

Hamish Hamilton

Upfronts



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THE ORENDA

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ONE

Hunted

I awake. A few minutes, maybe, of troubled sleep. My teeth chatter so violently I can taste that I've bitten my swollen tongue. Spitting red into the snow, I try to rise but my body has seized. The older Huron, their leader, the one who kept us walking all night around the big lake rather than across it because of some ridiculous dream, stands above me with a thorn club. These men and the weight they give their dreams. It will be the end of them.

Although I still know only a little of their language, I understand the words the man whispers and I force myself to roll when the club swings toward me. The thorns bite into my back and the bile of curses that pour from my mouth make the group of Hurons watching intently cover their mouths with laughter. I am sorry, Lord, to use your name in vain.

They'd all be screaming with glee, pointing and holding their bellies, if we weren't being hunted right now. With a low sun rising and the air so cold, the noise travels. They are clearly fed up with

the young Iroquois girl who wouldn't stop whimpering all night. Her face is swollen from slaps and when I look to her lying in the snow I fear that they killed her while I slept.

Not long ago, just before light, we'd all paused to rest, the leader and his handful of hunters stopping as if they'd planned it out in advance, the pack of them collapsing into each other for the heat. They whispered among themselves, and a couple of the hunters' eyes glanced over to me. Although I couldn't decipher their rushed speech, I knew they talked of leaving me here, probably with the girl who at that moment sat with her back to a birch, staring as if in a dream. Or maybe they talked of killing the girl and me. The two of us had slowed the rest down all night, and despite my trying to walk quietly, I stumbled in the black through the thick brush and tripped over fallen trees buried in the snow. At one point I'd removed my snowshoes they were so clumsy but I sank up to my hips in the next steps and one of the hunters had to pull me out, biting me hard on the face when he'd finally accomplished the deed.

Now the snow covering the lake glows the colour of a robin's egg as sun tries to break the cloud. If I live through this day I will always remember to pay attention to the tickle of dryness at the back of my throat at this moment, the whine like a bad headache coming. I've just begun to walk to the girl to offer her comfort if she's still alive when a dog's howl breaks the silence, the excitement in its picking up our scent making me want to throw up. Other dogs answer it. I forget how my toes have begun to blacken, that I've lost so much weight I can't support my gaunt frame for long, that my chest has filled with a sickness that's turned my skin yellow.

I know dogs, though. As in my old world, these are one of the few things in this new one that bring me comfort. And this pack's still a long way away, their voices traveling easy in the frozen air. When I bend to help the girl up, I see the others have already left, have disappeared into the shadow of the trees and thick brush.

My panic at being left alone to those chasing me, the ones who will make sure I die a slow death so painful I now weigh taking my own life, is so powerful I know exactly what I must do. And I ask Your divine mercy for this. I will strip naked and I will walk out onto the lake. I calculate how long it will all take. The first ten minutes as the pack races closer and closer to me will certainly be the most painful. My skin will at first feel like it is on fire, like I am being boiled in a pot. There's only one thing more painful than the first minutes of freezing, and it's the thawing out, every tendril of the body screaming for the pain to stop. But I won't have to worry about that. I will lie on the frozen lake and allow the boiling of the cold to consume me. After that first handful of minutes the violent shaking won't even be noticed, but the sharp stabs of pain in the forehead will come, and they will travel deeper until it feels my brain is being prodded with fish spines. And when the dogs are within a few minutes of reaching me, I will suddenly begin to feel a warmth creeping. My body will continue its hard seizures, but my toes and fingers and my testicles will stop burning. I will begin to feel a sense of, if not comfort, then relief, and my breathing will be very difficult and this will cause panic but the panic will slowly harden to resolve and when the dogs are on the lake and racing toward me, jaws foaming and teeth bared, I will know that

even this won't hurt anymore as I slip into a sleep that one cannot awaken from. As the dogs circle me I will try to smile at them, bare my teeth, too, and know that although my eyes are frozen shut that the dogs will begin to eat me, but I'll not feel myself being consumed, will be like you, Christ, as I give my body so that others might live.

This thought of giving, I now see, lifts me just enough to pick up the girl and begin walking her away from the lake's edge. If she's alive after all, won't her people—my pursuers—consider sparing me? I will keep her alive, not just because this is what You demand, but to save myself. The thought of this betrayal of Your wishes feels more an intellectual quandary than what I imagine should physically cause pain to my heart. I'll worry about that later. For now, I follow the others' footsteps as best I can, my thick black robe catching on the woven branches and nettles, the bush so thick I wonder how it is that the men I follow, and the ones who follow me, are not part animal, have some black magic that gives them abilities that are beyond the natural.

You seem very far away here in this cold hell, and the Monsigneur's attempts to prepare me last year before my journey to the new world seem ridiculous in their naivety. You will face great danger. You will most certainly face death. You will question Jesus' mercy, even His existence. This is Lucifer whispering in your ear. Lucifer's fires are cold. There is no warming your body and your soul by them. But Monsigneur doesn't have any idea what true cold is, I realize, as I allow myself and the girl to be swallowed by the darkness of the same trees that the cold sun tries to penetrate.

TWO

A Man Should Feel Happy

I stop to look up because the sun breaks. The puffs of my breath shimmer in the first light. It's you who shimmers, my love, in this first morning light. The sun will illuminate all of it. I know this most of all. The sun will show the Haudenosaunee who chase us exactly where to go, will show them how many of us there are, and what condition we are in, and especially that we drag a Crow with us. The sun today is not a friend. If we all die today, it will because of it. And the sun won't give real heat for three more moons, so the sun is shit today. And that Crow who tries to follow is shit, too. And the girl. Taking her was a bad idea. I knew it yesterday like I know it today. I'm older now, my love, and I still haven't learned to listen when my guts tell me.

I order Fox to set a sinew snare where the path narrows, just high enough to strangle the first of their dogs that follows, howling across the lake, not so far away. With any luck, the others will stop and be hungry enough to tear apart their friend for surely they've

not been eating much at all this last while. I dreamed all of this and spoke of it as the sky began to darken last evening. I know, my love, that yesterday you watched from somewhere above when my group stumbled across the smaller group of our enemy, both parties pursuing the same deer. Luck and the bit of tobacco I'd offered to Aataentsic the Sky Woman the night before allowed me to find our enemy's tracks first, and we followed nimble and fast. By the drag of the Haudenosaunee's snowshoes I knew they were close to starving. And by the lack of dog prints I knew what their last meal had been.

I tied the Crow to a tree and then attacked the other hunting party when we found them in a gully. It was almost too easy. We shot arrows through the first two and the two men left could barely put up a fight when we walked to them. They didn't even seem to care when Fox clubbed down one of the women who bit him hard through his hide. I myself walked up to the biggest man, already singing his death song, and swung my thorn club into his temple, angry he wasn't willing to fight for his woman. I will not forget having to stand on his head to wrench free my weapon. Yes, I'm older, but I'm still strong. The only one as tall as me is that Crow who I can now hear stumbling through the snow and whining, trying to catch up to us. He's a big Crow, thick through the chest and clearly strong, but is he not the most awkward human I've ever met? He is a holy one, though. I've watched him pray to his sky people for hours at a time, thumbing wooden and silver beads that I think I want to possess once I understand their power.

I took no pleasure yesterday in killing the last two women.

They were already so wounded we knew they wouldn't survive the trip home. Even though I ordered Fox to do it, my order is the same as if I myself had done it. Fox cut their throats with his knife so that they'd go quick despite the taunts of Sturgeon and Hawk and Deer to make it slow. When the three called Fox a woman for making the first leave so fast, he positioned the second woman, who was quite pretty, so that the blood from her throat sprayed their faces. That shut them up, and despite feeling badly for these dead, I laughed. For all I knew, it was this group who was responsible for the slow and awful deaths of you, my wife and you, my two daughters. There's been no peace since. I no longer care for peace.

As we gathered the few Haudenosaunee possessions that were worth taking, I caught the sound of a snuffle behind me in a clump of cedar. I didn't turn immediately for I was too tired to have to chase through the forest what was clearly a child. Fox made eye contact with me and then walked away and around behind the cedar, circling it in a wide arc and cutting off the child's escape. He emerged with the girl in his arms, her body as straight and stiff as if she'd frozen solid. She stared ahead with eyes that didn't seem to see but maybe saw everything. Was it this that stopped me from killing her, allowing Fox to suggest that I take her and make her my own child? Despite the pock scars from an old sickness, she's beautiful, and will only become more so in the next few years.

