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By Alan Catlin

*The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said...*

Philip Larkin

It was my first day at a new school and the coolness I had earned would now have to be earned all over again and the stakes were higher because girls were getting breasts and boys were getting confused and mean and I wasn't really that cool to begin with which my mom verified by chucking me out the door wearing a Kmart special on my head, only to ask me years later why I drank so much.

My instructions were explicit. Clear and detailed with a dose of whine to hammer home the importance of getting the purchase right. I wanted the long sock hat with the cool-coloured pattern that stood for disorder and freedom. A hat that said follow me. Or please let me in. And then she walked into the house with this acrylic traffic cone and tossed it to me in passing like I was a laundry hamper. This was worse than making me wear my dad's work clothes and smearing black eyeliner over my cheeks and sending me out the door as a hobo for three consecutive Halloweens.

She threatened to phone the old man at work, which would have pulled him off the line and stopped production and I'd probably have to wear the hat to bed for two weeks because my dad's groundings were nothing if they weren't colourful and humiliating. The truth was, my dad would have gotten the purchase spot on but dads didn't buy boys hats, stupid moms did. I pounded out the door leaving her vibrating from my class A snivel fit.

We'd moved into a new housing development near a polluted creek that my dad complained the builder forgot to mention in the brochure. All the homes were two story cookie-cutters. Sod wouldn't arrive until the spring and the front yards were cracked mud with narrow wooden ramps that went from the entrances to the edge of the sidewalk. Some disappeared in the middle below the clay, where the give started, only to surface again closer to the sidewalk.

When I emerged from our cutter I pretended in my head that I was different. The Rebel. Until I remembered that I had a traffic cone on my head and just how different I really was.

Not knowing who lived behind the doors of the houses I didn't recognize left me feeling lonesome and sad. I longed for my old friends and familiar streets, and grass. I even missed kids I hated. I spit on the ground to mark my territory but it was more of a fuck you and the spit froze to the white sidewalk a petrified impression of a tadpole.

I turned a corner that ended our subdivision and entered into an established neighbourhood complete with grass and patio slab walkways. There were four kids waiting for the bus

and they all knew each other. I could tell by the easy way they waited. Two of them wore the sock hats that I had described to my mom. They were long hats and the sock hung low over the front of their jackets with the tassels riding over the waist. I ripped my hat from my head and jammed it into my big side pocket with the sleight handedness of a magician.

Within minutes the tops of my ears felt raw from the snowless cold. That kind of bleak cold that comes with a clear pale blue sky that leaves you feeling like even the shortest distance on foot will take forever. One of the girls had on a purple hat that wasn't quite as stiff as mine but I found out later that she'd made it herself and didn't care what other people thought and her individuality was strongly marked and authentic and it made her popular and she didn't care if she was popular or unpopular. Which made her more popular. She didn't need to be in. But I didn't know this yet and my ears had moved from stinging to numbness. I put the hat back on.

This hat my mom bought me had bright orange and white thick stripes on it with a bright orange beacon of a tassel and I ate my lunch in the library so I could look up the word the tough boy called me from behind as I boarded the big yellow bus. Pylon. It even had a rough sketch of my hat on a macadam road with a pothole in the background.

The teacher's pet, a girl named Grace, was my designated guide in between class changes. Her job was to walk me to my next class because I didn't know my way around. She adopted an adult persona, ordering me to keep up with her and snapping her fingers to get me to pick up the pace. She even went as far as leading me to my desk and waiting until everyone

settled so she could make an introduction, until one boy told her to stop. *You don't have to keep telling us who he is Grace. We're all from the same home room.* Everyone laughed including the history teacher, and Grace backed off after that.

The only part of the day worth remembering came during gym class when Mr. Drummelsmith took attendance and I told him that nobody called me Frederick, and that, if he didn't mind, I preferred Freight. No one snickered and I made that mean there were better days ahead.

I got off the school bus and found a pile of dog shit on its last leg of steam wound up the side of a curb. I dropped my hat on it and then mushed it in good with the toe of my boot. I carried it home by the tassel and laid it on the boot mat. My mom had a thing with smells. She sniffed everything. Food, rooms, shoes, clothing, hair. Once I caught her sniffing a glass of water. When she came home from work the smell of dog shit had permeated the hallway all the way into the kitchen and, according to my mom, clung to the walls. By the time my dad came home the hat was in the trash and the house was a Lysol-scented ice box because my mom had every window open on the main floor and one at the top of the stairs. We went out for Chinese food and on the way home stopped in at the mall for the hat I had originally wanted. My mom browsed ladies shoes and I led my dad through a labyrinth of department store aisles to a wall of winter sock hats. I reached up and grabbed the one, lifting it carefully off the hook. He agreed my pick was better than my mom's. On the way

out we passed a blue light special. The flashing police beacon had customers hustling towards it from all directions and my dad and I shared a chuckle when the bin special turned out to be a stacked mountain of traffic cones. *Attention Kmart Shoppers*, my dad said in a swiftly delivered baritone voice for my ears only.

As we walked away from point of purchase he put a hand on my shoulder and looked down into my eyes. *I know you bullshitted about the hat and the fight you got in over it. I'm letting you off the hook because it's a new school and* — he looked around for my mom and then back on me — *that was a pretty stupid hat your mom bought. But she means well. She loves you. She's just a little slow sometimes like your grandfather.* Then we started walking and he added, *When you're an adult think about turning your bullshit into ingenuity. Maybe sooner.*

Two weeks later I had made my first friend. His name was Donnie and he was a pretty nice guy but I figured he'd be a temporary friend because I was his only friend and he'd lived in this town all his life. The skin between the bottom of his nose and his upper lip was always damp with little red bumps that formed a sloped trail adjacent to his lip. He got it from thinking with his tongue. I tried not to ask him too many questions because the tongue thinking began to take on a grossness that meant it would always be just the two of us. Or maybe we'd meet another kid but with my luck it would be Donnie's sister tongue-thinker, or a bum picker, or something worse. I couldn't begin to fathom what kind of girl would want to spend time with us even if she were related to Donnie.

One Saturday afternoon my mom and dad went over to a neighbour's house for a meet and greet. My mom apologized for it being an adult- only affair and my dad stood behind her in the vestibule rolling his eyes. They told me I could invite Donnie over if I wanted and I didn't but I did anyway. Donnie arrived with this album cover under his arm and he came through the door excited and his upper lip pooling. He told me about this song that I had to hear so I pulled down the door on my mom's high fi and we sat on the floor drinking Mountain Dew, watching the tone-arm pin the record to the tall narrow bit until it dropped it down onto the rubber platter. It was the first song on side one and the stylus crackled as it pierced the worlds smallest dust bunny. Quite honestly the whole affair bored me until that first chord of Take it Easy struck. Everything changed for me with that song. I wanted to move out of my parents' house. I wanted to take a road trip. I wanted to steal a Penthouse magazine. I wanted to be a rock star. I wanted to spit gems that had people running for note pads as soon as my lips began to move, but I settled for what waited inside the small dark hexagon-shaped cabinet in the far corner of the living room.

I jiggled the can of Mountain Dew with one eye closed, peering down through the sip-hole. Half-and-half seemed like the appropriate measurement. I knew the booze at the back of the cabinet collected bottle dust for a reason. My dad was a beer man and my mom, on occasion, went for a gin and Wink.

The brand label said Red Hackle and it had a man wearing a kilt pointing a sword up at the label. Other than the flat base the bottle kinda looked like a teardrop and it said 70

proof at the bottom but I didn't know what that meant.

I filled both our tins with the blended whisky and we both proceeded to gag and laugh and drag our teeth over the tops of our tongues to somehow get rid of the harsh soapy taste. Donnie eventually dumped his down the kitchen drain after two sips, which weren't really sips because I never saw his throat move.

Within the hour I was good and gone and Donnie panicked when I began painting the shag carpet with black vomit. I crawled in a circle, puking until I thought I was done and then I wouldn't be and it would start all over again. My stomach went concave almost like it had rolled up into my chest and then it would drop and shoot more black out my mouth.

He ran off to find my parents and even though I saw him at school we never hung together again. It wasn't my choice but I was okay with it.

I lived in bed for close to two days. Sunday and Monday. My mom wanted my dad to ground me but my dad told her I had suffered enough and to trust him that I had learned my lesson. *That kid might be a born again teetotaller now, and if he's not, then there isn't much we can do about it.* He smiled down at me when he said it, my mom shaking her head in the background with her lips in a frown and her arms folded tightly over her chest.

But here's the thing. As sick as I was, and I was very sick, the lingering thought that floated quietly around in my subconscious was my hope for another kick at the can. The seed was planted.

Other than the odd stolen beer, I didn't get drunk again for two years. I was in grade nine and it was the day of my 15th birthday and over those two years that quiet floaty voice grew some balls on my behalf, and I had moved on from Take it Easy by the Eagles to Tumbling Dice by the Rolling Stones.

My buddy Mike told me he knew a girl from school who told his sister that she thought I was cute and that she'd give me a hand-job if we went to the teen centre dance that same night. When I asked him if it was because it was my birthday he laughed so hard it brought him to his knees.

It was a magical night and a magical time. My two best friends were Mike and Pete and they'd lived in town all their lives and, unlike Donnie, both girls and guys loved them. As a result, those same girls and guys were beginning to like me. Or at least question my existence.

We planned to meet in a ravine along the shore of Frenchman's Bay right after dinner and on my way there I found two little boys half my age coveting an 18-pack of Brador with twelve bottles left. They'd found it under some branches and an old welcome mat. It made sense because most teens drank in the ravine, but finding these kids with alcohol still had a surreal quality to it and it also meant we wouldn't have to pay a stiff premium to Mike's older brother for going to the beer store on our behalf.

The little kids wanted to bring the case back to their dads and I convinced them to hand it over to me for two dollars. But they wouldn't accept quarters so I had to traipse back out

of the ravine to the closest Becker's for a two dollar bill.

I found Mike and Pete off the trail perched on a wooded slope and Pete had a little fire going that he wasn't paying careful attention to so I put the case of Brador down and immediately began to kick the low flames into a small circle, making sure dirt piled on the kick around so it wouldn't spread. Pete had two shortcomings. He was cheap and he liked fire. Mike sat on bolder almost the shape of a bean bag chair and he looked comfortable and stoned. He carried a bottle of Clear Eye with him always because dope made his eyes turn bloodshot and his old man was handy with the belt. I had never tried smoking dope before. It scared me but I knew, this being my birthday and all, I might have to roll.

"What's different about you, Freight?" Mike said it squeaky-like because he wasn't ready to exhale the drug.

"Nothing." I flipped off the beer cap with the blade of my penknife.

"Tight jeans," Pete said. "And your hair's different."

"Fuck yes. Look at Freight." Mike blew out smoke and looked down at the ground shaking his head and chuckling.

"You got rid of that part, right?" Pete asked. I had. And I stopped blow drying my hair because the heat always made it frayed and wispy and dead along the sides.

"Holy shit, look how curly your hair is. Did you get a perm?" Mike asked, squinting through a haze of smoke.

"No. I didn't get a fucking perm. I'm not a fairy."

We were quiet for a minute and then I had to ask. "Do I look stupid?"

Mike looked up from his rock and Pete looked over. We all

had beers in our hands and I thought it made them both look caring and paternal.

"No, you look better. What do you think, Pete?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Thanks."

Mike stepped out the roach and pulled out a small vile filled with dark brown hash oil from the breast pocket of his jean jacket. Then he slapped his pant pockets for rolling papers in a lame version of panic only reserved for stoners. Pete handed him a pack of orange rolling papers and Mike asked him why he had his rolling papers and Pete shrugged because that was easier than trying to explain to Mike that they weren't his because when he was stoned he was easily confused and sometimes computing for him became frustrating.

Mike laid the paper open over his knee and took a bobby pin out from the hairline above his ear and popped the red top off of the vile with his teeth, stirred the hair pin into the vile and came out with a fat long glob of dark syrup. He swept down and back across the paper like an old Delta blues picker playing a lap slide and in seconds the paper had a thick brown perfect rectangle over it. Then he wiped the bobby pin clean by dragging both sides over the thigh of his jeans adding to the oil lines that were already there and his pants looked like some druggie's version of an abacus.

I was feeling anxious. I did want to and I didn't want to — but being my birthday, and all, I didn't think I had a say.

Mike finished up with a sprinkle of tobacco then twisted up the paper with a finishing lick from end to end.

"Freight, you in?"

"I don't know. I like being drunk better."

"When's the last time you were drunk?" Mike looked at Pete when he asked but the question was for me. For a moment I felt alone. Two against one, but I shook it off.

"Couple years ago."

"When you heaved the black shit?" Pete said. I nodded and smiled.

"Fuck man I hope you don't do that tonight." Mike lit the oil spliff and Pete saddled up beside him and they both took tokes and watched me from the rock.

"What's it feel like?" I asked.

"Cool. I don't know." Pete said.

"Freight I'll tell you right now. This stuff should be legal. Gets rid of my headaches. Makes me focussed. Cope." He said the last word with a finger in the air and he choked it out with smoke and cough.

"Chicks love this stuff, too."

Pete would know. He looked like a combination of Leif Garret and Mick Jagger and even though the girls he fooled around with dressed like Neil Young, they were still really hot and dirty.

"Okay." And they cheered as I stepped in and reached out.

"Do you know what end to put in your mouth?"

"Fuck you, Mike."

"Tell me about this girl that wants to pull my wang?"

Seeing me stoned entertained the hell out of both of them and I loved the power.

"Sarah Bright," Pete said.

"Shit, the one on the track team with the red hair?"

"Yup."

"Man, I love red heads."

"Since when?" Mike asked.

"Since five minutes ago."

"You're the best, Freight man."

I opened all of us another beer and Pete said no and I told him not to be a pussy and he laughed, shook his head and took the bottle.

"Roll another spiff," I told Mike.

My word glitch sent them, and eventually me, into choking laughter.

I told them I was sick of hand jobs and that I needed to find a lefty anyway because I was beginning to develop a right hook. And they smiled at each other as if I were their invention.

We made another stop at Becker's and never made it to the teen dance because I tried to put a big bag of chips under the back of my shirt and Mike stole a package of cigarettes and the Italian store owner and his very large pasta-loving son detained us with threats of violence until the cops arrived. Pete was outside and saw it going down so he went to the teen dance on his own and slept in his dad's garage with Sarah Bright. Mike would eventually have to go to court for possession, but the cops told him it was just a formality and he'd get off because he was underage. I, on the other hand, would have to go to court and end up getting close and personal with a probation officer for one full year. Weekly visits once a week after school. And because I was under 18 my

mom and dad had to attend one once a month. All because I told the cops that the wops tried to beat us up and the Italian arresting officer took offence.

My dad called me a goof which was a forbidden word in our house for reasons unbeknownst to me. I didn't care. The time had come for my old man to go fuck himself anyway. That, and I was becoming a legend.

I made it to grade eleven and my entire high school career was a blur of skipped classes, smuggled beer, and joints under the bridge. And Leslie. Leslie was the girl I first saw at the bus stop. The one that didn't thrive on public opinion. I guess it was love at first sight because I sure chased her and to this day I'm not sure whose nuts I borrowed to do that. But I couldn't stop. We weren't in any classes together because her grades were stellar which landed her in all the advanced classes, whereas I was classed at the other end just shy of special ed and probably on par with a school that trained dogs to sit, stay, and heel. I used to peek into Leslie's math class until she caught my eye. I would press the side of my face in tight with the door frame and then use my own hand to pretend someone had come up behind me and ripped me away by the top of the head. The first time I did it she had to cover her mouth to stifle the laughter.

We became a couple. We were both virgins and the heat between us was almost unbearable. Sometimes necking with her and rubbing up against her actually hurt. We would French kiss and slobber on each other until her mom flicked the porch light on and off and then I'd walk home alone and stiff and

staggering in a sexual delirium that screamed for release.

It finally happened on a camping trip in the summer between grade ten and eleven and I think I had a better time than she did. She told me later that I'd rushed it and it hurt a little. But every time after that was amazing. Probably because she became the driver and I did what I was told.

Leslie was the greatest girl until she started to complain about my drinking. I hadn't met cocaine yet and I could take or leave hash oil and marijuana. But man did I love to drink beer. Leslie wanted to go to movies once in a while instead of basement parties every Friday and Saturday night. Sometimes on weekends she wanted me to come over to her place and watch television and cuddle in her parents' recreation room. And I tried but it got to the point where I would feign tired and head off to a party without her. And then I messed around on her with a girl from a place called The Rouge and that same girl envied Leslie and ratted me out. We were through. Like that. Over. Done. I gave up trying to get Leslie to speak to me because her resolve was impossible to penetrate and after numerous attempts to reach her over the phone her older brother ordered me to stop calling or else he would snap my fairy neck. I started skipping school, too, because passing her in the hallway made me run to the nearest boys' room and vomit. I suffered the loss of Leslie right into my mid-twenties. I thought about her all the time because not only was she my first love, I trusted her, too. She was a friend and a damn good person.

I began fooling around with girls that were the opposite of Leslie. Dirty girls that liked dirty boys and drugs and beer

and tequila shots. And cocaine. I started hanging with this one girl that went to a community college and she was wild. Sexy, violent, and the size of an Amazon. Her older brother was a criminal and a dealer and I made him laugh so he made me high. And he would front me coke and not punch me out when I didn't pay on time. My dad didn't like her on the property and my mom didn't like her on me, and if they were looking for an excuse to banish her they found it when I snuck her into our basement late one night and she had an orgasm that shook the foundation and had both my parents bolt out of bed because they thought someone was being murdered. So we parted ways, she and I, and I never saw her brother again.

My high school education came to a grinding halt in grade eleven when VP Morrel entered the cafeteria wielding a pair of bolt cutters in one hand and my severed combination lock in the other. He dropped the lock on the table next to my plate of fries and gravy and said *guess what today is?* And I said, *Asshole Wednesday?*

Tony the janitor stood behind him holding a box with the contents of my locker inside it. I could tell he felt sad for me. Someone had to because I sure didn't. Tony and I smoked cigarettes once in a while out behind the garbage bins whenever I wandered from a class. I think janitors have an affection for trouble makers. Kids they don't think have a future and might need a little blue collar encouragement.

Tony bragged about how easy his job was, and the pay, and the benefits. *Ever tried pushin one of these babies, Freight?* shifting the handle of the big wide industrial broom out in front of me. *Fucker practically floats, and I ain't kiddin'.*

VP Morrel pointed out the closest exit with the bolt cutters and told me I had ten minutes after which I would be trespassing. I felt like Clint Eastwood walking slowly through the cafeteria, drumming my fingers along the side of the box. Nodding at goody-two-shoe girls and sucking my teeth while old man Morrel shadowed my ass.

Mike and Pete and I were an occasional threesome after my removal from the educational system but sometimes they were a twosome and the times we were together had begun to dwindle. And then finally in my early twenties we ended for keeps. I think the older we got the more menacing we became and the fun antics of earlier times later had a cruel edge to them. And it turned inward. We became counter-productive as a group and didn't always trust the other. It ended in a fist-fight between me and Pete and Mike openly cheered him on. I had to walk and they were glad to see me go.

Mike grew up to become a drug addict with a good dose of mental illness. But it was a chicken/egg scenario.

Pete died at the age of 28 from the same type of cancer that stole Terri Fox.

I lived. I lived through a cocaine dependancy, alcoholism, and a mild stroke at the ripe old age of 32. I settled down the using some after that scare but time heals wounds and fades commitments and it didn't take long to amp back up. It got to a point where separating sex and cocaine became impossible. One of my dealers told me that an orgasm on coke was like kissing the lips of God. My kind of religion.

Around 35 I met Jesse and I fell madly in love with her so I began to lay off blow and cut way back on the alcohol. I had to retrain myself to have sex but it wasn't as hard as I worried it would be. Probably because a naked Jesse was intoxicating enough.

Happily ever after would be an exaggeration, although I do believe I've given her the best of me so far. But I've also given her some emotional scars, and I am not always sure it has made her a better person. Hell, there are no go-backs and nobody could accuse me of not trying to be a better man. They don't know my road. My thoughts. My tug of war. Or the ways I've come out the other side whole and complete.

One

I stood in the kitchen loathing my life. I tried for two paper towels and the holder delivered six. I bunched them up in my fist, loosened the belt on my housecoat and rubbed the towels into the scare-sweat that saturated my chest and my gut. I was still wearing my nightmare like a thin hide letting everything in.

All of the pubs, all of the taverns, and every tacky sports bar in town were closed. But only to me. Each time I'd reach the threshold the hand of a big hairy cartoon bruiser would flip the open sign to closed. And I knew if I protested, that

same hand would be closing around my throat. I could hear the drinkers inside laughing and arguing. Their voices stayed in my head, accumulating with each sign that turned me away until, finally, their luck was loud and unbearable. But the cure was so close. I could smell rum, lime cordial, and beer piss everywhere. I wanted to drink it. I wanted to roll in it. I needed to forget.

I pressed run on the coffee maker. You can't have troubles and smell good coffee all at the same time. And I remembered, we were going fishing.

"It's weeds," I told him.

John Eagle placed both hands on the lip of the boat and looked down into the clear water that was Stony Lake. Except he didn't just look, he watched. I could never figure why the boat didn't move when he did. Why it didn't tip. Capsize and dump us into the drink. Something.

"You're not going to find him over the side, man. He's twenty yards out," I said.

His head snapped up, his stare fixed on the forest a hundred yards from where we were fishing. It was a stretch of crown land and would be for the next 99 years, unless they were lying. A Great Blue Heron flapped out of the denseness. Out of the lowest mark where the bullrushes hid. Then straight out, veering left, collecting air under giant wings, leisurely, prehistorically. John, finally, gave me some attention.

"You caught him by the tail." He picked up his rod and

pushed the end into the worn out oar hole. The rod pointed straight up and the line gradually shifted from port side to directly over my head and the transom. I resisted the urge to duck like a child.

John poured coffee out of one of the stainless steel thermoses into the lid. We'd been out since dawn and he was drinking his first. I was vibrating on my fourth cup and my sixth Benson and Hedges. I counted them now. It was a start.

John sat back in the narrow bench seat and the bow of the boat went away. He used the cherry wood tackle box, that he made, as a hassock for his big faded brown boots. He brought the coffee to his lips and sniffed once before sipping. Then he stared at me. I knew a lesson was imminent and I was a captive audience, unless I wanted to swim home. But I did not want to. I lived for John Eagle's lessons.

"Okay, I'll bite. Why by the tail?"

"Firstly, I prefer Jesse's coffee over yours. Please don't make this again." He spat grinds over the side of the boat, dipped his hand into the lake and wiped his mouth. I didn't say what I was thinking. I still had some semblance of a meter — although I was the only one that believed that.

"What are we using?" he said, and the lesson commenced.

"Floaters." They were called jitterbugs. Mine was red and white. I liked calling them floaters because it was angler lingo. Gave me cred. Jitterbugs were surface lures that travelled nervously over top of the water. Probably the same way I would swim in the ocean if I thought sharks were in close proximity. As the fisherman, I could control the jitterbug's nervousness. Not so nervous, really nervous, or

dead – just floating.

John nodded. "And what are we fishing?"

"Small mouth." The pull on the line was so weak that I had forgotten a potential catch at the other end. I gave it a tug and the rod bowed, but it didn't jerk down and it came back gradually like it was a decision.

"Weeds," I said.

"When small mouth bass strike a surface lure they stun it first with their tail."

"Is that the splash?"

"Yes. Now think." John hummed a deep and out of tune version of the Jeopardy theme.

I gave it a tiny bit more thought than it needed and I think he knew.

"He got hooked by the tail?"

John nodded. "Unless he's a girl fish."

"Why?"

"I'm kidding."

I began to reel in my line. Not to prove a point. I knew John was right. It didn't feel like he was right but I knew right was getting closer.

I lifted a one-pound small mouth out of the lake, tail first. It twirled slowly one way and then back the other way. Tugged out. Eyeing home.

"Injun smart." I grabbed the rod in the centre and gently removed the hook. And I was equally gentle releasing the fish back into Stony. It stayed cupped in my palms for two seconds, maybe three, until it trusted itself enough to swim deep and away.

My pocket vibrated and when I stood up to create pocket slack the boat teeter-tottered. John touched the lip to steady us, and I looked at the text. "Time to head back."

"Good. I could use a coffee."

Two

I loved looking at the cottage from the open lake. The combination of that and my peripheral catching the small waves running left and right from the cut of the boat were perfection. Visceral. But always fleeting.

The nearer the boat got to the shore the more beautiful the building looked. Three thousand square feet of post, beam, and granite. The windows facing the lake went from the main floor, level with the deck, and narrowed all the way to where the roof peaked. Sometimes, when I was travelling the lake without John, Jesse would send me a text. I say sometimes, but it was often enough that I would keep my cell in my hand to feel it vibrate. The text would say *watch out for me* and she would be standing in the third floor window of our loft bedroom wearing only a snow-coloured thong, performing a slow twirl, eventually moving into a pirouette. I loved that part – watching her foot caress slowly up to the knee of the supporting leg, arms stretched out, her fingers calling me. Once, when I was about a stone throw away, I bounced the boat into the dock because she tilted her head back on the twirl and I tripped out the bow and scaled the hill because she tilted her head back on the twirl and I charged the field

stone steps three at a time because her throat pulsed on the twirl and I pounded over the deck and up the two flights of stairs into her bedroom because she wound me. She waited until I was naked, wild and starving. Then she put both of her hands between my legs and whispered into my neck, Your ankle is bleeding, and your boat's floating away.

Today she was on the dock, fully clothed, arms folded. And someone else was with her.

He had a patchy rusty brownish red beard, and wore a fedora pulled so far down it looked like his head was in a trap. It was an old hat with a new blood-red band around the base. I didn't recognize him, at first.

Three

The breakfast was a notch up from the usual Saturday morning fare. Maybe three notches. And it was a weekday. Scrambled eggs fried in butter then topped with feta cheese. Sausage and maple-glazed back bacon. Melons and strawberries in one of the better bowls and perfectly browned home fries. All this to impress my sponsor who didn't have enough class to take his trap off at the table while he fisted a sausage, pushing it into his mouth. I didn't know if it was his teeth clacking or the pork casing popping, but it would be a while before I ate sausage again, or sat at the head of the table.

The toilet flushed down the hall. "Is that how you hold a cock, Jerry?" I asked him.

John, sitting opposite me, tilted his head to the side, his stoic version of surprise or maybe shock.

Jerry looked up and didn't notice that he had killed my appetite.

"You not hungry, Freighty?"

I shook my head once, my lips slightly parted and my lower teeth peering through. I hated being called Freighty. That's another problem with AA. If the first person you meet is a dick-hole and they give you a pet name you're screwed right out of the gate.

I picked up one of the white-coloured cloth napkins stacked in the middle of the table and tossed it to the left of Jerry's plate. It opened in the air and landed bunched-up looking like a KKK hood.

"You might want to get that." I pointed to the part of Jerry's beard around the chin where meat grease was congealing.

"Been to a meeting lately?" Jerry asked. His lips were tight to his teeth when he spoke.

Walter, Jesse's Great Pyrenees, entered the room with a slow wag. I needed to stroke the dog but the damn thing wandered past me and straight to John.

With the thumb and index finger of my left hand, I began rubbing the corners of my mouth slowly and deeply. I didn't want to be defiant, I really didn't, but it was rolling in hard.

"What are you doing to stay sober?" Jerry chewed food through all of this. Like he had been down this road many times and he could easily multi-task because it didn't require

his full attention. Jerry was a legend in Jerry's mind. He had forgotten more than most would ever know and had dealt with all kinds of me. All kinds of Freightys.

"Staying here. Relaxing," I told the meat grease on his beard. Jesse returned from the bathroom and her back was to us. She was busying herself over the sink. She didn't want to intrude, but she desperately wanted to hear. I hated my wife regarding Jerry as a lifeline. John checked Walter's gum line for gingivitis. Walter sounded like a suction pump when John's thick fingers reached the back part of his jaw.

I really, really wanted to give Jerry the boot and spend the rest of the morning talking about Walter's gingivitis. John wiped his fingers on his jeans, folded his arms and looked to me and then Jerry, as if to say, *Sorry, I got sidetracked. Where were we?*

"Did your cottage get you sober?" Jerry said.

"Why don't you tip your hat and get the fuck out of my house?"

Jesse spun around. "Freight."

Jerry shifted his weight to the back of the chair and crossed his legs casually. But his face reddened like a baby in a stroller publicly shitting himself. "Let's go for a walk, Freighty. Just me and you. Boat ride. Show me Stony." Me, me, me, all about me.

"Why don't you go home and beat your wife, Jer?" I lit a cigarette in the house. I had broken a trust with Jerry. More like an AA commandment. *What we say here, stays here.* Before Jerry got sober he abused his wife. He shared it at the front of the AA rooms like it was just part of the war he had to go

through to get off the garbage truck. A badge of honour. But I didn't think Jerry's wife stayed because he got sober and stopped hitting her. She stayed because Jerry went from drunken pit bull to dry cobra. Dollars to doughnuts he still hit. But the act was unpredictable now. His wife lived in fear of setting him off with something she did on a Friday that had no impact on him when she did the same thing on a Tuesday. She stayed out of a known terror because the unknown had no legs.

Jesse walked Jerry to the car while John watched me fill the room with tobacco smoke.

"I don't need him," I coughed out. John watched the smoke float to the ceiling and then dissipate.

"Boating, fishing. That's the ticket." I drew in a deep one. "When are we hunting?"

"What about Jess?" John said.

"She doesn't get it. If she did she wouldn't have invited that fucking cult head over to my house to suck off sausages."

"You're kind of dramatic sometimes. And crude."

"Guys like Jerry give AA a bad name."

"And what name do you give it?"

Jesse pounded up the deck stairs. She was a light weight but the hard contact vibrated the screen door.

"Freight."

"Here we go," I said to John.

She faced the water with her arms folded and her elbows fused into the deck railing. Her posture ridged and ready. It made me slightly hard.

I moved in beside her, but not right beside her.

"You had no right to do that, Jess."

Her lips went thin. Sharp and down in the corners.

"If this starts up again you're gone," she said.

This was new. In the past *she* had always threatened to leave.

"I'm coming up on eight months. Good months. I'm happy. Why can't you see that?"

Jesse laughed sarcastically. "Because you isolate." She brought her face in close to mine and her breath smelled heavy and spiced.

"And you fuck me with anger." With that she turned, bumped my arm on the way past, and disappeared into the kitchen.

"And don't ever smoke in this house again." I could hear the tears in her voice.

I knew what she meant by isolate. It wasn't like I went off on my own or avoided the human race. I had a community, but it was a small one. John and Jesse. And the occasional intruder. But I did not have AA friends. Talking about not drinking for the rest of your life was like talking about a pretty ex-girlfriend, for the rest of your life. I would rather hide in the pantry with a bottle of vanilla extract than live out that kind of nostalgia.

I lit another smoke and drew in hard and deep, challenging the smoke to kill me. I guess Jess had a leg to stand on but it was an old leg and it sounded like a bad dance song from the eighties that kept repeating the chorus. She'd seen me at my worst and she'd seen me at my best. My best was now, so why the fuck she wanted to focus on my worst was beyond me.

Four

Jesse and I didn't speak again until later in the evening, close to bedtime. Earlier in the day, John left me to my own devices and I spent most of the afternoon and evening brooding. Being mad at her, hating her, and repulsed by her, until I was finally empty, and she was likeable.

I carried the Big Book of AA around for a while, for show, but she never came out of her room. Although she did eat when I was down on the dock. I knew because she left me some fuck-you dishes to clean on the kitchen table.

At one point I actually opened the book and tried a pass at the chapter called Whistling in the Dark. It was a turning point for me when I first read it in rehab, but today it was juvenile, dated, and annoying. I had moved on. I wasn't a little boy whistling in the dark on a wooden pony. I was not scared.

It was a good life here. Money was plentiful. Jesse was a trust fund baby to the tune of twenty five-thousand dollars monthly. It allowed me to take a leave of absence from the investigative firm where I worked. A company that handled mainly injury fraud. I followed jack-holes to Home Depot without their neck braces on, then I would snap a few stills as evidence. Or injured folks taking advantage of long-term disability through Workers' Compensation. Too hurt to go back to work but spry enough to run up ladders and replace rotted soffits or clean clogged eaves troughs on their own homes. The job could be boring. A lot of waiting, watching (whistling),

and thinking. Thinking about how thirsty I was. I called in once, or twice, intoxicated, and even though my superiors were red-flagged, I knew how to deny shit. How to convince. In the end, it was a little old lady shut-in that took me down. I had been parked on a side street in front of her bungalow for a small part of the morning and a good part of the afternoon conducting surveillance on a brownstone not quite directly across the street. There were so many deadbeats going in and out of the place that I could have snapped pictures and created a file on everyone for future fraudulence. The old lady needed someone to talk to and called the police. I didn't notice the cruiser pull in behind me, which I found strange, because I was in the noticing business. I didn't know he was there until I heard his cop knuckles tap on my window. I powered down the window, and if my slurred greeting wasn't enough, the bottle of Bacardi riding shotgun sure was. I probably stunk pretty bad, too. He was a nice cop, though, because when I opened my door and fell out of the car he caught me before my head could slap off the pavement.

But on clear days I was good at my job. Maybe the best. The company told me to get some help and then come back. *Take some time off and we'll see you when you're better.* I remember the young Ukrainian receptionist trying not to cry as I handed in my ID badge. I didn't think she felt sorry for me as much as I'd drummed up a past or present for her with someone else. Someone dead, maybe.

The cottage was Jesse's dad's up until two years ago. He had a construction company and was very successful at building and flipping, building and flipping. His nickname was Flip.

Flip was a functioning alcoholic, but it didn't make any difference to his liver, and when he died the cottage became ours. Jesse's. John Eagle came with the cottage. He had been Flip's groundskeeper for years and we decided to keep it that way. The gardens were breathtaking and there was no way the two of us would be able to maintain that beauty.

John has many skills but he isn't a jack-of-all-trades. He's masterful at each one. He was teaching me how to fish and identify with nature. For six months, outings with John had been the richest part of my life. I wondered, sometimes, if it bothered Jesse. I didn't know because she'd never mentioned it. Maybe she was just glad I was sober, happy to take a backseat if it meant I wouldn't drink.

I loved being with John, but I missed drinking with the Flips. That's the pull I was always trying to push down. I was glad there was one less Flip to drink with, but thinking that way left me sad and lonesome. It was like the death of a season. The one where the green colours die brown, and I'm still thirsty.

Five

Jesse was reading in bed when I padded in. Enough time had passed for me to settle down and love her again. I also felt like an idiot. That was the plan and it always worked. It functioned as an unsaid agreement.

I sat on her side of the bed and, from under the covers, she kicked her knee into my side. It didn't hurt, but it felt immediate and violent. It was a warning that I better be here

to clean up my mess, while she pretended to not be ready to hear me clean up my mess. I shifted down to the end corner of the bed, still on her side because if I went to my side of the bed that would be a *screw you, Jesse*.

I couldn't see her face for the book. She was reading *Love In The Time of Cholera*, again. It was her favourite novel and she picked it up once every two years.

Her exhale sounded loud, annoyed and intentional.

"What is it?" I said.

"What do you mean what is it?" The book still covering her face. I opened my mouth to try again when the book came down quickly, denting the comforter.

"And I didn't call him, he called me."

"Who?"

"What do you mean *who*? Jerry, you fucking asshole."

"Easy, Jess."

"Don't *easy* Jess me. I am so pissed off at you." The book flew back up and all I could see were wisps of riled blonde hair on top of her head. I wanted to touch her but we weren't there yet. And I knew the next time the book came down she would be crying. And she wouldn't pound it down. It would fall, like her arms fell off while still clutching the book. Then I could touch her, hopefully.

She removed one hand from the book and wiped her eyes.

I moved up the bed, took her book, gently, to speed things up, and placed it open and face down on my side of the bed. She watched to make sure I wouldn't lose her page. Her hand rested across the pulled up sheet and over her abdomen. I picked it up and it was wet.

"My little raccoon."

Jesse wiped under each eye with her smallest finger. "I didn't take my makeup off."

She pursed her lips and welled up again.

"What?"

"Jerry *is* an asshole," she said. We both smiled because we weren't ready to laugh. "Get me a Kleenex."

I hustled into the en suite and came out with the box of tissue.

"I didn't need the entire box." She dabbed around her eyes.

"Why do you say that?"

"What?"

"About Jerry."

"He told me that everybody in AA wants what he has. Then he gave me a greasy kiss on the cheek. And he put his hand on my hip. Why would you ever have him for a sponsor, Freight?" Knowing he beat his wife and touched my wife in two different places brought on a drink crave. It wasn't epic but it did mean Jerry might get a punch in the future.

"I don't know. I was in a fog. He goes to meetings every day. Been sober since the dawn of time. I guess I wanted someone hardcore. I didn't find out he was full of himself until after."

"After what?"

"When he speaks at meetings people fall asleep. And he loves speaking. If he speaks you can add forty minutes to a one-hour meeting."

"What do you know about meetings?" She said it softly and I needed to play it back in my head to make sure I heard her.

She started to well up again and I playfully squeezed the tip of her chin between my thumb and the big knuckle on my index. "It's okay, it's okay." It started years ago, back when we were avid movie goers. Jesse cried, with snorts included, and if she felt it coming on in the theatre she would nudge me and I would squeeze her chin to make it stop. Not hard but enough to make it a little pink.

"Are you going to go back?"

I smiled. She looked cute talking with her chin being pinched.

"Are you?" She waved for me to let go.

"The meetings make me go mental, Jess." I dropped my hand into my lap and held it with the other one. "Everyone lives in the disease, not the recovery. I didn't leave them to drink. I left them so I wouldn't drink." Jesse was listening to my every word. Looking for the flaw in my logic, or the lie. She knew the language of recovery, but she also believed I was tricky and it made me sad for her.

"I feel good. I'm safer with you and John than I am there."

"You can't put that on us."

"I'm not. That is not what I'm doing." I put my palms up defensively. "I don't want to go to breakfast meetings before meetings. I don't want to go in early to set up chairs and make cheap coffee. Not everybody has to go to AA."

"I know that. But I don't want to feel like a fool again. I can't go there anymore."

Our lovemaking was tender, but I didn't want to caress her. What I wanted to do was pin her to the wall and take her from

behind. Then I wanted to stand outside on the bedroom deck and smoke cigarettes until I felt stoned. Stopping when I finally felt nauseous.

I blew smoke high above the garden and wondered when my skin would feel like mine again. And if that would be like coming home or moving into a new house.

Jesse and I had a small outdoor August wedding. August 21st, 1997. Thirty people. Mostly family and a few friends. Mine were friends I hadn't seen for a long time and wouldn't see again after the wedding. The promises to stay in touch were nothing more than polite formalities. A way to openly lie into each others eyes without recourse.

Next to Flip, I was the biggest drunk at the wedding. But I was the most wired. Jesse kept asking me who the little skinny man was with the white hair. I told her he was an old friend from school and the reason he looked emaciated and gaunt was because of an illness that had been slowly grinding away at his life. I remember the look in her eyes as we sat together holding hands at the small head table. The look that said I am going to believe this because I prefer to see you in a thoughtful loving light on my fucking wedding day, asshole. Dennis was his name and he was my cocaine dealer and he was the worst kind of dealer because nobody loved his product as much as he did. But he had a romantic side and a love of weddings. The union that it stood for. My wedding gift came with a lean cut, and it was the size of an eight ball. The wedding ended after an outdoor dance under the stars, and when the sun came up I was under it, by myself, in a lawn chair at

the edge of a dead fire with a black corn roaster hanging above it throwing off cool steam.

I didn't use again for almost six months, and staying clean came surprisingly easy. I still drank but even that stayed moderate. It gave Jess and I a chance to settle in and become a real couple. Learning about each other. Separating chores by discovery. We fell into a routine of her cooking and me cleaning up after. I put out the garbage and she organized the recycling. She dusted and I vacuumed. And we fucked everywhere. Living room, kitchen table, backyard, car, pantry. We couldn't stop. The only person hornier than Jess was me and the difference was marginal. And then I got bored and dropped in to see Dennis. Jesse knew because I fucked differently when I was riding the wave of a coke high. I could go forever. I gave her one of the longest and most intense orgasms she had ever experienced and she didn't talk to me for three days. Not until I agreed to let her lead me by the hand to the washroom to drop the bag of white into the toilet. The slow healing began for us as soon as the toilet tank hummed into silence. I didn't care, though. I needed a break from all of it and I was ready to hide with her.

Six

I invited Jesse to join me and John fishing. I knew she would decline and so did she, but we were both proud of me for asking.

John sat in the front. His weight was safest there. Anywhere

else and the bow of the 14' boat pointed skyward, making it impossible for the operator to see where he was going. The trade off, with John in the front, was loss of speed. The nose would cut into the water and make the boat feel floaty and reckless, especially on turns. I was getting to drive the outboard more and more. John was teaching me how to drive outside the channels. Not many people on the lake knew how to do this safely. It was called Stony for a reason. I navigated around Pine Island, which was in upper Stony and directly across from our place. We headed towards lower Stony but would not have to go that far. John had a secret spot close to the shore of Brock Island where northern pike like to school, and I couldn't wait to land one. John said they were great fighters and to tire one out was to earn it.

I looked for our cottage and couldn't see it anymore. It didn't feel like a fishing trip until I lost sight of the cottage.

I slapped my vest pocket in a panic until I felt the cardboard smoke pack and the cellophane slide and crinkle. I didn't need to worry about forgetting my lighter because John always carried one or two. He never bugged me about smoking. The only rule was if you threw the butt into the lake, you would be going in to get it.

I loved being on this lake. Sometimes I compared the open water to meetings, and there was no comparison. Why would I be there when I could be here? Jesse said one of my shortcomings was I didn't have a reward system in place. It was all about feelings. She worked out every day and went through annoying bouts of encouraging me to do the same. I claimed it was easy

for her because she liked it. It surprised me when she said she never felt like working out. *How I feel is irrelevant to my commitment to health and a nice figure.* She said if she did what she *felt* like doing she would be in shoe stores all day. And when she wasn't buying shoes she would drink wine and eat pasta and bread full time. I think she thought she got through to me, but I felt sorry for her more than anything else.

I sat on two orange floater cushions to see past John and I still couldn't. I needed to lean far left or far right to see past his broad shoulders. When we were navigating channels and rocks, John would hold up his left hand for me to turn the boat that way and right hand to go right. Then drop his hand, signalling that it was far enough and to stay straight.

He looked over his shoulder and pointed to the left.

"Twenty yards out from that tip."

I loved the way the boat slowed down when I powered back on the hand throttle. It reminded me of the ducks and loons and how they skimmed to a stop. And I liked the way the water climbed the sides of the boat when it finally angled and settled. Killing the outboard was my favourite thing. Man off, nature on. Nature had so much more to say and it never pushed it on you like an opinion. It made me feel distant and safe all at once.

"We should put a steering wheel on this," I said.

"We could. Won't be as much fun though." John opened up the cherry tackle box and lifted out the top shelf. He picked out a yellow daredevil and a red. He looked over the side and put the red back.

"What's the difference?"

"The water is murky. Yellow is better." Prompting me, "How do you know the pike are here, Mister Eagle?"

I laughed and repeated, "How do you know there's pike here, Mister Eagle?"

John looked up with big cartoon eyes, his version of mock surprise. "Good question. See all the bugs and water striders?" He pointed with his hand. I leaned over the side and then looked out. They were everywhere. Little water walkers racing around anxiously and my eyes couldn't keep up. John continued. "Food supply. Plus, late spring early summer pike tend to move out of the weeds, but still hover close to the line. See where the weeds end?" I looked and did. "But also muskie," he said.

"What about them?"

"This is a big muskie lake and the pike know that so they stay close to shorelines."

"Are they a food source for muskie?"

"Not as much as city fishermen think. Muskie are mysterious. I think the pike like to stay clear."

John tossed the yellow daredevil to me and I dropped my hand low to make the catch.

"Jesus Christ." The hook hung from my fourth finger, the lure dangling and turning back and forth.

"You weren't supposed to catch it."

I gently turned the hook by squeezing the eye and twisting it until I pried the barb out. The hook followed and then I sucked my finger for a bit.

I liked the lure. It was shaped like a big teardrop with red

diamonds in the middle. It seemed like a native pattern but I didn't think John painted it on.

"Do I need a weight?"

"There's weight on the leader line. That's enough."

I waited for John to cast out so I could throw my line out the opposite side. We had crossed lines once or twice and it made John irritable. I told him to never have children. Jesse and I were childless. We were both in our mid-thirties when we met. We thought about kids, but adult time carried too much weight. I think she had regrets but I didn't. Sure, I would have rolled her way if kids were a draw, but I loathed the idea of being in my early fifties with a sixteen-year old daughter mouthing off all the time. Standing on her toes and getting up into my face. Or maybe a son coming home in the back of a squad car. Although the latter beat the former.

John cast out over the port side. He was graceful. All in the wrist, the arm barely moved. It travelled forever. I lost sight of the lure so I closed my eyes and waited for the plop.

When I opened them John was watching me, and he was smiling.

"Mind your business," I told him. But I think I was his business.

I cast out starboard, drawing the rod back with the lure still flying through the air and the line free. I wanted to keep the daredevil straight so when it sunk it might not pick up weeds. A trick John taught me. My lure never plopped the way his did, though. Sometimes it made no sound and other times more of a slapping sound. Today it slapped.

"Dammit. Do you think that startles the fish?" I asked.

"Yes. But if you keep casting on the opposite side I should be fine."

I stood up, spread my feet in between the rivets and began to reel in. John never stood unless he hooked a fish.

The point of Brock Island was infested with paper birch. Canoe trees, John called them. They rooted along the shore, with thick limbs reaching out over the water. Two had ropes strung, hanging motionless. I could see the guts on three of them, from shore erosion, just above the water line.

"Think they're true paper birch, John?"

He turned. "Some. Most. I believe the three at the end are paper and bog."

John could identify any tree and I desperately wanted that.

"I hope Jess didn't keep you awake last night."

He did not answer. He reeled in and cast back out, so I reeled in and cast back out.

"Make up sex," I added.

The daredevil was accumulating weeds. I reeled in faster. I held the line high, brought it close and disconnected them from the hook with my fingers. They were bladed and slimy. I tossed them behind the boat and had to flick my fingers a few times to get them off. Then I slapped the lure off the surface of the water, removing the small bits still clinging to the hook.

John didn't like it when I brought up sex with Jesse and I was never sure why I did it. He silently put Jesse on a pedestal, at least I thought he did. Maybe I wanted to take one of them down a notch — but I never knew which one I was gunning for. I was never graphic, but it didn't matter. It

made John uncomfortable all the same and he found it disrespectful. I found John's reaction, or lack thereof, entertaining.

"You ever had make up sex, John?"

John stared at me. He was embarrassed before he opened his mouth.

"I stood in for you once," he said, and turned away to look out over the bow.

Five minutes, and two cigarettes later, my coughing laughter settled into an occasional burst of smoke and, eventually, the odd controlled chuckle.

He smiled and giggled. Twice he put his big hand over his mouth and it made me want to put my arm around him.

"If you ever tell her I said that, you'll be on the end of my line." He pointed to the lure and cast out.

"I broke you," I said.

"Now I am an apple," John agreed. I nodded but I didn't know what that meant, but I also didn't want to break the kindred spell by pushing into teacher/student. John's smile widened. He had the whitest teeth I had ever seen. Whiter than Jesse's.

We fished in silence. I smoked. The sounds became hypnotic. The line whizzing out. The forced hum of the reel looping and bringing the lure back in. We both used spinning reels, although John sometimes called them open face, and every time I pinched the line to the rod and gently brought down the bar with my other hand until it clicked, felt like another chance. A new beginning. Maybe the big one. The one to write home about.

I was annoyed when I had to break the silence. The lure didn't plop or slap. It stopped dead on something floating. I pulled back on the rod. The tension stayed but the lily pads separated as whatever I was stuck on dragged through, leaving a water path behind it.

"I'm snagged."

John stood. He looked out and then to my bowed rod. "You are going to snap the line. Give me the rod and drive us over."

John released the tension on the line. He reeled in the closer we got. I didn't feel like a screw-up because of the kind of teacher John was. That and I was driving the boat. Participating in the clean-up. He handed me the rod, reached into the water and brought up a dead bloated fish by the gill.

"What is it?"

"It's an old walleye. Never been caught."

"How did it die?"

"Old age I suspect. At least twelve maybe fourteen pounds." He lobbed it and it landed on the floor of the boat. A gelatinous substance flew from the top of its head and stuck to the inside wall then plopped over and stayed on the curve. The memory of pickled pigs feet lit up in my mind. I could see my mom covering her mouth with a napkin, turning away while my dad scraped the thick film from the toes and over to the side of his plate. He called it toe jam every time, and my mother shuddered, every time. Then I remembered the sad part. How my mother would turn my way to look away. And she always looked past me, or to the left of me. Never to me.

"Ever seen one that big?"

John nodded. "Bring us to the island and I'll throw it on dry land."

"Why?"

"It will get eaten right away. That's better."

It wasn't really an answer. It was more of a half answer because I wanted to know what would eat it. But I was one question away from feeling like a boy, so I nodded, which felt dumb because he had already looked away.

John knew so much of what I wanted to know and sometimes I went into information overload, like a kid in a candy store – sugar everywhere.

Seven

Brock Island was uninhabited. I tied the bow off on the limb of the nearest birch. The shoreline was rock and sand and it wasn't until we climbed up the bank past the trees that I felt it in my socks – my feet were wet, but I didn't think twice about it. John placed the fish in some low grass behind the birch and began walking further into the island. I followed.

He was not meant for pavement. Level ground bored him. I tried mimicking his easy gait and big strides but it felt clumsy because I needed to watch my steps, and then a branch tapped my head a pretty good one. John never looked down when he walked, like he had front and back parking sensors in his boots that sent a signal to his brain.

We walked past a pine and John pointed but didn't stop. "Name it."

I stopped. I looked in, up and down. "Jack pine." The short needles gave it away.

John was gone and I hustled to catch up. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes. You were right."

"This one?" John stopped under it.

"Manitoba."

"Seriously?"

"It's a sugar maple. I'm just fucking with you," I said.

"I can never tell. You lack delivery." John slowed his pace and I kept up.

