEILA KULPAS
DIVINE MAKEOVERS

During the years my parents laboured
on the land, living in tents, huts or small houses
while saving for their property, all of my relatives
except for two uncles, were faceless characters
in their stories.

But after we settled on our acres when I was five,
relatives began visiting, sometimes staying for weeks
or months. We'd pick them up from the train station
in the nearest town, fifty miles and four hours away
by dirt road, or they'd arrive in the mail truck.

My mother had often spoken fondly of her cousin Harriet,
but I was surprised when an odd-looking woman arrived;
pale, the two sides of her face seemed slightly awry.
But, in the days that followed, she was kind,
and I found myself waiting for her smile.
And, not long afterwards, I noticed that her skin
seemed to glow, and suddenly realized
that she was beautiful. And, something similar
happened with several others.

Many years later, a blind friend told me
that people were always surprised when he
stopped them from describing someone
he was about to meet: he'd soon know
what that person looked like, he said.

MARGARET LONSDALE

HOPE IN A TIME OF GREED, STARVATION, & WAR

Sometimes I leave my radio on
all night, allowing the flow
uncensored to enter, knowing
I will intake even the unsavoury —
opinions proffered by voices
to which while awake
I might not lend my ear
— along with the informative and inspiring.

Probably this habit is unwise
oblivion and obfuscation are soothers
I might benefit from if only
I could learn to turn off the squeak
of awareness
I cannot seem to quiet.

My empathy-my horror-my sorrow
Outrage — defined futility of inaction
Still that I *do* feel must be confirmation
enough that I am still human.

In the small sphere of space
where my privilege resides
I seek to be, to strive for better
excavate some small niche
of refuge amid the bullets of chaos.

I forage for balance amid cruelty
tune my ears to professors of peace
their whispers like a promise yet to arrive
I stumble into the forest to commune
with the ragged beauty of nature
inhale her sacred offering for sustenance.

I turn toward the rhythm of the drum
the heartbeat of true humanity
and I trust there is some distant day
wherein a pause will occur:

A purifying rainfall
a deliverance of calm
a soft blanket of comprehensive gnosis
received in all languages
And then a universal agreement
a proclamation written across our common sky
declaring all lives of intrinsic value
all conflict quieted for eternity.

Onward then, the fearless populace will sing:
Hope dances with Possibility
the hopeful are tireless in this quest.

DENISE PASUTTI
MEND THE CRACKS

Take a deep breath
Wipe away the tears
The dawn has come
The mask must be donned

No pain
No fear
No doubt just cheer

Be strong
Be supportive
Be reserved

Night falls, quiet takes over
The mask falls away
In the dark, alone,
You can finally be yourself
Emotion overwhelms, steals sleep
Wets your face, claws your soul

Take a deep breath
The sun is rising
The mask has cracked
Piece it back together
Begin again

D. R. SPICER
A YEAR AND A DAY

Distance growing further then forth.
Arches pointed in blocks sky rising.
Twin lovers beckon us north.
Arrival in seconds wind sun lighting.
Inside outdoor observation enticing.
Empire State at foot not cliché.
Liberty freedom safety not fighting.
I was there.
A year and a day.

Vacation for two New York.
Chatter and noise always speaking.
Celebration not popping the cork.
Glass lines steel strength bringing.
Muscle blue swim life trying.
Forever river and bay.
Fear of heights pain and crying.
We were there.
A year and a day.

September lacked rain not warmth.
Tourist photo trick background taking.
Tenth place ninth month not fourth.
Turn of the century ringing.
Date stamp chronicle providing.
Orange flash not grey.
Torched icon trilogy prizing.
Everyone was there.
A year and a day.

Monsters kill mentors never forgetting.
Deep water trauma runway.
Roses in names remembering.
A year and a day.

JANE PEPPER
THE ROSE MAN

... and the rose man's happiest tending his roses.

You wouldn't guess
if you didn't know,
somewhere
somehow
some long ago —
a family's fortune lost
by someone careless
with hearts and souls
of binding flesh.

Of course, you'd never
know all this
in a place where
work and time
cease to exist ...

and the rose man's happiest tending his roses.

JULIE LADOUCEUR

THANATOS

Exhale, she turns still
In unblinking yellow eyes
Found eternal peace

*FLASH
FICTION
AND
NONFICTION*

JULIE LADOUCEUR

THERE ARE SHADOWS BEYOND THE BEIGE DOOR

There's a stranger in my home.

I don't see him, but I know I'm in trouble.

It begins with footsteps and a loud thud at the door. It jolts me off the couch. Lifted on my tiptoes, pushing through staccato breaths, I peer through the peephole. It reveals a man with dusty curls glimmering rust in the morning light. My stranger.

Without warning, we sit at the kitchen table. I don't recall how we got there. He made me tea. *Poison!* my mind screeches. Sweat beads on my temple as tension pinches up my neck. "Listen to me!" he scolds. I hold my breath; I bide my time.

Moonlight filters through lace curtains in my dimly lit bedroom. *When did it get dark?* Remembrance: there's a stranger in my home. I need to leave. *Now!* I drift asleep.

Out in the hallway, slivers of light paint the walls gold, as dusk eagerly waits its turn. I'm terrified. Suddenly, the corridor contorts, and the picture frames ooze out all their colours to the floor. My breath catches. *What is this?* I want to scream. I can't. *Why? He'll hear you, that's why!* I steady myself on the wall, eyes shut tight.

