

The New Orphic Review

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ERNEST HEKKANEN is the author of 47 books. The most recent are *False Memories and Other Likely Tales, I'm Not You, Heretic Hill, All Night Gas Bar, Wintering Over: Poems Strewn on Snow, Of a Fire Beyond the Hills, Shadows on a Cave Wall, Kafka: The Master of Yesno* and *The Life of Bartholomew G. Hekkanen* is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Literature in Canada and Contemporary Authors* in the United States. He is the subject of Margrith Schraner's critical study, *The Reluctant Author: The Life and Literature of Ernest Hekkanen*.

Attempt to Fly

Ernest Hekkanen

I HAVE AN ENDURING admiration for the brave souls who attempted to fly, back when flight was a glorious dream more than a substantive reality—at least, for human beings. My infatuation began when I was ten years old, in fourth grade, not long after Russia launched the first Sputnik on October 4, 1957, thus inspiring the Space Race. I was too young to fully comprehend the meaning of the event, or the ensuing influence it would have on the course of history. For me, it was something intangible that suddenly came to shape the context of the times. The “feeling” was out there in the ozone that space flight was something more than a notion found in Buck Rogers comic strips.

I was one of those boys who loved assembling model airplanes. I purchased a balsa-framed model with a wingspan of nearly three feet. I covered the frame with a thin silky membrane that I painted black and white and then I slapped an engine replete with a propeller on the front, only to watch it fly about thirty feet before crashing in a heap of tangled debris. My friends and I strapped cardboard wings to our arms and flung ourselves off the garage roof, in much the same manner that early aeronauts did, when they jumped from towers, usually to their deaths, but oftentimes escaping with broken bones and bruised flesh, as we did.

I remember my mother half-yelling at me, “What drives boys to do such stupid things? Can you give me a good answer, Mike? Can you?”

I was so seized by the idea of traveling into space, I built a rocket ship out of lumber salvaged from a nearby housing development. I worked on my rocket for two to three weeks. It had two compartments, on opposite sides of the fuselage, with a string-and-tin-can communication system, because, you see, my neighborhood friend, Andy, intended to travel with me, and we would need to communicate with each other on our long journey into space. We even built a launch pad.

“Yeah, but how are you going to get this thing off the ground?” another friend asked me.

“Simple. The same way a slingshot works, only we’ll need scads of rubber bands.”

In my imagination, large obstacles were little more than minor details.

Our launch pad held our rocket ship at a slight angle. There was a hook on the bottom of the rocket and another one attached to the launch pad, large enough to restrain fifty to sixty rubber bands stretched to the breaking point. For extra lift, we had nailed a tuna-fish can to the bottom of our spacecraft, stuffed it with fire crackers and connected them to a long fuse that Launch Central would light with a match. Our first flight was scheduled for take-off in early 1958, and we fully expected the event to be captured in local newspapers. Quite a few neighborhood kids gathered to watch us defy the restraints of gravity. The long fuse was lit and the kid responsible for tripping the trigger device that released the rubber bands stood at the ready, behind an old rain barrel. Larry was supposed to trip the device at the same time the fuse burned down to where all the firecrackers were stuffed in the tuna-fish can.

Although there was a fairly deafening bang and the rubber bands let go at roughly the proper time, our rocket, needless to say, remained resolutely on the ground. Did I feel foolish? Indeed, I did. However, I probably shouldn’t have felt any more foolish than early aeronauts who tried to bicycle their winged machines into the air, or who built boats hoisted aloft by dirigibles, or who tried to toilet-plunge their way into heavenly realms. As I grew older and learned a lot more about lift and thrust, mass and force, velocity and such things, I put aside the childish inventions designed to “break the surly bonds of earth.” However, the impulse never quite deserted me. Instead, it was transformed into writing stories that allowed me to experience life in a dimension somewhat removed from the one that broke bones and bruised flesh.

In forty-seven years of writing, I have enjoyed only a modicum of success. Nonetheless, this spring, Alan Twigg of *BC BookWorld* designated our abode, namely, the New Orphic Gallery, one of 200 Literary Landmarks in British Columbia. I doubt whether that will get me fully airborne, but at least it acknowledges the many years I have spent flying by the seat of my pants. I enjoy the irony inherent in that.

Born and raised in Edmonton, PAUL CRESEY is a graduate of the University of Alberta. He has been published in *Grain* magazine. He currently lives and writes in Victoria, B.C.

Locker 315

Paul Cresey

ARTHUR BELL LIVED in his storage locker. At least, I was pretty sure he did. Every day he left within the first hour we opened, and every night he returned just before we closed. Of course, because we were a twenty-four hour facility, it was perfectly acceptable for him to be in his locker after office hours, so long as he didn't sleep. Sleep was the condition that distinguished living at a place from visiting it. If Arthur stayed awake every minute he was here, then he would be perfectly in his right; but if he slept, and I found out, then he was as good as gone.

* * *

Early one morning Arthur asked my boss, Dan Cox, who was also the mini-storage owner, for permission to move to locker 315, having noticed that it had just recently become vacant. Locker 315 was one of our more luxurious units. The locker was spacious (two hundred square feet), had rolling doors on either side, and was heated.

Dan came into the office to update me on the situation. He had a neck like a turkey wattle and hobbled because of a crooked right foot. He also smelled constantly of stale cigarette smoke, a scent which he bore as if it were his *eau de toilette*.

"Arthur's moving lockers," he said, itching his neck.

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Which one is he moving to?"

"315."

"He wants more space?"

"Guess so."

"Are we giving him a discount?"

"How much is he paying now?"

I opened Arthur's file on the computer. "One fifty."

"What's locker 315 cost?"

"Three fifty."

"Ah shit," he sighed. "Give it to him for three twenty."

"You got it."

“When you’re done with that, Arthur needs your help out back. He’s got some heavy stuff he says he can’t lift on his own. And, if you could, take a look inside 315 first to make sure it’s clean.”

I grabbed the broom and sauntered across the lot towards locker 315. The mini storage was outdoors, so spiders were a constant issue, even more than dust and leaves. My mother believed it was bad luck to kill spiders; I did not. I was a spider assassin. I opened the doors on both sides of locker 315 and stepped inside, wielding the broom like a sword. I scrambled the webs overhead and brought them crashing to the floor. Then I crushed the mamma spiders underfoot and swept their corpses, brood and webs to the wind. I gave the rest of the ground a quick sweep. Clean.

Arthur currently rented locker 245. I found him observing a set of four treadless car tires sans rims. He was clothed in the usual out-of-season winter wear, complete with fingerless gloves and toque.

“So what is it I can help you with?” I asked.

“Just ‘cause you’re helping me,” said Arthur, “doesn’t mean I trust you. I don’t want you touching any of my stuff until I ask you to. I don’t want you looking at anything I don’t want you to look at. I have a right to my privacy.”

He was nuts if he thought he could stop me from looking at his stuff. In the time it took him to tell me not to, I had seen pretty much everything I could possibly see. There wasn’t really a lot to look at. He had a grey Dodge Caravan, a red tool cabinet, the four tires, fifteen or twenty boxes, and what looked like a carburetor.

He continued to stare at the tires. While I waited for his instructions, I tried to make polite small talk. Although he had been renting with us for two years, I only knew his name. “You owe this” and “here’s your receipt” had been the extent of our conversations thus far.

“So what do you do?” I asked.

“Why don’t you tell me what *you* do?”

“I work here.”

“Well,” he said, “so do I.”

“Oh. At Binders?”

The mini storage was neighbours with a local gravel business called Binders.

“No. Right here.” Arthur pointed to the ground. “Right over there.” He pointed in the direction of locker 315. “I’m working on my business. That’s why I need the bigger locker: my business.”

“What kind of business?”

He narrowed his wild eyes. “That’s none of your business.”

Arthur bent over and picked up one of the tires. His pockmarked face twisted into a pained expression. He threw the tire aside and collapsed onto the pavement in a motion that looked staged. I went over to help

him onto his feet.

He swatted my hand away. “Don’t touch me! I’ve got back problems. I don’t need you injuring me more than I already am.”

I let him get up by himself. He winced with every little movement.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“You’ll need to move most of what I got,” he said, clutching his back. “I don’t think I’m going to be any help.”

He was clever; I would give him that.

I moved the tires first. Meanwhile, Arthur followed close behind and talked to me about the business I wasn’t allowed to know anything about.

“...and so I’m going to rent some chairs and set up the equipment that is in those boxes and teach them about documentaries. I worked for the National Film Board from when I was twenty-five to about ten years back. This was when I lived in Toronto. Anyway, they flew me up to Baffin Island one year to document the migration of walrus in the Arctic Circle. I made a movie just like that penguin one. What’s it called again? Mine was called *Walrus: Friends of the North*. I almost got nominated for an Academy Award for short subject. Missed it by one vote. I’ve been all over the world shooting documentaries for the Board. Texas, El Salvador, Zambia, Sri Lanka—I could write three Johnny Cash songs for all the places I’ve been. *March of the Penguins!* That was it. The point is I’ve got all this knowledge and nobody to give it to. That’s what my business is about. People should know what I know, and I might as well get paid for telling them. If you can get paid for what you know, then you’re golden. You can’t lose what you know. Once it’s yours, it’s yours for good....”

We moved the van last. It had a dead battery and so had to be pushed. Arthur asked me to wait at the tailgate while he crawled around inside doing god knows what. If he were living in his storage locker, as I suspected, then he probably slept in the back of the van. I tried to peek inside, but he had put polka-dotted bed sheets over the windows.

Arthur rolled the driver’s side window down and popped his head out. “I want you behind the van at all times,” he said. “I don’t want you coming around the front. I have a right to my privacy.”

As the van rolled out of the locker, he shouted his demands out the window. He also made sure to remind me to stay behind the van. I pushed while he controlled from the driver’s seat.

When we finally got the van inside locker 315, I was sweaty and exhausted. Arthur rehung the bed sheet over the driver’s side window and the windshield as well, stepped out of the van and came over to me.

“Thanks for all your help,” he said.

He pulled a twenty-dollar bill from his tattered wallet and held it out for me to take. This sudden act of generosity struck me in an unexpected way.

“You don’t have to do that,” I said.

“I insist.” He waved the money in the air.

I believed it rude to refuse any gratuity twice, so I took the bill and slid it into my pocket. I promised myself that I would find a way to return the gesture somehow.

“I think I trust you now,” Arthur said. “I don’t trust a lot of people, but you seem like a trustworthy guy.”

* * *

Every so often I got to see what stuff tenants paid us to store. After three months of non-payment, a tenant’s stuff became our stuff, and Dan and I went treasure hunting. Our main objective during these hunts was to determine if what the tenant had in storage was worth more than they owed. If it was, we confiscated and sold their stuff; if it wasn’t, we continued to hound them to pay. Dan pretended curiosity was the reason he came along, but I knew it was because he didn’t trust me. He fantasized about finding sacks of cash or gold bullion. He thought if I beat him to the score I would take it for myself and tell him I had found nothing.

Sometimes Dan would let me pick out something from a locker to keep. His only rule was that he had to approve of everything I took before I took it. The first time he encouraged me to do this I had stumbled upon a coin collection hidden inside a Cuban cigar box. In it were US silver dollars, coins from Franco’s Spain and Canadian nickels from the nineteenth century.

“What about these?” I had asked, showing him the box.

“Would you look at that,” he had replied. “You know, my grandkids collect this stuff. I bet they would like that.”

And he had taken them to his Ford F-150 and driven off, the coins jingling on the passenger seat all the way to the pawn shop.

More often than not, however, all we found during our treasure hunts was junk. We rarely found anything of real value, like the coins. Most tenants paid us what their stuff was worth in the first year. This is not to say that there weren’t savvy tenants who used storage in the way it was meant to be used, as a garage or a temporary holding place between moves. They were just the exception.

Ever since moving to locker 315, Arthur had seemed destined for arrears. I knew he sometimes paid his bills late, but never later than a month. Obviously he had been unable to afford the increase in his rent. Thinking back to the promise I had made myself with regards to Arthur’s twenty-dollar tip, I asked Dan if we might reduce his rent even more to help him out.

“If he can’t afford it,” Dan had said, “he can always move back. I mean, Jesus, I already gave the guy a discount as it is.”

At that time Arthur was a week away from finding himself the next X on our treasure hunting map. I worried about what would happen to the

film equipment he had mentioned if he ever got on that list. I could already picture Dan, cigarette in his mouth, hobbling towards his Ford with a box full of cameras and film.

“My grandkids will love this,” he would say.

Nevertheless, other than asking Dan to reduce his rent, I did nothing else to stop the inevitable. I saw Arthur every day of that week leaving in the morning and coming back in the evening, but I never went out to warn him of what was coming. Half of me hoped he would pay at the last possible minute; the other half hoped he wouldn't pay at all. I was torn. As embarrassing as it was to admit, I wanted to rifle through his stuff, was damn near looking forward to it. I wanted to know if my suspicions about his sleeping situation were true. I wanted to find the original film roll of *Walrus: Friends of the North*.

When the three month mark inevitably passed, Dan and I went hunting. Dan kept an angle grinder and bolt cutters in his office for just such an occasion. Arthur's lock was thick and so required the angle grinder to cut. Dan enjoyed cutting the locks himself, so I stood back and watched. He pulled down on the lock first, to make sure he wasn't wasting his time, and then went about cutting it. The angle grinder buzzed like a giant mechanical toothbrush in his hand. He pressed it against the shackle. A steady jet of sparks rocketed into the air, cooled and then vanished from sight. Seconds later the lock fell to the pavement.

Dan set the tool down beside it and rolled the locker door up.

“Let's see what we've got,” he said.

This was Arthur's worst nightmare. I felt Dan and I were doing something shameful, despicable. But the part about it that made me feel even worse was that if at the end of our hunt we decided to chase after Arthur to pay, it meant we had reckoned his stuff to be worth less than nine hundred and sixty bucks. My last paycheque had been just over that. For doing nothing. What if this was everything he owned? My excitement deflated like a popped balloon. All of a sudden I didn't care what Arthur kept in his van or in his boxes. I became absorbed in a new purpose: protecting his stuff from Dan.

Dan went straight for the tool cabinet. He opened the top drawer and pulled out a Robertson screwdriver. In the second drawer he found an orange-speckled hammer and a set of five wrenches.

“Rusty,” he said. “Rusty, rusty, rusty.” He threw the tools back into the cabinet one at a time. “You find anything in those boxes yet?” He hobbled over to me.

I had started going through the boxes in the hope of finding Arthur's film equipment and hiding it. So far all I had found was a box full of yellow newspapers and a box of cleaning chemicals.

“Nothing yet,” I said.

He went over to the carburetor, stared down at it, lit a cigarette and

didn't move until it was done.

"Do you think it's worth anything?" I asked.

"Hell no," he answered, guffawing. "Thing's rusted to shit like everything else."

Dan tossed the butt onto the pavement outside. He walked alongside the van, trying to see through the polka-dotted sheets.

I had to stop him before he reached the door.

"Dan," I called. "Come look at this."

I had stumbled upon a box of glasses and decided to pretend they were real crystal. I gambled on the fact that Dan wouldn't know the difference, and succeeded.

"You sure it's crystal?"

"Yeah," I said. I handed the glass to him. "You can tell because of the way the light reflects along the rim."

It was complete hogwash of course, but I had him hooked. He held the glass up to the sunlight shining into the locker and turned it back and forth.

"Would you look at that," he said, mesmerized.

"There was another box like it," I lied. "I just can't remember which one."

Dan bent down and began searching for the second box. I kneeled down beside him and made myself bothersome. After I had bumped into him for the third time, he finally shooed me away.

"Why don't you go look inside the van," he said. "And tell me what you find."

"Okay, boss."

I walked to the driver's side door and opened it. A putrid smell billowed like smoke from out of the van. I turned my head, took a deep breath, lifted my shirt over my mouth and bravely entered. I climbed onto the driver's seat and looked into the back. The back seats were gone, and in their place lay a sofa bed mattress, grey and lumpy. A fuzzy blanket decorated with a locomotive was bunched up on the mattress. In its huddled state the train appeared to have crashed in the middle of the bed, the cars one on top of the other, the engine folded up like an accordion. I closed my sore eyes and rubbed them. The polka-dotted sheets admitted dim, perforated light that covered the interior of the van with a thousand dark holes, making it difficult to look at anything for long.

Also, I thought that I had seen something I couldn't possibly have seen. When I opened my eyes, I looked again just to be sure.

In the back corner of the van were three milk jugs and a five-gallon pail. Two of the milk jugs were full and the third, only half. Even though the lighting made it difficult to tell green from blue, I could see that what was in the jugs was yellow. I determined the purpose of the pail by association.

“Will!” Dan called. “Come here. I think I found something.”

I backed out of the van and closed the door. I pulled my shirt off my face.

“What is it?” I asked, walking over to him. I tried not to look sick.

He pointed at the box over top of which he was leaning. I peered down into it. Inside were a Super 8mm camera, four small film rolls, a large black camcorder, the kind that recorded onto VHS, and an unwrapped package of five VHS tapes. Hardened, brittle cables like vines entangled the film equipment. Dan had broken some of them trying to get a better look.

“Do you know much about this kind of thing?” he asked.

“A little,” I said.

“Do you know if it’s worth anything?”

Only what it was worth to Arthur.

“It’s all pretty outdated,” I said, “so I wouldn’t think much.”

“Give me a number.”

“Fifty bucks.”

“Nothing then.” Dan jabbed the box with his crooked foot. “You find anything in the van?”

I didn’t think he would believe I had found nothing, so I made up something he could believe.

“Just some rusty tools.”

“Rusty tools,” he snickered. “We should start calling him Rusty.” He laughed in apparent surprise at his cleverness. “We should just call him Rusty,” he repeated.

While we went through the rest of the unopened boxes, Dan muttered variations on his new nickname for Arthur, each time deteriorating in laughter.

“Rusty with the rusty tools,” he said. “We should call him the Rustman.”

* * *

At the end of every treasure hunt, Dan and I replaced the locks we cut with red ones to keep tenants from trying to run off with their stuff. A red lock also let them know without us having to say that we had gone inside their locker. For that reason red locks usually foreshadowed an altercation. The colour red set off tenants the same way it set off bulls.

After we had gone through the rest of the boxes, Dan decided he would make more money squeezing Arthur than he would selling his stuff, so we put red locks on both doors of locker 315 and went into the office to wait for him to come. At first Dan was going to leave me to deal with Arthur, but I convinced him to stay. Unlike Dan, I knew what was at stake for Arthur.

Ten minutes before closing Arthur returned from wherever it was he went during the day. I waved to him as he walked through the gate, visible

from inside the office. He waved back.

“Arthur’s here,” I called to Dan.

Dan was in the secondary office down the hall. I opened Arthur’s file on the computer.

Dan came out front.

“Where’d he go?” he asked.

“Around back,” I said. “He’ll be coming soon.”

Dan pointed. “Here he comes.”

Arthur came running around the gate and burst through the front door. The chimes hanging on it erupted into a cacophonous symphony.

“Call the police!” he cried. “Somebody’s changed my locks. I want to see your security footage from the last eight hours.” He grabbed his oily hair and tugged on it. “Oh please, please tell me they didn’t take anything.” When he let go, he left behind two giant horns on his head. He paced around the office like a nervous demon. “Do you have the footage yet?”

“Nobody’s taken anything,” Dan said. “You haven’t paid your bills. You know what happens around here when people don’t pay their bills.”

Arthur halted. His horns slowly toppled over.

“You changed my locks?”

“We cut your locks and put our locks on,” Dan corrected.

Arthur glanced at me and then back at him. “Did you go inside?”

“We did.”

“That’s illegal!” he screamed. “That’s, that’s goddamned unconstitutional! I’ve got a right to my privacy. That’s my private property.”

“It’s your property if you pay your bills,” Dan said, his voice rising to match Arthur’s. Dan snapped his fingers at me. “How much does he owe?”

“Nine hundred and sixty dollars,” I said.

“Nine hundred and sixty dollars,” Dan repeated. “What’s been going on with you? Why haven’t you been paying your bills?”

“I haven’t gotten my inheritance yet.”

“What inheritance?”

“From my cousin,” Arthur said. “He just died.”

Dan scoffed. “I’ve never heard of anybody getting an inheritance from their cousin.”

“Well, my cousin, Jamie, gave me one. It just hasn’t come yet.”

“You know I’ve always been fair with you,” said Dan. “I gave you a discount on the locker, and you’ve never had to pay a late fee. Hell, I’ve been more than fair. So I don’t like it when people I treat fairly try to take advantage of me by lying and making excuses and not paying their bills. I’ve got bills to pay too, you know. What do you think would happen to me if nobody paid their bills? Do you think the floor you’re standing on was free?”

“It’s true, it’s true,” Arthur said. “I’ll have the money in a month. It’s

already in the mail.”

Dan sighed. “One month?”

“Within the month.”

“Then that’s how long I’m going to give you to pay what you owe. Nine hundred and sixty bucks. I don’t care where you get the money or who you get it from: your cousin, your aunt, Betty, Bobby, Sue—I don’t care. Just get it to me in one month. Otherwise, I’m selling your locker.”

“Thank you.” He clasped his hands in front of him as if in prayer. “Thank you.”

After that we expected Arthur would leave, but he remained exactly where he was, hands still folded in front of him. His plaintive eyes darted back and forth between us.

“You got anything else you want to say?” Dan needed a cigarette; his voice grumbled with nicotine lust.

“The locks—” Arthur started to say.

“I’m not letting you into your locker.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want you running off with your stuff.”

“I promise I won’t,” Arthur said, hand on his heart. “On my cousin’s grave.”

“One promise at a time,” Dan said. “Pay your bill by the end of the month, and I’ll let you in. For now you’re just going to have to wait.”

Arthur realized there was no use arguing, so he left the office in a sulk. I was sure he would be back the next day and every day after that *ad infinitum*, to try to convince us to let him in. I imagined he would tell all kinds of crazy stories.

Dan and I watched Arthur meander around the gate and into the back.

“What’s he going back there for?” Dan asked.

I shrugged.

“If he tries any funny business, I’ll take it all to the dump. I don’t give a damn.”

Dan opened the front door, used his crooked foot as a door stop and lit a cigarette. The smoke drifted into the office and disappeared up the vent in the centre on the room.

“You think he’ll pay?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we’ll keep at him if he doesn’t.” He took a drag. “We’ll keep at him until he does.”

* * *

There was a reason why Dan was so strict about people living in their locker, and it dated back to a story from the mini storage’s second year of operation, three years before I was hired. Dan had told me about it on my first day of work. He had wanted me to know why he made exceptions to every rule except that one.

The story began with a tenant named Eddie Mayer. Eddie rented one of our basic, unheated lockers in December of that particular year, on sale at the time for two hundred dollars for three months. Dan had had even more trouble renting lockers in those days, so these specials were common, and usually attracted the down-and-out. Nevertheless, because he needed the business, he rented a locker to anyone willing to put forward some money and sign a contract. He wanted every locker occupied. As long as there was stuff in a locker, there was always the possibility of that stuff becoming his to sell.

Eddie had looked to Dan like the sort of character who might give him trouble, but, because Eddie had fifty dollars on him and a good signing hand, Dan had taken a chance. Dan had the manager, the predecessor of my predecessor, print out a contract, and that afternoon Eddie moved in.

Three months later Dan added Eddie Mayer to his substantial list of tenants in arrears. A week passed before he finally got around to searching Eddie's locker. The first thing Dan noticed was that the lock on the door was unlocked, a good indication that the tenant was inside. Dan called his name out twice and, receiving no answer, rolled open the door. He discovered Eddie curled up in the centre of a deflated air mattress. Eddie had died from exposure.

The police were called, the body collected, and Dan questioned as to whether he knew or had even suspected Eddie was living there and allowed it. Dan pled ignorance, of course, to avoid getting shut down, fines or criminal charges. But when he told me the story, he had concluded it by saying:

“You know, I suspected Eddie would be using it for something like that when he walked in here. If not for drugs, then for squatting. But I just didn't care: fifty bucks was fifty bucks. I thought, ‘Whatever happens I'm going to play Sergeant Schultz with this guy. I hear nothing, I see nothing, I know nothing.’”

* * *

I returned to the mini storage later that night. I opened the gate with my keycard and drove around back towards locker 315.

I found Arthur in front of the back door. He was bent over the red lock, hitting the shackle with a rock the size of a walnut.

The moment my headlights flashed over him, he flung the rock away and cried, “I didn't do nothing!”