We came to a clearing. A dead campfire. John picked up a stick and turned the soot. The coals underneath started to breathe and glow faint orange.

"Look at this mess." I stood next to another sugar maple. There were broken bottles scattered under the tree. An empty wet beer case close to the trunk. It carried some broken jagged pieces pointing up in between the thin cardboard bottle supports. Someone made a half-hearted attempt to clean the mess up, but was probably too drunk to finish.

The ground around the fire pit was rocky. Lots of shield and knotted tree roots sticking out of the ground. I wondered how many girls watched their drunken boyfriends come back from a leak and trip over a root and stumble forward into the fire. Teenagers camped on here but never near the fire pit.

"Shut up you fucking bitch!"

We moved quickly. It came from further in, near the centre of the island.

We could see a young woman. She was off to the right and appeared and disappeared behind the trees and the breaks in

the bushes, more so as we moved closer. It reminded me of a flip book I had as a child, with a little dog running in the corner, and finally, near the end of the pages, sitting in front of a boy scout who gave him an apple. But it ended before the dog ate the apple and I felt that the dog and I were ripped off.

The tent was straight ahead. John went towards it and I cut through the brush towards the girl.

"Hello." I threw her my best harmless wave. She went from tired nervous to nervous alert. "Mike, there's someone here."

I stepped out into the small clearing where she was standing and gave her another harmless wave but it felt awkward this time, like I really was a threat. There were rusty pine needles covering the ground and they crunched under the soles of my shoes and sounded louder the closer I came to her.

She looked older from in between the trees. She was probably eighteen, I figured. Her face hard but it might be the tired. She wore black yoga pants with a white band at the waist. I knew the brand because Jesse owned at least three pair.

The pants were tight and she had runners legs. Lean and muscular – and I could have cracked an egg off her ass. Her white tank top was tight, too. Her breasts were small and perky and her nipples were defined nicely through the top. Young women turned me on but I never did anything about it. I would never cheat on Jesse. But still, they wound me up.

"We heard some yelling and wanted to make sure everything was okay."

She crossed her arms over her chest. I didn't think she caught me but I couldn't tell for sure.

"Is everything okay?" I repeated.

"I might need a ride back to my parents' cottage. Would that be okay?"

"Of course. Are you okay?"

"Yes."

She noticed John and a young man come into the clearing before I did. The guy was maybe twenty. He was in jeans and didn't have a shirt on. I always felt hit with a twinge of insecurity whenever men had a good solid defined chest. It was worse when it was a boy.

The kid wasn't crying but he had been. John was carrying the sleeve of a sleeping bag. The kid, Mike, followed behind. He was scared and pouty.

"We're going to clean up a little before we go," John said to me. The kid fired the girl a look like it was all her fault, and then they disappeared down the path leading to the campfire.

"I tried to clean up," she said.

"Let me guess. Mike doesn't have a girlfriend anymore."

"No. No, he doesn't." Her arms tightened around her chest. She welled up and turned her head away. She had a nice sculpted profile and I wondered how it would hold over time.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I thought people your age just texted break-ups."

She snorted out a laugh, wiped the bottom of her nose and turned back to me.

"He asked me to marry him."

"What are you, eighteen?"

She shook her head in protest, like I couldn't be farther

off the mark.

"I'm nineteen."

"Did he have a ring?"

"No. It wasn't like that."

"Then it wasn't anything."

John felt sorry for Mike. Maybe sad was a better word. He stayed and helped him clean up the island. He told me Mike would drop him off. I took the young woman home. When she said *talk to you later Mike*, he looked at John in disbelief and didn't answer back.

Eight

Her family cottage perched on a small pie-shaped lot in a weedy bay hidden from the main part of lower Stony, next to an inlet that looked to me to be a prop stealer. I wondered how many a good lure sat at the bottom of that foul river. A young boy fished off the dock. I asked him if he was having any luck and he didn't answer or even look up, and then I noticed there wasn't a line in the water. The young woman jumped out of the boat and pushed it back out by the bow. When she bent over I decided that she didn't have enough cleavage to make for a good fantasy. Her mother met her halfway to the cottage and they both watched me drive out of the bay. I never knew her name, and her mother didn't wave.

Nine

The boat ride home was lonely, like I was seeing everything through the lenses of sunglasses tinted sun-piss yellow, and scratched in the centre.

The bloated walleye and the broken glass made the world a reckless place. And the boy. Especially the boy. I wanted a drink but was afraid to have one. Plus there was Jesse. Jesse the roadblock.

Back at the cottage, I found a note on the fridge. She was out for lunch at the Nut Shell in Lakefield with Mary Ferguson, Queen of the Cougars. I felt lonely, isolated and depressed. I raised my fist with the plan of punching the note into the fridge door but I stopped myself. I played the tape all the way through. The knuckle would heal but looking at a dented fridge door every day wasn't worth it.

I did not wait for Jesse or John to come back. I went into the upstairs bathroom to masturbate. I thought about the young woman, focussing on her breasts and then her legs, but I lost carnal interest and went to bed. I laid on top of the sheets and thought about the time Mary Ferguson spent the afternoon on our dock. She wore a string bikini and I remembered her big fake breasts and her tight deeply tanned abs. All of her was in my mouth. I was so hard I had to hold it with one hand because walking back to the bathroom made it sway and that made it hurt. After, I went back to bed, fell asleep, and didn't wake up until dinnertime.

Ten

Jesse was in the kitchen chopping red peppers into tiny little squares when I came downstairs. Red pepper wedges were not compatible with my taste buds and it was worse with the green and orange.

"Hey Sleepy Head." She greeted me without turning around. She wore the same short yellow summer dress that she wore earlier. I leaned into the fridge and stared at her profile. It held well over time. "When did you get back?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe an hour ago?" She popped the end of a pepper into her mouth and finally turned my way.

"How are you?"

"Fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I'm justing checking in, Freight. Pepper?" She tried to pop it into my mouth but my hand came up and I stepped back. She popped it into her mouth with a *your loss* expression in her eyes and on her moving lips.

"John told me about the kids on Brock."

Did she ask him or did he volunteer? I wasn't sure, but I didn't care enough to move further on it.

She pushed the peppers off the board with the outside of her hand while I moved in behind her. I slid my palms up under her skirt and caressed her great hips under the string. She tilted her head back into the crook of my neck and I noticed the glass of red wine tucked in between the juicer and the toaster so I dropped my hands and walked away. If she wanted a drink then she should have one — out in the open. Instead of tucking

it out of sight as a reminder that I do not fit in. I don't walk around with one finger knuckling the pin and I certainly wasn't going to succumb to the habits of social drinking amateurs. Watching someone nurse a glass of wine for two hours never created envy. Alcohol has one job and if you're gonna do it then you need to do it right. I also didn't like being mistrusted or worried over. Watched. I am eight months in and now this again from her. The Guessing Freight's Mood game. *Shall I hide this or say that or not say that and let him see this? Do I ask him how he is or let him brood, even though all he is really being is being **fucking quiet**.* The past is the past and it's time for this misguided thoughtfulness to find the front door.

John sat on the deck next to the barbecue holding my stainless steel tongs by the rubber handles. He was squeezing them over and over, getting caught up in the rhythm of the clacking sound while staring out over the lake. Walt was in the chair beside him.

"Get out, Walt." My gentle but firm pull by the collar encouraged the dog to slide off the chair and position himself on the deck close to John.

John held the tongs out for me and I waved them away.

The deck was beautiful. All eighteen hundred square feet of it. John built it for Jesse's dad six years ago and it never seemed to look anything other than recent. It wrapped around the side to the screened-in section, where we ran when the bugs got to be too much. Tonight they had tapered off some. Mosquitos. I hated them. I preferred black flies because I

couldn't tell when they were biting me. Mosquitos you always knew, and they were hard to kill unless they had their needle in. John told me that when you swung out to whack them the wind from your movement blew them clear of the hit. That was the only thing he ever told me that I already knew.

"What was that kid like?" I asked.

"He asked the girl to marry him. Did you know that?" John said.

"Yes. She told me."

"I don't think he was surprised. He was outclassed."

"I think so, too."

"He's a townie."

"I wonder how many city girls mess up the minds of townie boys by the end of every summer."

"They're waiting to be messed up."

Jesse came out with a big bright yellow bowl. The salad was piled high in it and I watched her move until she caught me. She smiled but by then I had made a point of turning back to John and caught only a glimmer of it.

The strip loins from the butcher shop in Lakefield were succulent. I covered mine in salt and John popped off something about me tripping into my plate with the salt shaker.

But the meal brought my spirits up to speed. I noticed how easy things were for everyone when I was feeling good. I wished they would learn to ignore me. They didn't understand the way they robbed me of my anger. Not so much John, but always Jesse. *You okay? What's wrong? Anything you need?*

Enough already.

We ate like hunters. Purposely and gratefully. Even Jesse, who usually went at it slow. In between chunks of medium rare, Jesse watched me shove clumps of salad into my mouth. The beets made it irresistible and I used my fork like it was a spear. She was pleased.

We didn't speak much through dinner, though. A lot of moans over the first few tastes of steak and then we settled into eating while taking in the lake. A pair of loons took to calling each other from different places.

"Dinner's ready," I said and Jesse smiled. "Do you get it, Jess?"

She smiled a second time. Her cheeks were half full of food. It was very cute and loveable. I turned to John. "Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Never," John said. Jesse pointed her fork at John and nodded in agreement, her mouth still too loveable to speak.

"The loon is saying *get home dinner is ready*," I said.

John disagreed. "I heard, *where is my dinner*? Because he's bringing home take out."

I grabbed a piece of gristle from the rim of my plate. It was a long thin piece that had marbled right through the centre of the cut and I held it under the table until Walter slobbered all over my fingers.

"Freight," Jesse said.

"What? It's good for his coat." Walter cocked his head and chewed the gristle with the side of his jaw."

"Is that true, John?"

John looked down at Walter licking his chops.

I chimed in. "Dog Indian telepathy. It's kind of cheating because Walter's going to lie to you. Yes it's very good for me, Uncle John. Give me more. I must have more."

Jesse beamed.

"Come on. What did the mutt say?" I asked him.

"He said that if you put your collar on he will take you for a walk."

Walter's front legs pulled the rest of him up, with the crown of his head rattling the underside of the table, twice. Then he started the rounds to everyone. His big tail left a short-lived breeze behind when he spun around to the next person, trying to find out if there was any truth to the promise of a W-A-L-K.

"Nice one," I said.

"I'd love a walk." Jesse tapped her finger nails off the table and pushed her chair back.

"I think your collar is on my bed table, Jess."

"I promise not to run away." With that she winked and left with the big salad bowl. John chuckled. I tried to remember if the Nut Shell Cafe had a liquor license. Not that it mattered any.

The back of the cottage was nearly as beautiful as the front, and it didn't need the lake to help it brag. Near the end of the yard, twenty feet in from the road, towered a blue spruce. John told me it was the biggest he had ever seen. In the winter the blue shimmered. The snow seemed to light it up. I would look at it in the night from the rear window of our bedroom on my multiple trips to and from the bathroom. Mostly

on the *from*, because the *to* was often urgent. It was a spectacular tree, and more so when the moon touched on it. It did something to me from the first time I laid my eyes to it. I never told anyone, but it felt like the tree had been looking for me for a long time.

Walter tried to get under the tree to take a leak on the trunk. The branches were too low to the ground and the dog never seemed to grasp that. By the time he realized he couldn't get under he'd race over to the corner of the cottage and anxiously cock one leg. No time left for pickiness.

To the right of the spruce, close to the forest line, was a weeping willow. John told us the myth of the weeping willow. *At one time it stood erect and strong, but the death of a pair of lovers touched the heart of these trees and their branches drooped in misery and could never rise again.*

It canopied the spruce slightly and only halfway up one side. Not enough to keep it dry. But it was a decent contrast. In the fall and winter months the branches looked like cold grey snakes trying to find a place to live inside the warm spruce. I didn't love the willow, but I didn't want to chop it down.

We stepped onto the road. Jesse attached the leash to Walter's collar. He got excited in the yard but always settled into a heel when the first pad touched the road. When John walked him on this road without a leash, the damn dog stayed right by his side.

"Road needs to be graded again," Jesse said. Sometimes she would try to talk like us boys when we were together. Like she was throwing words away. She was far too bright to ever have a

casual swaggered speech. The rock left over was a hump line in the middle where tires never went unless they were turning into or out of a driveway. The sides were down to dirt, with long stretches of washboard and the occasional pothole.

"I prefer it like this," I said.

"A true cottage road." John said it almost like a question near the end. I think he didn't want Jesse to feel ganged up on.

An ATV wheeled out of a path in the woods to our left. The driver turned right and waved, heading up the way we'd just walked.

"We should get a couple of those," Jesse said.

"Seriously?" I looked directly at her and could tell by her smiling that I was being boyish.

"Yes. I think they'd be fun."

"I think I love you."

"You and John should price them out."

I turned to John. "This kept man deal is working out." I stepped closer to Jesse and our hips brushed. Her perfect teeth and big dimples were profiled in full bloom and I had trouble taking it all in. I wanted to touch her softly all night. I took her hand as gently and loosely as I could. I didn't want her to think she was a lifeline, or that I needed one.

"They started serving soft ice cream at the resort," John said. I dropped her hand and pulled ahead of them in a quick-footed mock speed walk with my elbows flying out to the sides. They laughed and Walter pulled Jesse to catch up.

We made love that night, but I was sluggish. The weight of red meat and two swirl cones left my gut distended and tight. I tried to conceal the food hangover with tenderness. Slow and methodical tenderness. Jesse flipped us and finished on top. She went crazy, bouncing and throwing her head back. It felt like I wasn't even there or needed. A conduit, nothing more. She was close when she took my hand and put it behind her. She had never done this but I knew what to do. Then she came multiple times, slapping the side of my face on the last two, enough to make my cheek sting. She had never done that before either.

Eleven

I woke up alone and it was 7:30 am. I rolled my legs from the bed on to the floor and sat up. My abs were sore from being used as a human trampoline, but my face didn't hurt when I touched it. I pushed upright to a stand and limped over to the walnut coat stand that had been my great, great grandfather's. The pole was squared and worn lighter along the edges. But the walnut was so dark and rich that it became invisible in the night. No amount of adjusting to the dark would give it away. There were four brass hooks near the top and I lifted my housecoat from one of them. Jesse's was still on a hook so I knew she was dressed and had been up for a while. I looked out the sliding glass doors while slipping my arms through the housecoat. John and Jesse were in the wildflower garden to the right of the granite stairs. She was

listening to John tell her something and shooed some kind of flying insect away from her face every so often. I could tell by her frustration that it was the same bug that kept bugging her. There were two mugs sitting on one of the big rocks in the garden. One was level and the other was lopsided because of the rock shape. I figured it had to be John's. The lopsided one.

I came out with a fresh cup of coffee. The first pot, the one John and Jesse were drinking from was too old and too bitter.

"I made fresh." I raised my mug.

"Good morning," Jesse said.

I stood on the stone steps to their right. It was too early to be as dirty as they were and I didn't like gardening much anyway. Looking yes, cultivating no.

"What are you planting?" The three plants were lying on the ground. They had big prickly pods tucked under the leaves and a white substance trickling down one side of each stem.

"Milkweed," Jesse said.

"Replanting," John said.

"They were growing along the road," Jesse added.

"You saw them yesterday on our walk?" I asked.

"Yes." John cleared a space in the soil with his cupped hand. Then he looked back at me, but briefly.

John didn't get excited about thoughts or ideas. He was most open when teaching. Thoughts that led to ideas happened in his head. He didn't need a committee. But it was always strange when I could trace the thought or idea back to its origin.

Like opening a door right before someone was about to knock. It was no wonder John was single. The stoic mystery man only fared well in the movies. But I believed John Eagle could get laid a lot if he were a dog.

"This will attract Monarchs." She bent over and handed one of the plants to John. They passed it like parents handing off a newborn.

"You can fly around on your ATV with a butterfly net," John said, looking down at the hole in the soil he'd just made.

"If I see the ATVs on this lawn I am going to freak out."

"He said it, I didn't. I had no plans of driving on your precious lawn until he put the thought in my head."

She handed me her empty mug. I turned it upside down, on my way back up the stairs, and whipped the remnants of the coffee out.

"When are we going to town?" I said with my back to them.

"Eleven work?" John asked.

"I'll look over my tight schedule and get back to you."

John's truck was an older blue Ford. I hated the shape of the front end and the F150 emblem lacked the cool font of the newer ones. But it was a big eight cylinder and the power when he accelerated vibrated through the seat. I liked that.

We came to the stop sign at Northeys Bay Road and turned north onto Highway 28.

"Apsley or Bancroft?"

"Apsley," I said.

"Anxious?"

He said this because Apsley was closer than Bancroft by at least thirty minutes.

"The dealer in Bancroft is an arrogant prick." I did not want to tell John that the marine owner in Bancroft was an AA member. The way they looked at you after you stopped going to meetings was too much for me. Their eyes spoke volumes. *You are pathetic, and lost, and one day away from a drink. Maybe one minute.* The phone calls were easier. Either I didn't pick up or hung up when I did. And it must have worked because calls didn't come in anymore. Other than Jerry, but I was confident that wasn't a problem any longer. So I guess I was anxious, just not the way John meant it.

What were the chances of the dealer from Bancroft being at the Apsley marine? But there he was, hooking a jet ski trailer to the back of his pick up. It would be tough to dodge him if we wanted to look at ATVs because his truck was in the middle of the driveway blocking the store entrance. Ed was his name and he spotted John first and stayed there for a while. John's size caused stares. Ed got down on one knee and I could hear him working the tow chain. I prayed I was far enough over for the trailer to block me from his view. My plan was to get past him, rush up the stairs, and disappear inside the showroom. John had turned right where the new ATVs were under a canopy. I was so preoccupied with running into Ed that I kept going straight.

"Freight?" John called. Ed popped his head up.

"Freighty?"

Ed walked alongside the trailer wiping his hands on his

pants and I reached out to shake. Ed was tall and slim. He never looked like a program guy to me, but he was and I needed to remember that.

"Haven't seen you around. You okay?"

"I am, Ed. Really good."

Ed nodded. "I'm glad. We can't be too careful, right?"

I nodded but Ed was already looking past me.

"That's John Eagle," Ed said.

I nodded once. "You know him?"

"I know of him." Ed's delivery was code for *I have a secret*.

This was good. Getting gossip on John was a rarity.

"What do you know?"

"Knows Stony better than anyone. How do you know him?"

"He lives on our property. Manages the grounds. He's also a good friend. Really good friend."

"Well then I guess you know the hunting story?"

Shit.

"Yes." I glanced over my shoulder. John wasn't paying us any attention so I encouraged Ed. "It gets exaggerated a bit. What did you hear?" I had no idea what he was talking about.

Ed nodded upward with his chin in John's vicinity. "He found a black bear suffering. Be a few years back now, would you say?"

"Gotta be." I nodded knowingly and Ed continued. "Hunters tried a night kill and were too scared to track 'cause the bear was injured. Out of season, too."

"Jesus."

"I thought you heard it."

"The part about the bear always gets to me." Ed feigned

sympathy. Great. Now he thinks I'm a big softy that doesn't go to meetings.

"It was early morning and your buddy there didn't have a gun. He killed the bear with a buck knife." Ed pulled his collar down and exposed the base of his neck. "Right into the brain. And, well you know the rest."

"Actually, I don't. I only know up until the knife part."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why only up to there?"

"I don't know. I guess he doesn't want to incriminate himself. What happened?"

Ed's gossip excitement returned. He stepped in closer and talked out of the side of his mouth.

"He found the hunters on the road getting ready to leave. One of the guys pointed the gun at his face when Eagle confronted them for killing the bear."

I stopped breathing.

"John Eagle, over there, took the man's gun and broke his shoulder with it. Imagine getting a beating with your own damn gun."

"What happened with the other two?"

"Cracked the other guy's jaw. But the third guy." Ed's grin got caught in a grimace. Like what he was about to tell me personally happened to him. "He got it the worst. I got a buddy works emergency in Bancroft, said his nose was flattened. Just flat. Like a pancake with two tiny holes in the middle of— "

"I get the picture, Ed."

Ed folded his lips into his mouth and nodded a couple of times.

"They couldn't tell the cops who did it."

I shook my head. "They'd have been in more trouble than John."

"They sure would around these parts." Ed leaned in close. I could feel his breath on my ear when he spoke. "I heard the bear got him good in the shoulder."

I nodded again and I wasn't lying because I had seen the three white raised tracks of scar tissue on John's shoulder. Now I knew the cause.

"You looking for some new toys?"

"ATVs. I saw you here. Thought maybe you moved locations."

"No. I'm understocked on skis. Splitting on a sale with this fucking Nazi. If you can call sixty forty a split. That's German math for you."

Ed looked past the jet ski to the show room entrance. "What kind of a name is Jurgen?" Ed hit the J hard. "Anyway. Come on up. I'll keep my profit low."

"You got lots?"

"Always, man." Ed was walking away. He waved high with his back to me.

I didn't tell him that Jurgen was pronounced with a Y and not the J. It probably would not have made a difference to Ed anyway. I liked him more than I realized. I had a feeling that he might have quit the program.

I listened to the sound of her tires on gravel until the crunching faded and I was alone with the night birds. She

wanted to go to a movie in Peterborough and I didn't. I never did anymore and I think it was a missing for Jess. I told her to ask John and she did and they left together. I didn't remember carrying the Big Book out to the deck balancing an ashtray on the cover, but there it was sitting on the wide arm of my Muskoka chair. I moved the ashtray to the right side and put the book in my lap and looked around for all the sounds. Crickets, bullfrogs, birds – all in hiding. Then I lit up and opened the book. Some say AA is a cult but I didn't think so because you can come and go as you please, but that being said, it does get in your head, otherwise I wouldn't have been sitting there with an antiquated novel on my lap about two old boys that loved tub gin. It was Ed's fault. Jerry made me want to burn the book and for some strange reason Ed had me wanting to brush up on the philosophy, but not like a decision, more like cruise control.

There were signatures inside the front and back cover from the guys in rehab. Some of the accolades were indecipherable because some of the guys in there were so gone that their motor skills were damaged. Whether or not they'd get them back was a coin toss. Others were just illiterate. A few notes and signatures were clear and concise. Full of clichéd hope. But these were counsellor signings. The same ones they wrote in every graduate's book. I read through the ones in the front then pinched two inches of paper and plopped them over into the cover to read the back.

I am here for you baby when you're brave and especially when you're not. I love you with all my heart. Your Jesse Girl.

I remember vividly her writing that. Family Day. Every

Saturday in rehab, family came out to see their loved ones, and the counsellors barbecued hot dogs and burgers with wilted greens and served potato salad that tasted like a salt lick. We were sitting under a tree because the day was hot and the humidity close. A skin-bubbler, one of the counsellors used to say. I remember her giggling and saying no to a walk in the woods because she knew what I wanted and needed. She giggled when I had to adjust myself in my pants. I told her I might need a twelve step group for blue balls if something didn't happen soon and she slapped my knee laughing.

When the day ended I went into the woods by myself and cried because my heart wasn't big enough to hold the love I had for her.

Sometimes in the stillness, with no one else around, I'd get impact. I knew the years of drug and alcohol abuse had twisted me but they'd twisted Jesse, too. All my little broken promises of better days that nicked and then cut and then slashed with sweeping strokes until the wounds could never be trusted to heal, even on a kept word.

I stayed clean and sober for four months after rehab and then I rolled hard and it broke her. I remember coming home late one time and she was waiting up for me like a vampire. Tracking me into the bedroom and punching me in the centre of my back. Making me take out my paper money to see if any of the bills were rolled into little straws. One had been but I stick handled like a true blue addict and kept it in my sock. I did a line in the driveway before I got out of the car and my nose had begun to bleed in front of her. She shook her head

and her grin was unstable and violent. We had a small oval mirror above the headboard. I looked into it, saw the red trickle, and played the you are crazy card. *I don't see any blood, Jess. You're seeing things you want to see. You're making things up because you have bigger problems than I do.* And she started to shake until she collapsed on the floor and crawled partway under the bed to protect herself from the life I'd delivered us.

I came home late so often that she'd convinced herself I was having an affair and started forcing her hand down the front of my pants to see if I was slick. Or smell me for any fragrance that would be foreign to the world inside our home.

Other times, when I came home drunk and wired, she would be drunk and waiting. She would let me take her only to tell me how disgusting it felt when I was spent. And then she'd shower to really make a point. Someone without a mean bone in her body, I was making mean.

This was our life on and off for years and my sober stints, which were nothing more than letting my body and mind heal because I couldn't take it for a while, felt like bliss compared to the dark runs. And it fooled her every time into believing the worst was weathered and there were better days ahead. It began to fool me, too, because I always forgot when I remembered how beautifully we were capable of getting along. We were friends, lovers, hand-holders and laughers. But not when I rolled.

I had one run that lasted two years, and it was a good one. We moved up here two months after Flip passed and I think we both hoped it would be a geographical cure for me. And

instead, it became new ground. A place where I had no rep and could walk into any bar without patrons looking and remembering a past incident. Before we moved I had begun to garner a bit of a reputation for violence. I'd always been quick with my fists to hide a nervous, cowardly adolescence, but it got worse and I didn't always have valid reasons for punching someone. Like the time I belted a bartender for telling me it was last call. I mostly hit when my cocaine supply ran out before I was ready to call it a night. It infuriated me to see only resins in the baggie when I still had things to do and places to see. The last run came to a head because I almost drowned right in front of the cottage and for a long while after I felt like maybe I should have. I'd come home late and the lights were off in the cottage. The coke was beginning to work against me. It sometimes made me paranoid and the notion of Jesse hiding in the dark waiting to pounce scared me to the dock. I sat in the lawn chair, after I grabbed two warm bottles of beer from my private stash tucked under the life preservers in the waterfront shed, and kicked back. I could hear her coming down the deck stairs and along the granite steps in the dark. She could have flipped on the shed light from the house but she didn't. She stopped and stood in front of me with her arms at her sides and the moon lit her set of car keys. I remembered the silver shimmering because her hand might have been shaking. She said she was leaving me and the only reason she stayed until I came home was because I had her fucking car. I laughed and told her I always wanted my own cottage and she slapped me in the face. I reacted on instinct and leapt out of my chair and pushed her

off the dock. And then I panicked when she didn't come up, but that was my delirium because, in fact, she had come up, but quietly and numb. I dove in after her but fell short and scraped my chest and stomach over the rough edge of the pine boards. It winded me and I sunk like a boat anchor, taking in copious amounts of lake water and Jesse panicked because she couldn't find me. When she did I was dead weight and the water off the dock was close to ten feet deep. She was losing me. She screamed for John but he'd already been woken by the commotion and made Jesse hang onto the dock support while he carried me to the left of the dock and up the man-made stairs that led to dry land.

The next morning I made a promise to Jesse that I planned on turning my life around for good. And if she still wanted to leave she didn't have to because I would. I also told her I was sorry. I said it through hard tears, and phlegm, and snot. And I thought I meant it.

So I went back to AA. I went in and out of meetings for years prior but never really committed. Mostly I went to get a desire chip or some AA paraphernalia to leave on the table for her to see in the morning. I had stuck it out for close to five months. And I hated every fucking minute of it. I had a home group and eventually Jerry for a sponsor and managed one meeting a week and sometimes two. The rural meetings were small and it was hard to disappear like it was at big city meetings. I had a habit of slipping out the door during the speaker's talk and I avoided closed discussion groups as often as I could. I refused to do any readings. I refused to do any slogans. But sometimes I would go in early and set up the

chairs and make coffee. They didn't bug me too much about my lack of participation because I brought gourmet danishes and I didn't think they wanted to piss me off and risk losing those bites. I didn't pick up a one month chip or a three month and I truly didn't know why. I did know I had a rebel strong suit that allowed my addiction to come and go when it pleased. Maybe that was the reason. I was like a dog, that left on the leash for too long will head for the woods once the clip leaves the collar and run until the paws bleed. It didn't get better and better each day on the leash. It got stifling and boring and that's how it progressed for me in AA. Jerry told me once that I thought I was too cool for school. But dying ain't cool either. I asked him to be my sponsor after he said that. How was I to know it would be the last valid thing he'd ever say.

Twelve

Saturday morning, two days after our purchase, Ed's son backed the trailer into the driveway. It was 8 am.

I was outside waiting. "Jesse come on. They're here."

John sat on the edge of the small low porch that was tacked to the back of the cottage six inches below the door. He was stroking Walter's belly. Walter was on his back with his tail in a metronome-like trance.

The boy stopped, climbed out of the truck, waved, and

stepped onto the trailer. He unhooked the ropes securing the vehicles. He must look like Ed's wife because he didn't look like Ed in the least. I guessed Ed's wife wasn't very attractive and kind of pudgy.

Jesse finally came out and stood by my side. I knew she didn't care about any of this and it made me feel like a kid. Even worse, a son. Humouring me made her unattractive and if we were to have sex in the driveway right then I didn't think I would be able to pull it off.

She handed me a hot mug of Mexican medium bean that she purchased while John and I were ATV hunting. It was my favourite coffee, good enough to swallow the tension headache that often rolled in midway through the third cup.

"What's the one with a front seat?" she asked.

"It's called a Rhino. Or side-by-side, because the seats are next to each other. It's for you and me." It came out flat with a point blank delivery.

She took my hand. "Neat."

"The other one is a Grizzly. I got winches put on both of them. The Rhino has power steering but John whined about it so the Grizzly doesn't." I turned back. John was still on the porch stroking Walter.

"Stop hiding back there."

John got up and Walter followed him over. He felt the need to remove himself around anything he deemed intimate. I knew when it was happening, but why an ATV delivery meant *couples only* to John I didn't know and was just plain stupid to me.

"Relax, man. You're family," I told him. John blushed.

"Look how much you and Walter look alike." Jesse giggled and

touched John's elbow. It lowered the fever on his discomfort and I felt excited again.

Ed's kid spent over an hour with us. He went over every function and facet of both machines. Every knob and dial. Jesse, smartly, found a reason to vamoose about fifteen minutes in. The kid loved the informational part the most and I didn't have the heart to tell him he could leave now. I was held captive while John listened and learned. He always managed to stay present, whereas I wanted to scratch my own skin off along with some of the kid's.

I gave the boy a fifty dollar tip and he came close to hugging me. In the end, I felt good, like a good person for letting the kid finish what he started. He was a good kid and it wasn't his fault he was homely like his mother.

John knew the trails. He took us through one off of Northey's Bay Road that ran the perimeter of the Petroglyphs Conservation area. It was sacred land and John made it clear to me not to cross the boundary. My intuition told me that John visited the place often. John's respect for the boundary was not from a distance or because he was an Indian. It was more than that. It was personal. The place meant something to him, like the suffering bear did.

Jesse had the time of her life. She kept making whooping sounds on the sharp turns and held her breath when we climbed over fallen trees and dropped down ridges of shield. I had to tell her three different times to stop clutching my right knee.

Jesse let me purchase riding gear for the two of us. Helmets with a visor that covered the entire face, gloves and clothing with flashy logos on the top and at the back along the bottom. She looked sexy in her big helmet and her voice sounded hollow and tiny from inside it. I wanted to have sex with her in the woods and I wanted her to keep the helmet on and the visor down. Every time we hit a bump she would whoop and then straighten her helmet. I finally pulled off the path and stopped. John, from ten yards ahead, stopped without looking back.

"What are we doing?" she said from inside her lopsided helmet.

"Your chin strap is loose."

"Why are you yelling?"

John reversed back, stopping in front of us. All he wore was a helmet. He didn't want the other stuff. Partly not to create cost and partly because he really didn't want all the other stuff.

John removed his helmet and Jesse followed suit, even though I had finished adjusting the strap so it was snug.

I craned my neck forward and pulled mine off too. I felt it drag and pull the little hairs at the back of my neck and it made me want to punch a tree.

"Where are we?" Jesse asked.

"Are we still close to the Petroglyphs?" I asked.

"We're five hundred feet from the perimeter now," John said.

"I've never been there. All these years. We should go, Freight."

"We lived in Toronto for ten years and never went up the CN

Tower."

"That's because you're afraid of heights." She turned back to John.

"Do you go to the caves sometimes?"

The caves were where the petroglyph drawings were.

John nodded. "Often."

"What do you do there?"

"I go to the teaching rocks."

"To pray?"

"Sometimes. Mostly I listen."

I stared into the woods in the direction of the caves, even though they were too far away to see. "Do you hear stuff?"

"Not like a voice. Insights."

I looked over at him because of the silence after he spoke, and he was watching me. I didn't appreciate the way he was watching me. Through me. Like he had been told something about me and it made him feel sad. Or maybe disappointed. Worse, I wasn't sure he realized the way he looked while he was looking.

Jesse broke it. "Would you take us some time?"

John stayed on me for another beat and then turned to her, smiled, and nodded.

"That would be fun, Freight."

My helmet was back on. "Sure." My voice sounded hollow and scared and alone inside my helmet. Lost.

Walter was Jesse's dog but John was Walter's favourite human. If John wasn't around, Walter was more than happy to spend his time staying near Jesse. But he didn't shadow her like he did John. He positioned himself somewhere he could see her and slapped his tail off the floor or the ground when she walked by. On the rare occasion when I was alone it was like there wasn't a Walter. He disliked me. He sensed that I could take him or leave him and Walter wasn't needy. But he was a flock guardian and I always felt a little insulted when the big dog was nowhere to be seen.

One time, while still in my cups, I started yelling for help to see if Walter would come running. He didn't, but Mike the accountant from next door did. I wish that stint felt like years ago instead of yesterday. I was looking forward to the day when my past wasn't so close to the bone.

John was building a dock for one of the wealthy cottage owners somewhere on Stony. I didn't know where, but I couldn't remember if I asked. Most of the docks on the lake were aluminum — known as docking systems. But some traditionalists still wanted wood, and if you wanted wood, John Eagle was your man. John had access to the barge from the marina and he needed it today, I remembered. It meant John was working on one of the islands, and that he drove the material over on the barge and built the dock right on the shore of the island property.

There were framed pictures of John on the wall inside the convenience store at the marina. They hung above a small saw horse that supported an antique Johnson outboard. Beside the

pictures were little plastic bags with four different dye-coloured feathers in each bag, along with a little placard that read *Lucky Feathers*. The stills were of John Eagle building docks, anchoring them in the water, and standing embarrassed beside the finished product. But you had to know him to know he was captured feeling ridiculous. John didn't like the attention, but accepted it because it generated work. I told him to consider standing outside the entrance with a headdress on. Told him he'd make a killing. He laughed. It was a hearty laugh. And to me, it sounded like thunder.

Jesse got up early and left for Lakefield to grocery shop. Mary Ferguson was coming over for the afternoon and an early barbecue. She met a guy and now we had to meet him. It was always the way it went. When Mary met someone, and wanted to impress, she brought him to us. Jesse said that I should feel complimented and I reminded her that you can't feel complimented, put out, and used, all at the same time.

What I didn't tell her, and never would, was that two years ago I was loaded at a pub called the Pig's Ear, in Peterborough, and so was Mary Ferguson. At least I thought she was loaded. The rest was a black out. In the morning I woke up in my car, wedged into the floor of the backseat. It was like someone threw me in there and then stomped me down into place. My gut was fused to the grooves in the hard rubber floor mat, with one arm twisted in and around the metal under the front seat. I pulled my arm out quickly in case some phantom driver adjusted the seat back. Every muscle ached, every bone vocal, as I twisted and turned on to my back. Then the debauchery of

the previous night shifted from one side of my stomach to the other until it found my gullet. I climbed outside and vomited all over my chin, my shirt, and the back window. I watched, through wet squinted eyes, the yellow chunky liquid trickle down the glass and disappear into the space that separated the trunk from the car. There were bits of white too, and I worried that maybe I coughed up a muscle or a tendon. Something important that was never supposed to jettison out my mouth. But I kind of remembered a pickled egg-eating contest that I won because I was the only contestant.

Leaning up against the driver's door, taking gulps of fall air, I started the all too familiar panicked search for my car keys by slapping my front pockets simultaneously. They were in my left pocket but I only ever put them in my right. Habit told me this, not memory. Reaching down into my left pocket felt foreign, like being in someone else's pocket, or the slight brush of a stranger's hand in a crowd.

The keys came out with a condom attached to the one for the ignition. It hung over the key by a tear and it was unused. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a terrible thing. And then I dry heaved.

A week later, back at the cottage, the phone rang. I picked it up and heard Mary's husky voice at the other end. She didn't sound guarded. She sounded sincere and a little sad. Sad for me. I told her Jesse was out, but before I could get off the phone she told me I was good, which I totally took the wrong way until I realized she meant nothing happened. Nothing that anyone needed to know about. She told me to take care of myself. Get some help. I assumed I tried to have sex with her

but couldn't get past limp. The alcohol was running things back then and there were on and off switches that I couldn't control or even recognize.

"Hey lost little boy on the dock."

I turned, keeping my ankles in the water. Jesse was standing on the deck. She wore a short skirt. Her legs were lovely. Tanned and tight. Her little sleeveless summer top always turned heads. Mostly women admiring how firm and clear her arms were.

"What's holding up the girls, Jess?" I thought she was braless, but not completely sure.

Jesse, in one quick motion, grabbed the bottom of her top and flipped it up to her neck and then down. "Genetics," she said.

"Yes, your mom was hot."

"Pig."

Her beige nipples stayed with me after she pulled her top down, like a succession of snap shots quickly fading.

"I bought real bagels and real cream cheese, and real strawberries." As opposed to the Frankenberries, that were the size of a newborn's head, that she refused to purchase.

"Now you're really trying to get laid, Jess."

I pulled out the loungers from the storage shed and we had an early lunch on the dock. John put the chairs away every night because of the strong Stony Lake winds. I put my two cents in once and recommended he bolt the legs to the dock and he reminded me that we weren't Burger King.

"What a day," Jesse said, appreciating the lake.

Big fluffy chunks of cloud moved over the sun every ten minutes or so, and each time felt like a reprieve. Jesse pushed her sunglasses to the top of her head and then slid them back down when the sun blasted free.

"What do they call those clouds?" I asked.

"I'm not your Indian guide."

"No, you are my squaw."

"That's not so bad." She had turned her head my way and rested her chin on her knee. I could feel her eyes on me, and I began to cry, watching a chunk borrow the sun.

"Oh baby." Jesse moved to the end of my lounge, gently shifting my legs out of the way. It took effort but she didn't ask me to move them for her. She didn't say *shove over*. She didn't say anything. She just watched. I wasn't a cryer usually and she wanted to take it in. What I looked like, what happened to my face, and where it would lead.

I didn't cry for long and then I smiled, but my lips felt slack and tired.

"Fuck, you're hot when you cry." She didn't get the laugh she was hoping for.

"What's going on, Freight?"

"It's strange to be happy sometimes." I wiped the tears from my cheeks and eyes with the heel of my palms. "We never talk about leaving here."

Jesse counted in her head and then on her fingers.

"Twenty-seven months. You want to leave?"

"No. No, I don't. I love it here. I love the winter when no one is around."

"The fall?"

Jesse was a fall girl. Loved fall clothing, fall weather, fall colours. She loved helping John secure the garden to survive the cold months. She loved wrapping her hands around a warm mug of coffee on the deck in the early morning. Changing from the thin silk housecoat to the cotton one. Walks – especially walks.

"I hate the fall."

Jesse held up her fist. "Wanna cry again?"

"We're staying then?"

"Let's do it. But every winter I want two weeks in Europe. Starting with Italy."

I turned away like something unimportant caught my attention.

"When you're ready. Okay?"

I did it again. Killed something.

"We could invite John," she said.

I was present to how intuitive and observant Jesse was. I had forgotten that. Abusing myself and then stopping meant change, but it also meant experiencing why you loved certain people to begin with. Seeing them all over again. Or maybe for the first time.

"Do you feel left out sometimes?"

Jesse thought before she spoke. "You are where you are supposed to be. With the people you're supposed to be with. Besides, all your old friends were assholes."

"Even Ron?"

"Especially Ron."

I laughed. Ron was a drunk and a sleepwalking pisser. The

one time he stayed over he managed to mark his territory on Jesse's Japanese armoire and a bag of Walt's dog food in the pantry. We kind of drifted after that.

"You need John. He's good for you in a way I can't be. And don't want to be. But you are good for him, too."

"He likes to teach."

"No Freight. It's much more than that." She took a deep breath.

"What is it?"

"My dad told me that in all the years John worked for him John never had a friend over. Not even a visitor."

A story was coming and I wasn't surprised to be hearing it now, late in the game. Jesse was not a gossip, even in the intimacy of a marriage. I loved her for it and was annoyed by it. But I trusted her, implicitly.

"Maybe he was just being respectful of the property. Your dad's privacy."

Jesse shook her head and looked out to the lake to pull her next thought together. It made me a tad anxious like she might not tell me after all.

"John had a girlfriend he met on the reservation."

"Hiawatha?"

"Curve Lake. My dad hadn't been here long. She worked part-time as a cashier at the No Frills in Peterborough. It was closing time and her last customers were two men. My dad thought they were drinking but he didn't know for sure. They waited for her in the parking lot and took turns with her on the bank of the Otonabee River. She fought back and screamed. They suffocated her."

I had no words.

"They got off," Jesse said.

"How?"

"I don't know. But a year later they went missing."

"The two men?"

"Yes."

"Did they find them?"

"Never."

"John told Flip about it?"

"No. My dad's company did renovations for the Peterborough Chief of Police. They became drinking buddies. He told him. John isolated after that. Did his job and kept to himself. Until you."

We were silent for a few minutes.

I rubbed the back of my hand over my mouth until Jesse reached out and gently pulled it down into her lap.

"I don't like being a big boy. The stakes are too high."

"You have to be. And when that thought comes in, think of him. And me."

"I always think of you."

"No you don't. And I'm only asking you to try."

"I am. My head is like a filing cabinet, Jess. I still have a lot of bad files but there are good ones, too. They need to even out is all. But it's not there yet."

"Think of them as memories. The bad ones."

"Sometimes they are except they feel like they happened yesterday."

"Let's have sex before Mary gets here and then you can think about it all day tomorrow."

I rubbed her arm gently but quickly. "Tonight?"

She kissed my cheek and grabbed the plates and mugs. I felt selfish and heavy.

I heard her footsteps stop on the stairs and it meant she was looking back at me but I couldn't find a reason to turn around.

Fourteen

The afternoon was tolerable. I didn't like dinners that started late in the evening. They put me at risk. I was a bat in my other life and now I wanted to be a mourning dove. Jesse managed this and never apologized for me.

Mary and Daniel arrived at two pm and the visit started on the dock. Mary wore a one-piece, probably to avoid any comparisons Daniel might have made between both women, so I couldn't see her navel. She had a really nice navel. Jesse came down to the dock with snacks and a brand new bikini. Mary and I loved it but Mary was more vocal.

Jesse said, "I fell in love with the fringes, and, I wanted a halter top. Oh, and I learned a new term today." She ran her hand down her torso like a game show model and stopped at the bottoms. "Hipkini."

I knew immediately why it was called that. The way the bikini bottom clung to the shape of her hips was sexy. Sometimes I looked over Jesse and pretended we weren't married. Checked her out from bottom to top and then settled, or maybe fixated, on her mouth. It really turned me on.

Daniel was halfway through his third beer and beginning to try to dominate the conversation with charm and wit. I actually tried to like him. I hoped Jesse had noticed because I was proud of my effort. But it was difficult because Daniel was charmless and witless.

His hair was short with a strip down the centre that was a tiny bit higher. My guess was he was ten years younger than Mary, so maybe forty. He did this thing that was beginning to rub me backwards. He would look at you, for what felt like forever, and then cock his head like he was perplexed. Then he would stick his tongue behind his upper lip and push the lip out. Then he'd wiggle his tongue and the lip would pulse. It was physical hyperbole leading up to asking a question that Daniel believed was far more impressive than any answer he might get from the person he asked.

He sat up in the lounge and pointed his shiny knees in my direction.

Here it comes.

"So, Freight." He put emphasis on the FR and the T. "I - cannot - for the life of me," he winked at Mary, "Figure out what that is short for."

I was hiding in the lounge at the opposite end and Jesse and Mary were in between. I moved to the end of the lounge and pointed my regular guy knees in Daniel's direction.

"Well, that is a great question, Danster." It was subtle, but I saw Daniel twitch. "It's short for Frankachuka." Danster twitched again. Jesse laughed and slapped my shoulder.

"No it is not. Freight's first name is Frederick. His parents called him Fred. They had an elderly Italian lady that

lived next door. She always sat on her porch, right?"

"Her lawn. She didn't have a porch." I saddled back into the lounge and looked out at the flat lake.

"Her lawn. And whenever Freight walked by she would yell *Hello today Fred*. But, it sounded like she was saying *Hello today Freight*."

Daniel jumped in. "And it stuck." He nodded to the girls like he had figured out some big life puzzle. He had a super silly ass smirk on his face that disappeared behind Mary when he sat back in the lounge, signifying that the conversation was over, and he had won. Won what?

He also touched Mary a lot. Stroked her. At one point, he told a story about how good he would be at selling real estate and the entire time he rubbed Mary's left thigh with both hands, close to the groin. I don't know what he said. Mary went rigid and eventually saved us all by removing his hands and making a joke about blocking a potential tan spot.

The girls took over the conversation for the next while. Talking about Lakefield. What they would change if it were their town to own. Different shops. Health. Daniel and I interjected here and there with a word or half a sentence and I thought there was a remote possibility that Daniel could be a man after all. Like I said, it was remote, but there was a weak pulse.

"What is that?" Mary asked. She pointed out to the lake. I couldn't find where the point landed but Jesse did.

"Freight, I think it's John."

I stood. "Where?"

"Look to the left tip of Pine Island then follow it back to

us until you see a swimmer."

"I don't see — oh, okay. I got him."

John Eagle's strokes were big and methodical. They would arc out. It seemed like he was pulling the water to him. Like he was climbing it, and on every stroke, we got closer.

"You all right?" I yelled with my palms cupped around my mouth.

John gave me a thumbs up on one of the arcs and kept coming.

The three of us watched him swim, in silence. Closer and closer until finally his big darkly tanned hand closed over the dock ring and pulled him up. His black loose-fitting trunks clung to his defined thighs. His arms and chest muscles swollen from the swim. The cold water raised the bear scars to a lumpy eggshell white. It made him look like a warrior. I was proud of his greatness. Daniel tried to hide it but he was gobsmacked by the man that suddenly swallowed all the focus. From the long wet coal black hair to the chiselled jawline and the massive chest. John was like a pumped version of the statue of David. Bigger everywhere. Everywhere, I bet.

"Everything all right?" I asked.

"Fine. I left the barge there. I have to go back tomorrow."

"You didn't have to do that," Jesse said.

John smiled. The barge was ugly, dirty and box-shaped. Not acceptable in front of Jesse's place. Especially with company present.

"I like the swim after pounding a hammer all morning." Mary bit her bottom lip.

"Hi Mary." John and Mary had met a few times, but only

briefly, when she visited.

"Hey John." She touched Daniel's knee cap with her finger. It was gentle and careful. Like he could break easily. Daniel would owe John one in the morning. "John, this is Daniel." Daniel pushed forward but stayed seated. Either way he would be dwarfed by John. John put out his hand and they shook. For a moment, Daniel's hand went missing.

"Good to meet you, John."

"Thank you." John said. I loved that John didn't say *Good to meet you too*, because John didn't know if it was good to meet him yet. And it wouldn't be anyway.

"I'm going to change," John said to Jesse.

He was halfway up the yard, veering off to the right, when I casually jumped out of the lounge. "I'll be right back."

"Bring down some stuff," Jesse said.

"Like what?"

"Whatever you think we need."

"How do I know what we need?"

"Never mind." I think she initiated an eye roll with Mary, because I heard giggling on my way up the yard.

I caught up to John before he got to the door of the guest cottage.

"I know what you're doing."

"That's because I announced it on the dock."

"Fuck that. Don't abandon me."

"I might come back later."

"See I knew it. Don't leave me with that Daniel fuck. Come on down. Hey I'll make fun of him and he won't even know. It'll be great."

"I wouldn't enjoy that." John smiled.

"Just come back, please."

John exhaled lightly. Like he was put out but not too badly.

"I'll tell Jesse that you're hiding because you feel intrusive."

"I'll be down soon, you white bastard." With that, John stepped onto the porch and disappeared inside the guest house.

"Thanks buddy." I took off for the cottage.

I pulled the handle on the stainless steel door of the stainless steel fridge. It was nine thousand dollars and it made a very expensive posh sound when the magnets separated. The cool expensive air could only be felt if you stuck your head inside the fridge. I wondered how the manufacturer did that. The old fridge, the cheaper one, seemed to shoot cold air out at you when the door opened. You wanted to close it quickly before everything inside warmed up. Jesse said she would miss the old fridge when menopause started.

Daniel brought his own alcohol. A six-pack of Belgian beer. The kind of purchase you made when you wanted to impress new people, when all you were really doing was trying to hide your dick-headed personality behind an import. There were three left. Two were lying on their side on the bottom shelf and one was in the door. I took out a Boylens cream soda and a beer for Daniel. Jess would be proud of me. Then I grabbed an unopened bag of Old Dutch salted chips and a piece of white cheese in a Ziplock bag from the table.

I felt like I had one hand, the hand that held the bottle. The other one with the chips and the cheese and the pop had no meaning. No recollect. Severed. But this other hand, the one

holding the dark bottle, told me stories. My hand cradled the bottle as if my palm were an old yard hammock tied low between two elms, and cradling my cock could not have been more intimate. The urge to twist the cap off and open my throat wide wasn't overwhelming as much as it was an angry need to give up. To say fuck it and fuck them and fuck Jesse and then, just like that, I felt air around me. Colour and light. Tingles. I sat down in the kitchen chair slowly, because my balance couldn't be trusted, and gently clunked the base of the bottle on the table. I pushed handfuls of salty chips slowly and methodically into my mouth. Jesse yelled up for me so I pushed out of the chair, leaving the bottle to warm on the table.

I glanced through the screen door into the kitchen and said thank you God, but I left him there.

I was halfway to the dock, almost to the bottom of the granite stairs, when Daniel stood up and yelled, "Hello today Freight."

Both women laughed. Jess to be polite, but stupid Mary genuinely thought it was funny. I wished John would hurry up.