When they open, I stare befuddled as a tornado of moths circles a yellow porchlight. *It's dark again.* I ignore the drumming in my ears, tuning my heartbeat to the soft pitter-patter of my bare feet guiding me somewhere, anywhere, in the twilight mist.

Under a harsh July sun, everyone is staring, someone is screaming. I recognize the voice as my own. Familiar uniformed men point at me.

I am saved; I am free.

Something's wrong. Voices overlap as blue figures circle around me. Through the ruckus, my ears perceive pieces of conspiracy, loud whispers filling me with dread.

... dementia ... delirium ... sedative ...

Wait! A pinch in my arm.

"Please help me", I whimper as my eyelids turn heavy.

When I wake again, I sit in a baby blue room I do not recognize. The stranger rests across from me, a mirror on his lap.

I am still as a bunny; he is the wolf. He grabs my wrist in his right hand; in his left a picture, a younger him, beside an older woman, her platinum curls bouncing off her shoulders. *Do I know her? I might...*

On the coffee table, another stupid cup of tea.

The room vibrates, the grey carpet melts into quicksand. With wrinkled hands that shouldn't be mine, I grab the teacup and throw it at the man, but he steadies my arm and knocks the porcelain on the *quicksand carpet*, where it doesn't sink.

"Get out!"

The man leaves the room as I cry myself dry, staring at the wide-eyed old lady in the mirror, the woman I recognize from the now crumpled and tea-stained picture at my feet.

White knuckles clutch the copper doorknob, confining the shadows in the baby blue room beyond the beige door.

"I'll visit next week ... mama," he whispers.

HOPE

It was West Coast wet. Heavy clouds had been slipping down the North Shore Mountains and sliding into Burrard Inlet all day. A late November rain — not hard but steady — had been falling since morning.

Carl crossed the Cambie Street bridge, walked over to Beatty, then up Dunsmuir. In spite of his quick pace and long stride (“Carl, he was born lanky,” Mum always said), his red and black plaid jacket and faded jeans were soaked through. Only his socks were dry, owing to his steel-toed work boots.

Carl pushed open the bus depot’s swinging door. He looked around, taking his bearings. Off to the side of the entrance was a small sign: “This location will close, effective March 1, 1993. Bus services will be located at Pacific Central Station.”

He joined the line that snaked around the wooden benches. He’d spent much of his life standing in lines: applying for casual work, collecting weekly pay packets, signing up for UIC. Never bothered him. Gave him time to think.

Today, jumbled song lyrics skittered across his mind — a Canadian soundtrack: “summer wages”; “he may go to Hell or even Vancouver”; “four strong winds that blow lonely”; Stompin’ Tom’s list in “I’ve been everywhere, man.” Though Carl had never made it east of Alberta.

There were lines from a poem his English teacher made the class read when he was in Grade 10: *Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.*

He’d left home at the end of that year, like many boys in his class. They went to work in the mills or on fishing boats; they hitched rides to the Okanagan to pick fruit or up to the Peace to harvest wheat. They worked in the forests and the mines. They helped build B.C.’s big dams and ribbon of highways.

Carl had grown up in Vic West, where he lived with his sister and mum. His sister married a sailor from the navy base. Moved to Halifax. Mum passed more than 10 years back. Carl barely remembered his father, a man who had been there until, one day, he wasn’t. No, Carl wouldn’t be taking the bus to Victoria; nothing waited for him there.

Lines from “The Mountains and Marianne” came to him, even though her name was Julie and the last time he’d seen her was more than five years ago, when he’d been working on the build-out of the Coquihalla Highway. She served him mugs of black coffee and big bowls of chili at a café in town. He’d taken her to a couple of movies, asked if he could send her a postcard now and again. She gave him her address.

Carl reached the ticket counter. He took his wallet from his back pocket. The leather was damp but the bills were dry.

“A one-way ticket to Hope,” he said, as the slip of paper with Julie’s address fell to the floor, unnoticed.

ANN TIPLADY

BIRDSTRIKE

It's a short wintery day, the meager daylight is fading, when there's a crack on the big living room window. A bird has hit the glass. Fearing the worst, I hurry outside, finding a small sparrow lying on the bare soil in the garden below the window. With gloves on I lift it softly. Dazed, its head swivels around as though it were drunk. It's alive at least; it might recover.

But it can't fly in this state, and if I just leave it here, Cleo, the next-door cat, the huntress who thinks she owns our garden, might find it. I'd encountered her once, early on a lovely spring morning, crunching on a small bird, perhaps a spring migrant who would never go on to raise babies. I dare not leave it for Cleo to find. And it's getting dark and will soon be cold, both conditions working against recovery.

I gently lift it into a cardboard box and fold the flaps closed. They weigh so little, little birds like this, they feel almost like nothing in the hand. I set the box on the floor, just inside the front door, with a large book on top to keep it closed and, more importantly, to keep our cat out. The box is silent. Inside, in the quiet blackness, the bird can either recover, or quietly die.

The sun is just rising next morning when we hear scratching sounds from the box. Our own cat, forcibly retired from his hunting ways when he came to live with us, creeps around the box, inspecting all sides. Encouraged by the scratching sounds, son James and I slip out the door into the front garden with the box. Tilting the top of the box toward the garden we open the flaps and look. Inside is a bright-eyed, very alert little sparrow. After one second, maybe two, sitting motionless, it bursts from the box and rockets away, gone across the garden.

That window was awful for bird strikes. Usually they were glancing blows, leaving a puff of feathers floating down, or stuck to the window, as a bird flew off in a wobbling daze. After an upsetting fatality, where a living, flying bird was transformed in a split-second into a soft warm fluff with a sagging head, I went outside and applied long strips of blue tape to the glass, and added extra vertical lines with a wax pencil.