I shut my car off and got out.

“Will?” Arthur asked, squinting.

“I came to let you into your locker,” I said.

He lifted his arms to the sky and shook them.

“I knew I could trust you,” he said. “I said it right from the start. Oh, thank you. Thank you so much.”

“But before I do that,” I continued, “there's something you have to

know.”

“What’s that?”

“I saw inside your van. Dan didn’t, but I did. I know that you’re living in your locker. I know that you’re sleeping in your van. I didn’t tell Dan because I knew he’d never let you have your stuff. And I wanted you to have a chance to get your stuff before you leave.”

“What’re you saying?”

“I’m saying that you can’t stay here. I’m saying that you have to go. Tonight.”

The joy left Arthur as if it had drained out of his feet and onto the pavement.

“Where?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Somewhere else.”

I walked over to the locker and unlocked the red lock. I helped him roll his van out, got the jumper cables from the trunk and gave it a boost. I offered to help him pack, but he wouldn’t let me. With that, I wished him luck and left.

The next day Arthur was gone. Anything he had been unable to lift by himself, he had left behind.

At first I tried not to wonder about him, where he had gone and if he was all right. Whenever the thoughts crept in, I stomped them like mamma spiders. But, like spiders, they kept on getting in until, eventually, I had no choice but to allow them a tiny corner in my mind to spin their web.

ROBERT COOPERMAN's latest collection is *Just Drive* (Brick Road Poetry Press). His work has previously appeared in *The New Orphic Review*, *The Fiddlehead* and *The Antigonish Review*.

Robert Cooperman / Four Poems

Physical, Fort Hamilton, 1970

The thing of it was, I really did believe
I had a legitimate out from dying
in a rice paddy or cloud-forest,
from being sniper-shot, blown up
by a Bouncing Betty, my throat slit by Charlie.

When I was eleven, I'd crashed through
a glass door while playing with friends,
the pane shattered, and so many arteries
and veins severed, it was like splicing wires
to sew them all together, and if the doctor
hadn't lived next door, the army never
would've gotten its claws into me.

My right hand had less feeling than a salami,
it never grew a millimeter, and stiff
as a manual stick shift in sub-zero cold.

So at Station Eleven—where all of us
with physical or mental complaints were herded
for one last chance to be proven unfit—
I showed the doctor my scars, my hand,
my physician's letter; he held out a dime
like a sugar cube, and told me to pick it up,

“With your left hand,” he slapped
the bad one away like a fly.

I trudged from Fort Hamilton—a pit pony
about to be put out of its blind-drudgery misery—
into a tack-splattering drizzle, tempted to climb
the Verrazano Bridge and get it over with faster
than the army would have the decency to do it.

The Shrink's Letter

My father's idea to see a psychiatrist;
how Dad knew him I'd not a clue,
but the shrink asked me questions
and wrote down every lie I almost
believed by then: that I had nightmares
about Vietnam—that one, at least, was true:
sitting raccoon-rimmed and sleepless-eyed
in his darkened room's deep leather chair—
while I chanted my fears of jungle death,
of being singled out for special torture
by NCO's: forced to run in circles, shrieking,

“I am a shit bird!” while dodging fired rounds,
then ordered to do countless push-ups,
then beaten by every other draftee
for being Jewish, for being a college boy,
for being a New Yorker, for wanting to fuck
my cousin Roy, after his sister Sarah—
with her tits the size of cantaloupes—sucked
me off, then cheered me on; worse, for bogarting
oxygen that should've been breathed
by the more deserving, more patriotic,
the gung-ho to fight and kill and maim and die
for our best ever Jesus-loving democracy.

At the end of the session, he capped
his fountain pen as if he'd heard it all before,
and much worse, and said he'd mail me
and my draft board copies of the letter;
I placed the fee on his desk, cash only.

At My Draft Board, I

The waiting room smelled of fear,
of damp trouser-legs, where hands
had tried to dry and calm themselves,
while the secretary bullied papers
into rigid piles; draft age boys terrified,
paralyzed beneath her dragon glare accusing,

“Coward! Conscientious Objector? A real one,”
her gaze roared, “would stride into battle unarmed
and let the enemy use him for target practice
while his comrades waited for the Vietcong
to celebrate, so our glorious warriors
could ambush that band of gutless Commies.”

When I arrived early to be grilled by the men
who’d determine if I’d die in war or be spared
that honor in the dirty lie Nixon was selling,
the secretary—with her helmet of blue hair
and her bosom that might gleefully crush an infant—
was nowhere to be seen. So, daring as a spy,
I examined my file: my shrink’s letter hidden
at the bottom; quick as cat-burglar Cary Grant,
I shifted the letter to the top and sat back down.

When the secretary returned from the ladies’ room,
or from visiting her father, Satan, in Hell,
and shot me a sneer of, “Abandon hope,”
I tried to look even dumber than she thought me.

At the Draft Board, II

I was scolded into the room where four men waited.
Less terrified, I might've seen how tired they were,
how much they wanted to be home, relaxing,
not doing the hard job of deciding whether boys
the age of their sons should be sent to war, or reprieved.

More, specifically, whether our psychiatric
or Conscientious Objector appeals should be granted,
and best-case scenario for cowards like me—
who'd applied for both—told that the army wanted
no part of me and that I was free from the killing,
the dying, the screaming, the shrieking, the prayers
to our mothers to make the pain and terror go away.

Three men grilled me about why I deserved
to be a conscientious objector, the fourth read
my shrink's letter, turned one single-spaced page
face down after another, deliberate as a judge
studying complex, contradictory evidence.

"You're a traitor, aren't you?" one shouted,
"nothing but a goddamn, yellow traitor."
The other two picked up the accusation's scent,
my mouth drier than if I were swamp-pursued
by a pack of hounds; finally, the fourth rasped,

"Go easy on this kid; I think he's deranged."
The others suddenly asked if I needed
a couple of aspirins, a cup of water, tea?
When I shook my head, they ushered me out;
the secretary scowled, an owl that's missed its kill.

"You'll be notified," her voice striking, stabbing talons.
The next boy's leg jiggled, gripped by the death rattle.
"Don't," she screeched, "keep the gentlemen waiting!"

ROSS KLATTE is the author of *Leaving the Farm: Memories of Another Life*, and of short stories that have appeared in magazines in Canada and the United States. He is the 1990 winner of the CBC Literary Competition for what became the opening chapter of his memoir, and in 2011 was shortlisted for Canada's *Journey Prize Anthology*. He is a regular contributor to *The New Orphic Review*.

An Open Boat

A Tale Mostly After the Fact

Being a Somewhat Fictional Account of a Small Boat Near-Sinking
Off the Pacific Coast of Mexico

Ross Klatte

THAT AFTERNOON in Punta Verde, Bill and Lois were among the first to board the four o'clock water taxi to Ángelito. They'd climbed down off the pier and grasped one of the overhead metal tubes supporting the tarp canopy to step from seat to seat to reach the back of the boat. They sat down a couple of seats in front of the driver, a man Bill didn't recognize and who, he later learned, was new to the job. The back of the boat was where you were least likely to be struck by spray during the ten-mile trip down the coast.

Soon there was a crowd of other passengers in the boat, and a lot of cargo: bags and boxes of groceries, cases of beer, two heavy boxes of clay tiles, and a big gas water heater in its factory carton—most of it destined, Bill guessed, for the restaurants on the beach or the stores in the village.

The boat was one of the smaller of the half-dozen *pangas* that provided transportation to and from Ángelito, which had no road to it, a twenty-five-foot open craft powered by a single outboard. The larger *pangas* carried two big outboards, and one of those should have been available now, Bill thought, as even more passengers arrived, including a group of young men in identical shirts, knee socks and cleated shoes—a soccer team, forced to find space on the bow deck among the piles of freight. The sky was darkening, a storm maybe brewing. Bill was reminded of the wry observation by an old expat of the Mexicans' cheerful disregard for public safety.

Nobody decided to get off, to wait for another boat, despite that this one was obviously overloaded now. But then nobody ever did. It would mean a wait of at least an hour for the next boat, and most people, after a day in the noisy city of Punta Verde, only wanted to get home to their quiet village. Ángelito was *muy tranquilo*, and for gringo residents like Bill and Lois, the boat ride to it was part of the romance of living there. They saw Ángelito, its palm-thatched houses huddled under jungle-

covered mountains whose tops were often wreathed in mist, as like a paradisaal outpost on a South Pacific island.

The driver backed the boat away from the pier and swung it around. His assistant, a sturdy boy whom Bill *had* recognized, who'd helped the elderly get aboard, who'd cast the boat off and would collect the fares at the end of the short voyage, stood now, as was customary, in the bow, hanging on to the mooring line for balance. The boat was already rocking a little. There was hardly a foot of freeboard, Bill noticed uneasily, as the driver throttled the motor to full speed and they entered open water. Immediately they encountered a brisk wind and three to four-foot swells, and everybody was struck with spray. The spray was like an insult, Bill thought, repeated over and over—he was sitting next to the starboard gunwale and, despite the awning stretched along that side, getting absolutely soaked, receiving great splashes of water that clouded his sunglasses and left the taste of salt in his mouth.

Lois, hunched beside him with her head down, asked for the plastic poncho in his pack. He dug it out and they covered themselves with it. Spray continued to strike them, and there were the usual exclamations from many of the passengers—of delight from some, of simple, involuntary shouts from others. The spray became deluges of water, and the boat began to fill with it. Too late, people lifted their belongings off the bottom of the boat and onto their laps. There were no more delighted shrieks now, only silent endurance of what was turning out to be an ordeal. The driver, as if intent on getting the trip over as soon as possible, didn't lessen their speed.

The boat entered the lee of a headland and smoother water. They were relieved of spray for a moment. Then they were past the headland and into the wind again and abrupt, white-tipped waves that forced the driver to slow down but which he took head-on, despite the cry from one of the gringos on board, whom Bill recognized as the owner of a sailboat, to meet the waves diagonally and go farther out, away from the shore backwash. The driver began to take the waves at an angle but stayed close to shore, which turned out to be fortunate. The boat, with a foot of water sloshing back and forth along its bottom, began to wallow in the waves. Somebody started pulling life jackets out of a seat compartment and passing them around. Lois and Bill were handed a pair and put them on. Bill saw backpacks, groceries, an open purse with a cell phone or iPod in it, awash between the seats. Then the boat met a six-foot wave, went *through* rather than over it, and was swamped. The motor died. Panic! Men shouting, women screaming, a child crying.

We're going to sink, Bill told himself, and was seized less by fear than by that sense of unreality during times of acute stress.

Lois came out from under the poncho. She hadn't seen the big wave, but she saw the state they were in now and clutched his arm.

A couple of young men began jettisoning some of the cargo, notably the cases of beer, the heavy boxes of tiles; the water heater stayed, Bill noticed. "Out of the boat!" the driver shouted in Spanish, and virtually all of the passengers, old and young, the soccer team, the woman with a child—not everybody wearing a life jacket—suddenly, incredibly were in the water, swimming around the boat, then striking out toward the rocky shore. It was only a hundred yards or so off, but there was no beach, just jagged-looking rocks rising sheer out of the frothing waves breaking against them.

Bill looked wildly around for Lois. She was still in the boat, had a vessel of some kind and was bailing. "Are you all right?" he called to her. She nodded. She seemed perfectly calm and was bailing with the four Mexican men and one of the two other gringos on board, all of them at work with whatever had come to hand, a straw sombrero, a single bucket, this or that plastic container. Lois knew about boats, Bill remembered. Her parents had a boat on Lake St Clair in Michigan when she was a girl. Though he'd been in the navy, she was more of a sailor than he was.

He found the cracked remains of a five-gallon plastic container for gasoline and joined in the bailing, scooping up water from between the seats, lifting it with some difficulty over the starboard awning. The gringo who wasn't bailing, presumably because he had nothing to bail with, sat dumbly in his seat. He was sitting in water. Those standing were knee-deep in water. The boat was nearly submerged now, barely afloat in the sea.

None of them knew the color of the sky. That famous opening to Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat" slipped quietly into Bill's head, and he arrived at a new appreciation of that great story.

The driver managed to restart the motor. He turned the boat around and headed back toward one of the beaches. They met a boat going toward Ángelito and everyone pointed toward where most of their passengers had gone overboard. It disappeared around the point behind them, presumably to rescue those who'd swum ashore or send a boat that could.

After a mile or so, the boat partially bailed out, the driver turned around again and headed back toward Ángelito. Bill looked over at Lois, who didn't look up, intent on her bailing. He turned back to his own bailing. He guessed they would make it now.

They passed those who'd abandoned the boat, some twenty or more individuals, not yet rescued, marooned now on a rocky ledge. Somehow they'd managed to climb up out of the choppy sea onto the pointed rocks, past clusters of spiny urchins, they heard later. The marooned party waved, somewhat disconsolately. Those on the boat waved encouragingly back.

A little farther and they met a sleek boat going at full throttle. It swept by them, empty except for the driver. Yes, Bill decided, the rescue boat from Ángelito, and swung around to watch it speed down the shore, then

turn into it where he knew the group on the rocks was waiting.

The sea was still high. Their boat, mostly bailed and containing few passengers, was riding too high in the water, violently pitching and rolling, but Ángelito wasn't far now.

One of the Mexicans produced a bottle of tequila, lifted out of the flotsam in the bottom of the boat. He took a long drink and passed the bottle around. Bill was offered a drink but declined. Later he thought he should have taken it. Maybe he'd insulted the man, or acted the uptight, abstemious *gringo*. Safely ashore, he would enjoy a margarita.

He looked over at Lois again. She was sitting now, as were the others, clutching her sodden pack. She smiled back at him. She'd been so brave. He hadn't been so much brave as just suspending belief in what he feared might happen, disaster, drowning—*Lois* drowning and himself unable to save her. Actually, it might have been the other way around; she was the far better swimmer.

He was still standing, clutching the awning on his side of the boat, not relaxed enough to sit down. His own pack was soaked through. Inside, along with his wallet and a used paperback he'd bought in Vallarta, was his Kindle. It would prove to be ruined.

Later they would have to dry everything out, their wallets, every document in them, all the peso bills they'd withdrawn from a bank ATM in Punta Verde, as well as salvage what they could of the groceries they'd bought in the market.

Before that would come the trauma, slight in his case, Bill thought, maybe greater in Lois's. That night, during which the threatened storm broke, bringing torrential rain (in the midst of the dry season!), she would ask to be held, would begin to shake, finally howl with the terror she'd held in check all through the near-sinking. And in their bed together, Bill himself, after closing his eyes, would see the images, the white-capped waves, the boat awash, the passengers in the water. For days afterwards, he would relive the experience. Recounting it to others, he'd blithely call it an adventure. But he knew himself, along with Lois, along with all the others in and out of the boat that day, to be nothing less than a survivor.

Afterwards *panga* passengers were made to wear life jackets—when leaving or arriving at a pier, anyhow, to save the boatman from being ticketed. Once away from the pier, however, the requirement wasn't enforced and most people didn't bother. The jackets were uncomfortable after all. Besides, the incident had been unusual, if not one of a kind. Then too there was an aspect of machismo, Bill allowed. He had to admit it to himself.

At length, with a nod to the ghost of Stephen Crane, he would make a little story of it—without hinting, as Crane did in *his* story, that it might hold an interpretation.

DAVID SAPP is a writer, artist and professor living along the southern shore of Lake Erie. His poems have appeared widely in a number of venues across the United States, in Canada and the United Kingdom. His publications also include articles in the *Journal of Creative Behavior*, chapbooks *Close to Home* and *Two Buddha*, and a novel, *Flying Over Erie*.

David Sapp / Four Poems

Sympathy

When I was a child,
the first time I planted
anything, it was radishes.
I drew a line in the soil,
sprinkled tiny, black seeds in the furrow,
and covered them with small hands.
In a few weeks, plump
cupid cheeks smiled at me,
knowing I needed their joy.

When my mother's petunias spilled
a crazy wilderness across the walk,
I didn't know where to play
no matter how carefully I trod.
Each morning, heavy with dew,
their petals seemed to weep for me.
Even the thistles cried a little.

When I was mostly grown
and endured many days alone,
when winter hours were especially bleak,
I looked to my one, gruff plant
in its plain, clay pot,
whose every leaf declined to wither,
whose roots took hold, stems akimbo,
stubbornly for me.

When I married, I dug
a lilac sprig for my wife
from the old matron along the fence
and planted it at the corner of our house.
All these years it thrived, refusing
to acquiesce to implacable ice and snow.
On warm days in May, its gracious fragrance
drifts through our bedroom windows.

Reliquary

A thousand years from now,
a few pilgrims escape the sun,
trudging down the dark, cool nave
of an inconsequential abbey,
around the ambulatory, over
the crypt of some obscure bishop,
the vivid colors of stained glass
reflecting on stone, arched walls—
and come upon a tiny chapel
tucked away in a dim niche.

There will be our reliquary,
a forgotten, curious, little box
covered in tarnished, beaten silver,
precious stones clouded like cataracts,
perhaps a solitary ruby, and our images,
icons arranged in delicate cloisonné.
The tourists mistakenly believe it holds
dry, dusty bones, an eminent saint;
one gawker awkwardly genuflects
before the big toe of Mary Magdalene.

Unopened for a century or two,
they'd be surprised as there is merely
the relic of our fleeting days,
our romance, our children,
our feeble triumphs,
our fears, our laughter.
There is no tunic or splinter of the cross,
only a flower, a small marvel,
its blossom as succulent and fragrant
as the day it bloomed.

My Wife's Kitchen Cupboard

My wife's kitchen cupboard
is filled with an avalanche;
when opened, the olive oil,
black pepper, expired coupons, stray recipes
thunder, crashing from the precipice;
the paprika can't take it anymore,
inches to the edge. *Don't do it!*
A wilderness of exotic spices,
once traversing the *Silk Road*,
languish in the back, reminiscing
over the flavor of a single, ancient meal.
I've learned to warily reach
only for the cinnamon and garlic salt,
perched precariously on the ledge.

My wife's nightstand drawer,
gorged, when opened, explodes—
jolted babies cry, windows rattle,
a nostalgic booby-trap—lets fly
a detonation of diaries, school pictures
(wistful TNT ignites her silly tears),
grade cards, drawings, tooth fairy evidence,
ten-year-old grocery lists,
a receipt for our wedding flowers,
lessons on apostrophes, prepositions, Shakespeare,
and a book we opened once or twice
called *Keep it Simple Sex* (other titles
feature car repair and effective parenting).

My wife's closet door keeps
a typhoon at bay; when opened,
a deluge of shoes, skirts, excessively flowered
blouses, ratty, oversized sweaters
too hot for menopause, a torrent
of T-shirts, archived according to sentiment,
and bras, a wondrous, tangled
cyclone of bras, soft sculptor's
molds of warm, woman bosom.
My drawers are dull, nearly empty,
calm as the eye of the storm;
only the essential echoes hollow,
rattling around when opened.

Fifty-One Years Later

Fifty-one years later,
you were given
an incongruous image of your father,
like a misplaced photograph,
teenagers' bouffants and crew cuts
telling, buried at the bottom of a bureau.

When he was principal at Clyde
Senior High, lanky, balding, stoic,
a drawer of neatly creased bow ties,
a girl, a little older, resurrected
that harrowing day, a gray sky crushing,
a harsh, winter wind coming.

November, 1963 was his burden
to announce over the school PA,
his voice on the cusp of fracture,
John F. Kennedy was dead in Dallas,
Jackie's pink *Chanel* dotted
with a darker shade of crimson.

It wasn't simply the madness:
Kennedy was just a few years
younger, a husband, a father,
and John-John, who would salute
the president's caisson, was your age,
you, your father's youngest daughter.

He couldn't imagine this
as a grim rehearsal for 1968,
for Bobby, for Martin,
for all the boys he knew,
killed during Tet.

The girl, passing the trophy case,
school calendars, lunch menus,
laminated Thanksgiving turkeys,
could see past the secretary's shoulder,
through his open door, lights dim,
slumped, head in his hands,
your father, quietly weeping.

NILOFAR SHIDMEHR, PhD, MFA, is an Iranian-Canadian writer and a British Columbia Book-Prize nominated poet with four books: *In the Garden of Exile* (2014), *Between Lives* (2014), *Two Nilofars: Before and After Migration* (2009), *Shirin and Salt Man* (2008). She is also the Farsi translator of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. As a social activist, she hosted Iranian Women's Voices on Vancouver Co-op Radio, and as an instructor, she taught courses on life writing at Simon Fraser University. She was a juror for the 2015 RBC Bronwen Wallace Award for Emerging Writers. Dr. Shidmehr is the 2015-2016 Writer-in-Residence at Regina Public Library.

Autography of My Name

Nilofar Shidmehr

THE STORY OF MY life begins the way a Persian fairy tale begins: There was one and there was none. Except for God, there was no one.

I was thrown into life and was born. But my name was not born with me. Names cannot be thrown; they are chosen. My parents had a strange way of choosing my name. They did not decide my name by themselves. Instead, they put the burden of decision on another person. The task was given to a man at the birth registration office—a man to whom names meant nothing but statistics.

Twenty days after my birth, on the day my parents decided to give me a name and register it, they wrote three names on three pieces of paper and folded the papers. The “nameless I” could bear any of those three names my parents carried with them to the birth registration office. She could be three different women. The decision as to who I would be was left to the man who happened to be recording the newborns' names that day. So, the decision was left to chance.

It is said that God first created earth and everything on it, including trees and animals, and then gave each of his creatures a name. It was then that God's will to create and God's will to bring to existence coincided. Only after God's creatures received their proper names, did they come into existence. In this way God put his signature on his act of creation. By giving what he had created a name, he affirmed his presence in the act of creation. Only then, the axis of necessity and chance became one.

My name is Niloofer: water lily. As if a name could be translated to a language different than the language of names—different than the language of chance. I could easily be a Sepeeda—a Dawn—or a Shabnam—a Dew,

if the man at the birth-registration office had picked a different paper out of my father's cupped hand. Whether the man made the draw with his right hand or left hand and whether it was my father's right hand or a left hand in which my possible future names were nestled is a detail that nobody remembers.

Dawn and Dew have a relationship with light. The time when the first rays of light break out of darkness is dawn. Dews form at dawn and are transparent. Dawn and dew both let the light reveal itself to the eye. Unlike dawn and dew, Niloofar is opaque. It is a mysterious flower. Water lilies grow on swamps, on stagnant deep water which does not let light pass through it. Niloofars do not reveal their roots to the eye. Their roots branch out in the enigmatic space below the surface and grasp to the dark body of water.

The man at the office—whose name nobody remembers, nor his hand—picked a paper from my father's cupped hand held before him. He opened the fold and read out my name: Niloofar. My mother cheered, and for a passing moment before dying out, the light shimmered in her tears. My father closed his palm to Dawn and Dew and threw them into the emptiness of a bin by his hand. This is the way I came into existence—by chance.

But I was already born, twenty days before the day my name was chosen. What had pushed me out into life was a mysterious force called necessity. The same force will one day push me out to my death. This is the force which always already remains obscure to us as it holds powers unknowable to consciousness. The story of my being born, therefore, is not a part of my autobiography. It belongs to the autobiography of necessity—as the story of my naming belongs to the autobiography of chance.

Most people are named just once. For instance me, I was named twice—once when I was born and once when I came to this country as an immigrant. This was because my given name meant little or rather nothing to people. Like birth and death, emigration is also a journey to a foreign place. It is true that the immigrant comes to the borderline with her own feet, but the force that pushes the feet over the line does not come from within. Nobody knows the nature of this mysterious force. What lifts up the foot, moves the body, and pushes it to cross the border remains opaque to the senses.

Passing the border is like being born again. But one still needs a name to come to social existence. I knew that I could not choose my name by

myself. I imagined there are those, as there were my parents, who picked names for me. I was right. There was one, an unknown registrar of society who drew my new name. By chance. I do not remember, however, how the drawing happened. The important thing to the unknown registrar was to add my name to the list of names as statistics.

If I were the registrar of my birth as an immigrant, my name would mean something different than statistics to me. It would mean chance. So I would pick a different name from the cupped hand of emigration. I would create my auto-graphy through my act.

I would let the forces of desire which act out of the emptiness and fullness of a woman's womb act from mine and write my names. I would make my daughter as the registrar of the future present at my birth. The force of necessity could make this possible. It could make my daughter be born before I am. She would come out of my womb only a fraction of a second earlier than I'd come out of my mother's. In this way, like connected vessels, my mother, my daughter, and I would be linked together and present at my birth. My daughter would be a crossroad through which I make a journey to my mother's womb—to my mother's land.