By the time John joined us we were on the deck where the sun was less intense. The lake was a great way to cool off, but if you were out of the water, the sun and the lake together could fry a person. I knew this from first hand, first degree experience.

John offered to light the barbecue, which was code for *I*

will barbecue. Jesse thanked him. John sometimes liked to pull away. Cooking the food allowed him to do that. Not when it was the three of us. He didn't need to pull away then. But sometimes a fourth or fifth person might as well be the four hundredth or five hundredth person. I knew that feeling, too, but John beat me to the punch on barbecuing.

Six full racks of baby back ribs were steaming up the kitchen while Jesse prepared her secret rib sauce, which she was determined to keep secret. Sometimes she'd get up early to prepare it, but this time she just made a point of using one ingredient and putting it away right after.

I came up behind her and kissed the back of her head.

"How are you doing baby?" she said without turning around.

I noticed the ingredients on the counter.

"Lemon, olive oil, and walnut oil. I got it."

"Nice try. It's for a salad. I'm one step ahead of your sneaky ways."

The screen door opened and Daniel entered. "Boys' room, boys' room." He did a little dance like he couldn't hold it. Both hands cupping his crotch and his knees dancing up and out to the sides, akimbo.

"Around the corner, down the hall and to the left of the back door," I said.

Daniel immediately dropped the dance, winked at Jesse and sashayed down the hall snapping his fingers. I dead-panned for Jesse and she giggled into my chest.

"You're being a good sport."

"How come you're not having a drink?"

"I did. I had one down by the lake. I might have a glass of

wine with dinner. I don't know yet."

"Remember, you don't need to hide it from me."

"I know."

I kissed her mouth and whispered into her ear, "But do you believe?"

"Yes. Maybe. Sometimes."

"Remember the dinner party?"

She smiled and gently ran her fingertips down the front of my shirt. I was four months in once, and we went to a dinner party and no one drank. We were the first to leave and I found out later that the hosts were serving cocktails before we'd got to the bottom of their driveway.

"I don't need to have a drink, Freight. I can take it or leave it."

"I could never be you."

Her eyes went soft and thoughtful and the urge to show the world how much I could drink in one evening came and went, almost, without me knowing it.

Daniel returned. "Anything I can do?"

"Ah..." Jess looked around. "Yes. Could you take the meat out to John?" She pointed at the pot of ribs on the stove. Already steamed and screaming for sauce.

"Done." Daniel lifted the lid and peeked inside. Then he winked, again, and said, "This looks like some good buffalo." Then he left.

"Oh God I hope he doesn't say that to John."

I smiled and hoped he did.

The mosquitos were too much after dinner, and the sound of

Mary slapping her neck fell into a toxic rhythm for me. It was every five seconds on the nose and it was making me crazy enough to want to help her slap herself. I had the same problem in bed with Jesse when she forgot to put the bite plate for her TMJ in her mouth. She didn't really forget as much as she left the plate in the bathroom occasionally, and after reading for a while she would begin to drift. Then she'd gently put the book on her stomach and go to sleep. I always fell asleep last. I would get up and come around to her side, put the book away, gently unhook the glasses from her ears, and turn off the light. I wanted to shove the plate in her mouth too, but there was no way to manage it without startling her. She told me that her sleep window was small and getting up to retrieve her bite plate put her outside of that window, and it might be hours before there was another chance to fall asleep. Sometimes I'd flick her arm or give her a little push and the snapping jaw would stop. Mostly because she would roll over.

"We need to move to inside now," I ordered. I think I jarred everyone because they pushed their chairs back and fell into action like I had just belted out a military command.

Anyone who didn't visit regularly, and this was everyone, played out a brief moment of silence when they stepped into the great room. I was never sure if they needed to take the space in or the space needed to decide whether or not they were trespassing.

The main level was open concept with a big set of timber stairs leading up to four bedrooms. A wooden railing ran the length of the hall on the second floor and you could see the

door to each bedroom when you looked up from the great room. Two and a half doors if you looked up from the kitchen. At the end was the guest bathroom, but you had to be standing by the limestone fireplace along the far wall to see that door.

Jesse and I loved looking over everything from the second floor hallway. We could lean right into the railing at the same time. The bar was thick and part of the floor. It didn't creak when you put your weight on it, although, as a whole, the house creaked often and more so at night, but more often in the winter months.

The great room was beautiful. For some reason, looking down from above brought out the craftsmanship of the interior. The way the limestone fireplace scaled the wall all the way up to the ceiling. The bay windows with the oval-shaped cherry wood framing in between each big panel. We had a husband and wife cleaning team that came once every two weeks. When they left, the windows were clean and streak-less. I didn't know how they did it. Even getting the streaks out of my rearview mirror was a struggle.

There was a leather sectional in the centre of the room that comfortably sat seven adults. The oak coffee table in front of it was massive and low. It had a red leather top and wrought iron legs that curved at the feet. Jesse told me it was 19th century in the style of Louis XV. Flip had it shipped from France, door to door. A gold design engraved into the centre of the red leather reminded me of a coffin, and sometimes a dog house. It all depended on where I sat on the couch and where I perched on the landing.

Once we were done appreciating the great room, we would look

past it to the gardens and the granite stairs outside the bay window. When that became old hat, we moved on to the open lake and the big sky. It all happened in the space of a minute. It was a ritual for us, but not lately. Lately, Jesse did it on her own.

Shortly after we moved inside, I performed one of my famous room fades, where I wait until there's no attention on me and I vamoose. I hide. Trickle away. Sometimes I do it for ten minutes, other times longer. And only when we're entertaining company that I have had enough of.

I could hear Jesse climbing the stairs to the second floor. She walked to the end of the hall and climbed the smaller staircase, perpendicular to the guest bathroom, that led to our loft bedroom.

"Freight." I wondered if the trace of my butt print was still outlined in the mattress. Memory foam kept no secrets – for the first five minutes at least. I heard the glass door slide open that led to the small deck off our room. We didn't use this deck very often and she probably figured it would be a good place for her husband to hide. Because that's what I was doing.

Back down the loft stairs she passed the guest bathroom.

"I'm in here, Sherlock."

Jesse opened the door enough to fit her head through. I was sitting on the toilet with the lid down looking at the glass shower stall.

"Penny for your thoughts."

"They're good ones. I want a hundred bucks."

"Okay." She entered the room and closed the door. She didn't

stand over me because I hated that and she knew it. My dad did it to me when I was a kid, and more so into my teens. Standing over me with his pointer finger out, pretending to disguise orders for advice. The pointer close enough to my face that I could have told you if he'd picked his ass that day.

Instead, Jesse plopped herself down in front of me with her legs crossed. She made it look easy and painless.

"If you ever catch me in that position it's because I have been hit by a car," I said.

I wanted her here but I also wanted her to leave. I wanted her to know I was suffering, but I wanted to shut her out. I looked her over and could tell it was making her uncomfortable. She reached up to stroke my knee but stopped short when I resisted.

"Want to be left alone?"

I didn't answer right away. I looked through her, which to her always made me seem vacant and reckless, and then I drifted back.

"You're pretty, Jesse."

"Keepin' the home fires burnin', baby." She winked at me, but it was nothing like Daniel's wink. Jesse owned her wink. Man, did she own it. I felt warmth coming into my groin that slowly pushed out the isolation.

"I'm just a little anxious I guess. It'll pass."

"Want some ice cream?"

I loved sugar. It was an addiction that, right now, Jesse supported.

"Kawartha Dairy?"

"Moose Tracks."

"Can I have a big spoon?"

"Well, okay."

"And may I whack it over the bridge of Daniel's nose when I am done?"

"Yes, or you can wait until the morning because they're staying the night."

"You gotta be fucking kidding me?"

"I can't let them drive, and honestly, I don't think they can afford a cab."

I knew, through Jess, that Mary struggled financially. Always moving from one commission sales position to another. And all she had to do was stop working for commission. But she had an old forgetful auntie that kept the dream alive by bailing her out long enough for her to fall back down.

"Daniel has to be at work before eight so you won't have to see either of them in the morning."

"Fine. I'll set my alarm for 8:02."

I went to stand when she pushed me back down and rocked up to her knees. She moved in close.

"What are you doing?"

"Spoiling you with two desserts."

Jesse reached into the leg of my shorts and lifted my boxers to the side. I sprung loose and she caught me.

We entered the kitchen holding hands. Mary took one look at me and accused us, laughingly, of having sex.

"Don't be ridiculous, Mary," Jesse said. "It was a blow job."

Everyone laughed. John put his head down until the laughter

died. I knew Jesse had diffused it by being brash, but I was pretty sure John knew I had been given a blow job.

It wasn't until later, when I was lying in bed, that I worried maybe something did happen with Mary Ferguson.

After a time, we moved into the great room. Daniel wanted to play cards. "Hello today Freight. Do you want to play cards?"

"You went from Italy to Romania and then Boston in one sentence, Danster."

Mary spit up her drink. She couldn't speak and kept pointing at me and nodding.

"Freight doesn't play cards, but I do. How about Euchre? John, do you play Euchre?" Jesse asked.

"Not for a long time, but I know how."

"Girls against the guys?" Mary asked. I could hear the alcohol sticking to her throat.

"Let's do it," Daniel said. "Maybe John, you could do a medicine man chant. Put us on a winning streak."

"I'll reach out to my brother the fox," John said.

Jesse went down the hall to a little supply closet where we kept stuff like cards, old VHS movies, and some of her dad's hardcovers. Mostly about history. War.

"Let's play at the kitchen table," she yelled from down the hall.

Daniel and Mary got up from the couch and I stretched out on the sectional and nestled in on the heels of them leaving. John got up to follow and he playfully chopped the arch of my foot, but it hurt like hell.

I watched Mary pick-up the bottle of red from the counter.

She waved in around by the stem but careful to keep it upright. We better finish this. Jess?"

"Yes please. Is my glass on the deck?" She craned her neck to look past Daniel and Daniel pushed his chair out. "I'll get it my lady," he said in a Cockney accent.

They didn't know what they were doing and they didn't know how lucky they were all at the same time.

I don't think we were in bed for more than ten minutes when I covered Jesse's mouth until she nodded a promise that her laughter had settled, but when I removed my hand the staccato honking from the guest bedroom directly below our bedroom picked up again. It lived somewhere between a donkey and a rooster. Low at the top and high just before it stopped. Then it would start all over again.

Jesse bit her lips together quietly and stared at me with big wide cartoon eyes. The sound was a relief to me. I knew that nothing happened with Mary – blackout or no blackout, I would never forget a sound like that.

"It is Mary, right?" I asked.

"You think it's Daniel?" Jesse hit another round and I had to cover her mouth again.

The final honk was total donkey and it lasted eight seconds. Then silence.

"Well, it was good for me. Was it good for you?" I asked Jesse.

Jesse drifted off, curled into my chest with one hand clutching a clump of chest hair. I fell asleep, shortly after,

to the sound of the shower in the guest bathroom. The juxtaposing rhythm of the spray tapping body parts and shower tile.

Fifteen

John sorted tackle on the dock. Everything was out of the boat and lined up along the edge when I came down, still in my housecoat.

The lake was flat and quiet, newly, like I had never seen it before. A surprise at the bottom of a wrong turn.

"Where's mine?" he said, without turning up.

Halfway there, I turned and went back up the stairs.

Back with two cups of coffee, I sat on the end of the lounge behind John sitting cross-legged in front of three rows of lures and three clear round containers. Each container was the size of a coaster and an inch deep. They held grey sinkers — small in one container, followed by medium, and then large.

"Ever use the large weights?"

"No." John said it like he was a fool for keeping them.

I looked up at the sky growing overcast. There were still snippets of blue but the clouds were moving, closing in on the blueness.

"I hope it rains."

"And it will."

"I've never fished in the rain."

John looked up to the sky. "Today you will."

"Good."

"Let's go over these." John pointed at the first row and I stood to see over him.

"Rapala minnows."

John nodded. "I have caught sun fish, perch, rock bass, pickerel, pike, trout." He stopped. "Everything with these." He nodded at the bait like he approved of their efforts. He owed them one.

He tapped his finger on the dock in front of the second row.

"Spoons, pretty obvious."

John tapped the last row.

"Spinners."

"Why do the spoons work?" John asked.

"Reflection."

He nodded. "And the spinners?"

"Reflection and action. You don't need a weight. They're too heavy for trolling if you ask me."

John looked up over his shoulder, surprised. "We haven't trolled yet."

"But I'm right."

"Yes."

"Well let's just leave it at that then. When are we heading out?"

"I'll have to check online." He smiled.

"Guilty." I chuckled.

"Noon."

"Muskie?"

"Hard for me to say. Changes in the weather irritate them."

I showered and dressed. Jesse was taking a down day and I knew that meant her period would start later or early tomorrow. I didn't know her calendar cycle, I went by her actions. If she slept in or got up and lay back down after breakfast I knew she was premenstrual.

Jesse called her period the *red days*, and she said it without a hint of affection. She couldn't wait for the red days to end permanently. What she meant was, she didn't like being tired with aching cramps. Hated it. By the third day of actually menstruating she would want sex. She wouldn't ask, she would demand. *Get a towel, Freight, not a white one.* Then it would happen. Fast, kiss-less, and intense, with harsh explosions of breath, because it was a secret and we needed to get it over with. It was forbidden. If it happened earlier in the day there would be a less intense secret that night.

"Need anything?"

She opened her eyes and looked up at me from the couch, shaking her head slowly and only once.

"I'm going to buy cream from the marina."

"And chips," she said, shutting her eyes again.

Walter was stretched out on the floor beside her. He looked comfortable, but also dead.

I stepped out the back door to find my helmet sitting on the step. John, wearing his, was already behind the wheel of the Rhino. He looked excited, as excited as he was capable of, because he hadn't driven it yet.

I pushed the helmet down over my head and felt the top of my left ear fold, so I started again. I didn't think my ears were

any bigger or smaller than anyone else's. If they were, it would have been schoolyard arsenal from way back and it never was. Finally, I made it right and climbed in.

Both John's hands were gripping the top of the wheel. "I had a dune buggy when I was a kid," he said, starting the Rhino. "My father cut the frame from a Beetle. Then he tied a rope through the ceiling and around the roof with the other end to the trailer hitch of our pick up. He drove and the frame tore right off." He turned to me. "Then I had a dune buggy. But what I really wanted was a Beetle." John shook his head like it was a shame.

"What happened to your dad?"

"What makes you think something happened to him?"

"I don't know."

"He lives up on Oxtongue Lake."

We veered from the road into the bush. There wasn't a trail. John was breaking trail, and what I initially believed would be a relaxing ride along the road to the store instead had me holding on to the frame with one hand and the top of my helmet with the other. When I could, I stole quick glances of John grinning like a maniac, challenging the vehicle at every ridge and dip. Every rock and fallen tree.

"Don't do it."

We were stopped twenty yards from a mud bog. It looked deep and ends of branches and stumps and tree roots peeked through the surface. The muddy soil was dark brown and the whole bog looked like a Guinness record-breaking cow pie.

"I can smell it from here. Do it later on the Grizzly."

"What do you think I am going to do? Read my mind." John grinned. I barely found time to secure my chin strap.

John pinned it and I screamed. So did John, but our reasons for screaming were not the same.

We slammed into the mud and all I could do was feel the experience. I tried wiping my visor but all it did was make room for more mud to splash over it. At one point we were sinking and then the Rhino lurched forward. Near the end it revved and spun, circled once, and then we shot out of the mud cannon on to harder dry ground.

We sat on a rock together admiring the black dripping machine. I put my arms out in front of me. They were just as black.

"Mud looked brown going in," I said.

"I broke the seal."

I rubbed the visor over the inside leg of my pants, the only spot free of mud, and then I circled the Rhino.

"Doesn't look so new anymore."

"I'll clean it."

"Think you could make it go the opposite way? It would be harder with the rock shelf on the other side." I was in now. Brave because it was over and stupid because I wanted more.

"Next time."

John did not want to be wild again because he loved it too much. It was out of character for him, and now he felt exhausted because it was wrong or unpredictable. Something. His long face looked drawn and tired. Just before take-off he had wild eyes. Feral. Feral and intentional. Maybe even mean.

This was my first meeting with the man that attacked the hunters. Would I ever meet the man that made the rapists disappear?

"I can't go into the store like this," I said. John wasn't nearly the mud cake I was and I wondered if it was because of his size. More ground to cover. He walked over to the dock where the boats gassed up and I followed. The mud was beginning to cake on my neck and in my ears and through my hair, and it was irritating. I wanted to ask him what he was thinking and tell him that I wanted the Rhino cleaned posthaste.

We were on our bellies with our heads and arms dangling over the edge of the dock a foot above the waterline. I scooped water up into my face and into my hair aggressively. It took John longer to clean up because he was more methodical than I could ever be or wanted to be. I could feel my body tensing with irritation, but I kept going until my palms came away from my face and neck clean. Then I rolled onto my back and waited for John to finish.

"Do you think the Grizzly would have gone through the mud differently?" I don't know why I asked him this because I didn't care either way.

John continued to pull water through his hair.

"Did you hear me?"

"No," he said behind the splashing and the cleaning.

"I said do you want to go for a beer later?" I said it over a forced smile that was more like a grin trying to tear the skin from my face.

"Why is that funny?"

"I didn't mean it. You didn't think I meant it, did you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Are you all right?"

"Stop asking me so many questions." With that John stood and walked towards the store, squeezing the excess water out of the ends of his hair.

I felt the hit. It made me feel unsafe. I decided I was going to avoid John for the rest of the day. I wanted to tell him to curl up on the couch with Jesse and they could have their periods together.

John sat in the Rhino. "I'm going to walk back," I said in passing, and without giving him the time of day.

When I came out of the store the Rhino was still there but John wasn't.

Sixteen

The rain began late morning. It was a windy drizzle with bouts of straight downpour that hammered the deck. The big leafy plants in the garden folded over and together looked like a giant green mitten coming out of the dirt. John appeared out front. I watched him walk, like it wasn't raining, like it was any other day where he had not been rude and hurtful. He went down to the dock and picked up the three rows of tackle, then the sinkers, and put it all back in the box and closed the lid. He started back up the hill with the cherry box under his arm. I retreated from the window, taking

two steps back. John continued on to the guest cottage and disappeared inside. I turned away from the window and sat down in the highback, kitty corner to the sectional. My paperback was lying open, page down on the thick right arm of the chair. I picked it up and placed it the same way on my knee and looked back out the window.

"Still like the book?" Jesse rolled onto her side to face me. I was reading *A Farewell to Arms* and Jesse was very proud of me.

"I have to read a lot of the paragraphs twice to understand them." I knew I sounded like a child, but I didn't fucking care.

"Great books make us do that. They're like great paintings," she said. I told her earlier, when I was fifty pages in, that the conventions of thriller novels, which were the bulk of what I read, had me thinking something bad was going to happen around every turn of Hemingway's book.

"Honey."

"What?"

"Go kiss and make up."

"I didn't do anything. I asked him about the ATV and he called me stupid."

"That's not true."

"Well he didn't call me smart, did he?" I picked up the book and glazed over the type. "He's been moody all morning."

"It's irritating, isn't it?"

I pretended to read, which was code for *shut up, Jesse*.

A little while later I made my way into the kitchen for no reason and found the fridge. I pulled out a triangle of Brie,

some old white cheddar, pickles, and two different types of crackers from the cupboard. I kept eating the pickles, shoving them whole into my mouth and then having to replenish the plate. The garlic made my tongue tingle and cleaned the stale taste out of my mouth.

I put the plate on the coffee table.

"Where are the chips?"

I returned from the kitchen and went over to the window, eating the chips out of the bag.

"What time is it?"

"Check my cell."

I snapped up her phone from the coffee table and pressed the home button and handed her the chip bag.

"1:30. Guess we're not going fishing. Prick."

"Oh my God. I feel like your mother right now. Do you want me to go over and talk to him?"

"No."

Jesse smiled and I smiled back, realizing I may have sounded a little childish on the *no*. And this wasn't her fault.

John left the next morning and didn't return for three days. I focussed on Jesse to avoid stewing and maybe even worrying. Catering to her every whim.

It was day three, mid-morning. Jesse's period started in the middle of the night and I followed her to the bathroom to make sure she had tampons or the other things with wings, that I affectionately named nightriders. She finally had to kick me out and when she came back to bed I had the heating pad warmed and spread out on her side of the bed, slightly under the

pillow because she liked to warm her shoulders first. She moved the heating pad by the cord to the floor, put down a big beach towel, and ordered me to do her.

In the morning, she wasn't beside me but I could hear her downstairs in the kitchen making breakfast.

"Good morning," she said while I was still on the landing.

"Do you have better hearing on your period?" I asked, entering the kitchen.

"Maybe. I do feel tuned in. Stimulated is a better word. Everything is a little heightened." She turned to me. "Like a cat."

I kissed her temple on the way to the coffee maker and poured a cup.

"Did you know there were ancient tribes where all the menstruating women went into red tents? Or moon huts. I think they called them that, too. They were treated like queens when they were on their period. Massages, grapes, baths."

"That was before electricity, and potato chips. I cleaned up a mess in the bathroom this morning."

Jesse turned around. "Really?"

I nodded.

"I'm sorry. I meant to seal up the bag. No, I meant to close the door and get the bag later."

Walter crept into the kitchen and went under the table. He watched me, with big round eyes. "Look at him," I said to Jesse.

"Were you a bad boy, Wally?" she asked. Walter thumped his tail but kept his eyes on me.

"They need to make a flushable tampon," I said.

"John came back last night." Jesse turned on the gas burner to medium and placed a butter-greased fry pan on top.

"Nice."

"I heard his truck."

"Good for you."

"Are you going to talk to him? Because if you're not then I am."

"Good idea. Let me know what he says." I poured table cream into my coffee and went out to the deck.

"Don't be so pigheaded," she said to the screen door swinging shut.

That afternoon I went riding on the Grizzly. When I came back I was clean. It was a thinking man's ride this time. Just out there on flat ground at high speed trying to blow the stink off. When I walked around to the front of the cottage, Jesse and John were sitting on the deck. But all I did was glance at them and continue down to the water.

I felt stupid standing on the dock holding my helmet and wearing my Yamaha livery. Amateur.

I stayed on the lake and didn't turn around to the sound of John's boots coming down the granite steps. But it was a great sound.

"Hello today, Freight."

My shoulders released my neck and I half turned.

"That's all you got?"

John shrugged. "It's pretty good."

I reconsidered.

I noticed Jesse leaning over the railing, watching us.

"We're fine now, mom." She flipped me the bird and stayed. John and I smiled, but I think we wanted to laugh.

"Are we fine now?" John asked.

Did he think three days worth of distance made it all okay?

"Sure."

"I'm sorry."

I looked away and nodded. "Everything okay?"

"I went to see my dad because he is dying."

"Jesus, John. I'm sorry. I had no idea."

John nodded.

"How old is he?"

"Seventy-four."

"Not that old."

"You would mistake him for older. Don't let that happen to you, Freight."

I nodded. I swallowed back a *fuck off*. But I heard it in my head sounding like a kid trying on a big person's curse.

"What's he got?"

"Wet brain."

I didn't know what to say. And now I knew why he had snapped at me seventy-two hours earlier.

"He's hallucinating now. Thought I was his brother. Accused me of sleeping with my mother. Then, for a while, he's lucid. But he's not a nice person either way. It will be good to have him go."

"Is there anyone there to take care of him?"

John nodded. "My big sister."

"Where's your mom?"

"My mother died ten years ago. The last five years of her

life were away from him."

"Was he a beater?"

John nodded.

"Did you tell Jesse?"

"Yes."

"She's good to talk to."

"I know."

Those two words, *I know*, would bother me for a long time to come. Jesse didn't have first-hand experience. I wasn't a beater and I didn't have wet brain. I did have anticipatory addiction from cocaine, but I stopped using and it went away. The symptoms were strange and only surfaced when I was out of coke and going for a pick up. And I wouldn't have even known it existed if a rehab counsellor with a rope burn scar across his neck hadn't brought it to my attention. If I were going to my architect drug dealer in Toronto, my mouth would freeze on my way there because he used novocaine for cut. But if I went to my biker dealer in Oshawa, I would have to make numerous bathroom stops along the way because the biker used baby laxative for cut. I did a little research and the general consensus was I was inside of two years before permanent brain damage.

Maybe John was just agreeing with me. Nothing more. *Yes Freight you are right, Jesse is a good person to talk to, but not because you're a big fuck up. She's just good to talk with. Wise and thoughtful.*

I wanted a drink and didn't know how to change the subject inside my head. It had been making me belligerent all day and

I think that's why Jesse purchased ribs again. Baby back ribs with sweet potatoes fries.

We ate together on the deck.

"Why do you always have a damp cloth beside your plate?" John asked me.

"To wipe my face," I said.

"Why don't you, then?"

I looked up from my plate to Jesse and she made a circle around her chin with her finger. I picked up the damp cloth and cleaned my chin.

"Better? Are you okay now?" I said to him.

"When Freight was a boy, his dad couldn't stand looking at him covered in sauce, so Freight's mom always kept a cloth beside her so she could wipe his face."

"So nothing has really changed," John said.

"It has so. I wipe my own face now." I loved making them laugh and decided I would do it more often.

"Is he allowed on the couch?"

"No," Jesse said, but she didn't look away from her plate. I turned back. Walter was stretched out on the sectional with his large white snout hanging over the arm at one end.

"This is new. He started doing it a couple weeks ago," Jesse said.

"It's in a Great Pyrenees' nature to try things. Test boundaries. Probably learned it from Freight," John explained.

Jesse chuckled. "Yes. But the furry one is trainable."

"I'm right here, guys."

I pushed my chair back, collected their plates, and stacked them on the kitchen counter.

I clapped once to get Walter's attention. I didn't trust him much and never went over to him unannounced. It was just the two of us in here and the only thing that ever stopped him from biting me was other people in the vicinity.

"Off, Walter. Off."

He slid down to the floor and I went back to the kitchen.

John and Jesse were deep in an intimate conversation. They would stop talking the moment I returned, but I didn't want to return. I wanted to watch and then I wished I hadn't. Jesse's hand moved off the table and I had to shift my position to see where it landed. I had to press into the kitchen screen and crouch a little before I finally saw her hand on his knee. Up from his knee. I moved casually back through the great room and slid the screen door open. Her hand was back on the table and she was smiling.

John's hands were palms down flat on the table. His posture straight and pushed back into the chair.

She didn't say we were just talking about this, or we were just mentioning that. Or I was just telling John. She didn't say anything.

I confronted her into tears later that evening.

"I leave for five minutes and you jump into a conversation about his dad? Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And what did he say to make you feel the need to stroke his leg?"

"Nothing."

"You just did it?"

"I didn't stroke his leg. I put my hand on his knee, Freight."

"Why hide it from me. Why not his hand? That's out in the open."

"Do you know how paranoid you sound? And give me some credit. If I wanted to cheat on you I wouldn't initiate it on our deck while you're in the kitchen."

"Then why not his hand?"

"Because that *would be* too intimate."

"For whom?"

"John."

"And close to his groin isn't?"

"I was being supportive and I am done with this."

"I'll tell you when you're done with it."

Time stopped for her. For both of us. I crossed the line and I knew it but I was fucking hooked and it didn't matter.

"I thought we were done with this kind of crap."

"You provoked me, Jess. I was fine."

She took a composing breath and straightened her posture.

"John is going to ask you if he can go to an AA meeting with you. I was moved because his fucking dad is dying and he cannot stop thinking about his friend."

"He's wasting his time."

"Then so am I. Get out of my bedroom."

"Jesse."

"Get out!"

Jesse had been reeling me in for years. Since shortly after the beginning. We loved drinking together in the early stages of our courtship and the first few years of our marriage. But when she decided to slow it down and I had no choice but to speed up we began to lose our friendship. Maybe I didn't speed it up. Maybe I maintained it. I remember thinking, at the time, that she was the problem. She quit the team. Put on another jersey. She became a traitor and my habits, everything I had always done, had to go into hiding. And I accumulated more secrets as it progressed. I remember her finding me in a pub once. I don't know how she managed to do it because I changed watering holes weekly. I was playing darts when she surprised me with a shove from behind. It was timed perfectly, right as I was letting the dart fly and the dart went wild, barely missing a new friend's shoulder. I berated her for what could have been and she turned hysterical. Claiming her worry made her forget to put underwear on. Said she jumped out of bed, pulled on her pants, and started driving from bar to bar and pub to pub.

As for *this kind of crap*, she meant jealousy. I'll admit it came up sometimes. I had punched a couple of heads in the early days — but I was better now. Plus, I believed the root of the problem was Jesse's doing. When we were first dating she wanted to put a number on how many people we had both slept with. The combined number was thirty and I contributed nine. I wish I had never agreed to that game. If I could have a go- back, that would be the one.

If I could have found a way to drink casually during the

week and save, say, a Saturday, just for stupors, I thought our lives would have synced. It wouldn't be like the old days, it would be new days and they would be better days.

I liked the guest bedroom. Not the one Mary and Daniel ruined - that was the third door in along the landing. My room was the first door at the top of the stairs. I kept a spare housecoat in there, and a pair of jeans along with a blue checkered flannel shirt. Jesse called them my cosies. I think I owned four flannels that were stacked over a big wooden hook behind the bedroom door. I wasn't partial to the blue one, it just seemed to be the last on the hook and I was not in a fussy state when I first got there. But I was safe in this room. It was my treehouse, my fort, and I always came out of it a better person. I thought Jesse should have had a room like this. I'd even have lent her a cosy.

The next day opened quietly and uneventful. Jesse would not even acknowledge my breathing so I handed her back the same. It didn't feel tense, though. That worried me a little.

John and I fished the late morning and early afternoon away. We talked but he never mentioned going to an AA meeting with me. Maybe Jesse hadn't gotten to him in time. We caught and released four each. One of mine was a rock bass and I counted it but probably shouldn't have.

On our way back, John noticed two men to the right of our dock talking to Jesse. He pointed without turning back. We were a hundred yards out. Jesse's arms were folded and she stood on the incline above the two men. The taller man's

movements were quick and annoyed looking. He pointed down to the dock boards twice. The second time he shook his finger at the dock like he was giving it shit for something. John told me to open up the throttle, but it already was. I didn't need him to tell me how to protect my wife and my blood was beginning to heat up.

We tied off on the dock and Jesse's eyes welled. She was trying to control it but I think she was glad to no longer feel scared.

"What's going on, Jess?" I said it to her but I was visually glued to the tall guy. The little guy looked like he just wanted this to end.

John saw it first. "Whose blood is on the dock?". He looked around for Walter. Droplets and paw smears led off the dock to where the men were standing but neither of them was bleeding. Yet.

"This man's dog came on the dock. He was charging a loon family."

"Walter?" John asked.

Jesse bit her lips and nodded.

"What happened?" I asked.

"My dog needs stitches." The tall man didn't say it nicely. It had a pull-your-wallet-out feel to it.

"Shouldn't you be taking him to get stitches instead of taking it out on my wife?"

"Let's go," the smaller man said. "We'll look after it," he had the decency to say to Jesse. And I didn't think he said it because we were here now. I think overall he was a decent guy that would never cottage with this tall asshole again.

"Who's going to fucking pay for the vet bill?"

"Does Mike know he rented his cottage to a pair of assholes?" I felt guilty including the smaller nicer guy, but I was going down.

"C'mon Tommy, please. It's getting out of hand."

They turned to leave and so did Jesse. But the tall one started his retreat reluctantly and then stopped to watch the way her ass moved climbing the hill. Then he looked at me with a dirty grin. I know he did because John grabbed my arm, but it was too late. I walked in fast. I'm left-handed and he had no way of protecting my open hand swat to the left side of his head. He didn't think I was going to hit him. I am pretty sure he thought all I was going to do was get up in his face. It's partly why I walked instead of running. He tried to hit me back but missed and I came in hard with a jab that got his lip bleeding and then I took him down to the ground with all my weight. His friend danced around, begging and leaning over us. John finally scooped me up like I was a bale of hay, but by that time I'd already shoved three hands full of silt and pine needles into the taller man's mouth.

The smaller man helped him up. The asshole's eyes were watering and his lips and chin were covered in dirt and blood.

"I think you men should pack up and leave," John told them.

The smaller man nodded and they drove away thirty minutes later.

Embarrassment closed in on me. John stayed a little while and then went over to the guest cottage. I don't know how long I sat by myself before Jesse finally came out. It could have

been twenty minutes or half the day.

She took one look at my swollen knuckles and turned around, back a moment later with ice cubes in a soup bowl.

"You okay, champ?"

"I was afraid you'd say 'chump'."

"No, I think the chump is at a rest stop right now, between here and Etobicoke."

"Is that where all the chumps live?"

She nodded. "I think so."

"He looked at your ass when you walked away. Then he looked at me like he wanted a piece of it."

She nodded again.

"So I made him a dirt sandwich."

"And now your hand hurts."

"And now my hand hurts."

Now that we were sitting on the deck and talking quietly, the idea of Jesse hitting on John seemed ridiculous. What was I thinking? Jesse was the best and only ever wanted the best for me.

"I was so stupid the other night. I'm coming along, but sometimes things get blurry."

"John and I are going out for dinner. Can we talk about this when I get back?"

"You are a black-hearted bitch." My smirk almost pulled my face apart.

"That was pretty good, wasn't it?"

"Maybe one of your best, Jessica."

"I'll let it all go like it never happened if you do something for me."

"I'll go. But I am not promising to go again. And he has to ask me, because he hasn't yet."

"He's nervous about over-stepping the boundary. John!" John came out the door ready to problem solve. Jesse waived him over. She tried to do it like a buddy and it was a funny looking movement for her.

John was halfway to the deck stairs when Jesse said, "He'll go," and he stopped, slightly winded and slightly embarrassed. He almost moped the rest of the way. I guess that was his version of sheepishness.

Then Jesse left right after John sat down and gave his head a little tiny shake.

"She's killing you."

"I can feel it," he said.

I turned and looked back into the kitchen. "Now she's staring at the back of your head."

"She's a menace."

I roared and told Jesse John called her a menace.

"Not my John," she yelled back. It felt good for me to hear her say *my John* and not make it mean anything.

"It is a meeting up on Scugog Island. Native Friendship Group is the name of it. You won't know anybody. I figured that would be important to you."

"Is it open or closed?" John wouldn't be able to go to a closed meeting and I felt the rush of an out.

He smiled. "Open."

"When?"

"Sunday night."

"That's tomorrow, John. When were you going to tell me?"

"I wasn't sure I was going to."

I looked back into the kitchen and Jesse was rinsing something over the sink. I shook my head at her in annoyance.

"I'll go because I like getting laid."

"It's mostly men."

"Shut up."

The rest of the day went well. Other than my sore hand, my thoughts were clear. I wasn't worried about the AA meeting because it was still a day away and things might change. John took off somewhere, I think to grocery shop, and Jesse and I relaxed. We didn't talk much but we weren't unfriendly. I think I may have tired us both out. I was never boring.

We had a *get your own dinner* night. We did that once in a while. Usually when one of us wasn't hungry at the same time as the other. I made a grilled cheese sandwich with tomato soup and enough saltines to turn the soup into a stew. Jesse said it smelled good. She always liked the smell of forbidden foods, and sometimes seemed resentful. But that never meant that they would find themselves in her mouth anytime soon.

I stretched out in the lounge and kicked my sandals off. The night air between my big toe and index felt soothing. It was always cooler on the dock. I sipped my PG Tips and then put it down on the dock and lit up. The smoke dissipated into the night. Jesse would be down soon, I figured. We never planned nighttime dock sitting. It wasn't a ritual and she went down only if I did. She always waited for ten or fifteen minutes before coming down because of the few times she

arrived when I was getting up to leave, complaining that she'd come all the way down with her tea in hand and I was taking off. So now she timed it out. Waited for me to settle.

I heard the glass door slide open and close. She did it quietly when it was dark out. So quiet that sometimes I thought she forgot to close it.

I shut my eyes and listened to her steps coming down the wooden stairs and then becoming dense on the granite ones. Getting closer but not louder. Nearer. Soon I would be able to smell her above my tobacco smoke. I always could.

"Not many mosquitoes around tonight." She went past me to the edge of the dock and looked out into the black. There wasn't much to see with the clouds gloving the moon.

I leaned over the arm of my lounge and dragged the other one closer. It bounced and teetered over the spaces in between the dock boards like a bad neighbour.

Jess sat back and stretched her legs out.

"Where's your tea?" I asked.

"I didn't feel like one."

I took her hand and held it. She interlocked our fingers and I knew we were still good. I guess a woman could interlock and still resent you, but Jesse did not play that way. I knew right then that I had to go to that stupid fucking meeting with John.

We sat quietly, and it could have been ten minutes or forty minutes. Jessie's breathing changed. Long and deep on three and then a short harsh inhale through her nose on the fourth, with a quiver. Her grip on my fingers tightened in time with the quiver. She wasn't running her tongue over her upper lip,

but would be soon. I uncoupled our hands and she gripped the armrest hard enough to make my chair lean. I reached under her panties and slid my palm over the back of her hand. She made small circles, slow and pressing. I wanted to help, but a man can't touch a woman with the kind of accuracy she had when she touched herself.

She flipped our hands and all at once my fingertips were moist. I didn't wince when my punch knuckle screamed but I wanted to.

"Slower." Her tone sounded frustrated and she guided me and didn't stop until she trusted that I could mimic her perfect circle.

"Good. Keep doing that."

"Are you close?"

"Yes."

"How close?"

"Real close."

"Faster?"

"No. Shut up." She grabbed the backrest with both hands and held on.

"Other hand. Now."

The fabric tried to stop my other hand and her nylon zipper split.

"Faster, Freight."

She was swollen and incredible, trying to buck my hands free and howling into her palm.

When it was over, Jesse was spent. Sprawled out on the lounge with her legs open and her feet on the dock.

I was sucking on my knuckle, wondering when it would scab

over. She pulled my ear getting up, but she didn't mean to. She meant to caress it or maybe stroke the side of my face but I knew she was feeling clumsy and wiped.

"Make it up okay?" I asked.

"Yes, baby," she said.

I stayed on the dock until the big light went out in our bedroom, which made the back wall of the supply shed disappear. The moment the light went out I wanted a drink. The urge left no room for pity because of it's immediacy, and it's drive. They say all the sponsors in the world can't help you when you want a drink, because at the end of the day it comes down to you and your higher power. *One's too many and a hundred's not enough. One's too many and a hundred's not enough. One's too many!*

Jesse's pussy was my higher power and I needed to wake it up to get through this.

Eighteen

It was unusual for Jesse to sleep in and it wasn't like I tired her out, because I hadn't gone up to bed for quite a while. Instead, I stayed in the kitchen and ate pickles and chips and that seemed to do the trick. Maybe it was because alcohol doesn't taste salty or like garlic. At least my bar staples didn't. The chips were salt and black pepper. I needed to remember what a saviour they were. Totally changed the pH balance in my mouth and made me forget all about Captain Morgan.

I made a pot and walked out the door with two mugs. I felt chatty and needed a listener.

"Knock knock. Coffee delivery."

"I'm in the kitchen."

I put one mug down on the stoop and opened the screen door, wedging it open with my leg. Then retrieving the mug from the stoop, I went in. The door rattled shut behind me and hot coffee woke up my knuckle. "Crissake."

"You all right out there?"

"Yes, thanks."

I rarely entered John's domain. The screened-in sun porch was rustic but tasteful. Jesse was a big help but she told me that John had good taste. His style, once Jesse felt him out, was "shabby chic", whereas Jesse went for a modern, sparse decor, bordering on minimalist. Together they found some kind of hybrid that I couldn't explain, but it worked. John was a neat freak, too, and the few times I did drop over I never found myself distracted by piles or small clutters. Maybe I was a harsh judge of slob.

John was putting a new test line on my reel. He looked pensive but he didn't need to be because he could put line on with his eyes closed and one hand behind his back. Something was up.

I placed the mug in front of him and pulled out a chair to sit. He looked down at the coffee and then back at me.

"Jesse made it," I said.

He took a sip. "Liar."

"What's the difference?"

"You make it too weak or too strong. You cannot seem to find

the sweet spot."

I resisted the urge to tell him he should have seen me on the dock last night. Instead, I swallowed a big gulp like it was the best coffee I had ever tasted. He smiled and then went back to being pensive. It was like he forgot he was pensive and suddenly remembered. It made me feel a little intrusive.

"How many pounds are you winding on?" I asked.

"Nine," he said.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"No you're not."

He watched me for what felt like forever. Sizing me up for authenticity. Was I worthy of his worry or whatever the hell it was? This could be a problem, depending which way he went.

"Do you ever wish you were a father?"

I was so relieved I almost forgot the question.

"Father?"

"Yes. Do you ever wish you were one?"

"You mean do I wish I had kids?"

"Do you wish you were a father, Freight?"

I looked into my coffee for the answer. I always thought it was no, but maybe it wasn't.

"I don't know. Do you?"

He nodded. "But I can't be."

My inhibitors were in shut down mode, or something. I couldn't believe what I was asking before I finished asking it.

"Because you killed two people?" If only my tongue were a doorstop. I wanted to go back in time and say something

obvious like, *Because you don't have a wife? You're impotent?* Anything. I spoke through my fingers. "Jesus, John. I didn't mean to say that. I really didn't."

He nodded once and then drank down half of the coffee I made.

"Do you believe me?"

He nodded again. A big one-time nod.

"Don't answer. I'm not looking for an answer." But I was. Everyone that knew wanted to really know.

"Jesse told you the story?" he asked me.

"Yeah, Flip told her," I said.

"Cop told Flip."

"Yes." But he wasn't asking me.

"Do you think I killed them?"

"I think you had a right to."

"That's not what I asked."

"Yes. I think you did."

He nodded at my bravery. "She was the one. Her name was Lisa."

"Lisa."

His eyes came up on my face. I think it sounded weird for him hearing someone else say her name. He left the table and went into the washroom. When he came back out he took my hand and gently rubbed some kind of a clear paste over my scraped knuckles.

"Native remedy?"

"Polysporin."

I began to giggle.

"But I have Lakota for back tension, so I am not totally out

of the loop." Then I was gone.

"Let's go sit on the porch," I said.

John pointed to the split window above the sink. "Open both sides."

I did and then lit a cigarette, making sure to keep near the window. Sometimes I knew smoking was a stupid act. Like now, pushing my face up to the screen and blowing second hand out hard. Or in the winter when I was on the back porch in my housecoat and boots and it was -20, wearing any hat I could find. Switching hands to avoid frostbite. I refused to wear my leather gloves because you could never get the smell out.

"Did I ever tell you about my first date with Jess?"

"No." John looped the line three times around the fattest eye hole to keep it tense, then did something in the opposite direction that locked the line. He put the reel down. Then he sat back, crossed his legs and held the mug while resting the base on his knee.

"I took her to a movie so I wouldn't have to talk. It was a last minute decision so we went to a retro cinema and watched Gone With The Wind. It's gotta be the longest movie ever made."

"How long?"

238 minutes. That's how damn long."

John laughed.

"I was nervous and I was so worried about saying something stupid. I figured going somewhere you couldn't talk was logical."

"Did you have dinner first?"

I shook my head and took a drag.

"No dinner?"

I deadpanned him and shook my head again. "Popcorn and pop."

"Poor Jess."

"It gets worse."

"You fell asleep."

"No. She did."

"You would have been better off going to dinner and saying something stupid."

"I know it. She said no the next time I asked her out. Well, first I asked her out that night."

"After the movie?"

I smiled and nodded. "And she said she was too tired to think about it. Which is really fucking rude if you ask me. But I got over it."

"How many more times did you ask her out before she agreed?"

I tried to recall. It had been a long time since I told this story and maybe I never had. "Five. She said yes reluctantly on the fifth."

"It went well though?"

"Really well. She picked the restaurant. She picked me up. But I paid."

"She wanted control if it didn't go well."

"For sure. But it did. I probably said a few stupid things but she thought they were funny."

"Jesse thinks you're funny."

I agreed. "Unless I try too hard."

"You don't."

"Technically it was our second date but according to her it was our first because the other first didn't qualify. It was a

Friday night and she left Sunday night. I didn't judge her though. Guys that do that are fucked in the head. It doesn't mean the woman does that all the time, and so what if she does? If I were single, my dick would be up on Craigslist. Women that love sex are well-rounded and intelligent, for the most part. Jesse taught me—

"Stop."

"All right, all right."

John put a spinner on the leader and leaned the rod diagonally on the table's edge. I picked it up in the middle.

"I'm going to try this out on the dock."

Nineteen

The rod felt fluid in my grip from the very moment I walked out John's front door, like an extension of my arm. Better yet, my wrist. It was the farthest, smoothest cast I'd ever made. The lure plopped, breaking the surface like a bullet. I whooped and spun around. No one to see it but me.

I was six rotations in on the reel when something struck the line. It hit hard and I almost lost my footing and almost went into the lake. When he came out the front door, I didn't need him to tell me it was big because he could see the bend in the rod and started to jog down like a thumping moose.

"John, get the net! Get the net!"

"Don't horse the line or you'll lose him."

"I'm trying not to."

John kneeled on the edge of the dock with the net in his

left hand. "He needs to tire out. Let him run and don't choke the line too much."

"How big do you think he is?" We hadn't seen the fish yet. It was staying deep. Riding the bottom.

"Twenty pounds." John said it low, like it was a secret.

The tug picked up. It was the fish's biggest effort so far.

"Oh man."

"Reel in between tugs. If you're going to lose him, this is where it will happen."

I left John for the zone and later John would talk about it. He stepped back and I heard the loungeer squeak. I could hear everything and nothing — this was mine to win or lose.

Up until this point I had remained stationary on the dock. Now I began to move with the fish. It pulled left, I went left and brought it in line. The fish centred, trying to head further out into the open lake. I raised the rod above my head to keep it curved, then realized bringing it down and to the side would be easier and I made the correction. My lips were tight together and I clipped the back left side of my tongue, but it didn't stop me from grinding. I was nose-breathing, not snorts but loud breaths. Shots of air that I knew John could hear.

Then the line went quiet. Slack. It crinkled and floated breezily onto the surface of the water. I took one hand off the reel and held the rod high with the other.

John was about to tell me to get rid of the slack when my instincts kicked in again. I went out of the zone briefly and then right back in. I reeled in the slack and when the line became tense again it felt more like water current tense. The

kind of pull you feel when trolling, I assumed. Then, from twenty feet out, the fish broke the surface and twirled through the air.

"Sweet Jesus. Did you see that?"

"I was wrong. He's thirty," John said.

"Don't lose him, baby," Jesse said.

I looked over my shoulder and back in one rapid motion. The fish jumped again. Twisting in the air. It was speckled with a bar on the side. The dorsal fin way at the back. The head thin. I thought I was imagining it when I saw a row of teeth in the wide mouth at the front of the flat face. The fish slapped the water on it's side, making a circle of waves that spread out ten feet before dissipating.

"Ugly pike," John said.

"It's a pike?"

"Muskie." John picked up the net and moved to the far end of the dock to avoid distracting me, and Jesse joined him.

I worked it. I rhythmically brought the muskie in closer and closer to the dock. The water under the dock was clear and I could see the muskie snaking over the rock. It was massive. It's movements looked intentional but it was getting disoriented and tired. I could see it and feel it in the rod. We were still connected, but the muskie couldn't read me the way it did in the beginning.

I kept the rod out in front. I couldn't let the muskie get under the dock. If I let it swim around the dock supports it would be over. He surfaced, shook, then went back down. It scared me. That was where the thrill lived.

"Stay there, John. I'm bringing him down to you." John made

three tries to net. The first two, the fish pushed the aluminum frame out of the way and glided past. The third time, he swam into it.

John lifted the net out of the water. The muskie looked like a fat green boomerang in the bottom of the net. Its gills opened wide and they were dark pink and alien. Jesse had prayer hands over her chin and I began to breath through my mouth. I wiped sweat out of my eyes and smiled at them.

"I did it. I caught a muskie."

John placed the net on the dock and removed the fish horizontally, gently lifting him out. I went down on one knee and ran my index finger along the lateral line. The gills moved rapidly on my touch.

"Ugly pike?" I asked.

"It's the translation to English," John said.

"What's the Ojibwa word?"

"Maashkinoozhe. Muskie."

"It's beautiful," Jesse said.

"The word or the fish?" John asked.

"Both."

John put the muskie on the dock and reached into his back pocket, taking out a pair of needle-nose pliers. They looked like a toy in John's grip and in front of the mouth of the Maashkinoozhe. The spoon lure came out. John was swift and thoughtful.

"What do you want to do?" he asked me.

I looked to Jess and then to John, then to the Maashkinoozhe. They could not make the call for me.

"Will he live if we put him back?"

"Yes."

I could see it mounted in the great room but I didn't know if I could live with that.

"I have to put him back, but I don't know why."

"He gave you a fight, and a memory. Miigwech."

"Thank you?" asked Jesse.

John smiled and nodded. "Give him back?"

I nodded. John held out the fish to me.

"Oh Jesus."

"Lie down on the dock with your arms stretched out and I'll hand him to you." John dropped beside me and didn't release the fish until I had exacted the position of my hands.

"Look at those teeth."

"Don't drop him. Place him in."

I let the Muskie's belly slide out of my hands. It circled slowly. I could have reached into the water and touched him one last time. But I wasn't even tempted. The Maashkinoozhe finally swam off, exhausted but alive.

"Miigwech," I whispered.

"He earned his freedom," John said to the water.

I flipped over onto my back and hollered at the sky. I felt serene and alive. And I would not feel that way again for a long time to come.

Twenty

John excused himself to use the restaurant bathroom, leaving me at the table looking anywhere but at my drunken wife. Jesse

was loose, unrestrained, and touching everyone with her finger when she tried to talk.

"Tell me about the fish again. How did it feel, baby?" she said.

"You already asked me that, Jesse. Five minutes ago."

"But you didn't answer."

"That's because I told you ten minutes before that when you asked." I looked away from her hoping she would pick up on the *I think you are disgusting* vibe. But some drunks never do. They're so fucking stupid and irritating.

Jesse folded her napkin and placed her hands over it. I looked back at her stained red lips.

"Are you going to have dessert, hon?" she asked.

"No. I am not going to have dessert."

John must have been doing real business because he was taking a long time.

"How come?"

"Because I don't want any."

"Will you share with me if I get something? We can get whatever you want." She reached across the table and placed her hand on top of mine but was too stupid to feel my tension and my raised pulsing veins. She couldn't tell my palm was fused to the fucking oak table.