The tape, wax lines and accumulating dirt helped birds to see the glass surface, and bird strikes mostly stopped. Eventually we remodeled and changed the windows. As promised, the new glass is visible to birds; they don't crash into the windows now; rescue missions no longer are needed.

We simply enjoy the birds.

KENN PERRIER

ORGANIC BAGS OF WATER

You know that we humans all evolve through a series of accidents, right? You know, don't you, that life is a miracle? Take you, for example. You, all of you, sitting wherever you are, before me. I look about me and I can sense you in my world. Sharing with you — really, all organic bags of *water*, sitting together side by side, or alone, perhaps in groups with maybe strangers or loved ones. All orderly, straight backs and bent necks, eager to read and to process my words, my thoughts and my meanings. Each of you, with all your senses tuned, all of you metabolizing, respiring, digesting, working toward eliminating, your organ systems each doing their part. It is amazing that we are together in this sense, this instance, right now: here, present and accounted for. We could be any age, really, and all from different places, composed of different races and ethnic backgrounds; we have, each of us, lived varied and amazing lives. We have each lived every moment of every day, slept many hours in our lives, eaten a mountain of food you would think, and gone to the washroom a lot of different times. How many breaths have you taken in your lifetime? How many times have you sneezed? Think now, of how many times you have glanced up at a clock in your life? How many pimples do you think you've popped? Or blown your nose, with a piece of tissue paper? How many times have you looked in a mirror? How many Christmas presents have you opened in your life? How many times have you made love to another person? Brushed your hair? Put on your shoes? Started your car? How many band-aids do you think you've applied to your body during your lifetime?

It is unfathomable to think of the experiences we have lived through: the number of times we have laughed in delight, cried in sadness, the number of people we have hugged. Cumulatively, through the years, all the years, we have done everything ... been everywhere ... loved all ... sometimes hated all. We have opinions, feelings, emotions, loves and desires. And through everything we have traversed, through time immemorial, the path we have all travelled, has led us, ultimately, to this article. Today. Here. Right this instant. Everything we have done in our lives has led us to this instance in time and space. It is a miracle, don't you think?

TAYLOR GILBERT
@BLEEDINGHEART91

We all have our bubbles.

Our personal space. A comfort zone. If someone gets too close you might say, “Pal, give me some breathing room.” No one enjoys a close talker.

We have our family bubbles, carved back in the bubonic era of 2020. When we were forced to decide who we preferred to see every day and who we could happily settle for seeing around Christmas.

Then there’s your political bubble or echo chamber if you will. Just because you and your friends and AlbertaOilLover899989 believe it’s true ... it doesn’t mean it is. And just in case you’re wondering if I’m on your side in that debate, I think TreeHugger69 is just as lost.

We create our bubbles. We draw our lines. Tread on them at your own peril.

But to what end?

The only way to soften our hard exteriors — and these bubbles are tough, not for kids — is to find common ground. Find a solution to the dissolution.

I know this sentiment is trite and often falls on deaf ears but if we just, once in a while, offered the close talker a mint, educated a mildly racist uncle, gave OilLover a hug (after we confirm he’s not a bot), maybe our bubbles wouldn’t be so distancing. You might find you have more in common with your neighbour than you think. At least on our side of the bubble we still live in a democracy, and in a democracy, you have to be a player. If our neighbour to the south wants to complain about fire smoke from our backyard then so be it. Though, for someone so full of hot air, you’d think he’d barely notice. That’s my bubble brewing so I digress Point is it feels like a wave is coming; for good or for ill we have to ride it. Better we do it together. Take a page from the last great trip, the 1960s. I wasn’t there, but I heard it was one hell of a ride. So, come on everyone, smile on your brothers and sisters, make another small step for man together, it’s our only hope for preserving mankind.

We so easily forget that we live on one big bubble ... Earth. If that one pops ... well ... I guess we’ll cross that bridge when Mars attacks.

SUZANNE MALONE

THE COMMUTE

The toothless panhandler, a small bird of a woman hardly 90 pounds darted between the lamp standards. Her gaunt face a living tragic mask leaned in toward the curbside lineup of idling cars holding out her stainless-steel coffee mug. Suddenly, she spun away dug into her plastic shoulder bag and attacked her hair with a hairbrush. Battled her black frizz wider than her shoulders. At the same time her foot in an over-sized white shoe stamped the sidewalk as if grinding out a smoking butt. Her leg raised with exaggerated vigour to a butt that refused to go out. Abruptly, she returned alongside the waiting cars. Inside my Subaru world, I ignored her approach, rescued by the green light. I turned left into the bumper-to-bumper traffic and adjusted the rear-view mirror watching the woman's dance routine again. All those cars and not a single window opened. I rummaged in my purse. The light changed, and I moved ahead another car length. Emptied my wallet out onto the passenger seat. Coins rolled into the folds of the upholstery. I couldn't turn left — circle back — or edge into the right lane. Resigned myself to being bound by gridlock. Turning on the AC, I could feel the flush on my neck. *Shame on me.* The deep disappointment plagued my Friday commute.

The following days, the disappointment became an unflattering internal dialogue. *You don't need a master's degree in social work for God's sake.* In bed, it kept me awake — buzzed like mosquitoes. Questions without the possibility of answers intruded. Was the sidewalk dance mental illness or a jitterbug with the demons from substance abuse? Or maybe the bird woman left her teeth in a crystal bowl of water in a lovely home, and it was all an act. Investigative reporters would dig at the truth — an exposé about the untaxed income of successful panhandlers for the evening news. Of course not. I also knew she wasn't my mother. But what if? Maybe I shouldn't have given up — allowed Mom to disappear? That door had closed 40 years ago but left an empty hole. My life puzzle with a corner piece missing. I was good at ignoring it but here it was again. A yawning lack.