Then I would put a pen in my daughter's hand as she would come to life and declare her presence with her cries. Dipped in my blood, her hand would run against my skin and make three graphs, one of which would be my name.

One of the names is known, thus legible, to both my mother and my daughter. Like dew, this name is transparent. There is a second name which my daughter can read, but not my mother. This name is transparent to its author, but not to its reader. This name is like dawn, which is transparent to the light but not to the darkness. There is, however, a third name, which neither my mother nor my daughter can read. It is opaque like the roots of a Niloofar are to its petals.

It is a name illegible to its author. I am this third name¹. And this is how the story of my life begins: In the beginning, there was one and there was none. Except for I, there was no one.

¹ Alludes to the following excerpt from *Shams Tabrizi's Essays*: "The author wrote three things. The first writing could only be read by him not by the readers. The second writing was legible to everyone—him and his readers. The third writing was illegible both to the writer and to his readers. I (God) am this Third Writing."

DAVE MARGOSHES is a story writer who has been in many literary magazines and published several collections, including *Bix's Trumpet and Other Stories*, which won the Book of the Year at the Saskatchewan Book Awards in 2007, and the current *God Telling a Joke and Other Stories*, and a recent novel, *Wiseman's Wager*.

Tears in God's Eyes

Dave Margoshes

MY DEAREST MADELEINE,

I don't know why God is treating me the way He is. For an old man like me to have to witness the slow deterioration of the woman he's loved for so many years, your grandmother, is almost unbearable. It's cruel. I'm sorry, though, I must sound terribly selfish. I didn't mean to suggest that it's me, or only me, who is the target of God's cruelty—or is it merely His indifference? No, your grandmother has been a good woman, a pious woman, a good wife and mother and, no one knows better than you, dear Madeleine, a good grandmother. And now, in what they told us would be our “golden years,” to be robbed of her memories, her reason, that is—what is it they say about harsh penalties for prisoners? Cruel and unusual punishment. That's what this seems to be. What did we do to deserve it, tell me that, dear girl?

Love, Granddad

* * *

Dearest Granddad,

You are right, as always. I agree completely. What can God be thinking? Treating you this way is surely a sin. (Presuming that God is capable of sin. But why not? Haven't you told me yourself, many times, that God is all-powerful, can do anything, and that His ways are mysterious? A sin, if I remember rightly, is an offence against God—well, surely an all-powerful God can commit an offence against Himself. As to how and why—well, that's the mysterious part.)

All right, I'm sure you've figured out by now, Granddad, that I'm being a bit facetious. And I hope you haven't taken offence—knowing you as I do, I'm certain you haven't. In fact, you're probably killing yourself laughing. Careful, don't break a rib. But seriously, Granddad, you know I don't mean to mock either you or God. And even more seriously, do you really think—do you honestly believe—that the ordeal

that Gramma is going through is something directed against you?

As the kids say these days, *get over yourself!*

And I entreat you, Granddad, to consider this: when you were young, a strong young man, filled with hope and strength and passion, by your own account you would have given anything—*everything*—for five years with the woman you fell so completely in love with, Grandmother. And you have had 50!

With love (and just a bit of trepidation),
Maddy

* * *

My dearest Madeleine,

Thank you for your letter, sweet girl, though I must admit it stung. *Get over yourself!* Have you no respect for an old man? Your own dear granddad, on whose lap, at whose knee. . . . Blah blah blah, as you used to so eloquently say.

But you are right, I admit. This is, to use a word I've chided you for on other occasions, *about* your grandmother, not me. And thank you for your refreshing honesty and bluntness in reminding me of that. Forgive me, please, for losing sight—and faith, though I still rail against God for His cruelty. Mysterious ways or not—and, yes, I know I've explained away God's inexplicable actions countless times with that bit of received wisdom—I can't help but be angry and bitter. I'll rephrase the complaint I ended my last letter with: what did *she* do to deserve this?

Love, Granddad

* * *

Dear Granddad,

I hope this finds you well, and Gramma better. Oh, *dammit*, I know she can't be better, won't get any better. I hope she's comfortable, at least, that she's finding some peace. And you too, dearest granddad.

Sorry for my delay in replying to your last letter—I've just been really busy this week. Things are crazy at work, as always, but even more crazy than usual. And Robert—well, I won't bore you with the soap opera of life with my nutty boyfriend. I know you think I can do better, but—oh, *dammit* again, I love him. There, I've put it in writing. Sue me. You and Gramma loved each other, and in unguarded moments you've admitted the two of you did crazy things for each other. So please don't begrudge me *my* craziness.

Busy or not, wrapped up with Robert or not, I want you to know that you and Gramma are in my thoughts every day. I've been thinking more about this whole idea of the "mysterious" God, too. Why *is* He that way, do you suppose? I'm too old for Sunday School and so can't raise my hand and ask Rev. Peters. And, as you know, I'm not the down-on-my-knees praying type, so I can't ask God. If I were to send a prayerful question His way at this stage of the game, He'd likely reply with a "who

the hell are you?” (And forgive me, Granddad, if I’m being a little disrespectful—sacrilegious even? I guess the rants you’ve been directing in God’s direction in your last few letters give me license.)

But why *is* God so mysterious? He’s supposed to be a loving God. Yes, I know, the Bible also says he’s an angry god, a wrathful god, a jealous god...and look what he did to Sodom and Gomorrah. Not to mention Job, the Jews in Egypt—his chosen people, no less! And countless other examples. The Inquisition. The Holocaust. Starvation in Africa. Racism. Cancer. And, of course, Alzheimer’s. Every small, hateful thing that happens in the world. What kind of a loving God allows all that? Not to mention cellulite??!! (Forgive the flippancy, but you haven’t been driven to tears while trying on swim suits.) What kind of a loving God does or allows what’s happening to Gramma?

Well, I guess I’m just ranting now, Granddad, taking a leaf from your book and, well, maybe going a bit further. I’m not asking any questions you haven’t already asked—and you have more of a right to ask them than I do. I guess this is just my way of saying I hear you, Granddad, and I agree.

Wish I could do *more* than just that.

With love,
Your own Madeleine

* * *

My dearest Madeleine,

Don’t think another thing about it—I mean about being disrespectful to God, even sacrilegious, or stepping on my toes. God and I are both big enough to take it. (Well, I am, anyway.) Ha ha.

Your grandmother had another difficult night—which means I did too. Not much sleep. She’s sleeping now, though (and here, in earlier times, I might well have appended a “thank God,” but I guess I won’t, today).

You raise some excellent points in your letter, granddaughter. Far from being disturbed by your “disrespect,” I must say I’m proud to have a granddaughter who is an independent thinker, and not afraid to speak aloud her thoughts.

You know, there’s all these books about atheism now. I never used to give that particular “ism” much mind. Thought the atheists were a bunch of cranks, I guess. Now I’m not so sure. I guess that means I’m becoming an agnostic. Well, maybe so. Maybe that’s what living to a ripe old age means. It’s easy to believe everything you read and are told when you’re young. The world is a beautiful place, full of promise. Why *shouldn’t* you believe there’s an all-powerful loving God looking out for you? But then you go to war, as I did, and see and do terrible things, unspeakable things. You have a son who dies in a senseless accident, as I have. A daughter who dies of cancer—your own darling mother! Your wife loses

her memory and much of her mind and even control of her bowels. If those things don't turn you into an atheist or at least an agnostic, I don't know what can or will.

But I don't want to dwell on those things. The sun is shining today after yesterday's rain and, not much sleep or not, it's a beautiful day.

It makes me think of other beautiful days.

I can't begin to tell you, my dearest Madeleine, what the world was like when your grandmother and I met. This will be hard for a modern young woman like you, so smart, but there was no Internet then, no computers at all, no cellphones—there was no phone at all on the farm where I grew up. No electricity, no running water, no gas furnace. Oh, they had those things all right, this wasn't the Stone Age, but *we* didn't. We didn't have a car, no tractor, my dad ran the farm with horses when I was little, during the Depression. My brothers and sisters and I did our schoolwork by kerosene lantern at night, chopped wood for the stove. Work, work, and more work—that's what life was like in those days. Of course, you know all about this—you've heard me both lamenting and rhapsodizing about the "good old days" any number of times.

And things weren't all bleak—I wouldn't want you to get that impression. Not having some things that other people take for granted isn't necessarily a bad thing. Character building and all that. And even in the toughest times, there was food on the table. And we had plenty of fun.

Went to a dance over at Chopin, in the community hall, not far from our farm, and there was your grandmother, and there wasn't any need for kerosene lanterns, she lit up the whole hall all on her own. I was nineteen, she was seventeen. And after that first look, there was never another girl for me, never another woman. Sounds pretty corny, doesn't it, in these days of free love and "hooking up," whatever the heck that really is. But it's true, she was The One, and I knew it.

Maddy, dear, you've heard all sorts of family tales from me, but I don't believe I've told you this one. As you'll see, it's not the kind of thing to tell a young girl. But you're certainly old enough to hear it now.

My great-uncle Charles, who died at about the same age I am now, was a bachelor all his life. He used to say he never meant for that state to be his permanent one, but he never had the opportunity to marry. He had joined up with the British army as a young man for the Boer war, over in South Africa, and then later he was called up again for World War One—he was over in Palestine as a cavalry officer. In other words, things got in the way.

He said to me once, not long before he died, "I never knew a woman, not the way men are meant to, the way the Bible commands. Guess now I never will."

Surprised, I said, "You mean, there was never a lady friend? Never a, you know?"

“No,” Charles said. “None a that. In that department, I am still as I came into the world, as God made me.”

I don’t know what came into me, I guess I just wanted to cheer him up—I was only nineteen or so, this was not so long after I met your grandmother and I was already quite smitten, but not so wise to the ways of the world myself. “Oh, you ain’t missed much,” I said. It was a false good humour, and, you know, young as I was, I recognized it as such the moment the words were out of my mouth, the depth of that falsity was astonishing to me, it was a knife in the ribs—what a lie! Already I knew what your grandmother meant to me.

And now, more than fifty years later, the truth is, I wouldn’t give up a day spent with your grandmother for anything, not a single day.

Well, no, maybe I would, maybe I would give up one of those days if I could only bargain a better deal for her now from God, if you could only bargain with God, loving or not, mysterious or not.

Love, Granddad

* * *

Granddad,

I do believe there’s hope for you after all, you old codger! If at this stage of the game you’re able to admit you’re edging toward being an agnostic, well, there must be a God after all. ;-) Miracles do happen!!!!

And I guess if you can admit that much, I can finally come out and confess—no, don’t panic, I’m not gay—but I *am* an agnostic. And not meaning any disrespect, Granddad, because you know you’re the man I most respect in the world, I have to wonder how can anyone—any thinking anyone, anyway—*not* be an agnostic.

For all those reasons we’ve already talked about, and a thousand others. No, I’m not ready to go out on a limb and declare There Is No God, but how on earth can you not have doubt? In fact, if there *is* a God—and I’m not arguing there isn’t—wouldn’t it be in His Own Best Interests to make some of us be agnostics, sort of as a way of keeping Himself honest?

Anyway, as you can see, I’m not as brave as you thought I was. I didn’t have the courage to confess this to you before—I was afraid I’d disappoint you—but you’ve given me the courage.

With love,

Maddy xxxxxx (kisses)

* * *

My dearest Madeleine,
You could never disappoint me.

Love,
Granddad

* * *

Thank you, my dear Granddad. If I haven’t told you lately, I love you. I love you and Gramma very, very much.

You were telling a little about your great-uncle Charles. Tell me more about him, please.

Love, Maddy

* * *

My dearest Madeleine,

It's funny you should ask about Uncle Charles—my great-uncle, your great-*great*-uncle! I've been thinking about him.

There are a couple of reasons for that. One is that my own grandfather died young, as you know, of typhoid—I never even met him. So Great-Uncle Charles was like a grandfather to me, and he's sort of my model for what an old man is. I don't exactly mean he's my role model, or my hero, but now that I'm an old man myself, as old as he was when he died or thereabouts, sometimes when I'm shaving or otherwise looking in the mirror, I catch a glimpse of him.

The other is that Charles is forever entwined in my thoughts with your grandmother, and she is very much on my mind these days, as you know. Of course, from the day we met—at that dance I mentioned a few emails ago, there's never been a day go by that I haven't thought of your grandmother, no matter where I or she was. But even more so now—I think about her all the time, of course—her present situation, her needs—but I also think back to happier days, when she was well, when she was a young mother, when she was a beautiful young woman, the love of my life, my bride.

Tell you more, you ask. All right, I'll tell you this story. I know I've never told you, and I don't think I've ever told anyone about this. No, I'm sure I haven't.

I'll tell it to you as a reminder that your grandmother was not always the white-haired, plump, comfortable old “granny” you love so much, not always the sick old woman she is today.

Your grandmother and I became engaged—betrothed, they used to call it. I had already met her family and she'd met mine, of course, but soon after the engagement was announced—that used to be a big deal, not like today—we set out on a little journey to introduce each other to more distant family members. I'd be meeting her aunts and uncles and cousins and so on, and she'd be meeting mine.

Naturally, we visited Uncle Charles, on his farm, which was some distance from my dad's, over near Maple Creek, prettiest little spread you could imagine, with rolling pastures of short grass and a natural spring for his cattle, a shelter belt of blue spruce near the house. He was around seventy then, maybe a little older—I'm not sure exactly how old he was then because he always claimed he didn't know his birthday, not even what year he was born—but he looked more like he was eighty or more.

Charles was—well, *eccentric* is the word, I guess. He'd been in two wars, so I imagine he'd had the post-traumatic stress thing they talk about

these days—what used to be called shell shock. Back then, we knew about it, but it wasn't talked about much. My own dad used to say that Charles had never gotten over the early death of his brother Donald, my grandfather, who I'm named after—they were close, dad said, and had expected to farm together. And he'd lived alone all his adult life, sometimes with a housekeeper, sometimes not even that. He was not a man whom the so-called "woman's touch" had touched much.

His old house—the original homestead that *his* folks had built—was kind of a mess, with junk strewn around all over the place, the floors filthy. Dishes in the sink in a jumble, stuff piled up on all the chairs except his own, a big old polished maple rocker. It was not a fit place for any human being, to tell the truth, and certainly not for a young lady. My mother had told me, before we set off, 'Don't get into a huff about Charles' place, just hold your nose.' And I'd passed that on to your grandmother, told her a little bit about him—even told her, blushing all the while, what I told you in that letter a little while back, about him never knowing a woman. So we were prepared.

I don't think Charles knew we were coming. He'd finally gotten a telephone—my father talked him into it—but he never answered it, and I don't know if he even knew how to make a call. He may have heard that I'd gotten engaged, but that was probably all. So that's the situation we pulled up to, in dad's old Ford half-ton that belched oil smoke like some old men fart after eating beans, if you'll pardon my French, on a Saturday evening in late June, I guess it was. (Your grandmother and I got married Aug. 29, if you don't remember, and we didn't have a long engagement.) Your grandmother was wearing a summer dress with buttons up the front. I believe it was blue, with small white flowers sprinkled on it like wildflowers in a meadow, and shiny white buttons, mother of pearl. It did not have a plunging neckline, I can assure you of that—your grandmother was always a modest woman, and her clothes demure. But—how should I say this, granddaughter? She was a well developed young woman, and that dress, like most of her dresses, didn't do much to hide it. There was no question but that she was a woman, and a mighty fine-looking one at that.

Charles came out of the house and met us on the porch, wearing his undershirt, the straps of his overalls down around his waist. It had been a hot day and still was warm. He was a stoop-shouldered man, with a bit of a beer belly—not the fine figure of a man your old granddad is (pause for laughter here). He was mostly bald but with wisps of white hair across his skull, and several days' growth of white beard. There were introductions and some small talk as you'd expect, a little joking, though Charles was always very formal around women, *shy* I guess you'd say. But almost right away I noticed, and so did your grandmother—you couldn't *not* notice—that he was staring at her, primarily at her chest.

I didn't know what to say. Neither did your grandmother.

She began to blush, and so did I, I guess.

Charles noticed that, and became self-conscious all of a sudden.

"I apologize," he said. "Didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable, miss. But, you know, I never saw a woman's chest, not once in my life."

"Uncle Charles!" I exclaimed. "Please."

"No, that's all right," your grandmother said. She put her hand on my arm.

I was flabbergasted. I remembered our previous discussion, of course, but I guess I hadn't thought about everything it meant.

"You were never...?" I began.

"No," Charles said. "Never."

"And you were never at a girlie show at the fair?" I asked him. "Never in a magazine, one of those decks of cards...."

"No, never. I was never interested. Not that interested, I guess."

"And now you are?" I admit I was exasperated, a little angry, that this should come bursting out in front of my young wife-to-be.

"Now I'm an old man," Charles said. "I'll be dead soon."

We just stood there—we were inside now, in the living room. I remember I had my hands balled up into fists by my side. I was speechless.

After a minute, your grandmother turned to me, put her hand on my arm. You know, of course, that her name is Alma, which means "love."

"Don," she said, "would you go outside for a minute? Give your Uncle Charles and I a moment alone, please?"

"But Alma..." I began.

"It's all right," she said. "I'll be all right, honest."

I didn't want to leave them alone, I can tell you that, but I didn't know what else to do. I turned around, reluctantly, and went to the door. I went outside but as soon as I was on the porch I went right over to a window that looked into the living room. There were blinds or curtains or something, I don't remember which, but they were open enough that I could see. The window was closed though, despite the heat of the day, so I couldn't hear what they were saying.

I watched, pretty much in disbelief, as Alma unbuttoned the front of her dress.

She had her back to me, so I couldn't see exactly what was happening. She opened the dress and brought her hands in, her elbows rising. I imagine she was lifting her bra, lifting it or pulling it down. I could see Charles's face and that was enough.

They just stood there for a minute—about three feet from each other, no touching—then I could see her adjusting the bra again, and starting to button her dress. I backed away from the window, went over by the door, composed my face and stood there as if I'd never left that spot. After a minute, she opened it and I came back in. She put her hand on my arm

again. “Thank you,” she said.

We went back into the living room. Charles had regained his composure, you might say. “Thank you,” he said to me.

We left after another minute or two, not much more said. What could you say after that? I remember shaking hands with Uncle Charles just as if nothing had happened, and we climbed into the old truck and drove away. Your grandmother and I were quiet most of the way home, a couple hours by road in those days. We didn’t talk about what had happened—I don’t think we ever *did* talk about it. I didn’t know if she knew I’d been watching, and so didn’t know if she knew that I knew what had happened. She didn’t know what I knew, in other words, and I didn’t know what she was thinking. Had no idea.

I can tell you what *I* was thinking, though. A bunch of different things, all tangled up like a ball of baler twine the cat’s been into.

I was ashamed, of course. This was the woman I was going to marry. I was only nineteen. I’d never seen her naked myself. So of course I was ashamed, embarrassed, angry.

But I was also proud of her, very proud.

And grateful.

So, my dearest Madeleine, that was your grandmother in her prime. Do you suppose God is punishing her for that, for that sin? That would be hard to imagine. If anything, it would be the opposite. If there is a God—and my faith in Him is still unshaken, even if I am on the slippery slope to becoming an agnostic—if there *is* a God and He’s anything at all like the Bible says He is, then I’d expect there were tears in His eyes that evening.

Maybe that’s why He’s punishing her—if punishing her is what’s really happening—I don’t know, it looks like it to me, but who am I to question God? But maybe that’s it—He’s still sore that she made Him cry. The Greek gods didn’t like it when humans made them act a little human. Maybe our God’s the same.

That’s all from your old grandfather for now. Take care, Madeleine.

With love, as always,

Granddad

PS. Apropos of what we’ve been talking about, Maddy, I’m reminded of something else about my Uncle Charles, something he said once that stuck. I mentioned, I think, that he’d been in Palestine during the First Big War. Once at a family gathering, some of the men were telling war stories, and Charles remarked he’d seen all sorts of horrors, enough for a lifetime. Saw men dying, wishing they were dead, wishing they’d never been born, he said. “Up and down that damn desert we went,” he said. “Holy land, they call it. Never saw one damn sign of God.”

BARBARA CURRY MULCAHY lives in the Slocan Valley in BC. She is a reporter for the *Valley Voice*. These poems are from a collection about the human body that Barbara is currently writing. In 1997, Wolsak and Wynn published her book of poetry, *The Man with the Dancing Monkey*. It was shortlisted for the Lowther and Lampert awards. Barbara's most recent publications have been in *The Dalhousie Review* 94.3, *The Prairie Journal* #63, and online at the Leaf Press webpage *Monday's Poem*.

Barbara Curry Mulcahy / Eight Poems

Observations in Emerg

1

The nurse doesn't say "the doctor".
She says, "the physician". Someone has decided
to make it clear the doctor is not
a dentist or a vet or a PhD
in English literature.

2

But notice how the nurses have only a first name.
They whisk around in pastels or dark blue
or child-friendly prints.

3

You keep your hands to yourself
and try not to sit by or breathe
near the wheezers, hackers, and snifflers.

4

Today the locum wears jeans, a T-shirt
and leather shoes.
He's from South Africa.
He thinks he's dressing down
like a Canadian.

5

The nurse catches your eye.
She purses her lips.
She doesn't want you to ask him,
"Who ironed your jeans and T-shirt?"
"Who polished your shoes?"

“What do you wear through the snowdrifts
out to your rental SUV?”

6

You purse your lips, too.
You don't want her to ask
why you're here
again.

7

South Africans sew you up with elegance
and speed. Nurses like them.
Everyone likes a real emergency
where they can save a life.
They get frustrated by slow northern decay.

8

Your bachelor neighbor,
the months of errors and inaccurate medication
till one doctor asked him, What do you eat?
Ramen noodles.
And what else?
Ramen noodles
for breakfast, for lunch,
and for dinner. Beer
in the evening.

The first case of scurvy
that doctor had ever seen.

9

Northern Alberta in a snapshot:
the rich poor.

10

This malaise you get by the solstice. This inability
to think, this fog. All you can do is look.

Sitting in the waiting room, like looking
in a funhouse mirror: the quick tempers,
the people who've buried themselves
in books, TV, gambling, booze,
or hanky-panky.

Season of bickering, abuse.
The clinic is closed. Your doctor
has been forced out, and
your doctor before him left,
and your doctor before her, and
on and on, they've all left.
You can't make an appointment
any more. Now you wait for the locum
in emergency, the locum from South Africa.

11

South Africans are proficient
at gunshot wounds,
stab wounds,
heat stroke,
and animal bites,

none of which you have.

12

It's a waiting game, for which
you are supplied with many out-of-date
magazines, some colouring books, a box
of broken crayons, and a basket of toys.

I, of the Storm

Why do people mistake my calmness
for calm? I have a strong inclination to burn the bridges
in front of me. That, in the past, I have controlled myself—
means nothing.

I'm not afraid to break. That's my strength—
what's yours?

Be careful when you answer.
The body is not meant
for long periods of hypervigilance.
In the concavity of my lens, any remark you make
will be concentrated, create fire.

Does this scare you?

Good. I'd like you to be scared.
Fear clears the way for concentration—
but, go ahead, ignore this tip,
put on your mask, that professional face.
Retreat from who you are,
your words a pincer
to manage whatever clinical thing
presents itself.

Fool—
I would eat your detachment for breakfast
if I wanted meat
or bone to whet my teeth.

Your mask, your gloved grasp—
I'm not afraid of you.
All the time you're watching me,
I'm watching you.

Heart

What have you
done?

Heart like a stone
against the world heaved.

Heart like a fist
against the world pummeling.
Wasting what's in reach:
yourself
and those you love.

Heart. Heart.
Hand of the heart,
size of a fist, squeeze.

Hand of the heart
clench
and unclench

with milkmaid mind. Pail
of the body, receptacle.

The Head

Fourteen pounds suspended
on the occipital joint.
Balanced; and when the
head turns freely,
the mind turns freely—
or is it the other way around?

The Change Room

The young hairdresser held his scissors still,
surprised I didn't know
how I wanted to look. Then
he gazed at me thoughtfully,
and clipped.

Now, this strange, shorn feeling
that no one else in the mall
notices.

Lightheaded, aware only of
the things I have forgotten:
 how to walk in a crowd
 how long to look in someone's eyes
 which way to swerve in order to pass

I bump into this person and that person.
They rush away
from my apologies.