"Let's share a bottle of wine, hon." I hit the hon hard and she snapped her hand back before the mouse trap got it. But it did get her and I was glad of it.

"I'm sorry. I'm just happy and I didn't have lunch. I guess the wine—"

"I don't fucking care, Jesse."

"That I know."

When John came back to the table, Jesse was waiting by the front door and I was sitting alone.

He saw her and then looked down at me.

"She's tipsy. I know."

"She's a cunt."

"No. She's tipsy."

We arrived home to Walter's piss on the kitchen floor. It was right by the door and Jesse somehow managed to avoid stepping in it. I did too until my shoes were off. It soaked through my sock and I could feel it spreading across the bottom of my toes. I sat down on the chair and peeled the left one off and then made the mistake of squeezing the sock into a ball. The pungent smell wafted up to my nostrils and into my eyeballs and the excess dripped into my lap, trickling over my wrist. I tossed the sock in the garbage along with the dry one and, for no good reason, stripped out of my pants, throwing them hard onto some plates in the sink.

On my way through the great room I found Jesse cuddling him on the couch.

"He pissed on the floor." I am pretty sure she already knew because of my cursing from the kitchen.

She pulled her drunken face out of his furry neck and told me it was her fault because she forgot to let him out. I told her I threw my socks in the garbage and she said that was stupid so I walked over nonchalantly and slapped Walter a good one in the side of the head. He backed away, knocking Jesse off the couch. She landed between the leather and the coffee

table into the exact same position she was in on the couch. It would have been funny if it weren't so sad.

"Freight."

"What? He pissed on the floor. Should I give him a treat?" I said it on my way to the stairs with my back to her.

"You better be going to that fucking meeting tomorrow, you fucking asshole."

"I'll pick you up a desire chip."

Then she started to cry.

There were handprints all over the glass wall of the guest bathroom. The bar of soap had long hair and short hair stuck to it. I peeled most of them out with tweezers from the medicine cabinet, and when I was finished the bar looked like a fossil find from an archeological dig. I hoped the short ones were Mary's and not Danster's. I knew the long ones belonged to her. In the end, I couldn't let the soap touch my skin so I made it an extra hot shower.

The prints on the shower wall told a better story once things really fogged up. At first I couldn't figure out why the hand prints were so big. They looked like giant hands and the prints weren't smeared in any way. Then it hit me. Daniel pinned Mary's hands to the glass. His hands would have been overlapping hers while he took her from behind. But why didn't I hear a cock-a-doodle coming from the shower? Or a hee-haw? I guess the earlier wildness created space for intimacy. Maybe Daniel would be around longer than I had anticipated.

Alcohol made Jesse horny but I figured my chances of copulating with her were slim. And even though a little hatred thrown in the mix might stir it good, I didn't think she would

want to touch me and I was still a distance away from crow pie.

I put my left hand over the prints and pushed Danster out of my imagination so Mary and I could have a minute together.

Twenty One

Jesse's head ached and she wouldn't speak to me or look at me. I could tell her head was aching because her forehead was tight with lines.

When I walked into the kitchen the first thing she did was look to see where the dog was. She leaned her chair back and spotted him under the table and caressed his belly with her bare foot, then slipped the foot back into her slipper.

"I'm going into Peterborough," I said. The keys to the SUV were on the table where I left them the night before. She flicked them across the table with her finger and they landed on the floor.

I didn't have a reason for going. I told Jesse I needed to drive and maybe make a stop at Chapters for a coffee, buy a book. Something.

But she didn't respond.

I made the left at the new intersection because I wanted to avoid the stop and start traffic in Lakefield. I turned right on County Road 33 opposite the small farmers' stand — making a mental note to drop in on the way home and buy some corn and beets. I love beets. A smile touched my face, remembering how

many times the morning ritual would panic me until I remembered it was the beets from the night before.

At the bottom of 33 I turned left onto 32. This route to Peterborough, with the Otonabee River on the right, was my favourite. I powered down all four windows and the sun roof. Then I put the air conditioner on low. The decadence of windows down and air on felt rich and luxurious. I couldn't do it with Jess. She had a thing about the wind blowing her hair into her face and mouth. Or the loudness, which I loved almost as much as the wind blowing in my face. I put my arm out the window and let the catching breeze climb my sleeve. It made the sleeve look like one of those inflated men that stores put out front to draw people in. They look like big condoms to me, and probably most people.

AA always talked about meditation but I didn't know anyone in the program that actually made a practise of it. I decided to look for a book on meditation and work towards fifteen minutes a day. Buddhism might be the way to go. Hopefully Jesse wouldn't want to meditate with me. Some couple stuff made me uncomfortable. It felt icky, or maybe fruity. I could never articulate why doing things in tandem made me feel detached. It was supposed to be intimate. And then other things we did together brought us together. It truly was a conundrum for me. Holding hands was nice. Wearing the same runners was not. And then other times neither was holding hands. Jesse fixing my hair really didn't work. It felt motherly, even though I couldn't remember my mom ever doing that. Reminding me of chores I promised to do might be the

worst of all. It made my dick shrivel faster than a glacial lake probably ever would.

I travelled south on Water Street, or was it George? I could never remember which was which. The roads split at some point and became one-way running opposite to the other. Be tough for a kid to take his driver's license test in that town.

Peterborough depressed me and always created longing for the big smoke. I read somewhere that Peterborough had one of the highest unemployment rates of all the cities in Ontario, yet maintained one of the highest levels of happiness. Being a hot spot for retirees, I assumed that they were the only ones smiling and that they must make up a bigger portion of the demographic than I realized. Not that I tried to realize it because it was mostly a passing thought.

But where did the retirees go? Water, George, whatever, consisted mostly of cafes, used book stores, couple of pipe shops, restaurants and breakfast spoons, bars and nightclubs that, from the front, looked like entrances into carnival horror houses. There was a pizza place off Water/George that I went into, one time only, for a slice. It was a blur of tattoos, piercings, and metal bits. The young woman that served me had one entire side of her head shaved and the other side long. I guessed it was a choice because I couldn't spot the trace of a surgical incision. And all of them stared, like I was the freak. They needed my money, but they wanted me to leave as soon as the drawer to the register closed. The slice was old and dry and dusty. The pepperoni curled and was thin with too much spice. The sauce was MIA. I'd bet I was less

than ten feet outside the door when I whipped it into a public trash box. Funny thing, I remember throwing the slice on top of two others.

The whole of downtown seemed to have a subculture look and feel. It might be hippy or maybe beatnik, or maybe a hybrid. Hipnik. It was also a university town. But Trent was not a humanities university, it was a sciences university. Jesse had a theory that a university renowned for humanities drives a town upscale. They have all the shops this town had but are a step up and a more welcoming environment. More intellectual. I wasn't an intellectual, nor was I a hippy beatnik, but I strived for the former, and it was much easier to pretend there. These kids wanted to be different but they all fought over the same drum.

I made a right at the bottom on to Lansdowne, where the run of big box stores started. I came up on the turn for Chapters and noticed a new fried chicken place in the adjacent plaza, next to a new glasses store, and it made me realize I had not been out this way for a while. It made me feel good and relaxed. I might poison myself with some fried chicken and salty biscuits after my Buddhist book purchase.

I went in through the Starbucks entrance. I wanted to get my drink first, drink it and then get a book. Sometimes I did it the opposite way, but it meant buying the book, taking it out to the car and then coming back in for my drink. Books are important to me and I couldn't put them at risk. I never cracked spines, never read with a drink in one hand, and I never put the book down on a table where the public had

access. It struck me how much I missed the daily ritual of reading.

I was pretty sure the girl in front of me had Down Syndrome. She wore pink from head to toe and I counted five tiny pink elastics holding five short tufts of orange hair straight up. I knew she'd dressed herself and I thought she sounded cute and sweet when she politely ordered a big, big strawberry smoothie. She clapped and vibrated when the male barista offered her extra whipped cream. Fuck I wished my life was that easy. I wished people, places and things made me as excited as they did this girl. I caught a muskie and now it was all downhill. The barista could have stuck the whipped cream funnel halfway down my throat, fisted the opposite end, and I wouldn't have clapped once.

She spun around and kind of skipped over to the waiting area. A new barista came over to take my order because the first one was handling the girl's smoothie personally.

"Hi. What can I get you?"

"Aren't you supposed to welcome me to Starbucks?" I said.

"Don't you know where you are?"

"Nicely done."

We exchanged smirks that quickly turned into bright smiles. Then she laughed quietly. It sounded melodic to me. I liked flirting with younger women, but I always kept a paternal edge to my remarks and my body language. I never wanted them to feel uncomfortable or disgusted. I didn't have to think about it. Jesse said it was an innate trait and that I always occurred as sweet, kind, and generous. Never mentally

challenged, I hoped.

"This town needs more...beautiful young women." I stumbled and almost said black women.

"Thank you, and I don't need the competition." She put one slender arm over the top of the cash register. Her hand entered my space. Her fingers were long, nails short. I could see the fleshy part of her palm and the white lines that criss-crossed through it.

"What would you like?"

"A grande wet cappuccino. Please."

She slipped the top cup out of the tower of cups and grabbed a big thick black pencil.

"Can I get a name or initial?"

"F." I felt heat on my neck. "Freight," I said, quickly.

"Freight, cool name."

"Thanks. Spelled like the train." I reached back for my wallet.

"It's on me."

"Oh, thank you." I dropped two dollars into the square plastic tip container and it made her smile. Her teeth were gorgeous and I think I stepped back to avoid being bitten. I passed Pink Girl on my way over to the wait counter. She had a big straw in her mouth and whipped cream all over her chin and on one cheek. She was yelling for someone named Johnny.

I leaned on the kidney-shaped standing counter and watched the beautiful black woman make my drink. She was graceful. Not as machine-like as a lot of the baristas. She made it interesting to watch. She was slender from the waist up, and from the waist down, strong and fit. Bold legs that meant

business. The green apron fitted her perfectly, almost like it was tailor-made.

"Buying a book today or just in for a cap?" She didn't look at me. She stayed focussed on the task. I glanced over to see if she meant it for a friend but I was the only one there. She turned her eyes my way without moving her head, because I hadn't answered yet.

"I'm thinking about getting a book on meditation. Never tried it before."

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

She sounded genuinely surprised.

"Is that weird or something?"

"No, what's weird is I teach a meditation class."

"What's weird about that?"

She giggled and purred, and then took a deep breath in like she had known me forever. "You know what I mean."

"Where do you teach?" My drink was almost ready. Once she poured the hot milk in and handed it to me, the transaction would be finished and I worried it might get awkward.

"Are you going to be here for the next half hour?" She placed the drink on the counter.

"Probably, yes."

"Far end of Chapters, second aisle is the Buddhist section. I have a break in twenty minutes. Meet me there and I'll pick out the best starter book for you."

I picked up my cap, stepped away from the counter, and looked into the expanse of the book store. "Sounds good." I started to walk away.

"Freight." I turned back. "Tanya." She pointed at her name tag.

"See you in a bit," I said, and entered the book store.

I went directly to the Eastern Religion section and grabbed the first book I saw on Buddhism. Then I sat in a wicker chair along the bannister outside the aisle and waited, my book/drink rule slowly going to hell.

Nervous. Why was I so nervous? She's being sweet and helpful. Nothing more. So why the nervousness? I realized the coffee was way too close to the book so I put the cup down on the floor. Tom Petty's song *The Waiting* cycled in my head.

I kept one eye on the coffee shop and finally Tanya entered the bookstore. She had a light walk. Carefree, yet intentional. She caught me watching and gave a little waist high wave. She took the three steps up to my level and smiled on her approach. Naked without her apron. Like seeing a nurse in street clothes. Or better yet, a female police officer.

I stood up.

"What did you grab?" She reached out and took the book from my hands. I didn't know I wasn't holding it anymore until she held it up to me.

"Something you want to tell me?" she said.

I had picked up the Tibetan Book Of The Dead.

"I wasn't really paying attention."

"Come on." Tanya led me back down the Buddhist aisle.

She went right to a book called Buddhism Plain and Simple. A little white-covered book that wasn't too thick.

"This is a great start."

"Do I have to be a Buddhist to meditate?"

"No, not at all. But this book approaches meditation in a non-threatening way. Some books push the rules too much. It's not about getting it right. It's more about starting and creating a daily practise."

"Eastern politics."

"Oh yeah, for sure. Some say you must meditate with your eyes open, others say closed. Certain positions and clothing. Crazy crazy."

I loved the way she said the word twice. Very cute. We migrated back to the chair and Tanya sat in the empty one across from me. I think she led us back, but couldn't be sure.

"So why meditation?"

I opened up to her. I found her thoughtful and her delivery sounded genuine like she really wanted to know. I know young people can be thoughtful, but it felt like a treat to meet one.

"That's really great, Freight. Your family must be really proud of you."

I nodded.

"Is it hard, still?"

"Hard fitting in. It's the best way I can put it. Sometimes I feel like there's two opinions. Mine and then everyone else's on the planet." Tanya laughed a lot louder than she wanted to and covered her mouth. But she didn't look around. She stayed on me.

"I kind of know that feeling sometimes."

"How so?"

She took a moment before presenting her answer. It looked like reverie to me and Tanya could take as long as she wanted.

She breathed in deeply and put her hand on her abdomen.

"I'm 23, but I feel older. The stuff my friends want to do I am not interested in. I don't hang in clubs, I don't feel the need to be in a relationship. And I'm okay being by myself. That freaks them out sometimes. Like there's something about me that's wrong and they need to fix it."

"Wise."

"Wise?"

"You're wise. Wiser than your years. They might catch up to you some day, but it's unlikely. You might consider cultivating new friends."

"Like I did today?"

"Yeah. Like today."

"Why don't you come to one of my meditation classes? Bring your wife, too."

"She wouldn't be interested. Where do you teach?"

"In my apartment downtown."

"Big group?"

"Sometimes there's five of us, sometimes two, and other times I meditate by myself. Mostly students."

"I don't know. I'll give it some thought."

"You think you're too old to sit around with a bunch of young people?"

She really was tuned in. "Maybe a little."

"You won't be. It's a nice group and they'd be glad to have you, plus it's free."

"Well if you had said free in the first place we could have avoided all the small talk."

"Hey." She slapped my knee. "I liked the small talk."

I gave her my number and she promised to text me her contacts later in the day along with the time and date of the next meditation class.

I pulled out of Chapters, completely forgetting about the fried chicken and the fact that Tanya still held the book in her hand when I left.

It was like I knew her really well but not on the surface. I didn't find out if she went to Trent or what her parents did. Nothing of that sort. I did most of the talking and learned about her through the way she listened. It was a strange intimacy. I always wondered what hitting it off with someone would feel like. She might have been hitting on me, too, which was okay. Shit, it was more than okay. If you're pushing into fifty, or already there, and a much younger woman hits on you, it's incredible. Personally, I think it can instantly add a decade to a man's life, unless he does something with it. Then he can subtract five from the ten. But it is a compliment because they like your age. Tanya wasn't staring into my eyes and wondering what they looked like thirty years ago. She liked them now. Liked what they've seen and what they've done. I believed if a man my age denied this kind of compliment, or shrugged it away, he couldn't be trusted to live much longer. And whatever time he did have left wouldn't be worth putting on the side of a napkin, never mind a journal. What's to write about? He's lost his will to live.

But Tanya's compliment was playing havoc with me because she was black and I always wanted to make love to a black woman. Who wouldn't? I wouldn't.

Twenty Two

I made a relationship saving stop at the butcher shop on the way home and when I pulled into the driveway Jesse was troweling through a little flowerbed along the side of the cottage. Training ground. This one was hers and John left it alone. Walter laid by her feet and she ever so gently tapped his front paw with the trowel to get him to move it out of her path of dirt. I, ever so gently, put the dripping marrow bone between his paws and he picked it up by a strand of fat and trotted off in the direction of the clump of trees to the right of the driveway.

"Don't bury it, Wally, eat it up," I said. "You'd think he'd want it fresh instead of a week later when it's rotten."

She stabbed at the dirt like my heart was just below the surface.

"I can't take back what I did."

"No kidding."

"But, I can start making a bigger effort to pull it together."

She didn't respond but I figured in her mind she thought she couldn't because it might be a trap. So sad.

"I joined a meditation class today." She nodded, which was a start. Not an opening, but close.

"I made lunch. Yours is on the table."

That was an opening. And I thought it meant *we will talk again, but for now say thank you and leave me to cool down.*

"Thank you."

My thinking earlier in the day had been one big fucking misread because Jesse served me belligerence for dinner. We were outside on the deck. John was staying scarce, I assumed on purpose, so we were on our own.

I watched her for a while, sitting across from me eating like a hawk pretending to be a wounded bird. I purposely stopped my Peterborough rant in mid sentence and she didn't even notice.

"Am I bugging you, Jess?"

"Don't be ridiculous."

"What's with the flippancy?"

"Flippancy?"

I did not like the way she repeated it back to me. Like I was a big boy with a new big word.

"Yeah. Flippant. Because you have no interest in anything I have to say."

"Say something interesting."

"What did I do?" My first impulse was to hurl my plate over the railing, chicken bones and all. I swallowed that impulse and waited for a gentler one that never came so I just felt smothered.

"Sometimes, not all the time, but sometimes it would be nice if we could raise the bar on our conversations."

All I was doing was telling her how stupid Peterborough was, and about all the shitty shops.

"Well, let's see. I am excited about meditating, and the class."

Jesse nodded and smiled. It was a tired smile. "What had you do that?"

"I can tell you don't really give a shit, Jess, so it's not really about high brow conversations. You're just in a bad mood."

"Fine. I'm in a bad mood. So leave me alone." She pushed her chair back aggressively, turned and went inside.

I sat at the table not really caring what her problem was when John came over.

"Ready?"

It was then that I remembered my AA meeting promise and now I was as irritable as Jesse. It was a lousy way to end a beautiful day. The same day a beautiful young black woman hit on me.

It wasn't until we hit the bottom of Ski Hill Road, turned right into the town of Bethany, that I pulled out of my sulk and finally said something.

I pointed to a restaurant on our right.

"I had a clubhouse there once. Best club I ever had. I thought it was going to be mediocre." I turned to John. "I was the only one in there. Me and the cook. Guess what the cook's name was."

"I don't know," John said.

"Mel."

"Honest?"

"Honest. But the cook was a woman so I think full out it was Melanie or something."

"Melba."

"Yes, that was it. Melba. Melba Toast."

The town had a few nice and well kept century farmhouses in the centre of town, but as soon as we hit the outskirts the houses became bungalows with cream-coloured or white aluminum siding dented everywhere. Maybe they had dent parties. There were lopsided car ports attached to the siding, sheltering broken cars or car parts. One man's dry garbage is another man's dry treasure. Every second yard seemed to have a blue tarp tied down over trailers, motor bikes or snowmobiles. A kids Big Wheel sticking out the side. Family jewels in these parts. The tarps looked like shiny moguls. Uncut grass or unfinished porches completed the picture.

"How do people live like that?" I immediately regretted asking because the reservation had the same dressing.

"You get used to working with what you have and what you don't have. For a while. Then you give up wanting what you don't have and lose interest in what you do have."

"You've seen it before?"

"Yes. My father called it Ozhaashaa."

"Meaning?"

"Slippery."

"Like slippery slope?"

John nodded. "And he knew how to slip."

We rolled further out and into fields. Some were fallow, and others had crops, and the farmhouses were tired looking, but nice.

We turned up Island Road on the outskirts of Port Perry, and

a few minutes later we came up alongside the Great Blue Heron Casino. I say *came up alongside* because it was big. It wasn't close to the road but in some way it still felt like it was on top of us. This was my first time seeing the building, but there was a *deja vu* that I could not account for. Like the building was waving at me and not for the first time. Coaxing me like an escort.

"I thought it would be an eyesore. It's really nice. Clean," I said. And then I wasn't so sure I meant it.

John nodded.

"Ever been inside?"

"I was at the opening celebration but not since. I have no interest," he said.

"Well I have a big interest so I will never go in. Jesse and I went on a cruise, our one and only, through the Eastern Caribbean. I snuck out in the night, every night after boat sex, after Jesse fell asleep."

"Into the casino?"

I nodded. "To play Black Jack and one-armed bandits. It was powerful so I vowed to never go into one again."

"What do you mean by powerful?"

I had to think about it. I knew the feeling like I knew the back of my hand, but I couldn't remember ever being asked John's question.

"You don't have to tell me."

"I want to. I'm thinking. On the second-last night of the cruise I ran out of money. I felt really guilty. Each night I spent a little bit more than the night before. But this night I blew everything I had left. I wanted to make it up to Jesse

so I snuck back into our room and took all the travellers' cheques from her purse and went back to try my luck one more time. All week she had her eye on a man's wallet in one of the boat shops. She was waiting until the last day because they have these big sales to tempt you before the end of the cruise. Anyway, she didn't get to surprise me."

"Lost all of it?"

"Lost. That's a good word for it. Yes I *lost* all of it."

"You stole from your wife after you made love to her. That is powerful."

I nodded like I knew and feigned a sadness for yesterdays. It made it easier to square off on the shame.

Booze, sugar, gambling, sex, drugs, masturbation, porn, salt. The list seemed endless. I remembered the time I suffered with a head cold for seven days, but continued to abuse the hot medicated drink aid for months after.

We turned into the gravel parking lot of a small but tidy community building. It looked like a big cabin and I immediately liked it for the outward warmth and homeyness. There were six, maybe seven members standing out front. One woman was smoking but I couldn't see if anyone else was.

"Do we have time for me to light up?"

"Yes." John parked and turned the truck off.

"You made sure we would, didn't you?"

"Yes." John opened the driver's door.

"Thanks," I said, clamping a finger and thumb on opposite sides of the pack in my top pocket.

John closed the driver's door and nodded a smile through the

glass.

I stepped down and my legs wouldn't hold me. They were tingly and weak and my shoes felt tight. I latched one hand on the roof of the cab and held the door with the other. It swung out and I almost collapsed. I drew in a couple of big breaths with bigger exhales, but it made me dizzy. John came around.

"Okay?"

"I'm really nervous."

"Do you want to go home?"

"What if I said yes?"

"Then we would get back in the truck and go home."

"You could have asked me in Bethany."

Half a cigarette later we joined the members outside the entrance. I had forgotten it was a native group until we were close enough to see faces. It relaxed me quite a bit.

People introduced themselves as soon as we were within hand shaking distance and I manned up and took the lead, introducing John and making sure everyone knew he was there as support. I had marble mouth but managed to get through it without seeming too needy and new. Or at least I hoped it was one of those things where a year from now we'd all laugh about how desperate and clumsy I was on my first day.

There were six long, wide, untreated pine boards that made up the steps leading up to the entrance, ending at two narrow, tall, thick, untreated pine doors with glass insets big enough to see someone from the waist up on either side. A man made a brief appearance in the window before pushing the door open. He came down the steps. People made a clearing for him. It was subtle but I noticed. He was someone.

He went straight to John and they hugged. It was a long hug full of trust, respect, and much love. Then the man stepped back and looked John up and down. This man was in his late sixties maybe seventy, I figured.

"Why don't I see more of you, John Eagle?" John went boyish and stumbled on his words. The older man waved it away and turned to me.

"Freight." To this day I have trouble articulating the way my name sounded on his lips when it hit my ear.

When I was twelve, my dad and I were going out to the Red Barn for burgers. My mom was sick in bed with a viral infection. I remember my dad being as excited as I was about burgers because he had a skip in his step and kept ruffling the hair at the back of my head. After burgers, fries, and shakes, he handed me the keys and told me to go warm the car up while he saw a man about a dog, which was what he always said when he needed to take a leak – if my mom wasn't within earshot. I told him it wasn't cold out and he tried to put the keys back in his pocket but I dove for them before he could. I remember how loudly he laughed in the Red Barn. *Don't touch anything. Turn the key and let go when it fires up. Then shove over to your side.* I had heard the car start hundreds of times, just like I have heard my name said. But starting the car myself was different and that's the recall that came up when John's friend said my name. But hearing him say my name was better, because he was here with me and not in the washroom.

His eyes were beautiful. Piercing blue and mischievous. Yet at the same time, trusting and honest. Wise. I didn't think

lying to this man came easily.

"Hi." I put out my hand.

"Freight, this is Chief Gary Whetung of Scugog Island First Nation.

"Hi Sir, Chief."

"Former Chief. John refuses to acknowledge the new one."

Chief Whetung turned my palm down and put his other hand on the back part of mine. He patted it a couple of times and looked through me, while I hid my lit smoke behind my back.

"Next time you come out, you'll read one of the slogans. Okay?"

"Okay." Then he turned to John. "Let's go in. Freight, when you are finished your cigarette we will be in the second row from the front."

The Chief didn't look small walking up the steps with John. He was not six feet. I guessed five nine - but he didn't look small.

I opened up to a couple of other smokers. Most of the others had followed the Chief in and left three of us behind.

I confessed my absence. I hadn't been to a meeting in months, but they welcomed me back with no judgement. None that I could detect, anyway.

Inside the vestibule, on the wall to the left of the door, hung a framed photo of Chief Whetung and his Council members posing with the Queen of England. He was a younger Chief Whetung, and he stood proudly to the right of Her Majesty.

He looked destined to achieve to me, even back then. I wondered how much sobriety the Chief had under his belt.

Probably a gazillion years.

The chatter, coughing, and snippets of laughter pulled my attention back to why I was here in the first place, because for a few seconds I had forgotten. I looked around the vestibule and it was only me. Everyone was in the meeting room. I would be the last person to enter, and I hated that. I didn't need that kind of attention. Members would assume I came in last because I almost bailed, but resolved it by asking my higher power to turn me around and lead me to salvation. They'll pat me on the back later, too, after the meeting's over. *You can do this, Freight. One day at a time, brother. Give me a call, Freight. Just for today, pal.* But silently, as I walked away, *but for the grace of God there go I* would be their primary thought. And they would think it one more time – but later – when they were kissing their partners or putting their children to bed. Being a *but for the grace of God there go I* is the saddest way to be of service.

The double doors to the meeting room were wide open. Big high timber doors. A member shut the first door and I rushed in before he closed the second one. I walked the gauntlet to the second row, but couldn't find John's head. My peripheral picked up everyone in the aisle chairs, on both sides, glancing up at me as I passed. But where was John's head?

My shoulders grew tight, pulling me into a slouch. I wanted to be small and unnoticeable. Looking along the second aisle, to the left and to the right. Where the hell was he? "Freight." A hand touched my wrist gently. Chief Whetung stared up at me, but it was John who said my name. They saved

an empty chair between them and I shuffled quickly past the Chief and dropped into the seat. It felt good to be sitting. Like putting on the same hat that everyone else already had on.

"Where were you?" I asked John.

"Right here. I said your name three times." I turned to the Chief, hoping he hadn't heard the exchange and his eyes never left the front of the room when he tapped me soothingly on the knee, but he might have meant shut up now.

The front of the room made sense to me. On the left behind the desk sat a plump native woman, possibly my age. She was the chairperson for today's meeting. In the middle a podium, and to the right of that an easel with the slogans printed out in bold permanent black marker. All of this on two-foot high risers pushed together to make a rectangle stage. Along the ledge of the front riser were *Big Books*, *Twelve and Twelves* and a stack of the *20 questions* flyer with a big yellow band pinching them in the middle. I took the twenty questions test my first day in rehab. It happened in a tiny room not much bigger than a closet. In the middle of the room perched a tiny wobbly desk. Behind the tiny wobbly desk sat an obese perspiring counsellor. On the other side of the desk sat a broken me. I couldn't look the counsellor in the eye. He didn't make me feel hopeful or that he was a lifeline. Quite the opposite. So I looked past him to a cheaply framed photo of Doctor Bob hanging on the wall. I answered 19 questions 'yes' and it was the highest test mark I ever scored. Regretfully, the almost perfect score meant I was a true blue alcoholic. If you answered two right, chances were good you

had a problem. And I had aced it.

The chairperson tapped the mallet on a circle of wood. Rapid light taps, like trying to get children to pay attention. The first few rows quieted down and she hammered the circle one last time for the stragglers. It made a cracking sound and the room fell silent, except for a couple of guys snickering. Another man started whispering and I turned to see who it was.

"Why is my husband the only one still talking?" the chairperson said. The whispering stopped and another man piped up. "'Cause he can't get a word in at home."

The room broke up. I even heard a couple of knee slaps. It was an old routine between husband and wife that never got old and I found myself smiling and trying to suppress an out-and-out laugh. The room fell silent for a few seconds, just long enough for us to compose ourselves.

"I never said that, love of my life," her husband yelled out. We all laughed out loud on that one. The mock-scared delivery really brought it to a head for me. In fact, I giggled to the point of tears. Some things that aren't really funny are hysterical in a room full of people.

She held the mallet up and turned the handle so we could all see the fat, round, wooden head, then looked out to where her husband sat. "I think I will bring this home tonight."

Everyone wooed and cheered. She looked at Chief Whetung.

"Your people have disgusting thoughts, Chief."

Chief Whetung grinned and nodded. "And to think, they're better now." The Chief got laughs and applause on that one.

Apparently John wasn't the only one that refused to let the

former Chief's title slide.

She began by welcoming everyone to the meeting and reading the opening statement that I never listened to, then moved on to celebration announcements.

Jim S celebrating five years October 12th at the Allan Club.

Sarah R's ten-year celebration next week at the Big Book Group in Lakefield. Billy P celebrating one year this time next week, right here.

Everyone stood and cheered and those that were close enough leaned forward and over shoulders and heads to touch him. Billy sat right behind me and I wanted to duck down because it felt like a tent of humans closing in on me. Billy smiled. He looked worn. The clapping tapered off as everyone began to sit back down. The chairperson called someone up to the podium to read the 12 Steps of AA and then someone else came up to the podium to do the Twelve Traditions. Then Chief Whetung was called upon to do the slogans.

He stood behind the podium and you could have heard a pin drop. In fact, I heard something hit the floor and roll to a stop. It sounded like a dime.

The slogans were on the Chief's left and back a little. He stared thoughtfully at the first one which said –

KEEP IT SIMPLE.

He turned back out to the audience and placed prayer hands over his mouth. Then he tilted his head forward, pushing the bottom of his nose into his fingertips. He dropped both hands onto the surface of the podium and spoke.

"Very complicated slogan."

Everyone laughed. I could tell the Chief was a regular hit at the meeting.

Then he continued. "I believed drinking, and passing out, and sometimes eating, was a simple life, but I was wrong. It was very complicated. Complicated for others. Especially those that loved me. Those that depended on me. Those I promised." His cadence mesmerized me. I hung on every word, and the only interference was the anticipation of the next word.

"Today my life is still complicated. It is not so simple. Of course I have moments. Fleeting moments of ease that I sometimes over-think and eventually complicate. But the dirt is gone." He held his hands up. "I have that to be grateful for. And you. All of you. Be - there - for - you. That is simple to do."

He turned and looked at the next slogan.

THINK THINK THINK.

Without turning back to the audience. "I am going to skip that one because I cannot think of anything." Followed by laughter and some clapping.

BUT FOR THE GRACE OF GOD THERE GO I.

He turned out to the members and waited before speaking. He looked out at all of us, ending on me.

"How did I get to be here when others are still suffering? Why did I live when better men died? This is a slogan of gratitude, and fear. The fear can keep us remembering where we came from. Who we hurt. Fear of drinking. But what if we are out of our cups and still suffering? Thinking thoughts we thought when we drank every day. What kind of existence is that? Maybe one worse than drinking. I'm not sure." The Chief

was a great speaker. He was not sermonizing. I knew because dogma always had me looking for the nearest exit. Instead, his authenticity landed like a series of gentle punches snapping my head back.

"Delinquent thoughts. Thoughts of reckless love, and hatred. Victim thoughts. When I drank I could go and go until I passed out and the thoughts went, too. But what do I do now? I'm not drinking or using but these thoughts they can still wound me. When we have them we think loved ones don't know because we keep these thoughts in our head." He tapped his skull. "But they do know. And if they don't, they know something. They know they're suffering still. And that the promises AA made were false. They waited for you to shine through, but they were lied to.

"Your poison is killing off your loved ones. Want to know what to do? Talk to one of us. Talk to someone here. Share those thoughts. They had them, too. Or talk to someone that still has those thoughts and you will realize how stupid you sound. And take that sick person with you to someone who has something you both want. And if that sick person doesn't want to go with you, leave them behind before they sink you. And remember, *but for the grace of God.*"

The Chief stepped from the podium and took his seat beside me. "Thank you," I said, so quietly I was sure that he didn't hear me. "Thank you, Freight," he replied.

The speaker was next and should have bowed out, had a slip or something. Anything to avoid the act the Chief left behind, because it was too tough to follow. I drifted in and out of

his story. What it was like, what happened, and what it's like today. Boring. They say if you stick around long enough someone will tell your story, but the interim could be painful. They didn't say that last part, but it was true. I couldn't find any commonality with this guy and his post nasal drip was giving him wet knuckle and giving me throat bile. I was dying for a cigarette.

The chip portion of the meeting was brief. Two people got up for 24-hour sobriety chips and the supportive applause sounded jaded and bored. I figured they would be asked to return their collection of *desire* chips soon in order to save the group some money. One person, a young pregnant woman, went up for a 6-month chip and that brought the room back to life again. The chairperson beamed and rubbed the young woman's swollen belly. I didn't see a man cheering more than anyone else. No one person looking really moved or profoundly grateful, so she must have been a single mom-to-be. Sad, unless the father was a dick, then not so sad, I guessed.

The chairperson was about to close the chip ceremony when Billy P started walking up the centre aisle. The chairperson watched him. She seemed frozen in time. This was high drama and I did not know where it would lead. Billy stepped up onto the riser and said something to her, quietly. So quiet that even the closest few rows could not hear. She grabbed his wrist and turned it palm side up, placing a desire chip in the centre. Then she rubbed their palms together with the chip in between. She looked away from Billy and out to the audience.

"Billy asked for a 24-hour chip because he has a desire to

stop drinking." People clapped, but not everyone. Less than half the room. So few that it made me forlorn. Billy wasn't believed anymore. He could die and no one would get in the way.

We stood, joined hands, and said the serenity prayer together.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

John and the Chief sat on the tailgate of John's truck watching me smoke.

"That guy Billy. He went out a week before his one year. That's sad," I said.

The Chief's eyes followed my cigarette up to my mouth and then down to my side. I flicked the filter with my thumb nail and he watched the ash float to the ground.

"I miss smoking sometimes," he said.

I put my hand behind me.

"Not right now, Freight. Never when I watch someone. Watching someone die is not my idea of romance." John laughed. I dropped the butt and crushed out the heater with the toe of my shoe. Then I leaned on the box panel closest to the Chief and he shifted enough to see my face.

"We all knew the truth about Billy. He needed to catch up to us."

"He'd been drinking for a while?" I asked.

The Chief nodded.

"Why didn't someone call him on it? The group I used to go

to would have been all over him."

"Hard one to call. If we did that he might have run away to die. Keep coming back."

A chill tickle climbed the back of my neck and into the short hairs before it spread and lost intensity somewhere over the top of my scalp. Finally, I understood the power of *Keep Coming Back*. Billy, eventually, heard something that made the drinking too much to bear. A moment of clarity, and I witnessed it. I felt honoured.

"John tells me you are coming up on a year in a few months."

I nodded and lit another cigarette.

"And you don't go to meetings?"

"I did for a while. This is my first in a while." I fired John a quick sharp glance. The Chief paused a lot before he spoke. I thought of Hollywood Indians. They were often portrayed like the Chief. I thought the Chief saw those movies and took on that wise persona – but I knew it wasn't true.

"You don't have to go to AA to live a good life. Anyone that tells you that is living in fear and doesn't have a good life. At least not one that could lead to the great life. It's what I believe."

"I hated my group. My sponsor was a dick."

"Who was your sponsor?"

"Jerry W."

The Chief took a moment to pull forth a memory.

"Always wears hats?"

"Yes. That's him."

"I heard him speak once. Such a dick."

John and I broke up.

John didn't contribute to the conversation. A car cruised slowly out of the parking lot, tooting once on the way by.

"I'm starting a meditation class next week."

"Very good. Stay with it."

"It's funny. I went to buy a book on meditation, and instead, ran into a woman that teaches meditation."

The Chief nodded, without approval. "The meetings work for me. My life is half empty without them and I'm needed. It's nice to be needed."

"I liked this meeting. The people seemed really nice."

"We have some mini Jerrys, but we're doing okay. Come back a few times. See if it's for you. If the program is not for you, know it authentically, and not because some belligerent members left you a belligerent non-member. I'm not sure you have enough sobriety to make that decision yet, anyway. But I could be wrong." He turned to John. "Always a first." John nodded and grinned while he looked down at his own boots that he was swinging slowly back and forth.

"You have to come back next week because you promised to read the slogans."

I looked over the tops of their heads to the wooden building in the background.

"I don't know. What do I have to offer? Like you said, I don't have a lot of time in."

"You are a 'remember when'. That's a big part of the lifeblood." With that the Chief shuffled all the way to the back of the cab. It looked funny to me, the way he lifted his butt off the truck bed with his arms straight and palms flat. Each time moving his raised butt further back until he stopped

and rested on the outer wall of the cab with his right arm resting over the rail.

"Take me home, Johnny."

I jumped in the passenger side. I noticed the Chief grab John's arm and whisper something into his ear, but I didn't ask and John didn't offer.

Twenty Three

I didn't think we would make love when I got home.

I lay there covered in Jesse's perspiration and scent and tried to articulate what took place.

Jesse did all the work and it felt like I was being scolded. Like she was fucking some sense into me. I didn't feel sensible, but I would pretend to be if it meant going down this road again.

I dreamt about our sex the same night, but I wasn't myself in the dream and I remember it being very important that I find out who I was before I woke up, because I knew I was dreaming. Dream Jesse kept riding me and winking, but she couldn't stop winking. It wasn't like she wanted to but it would not have mattered because the winking was out of control and out of her control. It was unattractive and spastic. The corner of her left eye dripped like a tap washer, and the big perfectly round tears felt like pin pricks when they landed on my chest. But worst of all, and I don't know how I knew this, Jesse could not talk anymore, because she no longer had a tongue. It might have been the most unsettling dream I have

ever had and I was grateful to wake out of it.

Twenty Four

In the morning I turned my cell on and noticed that Tanya's contact information had arrived via text, around the time I was busy getting scolded. I sat at the kitchen table drinking my first cup and read the text. Tanya was big on the smiley faces and the winking one. She ended the text with a request to let her know if I couldn't make the class tomorrow night, followed by a sad face with a tear jumping out of the left eye.

Twenty Five

Jess entered the kitchen, stopped, and tenderly kissed the top of my head.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning." She sounded serene. But I detected a little bit of worn out and fed up in the way she said it.

"My first meditation class starts tomorrow."

Jesse opened the fridge. The cream sat on the table in front of me but, recently, she'd started using a gross-tasting coconut creamer similar in style and colour to the real cream carton. It tasted like chalk.

She spoke without turning to look at me.

"You going back to another AA meeting?"

"I'm over here, Jess, unless you're asking your coffee cup."

She put the mug down hard on the counter, and directed her piercing stare at the cupboard door.

"Forget I said that. I'm sorry."

"Can't you have it all? Go to both?"

"I'm going to both. I'm doing the slogans next week." Jesse knew what slogans were. A few years ago she attended Al-Anon meetings and they had their version of the slogans. It was always her favourite part.

"Cool. Can I come?"

"I don't know."

"No problem. Let me know if you change your mind." She went into the great room with her coffee. Something was up and I wanted to care but I didn't have the energy to work it through.

The rest of my day stayed uneventful. John wasn't around. He was finishing the island dock he had started work on a few days earlier. Jesse gardened and read in the morning and followed the same ritual in the afternoon. Then around three she left to meet Mary for a coffee. Caffeine at three was code for let's hold hands and talk about what a dick Freight was. It always made me nervous when Jesse shared with Mary. Mary's judgment was no better than a chipmunk's, and if she miscalculated the level of sharing she might lean in and spill other beans. My beans. The only good thing that could come from that would be me finding out what actually went down between Mary and me.

Twenty Six

Tanya lived above a furrier on Hunter Street. I travelled up a narrow staircase. It was tight and in the midst of a renovation. The drywall dust tickled my nose hairs and I stopped twice on the way up to brush dust from the arm of my shirt.

The landing was nice, and wide in comparison to the stairs. A narrow burgundy-coloured carpet runner worked well with the dark polished hardwood floor. The walls were powder blue, but kind of like that colonial-time blue. It might even be called that. Jesse would know what I meant. It was a nice hall. Homey. All it needed was a couple of tasteful pictures on the wall and I'd feel like a burglar.

I stood outside door number 3. I licked my thumb and index, then shoved one up each nostril to soak up the white drywall dust. It rolled in a deja vu so potent that I leaned up against the wall and closed my eyes until my breathing settled.

I gave the heavy door a forced but casual knock. Tanya opened it, still on the echo, like she lived in a little chair just on the other side. The voice of reason begged me to make an excuse to turn around, but it was too late.

Her white long-sleeve shirt clung to her skin and I could see through the thin fabric. She was braless and it was message-heavy braless. Topless could not have been more braless. I felt dizzy and sucked in a drop of drool that tried to push out the corner of my mouth. Her nipples were milk chocolate. Her breasts sat low and curved up beautifully, and

then I remembered she had a face, and the walls were colonial blue, and Jesse would know what I meant.

"Good to see you." She bit into a smile, took my hand and led me into the room.

"Do you set your room up like this for the meditation?" It looked like a room fit for the Dalai Lama. The small blood red carpet with a chubby smiling Buddha on it, and a Lotus plant on each side. *No mud no Lotus* stretched across the wall in thick brown and yellow block letters, each four inches wide. A futon couch was placed below it, with a neatly draped throw spread out, depicting bald Tibetan monks sitting around a fire with mountains and their white caps in the background.

I pointed to it. "Don't their heads ever get cold?" She tucked her chin into her neck, giggled, and squeezed my hand like it was my penis, before letting go and folding her arms over her breasts.

"This is how my living room is all the time. This is also my bedroom. If you have fifteen seconds I'll give you the tour." I could still feel the heat from her hand on mine.

I followed her ass to a little galley kitchen, hidden away by the wall separating it from the living room. It was sparse and spotless with a toaster and a cup tree at opposite ends of the counter. Then she pointed to the other side of the living room to a closed door and said, "Bathroom. And now we're done." She giggled again, sweetly.

"I'm going to check out that room," I said, and started forward, stepping high over one of the plants to avoid stepping on the rug in between.

"Can I make you a tea?"

"Yes, please."

"What kind?"

"Surprise me," I said, closing the bathroom door.

I sat on the edge of the tub and sighed. No bra and the loose shorty shorts that promised to deliver when she sat down. Did it mean anything? Maybe she wanted to be comfortable meditating. Maybe everyone would show up dressed the same. And where was everyone? Was I old and misreading things? Young women dress differently now and it does not mean anything and certainly has nothing to do with me. If I kept my eyes off her nipples I might get something out of the meditation.

The filthy ring around the tub and the faucet gave me back my resolve. I would get through this and never come back. I made a decision to nurture my marriage. It was a good marriage, and time for it to go to the next level.

The toilet was almost as dirty as the tub. I flushed it for show but made sure to wrap a piece of toilet paper around my finger so I wouldn't have to touch the handle. Then I washed my clean hands in the hairy sink and dried them over my pants.

Tanya was moving around in the kitchen. A kettle began to whistle low and picked up to a scream before I heard it lift from the burner and fill two cups.

I sat on the futon, waiting. The room needed a coffee table and a couple of end tables. Some people live like animals. Cave dwellers.

Tanya took the corner with two glass mugs filled with a brown, steamy, foggy-looking broth. I hoped she wouldn't sit beside me. She handed me a mug and sat on the floor, resting

one arm over the far end of the futon.

She smiled. "So, welcome."

I nodded. "Where is everyone?"

"Sometimes no one shows up. We still have fifteen minutes."

I smelled the tea and looked down at her with my ready-to-spit face.

"It smells like dirt."

She laughed with her big wide piano mouth and slapped her hand off the futon cushion. I might have caught sight of a dead black key way in the back, but maybe not. I wasn't a dentist.

"Did I surprise you?"

"You really did, Tanya." I don't think I'd said her name until now, but I might have.

"It's aged Oolong tea. It's Taiwanese. Let it steep for a few more minutes and the smell will go."

I put the tea down on the floor and rested my hands over my lap.

"You okay?" Tanya asked.

"Kind of. Maybe not."

Marta and Glenn opened the hall door and entered talking. They were disagreeing on some topic but it wasn't a serious debate because their tone was light. They weren't really paying attention to each other, and they were holding hands.

Tanya didn't get up. "Hey sweeties," she said. Her goodwill seemed a little forced to me. Like she was trying to hide disappointment.

"This is my friend, Freight. He's trying out meditation for the first time, hoping it will stick." She smiled at me. I

hated being the new kid. The one that didn't know the ropes. My peripheral vision tried to find an ashtray but I knew it wouldn't find one.

I went to stand and Marta waved me back down. She introduced herself and then Glenn. Glenn was fresh-faced with messy blonde hair. I knew it was a look. The *I just woke up* look – the softer rebel look that stood for depth and freedom. What it really stood for was too many thoughts all at once. He wore glasses from the Elvis Costello collection, sandals, cut-off jeans and a T-shirt that said *Bill's Photo Lounge and Cafe*. He fell into the futon next to me, and Tanya had to whip her arm out of the way to avoid having it sat on.

Marta was an enigma. She wore lesbian girl power like a 3D billboard and made sure her clothes were used and baggy. No man was going to get a glimpse of any curves or any angles. She didn't have any makeup on her face and I really thought she could have used some. But her T-shirt said *Rabbits don't wear lipstick* so running into her all dolled up wasn't going to happen any time soon. She was probably a vegan, too. I was okay with all of this but often wondered why, for these people, it always had to be a badge of honour. They always seemed to get too attached to their commitments, and then less committed people had to hear about it. My fear, but not really a fear, more of a concern, was that meditation classes were a vessel for the fanatically committed do-gooders that were too young and inexperienced to realize that life can punch and crush and lie, and in the end, laugh at everything you thought you held so dear. Ask any mother with three little kids why she isn't a vegan anymore. My first rule: Being significant

doesn't pay.

"I need a tea. Whattya got?" Marta said.

"Give her that cup of dirt you gave me to drink," I said. Marta's smile transformed her face. It gave new meaning to the term *hidden beauty*. I couldn't help but smile back. Her wide smile infected me, and I was in without trying. Glenn laughed but took the cue off Marta.

"Come see." Tanya beckoned Marta and shot me a playful glance before they left the room.

Glenn did some weird precursor thing with the fingers of both hands before he spoke. I hoped it was a one-off, or else I might have to break Glenn's knuckles.

"You retired?" Glenn asked me. I really hated that question, but ever since moving up this way, I got it a lot.

"Do I look that old, Glenn?" The boy actually, thoughtfully, looked me over.

"No. Not really."

I laughed. "Thanks. I'm kind of retired. My wife inherited a lot of money. I might go back to work, but I don't have to. What about you?"

"I'm taking a gap year from Trent. Did two years. But I'm not sure what I want to be."

"Be a good person and do something you love."

Glenn nodded. "How long did it take you to learn that?"

"First time I've said it. Never tried it. But I think it would have gone well." Glenn nodded again because he didn't know what else to do.

"How long have you and Marta been going out?"

"Marta's gay. We're like brother and sister." Glenn put his

finger over his lips and motioned with his head to the wall for me to listen.

I heard clothing with weight bumping off the counter. I heard a button pop, land on the floor and roll. Moving footsteps. Short steps like a tight dance or two people with no room to move.

Quick half-tongued whispers with seconds of silence, followed by a high whispered moan. It sounded teased, like it playfully regretted the end of something. Then, finally, a series of quick wet sounds. Little pucker noises that lost intensity each time. I didn't think their lips were touching on the last one.

"Told you. Gay," Glenn whispered.

"Tanya's gay, too?" I tried to sound uncommitted either way.

"No." Glenn said it like it was the stupidest question he'd ever answered.

Marta returned to the living room/bedroom. Her lips were red and moist and Tanya's saliva still glowed on her chin.

The kettle began to rise in whistle again. I focussed on the sound, hoping my rock would go down.

I'd stepped into a sub-culture that plays by it's own rules. And it made me nervous. I didn't trust myself around such a free and disorderly environment. I fantasized about it all the time, but being on the cusp of it was a whole different world. Surreal was rolling in, and if I passed Go and joined in it would become real. Then I would be fucked royally. I wished the last thought were enough to make me get up and leave. But it wasn't. I needed to play it out further.

It could have been ten minutes or fifty minutes, I couldn't tell. I fought to stay awake, because Tanya's voice was too soothing. Too soothing for a young person. Hypnotic. I wanted to lie beside her all night and fall asleep to her voice and wake up to it, too.

"Remember. Keep bringing your attention back to your breathing. It's okay for your mind to wander. Let it, or say 'thinking, thinking', and come back to the breath."

I inhaled deeply, held it, then exhaled.

"If you feel sleepy, adjust your posture. Imagine a string from the top of your head to the ceiling and it is keeping your head and neck straight. Not tight, more like aligned."

She must have had her eyes open and could see my sleepiness. I wanted to peek.

I didn't hear the singing bowl at the same time as everyone else and when I opened my eyes they were watching me. I was embarrassed. Embarrassed because the meditation kind of worked and they knew it before I did.

"You might be a natural," Marta said. I did not know how to respond.

"Really nice, Freight," Tanya said.

I swallowed a couple of times. The inside of my mouth felt drenched.

"At first I thought I might fall asleep. But I was also afraid of falling forward and looking stupid," I said.

"Glenn did that once," Marta said.

"I fell back though, not forward." Glenn rubbed the back of his head.

"Then what?" Tanya asked me.

"I'm not sure. It was like a blank. Like a blank slate. No past thoughts, no future thoughts. Nothing was happening."

"How did you feel about it while it was happening?"

"The nothing?"

Tanya nodded.

I looked down at the rug then back up at Tanya.

"I didn't feel one way or the other."

Tanya approved. Her lips turned down just slightly and I thought she might cry.

"Unattached," Marta said. Tanya nodded but stayed locked on me.

"It didn't last long."

"Doesn't matter." Tanya got up. "I have to open the café tomorrow so we need to call this.