The week passed and the Friday traffic was already backed up. Ahead in the fading daylight, I thought I could see the white athletic shoes on the sidewalk among the crush of pedestrians attached to their phones in a TGIF flow. The light changed and the lane of cars moved forward. I reached for my purse. The price of a coffee. That didn't seem like enough unless you compared the cost of a Tim's with the outrage of a Grande Latte. Should I question what the toonies and loonies would be used for? I opened my window to drop the coins in the stainless-steel mug. I heard her thank you and the horn honk from behind. It was something. It was nothing. It was a start.

P. J. SMITH

ON REMEMBRANCE

I sit at our bench by the bay where we would stop to chat and take in the day.

Under warm winter sun, I delicately open the tattered envelope and pull out the grainy photo tucked inside the poem. The 71 faces stare blankly from the old photo, and finding your face, I rub the edges of the 100-year-old image to feel its truth.



Nearby, the ocean laps ashore in peaceful rhythms. It seems that every wave is a moment, beating like a heart. Yours was so horribly wounded in that barbaric time.

I'd only known you as a thoughtful, compassionate man and so I sit and wonder how you felt in that moment.

Not the photographed moment captive on a grassy hill, inside the Bavarian prison camp where you and other downed flyers waited for rations and answered prayers. I mean the moment many, many years later when you held in your hands the photo of that captured memory.

I imagine that you had packed your pipe with Old Navy and walked the seawall a while before resting here at the bench, where perhaps you too cupped the photo and thumbed its edges.

But then you took it home and tucked it all away inside a crumpled old box marked *Tax Papers* where nobody looks for keepsakes. For decades the envelope was entombed in the box in the jungle of mother's closet until she passed not long ago. The box broke open and here I now sit at our bench, grateful but troubled that the poem and accompanying photo had been buried and forgotten.

Overhead, the sun's rays form compass points against azure sky. The light sparkles atop waves rushing the shore where once I built sand castles while you waded in the surf in your brown fedora and rolled up grey flannels. Mother had always chided, "His heart won't last, don't ask him about the war, just let him rest."

Never asking but I could always feel the hurt. War on the body and war on the mind, each suffering. I feel the photo was somehow another prison, keeping you chained inside that hell on earth. Arresting the image — and the anguished poem — was your path to some peace. You locked them away to forget and live.

I pray you would not mind that I've unfolded the past and brought these memories into the light of my time.

We've had a good life because of your sacrifices above the bloody trenches of Europe. How brave you all were, flying into darkness on wings made of fabric and faith. A spear that pierced the enemy's armour and broke their will, forcing surrender that came just days after you were assembled as POWs for the photo.

Distant memories, drifting in the sands of time, but not forgotten. I cherish these relics — the photo and poem — for keeping me alive to the ugly truths of persistent war. I will always remember, dear grandfather.

BILL ENGLESON

TIME

“Arabella,” Mother calls. “Arabella!!”

She’ll know I can hear her. I told her I would be down in the orchard. She knows I’ve been crying. I think she understands but sometimes I suspect she really doesn’t.

“Arabella!!!”

I’ll have to answer her soon. I always answer her or run to her. Embrace her. Reassure her. She’ll expect that because I always do that.

I knew Richard would be here, here under the spring noon sun. He often roams into our orchard. Even now when there is so little time left.

Our orchard adjoins his family’s orchard.

There are no fences here.

It’s always been that way.

At first, he’ll pretend not to notice me. Then he’ll glance at me, look somewhat surprised to find me here. Next he’ll offer his usual salutation. “Why cousin, what a surprise!”

We’ll both laugh. Well, I will. Richard doesn’t really ever laugh. I’ve rarely seen him chuckle. Even when I was younger, when he was such an awful tease, he would have a grim look as if he knew some day fate and time would come and carry him off against his will.

Now when the government has decreed that all the young men must report he appears contained. I suppose we all can become deeply buried in our own thoughts, but Richard stays within his as if they are a prison unto themselves.

How I long for those earlier days when occasionally he would tenderly torment me, when, just for a brief moment, he was fully with me.

I have tried to tell him of that longing, to say something, anything that made sense.

But here we are. And little makes sense.

“Arabella!!” Mother calls out again.

We have so few moments left.

Richard lights his cigarette. The smell of the burning tobacco mingles with the aromas of the orchard, the honeyed fragrance of the spreading wisteria and the lush berry scent of hyacinth.

“My last day here in this place, Arabella,” he finally says. His cigarette smoke drifts upwards and is caught by a rush of wind. I breathe in deeply hoping to share the smoke, a whiff of it.

I look up at him. He looks so calm, so prepared. How can that be, I wonder. Mother and father have lamented what his loss to our shared land will mean. They have whispered about it when they thought I couldn’t hear. As much as I didn’t want to overhear, I have. “The war goes badly,” my father has said. “Richard will not be much of a soldier,” he adds. “Poets haven’t the spine for it.”

Mother’s brother, Richard’s father, will drive him to the train station in the morning. As we stand here my fear is growing that this will be our last moment forever in the orchard.

Richard finishes his cigarette and snuffs it out in the moist soil.

He draws me in close, warmly smiles, releases me and walks away.