Our group should not have followed our own tracks back out. This certainty of direction gives away too much to an enemy who wishes to learn. By late last night, a much bigger group of Haudenosaunee had found the killing grounds and were following

us. It's not that I could hear them or see them. The cold air took on another quality, though, and the hair at the back of my neck had begun to stick out, tickling me in an annoying way. Like black flies. Yes, it's like black flies, buzzing your ears and waking you from an afternoon slumber. That's when I hurried my pace last night and my soldiers knew then too what we all now faced.

And despite her slowing us down all night, this morning as her people pursue us, I still don't regret taking her. She contains something powerful. This has become more and more clear in the last hours. Even if she does slow us all down, I'm willing to take this great risk because of the promise of what is inside her. And if the Crow is able to not just keep up with my hunters but keep the girl alive, too, he will have proved to me that both of them have something inside them that is worth studying.

Now that the Crow appears through the trees, the girl in his large arms, I decide to push forward. It's a good plan. If the Haudenosaunee catch up, they will catch up to the Crow first, and when they find their child in his arms, they will celebrate her survival with a feast that ends in the consumption of the Crow. Yes, they will send a much smaller party immediately to pursue the rest of us but these odds are better than what we now face. I point out the presence of the snare to the Crow as he stumbles up, breathing heavily.

When the Crow sits in the snow, the young girl stiff again with her eyes staring ahead, my men and I stand. The Crow's confused expression turns quick to anger, and I like this sign very much. Crow has energy left. Maybe he'll make it through today after all.

My four soldiers and I walk to where I see a sharp drop to a creek below. Crouching and leaning back, I slide down the hill on the heels of my snowshoes, feel like I'm flying as I pick up speed to where the creek will offer us a much faster route. I feel happy. A man should feel happy on the day that will be his last.

THREE

Dreams

I dreamed all of this. I told my father but he was too tired, too hungry maybe, to listen. I told my mother, too, and she too, was so tired, so hungry. I see the arrow that strikes my father in the neck before it even flies. I see the red of blood on the snow, how it steams for just a bit before freezing into something that looks like a soup he fed me when the shaking sickness came. Before my mother bites the small man who is like a lynx or maybe a fox and he smashes her head so that she falls to the ground and shakes like she dances in the snow, I have already dreamed her being held roughly by them and finding my eyes as I hide in the cedar. She tells me with her eyes that she is going to do something important, and when she does I am to run as fast as I can and not stop until I find my uncles and my cousins who aren't too far from here. My mother's eyes flash to me that I will run as fast as I've ever run and I won't stop until I find my uncles or I am dead. Her eyes blink to me that if these ones here catch me I will wish I had died already. And then

she bites the man like she is a crazed wolf and he screams out and begins smashing her in the head with his club and she flops in the snow like a pike pulled from a hole in the ice or maybe a rabbit that has been clubbed and shakes toward her death, feet thumping the ground. It is a good thing that my father lies dead on the ground near her with an arrow through his neck or he would not stop until all of them are dead. But he is dead and my mother shakes toward him and my oldest brother who is blind and deaf doesn't see or hear our mother and father dying and leaves the world with them when the big older man clubs him in the head. My whole family shakes on the ground today before leaving me and this is something I've already dreamed, the shaking of my family in the snow, feet and arms thumping, then vibrating, then humming then eventually going still.

I will not shake into my death, I tell myself in my dream, and I tell myself when I am swallowed up in the arms of the fox man, who has sneaked up behind me and is quick as a lynx and so I go stiff and wait for him to smash me on the head. Instead, he carries me to the big man who has struck down my brother, and as I pass the others who are dead, my father, my mother, my father's two young apprentices, their wives who have squirted blood onto the men who laughed at them, I keep my eyes forward and try not to see any of it, pretend I am my brother who cannot see, who I've mimicked since I can remember, that look of seeing nothing and seeing everything. But I do see. I see that my father lies in the snow, a bright ring of red circling his head like a red ring around the moon in autumn, and his arms stretch out from him as if he

is pointing with one to where the sun rises and with the other to where the sun sets, and I see one foot crossed over the other as if he can finally relax now that he has slipped through to the other side. I remain stiff, though, believe that if my body stays still and hard as I can make it that these men will lose interest and they will think I've turned to wood or ice and they will leave me in the snow because the weight of me is not worth carrying, especially when my father's brothers and their sons and their dogs find out what has happened. These men who have killed my family, these men who I've dreamed of, they better start running now, for my uncles and their sons who will pursue them soon will never stop chasing until they are done with it. And so I'll act heavy and stiff and allow my feet and my arms and my head to catch on the branches as these men try to carry me away. If I stay frozen they will be forced to eventually drop me.

This morning my plan has worked and I watch my family's killers leave me soon after my uncle's best dog sings out that he can smell me. But the stinky man, the big one whose face is hairy like a wolf's, he bends down to me, and his black clothes smell so bad that I want to throw up and his breath smells like rotted meat and the wolf hair on his face and the black clothes on his body scratch me and there's no way I can stay stiff and dead anymore and just when I open my mouth to scream, when I begin to swing at his face and claw at his eyes and bite like I watched my mother bite, I see my father, grown tiny and sparkling, hanging on a leather cord from this thing's neck.

It's my father, lying in the snow, a circle around his head and

his arms stretched out and his feet relaxed, one crossed over the other. My tiny father, as the hairy, stinky man bends to me, arcs toward me and I watch him come toward me, his face catching the first morning light and his body meets my lips and his body feels warm and I see now that he's still alive because he is warm and I make a kiss to him as he swings away and the stinky man picks me up and I hear my uncle's dog in the distance sing out once more.

FOUR

Protection

I know that the one called Bird and his warriors can't be that far ahead. I wish to God that they'd wait. The dogs mustn't be far, either, have gone quiet now that they are closer to their prey, to me. The stiff girl in my arms is brutally awkward to carry, and as I follow the Hurons' snowshoe trail to a steep embankment, I pause, trying to calculate the best way down. So steep, this drop, that I wonder if Bird hasn't tried to trick his pursuers and taken another route. I look around for other tracks. Nothing. Christ, please help me. The dogs will come soon, they will howl out my presence, and with that noise will come the men who pursue, with their flashing teeth, their red and black and yellow painted faces and hatchets and clam shell knives to cut off the tips of my fingers in preparation for the true torture. I know all about these ones I've never met. They love to caress their enemies with red coals and razor flint so slow that days pass before Jesus comes to take the victim.

The small of my back spasms as I stand looking out at the frozen stream beneath me. I consider dropping the rigid girl and letting her tumble down to the bottom, feel sick to realize I consider this because if she makes it, I, myself, will survive it unscathed, too.

And then I see the tracks below, Bird's snowshoe tracks, small as pigeon claws, etched along the distant bank and disappearing into thick brush. I lift my charge higher in my arms and step forward to figure the route, feeling steadier now with a small glow of salvation. The toe of my snowshoe catches a bit of branch or rock, something below the white, and I tumble fast, over and over, down the hill, my ribs and left arm hitting rocks at the bottom, where the frozen creek lies.

I stand and feel the shock of snow down my back. The girl is clearly no catatonic. Quick as a hare, she scrambles to her feet and begins to scratch her way up the embankment, its steep incline enough that when she makes it a length no taller than her, she slips back down again. It would be almost comical if not for the glare she shoots back at me, her eyes alight like some animal's. These ones are animals. I have seen with my own eyes what they will do to an enemy. They are all the same, animals in savagely human form.

I sit in the snow of the creek and fit the snowshoes back onto my feet, tying the hide cords as best I remember the Hurons showing me. I stand, think to say something in parting to the girl who still struggles desperate to climb away, and then think better of it. She will not understand my French anyways, and my head is far too panicked to try and speak the Huron tongue, which the one called

Bird claims she understands. I will leave this girl to her people, to my pursuers, and surely this will quell their appetites.

But no more than ten paces along the creek and I realize that to leave without her leaves me without protection. My legs ache so badly and my breath already comes in such short spurts that I know today might be the beginning of my last. The ones behind me are too strong. I turn back and shuffle through the snow to the girl who still frantically tries to climb up and toward her people. She looks to me as my arms reach out, and as I tense for her to scratch at my eyes, she instead goes stiff as if dead and drops to the snow with a thump. I would laugh if I had the energy. I bend and pick her up, struggling now with her scant weight, then turn and drag my heavy and awkward snowshoes along the trail left by Bird.

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ONE

VERMONT

Judy and Walter Walt Ribke lived on twelve up-and-down acres, open to whatever God gave them, on the eastern boundary of Addison County, four feet deep in the years of rueful contentment. Judy was younger than Walt, her dreams had an urgent truth, and five years had passed since they removed a cyst from her womb that was larger than a melon. Her uterus collapsed and for a year she awoke to formaldehyde dawns feeling sick and lonely and hopeless, no more chance of a child.