Pausing in the eddy of some sale racks, I
touch some fabrics, am led
to a change room.

Trying on these new clothes—I see in the mirror,
on the hook behind me, the crumpled
shape of my familiar.

How ragged her collar,
how sagging her hems,
how pillled her fabrics.

How hard
she has worked
to bring me safely here.

Words

For poets, sensuality—
only by getting lost can they find
what they don't know and nevertheless
desire. For scientists, accuracy—that bull's eye
revelation; for users, tools— to grasp what they want
or to build a lie even they can believe. For those at sea, echolocation—a
constant stream of pings to tell them yes,
yes, they are here,
here.
Yes.

But for the silent ones, all that white noise
drowning out what really is. Or,
distortion, a constant fraying
of their attention.

How can one thing be so different?
How can one thing be used or discarded
as if without a purpose of its own?

Why, why are we here?
Why do I need to call out to you?

Clickety-Clack

Interesting, how we respond to both physical
and psychological stimuli. In the body, feelings—
as important as facts. In the neuron,
the message changes back and forth,
electrical, chemical. Not static—
fluid—changing
at the right time
and place. How much
like love, how much like love.

Feelings-become-facts-become-feelings-become—
clickety-clack, clickety-clack,
we move along a track.

Shedding

Some scrape soles or palms
with pumice; some scrub with loofah. In saunas,
the Scandinavians, I hear, are fond of striking skin
with branches. Cut three or four days before, the leaves tender,
yet nearly dry, and the branches flexing, though not quite like
whips. This beating, not masochistic, the Scandinavians say,
but a way to bring blood close to where
toxins, lubricated by sweat, pass the barrier, then,
are brushed away with flakes
or scales of skin.

Beating builds character,
or so the Scandinavians insist
as they perch high in their saunas
like owls or vultures.

They never ever say
every aspect, character too,
one day ends up discarded.

JOHN BUCK was the winner of the annual Kootenay Literary Competition in 2015.

How To Deliver Water

John Buck

THE IMPORTANT THING is, don't speed. If you build up too much momentum, someone steps out of nowhere, you slam on the brakes and the jugs in the back of the van wobble and thump and sploosh! Water sloshes around your shoes, swirls around the gas pedal, and retracts beneath the seat like tides in miniature. Never fails.

Of course, watching your speed won't stop you from breaking jugs. It's almost impossible to maintain a calm, steady velocity *and* your concentration at the same time. Too hypnotically soothing. As soon as you feel yourself getting into the groove, the Zen of it—the road unreeling from your tires at the behest of complex machinery you'll never fully understand and don't care to, and you at the neural centre of it all—some jackass cuts you off or God throws a stop sign in your face. Sploosh.

So you want to avoid those Zen moments. Maybe develop a drinking problem. Everyday tasks become a lot more challenging when you're contending with a hangover. The constant dread that your head's going to shrivel up and disperse in a gasp of dust keeps you attentive to the here and now; your mind won't have the energy to expand.

Preserving the integrity of the jugs only comes naturally when you're going down steep roads in the winter, with a literal ton of water in the back and the brakes groaning and slipping, your teeth clenched and knuckles bloodless and the van shuddering like a terrified animal, inching down the icy slope praying to who-knows-what that the tires don't lose their grip and that the brakes last one more week, just *one* more, and swearing that if they do you won't let your boss off the hook this time, you'll *make* him get them fixed, you promise, you'll bounce his head off the desk if you have to, just this one last time, please please please....

You may have read somewhere that what we feel as gravity is actually acceleration, that one of the most fundamental forces of nature wants us to speed up at all times and the only thing keeping us from doing so is the skin of the earth. The urge to speed up—to let go, to fall—is essential to our experience of life in this universe. We'd be nothing without gravity.

Maybe don't think about that. It's not helpful.

Look at the dark branches highlighted with snow, the way they pose, artfully yearning against the sky's grey remoteness. Don't look too long though, keep one eye on the road. Just long enough to fix them in your mind. See how they resemble neurons? Don't look again to confirm the similarity; let your memory contort them to fit the needs of the moment. Everything is mind, that's the important thing. Try to transform yourself into a sort of calm, lavender-scented vapour infusing the interior of the van. Allow its metal shell to become a porous membrane through which the cold sneaks in to sharpen your senses. The rattling and grinding going on all around you are nothing more than the objections of your archaic physicality to its own obsolescence. They signify nothing. You are everything. There's no need to fear.

This is one of the times when you *do* want your mind to expand so if you're hung over, make a note not to drink on Tuesday nights.

Because every Monday is like every Monday before it, every Tuesday like every other Tuesday, every Wednesday—you get it. On Mondays you'll follow a river through snowy fields stubbled with brown, mountains crowding in on either side, until you reach a sawmill beside a lake. The place is a solid roar, a hulking mass quivering with internal grindings, its complex, interdependent workings less the cause of the noise than the form it takes as it squirms into three-dimensional space. There must be people here, somewhere, but you rarely see them. To you, the mill's purported function is of secondary importance to its role as a mystical ideal of ceaseless self-perpetuation. A shout from nowhere going nowhere. So just drop the jugs in the empty break room and get out of there before anyone comes along to break the illusion.

Tuesdays are banks and other businesses. Wednesdays: an hour-long drive down the highway listening to talk radio followed by some businesses, then residences connected by dangerously steep, poorly plowed streets. (You'll forget all past disagreements with the God you don't believe in and plead for your life on Wednesdays.) Thursdays: a fairly relaxing day on well-maintained roads, another long drive filled with more bodiless topical debate, maybe some music. Fridays: no time for talk radio, all local businesses. Ghost in and ghost out. And then back to the beginning again, each week a self-contained cycle repeating itself until the day you die, and maybe even after that.

Because why would you ever leave this job? It doesn't get any better than this. You're not exactly your own boss (if you were, you'd fix the damn brakes already) but for the most part you don't have to deal with people or their dissatisfactions. You're an instrument of the cycle, an anonymous weekly constant in the lives of your customers. There and gone too fast to grasp, like rushing water.

That's how your facelessness will feel on good days: like freedom.

You're pumped, there's no other word for it. You're losing weight and gaining muscle at a crazy rate (these are fifty pound jugs after all). Everything you eat is converted to energy almost before it hits your stomach. Sometimes it's almost enough merely to look at food; sometimes you feel like you could subsist on the mere *idea* of food, like just think *Food!* whenever you're hungry and that would be enough. You're not quite there yet but someday, maybe. Your system is becoming more frictionless and efficient with every week.

However, you might run into some problems when spring comes and the snow melts and the brakes are finally replaced (after the desperation of your need has passed). It all becomes too easy. You're too slick, you finish the routes in half the time, and you're still getting paid by the hour. Drink more, it'll slow you down. Not during the day, obviously; do you really need to be told that?

But even with the permanent hangover sharpening your focus, the van is too peaceful. It whispers down hills without complaint, making you feel like you've abandoned the last of your physical limitations. You're pure spirit now, a weightless mechanism ticking along in time with the cosmos. Even though the true forms of the trees are hidden behind leaves now, you no longer have to stretch to see neurons in the way their aching branches claw at the world's blue ceiling. It seems obvious: everything is mind.

So you'd better get comfortable with your mind, since you're going to be spending so much time in it. When you've finished your deliveries for the day, find an empty spot in a commercial parking zone. Throw all the empty jugs towards the front of the van so that you have enough room to sit in the back cross-legged. Or if you're flexible enough, assume the lotus pose. Make sure the windows are rolled down; it can get hot back here with the sun beating down. Now close your eyes and meditate. As a bonus, this will help pad out your work day.

You'll be able to hear people on the sidewalk, passing so close that if the walls of the van were liquid you could reach out and brush your fingers through their hair. Car motors gain volume and substance, then dissolve into memory. If there's a fly trapped in here with you, embrace it as your brother. Or sister. Is it sexist to assume the fly is male? Do flies have sex?

Dear God this is boring. How long are you going to keep this up? Be realistic.

Alternatively, there's a nice place to park by the side of the highway, with the van facing uphill and a view of the river spread out below you. The slope is steep enough that if you recline your seat you'll be lying almost flat. The van looks empty to anyone speeding past. Sometimes the sound of rain flicking against the roof keeps you company. Not even the rain knows you're there to hear it.

Eat some fries. Try not to drip gravy on your shirt. Let the heaviness

of the grease chugging through your system drag you down to sleep.

But this is unhealthy, you'll realize before too long. You can always go on hikes to kill time. Until on a far-off hillside you'll spot a black bear crashing through the bush and recognize in its locomotion a lumbering grace you'll only ever approximate, and realize that it's a part of this world in a way you'll never be. Also, if it came down to a fight, it has all of nature on its side and you have....

Don't dwell on that. Maybe stick to napping by the highway but cut back on the fries. Having trouble falling asleep? Your hangovers aren't severe enough.

Summer. The roads are painfully clear and bright, making you squint, but at least your customers are consuming more water now. You're out in the sun and getting more exercise than ever. Yet it's only proving more difficult to avoid brooding over the equivalency of gravity and acceleration. Oases of unfettered speed flicker in the heat waves, enticing you downhill. The temptation to ease off the brake pedal grows more irresistible every week. You need to test yourself against these sharp turns, to sway, to dance to gravity's song.

What is *wrong* with you? Don't answer that. Drink more instead. Avoid sugary drinks though, like coolers; in this heat, the dehydration the following morning will be murder.

Still, you can't help fantasizing that you're a meteor erupting from the depths of a dark forest and blasting down the mountainside, gaining mass as you accelerate, accruing presence in proportion to your velocity while below you the town radiates atmospheric waves of normalcy to repel you, causing the van to ignite from the speed of its re-entry and trail fire. The water in the back has burst its plastic skins and sloshes from side to side as you careen around corners and Norwegian death metal screams from the radio and for some reason a bear pelt attached to the roof flaps and scatters sparks in the wind, its mouth agape and roaring, and there you are in the neural centre of it all laughing as gears spring out from under the hood (you really have no idea how automobiles work, it's somewhat comical) and your mechanism flies apart.

Don't indulge these daydreams overmuch, or one day you'll be wheeling a trolley of jugs through an office building and catch yourself snarling at a man in a wheelchair for blocking the hallway. Like, lip curled, teeth bared, throaty growl: an actual snarl. You might be drinking a bit too much now. Fortunately, he won't notice you. No one does.

Motwethurfeday. They all blur together into a single oceanic day. The only blemishes on the horizon are the weekends, blacked-out smudges. You know they exist but you can't remember them. You feel like you never hit land. Your only contact with solid ground is through barely legible notes scrawled by Weekend You, such as, "No one is meant to live the same day more than once! Pay attention!" You suspect that

Weekend You has access to knowledge you don't. Maybe drink more to find out what it is? Just a little bit more though. Don't go crazy.

Fall. The trees announce their upcoming striptease by parading their gaudiest autumn styles. Water consumption is down and the roads are still clear, so your work days are shortening again. You've lost your taste for killing time by now. You stand atop a mountain of corpses of seconds and minutes and hours, time's innocent blood dripping from your hands, and sigh. The books you attempt to read in secluded rest areas to fill your days with content are rendered meaningless by the drab spacetime they occupy. It's as if life has become an endless wait in a dentist's office in which the only distractions permitted to exist are out-of-date fashion magazines. And through the door, an infinite succession of similar rooms. You never thought you'd wish for a dentist to manifest, or pray for icy Wednesdays and the deadly challenges of winter.

Call in sick. They'll manage without you. It's more important to get in touch with the deep truths Weekend You is trying to communicate.

Around this time you'll lose your key to the garage where the van is locked up at night and your boss won't seem to care, or offer to replace it. Nothing unusual or alarming in that.

A week later you'll return from your Friday route and find him waiting for you in his office. He'll ask for the gas card and the keys to the van before he—not unkindly—informs you that you're fired.

First you'll feel a plummeting sensation in your stomach. Try to ignore it for a few more moments. Nod and shrug as if to say, "That's understandable." Exit through the garage. Wave to the one co-worker you like, ignore the one you don't. Console yourself with the knowledge that you'll never have to see that guy again. Step outside and keep walking until you're out of sight, then stop and breathe.

It will seem as if the world is suddenly frozen slick and tilted and shooting out from under you, but look down. You're standing absolutely still. Absolutely? What does that even mean? (That's it, take refuge in your thoughts.) Nothing remains still, there are no fixed points, everything is relative. Remember Einstein? According to him, we're only truly motionless when falling. Although we may appear to be rushing past the walls of the elevator shaft, in actuality, from a universal standpoint, *they* are rushing past *us*. Only when we surrender to gravity completely, without resistance, are we truly unmoving. At peace. For a little while, anyway. Freedom has its price.

So you're *not* standing still. You're speeding down a hole of your own creation. Which means you're standing still. See?

A surge of giddiness and a wave of vertigo wash over you at once, inextricably tangled, but don't freak out, you're only metaphorically falling. Pay attention to the ground pressing up against your soles. You're not alone, it's falling with you. The bare trees and blind houses around

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you are tentative shapes sketched in the air, their existence dependent on the absence of any outside force jarring the medium in which they hang, suspended. Everything is provisional. Everything has just as much reason to panic as you do.

Inhale the damp leaves decaying into pulp. Take a step. And another. And again. Each one is effortless if you let the natural springiness you never noticed in the pavement before propel you forward.

Now go home. Try not to get too drunk.

And that's how it's done.

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Cons

Robert Shaw

MY WIFE, a flight attendant, spent the evening providing first-class service to her former stepfather, John, and his new girlfriend, June. She whipped up roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, served bottles of Spanish wine and topped it all off with John's favourite, Boston cream pie for dessert.

"You always knew the way to my heart," John said.

Courtney took out a knife and sliced him the fattest piece of pie. The next morning, John and June were leaving on a one-week vacation to Honolulu. Courtney had given them her standby passes to get there.

"What do you two have planned in Hawaii?" she said.

"Sun. Lots of sun. It's been a rough winter." June leaned over and gave John a little kiss.

"I love it out there," Courtney said.

We had recently returned from a trip to Ireland.

June said, "We'd love for you to join us."

"Wish I could." Courtney looked at me. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't."

"It'd be nice to have you around," John said.

In the ten years that Courtney had worked for the airline, John had taken full advantage of her standby passes. He took weekends to Vegas. He visited retired friends in Tampa. Once he went to the Rose Bowl. The trip to Hawaii would be his first flight over the ocean.

* * *

After supper, we made our way to the living room for a few nightcaps. My wife used the moment to give John a photo that we'd taken for him in Ireland. "It's just a little something." Courtney handed him a package wrapped in green tissue paper. "What the heck is it?" John was sprawled out on our sofa sipping a screwdriver.

"A keepsake," I said.

"Isn't that thoughtful," June said. "Open it."

John fiddled with the package. He tried to unwrap it, but his hands were too big, so he just ripped through it. He pulled out a framed colour

photo of a stone wall and held it up for June to see.

"It's beautiful," June said, "did you take it?"

"Not exactly," I said.

"What do you think?" June said to John.

"I think it's a wall."

"It's the O'Rourke castle." Courtney made her way to the table where we kept our liquor bottles to mix a new round.

"That so?" John said.

"Your castle," Courtney said.

"Well, what's left of the castle," I said.

There were things about my wife that I loved that night: her fair hair, emerald satin shirt, the way she appeared so earnest around John. Courtney told John and June about how we found the castle and took the picture. How it took us two days to get there from Dublin and when we did find the town we had to hire a taxi to help us find the spot. John didn't appear that interested. June looked at the photo for a long time. She commented on the framing and the colours. She asked me which year I thought the castle might've been built. I was pretty sure she was only trying to be nice. Then she handed the frame back to John and he rested it against the sofa.

"I think it will go great in his living room," June said. "Your living room could really use something to talk about."

I looked at my wife and felt a bit sorry for her. It was the type of gift that I imagined certain people would show more enthusiasm for, but John only sipped his drink and then asked for something stronger.

For the next half-hour, it was a regular night with company. Courtney told stories about flying and layovers, drunk passengers and an air-rage incident, where someone had snuck a knife onboard. June asked us if there was anything we wanted her to bring back from Hawaii. At one point, I nudged John and made a smoke-break signal with my fingers. He topped up his drink and we headed out to the back porch.

Outside, ice clung to the branches of my Japanese maple, the deck soaked in a messy spring snow-slush, but under that big open sky everything appeared peaceful and calm. I was happy that Courtney and I had decided to give our marriage one more try. I lit a smoke and kept the lighter going for John. He leaned into me. "Things still seem off between you two," he said.

"We're trying. I'm working again. Getting out of the house more."

"Driving tests?" He exhaled and turned his head toward the yard.

"I'm an instructor these days." I took a drag and coughed. "She's been going overseas too." I listed London, Frankfurt, and Paris until John was no longer paying attention.

"June has lumps." He looked away from me.

"How serious?"

“Who knows?” His drink was low, but he lit another smoke anyway. John told me about tests and more tests. “We’re still waiting for blood work.”

“Is it safe to travel?” I considered touching his shoulder to give him some sort of comfort, but stopped myself.

“God dammit,” he said. “Why now? Why me?” When we were about to go back inside, John stumbled and grabbed the wall for support. “You know to keep all that between us.” He spoke to me like a child.

* * *

Early the next morning, John and June packed into my driving instructor car and I shuttled them to the airport. All the way there I looked at June through the rear-view mirror. Her dark hair had wisps of white and I imagined that as a young woman she’d modelled herself after Vivien Leigh or Ella Raines.

“How do the flights look?” That was standby lingo for whether there were any available seats.

“Good. A few in the front. Back is wide open.” John cracked the window and lit a smoke.

“I’ve never flown standby,” June said.

“Easy as pie,” John said. “You miss one flight, you wait for the next.”

June laughed. I liked her laugh.

I dropped them off where I always left Courtney—behind the limos, near the taxi stand and the rental car drop-off. John didn’t linger. Bag in hand he was already halfway across the street before June had stepped out of the car.

“When will you be back?”

We both watched John head into departures.

“A week,” she said. “I guess it really depends on standby.”

“Don’t worry about that.” I didn’t know whether to hug her or tell her about what John had told me the night before. I didn’t do either. Instead, I passed her a suitcase and told her to have a great time.

* * *

Courtney and I had been stuck in the standby line many times—Fort Myers during Spring Break or when there were only three flights a week to Lisbon—but the worst was when we went to Ireland to try to patch things up, and it took me four days to get home.

I don’t know why we chose Ireland. Maybe it was because Courtney had claimed her birth father—a man whom she’d never met—was from Waterford, or that she’d read an article that the Cliffs of Moher were therapeutic. Her friends Leah and Ed lived in Dublin and so, at the very least, we had a place to stay while we decided where to go next.

We’d arrived on an overnight flight, took a cab to the city centre and found Leah and Ed’s place. They lived in a cottage-like bungalow with a small path and a bright red door. They’d arranged for us to stay in their

guesthouse. It was cosy and quaint and far enough from the main house that they wouldn't hear us argue.

Courtney and I slept for most of that first day. Later, we walked along the Liffey and visited Trinity College. We rode a double-decker tour bus. In the evening, Leah and Ed took us to Temple Bar for a taste of Irish nightlife.

"A lot of people go on literary walking tours," Ed told us.

The four of us sat at a table smoking cigarettes and drinking shots. I had just finished complaining about visiting the Guinness Museum.

"We're not much for reading," I said.

"They're still nice walks," Leah said.

"*Slàinte*," Ed said. We toasted.

After they left, Courtney and I stayed and drank more.

"They're kind of plain," I said. "Dull, maybe."

"They're trying to start a family," she said. "Be nice. Why can't you be nice?"

Courtney left me in the bar. I paid. Caught up with her on a bridge and grabbed her shoulder. "Why do you pull that crap?" I said.

"I can't stand you sometimes. More than sometimes." She took off her shoe and hit me in the shoulder. A few Irish guys whistled and laughed. I covered my head. Then I grabbed the hand with her shoe, pulled her to the ground and spat on her face.

"I'm sorry." I helped her up.

She didn't clean the spit off.

We walked back to Leah and Ed's in silence. In the guesthouse we had sex. Courtney made exaggerated moans and asked me to spit on her again so I did.

"I love you," I said.

"I know," she said.

We got out of bed, stepped into Leah's garden and shared a cigarette. That was the first time Courtney told me about the castle.

The thing about marrying a flight attendant is that I was always asked the same two questions: do you miss her when she's out there? Do you get free flights? The answer I gave more and more was that they're not exactly free, and yes, I missed her. Of course, I missed her. She was my wife.

* * *

A little over a week after they left for Honolulu, John called while Courtney was on her way to Corner Brook.

"We're stuck in Hawaii." The reception was clear and in the background there was the sound of an airport PA announcement.

"That's the way standby works."

"It's been two goddamn days," John said. "We're sleeping in the airport, for Pete's sake."

“I’m sorry, John. We’ve all been there.”

“What do you expect us to do?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “Sit tight.”

“Where’s Courtney? I need to speak with Courtney.”

“She’s not here.”

“Did she leave you again?” I held the receiver away from my ear because by that point John was yelling. It wasn’t the way a person yelled if they thought you couldn’t hear them, but in the way they yelled if they were drunk. John sounded hammered.

“John, she’s flying.”

“Is she near here? Can she help us get out of here?”

“She can’t do anything for you. You know that’s how it works.” I held myself together and said that flights usually get better by mid-week. “Passenger loads decrease.” I suggested they try a puddle jumper out to another island. “Be creative,” I said. “Maybe you could rent a *mâlia*.”

John went silent. It felt like he had hung up, but then I heard his raspy voice. “June isn’t feeling too good.”

“Does she need to see a doctor?”

“I can’t be this guy.” The line went dead, but I held the phone thinking he might come back to say something else. I stood in the kitchen, holding the phone, and for the first time felt sorry for June.

Courtney’s standby passes worked liked this: the airline gave her a dozen a year to distribute to friends and family, people like John, for example, but the catch was that there had to be an open seat on the flight. If a flight was full, the traveller waited until the next one. Thing is, they’re probably not the only people flying on a pass and then it goes by seniority. Courtney had ten years seniority, but others, they could have twenty-five or more. Flying standby is a mix of luck and planning. It’s a gamble and for some travellers the money saved on airfare is worth rolling the dice.

I walked into the living room and found the picture of the O’Rourke castle still leaning against the sofa. I picked it up and hung it above our fireplace.

* * *

When Courtney arrived home that night, it was late.

“There was a fog delay.”

She fell, still in uniform, on our bed. I leaned over to massage her shoulders.

“You’re kidding, right?” She wiggled away.

“They’re stuck in Hawaii.”

Courtney undressed. “What number are they on the list?” She took off her light-blue blazer and white shirt and placed them on a hanger. She removed the striped kerchief around her neck and unzipped her skirt.

“I didn’t ask.”

She left our bedroom and headed to the bathroom.

“They’re about to enter day three,” I said.

She appeared at the bedroom door with her toothbrush hanging out of the side of her mouth.

“They shouldn’t have gone.”

I followed her to the bathroom and confessed everything I knew about the lumps. Courtney rinsed her mouth.

“He told you all that? And you didn’t tell me?”

“Are you upset?”

“Of course I’m upset,” she said.

She put on this sexy lingerie nightie thing she’d bought in Galway and picked up the phone.

I listened to her recite her security clearance number. “John O’Rourke and June Richards. Honolulu.” She was silent. I touched the small of her back only to feel the material of her nightie. She brushed my hand away. “Standby passenger O’Rourke and Richards.”

Courtney didn’t want John to make a scene at the airport. The unspoken rule was that standby passengers were to stay out of sight from paying passengers. In most airports they referred to standbys as contingents, but called them cons for short. I can still spot a con a mile away. They pack light, no kids, usually reading a book, but preoccupied with the ticket counter. Airlines will take away your passes if you act up. Courtney told me about employees who’ve made a scene, even threatened other passengers at the counter.

She hung up the phone.

“Flights are oversold.” She got under the duvet.

“It’s not my fault,” I said. “I didn’t do anything.”

She switched off the light. “Did they leave a contact number?”

“I didn’t ask.”

* * *

To my wife, John was the only important stepfather in a long line of stepfathers. He had his own children and grandchildren, other relationships that had lasted longer than the one with Courtney’s mother. When he married Courtney’s mother, however, Courtney was still at an age where grown-ups could influence her. He taught her to sketch and often they would draw reasonable facsimiles for contests. Sometimes they won prizes, she had said. It was on those nights that I imagined John spoke to Courtney about the O’Rourke castle. The two of them at a kitchen table, a contest proof-of-purchase in front of them, John speaking about Celts and Vikings and the lone O’Rourke fortress in the emerald hills. “I’d love it if one day we could go visit it,” he’d tell her.