“Arabella!!” mother beckons yet again.

“Coming,” I finally answer.

ANDY RUFFETT

T.O. NOWHERE

The plane was on the Montréal tarmac, ready for takeoff to Toronto. But there was no fuel in the plane. This perturbed Ralph Bidau. So much so that he decided to make an announcement.

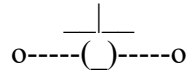
“Attention passengers, we have just been informed that there is no fuel in the plane. There will be a temporary 30-minute delay while we rectify this situation.”

No fuel in the plane?! How could anyone be so stupid?! How could *he*, Ralph Bidau, one of the many skilled pilots at Air Canada, be informed of such a lapse of judgment?! Didn’t the people who looked after the plane get hired to prevent this current situation?

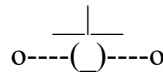
After 30 minutes had gone by, Ralph spoke again.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your patience. And we have liftoff!”

And then all the plane’s lights went out.



From the runway, one lady blinked. “Shit. I told them to check the lighting system next!”



Another 30 minutes passed ... and ...

“People, I am so sorry. The tank is full, and the lights have been restored!”

But he didn’t say anything else.

As the plane began its third attempt to free itself from the black concrete beneath its belly, the lavatory at the back of the plane exploded.

“That’s it!” cried a very irate Ralph Bidau over the intercom. “I’ve had it! I quit! Ground this plane for all eternity! I never want to set foot in this deathtrap again. I don’t even want to hear the name *Air Canada* mentioned! This airline is an embarrassment to its patrons, its staff, and to me! I hope this plane blows up with me in it!”

But his copilot kept tugging his sleeve as he spoke, trying to inform him of his mistake, but Ralph raged on.

“I hope this entire vestibule is incinerated before my eyes. I hope the cabin doors blow open and everyone makes it to safety before I rake this trashcan fire over the coals! I ...”

“Ralph ... you ...”

“What is it, Jerry? Spit it out!”

“The intercom ...”

“Oh, shit.”

JASON SZABO

A BAD START

I step into our largest conference room, late to my first meeting, the glare of my new boss, and looks of dismissal from my first clients.

I answer my boss's "Jason why are you late?" spontaneously. "Sorry, I started my day kissing a corpse, and it can only get better from there." Not thought out, not planned, not considered: just a statement of how my day began.

We had moved down in a van and were living in a campground until I could decide if this job is real. It had seemed so implausibly exciting after they flew us down for the interviews.

The morning's glaring sun was already baking the parched grass as I walked to the showers, pondering how this climate shock was simply part of the culture shock we would be facing. An elderly man, coming out of his RV in pyjamas, spoke at me: "I think I've lost my wife." When I turned to look, his face had that glassy stare of shock, and he repeated the same phrase. Guessing what had happened I pointed to our van: "My wife, Sharron, is a nurse, go get her."

I called out a simple "Hello," as I opened the door to his RV and saw his wife slumped onto their kitchen nook table with her face in a bowl of cereal. There were splashes of milk and Cheerios on the table, on her sallow cheek, and in her bedhead grey hair. So, with zero experience but too much training to do nothing, I did the basics: no breathing, no pulse, slid her lifeless body to the floor of that narrow aisle, and squeezed myself backward under their table so I could start mouth to mouth and CPR.

I kept at it, waiting for Sharron to arrive. She had sent the old man to call for an ambulance, but peeking in through the open door, she snaked her hand through my arms to place her stethoscope. Asking for a stop, she listened for a moment before saying "You're doing OK, just keep at it." Seeing how cramped the space was she stayed at the open door talking to me for that eternity until the medics arrived. I have no memory of what she said but will always remember the feeling of being supported.

My boss's glare remains a glare, but my clients' looks of dismissal transforms into compassion. "Are you OK?"

"Thank you. I'm OK. The medics had a defibrillator; the old lady had a heartbeat when they packed her into the ambulance."

And with that, the meeting proceeds: the client awards us the contract, and it looks like my boss will never ask me that type of question again.

At end of day, I join Sharron in the van, she sighs and tells me the old lady was declared dead on arrival. I feel guilty for the thrill in my voice as I confess the job is real.

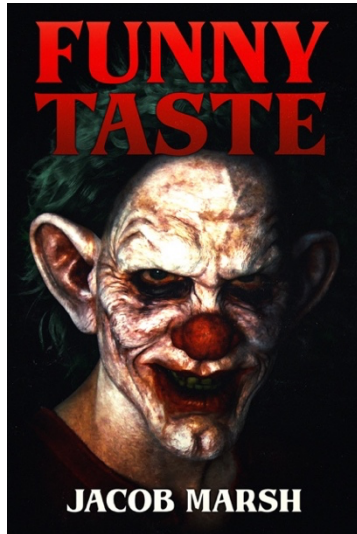
Together, poignantly, we decide to make a new life here.

BOOK REVIEW

FUNNY TASTE

by Jacob Marsh

Reviewed by Matthew Boiselle



Some horror novels hook you with a creepy old house. Others rely on haunted woods or abandoned hospitals. *Funny Taste* takes a different approach by asking a simple question: *What if your summer job at a rundown burger joint turned into your worst nightmare?* Needless to say, I was all in.