"It's not a café, it's a corporation." Marta grabbed her bag pushed into the corner. Glenn stood, undid his belt loop and then tightened it on the next hole.

Tanya was standing where she'd been sitting, her arms folded, looking at Glenn and Marta. She was clearly distracted. I didn't know what was going on.

"Thanks, everyone. Really great." She followed us to the door.

Marta turned back at the door and kissed Tanya's cheek. Tanya closed her eyes and took the kiss. Glenn waved. She finally looked at me.

"Thanks for this, Tanya." But all she did was smile and put her hand out. I shook it gently.

"You really are a natural." She gently closed the door, leaving me dumbfounded in the hallway.

Marta and Glenn were outside on the sidewalk when I came down. She caught me off guard when she pulled out a package of cigarettes. They were reservation smokes. She must be on a budget because reserve smokes were never a choice, as far as I could see. They tasted like horse shit and needed to be constantly relit.

I pulled out my pack. "Want a good one?"

"Yes. Please, please, please."

I handed her one from the pack and did the lighting for both of us.

"Where do you guys live?"

Glenn pointed. "North."

"Do you need a ride?"

Glenn turned to Marta.

"Yeah, that would be cool," she said.

We strolled east along Hunter. I parked on Water, north off Hunter and on the east side. It wasn't a long walk, so I kept us strolling because I never smoked in the car.

"Was everything all right when we left?" I asked.

I caught Marta trying to make eye contact with Glenn, but he was oblivious. It was dark, and the street lights lit her up in a way that made her attempt seem more important. Like it was a film noir moment.

"Tanya ended a relationship a couple of weeks ago and she's still messed up about it. Not totally messed up, but it comes and goes. You know what I mean?"

"I thought only the dumpee suffered." I took a long drag. "And then the dumper lost weight, suddenly had great hair, and

looked like a super model."

"I don't get it," Glenn said. I forgot these were kids. Non-sufferers.

"He means that whoever does the dumping starts looking better than they ever did to the person that got dumped."

"I still don't get it."

Marta grabbed Glenn's arm and pulled him in close.

"Glenn's going to breeze through life because he's so stupid." Glenn thought that was really funny. I thought it was the gospel.

We arrived at the car and Glenn, out of the blue, wanted a pulled pork burrito. We didn't, so he thanked me for the almost ride and strolled down Water Street without a brain to stand on. Marta seemed a tiny bit disappointed. Like he let her down, and that's what he does sometimes. I couldn't be sure of why he let her down, but my best guess was pulled pork verses kale wrap.

Marta hand-slapped me with her eyes when I attempted to open the passenger door for her. It made me feel strange. Not being stopped, but the fact that I gestured in the first place. I hoped she didn't think I was a sexual predator or anything.

I turned the ignition key and the instrument panel chimed and lit up the dash. She pushed back into the leather bucket seat and pretended we were boyfriend and girlfriend.

"Are you rich or something?"

"Yes, or something."

The ride to Marta's was less than ten minutes. She lived in a low rent subdivision, and I made enough turns to know I would need the GPS to find my way back out to the main road. I

pulled up in front of a dilapidated bungalow. The street light was out and the bare bulb on the porch didn't cast enough glow to read under, from what I could see. If the place looked rundown in the dark I couldn't imagine what the daylight revealed.

"Do you live with your parents?"

"My parents wouldn't be caught dead on this street. I live with a couple other students."

The garage door was open at the bottom and a feral tabby poked its head out.

"Is the class the same time next week?"

"The class? You mean the meditation?"

"Yes."

Marta opened the door and stepped out of the car onto the curb. She grabbed her bag from the floor and looked me over. Her expression turned serious when she stopped at my face.

"You married or single?"

"Married."

"Better to not come back. Keep meditating though. It'll change stuff." With that, she shut the door, ran across the lawn and up the porch steps, disappearing behind the unlocked door. She didn't even look back when she closed it.

I drove home, through the night, thinking. Thinking, thinking.

Maybe Marta felt threatened by me, but she didn't act threatened. She acted like she could kiss Tanya whenever she wanted and if that stopped, she wouldn't care. It would mean it stopped, and nothing more.

Tanya wanted me, that I was sure of. So why the cold fish

routine at the end? And what did being married have to do with it? Did I come across as weak? I would never cheat on Jess. Unless Marta meant that Tanya had a thing for married men. That must have been it. I thought, I should have asked Marta if the man Tanya broke up with was married and how old he was. Shit. I wished I'd asked.

Young people were so aloof and protective over their silly thoughts. Or maybe they were dumb.

My head tingled. I didn't know if it was the aftermath of meditating or the thrill of being desired by a woman thirty years younger than me. I wondered how tight she would be and if I could last long enough to please. Jesse said sometimes I was a boy in bed, other times a man, and that she chose which one to invite. I knew when I was the boy because she'd be ordering me to hang on — *not yet*, and laughing. Power.

I turned the radio on and put the windows down. My tip felt moist against my boxers so I accelerated and the Lexus shot into the darkness along Highway 28.

Twenty Seven

Jesse scared the hell out of me. I finished off the bottom of a bag of chips and three glasses of water before leaving the kitchen, and I was almost to the stairs when her voice jumped out of the dark.

"Freight?"

"Jesus Christ." My hand went to my chest.

I could see the trace of her outline sitting in the high

back, legs stretched out, her bare heels on the edge of the coffee table, and part of her right hand hanging over the armrest. She pulled the chain down swiftly, and she must have been pinching the end of it for quite some time because the reach around would have been too lucky a grab in the darkness, and I would have heard the chain swing with the misses. The lamp flashed on, and for a second I thought her neck might be broken because of the way her head wedged into the corner of the backrest at such a severe angle. She looked like she was waiting. Watching. She also looked dangerous.

"Why are you sitting there in your underwear?"

"The air conditioner stopped working."

The room did feel a little close but I hadn't put two and two together yet.

"I'll get the big fan out of the basement. Did you tell John?"

She nodded this nonchalant nod, like it was old news, but the nod landed far closer to dismissive than it did cool and collected. I hoped I would get to go to bed soon. Like in the next three seconds.

"You know he could drop by and see you dressed like this."

"How was your meditation class?"

She had sculpted shoulders under the soft white light.

"Good. The teacher said I was a natural. And a couple of students." I nodded like an idiot.

"Are you going to keep it up?"

"I think so, yeah. I might try it here."

"And not go?"

"Something like that."

"Figures."

"It is not like an AA meeting, Jesse."

"I called you five times. I texted you five times."

"I left my cell in the car." I slapped my pockets. "It's still there."

"Walter got in a fight with a racoon. He needed twelve stitches to his head. He came close to losing his eye."

I moved in and sat on the coffee table next to her feet.

"Oh man, Jess."

"He dragged me into the woods and wouldn't come out. I wanted to take him to the vet but he wouldn't come out of the woods. He wouldn't get up. And every time I tried to get him up he tried to get away from me."

"I'm sorry, baby."

"John didn't answer his cell and I had to practically beg the marina to take a boat over to the island and get him."

"Assholes." The owners of the marina were new. They could be stuffy and distant with the cottage owners because their bread was buttered by city people renting marina cabins.

"Walter finally came out of the woods for John and we took him to the vet."

"Where is he?" I looked around the floor by Jesse.

"He's under the kitchen table. He's drowsy."

"I'm sorry I missed the calls."

"The racoon ran up the weeping willow and then fell down and bled to death. He kept dragging himself in a circle until he couldn't."

"Oh baby. I'm so sorry."

"I got Walter's blood on my shirt and my shorts when we were

putting him in the back of the truck." She looked down at her stomach like she still had the shirt on.

We looked away from each other for what felt like forever. We didn't speak. We were emotionally clogged. Something in her demeanour was tapping at me. Sending me signals that I wanted to desperately ignore, hoping they would fade before I bought in. But this was a game and I had to play good cards, or else tolerate silence, feigned disinterest, and closed doors.

"Please don't touch me."

I let go of the soft grip I had on her ankle.

"Not right now. Okay?"

"Sure."

"I want to go to Toronto for three or four days."

"Great idea."

"Not with you. I'm going to take Mary."

"Girls on the loose. Take in some shows and stuff?"

She nodded. But we both knew I didn't really care.

"When I come back, I want you to be different."

"Here we go," I said under my breath, but loud enough to be heard.

"I know you think you're great the way you are, but that's the problem."

"Come on, Jess, cut me some slack."

"No. No, I'm not doing that anymore. You're a married guy that acts like a single guy."

"I don't cheat on you."

"It is ridiculous comments like that one that validate my point. I need you to grow up. Act like a man. Like a husband and a partner."

"What the hell. What brought this on? Lately you've been acting like some dark bitch that—"

Jesse flew forward, slapping the side of my face hard, once. She clipped the top of my ear with her nail and the ear began to bleed. My fist cocked instinctually, but the arm stayed at my side. Jesse saw it.

"Oh, are you going to punch me in the face? Do it."

"Who's acting single and ridiculous now?"

I stood up and scanned her in disgust. She didn't look away and provided the same look back. I casually walked over to the stairs and climbed up to the landing. I opened the second spare bedroom door, went in, and closed it ever so gently.

"He did see me dressed like this!"

Twenty Eight

In the morning, my pillow was bloody because I made sure of it. I sat on the edge of the bed, yawned and rubbed my index finger over the cut. There wasn't a lot of blood, but it was enough. The quiet *fuck yous* are the best and also the most insidious. But you needed to be committed. I took one more look at the red streaks on the pillowcase and decided I was. I was committed.

I wanted to go downstairs but I did not want to see her. I hated her. Irritating, immature, and ugly would be my latest description of her. And her little dog, too.

John and I hadn't hung together in forever. No fishing, no ATV rides, not even a walk. I looked out the spare bedroom

window and the Lexus wasn't there. It cheered me up considerably. I changed out of the clothes I'd slept in and slipped into my housecoat. I came downstairs and strolled peacefully into the kitchen, until I remembered my cigarettes and cell phone were sitting on the middle console of the car. The variety store at the marina didn't have Benson and Hedges. They had Players and Canadian Blend. The morning throat hit was the most important one of the day and those brands did not deliver.

I turned to leave and caught the package colours in the corner of my eye, along with my cell phone. The phone was weighing down a note. I put a cigarette between my lips and held it with my teeth, and ripped the note from under the phone. I wanted to see if I could do it without making the phone move.

My Uncle Joe tried to do this for my eighth birthday, but he was working with a full table setting and not a cell. I say for my birthday because he was always broke and the trick was his birthday present. Regretfully, for my mom, her brother was also always drunk. He drank so much that my dad was barred from drinking with him, and my old man hardly drank. Uncle Joe was a pig drinker and could hit tipsy like flipping a switch.

Anyway, my mom walked into the kitchen and yelled *Joe don't, those are paper plates!* But she was too late and he was too tipsy. It was an amazing trick only because it backfired. Mountain Dew, mustard, ketchup, and hot dogs and buns tumbled over the edges of the table. My only regret was we hadn't brought out the cake yet. That would have been gold. I think what upset my mom the most was the dress code she'd pushed on

the other mothers. All of us little kids were wearing our Sunday best, now covered in all of the above. We started wrestling and licking each other's shirts, and my mom turned feral. She even had a froth going in the corners of her mouth. My dad had to remove her from the kitchen because of her hysterics, and because she called my Uncle Joe a stupid fucky drunk in front of us. She never had much facility around profanity.

It only took a day for *fucky drunk* to become the most popular expression on my street, and it became so popular that, by midweek, kids I hardly knew were saying it to each other at recess.

The cell moved a little and I flipped the note over.

I should not have done that. It won't happen again and I am sorry. She didn't sign her name. The note could have been from anybody, but she was the one that hit me.

"Damn right it won't happen again." Not signing the note was code for *I should not have lowered myself to your level*. I put the note up close to my mouth and told it to eat shit and fuck off. Then I crumpled it and tossed it in the sink for her to see later.

Twenty Nine

I came back down, showered and shaved. The coffee smelled terrific, and then I remembered Walter.

"Walter. Hey boy." I looked around the kitchen and in the

great room, but there wasn't any sign of him, so I tried the deck.

"Wally?"

"He's over here."

John stood on the porch of the guest house. Walter was stretched out, splay-legged on the porch, flush with the outer wall. He looked flattened and kind of glued to the boards.

"How is he?"

"He'll be fine. Needs to rest."

"Want to go fishing today?"

John nodded.

"Coffee?"

John started over. Walter began to pull himself up.

"Stay," John said. Walter slid back down.

"I'm sorry I wasn't around yesterday for all the commotion."

John took the last step up to the deck and leaned into the corner of the railing. "It was not your fault. You were out trying to better yourself."

"Thanks, man. I'm surprised Walter got injured. He's taken down a few coons without incident."

"Jesse panicked and it distracted Walter. Just for a moment, but it was an in for the raccoon."

"She told you that?"

"No. She said she was screaming at the dog to stop. She had him on the leash and didn't think to let go. You have a cut on your ear," he said, pointing.

"Yeah. She was off leash."

John nodded but he didn't laugh. I thought it was a pretty good joke.

"When I came home last night she was livid. But in a quiet way. You know? The worst kind of livid." I pointed to my ear to hammer home the point.

"I'm sorry that happened."

"Do you think I'm messing up? I think I'm doing pretty good. Don't answer that yet. Let me get us coffee."

I put our mugs down on the deck table and took a seat across from him.

"I couldn't find any white death so I used maple syrup."

"That's fine."

"Were you embarrassed when you saw Jesse in her underwear?"

"When did I see her in her underwear?"

"She sat in there for a long time last night. I think she was worried you saw her."

"No, I didn't."

I nodded. "What was wrong with the air conditioner?"

"It flipped off because the filter was filthy. Fire the people that service it. They're not reliable. I'll take care of it from now on."

"She's not herself lately, you know?"

"Are you?"

"Yeah. I feel good. Don't you think I'm doing good?"

"I think you should be upset that your wife hit you and I don't see that."

"What am I going to do, hit her back?"

"That's not what I mean."

"I'm lost."

"Has she hit you in the past?"

"No, never."

"If I hit you right now, how would you feel?"

"I guess I would wonder why you did it."

I understood, but I didn't like understanding. "I'll talk to her." It annoyed me that I had to care about it, because I didn't. Some things were better left to blow over.

"Sounds like you don't think I'm doing well."

"The Chief told me that the end of every day is lonely. And all we have is ourselves and our higher power. And only one can shut out the other."

"Makes sense."

"How did last night go?"

"I think I might be a natural." As an afterthought, "In fact I think it's keeping me at an even keel already."

I didn't hear the Lexus pull in, but I heard the driver's door close. Walter dragged himself to his feet and moved slowly, disappearing around the side of the cottage to greet her.

She came around the front telling Walter how big and brave he was and to tell her if the other dogs made fun of his haircut.

She trudged up the stairs carrying two green grocery bags and her purse, with the strap beginning to slide from her shoulder. I rushed over to take them from her and hoped I didn't look doghouse when I did it. I was a step up looking down as I gently unwrapped her fingers from the grocery straps. She followed me into the kitchen and when I put the bags on the floor and turned around, she was in tight. Her fingertips feather-touched my ear.

"Does it hurt?"

"Little."

She caressed my face with the back of her knuckles and then dropped her hand, winded.

"I take it back. All of it."

"Me too, Freight-man." She hadn't called me that in a long time. I hoped it meant the friendly fire was over.

"Sit. I'll get you a coffee." I meant at the table, but she left to sit with John and closed the door before Walter could follow her out. He stood by the door, waiting.

I looked down at his head. "Wally. You poor bastard." The cut was deep and higher than the shaved head.

"You got the shit kicked out of you, buddy." I crouched down to eye level and tried to stroke his neck, but he backed away. I never said it out loud, but I had a strong suspicion this dog was going to bite me one day. And it would be a good one. A chunk bite.

John and Jesse didn't stop talking when I came out, and at first I thought that was a good sign, but they were talking about air conditioning like a couple of strangers in the plumbing aisle of a Home Depot. Who lied to me? Either John saw her in her bra and thong or he didn't, but someone was lying and it was fucking me up. Why would Jesse lie about something like that? I needed to ask her but now wouldn't be a good time. Actually, it would be the perfect time, but I didn't have balls of steel.

Thirty

We didn't fish that day. Around lunchtime I was alone in the spare bedroom peeling off the sheets to be laundered when my chest started to feel heavy. Tight and heavy. It didn't hurt but it did feel like a weight was pushing into it and my heart raced. Then my throat began to tingle and burn. I curled up in a fetal position on the bare mattress and waited out my first-ever anxiety attack. The crying was the worst of it because I couldn't stop. When Jesse finally discovered me, I was sitting on the edge of the mattress slouched over with my arms on my knees. Convincing her not to call 911 almost sent me into my second anxiety attack. I agreed to a doctor's appointment and she got me in on a cancellation that afternoon in Lakefield.

John went with us. He wanted to come and Jess wanted him to come and I wanted to be by myself. They made me sit in the back seat and Jess kept making quick head turns to see if I was still breathing. I finally told her to keep her eyes on the road or we might all need a doctor.

The waiting room had four toddlers playing on the floor with crusty, stained, stuffed yellow bird-like shapes. One kid kept sitting on his mom's foot and she would slip her foot out and slide the little kid across the floor with the bottom of her sandal, but he kept shuffling back. The mother occasionally turned her head to Jesse for camaraderie, smirking as if to say *darn kids*. When the mother wasn't pushing kids around with her blue sandal, or trying to visually bond with Jess, she was staring at John's groin. He sat across from us and I don't

think he realized how defined his package was in his jeans. It made me start a giggle that ended when Jesse grew concerned.

Doctor Salvo agreed that it was an anxiety attack. I think my carry-over anxiety from the house made his diagnosis a lot easier. He handed Jesse a requisition to get some blood work done and I felt like I was in the backseat again. I told him I just started meditating and, although he didn't say anything negative, his expression spoke volumes. I didn't push it because Jess was with me. She told him that I had started back to AA and he was all for that. Asked me if I was an alcoholic. What a stupid question. Firstly, my wife's proud delivery made it sound like I had won a Nobel, and secondly, why would anyone quit drinking if they didn't have to? Jesse asked him a few more questions about depression and stress and he gave her cryptic two-word answers. This is the thing about doctors. You go there for information and they keep secrets. I think it's because they don't know the answers and that's the biggest secret.

On the way out, I noticed the ceiling had a cartoon-like compass painted over it, with north, south, east, and west in bright colours. I told Jess and John I'd be right out after I used the little boys' room, and it really was the little boys' room. Cotton strings covered the top half of the mirror. It was meant to look like Spiderman paid a visit and saved a bunch of little kids from a washroom foe. Creepy. The urinal was so low down the wall that I felt like I was pissing into a bucket. The trap over the drain of the urinal had a picture of Batman on it with a bullseye over his mouth. I think it was to fool kids into not whizzing on the floor, but it wasn't

working, and for good reason. A kid that would gladly urinate on the caped crusader is a kid who eventually fries ants with a magnifying glass, then moves on to shooting frogs with a pellet rifle – and we all know where that leads. Cats, dogs. Arson.

What Salvo needed in his urinals were arch enemies, like The Joker or The Penguin, so kids could feel like they helped Batman. I flushed out a stream of unused vitamins all over the caped crusader's face, rinsed soap from an Aquaman dispenser off my hands, and exited. On my way out, the mother with the kids glanced at my crotch for only a second or two before looking back down at her kids.

I lit a cigarette outside on the front step and walked over to John and Jesse, grinning and shaking my head. They were standing next to the Lexus.

"Is Salvo a Paediatrician?" I asked her.

"And a GP," she said.

"Jesus, Jesse."

"What?"

John broke up.

We stopped at a new pizza parlour in town and the pies were pretty good. John paid even though Jesse tried to fight him on it. He was holding off on announcing he had a dock repair job he needed my help on, but finally spilled it on the way home. It made me happy. I trusted John's instincts and it meant he didn't take my anxiety attack too seriously. Jesse was a no out of the gate, but softened when John promised to keep a close watch on me, gently reminding her it wasn't the big chest-grabber. It would have been a thoughtful conversation if

I weren't in the back seat again.

Thirty One

John and I spent the next three days in and out of the water.

One of the cabin renters from the marina tore his leg open on a dead dock board. Apparently, his leg went right through and the gouge went deep along the outer side of his thigh, along with a nail that travelled up his shin, engraving the bone.

The jury was still out on whether or not he was going to press charges, but in the interim the marina hired John to repair and strengthen all their docks – just over two hundred feet of old loose board.

I didn't want John to pay me, but he wouldn't budge. After a fun but slightly heated argument, we agreed to donate my earnings to a worthy cause and I let John pick. He chose the Rally House for abused and impoverished women.

Working for John was easy. He wasn't a boss as much as he was a mentor. In fact, it didn't feel any different than fishing. And it could have gone the other way. Knowing someone intimately doesn't mean you know what it would be like to work for them. But I banked on John's sense of decency and fair play. He didn't bank on my two left hands.

I knew I wasn't handy. It was a story that started when I was a kid. I could never get the chain back on my bike

whenever it fell off, or get the hockey cards to make the motor sound they were supposed to make when the tire spokes slapped over them at a million miles an hour.

One of my worst foul-ups was a bird feeder that impaled finches. I cannot even begin to explain how that went down, and if I could then it wouldn't have happened in the first place.

Jesse thought of me as handy, even though I tried explaining to her how I wasn't. *I blindly trouble shoot, Jess. And sometimes I get lucky but I don't know how, and I never remember the random acts I performed to get lucky.* Sometimes I can dismantle some small appliance, put it back together, and voila. Other times I dismantle it but can't remember how to put it back together, or I lose a washer, or a screw, or a nut, even though I haven't moved the entire time.

Jesse always seemed to forget the time I worked on her reading lamp. The pull chain was seized and I dismantled it without an electrician sitting on the edge of the bed guiding me. I couldn't believe all the copper and wiring in the guts of one little lamp. The chain dropped free as soon as I had the lamp in six parts. I pushed everything back together and called Jesse up to try it out. When she pulled the chain the electrical shock shot her hand upward under the lamp shade, sending the lamp flying off the side dresser and crashing to the floor.

John was smart. He watched me work for about twenty minutes and subsequently decided I would be best holding material for him. Bracing planks, handing over tools, taking measurements. I was grateful there wasn't any pay involved.

John was under water for almost a minute. He surfaced with the tape measure and placed it on the dock.

"Sorry about that," I said.

John pulled his hair back and squeezed the water out of the tail.

He had a little cut on his forehead. He was working at eye level with the dock support when my foot kicked the tape measure from the dock. It bounced off John's head and into the water.

"Stop apologizing."

"I just feel stupid."

"It was stupid but you didn't mean to do it. See this?" John turned his elbow up. A faint twisted scar, barely visible, travelled over the bone and down the forearm like a small dry creek.

"I hired a kid, years and years ago. I was almost a kid myself. He handed me a saws-all by the blade, upside down, and hit the trigger."

"What did you do?"

"Well, I didn't hit him, but I definitely wasn't as patient as I am today." John, still in the water, grabbed the hammer and began tearing out old hanging boards with the claw end. "I need you in the water."

I jumped in quickly, trying to be efficient, and splashed John. John took one hand off the board underneath and wiped his face and eyes. I started to giggle. John smirked. He tried not to join in but it was hard.

"I thought you didn't want pay because you were generous."

That really got me giggling. It felt good and I couldn't make it stop. "You should have seen your - face - when - the tape - measure - bounced off it."

John nodded. "In that moment, you were the stupidest person I had ever met."

I eventually settled down and took over the tearing out of the bad boards. John followed behind me and measured out for the size of the new replacement boards. I had to work at stifling the odd giggle bout. Then I told John the electrocution lamp story and he couldn't work for a few minutes.

The Rhino pulled over next to the ramp leading to the first dock. Jesse climbed out of the driver's side, then went around to the passenger side and lifted out a medium-sized cooler. She was strong, but I could tell it was weighty because you get to know how a person moves after a while. John didn't notice her until she was almost on us.

"Lunch already?" I didn't mean she came early. It was all about time flying.

Jesse put the cooler down with a grunt. "Lot of food in there. So eat up. And no swimming for thirty minutes," she said.

"Would you like to join us, hon?"

"You will have to eat your vegetables."

"See you later," I said.

With that she ruffled the top of my head and left, while I watched her walk away.

"Thank you," John said.

"Welcome, boys." She didn't turn around.

John watched the Rhino disappear behind the line of cottage rentals. "Tell Jesse to wear a helmet."

"She didn't have a helmet on?"

"No."

"I will for sure."

I was two elbows deep in the cooler. I took out a big thick-cut sandwich wrapped in wax paper and handed it over to John and then reached back in for mine. John looked at his sandwich, turning it over in his hands.

"I feel like I should wait for a special occasion to open this," he said.

He was right. They looked like gifts with funky plain paper that sold for a small fortune. Maybe paper you had to buy online from Sweden or something. Perfectly flawlessly wrapped. All my lunches came this way when I worked for a living and it was neat to be reminded of how good a job Jess did. She had this way of folding the ends in so that the paper slid together like tongue and groove. I held the two glass containers at eye level. Both had carrots, celery, radishes, and a pickle in stretch wrap. I put one down beside John and then placed mine back in the cooler and unwrapped the food present.

Roast beef and Swiss cheese with lettuce, tomato, and a homemade mayo-horseradish mixture.

We didn't feel like moving when we were finished.

"Have another cigarette. I'm not ready." John let loose a belch that I am sure made it halfway across the lake. The pops

pushed us over the edge and I made a mental note to drink the bottled water tomorrow, with the pop.

We walked home together. I was dragging a little and John needed to slow down so it wouldn't look like I could not keep pace. I tightened my grip on the cooler handle, thinking he might try to take it from me.

"How many days until we're done?"

"Had enough already?"

"The opposite. I would like it to keep going."

"Two more days. You were a great help today."

I knew he meant it.

"Eat dinner and get to bed early or you'll be very tired tomorrow."

We turned down the drive to the cottage and John began to veer off to the guest house.

"Hey, I said. John stopped.

I stared at him longer than I meant to.

"What is it?"

"I forgot I'm an alcoholic today."

"Is that good?"

"I don't know. Okay, yes. Yes it is."

John nodded, smiled, and continued on.

Maybe I needed more of this. I couldn't tell if it was clear-headedness from a good day's work or being too tired to think. Either way, I really liked the emptiness.

Jesse must have known how my day would end and that I would be too dog tired to man the BBQ. She stood over the Weber, looking slightly concerned about screwing up the pork tenderloin. The way she stood made her calves pop. I kissed

her cheek in passing and dragged myself through the great room and up the stairs.

I needed a long hot shower from being in the water most of the day because my joints were singing a song that I'd never heard before. Jess recommended an Epsom salts bath. She always did, but I loathed baths. They were frilly to me and no matter how many times I told her that, it was like she never heard me or remembered. A woman's tenacity is far from contained. Women are like dolphins poking sharks with their snout, over and over until it finally clicks. I suspect one day I will have an Epsom salts bath and wonder why I waited so long to soak in a tub.

Jesse's suitcase sat open on the bed with skirts and pants and tops strewn to the left and right of the suitcase. At first I panicked and then remembered her trip to Toronto with Mary. I sat on the edge of the bed with all my weight. I tried moving her pants over on the way down but ended up sitting on them anyway, and something hard underneath. I shifted over and lifted up the leg of her designer jeans.

At first I wasn't sure what I was looking at.

I picked it up and looked at it a few different ways and then tried to unscrew what seemed like a top when it began vibrating. It had three speeds, and I tried all of them. This wasn't anything like the vibrators I remembered and I didn't even know Jesse had one. It was silver, maybe stainless steel, and slim, and weightless. I imagined Jess and Mary using it on each other and the thought took a toll on the empty-headed feeling I had worked so hard for.

I decided, during dinner, not to mention the vibrator discovery. If she wanted me to know about it she wouldn't have put it under a pair of jeans. Or maybe she wasn't keeping it a secret. Maybe she would want me to try it out on her later. Didn't matter because if it came up it would come from her.

We dined on the deck as often as the weather permitted. Staring out over the lake afterwards was like one of the dinner courses. The one in between main and dessert.

"I love tenderloin," I said, looking over at her.

"I know. Anything pork is good," Jesse added.

"Pigs feet?"

"Never tried them."

"My dad loved them. Pickled. My mom and I would have to leave the room."

We sat quietly for a few extra minutes.

"We should go to Tuscany this winter, Jess."

"Why Tuscany?"

"I don't know why it appeals to me but it does."

"I'd like that."

"What is the weather like at that time of year?"

Jesse shook her head. "I'll have to check."

"I'll do it."

"Okay. You feel good, don't you?"

"Yeah. Today was fun. Lunch was amazing."

"I wish you would eat the vegetables."

"I need to stay busy, you know? I bet if I meditate every day and start going to the meeting on Scugog Island, I could be off smokes in a year."

"I bet you could."

"I feel it now sometimes."

"You cough more now."

"I do?"

She nodded. "In the morning when you have your first few. And you snore way more, too, but I don't know if that has anything to do with it. Could be all the ice cream."

"Do we have any?"

"What do you think? It's how I keep you in line."

"Want some?"

"No thanks."

I didn't get up right away. Instead I lit another cigarette.

"How's Walter doing?"

"Better. Other than the ugly scar, he's back to his old self."

"I hate that you had to go through that without me. You know that, right?"

"I think so."

"And hitting me was my fault not yours." I could tell she didn't want to go there. "Jess, look at me. I don't want to talk about it either. But you need to know that I brought it on. I earned that smack. Okay?"

"Okay." She said it back to me so softly that reading her lips was the only way to tell if she'd said anything at all. I always owned Jesse when I was sincere, but I wasn't so sure this time. It wasn't in her tone or lack thereof. It wasn't the shape of her mouth or the way her eyes stayed on me a beat longer than usual. It came from her right hand. The way her grip loosened on the base of her water glass. Like her hand was numb. She was getting tired of holding on. Tired of me. I

was sure of it. But I only caught it now. I missed all the earlier signs. Six months ago the mole was small and insignificant. Then suddenly it needed to be removed before something unpleasant happened.

Jesse pushed her chair out and picked up some of our dishes.

"Relax hon, I'll do it," I said.

She put the plates down and went inside. And then it hit me. She wasn't upset, she was resentful. It had roots now and I didn't know what to do. Then I remembered. When Jesse came back from Toronto I would be a different man. The second chance relaxed me and I lit another one before I realized I already had one going in the ashtray.

Thirty Two

We walked together to the marina. Physically I felt good. A little tight but overall ready to go, even though anxiety tried to push in. The sky was clouding over. I could tell the rain would come in isolated downpours. I could tell because of how fast the rat-coloured clouds were moving and bloating and snatching sky.

We passed the marina store, still closed. It wouldn't open for another hour. John liked to get an early start and when we arrived the only other people around were a man and his ten-year old son. The dad was maneuvering paddles and positioning tackle in a rental boat. He wanted it to stay in place once they were moving. The little kid was dopey tired and his dad kept nattering at him. *Watch your step. Put it in the boat.*

Don't leave it on the dock. Wake up. At one point the kid said he had to go to the bathroom and his dad told him he could pee over the side of the boat. The whole outing looked like forced bonding, probably encouraged by mom because the dad's tone sounded short and distant. He owned pretty good tackle by the looks of it. If he was a true blue angler then his wife was really messing up his vacation by making him drag the little pisser along. My mom never pushed for dad-and-son time. I guess that's why I enjoyed outings with my old man.

We stopped where we'd left off yesterday. I opened the Thermos and poured coffee into the plastic lid. My finger barely fit through the handle and the rim tasted like plastic. I lit a smoke and looked for a place to sit before we got rolling but ended up leaning into a support post that seemed fairly secure. John's hands were on his hips, looking over yesterday's work.

"What's it like to not smoke?" I asked him.

"I have nothing to compare it to." He continued surveying the dock.

"Okay. What's it like to stand there and not need a coffee?"

"I want a coffee but I don't need it. You really are an addict."

"I am. Coffee and cigarettes are a lifeline. I can't imagine life without them."

"Don't the pictures on the packages bother you?"

"Yeah, man. They bother me so much that I need a cigarette to calm down."

He turned my way to see if I was kidding. And I wasn't. "It backfired on you?"

"What did?"

"The deterrents."

"Backfires on most smokers, I suspect. Governments make a lot of money off cigarettes. Cigarettes and fuel. If everyone quit smoking and driving the country would go broke."

John nodded. He thought I was close to talking out of my ass but it felt like I was already there. It made sense in my head before I said it, though.

I stepped out the butt, threw it on some rocks, and rinsed the Thermos lid in the lake.

We worked with less talk than the day before, partly because we'd found a rhythm, and partly because my melancholy bordered on darkness. And if I wasn't driving the conversation John was just as happy to stay quiet and move the job along. Silence with him came easy and made me feel safe.

The hatch to the Lexus was open when we turned down the drive. I came back to say goodbye to Jess and then make lunch for me and John.

"Don't worry about feeding Walter. I have John taking care of that."

"I can feed a fucking dog, Jess." She turned around. "I know that. I'm just trying to make it easier for you."

"Okay, sorry." I walked down the hall pulling the luggage along by its wheels.

I heard the freezer door slam on my way down the hall. She was about to tell me about all the different meals she made for me. There would be *how to cook* Post-it notes on each meal.

I leaned into the driver's window and gave Jesse a kiss on her cheek.

"Maybe you won't recognize me when you get back."

"I'm sure I will." And then she left.

I'm sure I will kept playing in my head. Didn't she believe I could change? Or did she think I wouldn't even try? And what was I supposed to change into? I kind of liked who I was. Not always, but often.

It bothered me enough to run it by John on our way back to work.

"I thought it meant she would have such a good time she would forget about you, and she was reassuring you that she wouldn't."

"Wouldn't have a good time?"

"No, Freight. That she wouldn't forget you."

"Ohhhh. I think you're right."

"Otherwise, it is a strange conversation for a married couple to be having."

Thirty Three

We finished up at five and drove the Rhino over to a little pub overlooking the lake. The patio balcony actually hung over the water and I could see rock slime and the occasional sunfish in between the deck boards that were too far apart for John's liking.

We ordered southern fried chicken burgers and each got a basket of sweet potato fries. Then John watched me devour

something called a Stony Lake Bottom Creamer. Piles of chocolate ice cream, hand stabbed with thick spears of dark chocolate and then tripped up with chocolate caramel sauce. The server brought two spoons and I jokingly told him that my wife had a dairy intolerance.

"Two spoons. You don't bring two spoons when it's two men," I said to John after the server left. He smirked and shook his head. "And if we were gay?"

"Then you could have done better."

We didn't talk much after dessert. John looked out, and I looked down. He seemed a little tired and I wondered if he was coming down with something.

"Are you okay?"

John turned to me with decision written on his face and especially in his eyes.

"I didn't do it."

"Didn't do what?"

"Murder the two men."

I nodded. I had nothing else.

"I wanted you to know the truth." Then he looked out to the lake. "They disappeared because they disappeared."

"Went into hiding?"

"That's all. They weren't discreet. They were drunk. They didn't plan it. They just did it and then they ran."

"Does a part of you wish you killed them?"

"No. But I wanted to cripple them. Suffering is a better payoff than death."

"Do you still?"

"Not so much now. If they knocked on my door by mistake I

could see myself making the best of it. But I stopped looking a long time ago."

The weight of camaraderie turned the dessert over in my stomach and I swallowed down rising bile. There would be no more looking up, only across. Eye to eye.

"What made you tell me?"

"Because you are my close friend."

But I am not who you think I am, John, because I have secrets, and urges that beg to surface and everyday I fight to keep them quiet and one day, one day, maybe on a Tuesday, I'll breach my end of the bargain and you will hate yourself for ever investing in this friendship.

"Thanks, John. I consider you a close friend, too."

John smiled. "Maybe we should have taken two spoons."

And then the rain started.

I pulled in behind the cottage. We were wet in the dark and my left shoe sloshed on the floor of the Rhino as I stepped out.

"I need to make a repair on the island dock tomorrow," he yelled over the rain.

"Need me?"

"No, sleep in."

"Okay, sleep well."

I went to bed and read Hemingway for close to two hours. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was becoming easier to read and when I closed the book and turned out the light I fell asleep wondering what it would be like to be friends with Ernest. I didn't know a lot about him, but somehow, through his writing,

I felt a kinship of sorts. Not the best of friends, but really-happy-to-see-each-other-when-we-got-the-chance kind of friends.

Thirty Four

Next morning I was out the door early. I had a full day ahead of me, but if someone were to stop and ask me what I had planned, I wouldn't really know. Other than the fact that they were slowing me down because I had something big going on that I didn't know about. Maybe this was the bright side of anxiety. Being left to my own devices was getting the best of me. It was all at once relaxing and thrilling. Truly a holiday for both Jess and me. Until I realized I didn't have a fucking car to drive.

I stood beside John's truck, wondering what the ramifications would be if I borrowed it without asking. He always left the keys in the cubby, down low on the driver's side, but that didn't mean I had carte blanche.

I called him and got voicemail. God dammit! I didn't know how people survive island cottages when the cell reception was so shit-iffy. I climbed in but the keys weren't in the cubby. The keys weren't anywhere in the cab. Then I remembered John gave us a spare in case we ever needed to move the truck or borrow it when he wasn't around. I still felt guilty taking it, until I found his set on the threshold between the screen and the back door with a note printed on a thin piece of

cardboard where a pad had ended. *I don't need the truck today. Go ahead if you need it.* I felt a skip in my step.

I pulled into the dirt parking lot of a greasy spoon called Angelo's, which made me think of a barber shop, which made me think of unwashed hair clippings, and if it weren't for the smell of bacon grease and buttered toast wafting out the bottom of the six square awning windows I would have pulled a 180. Angelo's turned out to be a find. Greasy and delicious, with lumps of butter on thick toast. The eggs and the strip bacon were fried in the same grease. I always ask for my bacon crispy and the outcome is a make-or-break for the restaurant. If they crisp it on the flat grill, we're good to go, but some places deep-fry the strips for a minute and the end result is always dried out and ready-to-crumble bacon. I eat it, but I never go back.

Angelo's did it right, all SIX STRIPS. Fucking unheard of! The java didn't lose them points because my expectations were minimal. I don't go to greasy spoons for a good cup of joe.

While waiting for my food I watched a couple sitting at a booth along the far wall. They weren't sitting across from each other, like Jesse and I did when it was just the two of us, they were sitting next to each other. I always thought it was kind of a cute throwback to a simpler time, but I also figured that these side-by-siders didn't have sex anymore. And watched a massive amount of television together. I sat kitty corner to them and although they had their backs to me I could see the side of the man's head. They were probably around my age but the guy had these big sideburns that started out lean

at the ear and became really thick partway down the right side of his jaw. His hair was Johnny Cash black and I wondered if that's what he was going for. It could be Elvis, too. Then he turned to speak to the waitress and I saw a big visor of hair that swung way out and back in at the cut end. George Jones all the way.

I paid at the counter, left a generous tip on the table, and twenty-five minutes later hit Peterborough.

I parked between Chapters and an organic dry cleaner, whatever the hell that meant. John's truck was high and old and stood out like a bad limp, so I parked in the middle, hoping to blend in with the other cars. And then I waited. I didn't quite know how to handle this. Do I go in and say hi? The magazine rack stood close. What if I went in and browsed? There was only one place I could do that if I wanted her to see me, and I didn't know what magazines were in that section. It might be the men's section with scantily clad girls that nobody has ever heard of on the covers. Or the puzzle section. What would that say about me? Or the prenatal section. I opened the truck door and prayed for *home decor* when Tanya walked out of the entrance with a rag and began taking the chains off the table legs on the patio. I began my approach.

She was leaning over one of the tables, and stayed that way long enough for it to feel like a gift. Like she knew I was behind her. She looked folded over when she stretched out to wipe the part of the table furthest from her reach. Then she gripped the table edge with the other hand and the wiping motion made her ass move up and down and around in a slow tight circle, independent from her hips. The best part of me,

the thoughtful part, recommended I turn around and head home, but the volume was too low. For years to come, I would revisit this moment as a *what if*. What if I hadn't cock-whipped my thoughtfulness?

I opened the door halfway.

"Tanya?"

She swooped upwards and twirled my way. I think she said my name partway through the turn, even before she saw me.

"Freight. How are you?" Her eyes were cat-like. Like she caught me in her ass trap.

I let the door close and strolled closer.

"I'm pretty good."

"Because you've been meditating?" She said it playfully, more kitten than cat.

"Every day."

"Liar."

I barked out a laugh that couldn't have been more forced if it had gunpowder behind it.

I pretended to browse the Eastern Religion aisle, for what seemed like an eternity. I started to think Tanya sent me here to wait for her while she secretly handed in her notice, ran home to pack up her rug, along with her singing bowl, and then relocated someplace far away from my old man's grasp.

The waiting was killing my groin buzz, and I was just about to pack it in when she came up from behind and poked her finger into the small of my back. I spun around knocking a book from the shelf with my elbow. I bent down to pick it up, but she placed her foot over it, pressing it firm to the floor

with the dirty sole of her shoe. My red flag was upside down. She was wild and unpredictable and would probably be so dirty in bed that I needed to run home. Run away while the smell of her was still foreign.

I tried sliding the book out from under her shoe when she pressed harder and leaned closer. She wanted me to look up and see how close her pussy was to my face but I couldn't do it. She pushed her knee into my shoulder as a dare and I wondered if it looked, to the other customers, like she was mounting my head.

I slipped my hand under the bottom of her pant leg and wrapped my fist all the way around her lean ankle. It wasn't bony but it did feel dry and chafed and that made me feel safe. Safer. I squeezed, and I swear I heard a quiet moan.

"Now what are you going to do?" she asked.

I slid the fingers of my other hand into the side of her shoe and caressed under the bottom outside part of her foot and it had a hot stove effect. She kicked the shoe off and rubbed the side of her naked foot over the top of the shoe of the opposite leg.

"How did you know I was ticklish?"

I put the book back on the shelf and had to catch my breath from leaning over. "Lucky guess and few options."

"My manager thinks I'm in the washroom with period cramps." She looked past me and then back to me. "Are you around later?"

My mouth opened before my brain had a chance to send it words.

"Be fun to have dinner," she said.

"Sure, let's do it."

"Cool. Meet me at my place at seven."

She tapped my chest twice with an open hand, but on the second tap she pulled at the cotton, right along the line of the buttons, and let go before I could resist, or not.

Thirty Five

I had almost a full day to kill before dinner with Tanya. I couldn't risk not being able to borrow John's truck, and it didn't seem appropriate anyway, so I rented a car and paid extra to have them deliver it by five pm.

The second anxiety attack started as I rolled down the cottage drive. I spent the remainder of the day shivering in bed until finally drifting into a half sleep. Half sleeps are toxic and this one was the mother of all toxic sleeps. I dreamt that all my dealers were undercover officers, and all my watering holes had banished me indefinitely. All the signs said open but it didn't apply to me. The worst was, everyone felt terrible about what was happening to me. A young undercover officer couldn't stop crying and saying how sorry he was, and wanted to perform fellatio on me to make up for it. But I knew it was a trick and that somehow my semen would reveal traces of cocaine and I'd be busted by an undercover cop with a mouthful of sperm.

When I surfaced the room felt cold and I pulled the blankets up to my neck. I decided not to go, but I couldn't stand her up because that would be classless. Finally I decided I would

go to her apartment at the said time and tell her in person that I could not have dinner with her tonight or ever. That I loved my Jesse and Tanya needed to find someone her own age, preferably single. That's the best help I could give her.

I put on my long-sleeve shirt with the pastel patterns on it that looked like faded lakes and rivers overlapping each other. It was Jesse's favourite. She picked it out at a place called Grreat Stuff in Toronto. I buttoned it up and then pulled it over my head and put it back on the white plastic hanger. I opted for a black shirt, jeans, and a pair of coal-coloured leather shoes with long squared toes.

I stepped out onto the deck and saw John fastening the bow rope to the dock ring. Walter jumped out of the boat and waited, patiently. He had a tired wag, celebrating the end of a good day because it didn't include me. Kind of a breezy *fuck you* wag and I suddenly felt irritated by the two of them. Irritated that John took Walter for the day.

"I'm not going to shoot him or anything, you know," I said.

He travelled up the granite steps without looking in my direction. He knew I was on the deck when he was down on the dock.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Because you took him with you so I couldn't be left alone with him. Because I can't be trusted."

That note got his attention. "He's with me because Jesse left him in my care as a favour to you."

"You really believe it was a favour to me?"

"I have no reason to believe otherwise."

"Right."

"You going somewhere?" He stopped at the bottom of the stairs, with Walter beside him, and looked directly up at me.

"I'm meeting an AA friend for dinner." I took my left shoe off and pretended to shake something out of it. I needed to avoid eye contact for a moment. I needed distance between the lie and when I visually connected with him again. John's eyes were waiting.

"I won't be too late I imagine."

"Good for you. We'll be back at the marina tomorrow."

John got partway to the guest house when he called back to me. "Freight. Why are you warming up the truck?"

"What?"

I went down the stairs and along the side of the cottage. The truck had been running for hours and the rental never showed.

"I started it and then ran inside to change my shoes. It's only been running for a couple of minutes. I guess I should have asked if you minded me taking it."

"Of course not."

"You know I'll fill it."

"You don't have to."

John and Walter headed for John's cottage and I left.

Thirty Six

Tanya backed out the door and locked it. She wanted to surprise me with how she looked and I thought it was immature

until she turned around.

The pattern on her turquoise crocheted sandals disappeared in between her slender toes. Her toenails were painted with lavender polish. My eyes travelled up her lean dark legs until they met the short white tight-fitting skirt. I made myself a quick hard promise to never let the backs of her knees rest on my shoulders. In tight to my neck. With my face—

"You like?"

I wiped my mouth and looked up. "You look great," I said with forced minimal delivery. I stayed far enough ahead of her going down the stairs that she could not take my hand. I also parked illegally, right outside her apartment. I tried to be casual about it but I could tell she felt rushed. My motor skills were off.

"Where do you want to eat?" she said, while looking over the inside of the truck.

"Do you like steak?"

"I love steak."

"There's a little steakhouse in Oshawa that I have never tried, but I hear great things about." I had not looked at her since we started driving and I over-watched the road like I was navigating a jet plane into a hangar.

"Oshawa?"

"Yes."

"You trying to hide me?"

"What? No."

Tanya's stare stayed on me until I could not take it anymore. Her smile was young, sexy and controlling.

"What is it?" I said without smiling back.

"You want to sleep with me don't you?"

"Tanya, don't ask me that."

I wheeled the truck onto the parkway, minutes from the 115 leading to Oshawa.

"I wanna sleep with you too but I'm not going to make it happen. And if it doesn't, that's cool. At least I have a new friend."

Laying it on the table relaxed me. Some power came back my way and it felt nice to be breathing again.

"I'm married—"

"But not happily."

"Yes."

"But not happy enough. Think about it."

At first I thought she meant *think about it* as in think about having sex with me, but then I realized she meant *think about it* — if you were, you would not be here with me. I always believed in my heart that things were perfect with me and Jess, and that any problems we had were because of my drinking. Like Mary, for instance. Now I wasn't so sure. I wondered what she was doing right now and that same wondering depressed me. Made me feel dark, sad, and slightly nauseous. Tanya reached over and touched my arm.

"I don't want to talk about my marriage."

Tanya nodded. "Let's be friends. Maybe I could meet your wife one day. She could come to a meditation class, maybe."

She reached out to shake. "Deal?"

"Deal." I shook her hand and I didn't feel any regret over a missed opportunity to knock home an important number on my bucket list. Anyway, if I wanted her, all I had to do was ask.

Barber's Steak House was romantically dated. The maitre'd led us to a small pocket of a room. We had to follow him and he moved slowly, just to irritate me because I entered the place with a younger woman who probably wasn't my daughter. He sat us and I said thank you and he smiled at the dark wood panelling. The wood looked treated recently. Oiled. Unless years of accumulated smoke grease went unnoticed by the night cleaner. The ceilings throughout were a dark blotchy red that made me think of granite.

I pulled Tanya's chair out for her.

"Wasn't he suppose to do that?" she asked.

"Yes, but he is kind of a dick."

She ran her finger along the brass lip of the faux gas lamp hanging low above our table and sat down.

We were close to the kitchen and I could smell butter and steak fat, with a hint of fish in the background. Thankfully the meat and butter overwhelmed the fish or I would have had to leave.

Our waiter wasn't quite as ancient as the maitre'd but he did have a visible limp and he wore a permanent ouch expression on his face. Tanya ordered a decent glass of red wine, but I think she just got lucky. Not sure why we were there together, I wanted to order our meals right away but the waiter seemed to evaporate before I had a chance.

Tanya looked around the room. "Black girl could disappear in this place."

"It is pretty dark," I laughed. She had this way of easing my anxiety, but it only left me with buried tension. Heart

attack tension. I could vapour lock five years from now and tonight would be the cause of it.

She reached over and pinched the top of my hand lightly. How did she know I was slipping away? The waiter entered and I pulled my hand back. I don't think it went unnoticed by either of them.

I ordered us New Yorks, medium rare, with some kind of reverse stuffed potato that sounded too decadent to turn down. Tanya ordered a half litre of the same red and I believed it was because I pulled away from her touch.

Jesse hadn't checked in yet, not even a text. Considering we texted each other from different rooms when were under the same roof, I figured she really must need down time from me.

I left the table and when I returned, Tanya's carafe was down a glass and a half. The story of my fucking life. Nothing is worse than knowing that because you're a recovering alcoholic the party doesn't start until you leave the room.

Tanya kept looking away to purse her full lips because of the dryness of the wine. Purse, swallow the bottom lip, lick it with her tongue, and send it back out shiny and damp. The looking away gave it innocence, otherwise it would have been message heavy. But it was the looking away that was busting my zipper.

"Hey, you okay with this?" She held up her glass.

"Don't worry about it."

"Well I don't want you to have a breakdown because I'm drinking."

"You mean a slip. I can drink wine. It's hard liquor I'm allergic to."

"Allergic?"

"It means whenever I drink it something lousy happens."

Tanya nodded. "But wine's okay?"

"Yeah. I just choose not to bother."

"Honest?"

"What do you mean, honest?"

"I'm not an alcoholic but I didn't think it was drink specific."

"There's different schools of thought. AA believes in total abstinence. Others don't."

"I don't get it. I thought the alcohol was the problem."