Time passed and Walt stayed near. She held his hand when she sat or when she slept. They painted the house a lighter blue.

On various nights in various ways Judy said do I feel old Walter, and he said you're too young to be old. Come here.

Walt and his partners, Larry and Mike, had built or bought

more than half of the commercial space in southeast and central Vermont. They provided the roofs, walls and drains around bakeries, cheese shops, notaries public and all the unimaginable businesses sprung from the minds of people who could not conceive of working for other people. Walt believed in doing your own thing, finding your own way. The rent came monthly, businesses closed and opened. Walt made other investments, he gave thanks and shared his wealth. Paint for the church, in perpetuity. Books and shelves for the beetle-eaten library.

There were wealthy couples you read about where the man worked and the woman shopped and other people mocked or reviled them. Walt was in love, and held close the fact that there is nothing more natural or right than buying the world for the woman of your dreams. Try to name the value of that smile to Walt and his life-worn heart.

And Judy wanted little. She did not spend her days buying furniture and curtains. When dresses and shoes appeared in her wardrobe they had usually been sought for and bought by Walt. Before the operation she had wanted one thing, and after the operation she tried to get used to not wanting. They said the desire for children would naturally dissipate, but a man who loses a leg does not stop wanting to dance or kick.

In her rational moments she allowed herself to want nothing more than spending time with a child. It didn't have to be her own, it didn't have to be beautiful or smart, it just had to be near for her to care about it and give her that taste of renewal and possibility that children represent. She was calm about her desire, but every

now and then, alone, she yearned like a prisoner yearns for friends beyond the wall.

I need a purpose she said.

She volunteered to visit people who were dying.

I'll keep Mr. McKendrick company on Thursday nights. They say he has three months.

That'll be good for him said Walt.

I don't know.

And good for you.

It's a purpose.

Your beautiful face every Thursday. He'll be cured, Judy. He'll live forever.

I'm young said Judy.

You're beautiful.

I just want to make you proud she said.

They bought paintings and a car and a dog named Murphy, but with every purchase and passing Sunday was a feeling that life was a collection of gestures and habits and it was hard to find surprises when most surprises were planned.

That sad light in Judy's eyes was becoming a settled part of her, and maybe, Walt thought, that's life.

His first wife had been killed in their car near Binghamton, a truck driver slept at the wheel. A lake of grief still sat in his chest and it would never properly be plumbed, but the one thing he could think of, the one fact which he could find the fortitude to contemplate, was that the trucks would never stop. He found a lesson in that. Those goods that people want or think they need,

hurtling across the country. You can stand still and scream at the trucks but they'll run you down; you can hop on and go where they go; you can find all sorts of ways to avoid them. You can adjust, instead of accepting, and you can make your own world.

Walt had wanted a baby with his first wife but she was taken away so young. With Judy he had never doubted it would happen, but it hadn't and now it wouldn't. He was more than happy with the thought of looking at Judy till he died, but as for what she had to look at: Walt was getting jowly from beer and his great love of cheese. When he thought about the idea of having a child, that modern human ability to choose to have a child, and when he thought about beauty and how things can change, he could see how, maybe for a man, a child might be a way to make these moments last—some way to prolong a beauty that can't be preserved. But he simply understood it as love. He wanted what she wanted, and was sad that he couldn't provide it.

They looked into adoption for a time, but the options were limited and waiting lists long. Walt said we'll figure it out.

One of the buildings they owned in the county was a bar called Viv's. Walt met Larry and some of the others there most Thursdays, especially once the season began. Viv's was in easy driving distance from Willamette Valley where white-tailed deer would rut. The bar was a place where Walt and his friends could relax or celebrate or pay inarticulate respect to the thrill and regret of hunting for meat.

Out of season they found other things to talk about, and Viv was always good at gathering newspapers and magazines. He

encouraged the exchange of facts, he said, not opinions, because opinions are like sperm: there are way too many of them, most amount to nothing, and they're more fun to deliver than to receive.

Viv usually had some newfound knowledge to announce, and in February 1972 he passed a copy of Life magazine to Walt and said now the monkeys are talking.

Walt looked at the article and it changed his life with Judy.

"Conversations with a Chimp" it was called.

He saw a photo of a chimpanzee sitting on a carpeted floor, apparently in conversation with a man. Walt read the article and learned of a group of chimps in Oklahoma who had been taught to speak in sign language. They could talk about things they saw and things they wanted to eat. They spoke spontaneously.

One of the chimpanzees, a girl, was walking with the man in the picture one day and watched a plane fly overhead. She looked up at the man and signed YOU ME RIDE PLANE.

Walt found that amazing and read that part aloud.

There was a photo of a baby chimpanzee in a diaper, sitting on a woman's lap. And on the cover of the magazine was a picture of a beautiful woman who was involved with Howard Hughes. Walt measured all beauty against that of Judy and found the woman lovely, but wanting. There is no happier feeling.

As he drove home, the thoughts of Judy, the photo of the chimpanzee in the diaper, the beer and the bleakness of February all swam in his head in a lonely and protozoan soup, till lightning struck, an idea was born, and Walt began making inquiries into how he could acquire a chimpanzee.

He had no idea where to look, what to expect, what a chimp was or whether he could in fact buy one. He thought of zoos, wondered how zoos got their animals. He thought about all the people he knew in husbandry, the friends who traded livestock, the hundreds of acquaintances involved with animals in one way or another. Judy had been at Shelburne, buying Walt some cheese. He remembered she had watched some kids getting excited about the new llamas. That was about the most exotic animal he had heard of in Vermont.

Where do you see chimps he asked Viv, and Viv said you see them at a circus sometimes, don't you.

So Walt kept his eye out for circuses.

He had spent a few years now trying not to go near things or bring up topics that would make Judy think of children. He hadn't wanted to upset her.

He went alone to a circus in Burlington and there was indeed a chimpanzee who came out a few times with a clown. The clown juggled bananas and the chimp tried to jump and reach them without joy, so he pulled the clown's pants down, revealing pink bloomers, and the clown dropped all the bananas. The chimp looked like he was laughing and so did everyone else. It was pretty funny. And at the end of the show the chimp bowed and jumped into the arms of the clown and it was also pretty cute.

Walt waited till the crowd had left and asked a guy if he could speak to the clown or the fella who played the clown or whatever you call him, and the guy said he's out in the blue trailer. Walt went through to the street out back and knocked on the pale blue door.

The fella appeared, half clown half man, and said yeah with lipstick lips.

Walt introduced himself and said he had a question, and the clown said I charge a hundred for a birthday and the kids can't touch the monkey cause he bites.

Walt explained that he was interested in the chimpanzee and wanted to know where he could find one.

Are you a clown.

No.

Wait right there for a second.

Walt heard a terrifying noise which soon became part of his daily life. He was invited in, and there in a cage on the floor in the corner was the chimpanzee from the show.

Settle down there buddy settle down.

The chimp looked simultaneously bigger and smaller somehow, and the second wave of noises was less of a shock to Walt. The chimp was in a pink dress.

The clown said she doesn't like people coming into the house. She's in a mood.

She's a girl.

Past few months or so she gets all moody.

Walt felt a strange combination of embarrassment and curiosity. He wanted to look closer, but felt he should look away.

What's her name.

I call her Buddy. They're all different. Buddy here is a good one.

Walt said hey Buddy, somewhere between the way he would talk to a horse and the way he would talk to a unicorn.

I can't rent her out or anything. But I can get you one for twelve grand.

Christ.

Sometimes as low as ten. I don't have that kind of money myself and if I did I wouldn't be a clown. You know. This is a chimpanzee. It's not a racehorse but it's not a dog. I can't tell you where I can get one, but it's not a simple thing.

Walt stared at his lipstick.

They're not born here, you see. It costs me. They travel. I travel.

The chimpanzee was looking at Walt and looking at the clown and she put her hand through a gap between the bars.

She wants to touch you.

She seemed small again. Her face wasn't as pale as others Walt had seen in photos. He looked at her fingers and something stirred in him. They seemed long and you could almost imagine them on a grandmother.

She's pretty goddamn strong. You might not want to touch her.

Walt saw no threat and softly repeated hey Buddy. He was low on his worsening knees and reached towards the cage and gently put the back of his own finger against the back of the chimp's and held it there. Buddy.

She moved her finger slightly to manipulate Walt's and the clown said be nice to the man, he's a friend, be nice, and she looked at Walt with whiteless eyes and scratched a little mole on the side of his finger.

She's cleaning you. It's a thing they do.

Walt looked at her and her eyes looked at his finger. Walt looked

down at his finger and while he was smiling inside and thinking this animal's cleaning me with a woman's finger, she gathered some spit and Walt felt the splash on his face.