There were men before John and after John, but Courtney usually dismissed them the way one might speak of a tenant or boarder. Often she’d confuse them, “Was he before? Oh, there was one in the middle, what was his name?” She’d been more elusive about her mother: who she

was, where she went, was she living or dead. I assumed, for both John and Courtney, there was something awful or sinister during those three years that John lived in that house. That something was said or not said that forced the two of them to go to that castle each night. The difference so many years later was that John had moved on, while that castle still held some type of false hope for my wife. “He kind of appeared at the right time,” she’d once told me. “I think I feel indebted.”

Courtney had spent an afternoon calling around Dublin until she located the castle, or what was believed to be the castle. It was close to Carrick-on-Shannon, which would take us awhile to get to. We thanked Leah, told her to give our regards to Ed, and headed to the bus station. Courtney figured a bus ride would be easier. We wouldn’t fight about how to get there. We’d have time to reconnect. I was into it. I pictured long, idyllic rides through the quaint Irish countryside, pit stops in pubs to eat steak and kidney pie, throw back a few rounds of Jameson. At night, my wife in my arms, we’d make love on a rickety old bed with rusty springs, the Irish night air connecting us back to each other.

But it wasn’t like that. The bus ride was a nightmare. The narrow bumpy roads made us both sick to our stomach, and an hour drive in any other country took three times as long in Ireland.

“What will we do once we get there?” I knew that wasn’t the point, but we hadn’t spoken for close to four hours.

“We’ll investigate. Spend the night. Maybe we can meet the current landlord.” Courtney appeared positive. “If it works out maybe we could talk John and June into visiting.”

From Carrick-on-Shannon, we hitched a ride to a tiny hamlet that was about the size of our cul-de-sac back home. There was a tavern and an auto-body shop. We never spoke about it, then, but by that point we both knew that there was no real castle.

It wasn’t that John had lied to a younger Courtney, it was just that John’s stories were only stories and that the truth, much like most truths about immigrants who came to North America from Europe, was that the O’Rourkes—poor and sick and dying—fled Hibernia with only the clothes on their back.

We found a taxi and he gave us a ride out to a new housing development.

“I think this is it,” the cabbie said.

We stood in front of the stone wall. The wall was only about ten-feet high. There was no moat, as I’d imagined, and no windows or rooms or lookout tower, as I believed Courtney thought there’d be. A few metres behind the wall was where the new houses were being built. Ireland was joining the rest of the world—out with the old. There wasn’t much else around the wall but long grass and piles of garbage. Courtney started clearing away the mess as though we were in a cemetery.

“Guess the O’Rourkes lost that battle,” I said.

“I always pictured it different.”

“I know,” I said.

“Don’t get me wrong, I knew we weren’t going to Windsor Castle, but I thought it’d be something more than this.”

“Maybe you weren’t meant to see it.”

We stayed at the O’Rourke castle for the rest of the day. What else could we do? We drank beers and made sandwiches. We smoked cigarettes. Courtney took the photo for John. That night we laughed about what a crummy trip it had been. We joked that we’d never get to kiss the Blarney Stone, go on one of those literary walks, or find out whether the Cliffs of Moher really were breathtaking. We went back to that tavern and watched a soccer game. Then we booked a night in a bed and breakfast. We tried to do it, but each time, Courtney said she wasn’t into it.

“Do you want me to spit on you again?”

“I don’t think it will do anything.”

The lights were off and she felt warm next to me. “I think we need a break,” she said.

“Okay,” I said.

“You’re supposed to say more than that,” she said.

“I know.”

I heard the owners of the house in the next room laughing. I’d wished we’d had their life.

* * *

Courtney was in our backyard cleaning winter debris—garbage, twigs—that had been left over after the snow melted. She handed me an industrial-size garbage bag. I walked around the yard wishing Ireland had gone another way. I picked up some cigarette butts and found a couple of stray golf balls out there (from the days I thought I might break into *that* business).

“What do you think about flowers?” I said. “Around the deck.” I pictured hyacinths and marigolds, even sunflowers towering up. “Make it look nice for potential buyers.” I thought about Leah’s garden.

“What will June do? What do people do with lumps?” she said.

“I don’t even know what a lump looks like.” I rubbed some dirt between my fingers. “Well?”

“I don’t care. The new owners will probably just rip them out anyway.”

“Look, it’s out of our hands, right?” I walked over to put my arm around her, but she pulled away.

“Everything slides off you.” Courtney pushed the leaves into a pile.

“Why did you even come back here, then?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

* * *

Our phone made that funny long-distance ring. I went inside to answer it,

“Aloha!”

“The planes are full. They’re full all week. There’s a storm. They’re short of planes.”

“Which is it?”

“I don’t know,” John said. “Everybody has a different story in this hell hole.”

“Easy, John. I told you things get better.”

He spoke to June. “Wait a second,” he said to her. “For Pete’s sake, wait a goddamn second.” His voice came back. “We’re thinking about buying tickets.”

“To where?”

“To where?” John laughed. “To the moon.”

“Just relax, man,” I said. “I’m only trying to help.”

But I wasn’t trying to help. I looked at that photo hanging above our fireplace and knew then that he’d never come and get it. John didn’t care about Courtney or the castle or even June’s lumps. This whole fiasco: the calls and the yelling and the “why me” was all about a man who didn’t know how to love. He didn’t know what those words meant to a little girl or an older dying woman. I listened to him rant and rave on the phone until finally he said, “Put Courtney on. Let me speak to your wife.”

I held the receiver against my chest so John couldn’t hear me. “His Highness.” I handed her the phone.

“John, sweetie.” She looked back at me before stretching the phone cord into the dining room, but I could still hear her. “How’s June doing?”

* * *

When Courtney came back to the yard, I had piled some more debris into the bags.

“What does he expect us to do?”

“He asked if I could fly out there to pick them up.”

“He had the nerve to ask that?”

“It will move them higher on the standby list.” She started to cry. “I have seniority.”

“You’re not doing it. We’re not doing it,” I said. “Christ, we need to work this out.”

“What else can we do?” she said. “They need my help.”

I sat on the ground and looked at the sky. I was so angry that I actually felt it in my knees. I thought to myself, let John and June rot there for all I care. Let Leah and Ed stuff their literary tours up their arse. “This is the end,” I said to Courtney.

“I know,” she said.

I felt the wet soil on my pants and imagined those pretty flowers growing, but I knew then that there were never going to be any flowers, at least not any that I planted. Courtney sat next to me and for a brief second our hands touched.

* * *

At three in the morning, she was wide awake with a crossword book resting against her knees. She had turned the TV to the weather channel.

"I'm going to Hawaii," she said, matter of fact.

"You're crazy," I said, still under the duvet. "They need to take care of their own problems."

"You don't get people."

I told her that flying to Hawaii was like going back into a burning building. "John and June are trapped, and now you're going to be trapped." I got out of bed and stood in front of the television. "What kind of person would go back into a burning building?"

She placed her crossword book on the table next to her. "Everyone."

"Then let me come," I said.

"No."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

"They asked for my help."

"You mean they want you to solve their problem," I said.

"They're not like that," she said. "John's basically my only family." She got out of bed wearing the little lingerie nightie. I looked at her the way I might look at a woman I barely knew, but I should've known her. I should have known her inside out. She pulled on a sweatshirt and began to pack her suitcase. "If I leave first thing, I can be on the nine to Honolulu."

"You're not a taxi service," I said. "We have our own problems here." I was about to say something nasty, something that I knew I might regret for a long time, but I stopped the words dead in their tracks.

She finished packing, leaned on the bed. "June's lumps are malignant."

"I told you they're waiting for the results." I flipped from the weather network to a sports centre update to some stupid game show with three nerdy guys trying to marry a cheerleader. "John told me tests and more tests," I said, imitating his raspy voice.

"On the phone today he told me that they knew before they left." She folded some clothes and placed them in her suitcase.

"Officially?" I switched off the TV. "Is this for real or to make you come pick him up?"

"Jesus," she said. "It's official."

* * *

After the O'Rourke castle we headed to Limerick where we planned to fly standby back to Toronto. The flights were full. Oversold. We sat in the airport bar and sipped coffee.

"I'm staying with a work friend," she'd said.

"For how long?"

"I don't know. Until I know what to do next."

The ticket counter called Courtney's name and offered her a jump

seat. She took it, and I stayed. For four days I took a bus to the airport and stood around until the plane left without me. Then I'd go back to Limerick and walk around, sit in a bar, admire young women, and think about that stone wall, which I decided had caused all of our problems.

When I finally arrived home, Courtney had removed things from her closet, her bedside table and the bathroom. I called the house where she'd moved to and begged her to come home, which she eventually did.

But that morning, as I drove her to the airport to rescue John and June, I knew there hadn't been a point to those calls.

"Goodbye," she said.

"Good luck." I didn't know what else to say.

The three of them got out of Hawaii: stopped in Chicago before making it home. Courtney left the airline a year later. She told me that she'd lost touch with John, but that she didn't believe it had anything to do with the passes. He also never claimed the photo of the wall, and so I kept it. And sometimes I'll still look at it and wonder what happened to June and her lumps. Whether they got rid of them or just waited until they destroyed her insides. I liked to imagine, though, that if June had died that John would've been by her side. I liked to imagine that she deserved to die that way. But deep down I knew that she didn't. None of us really did.

After fifteen years as a technical writer and editor, MARION AGNEW moved to Thunder Bay, Ontario. Her fiction and non-fiction have appeared in journals such as *Prairie Fire*, *The Malahat Review*, *South Dakota Review* and *Compose*, and have been selected for the *Ten Stories High* anthology and *Best Canadian Essays* (2012 & 2014). She writes from her home office in Shuniah, overlooking Lake Superior.

Two for Balance

Marion Agnew

JAMES FASTENED his watch around his wrist and tapped its face twice. Twice for balance. At the door to his apartment, he shrugged into his leather bomber jacket, which was solid but not too heavy—just right for the day. Before he zipped it, he touched the breast pocket of his plaid shirt. He could feel the stiffness of the folded cash under the cloth. The cloth brushed against the bills and the bills brushed each other, layer on layer of satisfying whispers and rustles.

He zipped up his jacket and then unzipped it part-way to touch his pocket again before re-zipping it and stepping out into the breezy October morning. He squinted at the sun, bright but low in the sky, and smiled as he shut the door firmly behind him. His fingers closed around the doorknob once, twice. He had decided not to wear gloves.

As he cut across the parking lot, he heard a nasal voice. “Jamie! You’re early this morning!” Then the snicker: “Heh heh heh.”

He glanced over and saw two men leaning against the side of a black pickup truck. The taller, older one raised a hand with a smile. “Morning, James.” His voice was a pleasant rumble, as it had been since late high school, though his hair was now white. The younger, skinny one hunched over his cigarette, his dark, greasy hair half-hiding a smirk.

James nodded but didn’t change course. “Good morning, Lou.” A pause, but not in his walking. “Dennis.”

“No bike today, Jamie? Taking yourself for a walk? Just you?” Dennis grinned around the smoke. Out of the corner of his eye, James saw Lou’s elbow move and Dennis shift to stay out of its way. Then James heard it again, the “heh heh heh.”

James kept his voice easy. “No, no bike. Just a walk.” He pushed down a pang of regret. He wouldn’t think of his bike.

Lou nodded. “Nice day for it. Have a good one, James!”

James turned onto Morse Street and picked up his pace, but he still heard Dennis whine, “I was *bein’* nice. The dude hears *voices*, Lou, how

come I can't talk to him, too?" and Lou growl, "He doesn't want to hear from assholes. Just leave him alone, fuck-up."

Then James closed off his ears. Maybe he should have closed them before. But it was also bad not to hear Dennis and Lou. First, because Lou was his landlord, and he said nice things sometimes, or asked questions that James needed to answer. And second, Dennis might be saying something he ought to hear, especially after Dennis had asked all those questions about his medication, and wouldn't give it up until James had said directly to leave him alone. Dennis had only snickered, apparently without taking offense, and drifted away. Lou had come by later to apologize, though James didn't really know what for. Dennis was Dennis; he couldn't help it. But James knew to be wary of Dennis, though he still worried about being rude.

If there had to be a Dennis, he was glad there was a Lou. Two. Balanced.

But now he was alone and striding toward Grenville Avenue, and it felt good. There wasn't a sidewalk here, and he enjoyed the crunch of gravel underfoot. Everywhere, from the ground right up to the top of his head, everything was just right: His feet were secure and warm in his favourite running shoes and white athletic socks. His jeans were the perfect weight to protect his legs from the slight breeze, even if it turned into a real wind later. The plaid shirt was unwrinkled, and his jacket felt like a warm arm encircling his shoulders in camaraderie. His ears were warm; he didn't need the toque or gloves, so he was glad he'd left them behind. In the distance, the sun lay golden on the big lake. To his right, the neighbourhood lawns still showed frost where the sun had not yet licked at the grass. Lou was right, it was a nice day. A nice day to run away. Wasn't that a song?

Nonsense syllables floated through his head: "Da doo ron ron." He let the rest of the song come back to him through the decades. His right index finger kept time: TAP-tap. TAP-tap. The song made him think of high school, his everyday blue shirt, how he tried to but never could slick back his hair like his friends, Satch and Monty, did. They looked cool. He looked like Howdy Doody. He thought some more about high school and suddenly he could smell the salty, smoky tang that rose every day when he unwrapped his ham sandwich, hear the crinkle of the waxed paper. And with the ham sandwich, an apple, itself sweet and tart together, perfect with the salty ham. The paper bag soft like cloth at the folds, creased and brought home every day, ready to be filled again for its return journey the next day. The sandwich and apple only, nothing to drink other than water from the fountain, no money to buy pop at school then, not often now, either.

He stopped at the dam that made Current River into Boulevard Lake and looked downstream, where the river resumed its winding journey to

Lake Superior. Always a pretty picture, today no exception. He lingered, thinking of *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, read to them at school, and the TV series *Ivanhoe*. When he was a kid, both stories had seemed like things that could happen only somewhere else to other people, though *Paddle-to-the-Sea* supposedly started in Nipigon, just 100 clicks up the Trans-Canada. His friends in elementary school had loved those stories. Monty Glenn had always meant to leave Port Arthur, like the carved wooden man surfing the entire reach of the Great Lakes in his canoe. Satch's adventuresome life was more like *Ivanhoe's*, only Satch had nobody but himself to blame for the turns his life had taken. Of course, Satch seemed to take great pleasure in telling stories about how he fixed whatever had gone wrong. Ever the hero, Satch was.

But James had felt no yearning for adventure, no need to save young maidens from ruin. It didn't seem real back then. Satch and Monty had laughed at him a little, called him Mama's Boy. He didn't know what it meant and had asked about it at supper one night. His father had just stared at him, chewing a mouthful of stringy pork and potatoes, before changing the subject. After supper, his mother had ruffled his hair and called him a good son. She was still at home then, the shouting hadn't started yet and she had not been sick and put in the hospital, so he must have been eight or younger. James never asked about it anymore after that night, and Satch and Monty had let up on the name-calling.

Today, his chest full of optimism and purpose, he knew different, knew he was ready for more. Now was as good a time as any for adventure, and it was time he stepped up to his responsibilities, too. He'd made his sacrifice—don't heroes always have to sacrifice things they love?—and he wouldn't think about his bike any more. He was ready for a trip like *Paddle-to-the-Sea*, and happily ever after, like on *Ivanhoe* every week. Yes. His time.

* * *

A couple of taps on the metal railing and James was off again, across the bridge and circling around and uphill to the broad sidewalk on Algoma Street. Because of the high school across the street, the traffic was heavy and impatient. James sensed something behind him, a crimson cloud, and took a deep breath in and out. Still walking, he touched his jacket, twice, over his breast pocket. It was okay. He was okay. His plan was solid, his purpose ambitious. Even his parents would have approved. Of course, they were no longer alive to care.

He had nearly passed the sprawling lawn of the old Psychiatric Hospital when a white Buick pulled over to the curb beside him, its window smoothly dropping so Satch could shout across the passenger seat. "James! How's the world? Get in, I'll buy you a coffee. Can you?"

"Yeah, sure, Satch." Plenty of time. All morning for this walk to happily-ever-after.

James had hardly shut the door when Satch hit the gas without looking. A car passing them braked, the screech blending with its honk, and Satch flipped the bird. “Yeah, yeah, drop dead, asshole. Listen, I just left the grandson at the daycare. Isn’t that a trip? Daycare in the old psych hospital. Bars on windows, locked doors everywhere, alarms. Hell, maybe the kids are safer there than anywhere else. Don’t worry about the seat belt, we’ll just go to the new Timmy’s down here. Still Mr. Safety, eh James?”

The seat belt made a satisfying *snick* as James latched it. He ignored Satch’s wink, the wink that let James know that Satch was really joking about condoms. “Safety first,” was all James said. The way his mother used to, always, about everything.

They settled in at a table with a coffee and a maple Danish apiece, and Satch tore his attention from the girls behind the counter to look at James. “So. How’s things? Walking, I see. That’s good for you, I bet.”

“Yeah, helps me control the weight,” James said, patting his flat stomach.

Satch shifted in his chair to emphasize his own soft belly wobbling beneath a navy blue golf shirt and nylon jacket. “I gained thirty pounds when I retired—and then lost a couple hundred when Barb left me.” His laugh boomed across the restaurant, turning heads, creating smiles. It was his standard line, and although James had heard it many times before, he still grinned at Satch, at his spirits, at the day. “Took her a year, but she works in a park somewhere now, did I tell you? New Brunswick. The kids are just back from there. She flew them out for the Thanksgiving weekend. This is Elliott and Cynthia. They took Dylan, too. Two years old and already on a plane. I didn’t fly till we were out of high school.”

James had heard this whole plan the previous month, when he and Satch had gone to a movie. Still, he acted as if it were news and shook his head. “Yup, it’s a different world.”

“Gone four days. I sure missed that little guy. When Cynthia works nights at Rosewood Manor, I get him overnight because Elliott is at work for six and daycare isn’t open yet. She drops him...”

James finished his Danish while his coffee cooled a little and the details of Satch’s domestic arrangements floated on the air. Satch had always been full of hustle and plans.

One time back in Grade 11, they’d all been sitting outside together during lunch break, James with Satch and Monty Glenn. It was early in the year, mid-September maybe, and still warm in the sun, and Satch and Monty had taken turns enumerating the attractions of each girl going by: Arlene (Monty: “stacked, but dumb”), Jill (Satch: “prude”). Louise Stanley had stopped to talk with Arlene, and James had held his breath, but she had elicited no comment. Then Barbara had passed, and Satch had said, “That one. That’s the one I’ll marry.” And he had, too, because that’s how things worked for Satch.

“Hey.” Satch leaned forward and looked at James. His voice dropped to a more confidential level. “So...how’s things?” Almost the same words as a few minutes before. Whole different meaning.

James smiled. Just like in high school almost 50 years ago, Satch’s attention on you like there was nobody else in the world. Charming as James could never be. “Oh. Well. Things are fine.”

“Everything okay at home?”

James just shrugged. His right index finger TAP-tapped a rhythm on his jeans.

“Reason I ask, I saw Lou yesterday at curling. He told me about his kid nephew, Donny or something?”

“Dennis.”

“Yeah, Dennis. Said he’s run into a bit of a problem keeping a job, thank God my Elliott isn’t the only one who can’t get his shit together. But anyway, Lou said he’s keeping Dennis around to help out with the apartments. But he’s still in trouble—drugs, I guess. Plus, basically Lou says Dennis can be a bit of a jerk. He’s not giving you trouble, is he?”

“Not really. He...just, like you said, he’s a jerk, is all. Immature.”

“Yeah. Well, screw him, anyway. Hey, those apartments doing good for Lou?”

James nodded. “Seem to be, yeah. Always full.”

“Any new neighbours?”

“Not since the summer. No room. You know that place up Hodder, it’s full, and there’s just a few vacant rooms in all the places on Cumberland, from what I hear.”

Satch shook his head. “Smart guy, that Lou, to buy that old motel and make it apartments. Wish I’d got in on something like that, just the right size for one, keep the rents affordable for people with disability, keep ‘em full.”

“Lou’s pretty handy. Does all the upkeep himself.” James kept his voice neutral, but Satch grinned.

“You remember my lamp from industrial arts class, do you? Yeah, you’re probably right. Not my thing.” Satch eyed James as if he’d just seen him and said, “Hey, I knew there was something different—walking, right! I thought I’d see you on the bike. It’s not too cold to ride yet, is it?”

James just said, “Today’s a walking day.” The reason for the walk belonged to him.

“Ah. Lou said something about the bike when he mentioned Dennis. You given up the bike for the season already?”

James took his time answering. First, he had to take a deep breath and push aside his bike. And then—well, he never lied, but staying quiet about some things wasn’t the same as lying. Staying quiet was pretty useful sometimes. But this was Satch. Satch had known him forever, through the worst times. Satch could know the truth. So James came

clean, on this part of his plan, anyway. “I sold it yesterday.”

“Sold it?” Satch leaned forward. “Jesus, James, seriously? That bike cost you thousands! I hope you got a good price. You gonna buy something new?”

James released a little regret into his voice. “No, not right away.” The folded bills warmed in his pocket.

Satch looked at him for a long moment, and James flushed as he thought about Satch giving him money to pay off the credit cards, and making him swear not to get new ones. But when he spoke, Satch just said, “Good Lord, James. That’s a helluva thing. You’ve been riding semi-serious for a long time, ever since the kids were little gaffers and we were coaxing my Kimmie into giving up her training wheels. Big decision for you. Hey, it’s not a money thing, is it? Disability’s still coming okay?”

“Money’s fine. Getting a little more, with Canada Pension now, too.” James looked down at the fingers of his right hand, still on the coffee mug. His left hand, in his pocket, was squeezed in a ball—not too hard, not too loose. He felt himself talking, making sense, reporting all the things he’d thought he would say. “It’s just...time. Walking is better for me. Can do it year-round, too. They said that last time I was in to the doctor.”

“So you’ve been to the doctor, that’s good. They change your drugs or anything?”

James blinked a few times and then let his breath out slowly. It was okay. Satch could ask these questions. He was Satch. He’d stayed in touch, taken the late-night phone calls, listened to James’s ideas and worries and fear, urged the doctor visits, sat with him in the waiting room, took him for his first prescription. That whole time had gone yellow for James, like a snapshot that aged, like who he’d been before was almost a different person. Almost, but not really. And James didn’t want to go back, didn’t want to pierce the memories of that time and release the red cloud and the hateful voices.

And back then, Satch had been there with him. He’d helped James deal with lawyers and disability, and sell things, and move and get by, he’d paid for this and a million other coffee and Danish. James listened as the reasons crowded around him, angels whispering of infinite kindnesses. Satch was like that other song, the bridge over the troubled water. Satch had a right to know things. Some things. This question was okay.

So James said, “No, not really. Everything’s pretty much the same.” Pretty much. Satch didn’t need to know about his cutting back, to save a little and make the medication stretch just a little farther. James knew it was safe—it just was. Satch didn’t know, didn’t need to know, the details of medications and things.

“It’s just that Lou said you were maybe acting different, is all.” Satch

paused and glanced down, muting his voice. “He said you were, um, talking to yourself more, this last week or so.”

James mustered a small laugh. “Oh, I might talk to myself, but nobody answers.”

Satch looked at him again, laugh at the ready. “Well, that’s the test, all right. That’s good news.” Satch sat back. “The doctor must like you as a patient, your routine and everything.”

“Yeah, no surprises. Keeps me going.”

“Well, you look happy, that’s for sure. Hey, remember I ran into Louise Stanley at the mall last month? Louise Stanley...I can’t remember her married last name, if I ever knew it. Well, I guess *that* doesn’t matter. Anyway. I saw her for lunch, a week or so ago.”

James blinked. His right hand crept toward his breast pocket but he willed it back to the table, then to rest on his jeans again. He could not keep his finger from a TAP-tap, TAP-tap.

Meanwhile, Satch had been talking. “Just great to see her. I was at Frankie’s with a golfing buddy and she came in with her granddaughter, maybe twelve. Looked like a dancer, a giraffe, one of those birds, a flamingo. You know how they are at that age. Hair flaming red, just like yours used to be. They sat down with us. I guess Louise is back in town to stay—her folks are pretty bad off. They’re at that home, Pinecrest or Pinesomething, anyway, in Fort William. There’s no one else to care for them, no brothers or sisters, so she came back, which must be a hell of a thing, after how they were to her, throwing her out like they did. They sent her to Alberta in disgrace, back in the day. You remember that time.”