"Here's an example. I also had a problem with cocaine."

"No way."

"Yes. If I did a line right now I could not be held accountable for what came next. And I know I wouldn't stop at one line. But, if I smoked a joint, I would just get tired, eat ten bags of chips and go to bed after. And in the morning there would be no desire to smoke another one. Get it?"

She shook her head.

"Marijuana was never my drug of choice, so I don't ride on it."

"Coke was?" It was less of a question than an understanding.

"That's right."

"What would happen if you did a line?"

"I would immediately order a double rum and Coke and come up for air maybe in two days, and I wouldn't know where. Or what I'd done."

"Wow."

"Wow is right." I am legend.

"What's the craziest thing you ever did when you were messed up?"

I looked up to the ceiling and then straight on her.

"One time in Toronto I was drunk and walking along Queen Street in the Beach. A police car, and a police motorcycle, were parked by the sidewalk. Two guys had got into a fist fight. I saw it coming because we were in the same bar earlier. I thought they were buddies. Maybe they started out that way. I think they did."

"What happened?"

"The motorcycle cop left his Harley running so I climbed on and took it."

"You stole a cop's bike?"

I shook my head. "Borrowed."

"What happened?"

"I brought it back. I only wanted to try it. I wasn't stealing it. I drove it around the block and parked it where I found it."

"What did they do to you?"

"Roughed me up."

"Were you charged? Did you go to jail?"

I smiled and shook my head.

"They let me go. It would have been too embarrassing for the cop. Imagine having to stand in court and tell everyone that some drunk stole your bike because you left it running."

"You were a real bad boy?"

"I guess, but those days are long gone."

"My friends think I'm a bad girl."

"I'm beginning to think that too."

Tanya's eyeline went down to her half-eaten plate of food. The wine made her loose, and now moody. But it also helped her get too close to her choices and the emotions that went along with those choices. I didn't know if she was downhearted, depressed, or something more sinister. Clinical. All I had to go on was Marta's advice to stay away, which must have been hiding in the back of my good file.

I wanted to remind Tanya that she was in her twenties and the real baggage hadn't begun to accumulate. There wasn't even a fucking list.

"Tanya?"

Without looking up. "Don't say that again, okay."

"I didn't mean anything by it. I don't even know you and I was mostly kidding." I regretted that before my mouth was finished with it.

"Mostly?"

"I didn't mean mostly. I was being playful. That's all."

"I want to go home now if you're okay with that." Again she didn't look up from her plate and I wanted to scream *grow up* into her face.

"All right." I pushed my chair back. "I have to use the men's room. Then I'll pay the bill and drop you off at your apartment."

"What a fucking joke," I said, punching the washroom door wide with an open hand.

I couldn't believe how quickly you could begin to stop liking a person and begin disliking the site and sound of them. This was the second time with the pouting card. First

time, leaving her place, and now a second time leaving a restaurant. A baby snit, because she wasn't old enough to be a bitch yet. Bitches I can handle because they're fucking warriors. Baby snits reminded me of biting puppies with razor sharp teeth that only know how to nip. Fuck her!

I came out of the washroom and went directly to the hostess station for the bill.

"Was everything okay, sir?" the Maitre'd asked. I didn't detect a smirk so I did not have to slap the side of his face. But it didn't diffuse the urge to slap someone.

I punched in the tip on the remote for 20%. "When you take out a girl half your age, there's bound to be trouble," I said, handing him back the remote. He smiled at my wedding ring, but I didn't think he disapproved.

Tanya was standing outside the door with her arms folded tight to her chest like she was cold. Her lips folded inside her mouth and they stayed like that all the way to the car.

I opened the passenger door for her and she said thank you, under her breath, with hurt feelings, like it was me that made us leave.

I went around to my side of the truck, lit a smoke, and let the driver's door support my weight. On the third drag the passenger door opened and her sandals slapped off the pavement, louder when she got to my side.

"May I have one?"

"I pulled one from the pack and handed it to her. She put the filter end way over in the corner of her mouth like an amateur and I lit it.

She stared at me through our smoke.

"Sorry for being a bitch."

I nodded slowly. "You're not a bitch."

"Thanks."

"I mean it."

"Do you think liking older men makes me a bad girl?"

"No. I think calling me an older man makes you a bad girl."

She moved in quickly and squeezed my forearm and just as quickly stepped back. It was spastic to me.

"What about you and Marta?"

"I knew you could hear us. Marta made sure of it."

"What about it?"

"Nothing about it. It's just fun. Marta likes to kiss me sometimes so I let her. We never take it any further. I like guys. Older guys, 'cause there's no bullshit."

"How many older guys are you seeing right now?"

Tanya flicked her lit cigarette at my face and it bounced off my collar. Ash spark trailed it to the pavement. "Fuck you, Freight." She turned and walked across the parking lot.

The temptation to leave her in Oshawa overwhelmed me and I began to like my dislike of her. It made me feel safe. I wanted to get home and get to bed so I could work with John all day. Then I would make us burgers, and after burgers we could walk back to the marina for a soft serve twist. Walt could come, too.

I pulled off the main street ten yards ahead of her. She walked casually along the sidewalk with her arms folded over her chest. It was her main move. Her *pretend bitch* position. I rolled the window down and waited until she caught up.

"Tanya."

She stopped and did a little girl half turn in my direction. Her annoyed look had me pushing down a grin.

"Let's go. I'll take you home."

"Why should I?"

"Grow up and stop trying to be a little fucking bitch and get in the fucking car because I have no problem with leaving you here."

Tanya's face softened, but it wanted to drop. I thought she looked a little nervous, and maybe scared.

"Yes or no?" I said.

She walked around the front of the car and climbed in.

The passenger window was all the way down all the way home. Her head back and tilted to catch the wind straight in the face. I kept my eyes on the road for the most part, but every once in a while I stole a quick glance. Until she called me on it.

"I know you're looking."

"Good for you." The nervousness and excitement that began my night was long gone and nowhere to be found.

Tanya lifted her knees and placed her feet over the glove compartment.

"Can you get your shoes off the dash?"

She settled deeper into the seat and crossed her right leg over the left. She rolled her head my way, without letting the back of it leave the headrest.

"I know I got some stuff going on."

"You should try meditating. Might help."

Tanya grinned and it contrasted with the darkness in the car, as if she had a flashlight in her mouth.

"It did, trust me."

We glided along the 115 north, through the unlit section, in silence.

"What do you care?" Tanya said.

"Why do I care?"

"That's right."

"I don't know you that well but I want things to work out for you."

"You do not." She laughed to herself but it sounded like a cackle and I stole a quick look.

"You're just afraid I'll go nuts if you say the wrong thing."

"Tanya, it's hard to know what the wrong thing is."

"So - why - do - you - care?"

"I guess I don't. I don't want anything bad to happen to you, but that's across the board. With everyone, pretty much."

"Feel good to be honest?"

I refused to respond to her childishness trying to feign being grown-up.

We pulled up in front of the furrier's twenty minutes later and I could taste freedom.

She put her hand on the car door handle and turned to me.

"See you," I said. I didn't move. Tanya gave her head the smallest of disappointed shakes, opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk. I had the car out of park and back into drive. She had one hand on the roof and the other on top of the door and let her upper body swing almost back into the cab. She looked me over with her head tilted at an awkward angle.

"I don't have daddy issues if that's what you're thinking."

"It crossed my mind, but who cares."

"Can I be honest with you?"

"Sure." I glanced at the time on the console and Tanya caught it.

"Older guys know how to fuck. They go crazy over young pussy."

"Okay I need to get—"

"All they want to do is lick it, and I love my pussy licked." With that, she gently shut the car door and disappeared behind her street entrance. In the end she won. Something. I sat outside her place for close to five minutes before I was capable of driving again.

Her closing remarks were the gospel. I didn't know it from hands on experience, but whenever I stared at a younger woman the fantasy was always the same.

Thirty Seven

The steering wheel was damp and slick when I pulled into the driveway. I had been sobbing, wiping away tears to make way for the next round and over and over again. I charged in through the backdoor of the cottage as quickly and efficiently as a sobbing man could with my upper body lurched forward in a stumble-run that had me fleetingly miss my mom.

I paced our bedroom. I couldn't stop the crying. Hard tears. Tears of regret, but also tears of change. I didn't know it would feel like this. Letting go. But what was I letting go

of? Was I leaving something behind or watching something leave? Why was I scared and happy? Jesse wanted a different man when she came home and maybe this was it. The change. I thought it must be because it felt immediate. It was strange to feel good and want to vomit, simultaneously.

I had almost ruined my marriage. If I had slept with Tanya, Jess would not have found out but she would have known. Guilt would steer my efforts to make up for something I couldn't tell her, and then she'd know. Remorse is a hollow point.

Thirty Eight

I woke up wanting pancakes, although I think it had more to do with wanting maple syrup and butter in my mouth than it did fried flour. I couldn't locate any syrup in the fridge or the pantry but the closet down the hall went deep and Flip had shelves built that you didn't know existed unless you spread the coats and jackets apart. All of our bulk buys found their way into that closet. Two-for-ones, bathroom tissue sales, canned goods, and, fingers crossed, syrup.

I opened the closet, but that's as far as I got, because Walter pulled my attention away. I could see him through the back door window, lying half on the lawn and half on the drive, his long white tail making slow circles in the grass. It was his worried wag. The wag that hoped everything would work out okay. John stood by the Lexus talking to Jesse, and when he stepped back from the car and looked out over the road, I knew it was trouble. I didn't know what secret had

doubled back to bite me on the ass – and then I did.

I opened the back door and John turned to look at me.

He wore disappointment and sadness. I could see it in his shoulders, and his face. It made him look weathered. And friendless.

I didn't know how affected he could be. He walked up the drive and turned right on the marina road, leaving me stranded to clean up my own mess. Walter didn't follow him.

The back of the car became the beginning of the plank. It would all end on Jesse and I had trouble remembering what she looked like. I stopped by the car door, but I stayed back, in case she clipped my knee cap trying to slam it shut to seal herself from my existence.

I waited for her to speak first. I had that much going for me, and if I had to stand here for half the day waiting, that's what I would do.

Her hand white-knuckled the top of the wheel and then she relaxed it. Then she'd do it again. She looked straight out the windshield, refusing to look at me. Like she was sitting at a red light that would never turn green.

"Mary told me, Freight."

Jess, it was two years ago and—"

"And it's okay now?"

"I don't know. I don't even remember what happened. She said nothing happened. So I let it go."

Oh, you are amazing, letting it go like that. Did you do that for me?"

"Come on, Jess."

"It was my birthday week. Do you remember that part? Because

it was your idea. *Let's make every day this week your birthday. Something special every day.* I knew you wouldn't follow through, but I didn't care. I liked the sentiment. But then you went on a two-day tear."

She delivered all of this to the windshield like a blind woman.

"What did you say to John?"

Her head reared my way with a phantom slap. And her eyes juggled hate and pity.

"Fuck what I said to John. What about what you said to Mary? What about that?"

"I don't know what I said to her."

"You told her that when you made love to me all you could think about was her. And that I would never have to know. You told her intimate things about me. Things that were between us, Freight."

"I don't remember, and I was drunk out of my mind. I never touched her."

"Because she wouldn't let you."

"But she didn't mind listening, did she?"

Jesse began to laugh low and maniacally.

"You bastard."

"What about you?"

"What?"

"This all came about because you sat in some trendy restaurant, and after a few drinks you started bitching about me. *Freight needs to change. I'm so sick of Freight.* Isn't that why you went away? So you could get my stink off you? Don't tell me Mary offered the information. You created the

opening. You told her you didn't want me anymore and that gave her carte fucking blanche. And here I am going to meetings and meditating. All for fucking you. Us."

She began to cry and shake and babble. Spittle shot down her chin and clung to a chain around her neck. I think she said I humiliated her, and something about it happening in public. Finding out from Mary, in public. I moved closer and her hand flew up like a wall between us.

"It's not safe now. I don't feel safe anymore."

She stepped out of the car and walked trance-like to the hatchback rising slowly. She grabbed her bag and her walk to the back door turned into exhaustion.

"I never slept with her and I never would have."

"I'm so proud of you." She closed the door from inside with a back kick.

Walter and I stared at each other for a minute before I left for the marina.

John measured boards. He worked methodically and intentionally. Trying to physically push thoughts of me away. I stood on the dock watching him work, waiting for him to say something.

"Shouldn't I be in the water with you?" I asked.

"I think your time might be better spent with Jesse right now." He looked up at me. "Don't you?"

"Jesse is busy dredging up the past. There's nothing to say until she lets it go. Know what I mean?"

He shook his head. "Time doesn't remove accountability."

"What did she say to you?" At first I didn't think he was

going to tell me, but his decision changed and I saw it on his face. He went from friend to father. But not my father. Jesse's father. And I thought he might hit me. I stepped back and his eyes softened. But his loyalty became clear. I was an outsider all along, like I figured. I had just avoided thinking about it.

"She said she was defending you over something Mary intimated. They'd had a few drinks. But Mary knew things only you could have told her."

"I don't know what to do."

"Go to meetings. Talk to the Chief. Stop your secrets."

"I don't have any secrets."

"You had a woman in my truck."

"I...I drove a lady home after the meditation. It was on my way."

"Meditation?"

"Yes, John."

"You told me you were meeting an AA member for dinner."

"What? They cancelled, and I remembered the meditation night. I was trying to be productive."

"Stop lying. Add that one to your list." And then he went back to peeling out dead boards like I had evaporated.

I didn't know what to do or where to go. My heart ticked in clumps of three and my stomach butterflied as I measured the pros and con of fight or flight and hate or love. John's one-sidedness hurt. A real man would be there for another man, but all he had was a dead girlfriend to compare with. I should have smoked in his truck and then he never would have smelled

Tanya. I tried to do the right thing more than they knew and look where it fucking landed me. My thoughts were reeling and hazy, brimming with falseness. *Truth be told, I had been losing interest in Jesse as of late anyway. Her and her classless friend. The only reason I came on to Mary was because I had no respect for her. She's trailer trash with a rich aunt keeping her in disguise. Fuck them. How could Jesse be friends with someone like that? At least I had an excuse.*

By my fourth pass of the house I took a deep breath and went into the fire. I could feel the vacantness as soon as I stepped in. Loveless and stale. I stopped in the kitchen. I did not know what to do or where to go next. Her luggage sat on the floor by the kitchen chair. It wasn't pushed in like the other three. A piece of paper and a pen were on the table, but the note hadn't been started.

Jesse had the wheelbarrow next to the garden. Weeds and late August die-offs were almost to the rim and I had missed all of it.

How long does it take for weeds to grow? Things were going strangely. Unpleasant sensations were moving below the skin, and I'll be fucked good if they make it to the bone.

I slid the screen open casually but with enough behind it for her to know I was coming out.

"Hi," she said.

"Hey," I said.

"I want you to do me a favour. And I just want you to do it. I don't want a discussion."

"You want me to apologize to Mary?"

"Don't guess." I think she cringed or maybe made tight

fists. I couldn't tell because her hands were in the garden. She worked and talked and never looked up at me.

"I want you to move out."

"What?"

"I want you to move out." The second time sounded accommodating.

"For how long?"

"I don't know. I need some distance." Finally she looked up. "See, I don't like you. I need some time."

"Okay. I could stay with John for a bit."

She looked over at the guest cottage and then back to me.

"Don't be stupid, Freight."

"Are we done?"

"Sure."

"I mean us. Are we finished? Because it feels that way."

I don't know. I don't want that. But I cannot be around you right now."

"Come on, Jess. Give me a chance. It's me. Us. It happened a long time ago and it could never happen today."

"Never?"

"Never." Did John tell her about Tanya being in the truck? Would he have done that to me?

"I'm anxious, Freight. I feel sick a lot. Sometimes I wake up and wonder what you're going to do to my day. What kind of mood you're going to be in."

"We have good days."

"A good day is ten seconds out of my life. I want a good marriage."

"I'm trying, Jess."

"I guess so. But I'm tired of the trying. And being supportive. And getting push back. It's boring, Freight."

I could feel the onset of a panic attack surfacing and I squashed it down with some deep breaths. Part of me wanted to use it to manipulate my way back into her heart, but another part of me was terrified that in her heart, I was beginning to blur.

"I have been thinking about doing thirty meetings in thirty days. Really get the culture back in my—"

"Stay in a hotel until you find a place to live," she said to the garden.

I packed a suitcase and some toiletries and went back out to the deck with my bag in tow.

"This what you really want?" I had cried upstairs and I didn't care if I wore the residual. I wanted her to know. She was breaking me and she needed to see it.

"I think so."

"You need to be sure about this. What if we lose each other?"

"You can take my car today but set up a second lease right away."

I pinched the deck railing with my fingertips until my temples hurt. There wasn't anything left to say. Nothing I could say would make a difference. Turning back time would only make it worse.

"You're sending me out to drink. But I think you know that."

She collapsed, dropping to her knees, and the broken stem of a bell flower jabbed the outside corner of her eye.

"Jess, are you okay?"

"Get out!"

I walked out of my marriage wondering how I knew it to be a bell flower.

Thirty Nine

The Roadside Tavern, up Highway 7, on the outskirts of Norwood, had a big long sign along the length of the building. I remember it being a gas station at one time. The pumps were gone, but the little pay hut that kept the attendants dry still stood in the middle of the lot. A farmer sold produce out of it now. And flowers. And maple syrup. And apple cider. The hut was closed and maybe only open on weekends, but I couldn't be sure because I didn't know what day it was.

I lit a smoke and waited outside the entrance for a change of heart. My higher power slept. There might have been a peep, but if there was, it sounded feeble. Maybe He was sick and sent the tooth fairy in to cover.

The tavern was empty, poorly lit, and safe. The pool table on my left had a nice tear in it, and a patron had shoved a snooker ball under the felt which raised the material, making it look more severe. Probably to remind the owner to fix the fucking thing.

My soles squawked off the sticky floor, compliments of Mister Lager and his lighter brother Ale. I chuckled to myself. If I were barefoot, walking on this floor might qualify as a slip. A near beer slip. Nut shells crunched as I

moved in close to the bar, which was short, intimate and loveable. There were four leather stools on the patron side. But only two had wooden backs. I picked the least stained out of the four, but I did it on the move because stopping to look over the stools would have been prissy. My stool was backless. I arched my ass up onto the side of the round seat and slid over and in. I heard the air push out of a hole in the cushion as I sunk an inch or two into place, just like the position memory feature on the Lexus.

I didn't know how this would go. I'd played it over in my head a million and a half times, but this was better. In my head I would be crying and scared. But this was good, and I knew it would be a short run. Hopefully the lesson would land on Jesse and John. The price of abandonment.

I made little circles on the bar with my elbows, something I had never done before, and then rested my chin on my knuckles and waited.

A young guy pushed through the kitchen door close to the back. I figured he was the owner's son. Maybe twenty-one, no more than twenty-three.

"Sorry about that. You been waiting long?" he said as he moved around the back tables to behind the bar.

"Not too long."

"What can I get you?"

"Do you have lime cordial?"

"Lager and lime?"

"Hit me."

The kid worked out of a pattern. Ritual. He didn't need to look at anything he touched. He could have found the glass,

the bottle of cordial, and the draught tap with his eyes closed. I fixated on him until he caught me and my eyeline quickly dropped to the bar. I hoped he didn't interpret the horny look on my face for anything other than a man wanting a drink.

I stayed off of him until the glass hit the oak.

"Thanks."

The kid nodded and moved back to the taps. He grabbed the grate from the beer trap and began rinsing it in the sink.

The hops and the lime filled my mouth with tang and made the flesh pucker behind my top two molars closest to the back of my throat. I resisted swallowing for a moment. It wasn't a slip yet.

Then it was.

Two pints in, Tom and I started talking. I was right about it being his dad's place. His mom died five years earlier and his sisters lived in Toronto. The old man was visiting the girls and Tom had the place to himself.

"I don't even have to go home. My dad has an apartment upstairs."

"That's convenient." I winked. He had cougar bait written all over him.

"What are the women like that come in here?"

"Mostly older."

"Do you take them upstairs once in a while?"

"No, they're your age. I have a girlfriend anyway. She's a waitress here on weekends."

Forty

Tanya floated across the sticky floor like a dirty princess. And when Tom, somewhat embarrassed, asked her for an age of majority card, she bent over and pulled two pieces of identification from the inside of her ankle sock, held flush by a fat yellow elastic band. It happened to be the same colour as the flash of thong she made sure to nail me with while bending over.

Tanya ordered a glass of red wine and Tom excused himself when the bottle he produced wasn't up to snuff. It had only been open for, he figured, three days.

"We have more in the back."

Her groin started grinding my knee while Tom was still a vapour trail and then our lips made the jumper cable connection. It fired up the middle but stalled my legs and I had to put one hand on the bar to stay steady.

She pulled away as quickly as she came in and then she smiled. I knew the smile because I had been fucked up by smiles like that before.

She didn't wipe my glaze from her lips or under her nose and it didn't look like it would dry before Tom came back.

"You still want to lick me?"

I said yes from a part of my throat, way in the back, that I didn't know could speak.

I needed to get shit-faced, and I did. Tanya questioned me about the drinking only once, because my bark was intense and she didn't want to spoil the promise the latter part of the evening held.

I stepped away from the bar and made a call to a guy. I couldn't believe how easy it was to step back in. Almost like I never left. When I came back to the bar Tanya had a pout on but it wasn't a toxic pout like the other one. This one wanted assurance and attention. Easy peasy.

"Called your wife?"

"No, a friend. We need to stop at his place."

"I'm not into that."

I laughed. "Don't be stupid. I'm making a pick up." I almost called it the *white mistress*. It's what I always called cocaine.

PART TWO

Forty One

199 days later —

I stumbled out of the entranceway onto Hunter Street before the furrier could land a third punch between my shoulder blades. I spun around and made a couple of feeble air punches. The second one grazed my own chin.

I was beyond drunk, moving into the pseudo sober place. Not yet remorseful and not ready to die, but on the train and

needing to get off before it left the station.

"You tossed out the wrong psycho," I said.

"One's better than two. If you show your face here again I'll call the police."

The furrier was shaking. I didn't think he punched people very often, and never one of his tenants.

"I did not rape her."

"I know that or else the police would already be here. But you're feeding her drugs and booze and she has enough problems." He tapped the side of his head aggressively. "So you're still an old piece of shit. Now fuck off."

"I need my clothes."

"Have someone pick them up at my store."

"What am I supposed to do until then?"

"I'm calling the police."

He reached into his pant pocket.

"All right. Relax." I reached into my front pocket and tossed Tanya's key on the ground by his feet. That's what he would have told me to do anyway. I could tell that the risk of touching my hand would be like eating spoiled meat.

I made my way west on Hunter, but I couldn't walk properly. My motor skills were mixing up the signals and commands. I took careful baby steps that finally morphed into a guy trying to avoid icy patches on a sidewalk, but there wasn't any snow on the ground. I needed to be wired. Coke highs were fragile highs that needed to be nurtured and maintained, and the furrier killed what was left of mine with his violent outburst.

Now that I had calmed down some and things were opening up, the slice just above my right eyebrow began to leak and blur my vision. Tanya had come at me with a butter knife and the choice of weapon didn't have me take her seriously. I screamed *do it* to her face, and she did. My back was beginning to ache too, even though the punches were insignificant.

My nose felt raw and sore to the touch. Four straight days of snorting could do that to a guy, and I could not remember the last time I slept.

Tanya reminded me of cocaine. Tanya was cocaine. The first time was the best and everything else became about searching for a repeat performance that would never be. Strangely, the best with Tanya wasn't the first time we did it. It was the first time I spoke with her at Starbucks. That fleeting thought made me feel human. And feeling human made me want to get high again. I ever-so-gently removed the little baggie from my shirt pocket and held it in front of my blood-free eye. Empty. I tore it inside out and licked out the white resin. My lips went numb for no more than two or three minutes.

I stopped by a wooden telephone pole for support. I had trouble keeping my balance and the pole gave me a couple of nice splinters that went deep into the palm of my right hand. The centre of my back was beginning to throb so much so that I could only shoulder-lean into the pole, and that still was barely enough to stay vertical. I took out my cell and scrolled through my contacts. I squinted, moving quickly through the Js.

The number I needed never made it to my contact list. Shit!

Then I remembered, and pulled my wallet out. Addicts never lose their phones or their wallets. In the deepest crevice of my wallet, I found the little folded twisted piece of paper, about the size of a Post-it note. Only it wasn't yellow, it was white. Just a number. No name, above or below.

"Yes?"

Hi. Is this...this is Freight. You said to call if...Hello?"

"Are you drunk, Freight?"

"Yeah, kind of. But I need—"

"Call me when you are sober. Then I'll know you need something."

Then the line went dead. The motherfucker hung up on me.

Forty Two

The following morning I came to on the floor of someone's garage with a kitten on my chest. He had raw meat breath and I gently moved him away, rolled onto my side, and threw up blood, bile, and half-digested french fries that I did not remember eating.

The neighbourhood was low rent. An Ontario Housing development for sure. I hustled over the dead uncut lawn until it changed into a dilapidated sidewalk with all the curbs worn, making the entire street seem like one big driveway entrance. Nobody was around, and even if they were, I don't think they would have paid much attention to me.

Indian summer had made the last appearance more than a week

ago and the fall air had a chill behind it as I walked. I was cold, and sad.

I pulled out my phone, but I could not find the piece of paper with the number on it, which put me into a panic. I stood at the corner of a busy intersection with my front pockets hanging inside out, reaching and patting myself down, including the tops of my socks. Then I remembered *recent call display*.

He picked up on the first ring and that made me feel cared for.

"You sober?"

"I guess."

"You are calling for help?"

"Yes." And I began to cry.

"Good man, Freight. Good man."

I sat waiting in a breakfast house on King called Two Bits, drinking cup after cup of old burnt coffee. I couldn't remember the last time I had a decent cup of joe. Jesse and John were walking around in my head and I could not get them to walk somewhere else. Sorrow is so underrated. Very few people know it's depth. Or that it sleeps until self-pity, hostility, and confusion have killed off enough days, and all the love that went with them. Then it opens one grinning eye and says *you ain't seen nothin' yet, pally*.

A blue rusted-out Taurus swung into the parking lot. I dropped three bucks on the table and walked outside.

The driver's door opened and Chief Whetung's head popped up

over the roof.

"I hope you can drive because I do not have a license."

I nodded. The Chief came around the front of the car and patted my chest gently. "You don't look very nice," he told me.

We drove to Scugog Island with all the windows down because the Chief said I smelled like rotting garbage. Like garbage wasn't bad enough, I had to be rotting. Even with the windows down, twice he needed to stick his head out. And the wind stole all the time from his face while it blew my stink off him.

If the leathery, over-baked pickerel the Chief served me for dinner was some kind of harbinger for the suffering ahead, the 24-hour desire-to-stop-drinking chip, followed by the jaded applause, made it real.

I stood off to the side away from the others. I had a cigarette in my left hand, wishing a double rum and Coke were in my right. Some members came directly to me and shook my hand. The ones with more sobriety patted my shoulder. One woman got in close and bumped a clumsy kiss off my cheek. Her breath smelled like Creme de Menthe. I wanted to have sex with her and suck on her lips the entire time.

I could turn away now. Leave. The Chief would look for me but if I stayed in the high grass to the left of the soft shoulder — or better, the ditch — it would be impossible to spot me. I had money. Jesse retracted on the lease agreement once she found out I was drinking again, but I had my own

account with some money in it. I could get a little place and slowly wean myself out of this life and into a new one. Not the old one, but a new better one. And if I had the odd drink, maybe only on weekends, I wouldn't be any different than anyone else. Maybe even better, and wiser.

The Chief came out and bounced down the stairs like a kid.

"Let's go, Drunky Joe."

I followed a few steps behind, and tossed my cigarette butt at the back of his pants, knowing he wouldn't notice. "Do you have to keep calling me that?"

The Chief stopped and spun around with the same energy that brought him down the stairs.

"No." He patted the side of my arm, gently. He seemed to me to be beaming.

The Chief didn't ask me to be his driver. I assumed it now because he kept getting in on the passenger side. I climbed behind the wheel and shot him a forced grin and he winked, but held it in a way that made his face look crooked. Like maybe he had Bells Palsy or something.

"Do you scare kids with that face?"

"I have something in my tooth." Then his face settled. "Let's go to Port Perry for a coffee and a donut."

The drive down Island Road was a dark one, with the CBC on quietly in the background.

"Why don't you have a license?" I asked.

"I let it expire."

"Why?"

"I drove over my cat."

"Drunk?"

The Chief nodded. "She slept in the wheel wells in the winter. I always checked. One time I didn't and I crushed her and her unborn litter. "Only drove once since then." I looked over at him in surprise.

"Thanks."

The Chief nodded. "You can buy me a sour cream glazed."

He grabbed a seat by the window facing the parking lot and the main drag just beyond. I put a box of donuts in between us and he slid the box around to peak inside.

"Woo weee," he said.

A dozen donuts, and three of them were sour cream glazers. He opened the box all the way and stared down at the doughy wheels.

"It never stops. We only transfer addictions," he said, and I laughed quietly.

"I have been sober twenty years and I will have five of these." He bit into the first one and it wasn't a sour cream, it was a chocolate dip.

"I thought you wanted sour cream. I bought three of them."

"See what I mean?" The Chief said through a mouthful of donut. The chocolate partially covered the outside of one nostril.

"Women, donuts – I want different ones all the time." He took another bite. "No porn though. Or gambling. They are death slips waiting to happen." Another bite. "There is no indignity in dying from a donut."

I laughed again, not so quietly. Then I stared out the window for a while.

"I guess I need a sponsor now."

"You're talking from the bush. Stop it. Say what you want and if it's stupid I'll let you know."

I was beginning to think the Chief was a mind reader. And that he could see me through rocks.

"Would you sponsor me?"

The Chief leaned back in his chair and took his coffee with him.

"I like coffee in a mug. It feels like a luxury. Makes me feel safe. To-go cups make me feel like a transient. I don't know why and I don't care to know. The weight of it just feels better." He held up the mug, turned it in his hand, and carefully put it back on the table. "How is your cut?"

I touched the bandage. "Tender."

A reservation RN came over and patched me up. She used dissolvable stitches but there would be a scar to go with the memory.

"Young girl was crazy?"

I nodded. "Bipolar, and depression."

"Did you make it worse?"

I nodded again.

"I'll do it," the Chief said.

"Do what? Be my sponsor?"

He nodded into another bite and I exhaled. I tried to keep it subtle but I believe he knew he had me trapping a breath.

"First ninety days you can stay in the spare bedroom. After that you can look for a place to live."

"I appreciate that but I was thinking maybe I would go back home. See if Jesse would let me stay in one of the spare rooms

until I am back on my feet."

"You're insane. This is why you'll stay with me."

"I'm not insane."

"Think about what you just now said. I want to see if the woman, whose life I ruined, is open to more punishment."

"She told me to leave. I didn't want to."

"To be clear, Freight, you watched her walk away."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"It will."

All this between bites of donut.

"Have you talked to John, lately?"

He took too long to answer and it made me anxious.

"Now that you want sobriety you think you want everything else back. I don't think it's possible and it is not important."

"You're not telling me something."

"John moved to Oxtongue Lake to be with his father. Your wife has been staying in Toronto."

"What are you talking about?"

"John left three months ago. Jesse left, maybe four months ago."

I drilled my palms into my eye sockets to make it all go away. Getting near to the loss of time felt like breaks screeching. I craned my neck back and the crack was audible.

"It's good to cry, Freight."

I put my wet hands back on the table, and then more tears began to brim over my eyelids.

"It's been almost seven months since I left. She called me so many times that I changed my number. What have I done?"

WhathaveIdone?"

"What we're best at."

"Is she with someone?"

"Ah, those are drinking questions. Maybe she is. I don't know. What does it have to do with you?"

"She's my wife."

"Not anymore."

"What happened?" I went for a napkin and toppled the dispenser trying to get it out. I ended up with ten or twelve napkins in one hand and I wiped my eyes with all of them.

"They loved you and you ruined everything. But it's not your fault. Next time it will be, but not this time."

"I wanna go to sleep," I told the table top.

The Chief finished his coffee, put the box of donuts under his arm, and we walked out together.

He stopped at the back of the car. The trunk pinged and thumped under his weight. He sat on the end and let his legs dangle over the bumper. I thought he looked like a little kid.

"Have a smoke and I'll have a donut."

I lit up and took deep draws.

"Freight. What you want now won't be what you want six months from now. And if it is the same, you'll want it differently. So differently, you'll think it's the first time wanting it. But you don't believe it now so you need to trust me on this."

"I'll try."

"Try as hard as you can."

Forty Three

The Chief's place was small and homey. Cosy. Safe. My first visit, earlier in the day, was a foggy one. I didn't notice the outside or the inside.

His cabin nestled maybe fifteen feet behind Lake Scugog. It wasn't a great body of water and not swimmable by my standards. Too much goose poo looking to become e coli. Lake Scugog sounded too inflated for a shit pond. Scugog Lake would have made a lot more sense.

We stood at the tip of the very narrow dock that jutted out twenty feet from the shoreline. It was tipsy turvy. One of those that had you overcompensating your footing to the end and back. Some docks were easier to navigate drunk. This was one of them.

"Fisherman's dream," I said, looking up and down the weedy shoreline, with help from the moon. "It's what real estate agents say when the swimming is terrible."

"Is that true?"

I nodded. "Yup."

"I have lived here all my life. I remember my mother reminding me to take a salt shaker whenever I went for a swim."

"Why?"

"Bloodsuckers. Not so much now, but when I was little it was nothing to come out of the water with half a dozen on you. Salt made them shrivel and then they would fall off."

"I want to see Jesse." I turned to him. "For a few minutes."

"Do you like to read?"

"Yes."

"I love to read. I have an extensive library."

"You mean AA books."

"I hate those books. Sometimes I think I got really sober so I would not have to read them anymore."

"Honest?"

"Yes, but don't get excited. I have twenty years. You have twenty minutes."

I sighed. I didn't mean for it to end loudly and dramatically. "What books do you have?"

Our master bedroom was bigger than the inside of the cabin. Every thought going through my head had Jesse, and life with Jesse, poking through it. I felt like a crazed cat pouncing over moving toes under a blanket. I didn't want to let the thoughts go, but they were frustrating because I couldn't move on them. I couldn't go home.

In the middle of the room perched an airtight Woodsman stove with a big silver insulated pipe attached that went up through the rafters. The Chief warned me not to walk into it in the dark. Hot or cold, it would hurt like hell. The tiny square formica-topped kitchen table sat three and was pushed up under a window facing the road out back. I noticed the walls had thin knotty pine panelling with some pressboard patchwork where a drunken fist had probably lashed out at nothing. I slid my finger down one panel and rubbed the smoke grease between my index and thumb.

The lime green couch along the wall and next to the table marked the divide between living room and kitchen, and across

from the couch, sitting on a small scratched pine stool, was a small Fisher television. The Chief caught me smiling at it.

"I might be the only one on the reservation without a flat screen." I couldn't detect pride or let down in his delivery. He didn't seem like a TV person to me.

There was very little leg room between the coffee table and the couch and I could tell the table doubled as a workstation because he had a fly-making kit laid out on it.

"May I?" I asked. The Chief nodded enthusiastically. I picked up a large one with a rich mustard-coloured feather tied around the end. It camouflaged the hook beautifully. Enough for me to stick myself.

"This is really good." I nodded and smiled at the lure. "John does this too."

"Who do you think taught him?"

"His mom?"

"Smart ass."

"Is he good at it?"

The Chief shrugged.

I went into a three-yawn spasm and the Chief gave me a tap on the ass. "Tomorrow. Today is done." And he led me to the bedroom door off of the living room.

I couldn't believe I made it through the day, but I always believed drunks had strong constitutions or we'd all be dead.

I lay on top of the sheets with the duvet half on the floor and half on the bed. It was an old blanket and I could see some of the quills coming up for air. The anticipation of its warmth made me chilly so I tugged and dragged it over my chest and under my chin.

The single bed sucked my middle into the middle, but I liked it. The bed would let me out when I was ready. I tilted my head back and looked at a framed slogan on the wall. It was upside down but easy to read. The big black and red cartoon letters yelled 'EXPECT MIRACLES!' It was a little too Tony Robbins for me, under the circumstances. I would have preferred a more subtle sign. YOU CAN, or DON'T LOOK BACK. FUCK THEM IF THEY CAN'T TAKE A JOKE would have been nice, too.

The only miracle I wanted was her. Beside me.

He'd left a book on my end table, under the little lamp with the totem pole stand. *A Farewell to Arms*.

Forty Four

I woke up to the lamp still glowing and the book open on my chest.

I didn't remember dreaming that Jesse and John were dead until my legs hit the cold floor. My skin had a sheen of dried sticky sweat over it. Mostly my neck around the back and over my Adam's apple. My chest hair felt a little damp to the touch as well. I chalked it up to the last year of hard living trying to seep out.

The smell of pancakes, bacon, and burning wood put a skip in my step. I opened the bedroom door, not quite wide enough, and managed to rattle the back of my hand on the door knob, then quickly compensated by scraping my elbow over the coarse wood of the unfinished frame on the other side.

The Chief flipped two thick pancakes and turned over his shoulder.

"Did you find a fifth under your pillow or something?" he said.

"Or something," I replied.

I sat down at the table and then the dream came back clearly. "Something happened to Jesse and John. I need to talk to one of them."

"Who told you this?"

"I...I had a dream. A premonition."

"It's an honour to be sponsoring an oracle." He slid a plate in front of me and sat down with his.

I woke up kind of happy and hungry. Now all I wanted to do was crawl back into bed.

"Years ago I worked as a tracker up in Blind River. Mostly white businessmen that liked hunting more than they did their families. Rich businessmen. I trained them to listen to the breeze. If you want to know where the deer are, listen to the breeze. Then some other native trackers got wind of what I was doing and they did it too." He smiled mischievously.

"You were messing with them?"

"Yes."

"So it doesn't work?"

"That's right."

"Why did you do it?"

"They were slobs. I felt I owed it to their families to make them look stupid. I guess I was a little bored, too."

"That's a good story."

"Thank you." He reached out for my hand and closed his eyes. With our hands joined, I closed my eyes, too.

"Give us clear eyes and clean hands."

The Chief went at his food like a coyote. All I could do was witness.

"What?" He finally looked up.

"I thought I was a pig."

The Chief waved his fork around the room and over the top of his head.

"Do you see anyone in here we need to impress?"

I shook my head and began eating. The Chief released an enormous fart and the sound reverberated off the seat of the wooden chair. He smiled through the chews. "Eat up and then we'll have donuts."

"I don't want a donut. It's too early for a donut."

The Chief mumbled something. I think he asked me if the food was good.

"Yeah. Thank you." They were the best pancakes I had ever tasted.

"Have you ever been to a closed meeting?"

"No."

"I want you to go to one this morning."

"Aren't you going?"

"No, I have a council meeting."

I thought you weren't the Chief anymore."

"Chief of advice."

"I can take the car?"

The Chief made a loud *haw* sound. "Mike Paudash will pick you up and wait outside for you."

"He's not a member?"

"He's a member of my family. Nephew. I need to bring the dock in today. Will you help me?"

I nodded.

Mike Paudash barely spoke, and he looked like a scrapper. He didn't seem like the stupid kind, though. It made me nervous. I had to ride in the back seat because of the big shepherd riding shotgun. The dog stared at me all the way to the United Church parking lot. I felt like I was in the back seat of a K9 unit.

We pulled into the parking lot and Mike Paudash parked, and then he took a book out of the glove compartment.

"Where do I go in?" I was talking to the dog still staring at me.

"Round back."

"Thanks." I stepped out of the back seat. It was a chilly morning and a chillier ride because Mike had the driver's window all the way down – but I had showered and knew it couldn't be because of me.

I zipped up the knitted sweater the Chief lent me. It had silvery satin lining inside and the whole thing weighed about six pounds. A six pound sweater with a bison embroidered on the back. He was smiling before he had it out of the closet and off the hanger. And not in a thoughtful way either.

"Hey, Buffalo Soldier."

I stopped and turned around. Mike had his elbow out the window, and the dog was now lying over his lap with its black 3D snout resting next to the elbow.

"He said if you take off to let the dog out of the car."

"Chief said that?" I said it like it was all one word.

Mike Paudash looked at me, and past me, like I was a complete idiot to think it could have come from anyone else.

The steps were narrow and short. They led down to a little burgundy-coloured door in the ground. My first closed bunker meeting. The concrete stairs were chipped and each step sent bits of rubble onto the one below it.

I opened the door with hesitation. I think it must have been one of those doors that needed to be opened quickly if you didn't want to draw attention to yourself. The door announced my presence with a dead grating squeal.

A young guy with separated teeth stepped out from behind the door. Just the upper row were separated, but the spaces were wide enough that if he wanted to floss with butcher twine, it wouldn't be a problem.

"Welcome. Don L."

"Hi, I'm Freight."

Don L made a half turn and waved over the room, like I was buying a used car. "Grab a coffee. We'll be starting in about five minutes."

I went straight into the church kitchen. It looked like a sterile out-of-date operating room. Or an up-to-date veterinary clinic. But they all do. I slid out a styrofoam cup from the top of the stack. "Morning!"

My hand jumped and the stack toppled to the floor. The big loud older man laughed on his way over to help me pick up the cups.

This kind of screw-up made me look like a shaky newcomer. I could live with the latter, but not the former.

I picked up the three stray cups from the floor and the older man grabbed the half tower, still on the counter, and set it upright next to the coffee urn.

"Sorry about that. Should I throw these out?"

"Naw. Floor dirt can't take us down. Ed McCabe." Ed put out his big meaty mitt and I shook it.

"I break my anonymity 'cause if a drunk's reaching out he'll have a hell of a time finding Ed M in the phone book."

This wasn't the first time I had heard this said — but each member tried to deliver it like they owned it, and the outcome added up to a lot of bad acting.

"I'm Freight."

"Freight?"

I nodded. "It's short for Fred. Kind of." I was saved by the bell, literally.

Counting myself, there were five of us, and all men. We were sitting around a square fold-out table in fold-out chairs. The kind that snip the tips of your fingers off when you reach down to pull yourself closer to the table. If this meeting went beyond sixty minutes the lower part of my back would be spot-welded to the seat.

Ed began the meeting. "We will go around the room and introduce ourselves. My name is Ed McCabe and I am *definitely* an alcoholic."

Here we go.

He winked at me and everyone felt compelled to smile at me and I hated my life to the fucking core.

"I'm Don and I'm an alcoholic."

"Peter, alcoholic."

"I'm an alcoholic and my name is Josh."

Peter and Josh looked like they could be brothers, but maybe not. They shared long chins with very little cheekbone to speak of.

Everyone was staring at me, waiting. Some politely, others scoldingly.

"Oh, I'm Freight. I'm an alcoholic." More shaky new guy admittance.

Ed spoke. "I guess this is it for today, so we'll get going." He looked at his watch. "We do this here meeting popcorn style. Anyone can share but we avoid cross talk. And don't give me medical advice or I'll throw this at you." He held up the Big Book and smiled with a rehearsed snarl. Everyone chuckled. The chuckles were respectful and slightly robotic, as if on cue. "I know I'm fat and I know my heart don't like it." I figured we were taking the heat for a nagging spouse.

The room fell silent. Everyone looked down at the table. Josh looked over the front and back of one hand. Ed put his head back, folded his arms over his chest and closed his eyes.

Don spoke. "Don, alcoholic. I had a pretty good night. I think my mom's starting to trust me more. She's not bitching all the time. We watched a movie together last night and she made turnovers. Apple. It was nice. My brother is still out there though. Sometimes he comes home, sometimes he doesn't. I'm trying to do everything I said I would do so my mom has someone she can trust. I'm pretty sure my brother stays at our

dad's a lot. Last week, I know I already said this, but he came home with his eye swollen shut. So I guess the old man got into it. Well, they both did."

Ed coughed, but it was more of a bark and the shrillness of it made me wince. He followed it up with a loud dry hack.

Don finished up. "Anyway, I'm doing okay."

"You're forgetting the most important part," Josh said.

Don smiled sheepishly. "Next month will be my one year."

They clapped.

Peter cleared his throat. "I'm Peter, alcoholic. Doin' good too. I've been around a while now. I'd like to meet someone, but I try not to focus on that too much. One day at a time. My ex is pretty serious about this new guy. It was hard at first, but I needed the closure. Makes a lot of money and my girls seem to really like him, so maybe I'm lucky. I'm thinking of asking out Josh's sister."

"Over my dead body," Josh said. Both men laughed.

"Watch the cross talk," Ed reminded.

The room fell silent. I didn't want to talk and they needed to know that now. Or maybe I did. "I think I would like to listen. That's all."

"You an alcoholic?" Ed said it with a dose of sarcasm.

I threw him a violent glance. It was fleeting, but enough to ice the room for a few seconds.

"Yeah, sorry. I'm Freight and I am an alcoholic."

"Never again." I couldn't stop pacing the shoreline, the water splashing the cuffs of my pants. "Pathetic fucks. A guy's eating turnovers with his mom in front of the television. Another guy thinks he's lucky because his wife started screwing someone else. Holy shit."

The Chief had hip waders on and was knee deep along the shore, pulling out the support poles that secured the dock.

"Your wife is gone. So is your best friend. Now you live with an old Indian with bad table manners. How are you any different?"

"Well, I don't think I'm lucky, that's for sure."

The Chief howled out laughter, and eventually I could not resist smiling. It felt good to hear someone not taking me as seriously as I was taking myself.

"I like you, Freight."

We spent most of the afternoon getting the dock in and carrying the sections to the side of the cabin, where we stacked them in snug to the outer wall. The Chief was adamant that they be stacked on the north side, and even though it made the job a little harder, it cut the edge off the cold winter wind that pounded that wall. The cold wind, he said, that liked to challenge the airtight stove.

Once inside, the cabin warmth felt good on my back. It liked me, but I needed to get out of my wet pants so the warmth could love me.

"Any donuts left?" I asked.

"No."

I shook my head at him, but I don't think he caught it. Then

I disappeared behind my bedroom door.

I stripped off my wet jeans. An old powder blue housecoat, that looked more like a hook rug or maybe shag carpeting, hung on a wooden peg behind the door. It wasn't there earlier. I put it on and it was as heavy as the buffalo soldier sweater.

I came out of my room to the Chief sitting at the kitchen table contemplating the lines on the back of each hand like they held a code or a secret message.

"This girl, Tanya, has my clothes. She has my suitcase."

"Better to buy new ones," he said, staying on the hands.

"Yeah. Probably is."

"If I can't go I'll get Mike to take you into Port Perry to buy some boxer shorts and socks. Maybe a shirt. You can pick out underwear together." The Chief chuckled to himself.

I shook the kettle and then filled it with water.

"Put it on the wood stove. It'll boil quickly," he said.

The old kettle, the wood stove, and this stupid housecoat were the trappings for what was going to be a damn good cup of tea. I just knew it.

"Your nephew Mike is a bit of a stiff."

"What does stiff mean?"

"Doesn't say much. No personality. Threatens people with his dog."

"He doesn't trust you."

"'Cause I'm white?"

"No, because you are a stupid drunk." The Chief stepped on the toe of one boot and lifted his leg up until his foot was halfway out. Then he sat in the kitchen chair and pulled it

all the way off. He pointed the other foot at me and I proceeded to slide it off.

"Thank you. What was it like being with a woman half your age?"

I laughed. "Seriously?"

"Yes."

"Like the dirty stuff?"

"The reference level."

"What do you mean?"

"How do you chat with someone that knows only a little?"

"At first it was okay but after a while I wanted her to shut up."

"I find people that know the least talk the most. All the time. Gab, gab, gab."

"Well, you're right in this case. She thought she had a bead on life, but she didn't."

"You have to listen if you want her to keep taking her clothes off."

"Yeah."

"Painful. But young women have beautiful skin."

I nodded.

"I can see the skin being a draw."

I nodded again.

"They're not great lovers. Not like older women."

I didn't want to talk about it anymore and the Chief dependably picked up on it.

"Do you like a good pirogi?" he said.

"Who doesn't?"

The Chief took the car keys out of his pocket and threw them

up to me.

"Your treat."

"I paid for the donuts and coffee."

"Your people owe us."

Forty Six

One month in —

I kept sticking my hand in my pocket to make sure it was still there, pinching it between my thumb and my forefinger. I had made it through forty meetings in thirty days, and a sense of pride came along with it. A pride I could not, for the life of me, remember feeling at any other time in my life. It would be great to talk to Jess tonight before bed. I wanted to tell her about the chip in the bottom of my pocket. But no one ever answered the cottage line, and there was no voicemail anymore. All that hollow ringing made me feel like the saddest man alive. I tried her cell phone a few times and each time this obnoxious teenager yelled *What's up?* into my ear. I guessed her old number had been recycled, just like me.

Some of the members hung back for the AA monthly business meeting, and although I was now an official member of the Friendship Group, and had been for a while, I opted out of the business part. I went to one, but everybody took the business meetings too seriously. They all acted so significant until the Chief told them to shut up so he could go and eat a donut. I stood out front chain smoking, waiting for him to finish.

The doors finally opened and the Chief stepped out with three other members. He was joyous and loud. "There's my boy." He floated down the stairs and hugged me for probably the third, maybe fourth time that day. The other three members smiled, but they were getting sick of it. Jealous. Attention from Chief Whetung was coveted, but I didn't feel bad for winning. I did not care one iota about what they thought. I loved the hugs. My distance was only a cover up and I rarely felt sorry for myself in the Chief's space. It felt like I didn't have a right to feel pity when I was with him. An insult to his efforts maybe? Fuck, I don't know. Who knows?

We strolled through the parking lot like we didn't have a care in the world. This was the first time we had been alone since I picked up my thirty-day chip. The one in my pocket that I couldn't stop touching.

"How does it feel?" the Chief asked.

"It's okay I guess."

"You son-of-a-bitch."

I laughed. "It feels pretty damn good."

"Enjoy it. And know it might get harder. It might not. But it might, all the same. We should celebrate a little."

"Let me guess. A donut."

"I was going to say a cake but donuts are fine too."

"I have put on fifteen pounds since I met you and your donut addiction." And I really had, but it was good weight. Safe, warm, and tasty.

We climbed into the Taurus and drove out of the parking lot.