The clown said hey be nice now dammit.

Walt looked at her and she laughed like she laughed in the show.
I'll be.

Buddy stood up and made a gesture and the clown said okay, come out, but be nice.

She slipped the dress over her head and revealed a homemade diaper.

I keep a bat or a stick around, but I'm guessing if you're not in the trade you won't be teaching so many tricks. I put her in the cage when there's visitors or when she goes to bed and whatnot. She calls it her bedroom.

She talks.

I talk. I call it her bedroom.

I read about one who knew sign language.

Yeah, she knows signs. Tell daddy to fuck off.

She raised her finger.

Doesn't mean they're ready for high school.

Buddy walked over to the couch with her arms up like she was walking through waist-deep water. She got up on the couch and sat just like a person would sit and Walt looked at her feet. They looked like hands.

The clown went to the fridge and grabbed a can of beer which he tossed across the room to her. She made a sort of coughing noise and opened the can with her teeth.

I'd offer you one but there's only one left.

He opened it and chugged it and so did she.

When she neared the end she caught the last drops with prehensile lips, looked at Walt like she was telling him a joke and didn't care what he thought of it, got up from the couch and went to the fridge where the clown said there's no more.

She looked at him like she was making sure she understood properly. Walt watched her flip through a magazine while the clown talked business. It seemed like everything she did was either funny or impossible.

While driving home, Walt reflected on his day and acknowledged that it was always going to be slightly odd to talk to a clown about a chimpanzee. But his mind was trying to catch up to greater things—the feeling of confusion had less to do with negotiating with a clown and more to do with the simple vision of that hairy little girl sitting on the couch across from him. Was she a person or a pet. The longer Walt drove, the more he realized that what he predominantly felt was excitement. This was an opening. She had seemed so energetic, so full of stories somehow. Were they all like that. Were girls and boys different. She was eight and the clown said that was different from an eight-year-old girl, but maybe not so different except for the menses and some peculiarities, he reckoned. He didn't actually know exactly what age she was.

What would Judy think.

Walt had finalized nothing. He and the clown had agreed that Walt would get in touch in a while and the clown would make

some inquiries and try to line up the right chimp. The younger the more expensive he said.

Walt wanted to think for a while and not necessarily surprise Judy with a baby chimpanzee but maybe try to find the right way to tell her about the idea. She was waiting with a roast chicken when he returned and she was the picture of his idea of home and there was gratitude in his heart. Please don't take those eyes away from me or let them get any sadder.

A month or so later he met the clown at a diner in Burlington. He wore no makeup and his name was Henry Morris. He could line up a chimp, probably a boy, might even need bottle-feeding.

Walt was nervous, but resolved.

He talked Henry down to six thousand dollars, not knowing that Henry would pocket three of those six. Henry himself did not know that his connection in Sierra Leone, a German named Franz Singer, paid only thirty dollars for the chimps he sold for three thousand.

In Outamba-Kilimi a mother chimpanzee had been walking with her baby clinging to her chest and a shotgun blast sent bone through the back of her eyes. She was several meals for Liberians across the border, her punctured skull was ground into a paste which a man in Hong Kong bought to heal his broken arm, and her baby was put in a sack and delivered to Franz Singer's farm outside Freetown.

Nights of hunger and bony moons, steel and the rubber teat.

Singer's chimpanzees were renowned for being free of shotgun pellets, less work when they arrived. They flew in crates, Pan Am cargo, neither colonists nor slaves.

Henry met the crate.

Walt told Judy he had bought a baby chimp, and Judy looked at the painting above the mantel, oil of the lake in summer. It was night but she felt the warm breath of the sun through her dress and thought life isn't what you see it's what you think.

They slept with their bodies close that night, their minds going miles down separate roads which they never dreamt were separate.

Judy had seen enough hours and days to know that when things are truly strange their strangeness doesn't appear until after the strangeness has passed. She thought of this when she was sitting on the living room floor looking into the eyes of Looee, who was holding her fingers on the bottle with hands that had grown so much in just a few months.

The deal between Walt and Henry had been that Henry would find an appropriate place to present the chimp to him and Judy. That seemed the hardest part to Henry. He had done this a few times now. He knew to buy a small cage, rent a pickup, drive to Newark, slip cash to the right people. The laws about exotics didn't exist in those days and quarantine was a matter of money. He knew exactly what he would do with the chimp but he couldn't think of how to present it back in Vermont. He got his shoes shined at the airport in Newark by a really nice guy named Louis. He told Louis with the right sort of wink that he was staying at the Radisson and Louis recommended a girl who gave Henry a ten-dollar handjob that he would have paid double for. He wanted to kiss her but when he leaned forward she recoiled. He drove back to Vermont and thought there's that jungle gym in the park for the kids, I'll arrange that we all meet there.

TWO

FLORIDA

The World needs fruit. The World needs sleep. The World needs touch and the quick pink heat.

Podo rules the World. Podo chooses his moments.

He limps and others limp to be like him. He eats his breakfast with loaded hands, and alms drop and scatter like seeds from a shaken tree. He greets his friends and assesses the day and the day bows down to black Podo. He takes Fifi by the hips while she sucks on an orange.

He will play with children and pin their mothers.

Podo runs to the greybald tree and swings around it once and twice and does something else without thinking what it was, and it is always something to behold, fast Podo.

Outside are grass and dirt and swollen birds, high summer,

there is concrete and society. Armpit heat and guilty meat, and friends who come and go.

Look to Podo if the food is taken from your mouths.

Look to him if you think all food can be yours.

He wants Fanta.

He will pound the eyes of detractors.

Show him your rosé.

A BIRD FLIES over the World.

Fifi watches Mr. Ghoul.

Mama likes Fifi.

Fifi likes Mama.

Magda slaps Bootie.

Bootie likes Burke and hitting Magda, his mother.

Podo is pinning Magda and neither really wants it.

Bootie and the new one are jumping all over Magda and Podo.

Bootie slaps Podo on the leg.

Podo is busy, sharp Podo.

Bootie and the new one want to understand.

They want it to stop, continue.

The new one is looking at Magda's rosé getting pin, pin, pinned by Podo, and Bootie is thinking about slapping or biting the swinging balls of Podo.

Podo thinks a thought that he can taste and the World swells hot and dark.

He has finished.

Magda walks away without looking over her shoulder.

Bootie and the new one are bewildered.

Podo feels the oa, grateful Podo. Magda feels safe.

He is huge, black Podo, and he walks with black hair raised, and daylight blue and slick on his body, and his shoulders are widening, legs surprising, he coils and uncoils with prowess and venerable grace.

There is oa in the ground and oa in the wind and everyone knuckles and bows, how-do.

Mr. Ghoul spends the morning eating onions.

THREE

Looee reached for Judy before conversation began. The little guy in the diaper and red shirt. As soon as she was near he reached out with both hands, apparently not caring if he fell from Henry's neck. Henry introduced his burden by name as he was losing it. L-o-o-e-e he added, spelling it thus because he reckoned the woman would find that cute.

All the way to Burlington her anxiety had grown.

What will he eat she said.

I don't know. I don't know all that much Walt said.

She tried to calm herself by not thinking deeply. Walt had said they seemed so human. She sang and ignored the cramps in her belly.

At that moment of meeting, Looee lunged and nuzzled and squirmed and settled. He and Judy made unwritten noises and he looked at her with eyes of eagerness and purity, and she understood his hunger.

Walter she said.

Henry looked around the park, at the jungle gym and concrete.

Looee was not a conventionally cute little baby, but there was something about the fact that he had hands that made Walt and Judy feel right away that he was more than a hairy beast. And the way he moved in Judy's arms made Walt say that's a cute little guy right there.

Henry said just give him plain old milk and you'll find soon enough that they'll eat just about anything, too much if you let em. He looks good and healthy to me.

Judy carried him away like she was determined to take him somewhere better.

It was April and snow sat on the mountains.

Judy held Looee in the backseat while Walt drove to various stores after Judy said there's all kinds of stuff we need. Looee stayed still in her arms like a newborn baby, alternately dimming and shining his eyes.

At Kmart a woman said how cute, when he was wrapped up, and screamed when she saw his face.

When they all arrived home Looee seemed awfully hot. Judy got a thermometer under his tongue and his temperature was 103.

That might be normal said Walt.

They gave him milk and bananas but through the night he grew weaker and hotter and Judy could swear he stopped breathing sometimes. She was sure he had a fever.

At dawn when things seemed worst Walt said do we take him to a doctor or a vet.

Judy said doctor without hesitation.

What on earth have you got there said Dr. Worsley, and Walt said that's a baby chimpanzee.