Satch paused, but James just shook his head. For one thing, he didn’t remember that time. For another, he didn’t know what he was supposed to say.

“Well, in spite of everything, she did come back. She’d be justified in telling them off, but she’s a forgiving sort, I guess. Her place is off Victoria, ground floor apartment. Little. Real little. I brought them home after lunch, stopped in a time or two since. I guess she was hurt some in that wreck that killed her daughter.”

James kept his eyes on the button placket of Satch’s knit shirt and drank coffee, ignoring *a time or two, a time or two* humming in his ear. Two was balanced; it was okay. It was Satch.

“Gotta be rough, losing her daughter. Kids, Jesus. I want to strangle Elliot four days out of five, grown as he is, and sometimes Kimmie makes the most god-awful unbelievably BAD decisions, but to have your own child killed. That’s just....” He shook his head.

James made an “Mmm” noise and kept his attention on his coffee.

“Nice her granddaughter came. Grandkids are great. Don’t make up for their damn stupid parents, not always, but they’re something. The kid was just visiting, though. Guess her dad and stepmom live in Calgary.

But maybe you know this. Louise said she'd seen you at the mall, too."

James cleared his throat and looked up. "Yeah, uh-huh. I ran into her at Zeller's after you did. She's working there, part-time. Still in rehab for her back, too." He wanted to tell Satch more, something else about Louise that Satch couldn't already know, but it seemed like Satch knew it all, and James was outside looking in.

"Yeah? Well, back or no back, she seems pretty spry to me." Satch smiled. "Damndest thing, to see her here again. Out of the blue, seems like, but then, that was her way. One moment she's there, and then poof, she's gone. Got to know her pretty well back then. She and Barb hung around together after high school. She seemed okay. Not a beauty, but decent-looking. Quiet, though. Well, you saw her some at the College, didn't you?" Satch paused. "This would have been...before your hospitalization?"

James looked out the window at nothing, a sparrow, a van in the drive-thru lane. *A time or two, a time or two, seems pretty spry, seems pretty spry.* Two. Balanced. "Yeah. I knew her back then. Remember? Her and me, we were both in the accounting program but I got that job at the mill and dropped out after a couple of months." He looked at the table. "A few years later, oh, maybe five or so, we met up again. This would have been after you and Barbara had Elliott. She was working in the office at the mill. Stayed a little bit. Said I should go back to finish in accounting, said she'd help me. Saw her quite a bit, for awhile there." James bit back what he wanted to say next, swallowed, and kept his voice soft to say something else. "But then she left."

Heh heh heh. James looked up at Satch, and then shot a glance at the tables around them. Then he wasn't sure he'd heard it.

Meanwhile, Satch yawned and rattled the bottom of his coffee mug on the table. "So, leave at 30 but can't get away, eh? She's back as fast as she left, and looks like she's here to stay. Say, speaking of leaving, I gotta scoot. Do you want something for the road? Can I take you somewhere? Oh, that's right—you're in it for the exercise."

In the parking lot, Satch gestured toward the back seat. "Lookit that. A car seat. At my age." He shook his head. "I tell you, though, and I never thought I'd say it. An unexpected baby can be the best thing to ever happen to you." He caught James's eye for a moment. James wondered why, but then, it was Satch, and it was just his way.

Satch blinked. "Oh yeah—I have some books to share, if you're interested. Dean Koontz, Carol O'Connell, that kind of thing. I'll bring 'em by the apartment tomorrow, okay? In the afternoon, maybe?"

"Uh, sure," James said. "Should be fine." He smothered a laugh and felt himself grinning. Tomorrow. He'd be happily ever after, tomorrow. In his jacket pocket, his finger tapped.

With a wave and a "Let me know if you need anything," Satch drove

off.

“See you, Satch.” James knew Satch couldn’t hear him inside the car, so far away, but he said it anyway.

* * *

Before returning to Algoma, James walked awhile on Court Street, finding his strolling rhythm, like coasting on the bike. He hummed about the rhythm of the falling rain, even though the sun was bright and orange in his eyes. He didn’t even need to keep time.

The houses were pretty through here—big and old. Some of them were set back on double lots and had impossible lawns, near-vertical from the higher bluff down to the sidewalk. He and Monty and Satch used to wonder how they ever got mowed. Satch had vowed to buy a house in the area someday, but hadn’t quite made it. Monty Glenn had had the right kind of income, though he’d never come back after leaving town for law school. James and Satch had lost touch with Monty, the way you do. But after Satch had retired early from the city, he’d delivered cars part-time for Dominion Motors, driving them to people in southern Ontario. James never could understand how people had enough money to pay for something like that, something they could do for themselves, and why didn’t they just buy cars down there? But Satch just shrugged, like he knew all the reasons why, but they weren’t worth explaining to James. Anyway, one trip, Satch had looked up Monty. They’d played eighteen holes at a club near Barrie, near where Monty said he had a summer cottage. Not four months later, there was the obituary notice in the Thunder Bay paper. James had seen it first, mentioned to Satch that it said he died unexpectedly and there was to be no service. Satch immediately decided Monty had killed himself. James could never believe it, but Satch insisted and later said he’d asked around and knew it for a fact. James wasn’t sure. He couldn’t understand how someone could do that. He exhaled. It didn’t matter now, anyway.

Leaving the nice homes behind, he cut uphill for a block, back to Algoma, before crossing River into a neighbourhood transitioning to commercial. Along here, the big houses were being turned into restaurants or torn down for medical buildings. Way up ahead, he could see Red River Road, which he sometimes still called Arthur Street in his head. He had never understood why Port Arthur had to rename Arthur Street when the city joined with Fort William to become Thunder Bay, and Fort William got to keep its Arthur Street. It still didn’t seem fair and it sure didn’t make sense. How could the Port Arthur side lose Arthur Street? It was high-handed, like the whole amalgamation in the first place, decreed to happen on January 1, 1970. James had been in his in-between time, after he was a little sick but before he’d gotten really bad and then better. But that date was one he remembered, and the Christmas dinner, too, the week before the official amalgamation happened. Satch had proposed a

toast to the new city, Thunder Bay.

“It’s been called the Lakehead all these years.” Barbara’s voice had startled James, it was so harsh. She was pregnant, and James had watched her push food around on her plate. “I was supposed to pick? Lakehead, *The Lakehead*. They split the vote on purpose. I’ll never get over that.” She buttered a bun.

“It’s a compromise,” Satch had said.

Barbara had rolled her eyes at James behind Satch’s back as she took a bite of bun. James shifted in his chair. Then, talking around her food, Barbara scolded Satch. “Compromise, my ass. Just like marriage—we compromise because I always give in.”

Satch had laughed at that, which made James relax a little bit. He’d known Barbara nearly as long as he’d known Satch, the way you might know a girl who’s around at school, but even so, she made him uncomfortable. It just wasn’t right for his friend’s wife to catch his eye like that. It was like having a conversation that Satch couldn’t hear. And her being pregnant made it that much worse, somehow. Though it seemed like Satch didn’t mind. Satch and Barbara had always been easy together, laughing and joking around. James had never seen anything like it. His parents had never teased each other; he couldn’t remember them laughing, not together. That was not his father’s way, nor his mother’s, even before she had begun muttering and pacing, and then the shouting, and then the move into the psych hospital, where she too had yellowed quickly and died just after James turned 14.

But he wouldn’t think about that. He’d just walk. The traffic was busier along here, four lanes squeezed into space suited for three. But James didn’t feel the crimson cloud here, didn’t need to calm himself. Ahead lay his favourite block and after that, another of his favourite parts of the walk: Red River Road to John Street. The absolute best part was the beginning, the six-way intersection, with the old elementary school, now a theatre, at the end of the wedge-shaped Waverley Park and their old Collegiate off up to the right. Down here, the hills and streets came together in a flurry of traffic lights, with churches—Catholic, Baptist, a couple of United—plus the funeral home, all old and grand, crowding every corner. James hadn’t been in a church since his father’s funeral, and before that not since his mother’s, but he liked knowing the churches were there. Churches were solid—buildings that big decisions were made in, where people got clean, inside and out, and learned to do good things. It was a good corner, a safe one.

Next came the part that had been ethnic when they were in high school, the same ethnicities that they all were: the Italian family grocery and the Italian Hall, bakeries, the Scandinavian Home, the Finnish buildings perched up and down Bay Street. Blown glass suncatchers drew his eye to the window of a craft store just beyond Bay, and a hummingbird in

shades of green would be perfect for his apartment window, but he maybe didn't have room, and anyway, he double-tapped his jacket over the bills in his shirt pocket. He kept going, striding past shops and old homes and laundromats and insurance companies, all, like him, thrumming with the business of living.

The morning was warming. The sun had climbed partway up the sky. He felt *right*.

* * *

Standing at the corner of John Street and Algoma, where Algoma became Memorial, he took stock. The next stretch was another long one, he knew—he still had three kilometres left. He checked his watch, and the light changed, and he swung into the crosswalk. Still plenty of time. He'd do a lot of it on Memorial and cross at that odd intersection by the A&W, the only crosswalk along here. Mr. Safety.

Maybe it was just remembering Satch's voice from earlier, but he swore he heard it again: "Mr. Safety." He looked around and saw nothing, but noticed he was walking through the parking lot of the Merla Mae Drive-In. Closed for the season now, though it had been warm enough some afternoons lately that sitting at a picnic table with a soft-serve ice cream or a root beer float would be a nice way to pass some time. Like it had been in high school, for the kids who could afford to date. And one time, anyway, for him. He and Satch and Monty had met up with Barbara and Arlene and Louise Stanley there.

"Not as dates," Satch had said. "A group of friends. And I'm buying." He'd just been hired on to work evenings and weekends at the garage across the street and wanted to show off his spending money. At first, James had heard Satch's plain statement, "I'm buying," as a gloating, black-and-purple boast. He'd wanted to turn Satch down, show some pride, like his mother used to tell him over and over: "Be more active, be a leader like that braggart, Satch." But she had been dead by that time. Besides, she didn't understand, had never understood Satch. Whatever Satch said, he didn't mean anything by it. He never did. It was just Satch being Satch.

Plus, of course he'd go: Louise would be there.

It had been the summer before their Grade 12. Monty would go on for his Grade 13 before heading off to university. James would stop at Grade 12, stock shelves at a grocery store before trying college. Of the girls, only Barbara even wanted a Grade 13, but she gave it up to work as a receptionist at the Port Arthur Clinic until she married Satch. At the time, none of them had known these particulars, but they had all sensed the changes in the days ahead, James was sure. In anticipation of that evening, James had thought that the night at the Merla Mae would be special, an evening to savour forever, but decades later, he couldn't remember anything much that was special about it. He knew he hadn't

said anything memorable to Louise. He mostly listened to the others talk. But even so, he could still conjure up his feeling—they were all together, good friends in a group frozen in time, though they also were aware it couldn't last. Arlene had drifted away to new friends before graduation, even, and because that's how connected things were in this town, she'd dated Lou briefly, decades before Lou had become James's landlord.

But now, so much was different. Back then, Lou had been just a guy at school who James didn't really know; now he saw Lou in passing nearly every day. On the other hand (*always another hand*, his mother used to say), Monty was gone for good and even Barbara had gone east into the wilderness somewhere. Satch had always been around, the constant. And now, at last, Louise was back. She'd left, but come back.

His feet kept the rhythm: *Left, come back. Left, come back. Two. Balanced.*

Come back, and James thought of his father. About a month after his mother died, his father, drunk, talked to James about heaven, the resurrection of the body. Asked him if he believed in ghosts, in reincarnation. James didn't know what to say. He'd never seen any body, be it a squirrel or a fish or a bird, do anything other than decay. And heaven seemed pretty far-off, not like something he could even have an opinion about. As usual, it turned out he didn't need one. That evening, his father had talked and talked about it before starting to sob, huge deep sobs with tears and then without them, his words coming slower and slower until they drifted off halfway through a sentence. His father became as quiet as James had been, and that's how things were from then on. They'd never talked of it again. From that night, James had mostly avoided alcohol, though his father had not. Really, he avoided it *because* his father had not.

Later, when he and Louise overlapped at the mill, he'd worked up the nerve to ask her to go for a root beer float, "in memory of days gone by," was how he'd finally thought to put it. She'd said yes, but when he went by to pick her up, she'd laughed like she hadn't been serious. And handed him an opened beer. And asked him in, and kept him there. Not only once, either. And after the first time, he knew he should have been careful but he just couldn't believe his luck, that it was happening to him, with her. He remembered her fingers in his hair, and what else she had done, what they had done together, time and time again, even though (*always another hand*) it also hurt to remember, because she left town a few months later, when his life was already yellow and that made it sad. He tried not to remember but couldn't help it sometimes. Just fragments—that was all he allowed himself. Underneath, he still knew what it had been, and some forty years later he could still hardly believe it: her joy and laughter, bells pealing and jubilation and lightning from his fingertips, her hands on the back of his neck, pulling him to her.

That was his yellowed time. While he was ill, she'd gone, and the voices had told him he should go too, find a bridge somewhere and fly off it, but Satch had listened and helped. Because of his illness, his time with Louise had become something completely separate from the James he was today. He could go back to before, and he could remember things soon after, but of the exact time, all he had was fragments of memories of hands and fingertips and laughter. If he tried to remember any more than that, it would just seem to have happened to someone else. And sometimes James wondered: If he could remember it all, wouldn't the hateful voices come back too? Would it be spoiled, or would it still be right and sweet and true?

Satch's voice broke through again. Still be true, *a time or two, a time or two, seems pretty spry, seems pretty spry*. James felt, rather than heard, a snicker underneath, a *heh heh heh* that was unbalanced, so he added another set of *heh heh heh* as his feet on the sidewalk kept time, just so he could make two. Then he on-purpose thought of something else: of the blue sky, blue velvet, of *Blue Velvet*, Bobby Vinton, she wore blue velvet, but he didn't know all the words, and then as he was walking, somehow Bobby Vinton became Bobby Darin and *Mack the Knife*, and the shark bites, pretty teeth, dear, and he shows them, pearly white. James didn't know more words and he wasn't even sure of those, but anyway, he let the rhythm bounce his step.

* * *

Approaching the corner with the safe crosswalk, James tried to swallow and found his throat dry. He pulled out one of the six toonies he allowed himself for spending money for the week and stopped in at the Taco Time. He felt so good he bought himself a small pop, a real treat. Then, after his washroom break, he was good to go, to keep on walking, keep on enjoying his day.

Nice day for a walk, he assured himself. Twice, because two is balanced. Unfortunately, the phrase "walking down the street" went through his head, and an invisible chorus singing "do wah diddy diddy" stayed with him longer than he appreciated. Eventually, he turned the "walking down the street" into *Pretty Woman*, but he had to hum along under his breath to outdistance that chorus.

He was listening so hard to Roy Orbison, clinging to the song, that he didn't realize the tall kid at the bus stop up ahead was singing right in his ear, from ten or more meters away. How was he doing that? And anyway, James wasn't normally the kind of person strangers talked to. Satch was that kind of person. That's how James should have known, long ago, that some of what he saw and heard wasn't there.

But now, there was the kid's mouth moving and it seemed like the light tenor voice, the "Mercy!" and "Is she walking back to me?" came from him. As he got close, the kid, swathed in black from toque and

hoodie to tennis shoes, tapped at his own ears, pulled out an earbud and said, "Your iPod? What's on it?"

"Oh." James stopped. "I...I don't have one. Just my brain."

The kid, maybe twenties, nodded a broad brown face under the straight line of his toque. "Cool. The brain's the biggest iPod there is." He half-shut his eyes and smiled at James. Pearly white. No snicker. He stood, swaying, while James smiled back, wondering what to say.

Then the kid broke into a kind of a dance, which was maybe part stagger, and James backed up, ready to walk around him toward the mall. "No," he thought, "that's not right," and forced himself to move closer, to take the kid's arm. "How long till your bus?" he asked, and the kid just shrugged. James looked up and down the street. He disliked the bus because the routes were so sparse and inconvenient, and buses just showed up whenever they felt like it, and it took you an hour or more to get anywhere, and this morning of all mornings he couldn't count on the bus. But the kid didn't look very good in spite of his smile, eyes still half-closed, so James stood with him and tapped his finger for a few minutes. Finally, a bus approached, and when the kid eventually stumbled up its stairs, he called out "Have a nice day!" like the tellers always said at the bank, before the bus's big jaws closed behind the kid and it drifted away, like Monty Glenn had, like Dennis did sometimes.

"Mercy," James heard Roy Orbison say. James hoped he could keep *Pretty Woman* for a while.

* * *

A long angled stretch, over the Wal-Mart parking lot to Fort William Road and, after that, the last straight part before Sears. Nothing in his head, not the pretty woman and not the shark and not the *heh heh heh*, which was good, that was okay and so was he.

Just another kilometer, the pavement under his feet. And the occasional, inevitable litter. Mostly paper and fast-food trash and all the cigarette butts, kisses cast aside. He kept walking. Picking up trash would sure be a big job, one that never ended.

In the gutter ahead, he saw a lump that turned out, as he got closer, to be a work glove, stained black with dirt or oil or just being driven on, he wasn't sure. And just the one glove. It bothered him a little. He liked gloves because they came in pairs; there were always two. Here, there was just one. It did cross his mind to wonder if it was left there on purpose for him to find, as a kind of message. A message about holding hands, a hand up, put your hand in the hand of the man. The crimson loomed behind him for a few steps and he breathed it away, breathed away all the hands, and left the glove behind, just the one glove alone.

Then in the dusty weeds to the right of the sidewalk he saw a running shoe, ripped and faded, the black bleached out to silver-gray. So that was also a one, and the two ones gave him two, and that was balanced. Relief

flooded him. It had worked out. It had all worked out okay, like today was going to work out okay.

He still had to be wary. He couldn't always be sure. So many things had seemed like they were okay and they had turned out to be not okay. It helped when things came in pairs. Plus, he'd always checked on things, to be safe—his mother had wanted him to be responsible, so at first he checked for her, and after she was gone and his dad was mostly drunk, checking twice on things saved them from stove burners left on overnight, and worse.

So then, when the men on his shift at the mill all started getting sick, he checked on that, of course he checked! And there was a pattern to it. And the pattern meant cancer. What else could it be? It made perfect sense, though the doctors that the mill sent him to told him different. They started off saying it patiently and later had said it more firmly, in a way that scared him a little, like they didn't like him for no good reason that James could see. He was only pointing out the truth, and lots of other people agreed with him and told him so. He could hear people talking all around him. And then the doctors and the mill put him on probation and wouldn't let him work. So when Satch took him to see a different doctor, a psychiatrist, James just couldn't believe it. Because the other thing, the pattern and the cancer, the balance of it all—it *all made sense*.

He felt it a little again at that moment on the sidewalk, the *rightness*, inarguable and firm and solid as it had been back then. Although he knew better now, mostly, sometimes that *right* feeling still fooled him. It got him in trouble a couple of times, even after he hadn't flown off any bridge. He still drove then, and he would park on broad neighbourhood streets at seven in the morning, sipping a cup of coffee, to watch people go to work and school. How did they do it? He didn't know. When he was younger, in school himself and at the mill, he'd seen other people every day. He knew what regular life was like. But then the doctors didn't let him work anymore, and he didn't see people and he just didn't know.

That was all he'd been doing, watching regular life, because lots of people were telling him he didn't really know how to live right, that's why Louise had left, that's why he'd been sent home from the mill, and he should watch other people to see. It was the *right* thing to do; the people talking to him said so. And then Satch told him he couldn't watch anymore, and made him sell his car. Which had helped pay bills for a while. And then the doctors told him again that what he heard was just noise, not real people, not *right*.

Mostly the noise and voices were gone, and so now he did know better. He knew that *right* sometimes wasn't. (*But sometimes it was*, he reminded himself, *like what he was doing today, that was right*.) He knew how not to think about it. He'd just look at the things around him, be glad of the running shoe and the glove, the two for balance. He'd had a fine

morning, his half-pill, his plan, his day. He'd think about this walk, which he'd planned. He'd taken long last bike rides. His bike had been just lovely. The frame blue like the lake and sky, the seat padded, and handlebars that let him leave his arms open, like he could hug the breeze. Oh, how he missed it. But no. He'd had to sacrifice it. He'd thought this through.

It had been a longer morning than he'd envisioned, though, back in his room, during the planning. But he wasn't really tired, not in his legs, though maybe a little bit tired inside. He had to admit that the sun was a little less beautiful, like she was shining for anybody and everybody, anyone in a car or walking along or in a bus or truck. James felt that the sun was maybe telling him he wasn't to think he was anybody special. Special or not, he was grateful for her company. And in the noisy traffic on the ugly stretch of road, the breeze came by from time to time, and the sun and the breeze, the two were enough. *Enough is as good as a feast*, his mother had always said. It had to be, sometimes.

The trip had been faster on his bike. These long stretches in the flat of Intercity, the space between the two cities, Port Arthur and Fort William—here, not that long ago, they used to make you get off a streetcar and get on another, out of sheer meanness. Back then, in high school, all this had been swamp, with the one road named Fort William Road because that's where it went, but who'd want to go to Fort William?

After amalgamation this part slowly turned into an everyman's land, with businesses of all different kinds on one side of the road and the railroad tracks cowering behind weeds on the other and finally snaking away. Over the years, the mall went in, and now new big box stores. Barbara, who had gone back to clerk in the city's parks department after their kids had grown up some, had started talking a lot about zoning and how there wasn't any. Satch argued with her a little but mostly just grinned when she got worked up. James didn't really understand all of what she said, so he had kept silent, grateful for the supper invitations and the time with someone's family, even when everything seemed to be happening to someone else.

Recently, James had been in the habit of riding his bike all the way to the mall a couple of days a week. *Recently* meaning for the past twenty-five years, since he'd started riding his bike all the time. He went to the mall because that's where all the roads suddenly went, so he had followed them there. But not into Fort William proper. He was a Port Arthur boy, never mind forty-plus years of amalgamation. And he hardly ever went into the mall itself—no point, all the things he couldn't afford and didn't need and couldn't keep in his small apartment. In fact, he couldn't remember the last time he had gone into the mall, but then one day after Satch had seen Louise, James had also gone in and had also seen Louise, and had been thinking, thinking ever since. Thinking that maybe he could

do more, maybe even leave Port Arthur for Fort William.

Walking had confirmed what he'd remembered from high school: they were two very different small towns, before they'd become one. He'd grown up in Port Arthur. Fort William had been a completely different small town, as different as night from day. They could have been hundreds of kilometres apart. In fact, they still were, in James's mind, in spite of the buildings between them, the government forcing them together into the one city. He wondered if Satch's kids, Elliott and Kimberly, were Port Arthur kids too, or if they even cared.

* * *

It was a long way to walk. Longer than he'd thought, for sure. James almost—almost—wished for Satch to reappear in his long white car, though it would ruin everything if he did. But James didn't really wish it. He was okay. He could see the mall for a long time as he walked, and as it grew ahead of him, his spirits recovered and his fatigue faded. He practically floated across the parking lot toward Sears. He grinned at himself in the mirrored glass of the outside door. He stopped in the store washroom to run a comb through his hair. Then he allowed himself his routine: two checks of his fly zipper (up and up), two taps to the shirt pocket, two minutes washing his hands, two paper towels, twice. He nodded at himself in the mirror over the sink and grinned. He unzipped his jacket but left it on. Casual. Inhale, exhale.

He headed toward the doors into the mall proper, winding through racks of clothing and the cosmetic counters, embarrassed to look at the giant pictures of women wearing outlandish makeup, wishing for a different route into the mall. The girls behind the counters, younger than Satch's Kimmie, looked just like clones of all the women he couldn't tell apart, the ones on the magazine covers at the grocery store checkout tills, the women with their perfect smiles, and something called a baby daddy, and their love triangles.

Finally he was free of all the faces and into the mall. He strolled its length to the food court. Lots of time. The clock on the wall said 10:17. A few old guys huddled over coffee, baseball caps on the table with their cups. They'd long been grey in face and hair, while James had only a sprinkling of greys through the wavy dark auburn hair at his temples. At a different table, James saw a woman and looked carefully at her, a mom and a toddler in a stroller.