Set on Birch Island, *Funny Taste* centers around Clown Town Burgers, a run-down restaurant that's somehow managed to build a cult following despite looking like it's been frozen in the 1980s. The burgers keep customers coming back, but the restaurant has another attraction lurking in the shadows — its twisted founder, who still stalks the halls dressed as the establishment's iconic clown mascot. Angela is just looking for a summer job, but it doesn't take long before she realizes she's signed up for something far more terrifying than flipping burgers and working the late shift. From there, Jacob Marsh serves up a

fast-paced horror story packed with mounting tension, memorable scares, and enough creepy clown moments to make you think twice before pulling into any roadside burger stand. What I really appreciated about *Funny Taste* is that it never loses sight of what it's trying to be. This isn't a slow-burn psychological drama or a dense piece of literary horror. It's an entertaining creature feature with slasher vibes that knows exactly when to crank up the suspense and when to let the fun take over. Marsh clearly understands what horror fans are looking for, and he delivers it without overcomplicating things.

The setting deserves a lot of credit, too. Clown Town Burgers almost becomes a character itself. Between the faded décor, late-night atmosphere, empty dining room and the feeling that something is always watching from just out of sight, the restaurant creates the perfect backdrop for the story. It's the kind of place you can picture vividly — and probably wouldn't want to visit after finishing the book. Without giving anything away, the horror elements are handled well, the pacing keeps the pages turning and the story wastes very little time getting you invested. There are plenty of tense moments, a healthy dose of gruesome surprises, and enough mystery surrounding the restaurant and its infamous founder to keep you guessing right up until the end. One of the things I enjoyed most was how effortlessly readable the novel is. It's the kind of book where you tell yourself you'll read one more chapter before bed ... and suddenly you've knocked out half the novel. That's always a good sign.

If you're a fan of creepy clowns, late-night horror, slasher-style stories, or simply enjoy books that feel like they'd make an awesome horror movie, *Funny Taste* deserves a spot on your reading list. Jacob Marsh has crafted an entertaining ride that's equal parts unsettling and fun, proving once again that some of the scariest places aren't haunted houses — they're the places serving dinner after midnight.

URL: <https://horrornews.net/185671/book-review-funny-taste-by-jacob-marsh/>

CONTRIBUTORS

Shamana Ali (Poetry: Rainbeyes) Shamana is a singer, writer, photographer who lives among trees by a salmon stream in Courtenay, B.C., and has sold her poetry in the Salt Spring Saturday market. She is an aspiring lamp shade. Anything to be close to words and books.

Kim Bannerman (Fiction: Moon Dance) Kim Bannerman is the author of the historical mystery novels *Bucket of Blood* and *Truly the Devil's Work*. She has contributed stories to *When Birds are Near* (Cornell University Press, 2020), *A Place Called Cumberland* (Figure One, 2024), and *In the Company of Animals* (Nimbus Press, 2014).

Robert Birch (Creative Nonfiction: July 1980) Robert Birch farms on unceded Coast Salish lands (Salt Spring Island, B.C.) with his husband, CrowDog. His recent work can be found in *Criminals* (Dopamine Books), *Spirits Queer*, *Spirits True* (Peregrine Ventures) and the Stafford Challenge 2025-2026 anthologies. www.robertbirch.ca

Sam Brocklebank (Fiction: The Visit) I am a Victoria based emerging writer, artist and lover of local travel and food, who enjoys living life through a creative lens. When not in the city, I can be found driving up the coastal highway in my campervan with my husband and our dog, Luna.

Jamie Buckley (Poetry: The Persistence of Things) writes fiction and poetry that examine human connection, memory, and place. Fascinated by the emotional weight of ordinary moments, Jamie is drawn to stories that capture connection in the natural world and in everyday life.

Linda Burtch (Poetry: Seafoam Circus) lives on the Gorge Waterway in Victoria, traditional territory of the ləkʷəŋən peoples, also known as the Songhees and Esquimalt First Nations. Linda feels privileged to live in this special place and explore the words it inspires.

Philip Calvert (Fiction: Red) Philip Calvert grew up in Prince George and returned to B.C. to live in Victoria after 34 years in Canada's foreign service. He has published extensively on Canadian foreign policy and international relations, and his short stories have appeared in *Island Writer* (Winter 2025) and *McCaul's* (September 2026).

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Tony Cond (Creative Nonfiction: A Trip to Remember) was born and raised in Oakville Ontario and spent summers in Bracebridge with his family. He is a professional engineer in British Columbia. Tony and his wife, Debbie, live in Victoria, British Columbia, where they enjoy gardening, classic vehicles, sailing and travel.

Cam Cooper (Fiction: The Girl in the Hudson's Bay) is a decades long resident of Victoria, British Columbia. His fiction is rooted in the people, neighborhoods and changing landscapes of the city, drawing inspiration from everyday moments that often pass unnoticed. When not writing he is the CEO of his generational family business.

Patricia Cota (Poetry: What I Did on a Rainy Day) is a retired educator who moved to the Comox Valley in the spring of 2024. She is an emerging poet who feels a strong connection to the earth.

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Rebeca Dunn-Krahn (Poetry: Rejection) is a writer and storyteller from Victoria. Her recent work was longlisted for the Gilmer Prize and a finalist in the Intrepid Times disaster travel writing contest. Her first short story is forthcoming in *Yolk Literary Journal*. Her memoir chapbook is still looking for a publisher. More at rebecadk.com.

Bill Engleson (Creative Nonfiction: Grad Guignol. Fiction: Say Uncle: 1958. Poetry: The Eyes of My Hometown. Flash: Time) Denman Island's Bill Engleson has written three novels, *Like a Child to Home* (2013), *The Life of Gronskey* (2023), *The Book of Gronskey* (2026), and an essay collection, *Confessions of an Inadvertently Gentrifying Soul* (2016). He also writes flash, poetry, and reviews. www.engleson.ca

Taylor Gilbert (Flash: @BleedingHeart91) I am new to the island as of this past May. I drove across the country from Whitby Ontario with my fiancé. I've been a chef for over 10 years but have always had a passion for storytelling. I am currently seeking a literary agent for my unpublished novel in the crime fiction genre.