The situation was inadequately explained, and Dr. Worsley said I'm just not sure you shouldn't take him to a vet but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious, Walter.

He had a look at weary Looee and thought his private thoughts about bodies and death and how he and his medical brethren found thrills in life and love despite their knowledge of flesh and its banal truths.

He took his temperature but frankly wasn't sure what was normal for chimpanzees.

His lungs sound congested, so as far as I can tell it's a respiratory illness. I'll do some reading about it.

Looee coughed a lot at home like a baby and Walt and Judy ran the shower in the bathroom and hugged him in a way his body remembered. The steam did him good and drenched them all in sweat. When Judy dried him with a towel in the bedroom on the bed, it seemed for a moment that he might be ticklish under his arms.

I think he's smiling, Walter.

That second night felt longer than the first. When Looee slept and his chest stopped moving Judy would panic and wake him up and think what on earth have we done, who is this. He developed diarrhea and made a terrible mess of the bed.

He truly seemed pale under his hair and Walt thought that

maybe they should have taken him to the vet but Walt was in a jungle of sleeplessness and confusion.

They waited, like they waited with each other when they were sick, ultimately relying on the instinct of the body to live and find its own solutions. Eventually his fever broke and his limbs re-gathered their twitches and kicks. The three of them slept.

BALLISTICS

D.W. Wilson



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ONE

Empedocles:

*Having seen a small part of life, swift to die,
a man rises and drifts like smoke, persuaded only of what
he has happened upon as he is borne away.*

On a Friday evening in September, some time ago, a friend of mine spilled a bottle of lager across her lap and slurred her curiosity about how it all began, that summer I spent in a scour across the Kootenays. She doodled her finger through the caramel froth yeasting on the surface of her thighs. I thought about getting her a paper towel, but I thought about a lot of things. We were taking potshots at empty beer cans with my grandfather's .22 calibre, and I'd lost my aim to nerves and thoughts and the restlessness that endures when adventures come to an uncertain close. I touched a scar on my cheek, about as long as a pocket knife, and wondered a moment after the dead and the gone.

How it all began—that's a good question. That's a philosophical question. It's like asking when a bullet starts toward the beer can. Is it at the moment slug exits muzzle? When I lean on the trigger? Somewhere among those hours spent checking and rechecking the chamber? It could be the munitions line, or the semi-trailer hauling cartridges down Highway 1, or the clerk at the hardware store who retrieves the carton from the glass. It could be strictly mechanical—hammer strikes casing, spark, ignition, *trajectory*—but over seventy parts make up the firing mechanism of a bolt-action rifle, even more if you count the bones of the human hand, the arm, the muscles and nerves and the synapses each themselves firing. And then, getting *really* philosophical, there's the Gunsmith's Paradox: to reach its target, a bullet must first travel halfway, and to travel halfway it must first travel a quarter, an eighth, a sixteenth, smaller and smaller, such that it will never reach its destination, such that it won't even start to move. This means nobody can ever be shot. This means no journey can ever end.

How it all began? Well, I can trace Gramps' defects all the way to his childhood: shrapnel he blocked with his sternum when he was seven, the result of a dud artillery round on a beach not slingshot range from home; a welding arc that dashed across his chest while he tempted his body's conductivity in the rain; smoke inhalation, steam scalds, stress levels, and a consistent blood-alcohol for all those years strapped inside a Nomex jacket with *Volunteer Fire* stencilled across the shoulders. That's his history, but if I were to pinpoint the moment when everything Began, capital *B*, the

summer my family's past came knocking, I say this: at eighty-two years old, Gramps had his heart attack.

IT WAS A POORLY VENTILATED evening in May, the kind that encourages a man to splay himself along a loveseat and wear musked-up muscle shirts from his childhood. Gramps' house offered little in the way of airflow, so we'd wedged the stormdoor with a Gore-Tex boot and unshuttered the windows, and something like a breeze tickled my pits and the skin on my topmost ribs. Earlier, Gramps had salvaged a blastworn industrial fan from his storeroom, but I lacked the technical savvy to revive a guttered servo, and Gramps lacked the sobriety. We'd settled onto the furniture in his den to suffer through UFC exhibition matches as we waited for the approaching dark.

I'd only been in the valley a few days, having fled from an impending thesis and some girlfriend drama that for many months has been only a few bubbles shy of boil-over. It was to be the last visit before my indoctrination: a PhD in philosophy. Back east, my *significant other*, Darby—who I'd dated and not married for the better part of a decade—had taken to long nights at the university's gym, training for handball, of all things; each night, calling her, I listened to the unanswered telephone rings and marvelled at the gap between us. There are a number of things a handball player can do late into the night, but only one of them involves the sport so named.

Gramps went to the kitchen and banged open his fridge and I heard him grab a pair of bottled beer. Outside, the dusk

light glanced off neighbouring roofs. Years ago, Gramps strung a mosquito net abreast the exterior window because brown birds tended to get drunk on the gemstone berries that grow on a nearby tree, and they'd kamikaze into the glass. One day he found a family of those birds piled at the house's foundation, and when he lifted them in his palm their necks lolled like tongues.

Pillow clouds swirled above the Rockies, and I smelled the pinprick sensation of lightning on the horizon. The sky had turned the colour of clay. Woodsmoke loitered in the air like breath—it clung to clothes and furniture, a scent like chimney filth, or hiking trips along riverbeds, or the charcoal that remains on a campground after the campers have moved on. The province was in flames. Folks in the Interior had fled their homes and each morning I woke expecting to see the town ablaze. Earlier in the month, the Parks had declared Fire Warning Red and everybody—locals and tourists, bluecollars and rednecks, cops' sons, preachers' boys, parlour philosophers, even the old, haggard men who huddle under the pinstripe tarp that sags off the bakery—doused their camping pits and boiled their hotdogs and darted amid traffic to stamp out cigarettes left to smoulder in the heat.

Gramps set the two open beer on the coffee table and his maimed dog, Puck—an eleven-year-old butter-coloured English mastiff—lumbered from behind a pony wall. On the television, two long-limbed Muay Thai fighters lilted in half moons around each other, gloved hands at temples, knees drawing like longbows. Then one of those stick-men split-kicked forward, sailfish-fast, and Gramps made this noise like *ununghf* and when I looked over the

old bastard had gone scarecrow. He lurched sideways and one hand clawed for the end table but fanned it, hauled a circa 1970 lamp down atop him, shade like a hot-air balloon. I knew a thing or two about emergency first aid, so I launched into CPR and dialed 911 and, from the driveway, watched the paramedics green-light him for de-fib in the ambulance.

The ambulance veered behind a panelboard house and out of sight. Neighbours from yards abroad lurked in my peripherals: a pear-shaped man hiked his crotch on his verandah; two kids, young enough to be my sons (I was twenty-eight), leaned on their bikes. Through the living-room window, beyond the mosquito net, Puck stood a vigil, his big head swooping as he looked from me to the empty road and back again as if to say, *What are you waiting for?*

I rushed inside, grabbed Gramps' keys from his hunting vest, and commandeered his Ranger. It was a three-minute drive to the hospital, up a hill with a sixteen percent gradient and past a rundown hostel ripe with the stink of dope and gamey thrill-seekers. As I crested that hill, driving straight west, I was struck by a clear view of the Purcell Mountains. For a moment, under the sunset, they looked to be on fire, the treetops glowing red and orange, and it seemed I could see past them, through that shield of rock and carbon, to the very flames that ravaged the province's interior. I felt a gust of warmth in my eyes, like the dry heat from a wood stove, like a welding torch, as if from the blazes burning on the mountains' far side.

When I arrived at the hospital, a receptionist with curly hair sat behind a desk built into the wall.

My grandfather had a heart attack, I said.

Cecil West?

That's him.

She directed me to a lobby with a window overlooking the courtyard of an old folks' home. There, a double-bent man, out for an evening stroll, passed half a sandwich to a Dalmatian at his side. In the room with me, a toddler drooled on a Tonka dump truck he'd filled with alphabetized blocks. He wore a spaghetti-stained sweatshirt, and he mimicked an engine's hum as the Tonka trundled left to right, where he dumped its cache in a heap against his knee. On those frequent trips to the hospital when I was a kid, Gramps never let me handle the scarce toys laid out in waiting rooms—germ laden and smeared by hands too long unwashed, I suppose.

Then a tall woman my age, with blond hair tied in a bun and a thin, square jaw like a boy's, stomped into the waiting room and glared down at the toddler. She wore blue jeans faded in scruffs at the thighs and a grey T-shirt cut above her triceps. I recognized her as a fling from my highschool years. Missy, she used to be called.

Where's your brother? she said to the toddler.