Forty Seven

I woke up and stretched my arm over the bedside table and gently padded the top with my fingertips. I brushed over Hemingway, the thirty-day chip, a cup-less saucer, and finally my cell phone. I lifted it straight up, to avoid taking anything else along with it, and held it above my head. I pushed the home button. Three in the fucking morning. I pointed the glare from the phone towards the totem lamp and pulled the chain. I got my pillow propped up against the headboard and sat up in bed, thinking. Thinking. Thinking.

How could it go away so quickly? The joy and possibility of earlier had packed up and moved on. And now hurt, regret, and guilt had signed the new lease in my head.

The Chief rattled around quietly in the cabin and I found it comforting. It didn't take the sting out, but it helped. The Chief had insomnia at least two times out of seven and would work on his flies through the night, and I always looked forward to what I would find on the coffee table in the morning. Seemed like I was benefitting from his sleeplessness. Another thing to feel guilty about.

"Hey, keep it down out there or else I'll call the cops," I said. The movement stopped and I didn't hear him move closer to the door until he spoke into the crack.

"You need to talk?"

His voice sounded boxed in and the thought of his face tucked into the corner of the door was endearing.

"Do you have clothes on?"

"Yes."

"Enter."

This wasn't our first nighttime vigil and the frequency finally had the Chief put a small stool in the corner – ready to be pulled out.

"You jinxed me," I said.

"Remorse?"

I had to recall the meaning of the word, which, fleetingly, made me wonder if it could be the onset of wet brain, to go along with all my other upsets.

"Yes, remorse." Emotion started to balloon. "Jesse has a dog named Walter." I brought my hand up to my eyes and pressed my thumb and middle finger into the outside corners, but the drops were already rolling over the skin of my fingers.

"I didn't treat him nicely. One time I hit him. I can't get it out of my head. It keeps replaying and it feels like I did it again each time. He was a good dog, you know? Really nice. His fur felt thick and nice."

The Chief smiled and nodded thoughtfully. Authentically.

"I think you were meant to be sober."

"Aren't we all?"

"No. Some people should drink everyday. They're ugly and unbearable in a dry state. But not you."

"Why not me?"

"I told you that it might get tough. It came sooner than I thought." He laughed, because we only talked about it ten hours ago.

"I don't feel like having a drink. Not right now."

The Chief shook his head slowly. "That's not what I meant."

There's an order to things."

The Chief's posture was perfect. He could sit on the hard stool for hours and then gracefully float to his feet like he hadn't been sitting for more than a minute. I watched him do it many times.

"What I meant was impact. You are getting impact."

"But why the dog? Why not Jess or John? Or Tanya even?"

"Your Higher Power is giving you only what you can handle. If the remorse for all those people rolled in right now I would have to have my nephew and his dog watching you 24/7."

"But I don't feel like drinking."

"You would if regret spread too fast. Because you would want to push it down. Anything to forget it."

"I keep thinking I want another chance with Walt but then I think I would be using Walt to get Jesse back."

The Chief started chuckling.

"Why is that funny?"

"Then you could use Jesse to get John back."

"Am I going crazy?"

"Yes." The Chief leaned his head on the wall and closed his eyes.

"Most members don't get impact until at least three months sober. Mostly six. I had a feeling that it would be earlier for you. Not this early, but here we are."

"So it's good?"

"Good, yes. But harder. Much harder."

"Fuck."

"But then sweeter. Sweet like me."

"What do I do?"

"Keep sharing. Talking it out. Wake me up. Talk to other members and take their advice lightly. We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol, that our lives had become unmanageable. You are tasting the second half of that step. You don't yet have a relationship with it. And you know nothing about the first half."

"How come you don't push the Big Book on me?"

"Why would I?"

"Because it's required reading. Like working the steps."

"Most AA members are two steppers. One and twelve, close the Book." He slapped his hands together.

"What do you mean?"

"They practise step one and step twelve and forego the middle steps because that's work."

"I think it would be hard to spot someone like that. At least right away."

"They brag about not being able to drink to anyone that will listen. And you wonder if maybe they were kinder gentler people when they drank."

"Those must be the ones I can't stand."

The Chief nodded. "Some don't reform well. The Book will give you three things. Information first. Second knowledge, and if you use that knowledge, if you build the ship well, then it will give you the third thing. Wisdom."

"Wisdom." I repeated the word under my breath.

"When that day comes maybe we can have an intelligent conversation."

The Chief got up and left the room.

"Hey. Gimme a Big Book, will you?"

"Top drawer."

I pulled open a top drawer that I didn't know existed. I lifted the book out and turned it over in my hands, opened it and fanned through the pages. It looked clean and smelled new. I looked up step one, which I already knew. *We admitted that we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.* I couldn't recite step twelve. I closed my eyes and gave it a shot and all that came out were spiritual awakening, and carry...something. *Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.* This step scared me. It had a life attached to it. No wonder guys wanted to fake it. I really understood how useless both steps would be without all the ones in the middle. I remembered a little orange toy riding tractor that my dad eyed together while the instructions sat in a plastic envelope, along with some cool decals tied to the seat. I also remembered my mom peeling burrs out of my hair and shirt collar, and pinching my cheek with tweezers trying to get the thistles out – my dad in the background, wondering out loud why the fucking front wheel fell off.

Forty Eight

Two months –

I was witnessing the Chief's fury for the first time. His nephew looked like he might shit himself any second, and on my

behalf. It was a pent-up fury until we got to the car.

He came in tight to me. I wanted to stand my ground, because right or wrong, that is what I do. But reflex took over and I stepped back and out of his space.

"Are you stupid?"

"I guess so."

"Don't be feeling sorry for yourself. Unless you are placating me, which could be dangerous for both of us."

I could see the arresting OPP officer watching us from the dispatch entrance. He was a good guy. I liked him more than I did the Chief in that moment.

"I wanted to make amends to her."

The Chief started vibrating. Getting up on his toes and into my face. "You are not ready to make your amends. No one wants to hear your sorries. They don't believe you. I don't believe you."

Then he turned away like I was too disgusting to look at.

"I guess I'll have to live with that."

"And so will that young girl you twisted up. She's very sick, and you are sick. You can never make amends with her, even when it's time."

He marched over to the passenger side and bellowed for the dog to get in the back seat. Man, did that dog move. The Chief laid his arm over the roof with a fist at the end and pounded it once off the metal.

"You almost traded in your sobriety for sex."

"It would have been fine if that fucking furrier hadn't called the police. I never even saw her."

"That furrier saved your life. Michael, the car doesn't

drive itself." The scrapper ran around to the driver's side and they pulled out of the police parking lot, without me.

I stood still for a minute or so, too emotionally winded to do much else.

"Can I give you a lift somewhere?"

I spun around, surprised that I wasn't the only person on the planet.

"No. I don't want to put you out."

"My shift is over."

"Was I your last collar for the day?"

"Yeah. Before you there was a kid pouring his dad's motor oil into a sewer."

"Great."

"I don't mind giving you a ride somewhere."

"I appreciate it, but I'm going to call a cab."

The officer nodded, but I could tell he had something else to say. It was an awkward few seconds, and then he did.

"Are you in the program?"

"Yes. You?"

"No, my brother-in-law is. Gerald B."

"Short for Jerry?"

"No. Everyone knows him as Gerald."

"I don't think I know him. How is he doing?"

"Good. Fifteen years now. My sister's a lush. They quit at the same time, but she couldn't get it."

"They still together?"

The officer nodded.

"That's sad for her."

"No, it's sad for my brother-in-law. Keep working it. It's a

gift."

I nodded. He signed off with something midway between a wave and a salute. Then he turned and walked back up the path leading to the front entrance.

I had to tell the cabbie I didn't feel like talking, which was code for *you talk too much*. He grumbled, took it personally, but stayed silent for the remainder of the drive.

I needed time to think before I got home. If I went to Tanya's to get laid, I didn't know it. I did not think my motive was sex, but the Chief was good and I needed to consider it. What would I have done if she dropped to her knees like it was yesterday? Peeled her pants off with record speed, the way she liked to? Initially, I liked that no-nonsense approach to getting naked and fucking. It left more time for the important stuff – drinking and using. But it did wear thin after a time. Clothes off – screw and scream – clothes on – drink and rail. I felt between my legs over my pants. Damn, the Chief was right.

I was vibrating and anxious when we pulled up to the cabin, and had been since the moment of hard revelation. My heart had moved into my ears. Like I had two little hearts in a pounding competition. The muted cabbie stopped in the drive and my hands began to shake. I couldn't get them to stop.

*What have I done - What have I done - What have I done -
What have I done!*

I was almost to the front door when –

"Hey, buddy."

"What?"

"You gonna pay me?"

I already had my wallet out when I got to his window and doled out a one hundred dollar bill.

"Keep it."

"Really? Thanks."

The Chief sat at the table staring at his hands through a table-top magnifying glass about the size of a handheld vanity mirror. He peered into the glass intently, and not because he wanted to pretend I didn't exist. He wasn't like that. I watched him watch his hands negotiate thread around two small black feathers and the stem of a small hook.

I sat down at the table, slowly and carefully, like I might break.

"I've ruined everything."

"Did you drink?"

"No."

"Are you planning to today?"

"No."

Finally he looked away from the glass. "Then we're okay. But. If you keep racing around saying sorry to people, you'll be back on the garbage truck before you know you're on it."

"I really love Jesse."

"Is this about Jesse or me?" He went back to work on the fly.

"I guess a bit of both."

"I don't judge you. And I do believe you love her."

"Jesse, right?"

He chuckled. "You feel like you cheated today, but you

didn't."

"Yes. That's it."

"Ever remember having an argument with your wife and saying sorry?"

"Sure. Lots of times."

"Did you ever say sorry and have her accuse you of not being sorry?"

"A lot of times, sure." In fact, over the last few years it was a theme in our marriage.

"How did that make you feel?"

"Angry."

"Then you weren't really sorry. And she knew it, that's why she called you on it."

"But I was sorry."

"No you weren't. Later you were, and she accepted. You thought she had calmed down. But it wasn't that at all. You were truly sorry. Making amends too early will kill you. You haven't earned the right to say sorry. Understand?"

I nodded with no lips.

"I am sorry I left you behind today."

"No you are not."

"Goddam right I'm not. Make us some tea."

I jumped up, quicker than I wanted to, and went off to fill the kettle. I didn't need to wave my hand over the airtight to know if it was hot enough to boil water because the room was stifling. Hotter than usual for sure.

I put the kettle on it and didn't know what to do next. The sting of the Chief's fury came back, now that some of the other toxicity had cleared from my head. I stood around the

hot stove like a useless moron.

"Sit," he barked. I did.

He leaned back into his chair, crossed his legs and folded his arms over his chest. He left one hand free to help animate and guide the story.

"We are so lucky, Freight. We have this way available to us. I would hate to be on the receiving end of our damage. Where do these people go to heal?"

"Al-Anon?"

"My first wife went there and left me. I hate that club."

"How many times have you been married?"

The Chief held up three fingers. "The best one died five years ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"She was the second wife. I passed out once and she sowed the sheets around me, then sat in the corner of the room holding an ice scraper, waiting for me to wake up."

"No kidding?"

He pulled back the hair from his forehead and revealed a deep tissue scar that disappeared in and beyond the hairline. "I got off easy. In the summertime it would have been a garden spade."

"And she was the best wife?"

"I like them sparky."

"Did she die while you were still together?"

"No. I tried to get her back for years, but eventually I gave up and married some other woman. Last time I tried to win her back her husband shot at me with a pump action 22. Then my third wife found out I was pining and she left a week later.

But it was time, anyway."

"Jesus."

"Wisdom didn't come easy for me." As an afterthought he added, "I am done getting married."

Forty Nine

Three months —

The waiting was palpable. I was in an aisle seat, front row.

"Anyone with three months sobriety, come up and get a chip," the chairwoman said.

I stood up with twenty or so other people. Members of my group who weren't getting a three-month chip. They were standing up for me, and they hooted and hollered.

Ina the chairwoman rubbed the three month chip between our flat palms and whispered "Keep coming back, Freight." A few folks in the first and second row reached up for high fives. The attention was almost too much. For the first time in my life I was being liked because I was likeable and not because I was worth tolerating for maybe something good I would do at a later date. That kind of hoping is terrible. And it only rears its head when trust is gone.

I was earning friendships and being an example to newcomers. I didn't know if I was changing into someone new or finally becoming the person that had been tucked away.

I noticed a young guy before the start of the meeting. The older man with him might have been his dad but the young guy

was so beaten, saggy, gaunt and yellow, that I couldn't find a family resemblance. They both looked lost and I couldn't take it. The old man looked frightened. The younger man tried to look hostile and aggressive, but it was hollow because he was just too beaten to be either.

After the closing prayer, I pushed quickly down the outside aisle, feeling back slaps along the way, until I made it to the vestibule and then outside to the parking lot. Instinct told me the two men were going to leave as soon as the meeting finished, and they were almost to their car when I caught up.

"Hey," I said.

Both men turned.

"I'm Freight." I omitted the alcoholic part because I thought it might be cooler for the kid's sake.

"I'm Robert." Robert reached out a hand and we shook. "This is my nephew, William." I extended my hand and William gave it a limp pump. Then, and I am not positive about this, I think he wiped his palm on the back of his pants.

"Congratulations on your award you got in there," Robert said.

I nodded. "How are you doing, William?"

"Fine."

I looked to Robert who shrugged, like William was a lost cause and the family keeps trying but most of us don't give a shit anymore and tonight was nothing more than my turn.

"You don't look fine."

"So?"

I turned back to Robert. "You got something to write with?"

"Think so." Robert opened the passenger door and I heard the

sound of papers being shuffled around.

"It doesn't need to be this way. I know you think it does but it doesn't," I said.

William nodded and turned back to see how much longer his uncle might be.

"Got it." Robert came back with a pen and a receipt for an oil change.

I told him my number and he wrote it on the top corner.

"Call me if you want to talk or need a ride to a meeting. Okay?"

William nodded and walked to the passenger side.

"Thanks, Freight." Robert leaned in. "Don't hold your breath waiting to hear from Will."

I stepped out of the way as the car made a three-point turn and exited the parking lot. I watched the taillights until they faded south on Island Road.

"Big shot."

I turned around and pretended to pull out a six-shooter and the Chief put his hands in the air. I walked slowly over to him, listening to the sounds of my shoes kicking gravel.

"How'd it go?" the Chief asked.

"We'll see, I guess."

"It was good of you, and you're not a psychotherapist."

"Yeah, I know. Kid has drug eyes." Looking into William's eyes was like looking into nothing with nothing looking back. Dull and empty, and maybe a little mean. If he didn't lay it down soon his eyes would turn wild forever.

"I know. Still a chance though, but you cannot chase him. You gave them your number." It wasn't a question.

"I gave them yours."

"Seriously?"

I pointed a finger at the Chief. "Gotcha, donut queen."

"Prick. Let's get a good coffee. I'm freezing."

I looked up into the dark starless sky. "Snow?"

"Some, but not much if it stays frigid."

There were two people in the line up in front of me. The Chief wanted a soup combo. I didn't know what I wanted and the sliding menu graphics weren't making my decision any easier. But that all went away when I felt a finger push into the centre of my back. "Hello, Freighty."

He wore a big wide pumpkin-coloured jacket. The patchy beard looked recently trimmed, but it was clearly a home job. On that head was a Maple Leaf blue toque with a white tassel hanging by only two or three thick threads, resting on the bulky shoulder of the pumpkin jacket.

"Hi Jerry. How are you?" I despised asking questions when I couldn't care less about the answers.

"I heard you were back. Gonna stick it out this time?"

"I plan to."

"Next," the teenage boy behind the cash yelled.

"That's me." I left him in the line, hoping we were done but knowing we were not.

I put the Chief's bowl of garden vegetable soup in front of him and then I sat down.

"Looks like your friend is coming over."

"He's my old sponsor. Not my friend. Not even an old

friend."

Jerry had a giant coffee in his wife-punching hand. He hovered over me and his bulky jacket touched the lid of my coffee and I knew I'd need to get a replacement. He was invading my space like he still held some kind of ownership over my sobriety. I was the Chief's problem now and Jerry needed to get that, and get out.

"Mind if a friend of Bill W takes a load off?" The Chief moved over to the seat next to the window so I wouldn't have to, and Jerry saddled in.

"Jerry," Jerry said to the Chief.

"Gary." The men shook.

"You used to be the Chief back there?" Jerry did a sideways thumbs-up pointing to the left of my head.

"Yes. The Chief of back there," he said, and I snorted into my fist, trying to morph it into a cough. But Jerry was so caught up in Jerry that it all slid by.

"I think we've met before." Jerry sipped his coffee and leaned back in the chair turning his grin on me. It made me want to hold Jesse and tell her I loved her over and over until my throat bled.

"You his sponsor, Perry?"

The Chief nodded with a mouthful of soup.

"Gary, Jerry."

"What?"

"His name is Gary not Perry."

"You got your hands full with this son of a gun, Gary."

I dropped my hands under the table, which were now uncontrollably clenching into fists.

"Was at a Toronto meeting tonight." He made a wettish raspberry sound spitting something off his tongue tip and onto the floor of the restaurant. "One of my sponsees celebrated a fiver. Big meetings down there, man. I spoke to, must have been, two hundred." I visualized 200 hundred people sleeping on a train and drooling down their chins because the conductor wouldn't shut the fuck up.

"I was sorry to hear about your break-up, Freighty."

We have a rule. What we say in AA stays in AA, but it didn't apply to gossip. Nothing trumps gossip. The geography of *who knew* probably stretched from rural meetings in my area, right down to the Shwa, Whitby, Ajax, Pickering, and now the big smoke — thanks to Jerry. What they knew changed as the tale travelled. Probably, it started out fairly accurate. I went back out and my wife had had enough. I was a dry drunk waiting to drink. Took up with a hot young black girl for a while and then came back to AA, beaten like a cowering mutt in the dead of fall. Then as the story got boring the details shifted slightly with each person that told it. *His wife caught him in bed with a furrier's mistress, which was a stupid thing to do because the furrier was his dealer and then his wife bought a 2000 dollar coat from the furrier as a fuck you to her cheating husband...and she was rich so he really fucked up that one. Now he's broke and his sponsor is the Chief of Police.*

I relaxed a little. Jerry sounded like he meant it. And then he spoiled it.

"Some guys need to be punched harder than other guys before they get it. Losing pussy always wakes them up."

"Jerry, if you refer to my wife as pussy again I am going to

throw this soup in your face."

Jerry laughed and turned to the Chief. "Reel your buck in, Kemosabe."

In one fell swoop, the Chief drained his coffee down the front of Jerry's jacket. Jerry jumped out of his seat and knocked his own coffee across the table and all over the floor.

"What the hell?"

"Get out of here, dog-fucker, before I do something crazy," the Chief said, and went back to sipping his soup.

Freight looked up to Jerry and then over to the Chief. Jerry pulled down the zipper of his jacket and more coffee dripped out of the nylon teeth.

Jerry didn't speak. He left humiliated and too scared to be angry.

"Good seeing you, Jer," I said as he passed.

We remained silent for a moment while I beamed.

"Good seeing you, Jer?" That was kind of mean," the Chief said.

"You called him a dog-fucker."

"A do-nothing. Doesn't contribute anywhere."

I laughed. "I know what a dog-fucker is."

"It's too bad he has forgotten to drink."

"Thank you."

"I thought you were going to kill him, so..."

"Young buck like me could do some damage."

"Yes. You have the heart of a drunken warrior."

"I knew Jerry was a racist. Subtle, but it's there."

"Ignorant dog-fucker."

"Does it get to you?"

He shook his head, wisely. "Once I had a dream that they dug up my property and found a white man's burial ground. I had to give back the land and relocate to a subdivision. I guess it was a nightmare."

The Chief finished his soup, slid the bowl to the left, and went through the usual ritual of cleaning the table in front of him with two napkins. One after another. Finally, when the table was clean, but not any cleaner that I could see, the Chief unfolded a third napkin and laid it on the table, then gently lifted his donut off the plate and placed it in the centre where the creases of the unfolded napkin crossed.

He put both hands, palms flat, on the table. One on each side of the napkin. "I talked to John Eagle yesterday." He had my attention and so did my breathing.

"How is he?"

The Chief pursed his lips and nodded. "He is okay."

"Okay?"

The Chief pursed his lips again. "Just okay. His father is failing." The Chief took the first bite of the sour cream glaze. He made little bites around the donut, always, until all that was left was a jagged hole. Then he would pop the remainder into his mouth.

"He asked about you."

"What did he say?"

"Asked how you were."

Little bite.

"What did you tell him?"

"Good."

"Oh Christ. I am going to dump my coffee on you in a second."

"It's not the first time he's checked up on you. It's just the first time I've told you."

"I miss him. Think he'll come back one day?"

"That, I don't know. He's seeing someone. Native woman."

"I would like to see him. Talk to him."

The Chief shook his head, but the shake had come from John. I could tell.

"Why? Is he that mad at me? I'm really trying to make this right."

"I know that, Freight." He put his hand over top of mine. And then it dawned on me. Maybe John was not upset with me. Maybe he was mad at himself for something he did or didn't do to me. I had to push that thought out for now.

"What do I do?"

"Keep getting better. And don't make me regret telling you this."

My emotional plate was loading up. At the bottom was drinking and above that was everything else. All the hurt, the incidents, the blackouts. The stuff that needed healing, mostly people. Drinking now would be like a bad version of the tablecloth trick.

"How much time does his dad have?"

"Who can say?"

It had warmed slightly. The snow was falling with the threat of intensifying and the car tracks were already beginning to make the parking lot slick.

"Be two feet by morning," the Chief said from inside his hood. I almost slipped under the car but got a hold of the roof rack just in time.

Fifty

The Chief's prediction proved true by morning. I sat on the edge of my bed, staring out the little, perfectly square, bedroom window. I needed exercise and shovelling snow would do me good. Physically and spiritually. *Spiritually?* I put on the same clothes as yesterday, minus the boxers because I was not an animal. The smell of spiced meat trickled through and around the door while I was getting dressed, and when I stepped out of my room I couldn't tell if I wafted into it or it wafted into me.

It was too much. The Chief chopping vegetables at the counter. It was too much. The sound of the thick part of the blade tapping the cutting board. It was too much. It hammered home the deepest of regrets. Jesse in the kitchen. Walking up behind her and getting a kiss on the cheek, or the forehead. Jesse trying to pop a green or a red into my mouth. Her neck, and her skin, and her good will. And her innocence. I had crucified her innocence.

My hand went to my chest, where all my regrets lived, and I made a sound that I hadn't made before. My heart was making sounds with my throat, and those sounds became louder when the Chief turned around, because I needed help.

"Sit down on the couch," he said.

I stumbled to the couch and sat on the edge. The Chief sat on the coffee table with his knee in between my legs.

"Jesse?" The Chief whispered the name.

I was helpless. I leaned into his chest and he folded his arms over my shoulders so I could howl into his shirt until I had nothing left.

"I - want - her back. I so want her back."

He waited. He didn't say a word because there were no words for this kind of grief. Only lies would help, temporarily, and he would never do that to me. The truth needed to wait.

We spent a good portion of the day clearing the snow, and after, eating chili with crusty bread. We watched CHEX television, which was a local Peterborough station, because the Chief only had rabbit ears. Andy of Mayberry reruns kept us laughing until about eight pm. Around that time I went to my room and came back out with *A Farewell to Arms*. I stretched out on the couch with the little lamp on behind my propped up head, listening to the sounds of the fly-maker working over the kitchen table.

Fifty One

Six months -

The three raps on my bedroom door were obnoxious sounding.

"What the hell?"

"Get up."

"Better be a fire."

"We have company."

"Let me get dressed. Who is it?"

"Shut up, and hurry up."

I threw on my clothes. Out the window, spring teased. It poked around the clumps of drift in the bushes that were too packed and stubborn to submit to run off. But they'd have to soon. It had been a short, but damn cold winter, and I welcomed the beginning of warmer days. I wanted to walk around in a short-sleeve shirt, because near the end of every winter I didn't believe I would ever get to do that unless I relocated to a warmer climate. Being cold and bundled was all there was.

I opened the bedroom door, embarrassed that I couldn't get to the bathroom to fix my hair and wash the sleep out of my eyes before seeing guests.

The Chief sat on the couch. Walter sat on the floor beside him.

"Walt?"

I scanned the room, including the closed bathroom door.

"She's not here. My nephew picked him up last night."

"Where is she?"

"Away for a little while. She needed someone to look after the dog."

Walt turned his head to the side and looked at me. He slapped his tail twice off the Chief's foot. It was a submissive slap, hoping it was okay to be here. Safe to be here.

The Chief moved out of the way so I could get in. I patted the back of Walter's neck and he trembled under my touch. Maybe I went in too fast. Or it was the strange surroundings. But I knew.

"I need to meet with the Council. When I get back I want the two of you to be the best of friends or else one of you will have to go, and the dog is growing on me."

Walter slid out from under my touch and whined at the door on the heels of the Chief shutting it. I went over to console him, but he made a wide berth around me to the far side of the coffee table. Then he whimpered once, hacked once, and sat down to watch my next move through bewildered and bloodshot eyes.

"It's okay, puppy boy." He didn't wag his tail. He didn't smile. He didn't give me anything. "Maybe it's not okay. Do you want a cookie? Treat?" I looked around until I spotted his food bag to the left of the front door. It had a smaller treat bag on the floor next to it. I reached in and took out a bone-shaped cookie. I smelled it and decided it must be peanut butter-flavoured, with maybe a hint of charcoal. I held my arm straight out with the cookie in my hand and carefully approached, until he made a two step retreat. His hackles weren't up, but he owed me some bites and I needed to earn his trust. I dropped down to one knee because I didn't think he liked me towering over him, and then I held out the treat with my palm flat because, like an idiot, I sometimes confused dogs with horses. Walt dropped his hind quarters and slid into a lie, stretching his front legs out. Then he yawned a big wide

one, dropped his snout between his paws and rolled his eyes up to my face. He looked cute, but he also looked ready.

I sat on the floor for a while, with the coffee table as a back support. I purposely stopped looking at Walter, but I felt his bead on my profile. I figured if he lunged, the last sound I would hear would be the gulping of my Adam's apple going down his throat. I wanted the Chief to come back so he could take care of this. But that was my default. That's why I'm here, and that's why, why, why.

"You miss the cottage? I know I do. I miss your mom the most." Walt's ears flicked on the *mom* sound. "Let's be straight, Walter. You knew I was a dick long before I did, right?" Walt sneezed. I guessed he needed to get used to the different smells in his new environment. "Okay good. But here's the thing. I know now too. We're both on the same page. And that time I hit you for having an accident in the kitchen was inappropriate, but it had nothing to do with you. Your mom had a few drinks that night and I didn't feel safe. Or maybe I was jealous because I couldn't have one. Who knows. I don't even care. I just wanted to say I'm sorry for hitting you. Cookie?" I held out the biscuit but Walt didn't bite — literally. I slowly brought the treat to my nose and smelled it again. "Smells okay." Then I pretended to eat it myself but he didn't care. "Water?"

I stood up quickly and so did Walt. He was slightly spooked and still far too watchful. I didn't fear for my safety but I wasn't taking any chances. I walked in between the coffee table and the couch, came back the same way and put down a pot filled with cold water. Walter lapped up all of it. Victory.

Good boy, Wally. I patted his head again and he let me, until I went for the ear ruffle, which made him bounce back and drop into the lie again.

"Sorry, sorry." I sat down on the couch hoping the distance might ease his tension. I needed a break anyway.

I never understood the term 'dry drunk' until recently. Although, until recently came along, I thought I did – in theory at least. But not the experience (because when you're in it you don't know you're in it). A dry drunk is someone who doesn't work the twelve steps and may or may not go to meetings. They still have all the shortcomings of an practicing alcoholic, they just don't drink. AA compares it to a drunken horse thief. If you take away the booze you still have a horse thief. And this was where I confused it. If you take the booze away from a drunken horse thief, you still have a *thief* stealing horses. But wouldn't they be better at stealing horses once they started doing it sober? A drunken thief may, on occasion and assuming he robs the barn at night, come home with a donkey. Or a pig, if he's really in his cups.

But my old way, this old way, of regarding people, places, and things, was shifting. Sometimes it felt like an about face. And rarely did it feel like I came to it wittingly. More like someone dropped me off and drove away laughing. Twisted thoughts were untwisting in a way that made my head snap back the same way it snapped back the first time I heard the Chief do the slogans – if all I did was stop drinking, it might not get any better. My life may not improve. And I could prove it because I lived there. I tried it on and it did not fit. And I could talk about pigs and donkeys until the cows came home.

Fishing and all-terrain rides through the woods were geographical cures for a horse thief. Band-Aid solutions that tricked me and others into thinking I was better. Healed and productive. But I wasn't, I was worse. They were too. The moments of clarity only worked to dig the hole deeper, because I misread them for something they were not. *I am better now Jess, I love it here. You, and fishing with John. It's all I need. I feel good.* I realized, finally, that those moments of clarity were self-indulgent. Pain relievers. I was hijacking myself from what really needed to take place. I heard an AA member once say, *Don't run from the peeler.* It's gonna hurt like hell but that's the price. That old skin has got to go.

It's all trial and error, and earns and losses, and crying and laughing. Anger and exhaustion. And then there's *keep coming back*, and *one fucking day at a time*. And why was Walter here without his mom?

I lay back on the couch and pushed the mismatched pillow to the sweet spot near the top of my neck just under the base of my head. This was never an easy job. It always took three or four tries. I closed my eyes and I wanted to stop thinking, and then I couldn't stop thinking.

At least three times a day, as of late, I wanted to cry, and did. I went to my room to do it, or around corners. I wasn't as embarrassed about crying as I used to be. It was the number of times that flustered me and sent me into hiding. I didn't always know what the crying was about. I didn't think a thought generated it. I didn't put aside special weep times. It just rolled and then I had to dissect it. Sometimes they were wanting people back tears, and other times they were

tears of fear and then gratitude. Sometimes I laughed and then cried because it was so rich to laugh. But when I thought about Jesse and John for too long I more than cried, I wailed inside. Shivered. And my little sober world became dark and weighty. I tried my best to push them out. If I knew I could never have them back I would lose this fight. Prior to trying to visit Tanya, I had been thinking about Jesse constantly for two days straight. I wanted to get better with or without her, and John.

The Chief told me there was no *end day* for the Sober. No completion date to strive for. *You will always, always, and always, be a work in progress, Freight. And remember the word 'progress', and that the opposite of progress is relapse.* He also used the word *deteriorate*, which landed on me harder than relapse. *Life is not any gentler to a recovering alcoholic than it is to anyone else. But it will pummel a foolish drunkard.*

I let the tears dry on my face and felt myself drifting into sleep.

I woke to a thumping sound that vibrated the couch. The Chief leaned over me like a psycho with a big stupid grin trying to push his ears into his hairline. Between the thump thump and the psycho, I surfaced quicker than what felt natural and serene.

"You made amends."

I followed the thumping. Walt's big head rested over my knee and somehow, without waking me, he managed to get the rest of himself snuggled between my legs as best he could. I tilted my

head up to get a better look and his wagging picked up speed. When I reached out, he licked my hand one million times at the very least. Top, bottom, and in-between the fingers. I was in.

"Let's take him for a walk before he shits in the house," the Chief said.

"He's trained. He doesn't do that."

"I wasn't talking to you."

Fifty Two

The three of us went out the back door and across the yard to the trail entrance at the far end of the Chief's property. I liked the idea of using it more now that I had to. I didn't want to give a fat lazy Walter back to Jesse. The path was narrow, sometimes enough to walk side by side and other times single file. It gave it character. Eventually we'd end up at a small creek that fed into Lake Scugog. Maybe out of, I couldn't remember. We wore heavy socks inside our rubber boots, not because of the cold so much. More about how uncomfortable walking in stiff rubber was with only thin socks. We sunk in places and twice I had to support the Chief so he could pull his foot out of the mud without leaving the boot behind. I carried Walt's leash in case he found trouble, but all he was finding was a good time. He started out running circles around us and the Chief kept trying to stay out of his way. "The more you try to avoid him the more he wants to be near you. It's the first rule of dogs."

"Whatever," he said, while trying to dodge another up close

and personal. Finally, Walt left us and began racing down the trail, going out of sight on the bends. But he always trotted back to make sure we were okay and then off he would go again.

"Look how dirty he is."

"I'll hose him down."

"You will have to turn the outside water back on."

"I need to know some stuff."

The Chief nodded. He nodded a lot and I was getting used to looking at him when I spoke.

"Stuff about my wife."

The Chief nodded again.

"You gonna tell me?"

"Yes."

The Chief put his hand on my arm and stopped. "Listen. Notice how when you stop your senses come alive?"

I did notice. Birds - breeze - water - a far off chainsaw. Behind the anxiety of needing information, I still noticed.

Then we walked again.

"Jesse and I have been in communication." He turned to me. "From the beginning. From the day I picked you up. John exchanged our numbers before he left." We continued walking but at a slower pace.

"Why?"

"You hated everyone in AA except me. They hoped you would reach out before you died."

"Bit of a long shot, don't you think?"

"Not really. Drunks are more predictable than they know." Less rebel, more whiny bitch."

"What else?"

"I kept her included on your progress."

"Without my permission?"

"I don't care about your permission, and you are new to the business of caring so don't be one of those reformed assholes." The Chief kicked a mound of snow in passing. His boot ploughed through it and came out wet on the other side, with the mud gone. "Not long ago you were doing lines of coke off the tops of urinals. Yesterday you complained about too much butter on your toast." Under his breath. "Suddenly I need his permission."

We made it to the small waterfall that was part of the river and the Chief sat on a dry piece of shield. I sat on a damp stump, kitty corner.

"I don't want you to think that this means she wants you back," he said, watching Walter. "It's not safe for you to go there. And she is not in a position to know her wants."

"I don't know what that means."

"Jesse is not well, Freight."

I watched Walter splashing around the bottom of the fall, but it seemed surreal, like I could only see him peripherally, or how you see something moving in the distance in high heat.

"She has breast cancer."

"Don't tell me this." I stood up and then sat back down. I put a hand over my mouth and vomited between my fingers onto the toe of my boot. I dry heaved a few more times and then sat upright, taking slow deep breaths to settle down.

"Where does it stand?"

"They found two lumps. Surgery is in a couple of days. The surgeon doesn't need to remove the breast, but they won't know

the potency of the tumours until she has them removed and the doctors perform a biopsy."

"They don't know if it's spread?"

The Chief shook his head.

"I should be there for her."

"You are. She wanted you to take care of the dog."

"You know what I mean."

"Do you know what I mean?"

I nodded and wiped my eyes.

"There's more. She has been having anxiety attacks. Seeing a therapist, trying to avoid anti-depressants. Two weeks ago she had a panic attack and was rushed to Toronto East General. They thought it was her heart. Thankfully, the testing found the tumours."

"Oh my God. If they're taking her in this quickly it's gotta be serious. People wait months to get in."

"A friend of Bill W sits on the hospital board. Also a friend of Gary W."

"Okay that's good, that's really good, but I think I should see her. Don't you?"

"Yes, I do. But she doesn't want to see you. Her friend Mary is staying with her for a while."

"Why doesn't she want me there? What if I just talked to her over the phone?" The Chief shook his head. "Why doesn't she want to see me?"

"Freight, I didn't ask. That is the truth."

I nodded slowly, over and over. "I'm glad Mary is there. She's a good friend." Walt scampered up to me and, without thinking, I buried my puke covered fingers deeply into his wet

flanks.

"What Jesse wants right now is for you to take care of that dirty dog. She loves that dirty dog," he said, shaking his head.

"Did I bring this on?"

"People pick people. They don't pick promises.

It was cryptic but I nodded anyway. "Do you like Jesse?" I asked.

"Imagine how you would have handled this if you were drinking. Or not working your program. Imagine."

"I can't imagine. I don't feel like I'm doing very well as it is."

"You are." With that the Chief stood. "I'm hungry." He scaled the bank like a billy goat and headed back the way we came.

"I asked you if you liked her," I yelled after him.

"She is thoughtful. And I like her very much." He said it without stopping or turning around.

I knew what he meant. To lose her would be to know loss.

Fifty Three

The following evening I picked up my six-month chip. I was excited, but just as excited to bring half a dozen members back to the Taurus to meet Walt - who made the rounds, leaving no one out.

They would talk about me after. About the power of animals. About how paternal I was with the dog. The dog they called

Wally, Willy, and Wendall, arguing over the correct name. I could tell they would because of the way they smiled and waved and turned away as a group when we were leaving the parking lot behind.

The Chief was too tired to go for a donut and I couldn't stop asking him if he was sure he was okay.

"Worried I am going to die on you?"

"No, I am just asking if you are okay." I tried watching the road and staying quiet, but I didn't get very far. "Are you?"

"For crissake, man. I am old. Sometimes tired is part of the deal."

"Okay. Sorry."

Then he blew out a big sigh. "Would it make you feel better if I ate a donut? Because I'll do it to shut you up."

"No, I'm fine. Little tired myself."

"How does it feel to be six months sober?"

"Good. I think I'm ready to change the raft. Maybe become a Buddhist." I smiled.

"Change the raft? What does that mean?"

"Like when you've crossed the river but you still have the raft on your back, but you don't need it because you've crossed the river."

"You are a better drunk than a Buddhist."

"I was kidding." I thought he must be under the weather. "You know I'm kidding?"

All he did was nod. "Maybe I am wrong. Maybe you would do all right as a Buddhist. You could live in a cave and never see anyone. And if someone came to visit you, you could show off your snake bites and they'd run back down the mountain."

"A monk?"

He nodded, again with the tired smile. "You are not good at being liked are you?"

"I never thought about it. I think I am."

"You are the group's favourite."

"That's because of you. You like me so they like me."

"In the beginning, yes. They're genuine now."

I drove for a while and we stayed silent. It was my turn to talk and the Chief had no problem waiting. Letting me sweat it out.

"I don't know if I deserve it."

"Why?"

"I hurt a lot of people. Do we have to talk about this? Did you talk to Jesse yet today?"

"Yes and no. Recite step three."

"Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him."

"Say it with less petulance."

"Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him."

"Starting tonight, I want you to kneel beside your bed and tell your higher power that you are doing just that."

"Remember that speaker, a while back, that didn't believe in God? Said his vintage Harley was his higher power." I chuckled.

"He must look pretty stupid kneeling with his prayer hands over the bike seat." The Chief sunk back into the crevice and folded his arms.

"You don't buy it?" I asked.

He smirked and shook his head. "He wants to be different. 'Look at me, look at me. I am such a rebel'." He delivered the line in a high pitched squeaky voice and it broke me up.

"You want to get sober and have a life, you pray to the Great Creator."

"But what if you don't believe?"

"Do it anyway and watch the magic. A guy once told me that his girlfriend's vagina was his higher power."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope. Then he found out his higher power had a bit of a cult following."

"Ha! That's great. I wonder what his higher power is today?"

"He died."

"Really?"

"He went back out and got in a head-on with a motor bike." He looked over to me. "The gods must be crazy, wouldn't you say?"

"I certainly would."

The Chief's eyes were closed for the remainder of the drive. He might have been asleep, but I couldn't tell. Funny. I knew him well, but I didn't know if he was a quick drifter or an adjustment sleeper. I have always been the latter, for the most part. Many flips and turns and rolls into short-lived sweet spots. Mornings were the best, because I didn't need to find a comfortable position. I woke up nestled and could lay in one position for thirty minutes or more.

Walt pushed his big furry noggin up along my window. He soaked my ear on one try before planting his snout on my

shoulder. His whiskers tickled my neck and I had to silence a giggle. Talk about nestled, he was right in. I curled my arm around his head and lightly scratched over the crown, all the way home.

I wanted Jesse to see the two of us together. She would be proud and moved at her boys finally getting along. I took a couple of short deep breaths to cut it off, but it was too late. It entered my belly first and then, like a hot air balloon, floated into my heart, forcing it's way up into my throat until my tongue went gummy and coated. I recited the third step under my breath, over and over, like it was one long endless sentence. I didn't stop to think if it even applied to my meltdown. I kept saying it hoping it would push out the other stuff, make my head explode. Anything. By the time we pulled into the driveway I felt better. Walter had picked up on my anxiety and I thanked him for the cleanest my ear had ever been.

The warm tap water trickled over the chips. My six-month chip was shiny and clean, but the others, my desire, one-month, and three-month, were getting worn and scratched from bouncing and shifting in my pocket, so I decided to give them a good clean. They were cheap and didn't hold any dollar value, but they were priceless to me and I felt I'd earned them. Jesus. The hump I climbed over on the ride home was worth a chip pick-up all on it's own, as far as I was concerned.

"Walter is on your bed," the Chief said.

I continued cleaning the chips over the kitchen sink.

"I know."

"You don't care?"

"Not really."

"Disgusting."

I dried each chip with a tea towel and then inspected them for wear and cleanliness.

"Some members replace them with new ones," he said.

"Wouldn't be the same."

"I don't think so either."

I placed them on the counter and then rearranged the monthly order.

Desire - One - Three - Six. The Chief came up beside me and we both looked down at my awards. "A lot of pain there," he said. All I did was nod.

"These chips are for all of us. Everyone you've touched and those you have never met."

I nodded again.

"Maybe you are a big leader waiting to wake up. Who knows."

"What makes you think that?"

He shrugged. "You have something."

"What?"

"I don't know. Something."

"Come on. Give me more."

"I'm selective. John Eagle is very selective. Your wife could select anyone."

I filled the kettle and placed it on the wood stove. I didn't think I would ever boil a kettle any other way again for the rest of my life.

I collected a couple sticks of kindling and two bigger

pieces of ash and placed them inside the stove, remembering to keep the big chunks in the centre away from the fire brick.

"You don't look very good," I said to the Chief. He had a sheen of moisture on his forehead that his hair was trying to cling to. I pulled out a kitchen chair. He didn't fall into it, but he was tippy enough to make me watch in case I needed to brace his arm.

"I must be getting something." He looked old and weathered, and he was – but today he looked it.

I'll make us some tea. Are you hungry?"

"I'm not hungry. How many times do I need to repeat that?"

"Tea?"

He looked at me impatiently.

"What? It's not food."

"I'm going to bed."

I think he mumbled 'before I stab you' under his breath. I watched him shuffle across the room and disappear down the short hall. I was concerned, but glad. Glad to have his crankiness out of the room.

By morning he was feverish. I knocked on his door around nine o'clock, and when he didn't answer I opened the door. The smell of sickness was palpable and clung to my nostrils. So much so that I instinctively reached up and palmed the lower part of my face. His eyes were half open and his lids were puffy and greasy. His breathing was laboured and his tiny chest had trouble rising on the inhale but sunk and folded like a damaged air mattress on the exhale. The in-between scared me the most.

"We need to get a doctor," I said.

He tried to speak, but he had no energy for volume so I moved my ear up to his lips and made sure to hold my breath.

"Popeye," he whispered.

I beelined for the kitchen. The sidewall of the fridge had a piece of paper with a list of important numbers. A Popeye magnet, with a little fly lure tied to his sailor hat, held the paper in place. I slipped it out from under the magnet and scanned the list until my finger landed on the physician's number.

It took three hours for the doctor to arrive at the cabin. I bet it would have been sooner if the Chief was still the Chief. In the interim, I kept a cold face cloth going and gave him water out of a straw. I managed to get him propped up some and that settled the harsh breathing a little. Walter wouldn't leave the Chief's room, which I thought was nice, but I wanted him to leave because his loyalty foreshadowed more than I could bare. Then I convinced myself that cats know when people are dying and dogs just like to be nice.

The doctor was old but he had a swift gait. His tone was light and his speech was quick, as if he'd borrowed the voice of a much younger person.

He asked me to leave the bedroom and his delivery had a polite kick to it.

He came out of the room looking grim, closed the bedroom door quietly and joined me at the table.

"He is sleeping now."

"What's the verdict?"

"He has a lung infection and strep throat. I wanted him to stay in the hospital for a couple of days, but he's stubborn. He said you have a nursing background. Is that accurate?"

"Yes."

He paused for a moment before scribbling out a prescription. "I've given him a shot. He'll sleep most of the day. Get this filled out and start him on them right away."

"What are they?" I asked, looking down at the script.

"A nurse would never ask that question." The doctor smiled. "He needs someone here most of the time, at least for the next three days. A lung infection and strep are not the most desirable combination."

"I'll be here. What should I look out for?"

"Trouble breathing and high fever. If that happens, call an ambulance and then call me. Keep him on liquids for a few days. He'll let you know when he can eat."

"Can he have a donut?"

I wanted a go-back but it was too late. I had already let the inside thought out.

"Where did you go to nursing school?"

"I mean when he's hungry again. 'Cause he's gonna want one." I nodded and grinned like a monkey. "I'm not a nurse."

"Clearly. Oatmeal or rice would be a better start."

Fifty Four

I drove into Port Perry for the first time without a mentor and it felt good to be on my own. After filling the

prescription at the local drug store I stopped in at a take-out joint called The Yellow House Pizza Parlour. The first pizza of the day hadn't come out of the oven yet and I had to wait ten minutes, but it came out fresh and piping hot – and was quite possibly the best slice I'd ever tasted. I sat in a junky, dirty, plastic chair, my paper plate resting on a sticky ceramic ledge. The mozzarella was too hot to separate and I had white strands of it cooling on my chin. The thick-cut pepperoni burned the roof of my mouth but I wouldn't know about it until much later. I had to tell the Chief about this place. It was directly across the street from the donut shop. We could really do some damage.

The low fuel light started blinking once I hit the outskirts of town and I could not risk running out of gas when I needed to get drugs into the Chief, so I made a U-turn and headed back to the first gas station in town.

Halfway through my fill, Mike Paudash, the Chief's nephew, pulled in behind me. He climbed out of the car, walked down the side and unscrewed the gas cap. I noticed the cover was missing that hid the cap. He disconnected the pump and jammed the nozzle into the hole. Everything he seemed to do, from what little I knew of him, was lacquered with hostility.

"Hello, Mike."

Mike looked over and something on his face shifted when he saw that I was the guy saying hi. His shepherd moved over to the driver's side and hung his big head out the window. The panting and the overgrown canines made me uncomfortable.

"Your uncle is sick."

That perked him up. "What's wrong with him?"

"Fever, lung infection and strep." Mike couldn't hide his anxiousness and I shook my head sadly for affect.

"I am on watch, but if something comes up can I count on you?"

"What do you think?"

"I think I can. Yes sir, I think I can."

He fixated on the pump handle, trying to forget I existed.

"Thanks for picking up Walter."

Mike nodded.

"You met my wife."

"I thought she was your ex-wife."

"Whatever." The game was tied. "How was the traffic in the beaches? Used to drive me batty."

He smirked and I think he snickered. The Chief must have got to him first.

"What? I'm not a maniac. It's not like I'm trying to find out where she lives so I can drive down there and make trouble. We're just taking a break for a while." The small part of my brain where reason lived could not believe I was starting this conversation. But the bigger parts were throwing me face first right down the rabbit hole.

"Then I guess it doesn't matter where she lives, does it?" he said.

I ripped the handle out of the gas hole and jammed it back into the pump.

I jumped into the car, circled around the other side, and headed for the exit. I was watching him in the rearview when he yelled *keep coming back*.

The old Freight had surfaced at around the 21 dollar mark of the fill. I knew because I was staring at the price climb when it happened. When I started to stew and turn rotten. But I didn't feel threatened by the shift. I think I needed it. I got to be human, kind of, and then slip back into my newer skin. My head was like a little filing cabinet with only two drawers. For years, I stored and retrieved information (thoughts, ideas, impulses) from the lower drawer – the toxic drawer. But lately, going back the last couple of months, the good drawer was in play, and sometimes it felt like I had left it open. The use ratio played in at around 40/60, the latter being the toxic file, but it was getting better. I was getting better and sometimes I was even logical. Which is different from being right. In the past, every move and thought was justified around right and wrong, but with feelings. What feels right for me and what feels wrong for me, minus logic and the impact on others. What's fair to Freight, and fuck everyone else. Logic was different. It doesn't justify, it purifies.

I put a note in the good drawer to apologize to Mike the next time I saw him. And if he didn't accept, then fuck him. Oops.

I sat reading on the couch with Walt's head nestled in my lap and his front paws dangling over my knee. The dog was tuned to any movement from sick bay. His head would pop up, slightly cocked for listening, and if the head went back into my lap I knew we were okay. So far so good.

We were close to dinnertime when Walt lifted his head into a

whine and slobber-licked my cheek. "Is he up, Wally?"

Walt climbed down to the floor and waited for me to lead us to the bedroom.

The Chief's spindly arm hung over the side of the bed. And his hand opened and closed, probably to remind me he wasn't dead. Walt slipped between me and the bed and got in three or four licks. I grabbed him just as his hind quarters crouched, ready to propel himself onto the bed.

"Lie down, boy." He dropped at the entrance to the bedroom and faced the living room.

I took the medication out of my pocket, twisted off the lid and placed a red and white capsule into the centre of the Chief's hand and closed his fist around it. He brought the pill up to his mouth and let it drop out of the fleshy part of his fist. He snapped his fingers for water, but didn't have the energy to produce the snap sound.

I tilted the back of his head up and guided the straw to his mouth. He sucked on that straw forever, like a desert camel.

He pointed to the door. "You want me to leave?" The Chief shook his head. "You have to use the can?" He raised his thumb up.

Carefully, I cradled his legs until they were over the side of the bed and felt pockets of sweat on both my inner elbows. The blanket slid from his shoulders and he trembled. He was so frail and skeletal, and it made me scared. I practically leaped for the housecoat hanging on a hook behind the door, as if his life was hanging in the balance.

The wall and I helped him to the bathroom and I was ever so grateful when he closed the door and left me in the hall. He

did a five minute start-and-stop pee. There's something to look forward to, I thought. My three-yard gusher was long gone so I guessed right now I was somewhere in the middle. Slow but consistent.

I could hear him brushing his teeth and I was grateful for that too, because his sickly death breath really affected my appetite and I got a little dizzy holding my own breath whenever I had to be near him.

The rest of the night remained quiet. Reading, occasional log in the stove to keep the chill out, last pill and bathroom break before I shut the night down.

The next morning I called for an ambulance.

Fifty Five

Walter's harsh, higher than normal bark had me bolt upright in bed. He paced frantically from my bedside to the bedroom door, and I knew we were in trouble. I trailed him to the other bedroom and barged in. The Chief's breaths were far apart and I didn't need a nursing background to know he was struggling for air. His movements were jittery and uncoordinated.