Nigel Greenwood (Creative Nonfiction: Milltown Symphony. Fiction: Blind Date) is a former naval person and a current master mariner who sails seasonally in the Arctic as an ice navigator. His recent long sea voyages have afforded much time for pondering the complexities and mysteries of human relationships. He grew up in a coastal milltown.

Britta Gundersen (Creative Nonfiction: Fire in Paradise. Flash: Hope) writes non-fiction and the occasional pieces of poetry and short fiction. She is the author of *Ominous: An African Adventure* and *Island-Wise: Global Reflections*. Her third book, *A Viking's War*, was recently released. Her work has been published by the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec and the Victoria Historical Society and also has appeared in *Island Writer*, *British Columbia History*, Québec City's *Chronicle-Telegraph* and the *Montreal Gazette*.

Kim Harrison (Creative Nonfiction: Transference. Fiction: Nineteen Seventy-Four) Kim lives and writes out of Victoria, British Columbia. Recent stories have been published or are upcoming in *Literally Stories*, *St. Katherine Review*, *Bewildering Stories*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Dark Winter Literary Magazine* and others. His blogspot link with publication credits and music videos may be found here: <https://harrisonkim1.blogspot.com>

Christine Havelka (Creative Nonfiction: Iceland to Canada — The Gaudi Family Saga. Poetry: Band-aids Don't Stick on Snakes. Artwork: Dark-Eyed Junco in the Snow — Photograph) Christine Havelka likes to write in the morning with a cup of coffee in one hand, pen in the

other. This meditation in creativity is an antidote to the angst of editing when teeth are gnashed and the English language cursed. Having one of her poems painted on a window in the village of Oak Bay also helped.

Rachael Hawthorne (Poetry: in fruit flesh & blood) Rachael Hawthorne (she/her) is a queer poet and visual artist living on the unceded territories of the Qu'wutsun and Malahat Nations. Informed by her background as a psychotherapist, she investigates the friction and resonance between our inner landscapes and the unravelling ecologies around us.

George Jackson (Creative Nonfiction: A Whale of a Tale) is a sailor, having messed about in boats since the 1940s. Now in his 90s, he leads an active life golfing, swimming and keeping a weather eye on the marine traffic in Haro Strait.

Leila Kulpas (Poetry: Divine Makeovers) has an honours degree in English, a medical degree, and a fellowship in psychiatry. Her poetry has appeared on the internet on the *Pandora's Collective* site, in 11 literary journals, and in seven anthologies.

Julie Ladouceur (Poetry: Thanatos. Flash: There Are Shadows Beyond the Beige Door) Lover of the arts in all its forms, you can find this singer-songwriter nursing her coffee addiction in a local coffee shop or hiking on a trail with an opinionated toddler in her shadow. English is her second language.

Margaret Lonsdale (Creative Nonfiction: Where Old Books Slumber. Poetry: Hope in a Time of Greed, Starvation, & War. Artwork: Water Lily, Japanese Garden, Gorge Park — Photograph) Margaret Lonsdale writes essays, poetry, short fiction and song. Her work is inspired by human resilience, rhythm, travel and a deep respect for the natural world. Margaret resides in North Saanich. margaretlonsdale.ca

Daniela Lorenzi (Creative Nonfiction: Divorce Honeymoon Style) Daniela's poems and CNF pieces have found homes in a variety of literary journals and anthologies. *This Old House*, a poetry collection, was published through Repartee Press, in 2023. Currently, she is working on a compilation of travel essays.

Michael Maitland (Fiction: Yogurt and Mayonnaise) is the author of *The World is But a Broken Heart*. An adaptation of the book is in development as a feature film. Other stories have been published in *The Antigone Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *Island Writer Magazine*.

Edeana Malcolm (Creative Nonfiction: The Pits) Edeana Malcolm has published nine historical novels. Her latest, *Maid of Gold*, is inspired by the story of her grandmother's grandparents who, in the 1850s, travelled from Quebec City to the Gold Rush in Australia.

Suzanne Malone (Flash: The Commute) has primarily written short stories but had recently enjoyed the challenge of flash fiction. Inspiration is often travel-related, but also comes from life as a parent, grandparent, healthcare provider and ski coach.

Andrew Moore (Creative Nonfiction: All Washed Up at the Penguin House. Fiction: The Priest and the Pagan) Andrew specializes in community development. He works with First Nations around B.C., assisting them to create a vision for their future and helping transform this into reality. He is a musician, performer and producer.

Neal O'Reilly (Fiction: Throwing Shade) Neal O'Reilly is a tired, middle-aged industrial electrician with a gorgeous supportive wife and two astounding children, who occasionally secludes himself in a musty and rather unhealthy cellar of a basement to write self-indulgent works of fiction.

Denise Pasutti (Poetry: Mend the Cracks) As a writer of poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction, and an aspiring artist, living in the beauty of Victoria inspires and motivates her creative pursuits. From childhood, creative practice has been part of her life.

Derek Peach (Creative Nonfiction: Terminal Humanism. Poetry: Sonnets) Derek has been a teacher and traveller and has recorded his experiences in poetry and prose along the way. Now in transition to writer, he draws on all of those times for current work.