Went to get a Coke.

And left you here, she said, and looked right at me when she did. Alan?

Hey, Missy, I said.

She curled an arm to her hip. Nobody calls me that anymore, she said, but didn't seem upset. You alright?

Gramps had a heart attack.

Jesus.

Yeah.

Don't worry, if I remember your Gramps, he's too stubborn to die.

Thanks, I said.

She pressed the back of her wrist to her nose, and I thought I recalled her doing that in highschool.

You gonna be around long?

Just the summer. Or what's left.

She bent to scoop the toddler under her arm, pried a stray block from his pudgy hand.

Danny's a cop, she said. That's my husband.

I don't remember him.

You either, she said—a retort, but I'm not sure what she meant by it. She made a *gotta go* motion with her head and disappeared through the door, and I sensed that I would not see her again. Outside, in the courtyard, the double-bent man raised himself to height, Dalmatian by his side, and together they scuttled toward the care home's rear door. Gramps had told me, time and again, that he'd rather die than spend his final days locked up with a bunch of bluehairs. If he got that bad, I was to drive him to his cabin in Dunbar and there'd be a hunting accident involving a twenty-gauge shotgun—a weapon that reminded him of his days across the pond. Couldn't do it himself, he told me, else he'd get eternal damnation. At least once per visit he and I swung into his truck—an old four-by-four reeking of hides and the rusty scent of bled animals—and drove down Westside Road, past the ostrich

farm, to the gravel pits where highschool kids built bonfires big as campers, and there we'd waste the day and a carton of rimfires on emptied tuna cans and paperback books Gramps had deemed uninteresting at best.

When I was finally admitted to Gramps' room, I found him upright in an aquamarine hospital gown, spotted with sticky discs and wires that relayed iridescent spikes to an ECG. Gramps' heart, I would discover later, hadn't stopped due to cholesterol or disease or blood pressure: like breathing, I guess, the heart is on a cyclical firing sequence, and Gramps' had simply misfired. Gramps shifted in bed. Deep lines drew along his cheekbones and wrinkles bundled like metal shavings in the corners of his eyes. He peeled his lips over his gums in what could have been a smile.

No flowers? he said.

I only bring flowers for good-looking girls.

I'm in a gown.

And it brings out your eyes, I said, and sat on the edge of his bed. He seemed very small beneath that sheet.

You doing okay? he said.

What kind of question is that.

I'd hate to ruin months of self-pity just by having a heart attack.

You are such a dick, I said.

He grinned, downward. But seriously, he said. You okay?

I'm okay, Gramps, I told him, with as much conviction as I could muster.

He cast his eyes to his hands, fiddled with them in his lap. I chewed a hangnail on my thumb. He looked old, too, all of a

sudden—moisture filmed his irises and his cheeks sagged at an angle off his jaws, bespeckled and age-worn, and what little hair remained seemed wilted and thin, like the strands you find gummied to the tiles of a public shower. He looked, I guess, like a grandfather on his deathbed.

I'm dying, he said.

No you're not.

It's like approaching a wall.

I nudged his thigh with a fist. He flashed his teeth.

I'm not just traumatized. A guy knows when the time is up.

What'd the doctor say?

It's coming, Alan. I can feel it.

No. You can't.

I need you to do something for me, Gramps said in a drawl I didn't like. And I need you to do it without asking any of your ridiculous philosophy questions.

Then I was outside under the fluorescent lights that lit the asphalt parking lot like an ice rink, and then I was in the Ranger with its smell of Old Spice and sloshed beer and everything else my grandfather. From the radio, a monotone voice droned factoids about the burning Interior. I drove the long way around Invermere's lake, like I used to do when I was sixteen and desperate to ogle the girls whose folks had come from Calgary to spend their summer in the great, untamed wild of the Kootenay Valley. At the beach, kids half my age gathered under a streetlight. They dabbled toes in the water and sloshed vodka on their gums and I cringed at the idea that kids were now half my age. Home, I went to Gramps' bedroom,

like he instructed, and inched a shoebox from beneath his bed. It was maroon and covered in dust and dog hair and inside I found a trove of sentimental items: a tarnished cap revolver with a sulphur-scorched hammer stained as though by ochre; a dehydrated poplar leaf big as my hand; at least two mouths' worth of baby teeth, some my own; a wedding band too large for any of my fingers; a silver Zippo lighter adorned with the American eagle. And there, at the bottom, I found an address with the name *Jack West* scrawled in my grandfather's blocky script. I ran my fingers along those letters and, lifting the paper from the box, felt the passing of a burden. What goes around comes around, they say, but I'm not so sure. Never really leaves, maybe.

I need you to find your dad, Gramps said to me from that hospital bed. Because I don't know how much time I've got left, and there are some things I need to say to him before I go.

*

Here's a story about Jack West: In '69, when he was a stupid kid, he shot me in the leg with a .22-calibre rifle—our very first introduction. Him and his old bastard Cecil had lodged the night in a copse of trees a short distance from the cabin they owned out at Dunbar. Cecil'd caught wind of a series of break-ins, and upon inspection found stuff missing: a couple old plates, fistfuls of cured elk, one or two sixers of beer. The cabins that lined the Sevenhead River were easy prey for scavenging, and though I could've foraged to keep myself alive, I had my daughter, Linnea, with me. Maybe I

got cocky, too: the night Jack shot me was the first night I didn't do a full search of the bushes that ringed the cabin and its field. Some carelessness could get a man killed in war, I'll tell you that.

The moon shone full force that night and the cabin's front door was clear for thirty yards in all directions. I intended to camp just inside the entry because it was March, and chilly, and I could smell rain on the horizon—that scent like gravel that is universal across the world. I'd also whiffed the sourness rising through the collar of my shirt, and hoped to snag a bar of soap. My daughter didn't seem to care, but a guy needs to have his own standards—we can't all be bushmen, regardless what Cecil West has to say. As Linnea and I skulked through the forest I grunted warnings to watch for the tree branches and their pine needles, because I'd seen a guy lose an eye in Vietnam after he got whipped in the face by a bamboo stalk.

I crouched at the border of the tree line and did a slow, one-eighty scan, though in hindsight I can't guarantee thoroughness. If I'd really been searching I might have noticed the mud marks at the base of the cabin's door, or the footprints in the mushy earth where Cecil and Jack had earlier done an inspection. I sniffed the air, tilted my ear to the quiet, for Linnea's benefit, mostly. She was fourteen back then and unimpressed with anything I had to say. Partly, I hated myself for hauling her along, for putting her through that. I squeezed her shoulder for reassurance then exited the tree cover and bolted for the cabin's door.

Jack was fifty yards upwind. He tells me he can't remember the events that led to the gunshot—they're obscured to him, a mishmash of adrenaline and instinct, and I believe him. He was

pubescent and he had a rifle in his hands, felt empowered, bigger than fourteen years old. He was no stranger to the outdoors: at school, during games of manhunt, Jack hid among the thick bushes outside the schoolyard's ringwire fence. Protocol forbade him from romping through those wilds, but Jack West was never really a kid to bend to any rules besides his father's. He liked the wilderness, and he liked to hunt, and he was not unaccustomed to firearms. He knew how to handle a gun: never maintenance a rifle with the action shut; a firearm's safety is true in name only; to avoid eyepiece gouges on your cheek, nestle the stock on the muscley part of your shoulder, right where the deltoid curls like a rope to your pectoral.

Here's what I think went down: Jack got scared. I darted from the tree line like a burglar and Jack traced me with his irons. I know the sensation of having a person in your sights, that flutter where your throat meets breastbone. Jack would never admit it, but he struggled in the shadow of his old man, so maybe he saw a chance to chin up in Cecil's eyes, a chance to have the old bastard give a father's approval. And in Jack's defence, I didn't exactly look like a guy who didn't need to be shot. My clothes were bushworn and sedimented with God knows how much mud and I was stalking toward his cabin, hunched like a guerrilla. I reached the door and jimmied a kinked nail in the lock and jostled it around, and the whole time Jack had me trained in that thumbnail space between the sights.

A .22 has about as much kick as an impatient cat. As I twitched the nail around the tumblers, the woods were quiet. I vaguely recall

the sound of my own breath. Then there was a small *whump* across the valley, and the bullet snagged me in the calf.

It's a little blurry after that. I hit the wooden wall of the cabin and scrambled around the side for cover. The adrenaline was in me. Cecil came tear-assing around the cabin in pursuit and his gumboots left skid trails in the mud and he slid enough to touch his knuckles to the dirt. The whole time, I'm nowhere near to finding cover and I'm hearing gunfire like popcorn in my skull, as though I'm back in the jungle, so I plant my feet and kick a rock aside in case it trips me up. Fight or flight, as they say. I test the turf, the give, how much slick I have and how well my boots bite into the mud and bloodweed and parched knotgrass. And there's Cecil bearing down on me, the first goddamned Canadian I'd met since crossing the border, this maniac with a cadet's hair and a menacing way of moving forward, as if he knows how to handle himself, as if he's going to rip me a new asshole.