James didn't slow, walked all the way down to the Zellers before circling back to the food court. A few women about his age, wearing sleek black outfits, sped past. Those must be the mall-walkers Satch had talked about. Satch had tried it awhile after Barb had left him. His motive, being Satch, had been to meet women, which he did, also being Satch. And then they nagged him about his eating habits and his weight, so he stopped doing the mall-walking. James remembered laughing when Satch

told him about it, which was okay, because Satch told him for no other reason than to make him laugh. James felt pretty good now, thinking about it.

He passed the food court again and then dawdled in front of the Coles window to look at the books. He admired the bestsellers in the window, the hardbacks, as much as \$35 each. He tapped his finger inside his jacket pocket.

* * *

When the chance came, he was surprised. He had thought he was ready. But her voice surprised him, still.

“James? How nice to see you here again!”

“Well, Louise! Hello there. Lucky to run into you.” James laughed from sheer pleasure but made sure he stopped in time so he could say the next thing. “Can we get coffee? Do you have time?” He risked a glance at her face and caught her smile, her green eyes peering at him underneath long strands of brownish hair, her nod.

He couldn’t think of anything else to say while they found a spot at a table, and she stayed silent, too, except for saying “black with two sugars,” but when he came back with coffee, she made it easier.

“This is nice, to stop for a few minutes. I’m just on my way to work. Eleven to five today.”

“You getting plenty of hours?”

“About all I can stand to work. My strength is slow to come back. The accident was over two years ago, now. But I found a chiropractor here who helps.” She put a hand to her hip and slightly arched her back, and in that movement, James could see her again, some forty years before, her eyes half-closed. He held his breath. Then she relaxed and said, her voice thin, “It never seems to go away completely, though.”

James was afraid she would start crying, and he wouldn’t know at all what to do. He finally found something to say. “No, I guess it wouldn’t go away. I guess some things just stay with you.” He hoped it was the right thing. Was enough.

She blinked and stretched out her hand to lay it on his jacket-covered arm. “You’re right.” She squeezed his arm—James wished he had taken off his jacket so he could feel the heat of her hand on his forearm through his cloth shirt—and let go before James could touch her hand as it lay there. She sat back. “So, James.” She smiled as if waiting.

He had been practicing but still found it hard to begin. He started safely. “How are your folks doing?”

She shrugged. “About the same. Oh, look at these.” She pulled a couple of 5 X 7 prints out of a manila envelope in her purse and slid them across the table. “I’m getting frames for them today, to put up in their room.” James saw a younger Louise and a girl, could be high school or college maybe, and Louise smiled. “That’s me and Angela, my angel girl,

oh, fifteen or so years ago.” She took a quick breath and swallowed before pointing at the other one. “And this one is Angela and her Chantal. Chantal was here visiting two weeks ago. We ran into Satch. Maybe he told you.”

Something shifted in her voice then, and James looked up at her face to see what she meant, but her face was turned slightly, hidden from him. She might have started talking again, saying other things, but James stopped trying to listen and just looked at the photos—the red-gold hair above blue eyes, the faces broad through the freckled cheekbones angling down to a small chin. He looked at olive-skinned Louise, who had fallen silent, her green eyes searching out his blue ones. It all might be true. Or not. There was a pattern, but was it a real pattern? And then, a startling thought: *Did it matter if it was true? What did it matter?*

James closed his eyes against the thought and opened them again to say the cautious thing. Not untrue, just not all of the truth. “They look just like you.” He swallowed the word *beautiful* and added, “Very nice pictures.” Both of them. Two, and then he heard *a time or two, a time or two, seems pretty spry, heh heh heh*, and he closed off his ears, though it was hard to close the ears to the inside of his own head. He blinked several times.

His ears were closed, but her voice, flat, broke through. Her tone made the words not matter: “Yeah. Thank you.” She slid the photos back into her purse and glanced at the clock high up on the wall over the fast-food counters.

James was aware of people, he could see a tall black-clad figure slowly swaying out of the corner of his eye, he did not want to hear the *heh heh heh*, so he said quickly, “Louise, I...I was wondering.” Again, he found her eyes, which were no longer smiling at him but were at least looking, and he licked his lips. “It’s just...I’ve been thinking.” *Be active*, his mother said in his ear. He looked at his interlaced fingers on the table and let it all out in a rush. “I know some of what you’ve been through, not everything...my parents are gone, and I know that’s ahead of you. And I don’t have anyone, and maybe that’s how it feels to you, with—with your daughter and your—your granddaughter not here. I’m not...my...my health is not so good in some ways, you know, and I don’t have much...money or things. Not much at all. But between us, we’d have more. And I know...I think...I wasn’t good to you before, I was not careful, and I’m sorry. But I didn’t know, I really didn’t. And then...well, now...” He let out a sigh and shook his head, unsure how far he’d talked, where he had arrived, so circled back. “My health, I guess you know. I fell apart. But it’s better now, it is, and I’m doing well.” His hands were shaking and he didn’t want to look up.

“Oh, James.” Louise’s voice was soft. He couldn’t tell whether it was pity or tears or something better, and he couldn’t look, not yet. So he talked more, out loud, so he could finally arrive at the place where

everything was all okay, back at home.

“Before, when I saw you here at the mall, you said money was tight, and I know you’re hurt, with your back and all.” He saw her again, hand on her hip, back arched, and stopped before he got off track, dragged himself back to what he wanted to say. “Louise, I sold my best bike. Here.” He pulled the bills out of his shirt pocket and laid the crisp folds on the top of the table between them. “That’s \$700. It’s...I know it’s nothing, really. Probably not enough.” *Which can be as good as a feast*, his mother reminded him, but James ignored her. “I know it’s not even your rent, maybe. But...I didn’t know, I thought you might need it. Could use it. I want to help, I want us to....”

Then he risked a glance at her. She was crying silently and beautifully, her eyes on the folded bills. He looked down at them, too, and said the only thing he knew for sure, true or not true, balanced or not, whether today would end in one or two. “I’m sorry. I want...I don’t know. For it to all be okay. For us to...be okay.”

They sat in silence. James tapped his index finger on his leg, steadying himself in this little canoe that he hoped was taking him to his happily ever after. For the first time in a month, he thought beyond this moment, to the *after* that might not be happy, to the long walk that might lie ahead.

HELEN DEACHMAN is the author of *Letters to Muriel: A Search for Kin*. She hails from Ottawa.

Bittersweet

Helen Deachman

“Spanish Civil War monument unveiled:
Governor-General lauds idealism of members
of famed Mackenzie-Papineau Battalion.”

—*The Ottawa Citizen*, Oct. 21, 2001

THE LETTER the postman handed me that long-ago morning was tattered and faded—the writing scarcely legible, yet the name and address were mine.

I knew it was Einar’s writing, the young Finn I’d met before he went to Spain. Was he still alive then, after all this time? My hands shaking, I read the words but they scarcely registered. Simply a jumble.

Months had gone by, and I’d never fully given up hope. But eventually I’d had to face reality. Other volunteers, defeated and haggard, had returned home, but not Einar. His parents had received no word. I knew nothing of his friends. And living here in this town so far from everywhere, I had no idea where to look or whom to ask. There were no official lists. The government seemed to be treating these men who’d gone to fight Franco as non-persons.

I opened the letter, written from France in October 1938.

Dear Maggie,

We are still here in France. No way to get home. We did all we could, but the war is lost. Germany and Italy gave Franco what help he needed. Britain and France, the United States and Canada, none. We had no chance.

Now we wait. The C.P.R. wants \$10,000 to sail us home. 300 of us. A joke! None of us with a cent. If we are still here in three days, the French say they will move us to the camps. I feel no hope, but in my head I am home to you.

P.S. I hear talk this morning help may come. A Canadian reporter in London has maybe found some money. A British member of parliament will maybe

donate half of what we need. The reporter hopes
someone else the rest.
Much love from me,
Einar

It was during the late thirties when I was living with Mother that I first met Einar. Mother did not approve. "Isn't he a Finn?" she asked icily. In this small northern Ontario town, most of us of British stock assumed we were superior to these recent European immigrants; 'we were us' and 'they were them'. 'They' being Ukrainians, Scandinavians, Austrians, Poles, Finns and Italians. We knew almost nothing about them. What we didn't know, we imagined.

We didn't mingle with the newcomers. They worked in the bush camps, the sawmills, the coal docks, or on road gangs. Many, especially the women, spoke little English. Once or twice a year when our shoes needed repair, we took them to the gentle Nick Los over on Van Norman Street. For an occasional treat we walked down to Secord Street and bought a loaf of melt-in-your mouth rye bread from the Kivela Bakery. Mother, if she needed a taxi, called Oikonen's.

We all knew the Finn Hall down on Bay Street was a gathering place for bush workers when they came to town: lumber and sawmill workers, other Wobblies. Radicals. A tough bunch, everyone knew. Years afterwards, of course, the Finn Hall's Hoito became *de rigueur* for Sunday morning breakfasts. Even for tourists. Lineups out the door and down the street. But that was later.

Mother's feelings about Einar didn't soften. When his first letter came, I'd been skating with Jenny and Sally down at the Co-op Dairy rink with its ice made from leftover skim milk. A night that was cold and crisp, the sky full of stars, and me higher than the moon as I walked home. That feeling didn't last. As I opened the front door, Mother was waiting in the front hall waving a letter at me. "Just who do you know in Toronto?" she demanded angrily.

"Don't you remember?" I reminded her. "I told you about Einar. He's on his way to Spain."

"A Finlander!" she exploded. "Where did you meet him? He's a Communist! Why did you give him your address? You will not answer his letter!"

Tight-lipped, I snatched the envelope from her hand and went to my room. She stormed off to the kitchen, pointedly banging the pots.

She needn't have worried. It was far from a love letter. Simply his impressions of Toronto: how people there seemed more proper than those back home. No one carrying a lunch pail. He described his enlistment for Spain at the Seamen's Union Hall on Spadina Avenue; meeting up with a couple of buddies he'd known when he worked in the bush camp; finding

a reliable person to sign his passport, a passport that included a warning forbidding travel to Spain. That certainly would have alarmed Mother. What he was doing was illegal.

His ship was to leave from Montreal, a city he seemed to fall in love with. Mother, who instinctively disapproved of this French, Catholic Gomorrah, would have been aghast at his enchantment. The city's contrasts excited him: its prosperous mansions high up on the ridge overlooking the working-class neighbourhood that edged the railway tracks below; the bustle and noise of downtown traffic, gradually giving way to the quiet serenity of the wooded Mount Royal. The gray stone architecture—wrought-iron railings leading up to second floor flats, or seductively down a few steps into secluded grotto-like cafés; the old-time calèches drawn by horses clip-clopping along midst the rest of the traffic. Some street signs in English, others in French.

Sightseeing along Sherbrooke Street near the university, Einar had met a friendly “bon homme,” time on his hands, eager to talk.

“I don’t see you before,” the fellow began, and when he heard Einar was on his way to Spain, he couldn’t wait to describe the rally he’d attended earlier that week in the huge protestant church down on Dorchester Street.

“*L’invité*, speaker, you say? is André Malraux. You know the guy is writer from France, *très passioné, tu sais*, he tell us about Spain. Franco. The takeover, you say? *Coup d’état. Illégal!* He tell us about Spanish people, civilians, bombing! Civilians! People poor, worse like us. *Its font rien!* Nothing! Killed by bombs! Franco and Hitler.”

He stopped. Then started to laugh.

“But Premier Duplessis, you know? He is *drôle*, you say? Joke on Duplessis. When he hear about meeting in arena, he cancel it. He know Malraux. What he will say. So he cancel arena. *Mais*, meeting people act quick. *Très vite*. Move meeting to big church on Dorchester. Church is packed. To the doors. I am there!” And he laughed again. “Duplessis ’as egg on ’is face. That is how you say?” And off he went, still chuckling.

I hadn’t told Mother how I’d met Einar. I think I was afraid that talking about him would destroy my image of him—like a dream that dissolves in the telling. Besides, I was trying to avoid a storm. Mother’s feelings were clear. She disapproved. She knew nothing about his family. Didn’t want to know. He was foreign.

It was November, late afternoon. I can still see the whiteness of twilight in the air. There I was, absent-mindedly walking up the path of leafless poplars in Waverly Park when I stumbled, and my library books went flying. A tall, gangly, blonde fellow caught up with me, and without a word, helped me to my feet, gathered up my books and began walking alongside me.

There was nothing suave about him, but he wasn’t tongue-tied like I

was. A little awkward, he began asking me questions about myself. I told him I loved reading, listening to music, especially my new Louis Armstrong, *St. Louis Blues*, that I'd just bought. He interrupted and asked me if I'd been reading about Spain. "Spain?" I wondered. "Why Spain?" But before I could ask, he told me he was planning to go there. I assumed he meant on a holiday.

We met a few times after that. Once at a late supper at the Arthur Café, and while we ate our fish and chips, he told me about his family. His father coming from Helsinki in the late 1920s, and his mother, with Einar and his sister Hilka, a year later. How his mother's spirits sank as the train rumbled its endless way through the wilderness of northern Ontario: nothing but trees, rock, water; trees, rock water. Her first encounter with the town: the clatter of breaking glass—her grandmother's fragile china—as the baggageman hurled her trunk onto the platform. The muddy streets, with here and there a board sidewalk. The rudimentary house that awaited her—with its thin walls and rough flooring, anything but welcoming. And, worst of all, no indoor toilet, no running water. Hoards of blackflies and mosquitoes. She'd held back her tears; tried not to think of Helsinki, with its parks, its coffee houses, its lively theatre. Her childhood friends. To find herself with so little English in a foreign place so far from home, where people sounded rough and discourteous. She felt lost. Abandoned.

I was relaxed with Einar. His straightforward manner, his warmth, even his casual acceptance of his difference made him seem grounded. I didn't want to let him know, I couldn't—I was too shy—but he was beginning to grow on me. Not that I would have admitted such a thing, except to myself.

But Spain still bothered me! I needed to know more, and I kept searching the *Chronicle* for news. At first there were graphic photographs of the horrific bombing of Spanish civilians in Guernica, but later reports became scornful: 'unpatriotic ragtag idlers defying the law' and other disparaging remarks. Only one tiny item of protest, hidden in the back pages: a local lumber union protesting the government's ban on travel to Spain. I had only a vague idea what that meant. Presumably a reference to the passport warning: **Not Valid for Travel to Spain**. But what was wrong with support for the Spanish government? It was all very confusing. I felt like a child, hearing fragments, unable to sort it all out.

Einar's next letter came from Spain. Sometime in February. Reading it, I could hear his soft, lilting accent.

My dear Meg,

We are in Spain at last. I have so much to tell you.

At the end of our crossing, the ship tied up at Le Havre. Customs checked our passports and took our

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\$30 fee to enter. They knew we are not tourists heading to the Paris Exposition like we were told to say, and they stopped asking where we were headed. Just to look at Sammy's cardboard suitcase—only socks and underwear—but they let us pass.

Christmas Eve we headed south, and the next day was a village (how to spell the name) where church ladies made us dinner. Soup, roast duck, potatoes, apple pie. We all talked at once: Norvege, Dane, Finnis, Czeck, and thirteen Canadians. Impossible to understand, but we use our hands. After dinner a movie—*Rose Marie*—Nelson Eddy and Jeanette MacDonald. All us Canadians, we laugh at the freezing north, looks so romantic.

It was late when we boarded the bus for Pyrenees mountains. Riding in darkness I felt alone. Homesick. I thought about Christmas when I was a boy. Me and my sister pulling the toboggan to the end of our street, looking for a tree. Ones far away look just right, but up close, skinny and bare. We hurry home, my hands and feet are like ice.

At night, we light candles on the tree, like in Helsinki. Church at midnight, then home and open presents. Late in the night, I cannot sleep. Out the window I watch huge snowflakes floating down.

Our steep climb up mountain pass begins after midnight in snowstorm. Up 9,000 feet they tell us, single file, narrow path. No warm boots, only thin shoes and socks, flimsy jackets. No talking, the enemy can be close. One huge man trying to keep up, sinking in deep snow. He begs us to leave him but we can not. We found rope, and drag him behind.

At last the top. Then the going down, steep, narrow, slippery, nothing to hold to. Worse almost to climbing.

At the bottom a shack. Two Spanish soldiers come out, smiling, give us cigarettes and coffee, strong, like Finns make. We want to stay but must keep on moving.

Love Einar

P.S. I send you a hug. A friendly bear hug. Please write. I think you can use this address.

Canadians in Spain
Seamen's Union Hall
Spadina Ave. Toronto, Ont.

Whenever a letter came I was excited, but between times I felt flat. Einar didn't write often. I did all the usual things: skating, skiing, reading, working at Lowry's Stationery, but it wasn't the same. Thinking about Einar, I'd compare him to the boys at school. They seemed young and boring now, no sense of adventure. I couldn't imagine them going to Spain. Einar was an odd mix: earnest, adventurous, shy, and funny. Made me laugh when he gently poked fun at me, never made me feel stupid. He seemed to know what was going on in the world.

When his family moved to Lappe, a few miles from town, Einar came in to go to Tech, but stayed only a year or two. He was older than his classmates, restless to be working. He found a job in the bush camp.

Then he heard about Franco and Spain, and knew he had to help out. But why, I wasn't sure. A longing for adventure? Knowing Einar, I think it was his innate sense of fairness, his vision of what things could be like. He had listened as a child to his father's dreams of a new, more just Finnish society, so for him, the Spanish Republicans' plans to break up the huge estates and divide the land among the peasants did not seem such a radical idea. It was the right thing to do.

I felt bereft when he left. Would I hear from him? See him again? In the meantime I still had to learn about this war he talked about. Franco. Republicans. The ban on travel to Spain. What was it all about?

Late one afternoon when I'd come home from work early, Mother, all out of breath, burst through the front door, slamming it behind her. She'd been to visit our minister, to ask what he thought about Einar, that 'foreign fellow'. She couldn't get home fast enough to tell me Rev. McCann's warnings. "He was most emphatic," Mother announced. "It is illegal for Canadians to take part in the Spanish conflict!" Inwardly I fumed, but I had no response.

Mr. Robinson was my funny, wise history teacher. Band leader as well. In my final year at school, I'd asked him if I could play trumpet in the school band instead of piano for the school choir. His serious demeanour had turned mischievous. "I wish I'd known earlier," he said regretfully. "All the trumpets have been taken, but I do have a tuba. How about trying it out?" He could see, of course, that I was a mere five feet tall, that I would have to parade with that cumbersome horn. But I was game. I could forget the piano. And despite his mischief, I knew he could be serious. He was interested in politics, in what was going on in the world, not just someone who followed the crowd. He would take me seriously.

Still, I was a little hesitant about knocking on his classroom door, appearing out of the blue. But I had to overcome my ignorance about the war. And though I hated to admit it, I was a little apprehensive about what Einar was doing. Of course, there was a conflict between Einar's decision and the law, but was he morally wrong to defy the law?

Being there again in my old third-floor classroom was reassuring: out the window the same day-dreamy view of the bay guarded by the Sleeping Giant. The same Cadbury's Map of the World rolled down over the blackboard, and the framed print of Wolfe's men scaling the ramparts of Québec. And just as I knew he would, Mr. Robinson listened carefully as I told him how muddled I felt.

He was his usual wry, measured self. Sympathetic. He didn't know Mother, but he understood her fear, knew that perhaps it stemmed from 'a little knowledge'. He wasn't surprised at all by the misconceptions about the war. Most newspapers, including ours, gave only one side of the story. The propaganda was doing its work.

"The war in Spain is hard to sort out," Mr. Robinson explained. "It didn't develop overnight. The last straw was when General Franco returned to Spain from Morocco and overthrew the government. A government," he added, "that had been elected by the Spanish people. Many countries, including Britain, the United States, and Canada, chose to remain neutral. That's when over a thousand Canadians, many of them out of work or recent immigrants, defied the law, and along with volunteers from several other countries, went to Spain."

He paused.

"Did they believe in democracy? Or were they seeking adventure? Probably both. Whatever their reasons, they knew the Spanish government needed help. Not only did Franco have the backing of the wealthy landowners and the Catholic Church, but he was receiving huge loans, planes and weapons from Hitler and Mussolini."

As he stopped to light his pipe, I told Mr. Robinson about a conversation I'd overheard after church a few weeks before. Our family physician, Dr. McKibbin, had just returned from a visit to Germany with the news that Canadians had nothing to fear from Hitler. The German people liked and trusted him, and were willing to do his bidding. And even though they resented the exorbitant reparations payments the British allies had forced on them after the Great War, Dr. McKibbin was certain the Germans were reasonable people.

Mr. Robinson smiled wryly at that.

"Of course he would say that. I know McKibbin and his views on communism. He'd be sure to approve of Mackenzie King's ban on travel to Spain."

He appeared lost in thought for a moment or two, and then he continued. "Listen. Here are a couple of examples of what our government is afraid of. Recently, the Spanish government released 30,000 political prisoners. Pretty scary, right? Besides that, it announced that henceforth tenant farmers would be rent-free, and that in order to distribute the land more fairly, the government would break up the huge estates owned by powerful landlords."

He stopped and let me absorb all this. Gradually I began to see why Britain, the United States, and Canada were so worried. In their eyes this Robin Hood idea of taking land from the wealthy landowners and giving it to the landless peasants amounted to communism. What if such an idea spread to their own countries?

I came away feeling relieved. A cloud had lifted. I had a much clearer sense of what was happening. Mr. Robinson hadn't made me feel stupid. He hadn't denounced Einar. He even seemed sad and a little angry that Canada's government had remained neutral when Hitler and Mussolini were anything but. Mr. Robinson had seen a lot—had served in the Great War—I guess nothing surprised him.

I left, more confident than I'd felt for a long time. Like a new person. After church the next Sunday, when Mr. McCann shook hands with me and said in an undertone, "I hope you have taken to heart my warning," I knew exactly what he meant. Einar going to Spain illegally. But this time I was ready. Mimicking his reverent tone, I solemnly recited that reassuring verse from the New Testament: "Render unto God the things that are God's." No longer would I be intimidated.

Weeks later, another letter came from Einar. This time I whooped for joy, waved it in the air, childishly taunting Mother, daring her to react. To my surprise, I waited in vain. No rebuke followed. I felt a huge relief! I read it aloud to Mother.

May 5, 1937

Dear Margareta (your name in Finn. Do you like it?)
Your letter arrived at last! Can you see us here when mail comes in? All crowding around, short fellows trying to see over tall ones, waiting to hear our names.

You want to know what it is like here. To hear about my comrades. I never met anyone like Tony. He lives in New York. Speaks Spanish. A guy who reads books. He worked in a cigar factory in Florida and they paid him to read to the workers. He knows about people like Cervantes and Tolstoy and Marx. Have you read them? Tony knows many stories, and when there is time, we sit around listening to them.

Some days it is like war disappears. We travelled in countryside of orange trees and olive and grape vines. Villages where churches and castles seem like growing out of mountainside. Where only sign of war is Spanish women singing the *Internationale*. ('Change will not come from above!' Tony tells us.) They hold up jugs of wine, call to us *bebid, por favor*, please drink. We are like sons and brothers. A young man and his girl stand

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under a huge tree, fists in air to cheer us on our way.
Children call to us, *Salud! A la Frente.*

In one of his letters Einar talked about how resourceful some of the Finns are, finding a stone building on a farm they had taken, repairing the stonework, fixing up a stove that was inside, and transforming it into a sauna. Everyone cheered.

In another letter he wrote about a buddy who'd escaped one of Franco's ghastly prisons, a stinking black, watery dungeon full of rats and filthy ooze, where every day he'd been interrogated and beaten by Germans. Franco's allies.

Still, despite the horror, the prisoners put their spare time to good use: carving chess men from bread or wood or soap. Making cards to play bridge. Organizing classes in Russian, Spanish, German and Greek; teaching each other math, algebra, electricity and journalism. They formed a choir.

I loved his letters. He seemed in good spirits. But later, the tone changed. No longer light-hearted, he sounded despondent.

(I think it is August)

Dear Maggie,

For weeks rain and more rain. Still we march and march on and on, soaked through our skin. There is no sense. We are all so tired. No billeting in villages, our French commissar shouts. If we want shelter we must take the town of ***. He says we are taking 'evasive action' against air bombardment. What does that mean? He is not a real person. All the time shouting, calling us cowards! Why am I here? I do not feel I am myself.

Yes, always complaints. About food. Never changes: lentils, bread, baclava, garbanzos. I dream of Kivela rye bread.