Jane Pepper (Poetry: The Rose Man.) writes and works on her art in and around Victoria. She enjoys limited (due to time and physical ability) hiking and exploring local island places she has not yet had the opportunity to visit. Her "bucket list" is long and still growing.

Kenn Perrier (Creative Nonfiction: Crime Pays. Flash: Organic Bags of Water) I have been writing fulltime now for just over a year and am close to completing my first draft of a creative nonfiction book. I love writing (and reading!) but have never before given myself permission for either. I am also working on a book of nonfiction short stories, and a book of fiction. I will be starting a series of children's books this fall.

Andy Ruffett (Flash: T. O. Nowhere) writes what he sees. He has a bachelor of arts degree in creative writing and English literature with honours from York University. He hopes his readers enjoy reading him as much as he enjoys writing.

Andrew Russo (Creative Nonfiction: Death of an Academic) Following an earlier decade in the coffee industry, Andrew earned a PhD in public affairs and policy. He taught, researched and presented on disaster resilience. He now writes on academia, democracy, coffee and the environment from North Cowichan. You can follow his work through <http://andrewrusso.me>

Raccoon Sixty (Fiction: The Island That Shall Remain Nameless) Raccoon Sixty is a humourist travel writer. He has published two books of travel accounts recounting independent travel exploits since retirement. He has also spent 40 years as a financial professional working in four continents.

P. J. Smith (Fiction: New Beginnings. Poetry: Portrait of a Wedding. Flash: On Remembrance) writes short stories and poetry about social issues and relationships. He is a former newspaper reporter, covering crime and politics, and a communicator for land claims and child welfare.

D. R. Spicer (Poetry: *A Year and a Day*) is a Victorian writer who loves to weave the magic of technology into human stories. He chooses to tell his tales through quirky and courageous characters, including those who are LGBTQ+. He has been an adviser to tech companies for over 20 years and brings this unique perspective into his writing. While science and technology are featured in his work, music, and probably cake, will make appearances as well.

Jason Szabo (Flash: *A Bad Start*) born in 1950s Canada, has lived and worked as a technocrat in: Canada, Germany, USA, Malaysia, Columbia, Mexico and Austria. He now lives in Victoria and truly appreciates how incredibly special this piece of the world is.

Ann Tiplady (Creative Nonfiction: *The New School Report Card*. Flash: *Birdstrike*) Ann was a wildlife biologist, then was a farmer, and now is a writer. She has been published in the *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *The Manifest Station* and *Boulevard Magazine*. Find Ann at anntiplady.com.

Sarah Weaver (Poetry: *Robin's Egg Blue*) writes poetry and memoir. Her website is <https://sarahweaver.ca/>, and her blog *Coast Lines* is at <https://linesfromthecoast.blogspot.com>.

Frank Wilson (Poetry: *Different Sea-Sides*) a retired university professor from the UK is a Victoria-based poet and writer with seven published collections of poetry, three books of short stories and a local history book.

Amber Woods (Poetry: *Dawn and Dusk*) Amber Woods had been dabbling with writing for years. She writes mostly non-fiction historical pieces. Amber has been published in the Victoria Historical Society's quarterly, the *James Bay Beacon* and in the Spiritually Speaking column at the *Times Colonist*.

EDITORIAL AND PRODUCTION TEAM

Valerie A. White. Editor. In 2015 Val completed The Writers Studio program at SFU, where she began to free her imagination from the shackles of academic writing and prepare for more creative expression in her third age. She is currently writing historical fiction about her imagined ancestry, while enjoying the lifestyle of Vancouver Island. Val became involved with VWS, first as Treasurer and, now as Editor of *Island Writer Magazine*.

Tayanna Linden. Flash content editor. Tayanna is a communications advisor with Island Health who uses her master's degree in public relations to champion equitable access to healthcare. She also writes poetry and long-form fiction, drawing creative inspiration from her travels and outdoor adventures. Her perfect day includes a paperback novel, a swim in the ocean and, ideally, an Aperol spritz.

Daniela Lorenzi. Assistant editor. Daniela is a retired UVic language instructor who believes that discussing grammar is the best party game there is. Admittedly, she has few friends. In her spare time she writes poetry and creative nonfiction. Her book of poems, *This Old House*, was published by Repartee Press in 2023. Currently, she is working on a memoir-in-essays based on her travels.

Edeana Malcolm. Fiction content editor. Edeana Malcolm has published nine historical novels. Her latest, *Maid of Gold*, is inspired by the story of her grandmother's grandparents who, in the 1850s, travelled from Quebec City to the Gold Rush in Australia.

Diane Massam. Poetry content editor. Diane has recent publications in *Queen's Quarterly*, *Grain*, and *The New Quarterly*. She won the 2021 FBCW poetry competition and placed second in the 2025 Raven Chapbook contest. She holds a certificate in creative writing from the University of Toronto, where she is also a professor emerita of linguistics with many years of experience as a writer, editor and educator.

Caroline Mufford. Style and line editor. Mesmerized by grammar since age 10. Retired journalist (BA, magazine focus), worked writing/editing newspapers, news websites and magazines. Taught college English. Author *Quesnel: A Multicultural Tapestry*. Writing short CNF set in B.C.; lived in Victoria since 2006.

Sage Strachan. Creative nonfiction content editor. Originally from Alberta, Sage moved to Victoria in 2021 to study writing. Now a proud UVic graduate, holding a BFA in creative nonfiction, they have five years of co-facilitating workshops and peer editing under their belt. A recipient of The Keith and Shirley Wagner Prize for Writing, they are now honoured to be a part of the *Island Writer* team.