Get away! I barked to Linnea, and drew my hunting knife from its sheath on my thigh.

The gap closed. Cecil ditched the rifle—no time for him to reload it—and I lashed the knife. He twisted mid-lunge, deflected the blade along his ribs and cinched his elbow down on my arm in a trap out of some British Army textbook. I rammed my forehead into his nose and he dug his knee into my gut. We meshed together, held each other like wounded men. But flawless victories are for the Bruce Lee movies: people don't go unscathed; people don't stay calm. We're desperate and cowardly and we scramble like beasts—a man would betray his own son if it meant one more shaky breath.

Cecil cracked me with his elbow and I gouged his eye with my thumb and the whole time my knife flapped useless, pinned.

We stumbled apart. I smeared blood and snot on my palm and Cecil squeezed juice from his eye.

I think you've got the wrong idea! Cecil hollered. He lifted the rifle from the ground.

You shot me.

My boy shot you.

Yeah?

Cecil levelled the rifle. I tightened my grip on the knife.

You ain't gonna shoot me with that, I told him.

That so?

You didn't reload.

Cecil ran his tongue along his teeth. He gave a nod and planted the gun's butt in the dirt. You're right, he said.

Get outta here.

This is my cabin.

Hell if I care.

Put the knife down.

Gimme the gun.

Cecil didn't move, leaned on the rifle as if breathless. You're bleeding, he said. I can help. Where'd it get you?

Calf.

Lucky. Hollowpoints. It make it through?

I shook my head, felt the warmth blooming, sticky, against my leg.

I have beer, and some fishing line, Cecil said. It won't be fun,

or pretty, but you can strike it off your list of things to do before you die.

For a moment I didn't respond, sensed my daughter's eyes on me, knew, whether I liked it or not, that I was at this man's mercy.

I'm Cecil, he said.

Archer, I told him.

You here from the States?

I showed him my gums, had no idea if he was a sympathizer or even where I could find one. Cecil waved a hand. Forget it. Anyone else out here with you?

I sheathed the knife. I've never been good at reading expressions, but Cecil seemed genuine, and he had the face of a guy who had seen enough bullshit. Then his son rounded the cabin and I looked upon Jack West for the first time. It's been a long road. His fingers kneaded the fabric at the hem of a bulky coat and he shuffled to Cecil's side. If I had it my way, that's how I'd remember Jack West—just some stupid, awkward kid on a chill evening in spring, when the future and all its shit were still distant, impossible things.

I WAS ON THE RUN from the US Army. Weeks before, home in Montana, I'd received a letter from Uncle Sam saying they needed me for another tour. It came with a stack of bills and a hardware flyer, and the mailman who handed it over—an old guy with watery eyes—bit down on his lip as if he had advice to give. At the top of the letter, in red block typeface, it said FINAL WARNING—so if I didn't want the military police on me like a herd of turtles then I

had to skip town or re-enlist. One of the toughest calls I've ever had to make: I'm a decorated soldier, I've got a Purple Heart, a Long Service Medal, a Combat Action Badge—even back then I wasn't some dreamy college kid crafting posters to save the world.

The day that letter arrived I grabbed a bottle of my homebrewed wine and got in my pickup and drove out to the acreage where I grew up. That property was someone else's legacy by then, but my family had made the land fertile, had stripped their palms raw tearing up bloodweed, planted and cultivated the trees along the riverbanks to give the soil strength. If any ghosts haunt it, they are ghosts I would know by name. The new owner—a good enough guy—had flattened our old house, but the landscape was unchanged. Landscapes take longer to move on; they're ponderous, they remember. Generations of my family went into the sculpting of that land: our sweat flavours the waters that feed the wellspring; acres of poplar trees have heard us fight and bleed and carry on. Us Coles are in the soil, and not just metaphorically.

My part of Montana is all prairie fields, but if you find yourself a vantage point and look west you can see the Bitterroot Mountains across the wheat and birch and horsehead pumps. When I got to the acreage I hiked to a land bridge above a small stream where I first put my hand on a girl's knee and where we scattered my dad's ashes in '59. He was a county deputy who spent the whole of his career without a promotion, and I don't think I ever saw him as happy as the day I made sergeant first class. I was twenty-seven; first thing he did was salute. So that stream was a good enough place to think things over. Neither me nor my dad had ever been men to

shirk responsibility, but fleeing to the Great White North was an exercise in just that. Tough tradition to break.

But I broke it, and then I got shot in the calf, and then I was bleeding and wounded and madder than the Bible. Cecil put his shoulder under my arm and Jack tried to help but he just got in the way, so Cecil waved him to the sidelines. My adrenaline had flushed. The cold got me shivering. When Linnea tells this story she says I forgot about her, went hyper-masculine, all big chests and tough words and facial hair. She's only half right at best. Cecil hobbled me forward and the whole time I was trying to think up a sane way to call my daughter from the bushes. Jack picked at the hem of his coat and Cecil barked for him to open the door, for the love of God.

Wait, I said, and then I whistled for Linnea to come out of the trees. She did so with more than a little reluctance, and then, out in the open, she fixed me with her devil's glare. It's a glare that promises retaliation at a later time, a glare of the very-unimpressed. She often looked at Jack West like that, almost by habit. I've come to miss its intensity.

Upon seeing my daughter, Cecil's forehead bunched up like a man in thought. Then he nodded to himself and pushed me through the door and into his cabin. There, he boiled water on a Coleman stove and I hiked my pant leg and cringed at the stupidity of my wound. Jack and Linnea stayed outside. When asked, Linnea says Jack was more terrified of her than of me, that he kept his distance just tugging sprigs from his coat. That's the one trait he sure as shit inherited from his dad—complete lockdown

around the better sex. Things might've turned out different if he'd inherited Cecil's backwater sense of duty, but that's neither here nor there.

At Cecil's behest, I propped my wounded leg on a chair and he rolled the pants above my knee. The hollowpoint had splintered barely after piercing the fabric, and I doubt any shards cut into muscle—not that it didn't hurt like a bastard. The skin had gone seven different shades of yellow and I could see the purple blotches where a fragment went in, but I've taken worse injuries. The worst—my burned arm—flared up by the mere proximity of heat. Cecil set his saucepan of hot water nearby, dipped a rag into it, and, in a gentle, circular motion like a guy brushes his teeth, cleaned away the weeks of dirt and sod and soil.

Jack, he called, and the boy poked his head through the door. Get the whiskey.

Jack shuffled to the cupboards and opened them and I watched him search, hesitate, and search again. He craned his neck around but Cecil had his head bowed near my calf. I caught the boy's eye though, knew from the way he winced that there wasn't any whiskey in the cupboard. He said as much, real timid.

What is there? Cecil said.

Jack produced a bottle of sherry and Cecil blinked twice and pulled his lips into a cringe. In a comically gruff voice, he said, What's that doing in there?

Jack brought two ceramic mugs, filled mine up, avoiding my eyes the whole time, and scuttled outside. Cecil lifted his eyebrows and indicated the needle dangling its trail of gut, and I raised my

mug of sherry. Fucking ridiculous, but that's how it went down, that first evening: Cecil worked with a pool player's concentration, plucking metal from my hairy leg and closing the wounds that needed closing, and I drank sherry as if it were juice and wondered if I might just be luckier than the blessed. Occasionally, Cecil splashed sherry in his own mug and winced it down. I think we both pretended the sherry was whiskey, because, hell, it should have been. I've heard Cecil tell the story a couple times, and he always makes that change. Of course he makes that change.

So, where's home? Cecil said after a time.

Grew up in Montana, but we crossed the border from Washington.

Cecil's cheek twitched toward a smile. Woman drag you there?

Shit yes. Been there since Linnea was a girl. What are the kids doing out there, anyway?

Jack doesn't want to be in here.

Thinks I'll wring his neck?

Probably thinks *I* will.

I'll repay you for the stuff we took. I'm good for it.

Jack and Linnea came inside and sat across from each other at the table, Linnea beside me and Jack beside his bastard father. In the dull light of the oil lamp Linnea looked tired enough to die. Her dark hair was stuck to her forehead and heavy on her ears. I offered a dirty hand that could cup her entire cheek. She closed her eyes and put some weight in my palm, and though one day I'd switch seats with Jack West, right then I'm sure he watched that tenderness with more than a little jealousy.