And lice. In every crack. Crawling in our socks, in our shirts, in our trousers. Every place on our bodies. And typhus. Spread by lice. I was sick for days. Still weak.

Worst is how they treat us. Harsh punishings for small misbehaving. We are volunteers, remember? but we are thrown into dungeons by our own officers. Last week I can not believe. Two men sent out in the night to dig trenches in no man's land. Only one came back. You understand? You call it justice?

Our new commissar will maybe change how things go. Last night he ordered us to sleep in barns near the

village where we can stay warm and dry. I want to sleep
and sleep and never wake up.
Much love to you.

Einar's last letter from Spain has disappeared. I tried to put it out of my mind. He sounded confused, frightened, completely unlike the young Einar, so eager to leave for Spain to fight Franco. I could feel his terror—fighting on unknown ground with out-of-date, useless weapons. Terrified and helpless under enemy bombardment. The drone of planes circling overhead; bombs exploding; the sharp retort of rifle fire, knowing the next bullet could be fatal. The screams of the wounded, calling out for their mothers. I knew his faith in the cause had been shaken.

And now this letter. Waiting in France to come home. I look again at the envelope. The right address. But the word 'unknown' in that feathery handwriting: Where did that come from? I've always lived here, in this same house. Who could have written it? Only one determined person.

I read the letter again. Written from France. He'd been on his way home. With 300 others. But no money for passage. Nothing. Threatened with confinement in the camps. Then a glimmer of hope. Money might be found. What had happened?

I knew some of the men had returned to Canada. Unheralded, of course. They were the 'undersirables' who had broken the law. Subversives. Criminals. Only the Mounties were interested.

I'd heard that a couple of the men who'd returned were living somewhere on Hilldale Road, on the edge of town, and I went to see them. No, they didn't know Einar, but they did know Ed Rynnanen and Walter Elomaki, the two men Einar had run into when he'd signed up for Spain at the Seamen's Hall in Toronto. They were almost sure that Rynnanen had returned home to Sunshine.

Rynnanen's face fell when I asked about Einar. The last time he'd seen him was on the ship coming home. Einar hadn't seemed well. "The way he acted," said Rynnanen. "Didn't answer when I spoke to him. Just stared."

He told me the returned men had split up in Toronto. I made up my mind to go there. I knew Mother would do anything to stop me, but I wouldn't give her a chance. I said not a word, bought my ticket, and boarded the train for Toronto.

Toronto Western was the hospital closest to Spadina Avenue and the Seamen's Union Hall, and I went there first. They had no recollection of Einar. "Why not try the Yonge Street Mission? He might have eaten a meal or two there."

The man in charge seemed sympathetic. He looked me over carefully, then shook his head. I came away empty-handed.

A bar close by on Queen St. W. was crowded at four in the afternoon. Smoky and noisy. A congestion of languages came from every table in the room. Except one. In the far corner, I noticed a group of four or five men, sipping their beer, saying nothing. Finns, maybe? Not exactly morose. No, they didn't know Einar. But they had run into someone who could fit his description. "You might find him around Dundas Street. In a bar or a pool hall."

By the time I tried the third pool hall, I no longer felt self-conscious. No thick cloud of smoke, no habitués standing around; in fact there were only two men. I knew at once I'd found Einar. He was stooped and haggard.

Neither one looked up. I waited till their game was over.

"Einar!" was all I said. Startled at first, he turned to me, but his eyes were vacant. He seemed frightened and he clutched his friend's arm. Then found his voice. "Maggie!"

"Let's go next door for a coffee. A Finn coffee," I added, as playfully as I could manage.

We sat facing each other. Silent. How to begin? I studied his face as he groped for words.

"I couldn't, Maggie. I couldn't go back. I can't go back. Too much has happened. You think you can help, but you're wrong. I won't go back. I don't want anyone to see me. I don't want my family to see me. I didn't want you to see me."

He stood up. "I loved you, Maggie. But now it's too late." Wiping a tear, he lurched a little as he made his way to the door.

I stood there, dazed, confused, a jumble of grief, bitterness, resentment. I watched until he disappeared.

So this was Spain. Without the romance.

The sky was beginning to darken. I began to walk.

ERNEST HEKKANEN is editor-in-chief of *The New Orphic Review*. The following story comes from a collection that will bear the same title.

I Seem to Recall This

Ernest Hekkanen

YOU KNOW HOW towns linger beside highways and never seem to change, except that the houses go unpainted, storefronts close and never reopen, or businesses burn down to their basements and the yawning pits get fenced off so pedestrians won't fall in—well, that's the sort of place that Hank and I once called home: Celwood.

Celwood languishes beside Valhalla Lake, on the rolling, wooded eastern shore, not the sharply rising western shore, where the Granite Teeth of the Old Ones surge skyward out of forested slopes at the base. Pine-beetle kill and a subsequent forest fire devastated the forest industry fifteen years ago, and now where the lumber mill once stood, all you can see are crumbling foundations, slabs of concrete being encroached on by scrub cottonwood trees, rusty rails where the Burlington Northern once had a spur line and spongy masses of slowly rotting sawdust that stretch at least two-hundred meters down to the shore of the lake. The once healthy population of 3,500 inhabitants has dwindled to 275, and nearly all of the houses look like empty shells, with For Sale signs out front. However, the townspeople that time has tried to leave behind continue to hope that Celwood will live on; that it will be turned into a retirement village.

Hope is like that. It often defies reality.

I glanced at Hank in the passenger seat. He had missed nearly everything that had passed by outside the windows of my Jeep Cherokee, preferring instead to do sudoku. He had purchased four of the advanced booklets prior to leaving Vancouver for the interior of British Columbia and was now working on the third one. He's become extremely good at solving the number puzzles. It's a habit he picked up while recovering from landmine injuries suffered in Afghanistan, where his lower left leg was blown off nearly up to the knee. Several surgeries had managed to save his right leg, although he now walks with a pronounced hitch in his step. During his many months of rehabilitation, first in Europe, then in Toronto, then in Edmonton, and finally in Vancouver, he passed his time

solving sudoku puzzles. I could, in part, be blamed for enabling him in this pastime, which soon became an obsession, as I was the one who introduced him to the puzzles.

“We’re nearly there,” I told him.

“Great,” he said, without looking up from his booklet.

Once a fairly gregarious fellow, Hank has, in the years since sustaining his war injuries, become a sphinx—a handsome, square-jawed sphinx given to a great deal of silence. It’s as though he has retreated to a place deep within himself and you have to make an appointment if you expect to find him at home. Surprises aren’t recommended. He goes into combat-ready mode, as though every cell in his body is listening for what might happen next.

The Number 6 Highway snakes north through the Selkirk Valley, along the glistening waters of Valhalla Lake. At the turn-off to Celwood, there is a downhill grade, succeeded by a sweeping curve and a steep climb along what is called the Face, which rises escarpment-like out of the lake. A “Trucks Turning” sign, replete with a logging-truck silhouette, cautions drivers to be on the alert for tractor-trailer rigs, despite the fact that very few trucks are now seen along this stretch of road.

I pulled into the left-hand turn lane and swung onto the Celwood Access Road, intentionally taking the turn a little too fast, in hopes that it would force Hank to look up from his sudoku puzzle. The momentum tilted him to the right so his shoulder bumped against the passenger door.

He started, predictably enough.

“What’s up, man? You could’ve tipped this bucket.”

“Sorry. I wanted to beat the car coming the other way.”

“What—and kill us both?”

I glanced at him. There had been no such car coming the other way, but he hadn’t bothered to verify it. “Recognize where we are, Hank?”

He surveyed the S-curve of the paved road. An old Petro Canada gas station, long since abandoned, sits in one of the curves. “Yeah, I seem to recall this. Celwood, ain’t it?”

Hank hasn’t been back to visit Celwood since signing up for the army.

“That’s right. We’re almost home.”

“Some home this is. Next best thing to a grave, if you ask me.”

Hank lives in a bachelor suite in a social housing complex on the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver—which allows him to get by fairly decently on his military and disability pensions. Pick any time of any day of the week, and you can spot at least four or five drunks or crackheads in the street outside the building. That area of town strikes me as being a lot closer to the grave than does Celwood, but I didn’t say that. I preferred not to argue with Hank, although, at one time, we used to do quite a lot of that—back before he had sustained his war injuries.

At thirty-eight, Hank is three years younger than me. He was the

rock'em-sock'em hockey kid and outdoors bush brat, back when Celwood could afford the upkeep of a hockey rink and the forested mountainsides hadn't been razed by fire. The trees are coming back now, but they're little more than seven feet tall, at most.

The Celwood Access Road straightens out on its way down to the four-way stop at Main Street. We weren't going that far. The first cross-street you come to is Cedar, followed by Fir and then Larch. The street sign on Larch has gone missing, and now the locals refer to it as No Name Street. We turned left onto No Name Street and drove past a couple of vacant houses to where my parents live in a two-storey house with a wrap-around porch protected by a sloping roof.

"We're here," I said, switching off the engine.

"Yeah, I can see that, Bro."

My name isn't Bro. It's Doug—short for Douglas. Our last name is Henkel.

* * *

There is something you should know about the Selkirk Valley, the most northerly tip of which terminates at Celwood, "the town that lumber built", as it says on the Welcome-to-Celwood sign. A lot of draft-dodgers from the Vietnam War era relocated to these parts, from the late 1960s to the middle 1970s, purportedly as many as 8,000, although that figure strikes me as inflated. The American expatriates became a left-wing political force in the West Kootenay, and there is a book that documents their contribution, namely Kathleen Rodgers's *Welcome to Resisterville*. My parents hail from that generation. My old man, Alan, came from Chicago. He downplayed his expatriate American identity for many years, although it eventually came to light during a citizenship ceremony that took place down in Nelson, in 1980. My mother, Patricia, is also from the States, although she came to Canada with a different young man, a fellow by the name of Mathew, whom Hank and I have always known as Uncle Matt. He lives further south down the valley, and, no, he's not my real father, if that's what you're thinking.

I opened the door and got out of the Cherokee. Hank had gone back to working on his sudoku puzzle.

"So, are you going to come inside?" I asked him.

"When I've finished with this."

"When will that be?"

"Any time now."

I slammed the door and headed around the tailgate, toward the house. Mom and Dad had already come out onto the covered porch and were grinning like a couple of proud grandparents at the baptism of a grandchild. My father's expression quickly became crestfallen, though.

"Isn't Hank going to come inside?"

"He's preoccupied. Sudoku."

“That damn sudoku. Why did you ever have to introduce him to that?”

“I guess it’s better than checking in with your iPhone all day long, although he does that, too.”

Initially my father had tried to discourage Hank from joining the Canadian armed forces, but that had only made their relationship more volatile. During an argument shortly before Hank shipped off to Canadian Forces Base Edmonton, my brother told my father, “Just because you were too cowardly to enlist back in the 1960s is no reason for me to be the same way.”

My father had chosen to roll with that particular punch. “I’m sorry you have to feel that way,” he responded.

“And I’m sorry *you* have to be the way *you* are,” Hank snapped back.

My parents had flown to each of the hospitals where Hank had spent time in recovery. They had been present after each of his major surgeries, to welcome him back to the world of the living. I have a vivid memory of my mother breaking down in the stairwell of one hospital, sobbing wretchedly. “My God, what they did to my baby. I could murder them myself—in cold blood.”

It was her grief speaking, of course.

“Should we sit out here on the porch or should we go inside?” My father looked at me.

“I suggest we go inside, otherwise he’ll get the idea you’re really anxious to see him, in which case he might stay in the car for the rest of the day.” I gave them an expansive grin. “He doesn’t do transitions very well, from what I’ve come to understand.”

There isn’t anything terribly distinctive about the interior of my parents’ house. It’s all very middle-class and predictably tidy, although I noticed that my mother had replaced the old crocheted doilies on the arms of the sofa and armchairs with new ones. The only other decorative feature worth mentioning is the preserved pelt and head of what had once been a 132-pound cougar, pinned to the wall above the sofa. My old man shot the cougar in the backyard of the house, about a half-dozen years ago, with a .303 rifle, a throat shot, perfectly aimed, when the cougar sprang at him. The cougar had tried to break into the chicken house, but had failed miserably. My parents no longer keep chickens, for obvious reasons.

“How was he on the drive out from Vancouver?” my mother asked.

“A real gem. Quiet, obedient, took a piss at every rest stop.”

Mom screwed up her face. “Why do you find it necessary to be so graphic all the time, Doug?”

“Because I’m a writer. Details make the story.”

My father stands six-foot-four. In his younger years, he was a strapping, square-shouldered man, with wavy, dark hair and a commanding presence. In his sixty-eighth year, he looks somewhat haggard and stooped, although in good overall shape. A fringe of grey has replaced his dark hair. My

mother stands five-foot-nine and is rather plump round the midriff, with long grey hair pulled back in a ponytail, most days. She's always been a peaceful presence in the family. An upright, standing Buddha, as Tennessee Williams might have put it.

"How about a beer?" Dad suggested.

"Sure, I could use one."

The large living room window looks out onto the porch and the front yard, where a large walnut tree occupies the south corner. My parents have three hazelnut trees in the backyard. In total, they collect nearly a hundred pounds of nuts each year.

Hank had yet to get out of the Cherokee. He was occupied with his puzzle, no doubt.

"Does he talk very much?" my mother asked.

"Not a lot, although from time to time he will go on a talking jag of forty or fifty words."

"So, how is Janice?"

Janice is my wife. We live near Trout Lake on the east side of Vancouver, with our two children, Deb and Paul. I didn't give my children their first names. My wife did. I teach in the English Department at the University of British Columbia and write books on the side, one of which was recently eliminated on a Canada Reads show on CBC radio.

Dad handed me a can of beer.

"Have you mentioned our proposition to Hank?"

I popped open the tab on the can. "Nope. You asked me not to, and I strictly obeyed."

"I wish he'd come inside," my mother said, almost in a whimper. "He's just sitting out there, all by himself."

"Hank is his own best company," I told her. "Whenever he comes over to our place for Sunday dinner, or something like that, he eats very quietly and politely at the table, then he goes to the living room and works on his sudoku puzzles. Deb and Paul think of their uncle as a very strange man. Sometimes, though, they manage to talk him into walking the dog with them around Trout Lake, so that's an improvement, I guess."

"Do you think he's plagued by memories?"

"I'd be guessing, Mom, but, yes, I think so."

I heard the passenger door of the Cherokee slam shut, and glanced out the window. My brother warily surveyed his surroundings, as though anticipating where he might have to dive for cover should he hear the sound of gunfire. He once employed a cane to steady himself, but stopped using it four months ago, his theory being that he had come to rely on it too much. My brother doesn't like to rely on things, or on people. Not long after he moved into the social housing complex on the Downtown Eastside, a couple of crackheads had tried to mug him, figuring a man with a cane would be an easy target, I guess. He had broken the cane over

the second assailant's head, after ramming the tip into the first one's stomach. The failed attack had made it into the *Vancouver Sun* and onto local television news programs.

"Crackheads pick on wrong man," the headline had read in the *Sun*.

In the past year, Hank was fitted with a robotic left leg that anticipates when he would normally bend his toes, which are now non-existent, of course. It has smoothed his stride to some degree, but there's still a hitch when he walks, due to some difficulties with his salvaged right leg. By now, he was treading rather heavily across the porch. Then the doorbell rang. Mother went to open the door. The ringing of the bell had brought tears to her eyes. She wiped them away before pulling back the door.

"Oh, Hank," she gushed, "my beloved son. Thanks for paying us a visit."

She flung herself against his chest to give him a hug. He stood there rather stiffly, as though enduring the ordeal, a lopsided smile on his face, not knowing what to do with his arms.

"Mom, there's no reason to get so emotional," he said. "I'm not a mirage. I'm not going to dry up and go away."

"I can't help it," she said, wiping away tears. "You're my son, and I so rarely get to see you, anymore."

My father went over to where they were standing. "Good to see you again, son," he said, sticking out his right hand.

Hank clasped his hand. "Good to see you, too, Dad."

His gaze fastened on the cougar pelt pinned to the wall above the sofa. "Oh, so that's the culprit, eh? Doug told me how you killed that big cat. God, he was one really big bugger, wasn't he?"

"I did it in self-defense," Dad explained.

"I know what it's like. Kill, or be killed. It's a pretty simple equation, really."

"You would know better than I," Dad told him.

My father offered Hank a beer—out of politeness. Hank gave up drinking about two years ago, after an inebriated evening at a Legion in Vancouver. He had taken a cab home. When he got to the social housing complex, he realized he had misplaced his wallet at the Legion. That had resulted in an argument with the taxi driver, who asked for a cop car to be sent to the scene. My brother wasn't being violent, but the cab driver had interpreted the volume of his voice as menacing. Hank had confessed to being at the Legion. He was a veteran, he explained to the officers, and had shown them his prosthetic lower left leg.

In the end, one of the cops had paid Hank's taxi fare for him. It only amounted to seven dollars. The next day Hank had shown up at the cop shop on the Lower Downtown Eastside. He had left the money in an envelope at the front desk, along with a few extra dollars for some doughnuts and coffee. Later that evening, the officer had phoned to thank

him. After that, my brother had stopped drinking.

“I didn’t like making a fool of myself,” was his explanation.

Hank settled on having a Canada Dry ginger ale. Mother went to the kitchen to get it. Dad gestured to the sofa. Hank and I sat down at opposite ends. Hank tapped the coffee table with his good right foot.

“One of yours?” he asked Dad.

“Yeah. I made it about five years ago.”

The coffee table was constructed out of salvaged wood from the blackened, burned forest. Don’t get the wrong idea, though. It’s gracefully designed, exquisitely put together: nicely turned legs, wonderful finish, you name it. Making furniture became an alternate, Plan-B business for my dad, after the mill shut down. It began to thrive after about six years.

Mom came back to the living room. Handed Hank a can of ginger ale and a tumbler.

“So, now maybe you can tell me why I’ve been kidnapped and brought here, to this outpost,” he said, filling the tumbler with ginger ale and plunking it down on a coaster on the coffee table.

“What do you mean, kidnapped?” My mother tried her best to look befuddled.

“The journey here. All the driving that Dougy has done. This isn’t a casual visit, Mom. It’s more like I’ve been brought here to be ambushed.”

Dad leaned forward in his armchair. Placed his forearms on his knees. “You’re right, Hank. We do have ulterior motives.”

“Which are?”

“A little ways up the street, on the other side of the road, a bungalow has come up for sale.”

“Big deal. Everything’s up for sale, here in Celwood.” My brother gave a dismissive chuckle.

“It’s selling for a really good price.”

“A fire-sale price, I would bet.”

“Yes, a fire-sale price,” Dad admitted. “I was thinking I might buy it. We’d keep it in our name—that is, your mother’s name and mine—but we were thinking you might like to move in. You could pay us a nominal amount of rent. Anything that strikes you as fair.”

“So that’s it,” Hank said. “You think I’m in need of a handout.”

“No, no, no. This wouldn’t be a handout. This would be taking advantage of a good opportunity.”

“Celwood!” my brother guffawed. “A good opportunity! You’ve got to be deluding yourself, Dad.”

“There are rumors that Celwood is going to rise from the ashes, as a destination casino-slash-adventure destination.”

“Those sort of rumors have been going around for years.”

“Yes, and I don’t put too much stock in them, myself. But I’m getting old, Hank. Both your mother and I are getting old, and, well—.”

“Well, what?”

“I was wondering, if you’d like to take over my furniture-making business. In high school you showed a lot of a talent for woodworking, if you ask me. I was wondering if you’d like to go into business. A lot of specialty places are taking orders from me now. You’d be doing me a favor, actually, because I can’t keep up with the demand.”

Hank’s expression became steely. “I don’t know whether to be delighted, or insulted,” he said, reaching for the tumbler of ginger ale.

“Please feel delighted,” my mother said. “For our sake, please feel delighted—just this once. We’re not trying to be conniving or anything like that. We’re thinking about something that will benefit all of us.”

“Including Dougy, here?” He glanced at me at the other end of the sofa.

“Yeah. Janice, the kids and I could then come here for the summer—to plague you with our presence.”

“Are you trying to tell me, I’ve been plaguing you with my presence these past few years?”

“Of course not. I’m trying to be funny. But let’s face it. You deserve much better than that social housing complex down on the Eastside. You were really good at woodwork, back in high school. I’m sure you could fit it in between bouts of sudoku—if you really wanted to, that is.”

“I’d have to think about it,” he said.

“Yes, please think about it,” my mother said. “For our sake.”

“So whose house is up for sale?”

“Remember the Tilsers? Brad died several years ago, and Mildred has gone into an old folks’ home. Alzheimer’s, apparently.”

Hank set the tumbler on the coaster. “I guess I could do the polite thing, and take a look at the place.”

“Great, I’ve got the key,” Dad said.

* * *

On No Name Street, the lots are fairly large—double wide and triple wide, for the most part. Three out of every five houses sit empty. The Tilser house was small by comparison to most of them: a one-storey bungalow, with a two-car garage. Dad had designs on turning one of the garages into a woodworking studio—a branch plant to his garage. The bungalow was in fairly decent shape. Baseboard heating backed up two airtight, wood-burning stoves. The hardwood floor needed sanding and revarnishing, and the backyard had become quite unruly, the fruit trees raided by bears each fall.

“It’d need a fair bit of work done to it,” Hank remarked.

“We could do it together, as a team. It’d get you back into working with your hands.”

“At least my hands didn’t get blown off.”

Hank has some ugly scars on his left arm, from having undergone two

surgeries.

“I hope you aren’t doing this because you think I’m a charity case,” he said, looking straight into Dad’s eyes.

“To tell you the truth, I’m the one who’s getting to be the charity case. A specialist told me I’ve got the beginning stages of Parkinson’s. That’s a very aggressive disease. They have drugs for it that will buy me some time, but in the end it wears down everyone who gets it.”

“When did you find out about this?”

“A few months ago.”

Hank turned to look at me. “And how long have you known about it, Dougy old boy?”

My jaw was still hanging slack. “Seconds ago. They haven’t told me a thing.”

“I’m sorry to hear about the Parkinson’s, Dad. Really, I am. So, how much is this house going for, anyway?”

“Forty-nine thousand.”

“Is anybody else bidding on it?”

“What—in Celwood? You’ve got to be kidding.”

* * *

Back at my parents’ place, Dad gave Hank a tour of his woodworking facilities. The garage is an independent building off the alley that Dad has expanded to make twice as large. He has a lot of equipment: lathes, drill presses, table saws, a planer, a joiner, et cetera. A wooden sign arches above the bay doors. Phoenix Furniture, it proclaims.

“You know the myth behind the phoenix, I take it?”

“Yeah, I know it,” my brother said. “I’m not dumb, only wounded.”

“Your mom and I refused to leave Celwood. This was our way of saying it—for better or for worse. We weren’t going to be driven out. That was that.”

“And you haven’t been,” Hank said. “For what it’s worth.”

“Except for the Parkinson’s.”

“Yeah, except for that. I’m really sorry to hear about it.”

Dad shrugged. “We all get dealt different hands. That’s just the way it is.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

After dinner, Hank told Mom and Dad he had decided to accept their offer. “I’m going to pull my full weight, though. I don’t want anybody treating me like I’m half a man.”

“I would never dream of doing that,” Dad told him.

Later that evening, Dad and I were washing and drying dishes at the kitchen counter, while Hank and Mom were talking out on the back patio—on a settee that Dad had built. The sun had gone down behind the mountains to the west, but there was a great deal of diffused light—a halo effect that made the mountains look a deeper shade of green. Mom

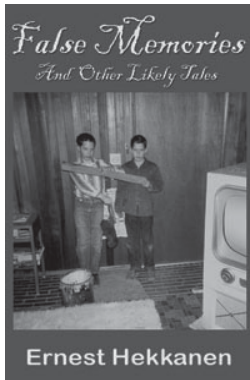
was leaning against Hank's left shoulder. Then, all of a sudden, Hank's shoulders began to writhe and buck, and from the way he leaned forward to put his face in his hands, I realized he was sobbing—sobbing violently—while Mom stroked his back.

“Should we go to the rescue?” I asked Dad.

“No, let him cry. It's about time he let down his defenses.”

Several months later, Hank emailed me from Celwood. “I'm thinking I might like to write a book about my experiences in Afghanistan. Do you think I could get you to help me with the grammar and such, how exactly I should go about it, you being the big expert and all?”

“I'd be delighted,” I wrote back.



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