The ambulance arrived in five minutes. They carried a gurney in and dropped the leg wheels once they were in the room. The second attendant took one look at the Chief and ran back out to the ambulance for oxygen. Even though it was the first thing out of my mouth as they pulled into the driveway.

They strapped the mask over his bony jaw and then cocooned

him with light blue blankets before driving off to Oshawa General Hospital.

I felt relieved knowing my friend was in good hands, but that all went away when I heard the siren blare.

I entered the emergency ward full of purpose – tall, and with big purposeful strides. I didn't like hospitals and I didn't like vet clinics. But I loathed emergency. And that's why I had my game face on. I was worried and anxious and I needed answers, but I could not let them see that. Any show of emotion would put me in the bleachers for God knows how long and I was not prepared to sit still staring at some flu-ish kid in a cubby hole-sized play area with germy outdated Lego drying his runny nose with his own tongue. Front row was a little better, other than charging three bucks for a bottle of water. A line of vending machines never gave me a gag reflex, but a sick kid always did.

Behind the glass the petite brunette wearing a yellow two-piece cracked me in record time. And I was wrong – water was up to \$3.95.

Everyone entering the nursing station had a stethoscope bouncing off their sternum. (The word *sternum* would never enter my mental vocabulary outside of a hospital.) They wore blue scrubs, green scrubs, and yellow scrubs. I couldn't tell the difference between a doctor and a nurse. The custodian wore blue, but he had the decency to push a supply cart around so I would know his position. One man with a clipboard stood out from the pack because he looked like he had been called

off the third hole in mid putt.

I stood up when the admittance nurse pointed me out to another nurse. I pointed at my sternum (fuck) and they both fired me *get over here hand gestures*, like I was in trouble for force-feeding another kid donuts or something. I marched up to the glass and the newest nurse waved me around with a silly look on her face.

"You're Gary Whetung's friend?"

"Is he okay?" My legs began to tremble.

"We're going to keep him here overnight."

"Is he okay?"

"His throat was swelling up, that's why he couldn't breathe. We are going to monitor him and get his fluids up."

"I was giving him fluids all the time."

"You did fine. It went beyond home care."

I nodded. I was a little embarrassed but her thoughtfulness pushed it down.

"May I see him?"

She smiled. "Best not. He's sleeping and probably will be for most of the day and night. Come back tomorrow morning. Okay?" But it wasn't a question. She touched my arm and my groin was alerted. "He'll be fine. Don't worry."

"Okay. Thanks so much."

I turned to leave.

"I noticed on his chart that tomorrow is his birthday."

"I didn't know. I'll bring some balloons."

I drove home wondering how old the Chief was. He looked sixty on good days but he could be eighty. I remember seventy. For some reason it became very important to find out how old

my friend was.

Walt bounced on the floor and wouldn't stop until I dropped to my knees for a proper greeting. I should have brought him along. He could have waited in the car. I had a little guilt going, but he clearly wasn't holding any kind of a grudge.

I opened the Chief's bedroom window all the way, but it didn't suck the stink out of the room the way I wanted it to, which would have been instantly. I stripped the sheet from the bed wearing my new antibacterial gloves that were hanging off the custodian's cart back at emergency. I dropped the sheets to the floor for Walt, so it seemed. He rolled over them, making sure to get his back scented with the dry sweat. Then he play bit the twisted elastic corners of the fitted sheet trapped between his paws. I made a mental note to not touch him for the rest of the day, but I figured I was fifteen minutes away from forgetting my mental note.

I shooed him off, held my breath, and picked up the mountain of sheets when a buzzing vibration started. I dropped the load on the bed and searched for the noise. I knew it was a cell on vibrate and I rushed to find it before it ended. I opened the top drawer of the end table and cleared away a book, one wool hunter's sock with the red band at the top, and a pair of clean underwear. Jesse's name lit up the drawer and I didn't know what to do. I turned, looking around for someone to help me make a decision, and quickly remembered I was alone.

I left the laundry on the bed. I spent the next while pacing the cabin — looking out windows, staring at Jesse's new number, rearranging the three magnets on the fridge. I tried

making a fly lure and then spent five minutes in the bathroom picking over the perfect- sized Band-Aid for my pinky tip. Walt followed me everywhere for a while, until eventually he found a spot on the couch where he could observe me from a distance.

She didn't want to talk to me and she wasn't calling me but she might wonder why the Chief didn't call her back. I didn't think it would be fair to leave her wondering why the Chief was out of communication. I considered sending a text, but that might read cold and thoughtless. Then again, maybe it was very thoughtful. I would be passing along information regarding the Chief and not breaching her *no talk rule* at the same time. But this was fucking serious and I could not justify texting the state of someone's health. They took him away in an ambulance for Christ's sake! Jesse and the Chief deserved better than that.

A moment of clarity slapped my insincerity. All I cared about was hearing her voice and finding out if I still had a chance. All about me. I knew it to be the truth because I had forgotten that she was sick, too. Sicker. My God. I used the people I loved as a smokescreen to forward my own agenda, and it started at the gas station. I dropped to my knees and rested my elbows on the couch and said the third step prayer three times in a row while Walt combed my hair with his tongue. I felt empty when I stood. Good empty. Harmless empty. I believed I might have been one more justification away from tumbling down the proverbial hill with an unstoppable momentum. I was grateful to be upland, still. And although it was a close call, it was good to be looking out

instead of high.

I sent Jesse a text.

My uncle is in the hospital for an overnight. He has strep throat and a lung infection, but he will be fine and said to tell you he will call you as soon as he is home. Most likely tomorrow.

Jesse responded immediately.

Oh dear. Please give him my love.

And that was that. I considered sending another text but the clarity had a good foothold. It clung to me and I couldn't do it. That, and Jesse knew Mike and would be red-flagged by any attempt at friendliness, seeing as Mike was an asshole with the personality of a tent worm.

I no sooner put the cell down on the coffee table than my own began to ring and vibrate in my front pocket. I mumbled a prayer for it not to be the Oshawa General. I never imagined it would be her calling. My hand trembled so badly that I had to take the call with the untrained one.

"Hello?"

"Freight?"

"Jess?"

"I called Gary and his nephew sent me a text saying he wasn't well."

I was momentarily confused until I remembered that Gary was the Chief's first name.

"That was me pretending to be the nephew. I knew you didn't want to talk and I...I guess I should have said it was me."

Silence.

"I'm sorry," I said, knowing I'd blown it.

"Is he going to be okay?"

"Yeah. The doctor wants to keep him in until his throat opens up so he can breath on his own. But they aren't worried."

I hoped my carefulness wasn't coming through.

"I'm glad he's going to be okay."

"Me too."

"You like him? He really likes you."

"He's changing my life."

"It's nice to hear your voice. You do sound well," she said, and I could sense the small smile behind it.

"Are you okay, Jesse?"

"I don't know yet. I'm scared."

I slapped my hand over my mouth and fought off the tears. Not now. It'll be a flood.

"How's my boy?"

I laughed a little. It was short and raspy.

"You mean my new best friend?"

"Are you being serious?"

"We go everywhere together. Sleeps on my bed, if you can believe that."

"Get out. Where is he now?"

"Lying on the couch."

"Get out of here. You're spoiling him."

"You will have to retrain him when he gets home."

Silence.

"Jess?"

"If I can't will you keep him?"

"Yup."

"And love him."

"Yup."

"I'll know more this week."

"You'll let the Chief know right away, okay?"

"Can I call you, too?"

"That would mean a lot to me, if you did that."

"Then I will."

I could never remember speaking so deliberately. So carefully. So presently.

"Is Mary still with you?"

"Yes. She's being such a good friend."

"She is a good friend. I misjudged her."

"Is this really Freight? Where's my husband?"

She didn't say ex - she didn't say EX!

"I'm trying. Harder than I ever have."

"I know it. I've got watchers on you mister."

"I like that."

"I'd better go. I'm tired a lot lately, so I take an afternoon nap everyday."

"Hearing your voice was...really nice."

"You too. You sound good."

I wanted to tell her she sounded good, too, but I didn't. It would have been a lie.

"Send me a pic of Walt on the couch."

"I'll do it as soon as we're off the phone."

"Take care, Freight."

"Do the same, Jesse."

The sounds that came out of my mouth were primal. Shrieks ending on long howling wails. I circled the living room and

didn't pull out until Walter joined in on the howling. I dropped to the floor next to the couch and he shrouded me with concern. After a few minutes he pulled away into an anxious pant, telling me he really needed me to pull it together. He'd done all he could and now he needed it back.

I scratched his belly, knowing full well he would flip onto his back and point his paws to the ceiling. Then I took the picture and sent it off to Jess.

HA HA HA, my crazy boys!!, was her response.

Fifty Six

I watched the rain from inside the laundromat. The sound of the industrial dryer tumbling my clothes and the rain slapping the window made me feel tucked in and drowsy. I kind of wanted a smoke, but I didn't want a soaker. I guess I might have turned a blind eye to the *no smoking* sign if I was alone.

It was heavy rain. Sheet rain that came in on a wide shelf. And it ricocheted at least two inches off the dirt parking lot. Higher off the roof of the Taurus.

The dryer ticked and tinged. It sounded advanced for such a grey beater. I watched my clothes slowly tumble until they stopped and the door unlocked with another tick. It was always a tug-of-war with me and dryers, and today wasn't any different. Firstly, my clothes, short of being on fire, couldn't be any hotter if I had dried them in the oven. And they came out shaped like a long giant dark Twizzler with flecks of white and blue from socks and boxers. I yanked and

pried and finally placed the hot rope in my basket and then noticed that the young attractive native girl was watching me swat the overhanging ends down into the sides. She smiled and offered me a garbage bag to put over top of the basket, to keep my laundry dry when I duck and run for the car. I liked the way she said it – *When you duck and run.*

I thanked her and offered her a ride home but her boyfriend was due any minute. I wanted to say I lived with the former Chief, but I didn't bother.

The rain eased off on the drive back and was full throttle again by the time I got home.

I rushed inside and Walt rushed outside. I stood inside the door, waiting for him to take care of business. He circled, squatted, and finished up on the wheel of the Taurus.

"That will be our little secret," I told him, as he raced back inside and shook next to the coffee table with the Chief's fly-making tools on top.

"Two secrets now, Wally."

We spent the remainder of the afternoon, and into the night, relaxing on the couch. I made myself a big bowl of tomato soup and a buttery grilled cheese sandwich. That was the trick. Butter, butter, and then just a little more butter. Once the sandwich had been dipped and eaten, and the soup was cool enough, I turned what was left into a stew with lots of crumbled saltines and a good handful of pepper. *Tripping with the pepper.* John once said I did that with salt. I tore up two slices of cheese for Walt along with his dry kibble, mostly because of the guilt he tried to lay on me, which we both knew

was a disguise for plain old mooching.

The rain never let up. I loved the sound of it on the roof and the way it occasionally threw buckets at the window above the table. The airtight kept the chill out of the room and made Walt sleepy.

I put the Big Book down on my lap after reading the passage about resentment. I knew I had resentments, but their origin didn't jump out at me and the Chief always said that those were the places to dig deepest. Put the most thoughts into where you think you are different, and free. So I tried formulating a mental list.

Not being able to drink was something I resented. Although not lately. In fact, I didn't think that at all this time. But I knew that could be dangerous thinking. Whether you wanted to drink or not was just for today. One day was all you had and all you needed to live a productive life. Something about today being a gift... I couldn't recall the quote. Walt lifted his head. "We're good, boy." He dropped back into his doggie slumber.

I resented John Eagle, even though I loved him. I resented his way with Walt, and with Jesse. Especially Jess. I hated how my wife and my dog had depended on John more than they did me. Or could me.

I resented Mary every time I had jerked off to the image of her fake breasts or tight abdomen, but I didn't know I had. I hadn't masturbated in a while. I hoped it wasn't unhealthy, and that I wasn't clogging up the pipe.

I wondered if Jesse would live and if we would make love again. And would it be as a couple, or occasional lovers with

a past?

I always believed that if I had not come along, Jesse and John would have lived happily ever after. I resented that too, but nothing on my list was visceral, at least not in this moment. In this moment all I wanted was for Jesse to be well again. I wanted to see my friend John again. I wanted to make it right for both of them. I wanted to contribute, and I wanted to be real. I needed to help someone.

I needed to be a sponsor.

The Chief said that when the time came, I would not have to look for someone to sponsor. They would show up because of what I had. I should have gone to a meeting tonight, but I was tired and serene. Alone and peaceful with my dog. Correction, with Jesse's dog. But I had a feeling, and it was visceral, that whatever happened I would be reluctant to let this mutt go. We were beginning to need each other.

Fifty Seven

I didn't believe in slips. I felt, mostly in hindsight, but not exclusively, a vague awareness that finger-tapped from the inside of the addict's box in my head. It was in the first drawer of the filing cabinet. It sat in the very back, and it was sneakier than the open files. It loved to whisper, *I can't get out. Can you let me out? It'll be fine, I promise. Certainly it will be better than this thinking shit. What's this life without the odd reward? And it's nobody's business but ours.*

But a slip, supposedly, came out of nowhere. Maybe that's why they say one day, one hour or one minute at a time, because what started out as a good morning could end with a night in the ditch. But slips, goddammit, were premeditated in my experience.

It took a dogfight to rattle my theory.

Fifty Eight

The birthday balloons crowded most of the backseat – three yellow and two green, clinging to the ceiling. Walt's head kept poking through and disappearing again. He looked like he was trying to find his way out of a funhouse. Eventually, I coaxed him into climbing over onto the passenger seat. Then he whined at the balloons because he missed them.

"It's okay, Wally."

We were on our way to the hospital. I could have, and maybe should have, left Walt behind, but I envisioned the two of us travelling everywhere together and I wanted him to get comfortable being left in the car by himself for short durations.

We were waiting for the red to change at the intersection across from Yellow Pizza, minding our business, when a car pulled up on my side – way too fucking close – and powered down the passenger window while simultaneously laying on the horn.

Nephew Mike's scowl made him look like he was in agony. And his ten-to-two looked like he wanted to rip the wheel right

out of the steering column. He made a circular motion with his nose picker, encouraging me to bring my window down. I realized, in that moment, where the fuel that sparked the upset came from. It was a misstep at my end, but I doubted Mike would believe that, so fuck it.

I rolled my window down.

"Yes?"

"You didn't tell me he was hospitalized."

"Because he wasn't at the time."

"Why didn't you tell me later?"

"Because then I would have to talk to you."

He stretched over to the passenger side. His face turned crimson and his jaw slid into a tight, chiselled box shape. "You are a fucking useless idiot." His delivery sounded low and menacing and the word *idiot* was almost lost under the clenching.

"Yes, but in the morning I will still have a personality." I have always been clueless around who could beat me to a pulp and who could not, which has always allowed me to mouth off freely.

I heard the growl and it wasn't coming from my car. Mike's shepherd rose from the backseat and climbed, alien-like, one leg at a time, into the front. He stuck his big head out the window and began incessantly barking at my face. Not close enough to bite, but close enough for a strand of white saliva to fling over and attach to the bridge of my nose. I knew he had something red and raw for breakfast, too.

Then Walter snapped and leapt, protectively, into my lap. And when one of his nails pushed the crotch of my jeans deep

into the side of my scrotum, with a pinch for good measure, I howled and cursed.

Both dogs pushed farther out, snapping. The growls that started in the backs of their throats were now on the tips of their teeth and this was not good news for animal or man. I tried to drag Walt back inside the car, but he was a born protector and his upper body strength was too much for me. I could hear Mike giggling like a kid, over the commotion.

"Pull your mutt in, you fucking dummy," I screamed. The intersection lights changed twice already, but the two cars behind us didn't care because towns like this pray for spectacles.

Walt's paw came down with force and got me again on a different area of my groin, but equally as tender as the first. His protective nature was killing me. I had no other choice. I opened the car door to let him go, knowing that I was one more groin stomp away from passing out. The door was partway open but Walter leapt through the window. He was too big to make it clean, and his hind legs tangled him up, sending his jaw into the handle of Mike's passenger door, which I saw and heard clunk, and I winced on Walt's behalf.

The shepherd hung over the side, trying to bite into the top of Walt's head.

I rolled out of the car with one hand on my nuts and grabbed Walt by the collar, but he dropped, extended his neck and backed out of it. I threw the collar in the front seat of my car and tried to stop Walt from fighting and snapping his way through the passenger window of Mike's car.

"Oh, fuck. He's coming in. Get him out of here. Get the dog

out of here." I had never witnessed Mike so animated. The shepherd went on the defensive, backing into Mike's lap while still trying to get some retreat bites in. Mike started gagging. I think he had a clump of dog fur stuck in his throat. I hoped that's what it was because a seizure was the last thing I needed at this point. I flung the passenger door open, kneeled on the front seat and wrapped my arms around Walt's neck. I used all my weight to try and subdue him.

"Jump out, idiot. Jump out with your dog," I said. Walt knew they were going to get away when he heard the door lock release and he amped up his effort for one last go. My head bounced off the ceiling light and cracked the plastic cover. Mike managed to get his dog by the collar, which wasn't necessary because the Shepherd wanted out more than he did. Both out, he slammed the door closed and rushed across the street in a crouch with one hand on the collar.

Walt settled into a heavy pant, like he had unfinished business, but it was enough to get him back into the Taurus with little effort on my part. Drivers began honking and pulling around me now that the fun was over. Ungrateful pricks. Although one man in a pick-up slowed down to mention what a mean son-of-a-bitch Walt was, and he smiled when he said it.

My scrotum throbbed and there was dampness down there too. I pulled into the parking lot on the right, adjacent to the Tim Hortons. What if I wasn't bleeding? What if I had an accident? I prayed for blood because an accident might be a symptom, and if it wasn't, it would never change the fact that I'd pissed myself.

I parked and stepped out of the car like I was a broken flower. I used the car as a cane and hobbled around to the passenger side where there seemed to be more privacy. Then I undid and unzipped the front of my pants and looked in with one eye closed, but it was dark down there. Was it just dark? Because blood can be dark. Especially given the chance to congeal. Jesus Christ. I looked around for help, but help for what? I couldn't ask someone to help me look at my nuts.

My hand went in and out of my front pocket, gentle as a lamb, and on the out I held my cell by the end with two fingers. I turned on the flashlight app and pulled open my pants again. My penis curled sharply to the right, and that's all I could see. I knew I had to go in.

I put the cell in my back pocket and reached down deep into my boxers. I came in on the far left and then made a cup with my palm, cradling my balls. The tenderness was unbearable and my palm felt like a lit match to the skin covering my throbbing jewels. I pulled my hand out with no trace of blood, but something was wrong. I walked bow-legged back around to the driver's side. Walt had settled down considerably and gave me lots of kisses. He physically seemed to know to keep his distance and the kisses were light, quick licks.

"I know, Wally. You were only trying to save me, but you messed my nuts up in the process." Big lick.

I started the car but couldn't remember why I was in town in the first place until I spotted the balloons in the rearview mirror. Oh yeah, the hospital. And now I could kill two birds.

I sat waiting at the intersection for the light to change. My indicator indicated that I was going to make a left on the

green, but when the green came, I didn't. I kept the indicator flashing and stayed straight, rolling into the Beer Store parking lot. It was not a debate. It didn't make sense and it didn't not make sense. I had convinced myself of nothing. I didn't do what needed to be done, I just pulled into the beer store parking lot. I was working from an old file and in that moment it was the only one I had ever known.

I pulled right up front next to the disabled parking spot and Mike wheeled in next to me on the opposite side. He jumped out of the car and pounded his fist, once on the windshield above my face.

"Get the fuck out of here," I said, climbing out of the car. I figured a fist fight might be on the horizon and I welcomed the chance to forget about my nuts while I laid a few gut shots on the nephew. He walked away, but that was too easy, and when he popped the trunk and came back with a tire iron I thought that my nuts were about to become the least of my worries. He stood in front of me and tapped the hooked end into his palm for effect. It worked.

"You are really tough, Mike. Go ahead. Do it."

He didn't move. He just kept tapping it into his palm. He looked through the plate glass window of the store and then back to me.

"You come out of there with a case and I will break every bottle."

"What?"

"You come out of there with a case—"

"I heard you. What the hell are you doing?"

"Making sure you don't fuck yourself up over a little dog

fight."

A big deep scratch trailed down the side of Mike's face. It was bleeding and puffy, and I wasn't sure he knew about it. I turned my head up to the big Beer Store lettering and then back to Mike. I couldn't help but laugh. "Are you for real?"

Mike's eye twitched, or maybe his cheek.

"Believe it or not, I don't really want a drink. I'm going to the hospital. My nuts are burning."

"Your nuts burn when you want a drink?"

"Yes. My dad's did, too. You should get your face looked at."

He followed me all the way to the hospital. I believed he wanted to see the Chief, mostly, but felt obligated to chaperone my drive, for reasons I did not know.

Was it possible we were beginning to like each other? The jury had yet to return. I guess being on the cusp was as good a place as any.

Fifty Nine

The bloody jagged line down the side of Mike's face gave an elderly hospital volunteer new life. She more than redirected him to emerg, she escorted him. I laughed as they started their slow, slow journey and he fired me a look that said, *we were so close and you had to go and blow it.*

But as I bow-legged my way to the Chief's room, with helium-deprived balloons bouncing and rubbing off the side of my head, I wasn't sure I was any better off.

I wanted to kiss him right on the mouth. I missed the hell out of this old man sitting upright on the edge of the hospital bed. Most of the pastiness had faded and the hollow cheeks were back to their deeply-tanned ruddy selves.

"Still sober, kid?"

I gingerly sat down on the plastic chair, kept my hands clear of the filthy veneered arms, and recounted the *dog incident*. Reluctantly, I mentioned the part about pulling into the Beer Store. And how I didn't really want to drink in the first place.

"Greatest goddam story of the year." He chuckled. "What a lame slip that would have been."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Good arsenal for your AA talk." He pointed his finger at me. "And that day is coming."

"Great," I said to the floor.

"You are two people. Don't ever forget that. One is a dirty sneaky rat asshole. The other one is an asshole."

"Did you tell Mike to watch over me?"

He shook his head and I believed him. "Maybe he likes you."

"It's unlikely. Maybe he did it for you."

"No. There have been many Freights. Too much work."

"I don't know what to make of it then."

"My nephew is an alcoholic."

"What? Why doesn't he go to AA?"

"He has never picked up a drink."

"Come on."

"He lost his father to alcoholism and a sister to drug

addiction. He won't test what he already believes."

"It doesn't mean he's right."

"You can be defiant, impulsive, angry and immature. So can he. Add alcohol and I wouldn't be able to tell one of you from the other. Do you understand?"

"No."

"He has all the traits of an alcoholic. All he needs to do is add some alcohol."

"Poor guy. At least I got to drink."

"He probably doesn't like you. He doesn't like drunks, but he doesn't like when people die for stupid reasons. Are those my balloons?"

"Yes. Happy birthday."

The Chief nodded and I tied the balloons to the end of the bed.

"How old are you?"

"Would you ask that question to a woman on her birthday?"

"Yes."

"Seventy-eight."

"Man you are old."

"You should go and get your balls checked out." And then he began to giggle.

"I knew you thought it was funny."

"Go get them checked, come back and I'll be ready."

"They're letting you go?"

"I don't know, but I am going. I have never stayed in a hospital before. I don't like it."

"You need to talk to the doctor—"

"Hurry up. We need to leave before he comes back."

I hobbled out of his room shaking my head.

The nurse made me wear a backless gown and the tissue paper over the patient bed was clinging to the crack of my ass. The doctor walked in around the two-hour mark and he took less than a minute to diagnose my injury. I had the equivalent of rug burn on my scrotum. The doctor called it nut rub. Said it like it was a medical term. There was a slight bit of swelling around the pinch where the dog nail got me, and the doctor said if it weren't for my pants and boxers protecting the jewels, there would be a wormhole to go with the nut burn.

When I finally got back to the Chief's room, Mike had returned from emergency. He and the Chief's doctor were standing at the end of the bed. I told this doctor that the gauze pad, recently applied to my scrotum, was now over my kneecap. He didn't even look at me when he recommended I go find a triage nurse.

Mike had a thin bandage running vertically down the side of his face and it made him look like he was from another era. My grandmother had a photo on her dresser of my grandpa with half a dozen other men standing outside the mouth of a mine entrance. One of the men had his face bandaged up.

"Take him home," the doctor said, impatiently holding out a prescription for one of us to grab. "Get his GP to make a house call in a few days." His words came out clipped. I didn't reach for the script, but Mike, out of nervousness, finally did.

"Don't go anywhere. I have one more prescription," the doctor said.

The Chief sat on the edge of the bed with his fingers intertwined and resting in his lap. He looked small, disappointed, and a little hurt. Chastised entered my mind.

"He's right here. Why don't you tell him?"

"Pardon?" the doctor replied. He rolled his eyes up with his head still bent over the clipboard, his pen tip pressing down the paper where I'd interrupted his chicken scratching.

"He's an adult and you're talking to me like he's a kid."

The doctor's sharp look went vacant because I was completely unaffected by it. At least the way he wanted me to be.

He tore the second script from the pad and put his hand out for me to take it and I casually pushed my fingertips into my front pockets. He placed it on the end of the bed and scurried out of the room.

Mike smiled and, for the first, I realized he wasn't a bad looking guy.

"Now he likes me," I said to the Chief.

"I think so," the Chief said.

"No I don't," Mike said.

Mike went over and helped the Chief to his feet and matched his slow pace out to the parking lot.

"I'm gonna make a birthday dinner later. Take that crazy dog home and then join us," I told Mike.

Mike nodded as he was climbing into his car.

"Hey."

Mike looked over.

"What's the dog's name?"

"Jack."

"Jack. Is he hurt?"

"His ear is nicked. Could use a stitch but he'll be okay."

"He could get an infection. I'll pay for it."

"No."

"Hey, if I had told you the Chief was in the hospital none of it would have happened. I'll pay for it. Bring the bill tonight."

"I'll think about it."

"Good enough. Think about Jack."

The Chief bitched about dog hair on the seat for the first five minutes of the drive, and when he finally settled I told him about my conversation with Jesse and how it came about. I spilled everything and more.

"I wanted something good to come out of being sick and this is it. You handled it well. Pretending to be my nephew was a wise lie." Walter licked the Chief's ear for the third or fourth time and it was funny to watch the Chief complain and frantically try rubbing his ear dry.

"Did you want to beg to see her?"

"No. I thought I would but I didn't."

"And now you think you want to be a sponsor."

"I need to be."

"Can you ever remember a time when you were this powerful?"

I sucked in a breath and thought about the question. When I finally exhaled I shook my head, but there was sadness too.

"Good," he said.

"Good?"

"You have no story around it. Nothing to get back to. You

own a blank canvas. Very exciting. You get to say how it goes now."

"You think I'm ready to sponsor?"

You already started with my nephew. If ever a boy needed a friend it is that son of a bitch. Piecemeal it though, or he'll run for cover."

"I'm fine with that, but I mean in AA. An AA sponsor."

"I know what you mean. It'll happen. Remember when I said don't look for it? Be true and honest. Don't showboat or someone will throw hot coffee on you."

I pulled into the strip mall parking lot, climbed out of the car and disappeared inside the pharmacy.

"Birthday donut?" Pending a quick left into the donut shop, I crawled up to the intersection.

"I want that Oreo donut. Half dozen."

I wheeled left and circled the building until we found the start of the drive-thru lane.

Sixty

"You shouldn't have pierced them." The chorizo sausages were spurting into the coals.

"I know what I'm doing," I said, followed by a dirty look that Mike missed or ignored.

"You don't have to par-boil them either. All you do is make sure they're fully thawed, because I don't think these were, and keep the heat low. Turn them every two minutes. Eight

minutes in total."

I missed the quiet brooding prick.

"I know what I'm doing."

"The flavour is running out of the meat." Mike waved his hand over the sausages in defeat, and shook his head.

I handed Mike the tongs.

"I can't save them now," he said.

"You're saving yourself, Mike." He snapped the tongs out my hands and I marched off.

"How's the first date going?" The Chief sat stretched out in a dilapidated wicker lounge that he'd found next to a dumpster ten years ago. The hassock part of it looked melted and dangerous.

"Grating. I miss the hatred." I grabbed a stump of wood from the pile outside the door, placing the flattest end on the ground, and then drop-sat.

"Oh Christ." I hobbled in circles with a hand gently over my crotch and the log fell over and rolled.

Mike's throaty laugh got the Chief laughing and eventually coughing. I hobbled inside and came out with two cans of cola. I popped the tab on one and placed the other over the crotch of my pants. "Just warming up your pop, Mike."

"They're not dry, they're delicious," I said, through a mouthful of chewed meat. "Spicy too."

"I kept the pierced sides up and turn the heat right down," Mike said.

"You saved them. My nephew saved my birthday dinner, Freighty."

"Assholes. I am eating dinner with two assholes."

Mike smiled at his uncle.

After dinner, Mike went out to his car. When he came back in, he was carrying a cardboard box folded shut at the top with a worn-out bow taped flat on one side. The Chief pushed his dinner plate to the middle to make room for the box. Mike gently placed it in front of him.

It was cute to see how excited the Chief was with his gift. He caressed the box and looked over at us both with excitement and anticipation. Remembering I forgot to get him a gift sank in and it made me feel shitty.

The Chief stood and slowly opened the box, pulling back one flap after another until it opened. He looked in and brought both hands up to the sides of his face. I could tell by the way he did it that whatever was in the box would be fragile. Then a tiny kitten paw came up and curled over the edge. And then the other paw, and finally a head. The Chief stroked one tiny pointy ear and we laughed when it folded back and stayed that way.

"I always have something to say, but I don't in this second."

"Pick him up," Mike said.

Walter came off the couch and rushed over. He sat to the side of the table next to the Chief and his tail wouldn't stop wagging in tight circles almost fast enough to float his rump off the ground. The Chief reached into the box and then Walt's entire body vibrated and the puppy whines began.

"Settle, Wally."

The Chief lifted out the kitten. It scrambled up his arm to his shoulder, which was the perfect perch to take in Walter. The Chief put his hand up and the kitten wrapped both paws around his wrist and gently bit and licked the knuckles.

"Is Walt going to hurt him?" the Chief asked me.

"No. He wants to be friends. Let him sniff."

He pried the kitten from his shoulder and held him close to Walt's face. Walter stood on his hind legs.

"Be a good boy, Wally."

They sniffed each other. Walter looked like a white furry slinky with his entire body wagging. He licked the kitten's face and got a playful nose swipe in return. The Chief put him down beside Walt who desperately tried to shrink in size. Pinning his chest to the floorboards and bringing his backside in tight and high.

"That's not the dog that tried to kill us this morning," Mike said.

"If you asked me if I wanted a cat—"

"You would have said no. That is why we didn't ask."

"It's from both of you?"

Mike nodded. He avoided eye contact with me.

"He's a Main Coon. Smart and friendly. Good mousers," Mike said.

"I'm going to call him Slip," the Chief said.

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Yes, because Keep Coming Back is too long."

"Oh boy. Why don't you give him an Indian name, like Dances with Dogs or something? Eating Mouse. Or Little Tatanka."

"Are you done being offensive?" the Chief asked.

"Slip works," I said and laughed.

"I brought food for Slip. And a treat for Walter." Mike looked to me for approval and I smiled and nodded.

Mike excused himself and I followed him out a moment later, but I don't think the Chief heard me leave now that he was owned by a kitten.

Mike didn't notice me until he closed the trunk, and there I was standing by the driver's door.

"How did you know?"

Mike shrugged. "I wouldn't be thinking about gifts if I had sore balls. And then I could tell by your face."

I nodded. "Well, thanks."

Mike nodded and came around to pass me.

"I mean it. Thank you. Did you get Jack fixed up?"

"Yes, but it's okay."

"How much?"

"It's okay." Mike tried to head in but I grabbed his arm.

"About three hundred?"

Mike gave a quick nod. "Just under."

"I know you can't afford it. I can. Let me pay for it. It's not charity."

"Then what is it?"

I stumbled. I didn't have an answer. Mike pulled his arm free and headed for the door.

"Being a friend," I blurted before Mike got inside.

Mike paused and turned back to me. "Split it?"

"Okay. You pigheaded son-of-a-bitch."

I lit a smoke and folded my arms over the roof of Mike's car. I looked through the cloud of smoke. Some blew back into

my face and made my eyes wince.

I was close to the filter and almost ready to go back in when the front door opened and Walt barrelled out with the Chief in tow. Mike stepped out behind him with Slip cradled in his arms, and it was the look on Mike's face that made my body tense and my heart begin to race.

"What is it?"

"It has spread," the Chief said.

"What's spread? What do you mean?" I knew what he meant but the flight part of my brain wanted to resist this information. They watched me, waiting to see what I needed, what I might do. No one spoke.

"Jesse called? When?"

"A few minutes ago."

"But she said she wouldn't know anything for a couple of days." I took another drag. It was frantic and I forgot to inhale.

"She said she would call me."

"I know. And she will. She wanted it to be good news, son. So it fell into my lap, because, I take care of you."

I sucked in clips of air through the mouth and then the nose hoping it would stop what was coming, but my hands grabbed my face and the rest of me heaved. The Chief put his hand over the back of my head and gracefully pulled me down into his shoulder, where the kitten had perched. I could smell the little kitten.

I sat at the table, Walt draped over my lap. He was trying to dodge paw taps, not yet grown into swats, from Slip

teetering on the edge of the tabletop. Walt tried to learn as much as he could about his new friend and Slip's tail resisted it with a flick. Both of them were invading my space. Space I desperately needed invaded.

Mike busied himself with kitchen clean up and making tea. The donuts were on a plate in the middle of the table.

"She sure knows how to ruin a party." My eyes ached and my face felt colourless. Mike and the Chief would have stayed at the table with me all night, if that's what it took. It made me want to be brave.

"Did she say how bad it is?"

He nodded, and watched me without blinking.

I swallowed the deepest of breaths and turned my head away from the table to exhale. Then I gave him a nod.

"They did some follow-up tests and found a spot on her lung. It is an aggressive tumour. They want to do chemo and radiation for the next month and then after twelve weeks they'll know more."

"Did they give her percentages?"

"She didn't say. You should call her. Don't wait for her to call. But don't cry. If you can't control your emotions then wait."

"I want to call now."

"Good."

Mike placed a pot of tea on the table. "Will you tell her I am praying for her?" Mike asked.

"I will. Thank you." Mike nodded and went back to the cupboard for cups.

"I'll call from my room." The Chief put his hands out

eagerly for Slip. I handed the little boy cat over and pushed Walt from my lap.

"Freight." I turned back to Mike, from inside the bedroom.

"I'll make sure the old man doesn't kill the donuts."

I gave him a thumbs up and a tired smile as I closed the door to my room.

I didn't come back to the table with a skip in my step, but I was far more intentional coming out than I was going in. They looked at me nervously and slightly confused. Like I had something up my sleeve that they would not be able to talk me out of. I plopped in the chair, picked up a donut and bit through to the middle.

"We haven't even sang yet," the Chief said, mostly to Mike.

"Do you feel like an adventure?" I asked.

"I am seventy-eight. Waking up is an adventure."

Mike picked up a donut and bit into it politely, almost daintily. And although I never considered how he would eat a donut, noticing that it seemed out of character would have been an understatement. Mike was an enigma.

"How would you feel about moving for a little while? Couple months."

"Where?"

"Jesse wants me by her side and I want you by my side and she wants you by my side."

"Toronto?" He didn't sound thrilled.

"No. She wants her treatments up here. Peterborough. She wants to come back to the lake each time."

"What lake?"

"Stony."

"Oh, I heard about your place."

"We would need to move in there for a while."

The Chief pounded the table with his fist. "Let's do it. You got an ATV, right?"

"Two."

Mike had his back to us. I caught him taking clean plates out of the drying rack and rinsing them again.

"You in, Mike?"

Mike stopped and turned around. "Me?"

"I could use the help. It's a big place."

"What about Jack?"

"I don't know."

"Bring the dog over. I am sure if you two don't scream and swear at each other the animals will be fine," the Chief said, waving us off like we were dumb asses.

"Does Jack eat cats?" I asked.

"He loves cats. He likes to flip them with his nose."

"Are you sure Jesse is good with this? Us?" the Chief asked.

"It would make her feel better if it weren't me, alone. I understand that. Kind of."

"I'll cook. I'm pretty good," Mike said.

"You're okay. Don't say good. You're just okay," the Chief said with an eye roll my way.

PART THREE

Sixty One

I am not the same man. I dream about this often. The dream is almost always the same. I am looking down at myself pulling away from the old gooey me. Like the new me keeps taking one hard, high step at a time, trying to un-trap himself from a human-sized wad of gum. And the gum stretches and stretches, trying desperately to whip me back. I don't punch at it or try to tear through. I walk away because there is a feeling in the dream, or maybe more like a knowing, that I have earned the right to walk away. Sometimes the sticky me is different colours, but always dark shades.

I have using dreams, too. But I believe the waking world isn't a safe place until the bad past begins to play out in the night, in dreams. Each time I wake up panic-stricken that I have slipped, and then I remember. It happens a couple times a week, so I keep a towel at the foot of my bed that I use to wipe the damp cold sweat from my legs and arms and neck. Sometimes my forehead. I do my neck last and by then I am grateful that it was only a dream. I am alive and I am happy, but mostly I am peaceful.

But there will always be two of us. Even when I'm an old porch man. I'll rock over him so he can hear me and know I'm there. I can see him if I like, and he gets to see me. All I have to do is climb down from the porch, kneel on the last step and look through the lattice board and he'll be looking

back. He can see me clearly, better than I can see him. I don't know if that gives him an advantage, but it makes me nervous, some days. He lives under everything.

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We moved into the cottage on Stony and I had my Jesse for six more months. Then she was gone. And in the end, she taught me my most valuable lesson. How to be brave. And that bravery comes from laying aside all meaning so others have permission to be scared.

It happened quickly. We had a brief reprieve that fooled us into believing we were out of the woods and then one morning Jesse collapsed with unbearable stomach pain. In the end, her picture could have been on a cigarette package, although she never smoked. She was so emaciated and gaunt. But I still thought she looked beautiful. So beautiful.

She died on Stony. That was her second last wish. We held hands and when she briefly slid back to consciousness I called her my sweet sweet princess, and then her hand went slack and her eyes closed forever. Strangely, of all the ways and reasons for missing her, knowing those eyes would not open again became the biggest hurdle.

I haven't had a cigarette in over a year. I don't keep track like I do with drinking, although some days I forget how long I have been sober. Two years maybe? Little less.

My one year was bittersweet. Jesse was having a bad day from the treatment and couldn't make it. A tech-savvy member of our group set her up to watch me get my medallion live over the

Internet on a shared screen. But he had the decency to turn it off when she fell asleep with her mouth slightly open and looking undignified. I'll never forget how thoughtful that was of him.

When I returned home that same evening she was still sleeping. She appeared peaceful. Content under the circumstances. I wanted closeness and life was showing me distance. The place where only memories survive. I got down on my knees and ever-so-gently placed my one-year medallion in her bloodless palm, then closed her fist around it. She didn't stir. The only movement came from Slip's little head burrowing out from under the comforter.

I know they say one day at a time, but I know I will never drink again. The desire has lifted for me. Sometimes I want a smoke but the wanting only lasts for about 30 seconds so I don't bother. But I do not want a drink. Maybe if I hung around drinkers it would be different, but I don't, and I have no hidden future agenda. I still maintain meetings, sometimes two a week but always one. I am not sponsoring anyone, so far, and I try not to think about it. Maybe I don't have what someone else needs. I haven't told their story yet.

The cottage property is for sale but there haven't been any offers. Hopefully in the spring. I know it will sell and I am not financially rushed, but I don't live there anymore and I won't go back there. It is a hard memory. A different time, a different me.

The Chief is still my dear friend and mentor. I mostly seek

council with him over matters of the heart, and donuts. He doesn't know that when the cottage sells I'm going to give him a hundred thousand dollars. His biggest regret is never having been able to travel. Becoming a part of other cultures and embracing their customs. The money will allow him to do that and I may go along on a couple of adventures. I'm also going to give Mike some money, but I haven't decided on the dollar amount yet. I love Mike. Not as much as I love the Chief and it's a different kind of love. Sometimes a very patient love and other times a buddy love. Mike, like the Chief, is easy to be around for the most part. He doesn't need to fill the quiet moments with nothing words and he likes silence more than I do. We still argue occasionally and tell each other it's over, but it never is. Over for us means needing a little break. That break can be as much as a day or sometimes fifteen minutes.

The only thing that truly gets under Mike's skin is when I ride him about Jack humping Walter. It doesn't happen all the time, but when the desire strikes I have to look away. Thankfully Jack is always a couple of Walter snaps from giving it a break for a day or two. The cutest part, well the only cute part, is when Walter runs over to me with a look on his face that asks *Why dad? Why is he doing that?*

He's beside me now, riding shotgun and sleeping soundly, with his big paw hanging over the edge of the seat. I can drive for hours with his head as an armrest. I hope I make him as happy as he makes me. I think I do but I am not a dog whisperer so I'll take it on faith, and wags.

I'm driving a brand new pick-up. Fully loaded with lots of

leather. It's something I always wanted, but resisted purchasing. I talked it through with the Chief. He asked me what I thought Jesse would want for me. I cried some and then ordered the truck that same afternoon.

Oh Jesse, my sweet Jesse. I hope I did you a good turn in the end. I can't know because you are not here to tell me.

Shortly after her death, the Chief gave me a prayer candle. He told me to light it and talk to her, with no expectations. *This is about you, not her*, he said. I almost didn't do it for that reason. I have grown sick of it being about me, and prefer to be of service to others. Not like a martyr – being of service can still burn me out – but in the end, it is a better way. The better way.

So I did it. I lit the candle and stayed up all night talking and thinking and a few things came out of it. One, I realized, was that in my cups, or on my way there, I didn't lie because I was a liar. I lied to justify what I didn't believe other people would understand. But I wasn't unique. The wording may differ and I suspect all users have a version of this going on in their heads. I also really got *but for the grace of God there go I*. Why me? And why not Jesse? How come a bastard like me gets to go on and live and breathe and make a difference? Make a difference. Make a difference. Make - a - difference. That was the biggest takeaway. And I don't care what anyone says, Jesse tapped me from wherever she went, and rifled it into my brain.

I remember every word she said to me in the last six-months of her short life. But the ones that stand out the most were on the dock. We were holding hands. She was leaning into me

for support because the drugs and the sickness were now both working against her.

*Freight*, she said. *You know what's happening, right?* I remembered not being able to swallow, and thinking about it now I can feel the tint of life leaving my skin.

*Yes.* And she asked me to say it, and I did.

*You're dying.* She nodded. *Yes I am. Let's hope it's soon. And I wouldn't trade a day.*

But I would have. If I could have traded every bad day I inflicted on her for a good one, and if the price to pay was the shortening of my life for the extension of hers, I would have done it in the beat of a heart. Still would, if that were possible. But it is not possible.

The surname was faded into the small sign tacked on to the trunk of a pitch pine in it's final year. I stopped the car and Walt sat up.

"You ready for this, pal? 'Cause I'm not." He licked my mouth and I moaned in disgust, like I always do, so he would do it again. And he never let me down. The cool fall air was trying for crisp. It felt good though, when I put down Walt's window.

He stuck his white bear head out and I pushed into my door, out of range of his circling tail.

"All right. Let's do it, Wally boy." And I slowly rolled down the narrow driveway, canopied by thick branches on both sides, leaving the sign on the pitch pine behind. The sign with the faded lettering that spelled out EAGLE.



I braked all the way down the steep slope and when it flattened out into a clearing, I had to veer right quickly to avoid clipping the back end of an Airstream trailer. It was old but regal. They always are. It didn't have any wheels. My first thought was that Mr. Eagle sold them for cash. Joist hangers were pushed flush to cover up the wheel wells and, underneath, concrete blocks were piled up tight under the joists. It had been that way for a long time because the blocks were fused into the soil, looking like square grey tree stumps. Past the trailer ran a hundred yards of lawn, mostly crack grass, the kind meant for whistling, and crab grass. Remembering the types of sod, here and now, was not lost on me.

Where the grass ended, the beach began. Three, maybe four hundred feet of sandy shoreline. There was a canoe tilted slightly to the left, half on the beach and half in the shallow water.

I'd been sitting in the idling pick-up wondering what my next move might be when Walt gave me a wide-tongued wake-up lick all the way up the side of my face and for a moment we were cartoon characters. I opened my door and told him to wait until I was out. It's unlikely Walt remembers stepping on my nuts, but that's okay because I will never forget. And as long as one of us remembers we can avoid a repeat performance.

Walt trotted down to the beach for a drink, nodding at new scents along the way.

"Hi."

I turned around and at first I couldn't locate the greeter. I knew it was a woman but I couldn't find her.

"Hello?" I said.

She took another couple of steps and came out of the brush and into the clearing. She was native, and beautiful. Did John have a sister? I didn't think so but there was a strong resemblance. Then I remembered the Chief telling me John had met a native woman.

"Are you looking for John?"

"Yes. I'm an old friend of his."

Walt trotted over to greet her and she met him halfway. She had to be six feet tall. I wanted to touch her long black hair and hold her hand. I didn't want her and I didn't need her, but I really wanted to touch her hair and her hands.

Walt made her smile and I caught the tail end of it when she lifted her head.

"What's your name? I'm Lily."

"Freight."

Did I see hidden fleeting recognition upon hearing my name? Something?

I reached out and we shook hands. Her grip was strong and warm, but dry from handling wood. I thought of reaching up and pretending to pull an insect or a twig out of her hair and then showing it to her, but it was a thought and nothing I would follow through with.

"He's farther north helping a contractor. Left this morning."

"Oh, that's too bad. When will he be back?"

Lily shook her head. "Three days, maybe five."

"Dammit."

"Could have saved yourself a long drive if you had called

ahead."

How did she know how long my drive was? She does know something about me.

"I wasn't sure if he would want to see me. I liked the drive. It was fun thinking that he might want to. You know?"

She shook her head and I had to laugh.

"I bet you and John are a match made in heaven."

She smiled and it was wide, and her face ignited with joy and friendliness.

"Yes, but I could kill him sometimes. He can be moody. Not speak for days. Likes me to do his dirty work." She said this last line much louder than the rest. Then she waited.

"I am sorry for your loss," she said with a hand cradling her abdomen.

I nodded. "Tell John Eagle I said hello. And I hope he is well. Tell him I know why he doesn't want to see me and it's okay."

Lily gave me the saddest smile. She looked over her shoulder into the woods hearing the leaves break just before I did.

John Eagle stepped out, a little heavier and a little older. A bit of grey lined both sides of the hair close to his temples.

My stomach dropped and I had to resist the urge to put my hand over it. Walter went dog crazy. He barrelled back from sniffing around the canoe. John crouched just in time for Walt's leaping love. He flipped onto his back and whined over John's absence of belly rubs. Finally he flipped back to a stand, gave John neck licks and then trotted over to me. I

dropped to one knee and rubbed his neck. "I'm okay, Wally. I know I'm your dad."

"Who is this dog-loving man? I don't remember him," John said.

"I'll make us tea." Lily gave John a playful slap on the chest.

He threw her a defeated look that should have been for me but we weren't there anymore.

She walked toward the trailer and Walt followed. John stayed on her and I could see he wanted her to come back.

He walked slowly toward the beach and I matched his pace, but slightly behind and a good distance to the side.

We stopped and looked at the canoe and then out over the lake. We had done this many times together. Different times - different lake.

"You look good, Freight. Better than I have ever seen you look." He said this with his eyes on the lake. Eventually he turned to me.

"I'm sorry for not coming to the funeral."

I nodded. "I'm sorry about your dad."

"We know loss."

"That we do."

John stiffened and went for small talk. "How is the Chief? Is he still teaching you?"

"Yes, forever."

"His health?"

"Like a horse."

"That is good to hear."

"She told me, John."

His chin dropped to his chest. His eyes closed, and after they were closed he squeezed them as if to lock them up forever.

"I know it's why you left, and why you couldn't come back."

"It was wrong." He said it low and I barely heard it.

"No, it wasn't. In some ways it was easier than thinking you hated me for what I did. But, in the end, I couldn't have you hating yourself."

I could feel the emotion rising in my throat. It was trying to break out and I had to push it down because I needed to say more.

"I don't know," John stammered.

"I do. I let it happen. I watched her walk away." I sat down on the beach and John followed suit.

I reached into my shirt pocket and took out a small envelope. I ran my fingers over it, brought it up to my nose and smelled it. Then I held it out to John. He looked at it for a bit and then slid it from my fingertips.

"I have never read it and I don't ever want to know what it says. It is none of my business."

John held the note close to his chest with one hand while the other grabbed at the sand, letting it run through the fingers back to where it came.

"Jesse died with no regrets, other than not getting to carry on."

John nodded. I think that made him happy but I could not know for sure. Then he turned to face me and his face was wet with tears. "I loved her very much, Freight. So much."

"I know it."

"You did, too."

"I did, with all my heart."

Walter appeared and laid down in the sand at a middle distance between us. John looked down at him and then back to me.

"I guess you didn't come to give me the dog."

"No, sir. That's my boy now."

"I see it."

"Tea is ready." Lily yelled from the open door of the airstream.

"I hope you're hungry. When she says tea she means lunch."

We stood.

"I like her," I said.

"Me too. Feisty, in a thoughtful way."

"Does she know?"

"She knows everything."

"Good. I hate secrets."

We walked up to the trailer, side by side.

"Nice truck."

"I needed something to get your ATV up here."

"You are kidding me?"

"What am I going to do with two ATVs?"

"Lily."

Lily opened the door and poked her head out.

"That's our ATV." He turned to me. "We have been saving up for one."

"She took long strides to the trailer. She leaned over the fender and slapped one tire. Her legs were tight and strong and long in her jeans. It reminded me that I was alive."

"I'm not there yet, but when the time comes, does Lily have a sister?"

John moved in and put his arm around me. He laughed, and to my grateful ear, it sounded like thunder.

### Epilogue

A part of me I cannot always get to resonates with a truth that, slowly, I am beginning to comprehend. The truth that even though my suffering was ugly, it was also holy. That my loss has brought me home. I feel a tenderness and a depth, and there are days I can forgive the man that lives under the porch. Those are good days. Alone, but good.

The End.

