Cecil removed a last piece of metal and pulled the last stitch tight. Then he hazarded a look under his arm, across his ribs where my knife had scraped and been pinned. He eased off his hunting vest. I didn't have the best angle, but his checkered shirt was lanced open, damp and oil-black in the lamplight.

Jack, he said, and his son perked forward. How bad am I bleeding?

Jack tugged the flaps that wreathed the cut and I saw a gash there, curved like a smile. Not too bad, Jack said.

I pushed my mug aside and leaned in and waved for the needle.

Lord knows I've been drunker for more delicate things than a few stitches, I said.

Keep sipping your girly drink, Cecil told me. Then he passed his son a fresh ski needle and a string of gut and for a second Jack just stared at it like it was a thing of great worth. Cecil tugged his shirt over his head, revealed his battered, wiry torso, his pale skin and farmer's tan. He tilted sideways so Jack could access the cut. It didn't go very deep and stretched only as long as a thumb, but it ran at an angle along his ribs, and Jack's forehead bunched as he tried to find a way to work. Cecil's skin gleamed sweaty and bruised and scratched along his upper arms and collar where my fingernails had grooved his flesh. I could feel myself similarly beaten; in the morning, both of us would be stiffer than a two-pecker goat. Jack worked silently and Cecil adopted what might be the gruffest expression I have ever seen. I slid the sherry across.

I worked in the hangars, in Britain, he said. Never saw any combat.

Marine Corps. Never been shot before. Hit with napalm, but never shot.

Don't worry about paying me back.

I'll find a way.

After Jack finished and Cecil had eased his shirt on, he said he had wireframe cots in the loft, but needed to know if I'd be able to pull myself up the ladder. I told him it'd take more than a pellet in the leg to keep me down, and he grunted like I expected him to. He glanced under his shirt, to inspect Jack's work.

It's passable, he said, and ruffled the boy's hair. Then he climbed to the loft to set things up, and I spun the sherry between my fingers and looked over at Jack.

Sorry, he said.

It's alright.

I don't even remember firing.

When the adrenaline's in you, I said.

You ever shot a person?

Then Cecil came down the ladder and jerked a thumb toward the loft. Two beds up there, he said.

You're hit too. Make the kids sleep on the wood.

Jack and me can sleep in the truck, he said. I'll visit the doctor in the morning, in case you need antibiotics. Then we'll think of something.

You a sympathizer?

Cecil put his hand on Jack's shoulder. He ran his tongue along his teeth, tested the point of a canine. I'm not a war supporter, if that's what you mean.

I'm AWOL, I said, sounding suddenly sober, even to myself.
It's more serious.

You're too grey to be a draft dodger.

They'll court-martial me.

Like I said, we'll think of something.

I owe you, I told him, and Cecil made a motion with his shoulders I have come to understand as the only way he knows to acknowledge that he's been thanked.

MINISTER
WITHOUT PORTFOLIO

Michael Winter



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ONE

She told him there wasn't another person. Henry watched her stand up from her kitchen table and push things around on a counter. She peeled up the foam placemats that made that satisfying sound. She was busying herself and of course he was in her house, he was the one who would have to physically leave. For three hours they talked it over and she told him how it was and he fled through the spectrum of emotions and they were both cleansed but she returned to what was not an ultimatum. I'm leaving you now can you please leave.

But I love you, he said.

He was quite proud of how he said it. He did not know he would begin a response with the word "but." He hadn't punched a piece of furniture or raised his voice and now he said this short sentence with mercy and with confidence and honour. It might have been the voice of a messiah, the little messiah that runs each of our lives. The statement was reassuring and he could tell it had

some effect. But they were broken and she knew he was a good man but who can push through the hard times of the mundane life any more? The idea of not enough on the line, he could absorb that. But she had dismounted from the horse they were both riding. One of the things she said was she wanted to live a dangerous life.

He found his black boots and bent his toes so the joints creaked and said so long in his head, not out loud, it would have been too casual. Also, he caught himself and understood that the previous words were the best words to leave on. But I love you. They would give him the high ground and he could really dig a good ditch for himself now and remain unshaven and unwashed and drink himself into a narrow hallway with no door at the end, he could do that and search for commiseration.

It was bright out, a very happy afternoon in the autumn. Astonishing. He put his heart on a little branch, hung it there, and then almost skipped into the street. He knew that, if she was watching, that little hop would not be very attractive. But he was cleaving himself in two, something he did often for sentences at a time, but not for long days or weeks and that is how he spent his time now, split apart. A stacked cord of wood that should have been a tree.

Luckily he lived in a town that was built around a harbour and Nora's house was on top of a hill, so he had an easy walk down to the bars on Water Street. The roofs of buildings swallowed the hill and he would not have to walk past her house all the time if he just stayed downtown. That is the logic people use when they discover themselves drinking intensely. He found himself in one bar called

the Spur and a man in a corner was singing a country song which filled Henry with loathing. The man had no right to pollute the air with that song, a song from Nashville that understood nothing of a real life. He knew the man, of course, had spoken to him perhaps three times. Henry ate a pickled egg and chewed through the overboiled cold and dull yolk and drank down a pint of pale ale and came around on the song. Stripped of the production Henry was applying to the vocalization, the core of the song was ultimately true and as he left the bar he patted the old man on the shoulder. He was humming it now, Henry was. There was a line at the end where a man cuts off his lover's head and kicks it against the wall. He sang it the way the old man sang it and walked down farther towards the polluted harbour and stared up at the green and marble monument to the war dead. The men up there with their bayonets and loose helmets and kneeling and dying and forever enjoying their patina. Was it brass. No one rubbed the nose of a soldier on a memorial for good luck. Live a dangerous life.

There was the dark harbour to end his land activity. The sleeping marine vessels supplying the offshore oil and a coast guard ice breaker and a military vessel of some kind. Pure utilitarian boats all moored on very thick hawsers. He stared at the serious hulls, empty of men, and saluted. The stink of cooked diesel. Perhaps there is something here, he thought. The thought of war, or not war but an expulsion from civilian life. Or the hell with it, there is something noble in servicing oil rigs. Oil will be the end of mankind but to be in service of it is not without honour. What was it John's son had told him? Oil was the bones of dinosaurs. Civilization was

something he had not chosen. He was born into good manners and a life sheltered from death. He could renounce it. What had it given him? What were the benefits but a broken-heart?

TWO

He walked around the town all night and, as the sun rose over the ocean, he found himself back at Nora's door. He sat across the road and watched the house and street slowly wake up. He had to be back at the Bull Arm site Monday morning and he knew he'd pay for being up all night. But he was thinking there might be early activity. He wondered if he had the strength and accuracy to fight a man and win. Anyone passing him by at that hour could see he was looking to break up an aubade. But Nora was asleep and there was no man with her and the alert daylight made him stagger home feeling small and without a shell. He felt himself evaporating and it scared him. Back to John and Silvia's where he rented a room in their finished basement. He fell asleep and solidified a body and woke up remembering Nora Power had broken up with him. She had come into this bedroom once and, he realized now, tried to break up with him. This was about two weeks ago. Henry had been watching hockey on a small colour TV, with

a bag of roast chicken chips on his chest. He had worked hard all week at Bull Arm and sometimes he just liked to lie around and be a table for a bag of chips. She sat on the floor with him and wiped away her tears and put her arm around him and he gave her a good hug and she ate his chips. She was wearing a white sweater with red sequins sewn into it and the chip crumbs clung to it. She had beautiful skin and she was a big woman with a gorgeous body that he loved to stroke.

He went to work and every weekend for the next three months he tried to convince Nora Power otherwise. The word otherwise, he thought. Otherwise I will throw myself in the drink. It was winter now and the drinks were frozen over. Sometimes, on a Sunday morning, he'd watch cartoons with John and Silvia's two kids while Silvia made pancakes. Clem: Did the milk walk away from my mouth? The boy was using a straw in a small glass of milk. His sister explained the milk was running back down the straw.

THREE

Henry's buddy, John Hynes, had a contract with Rick Tobin and was gone to Fort McMurray for three-week stretches. Henry had been thinking it was the work at Bull Arm that had made Nora stray from him, but Silvia didn't mind John being away in Alberta. They managed to foster a love at a distance. He examined his friend and his friend's wife. Fostering, he thought. I will foster this love. He spent the money he made and attempted to convince Nora. He found himself one evening pressed up against her window pane saying please, Nora, please until her father came over and said Henry, Henry. He stared at her father's belt through the window, the yellow wool vest he wore in winter – Henry knew her father loved him but her father also understood his daughter. Or, at least – because no one can understand Nora Power – he backed her up in her dismissal of Henry Hayward.

It took five failed efforts for him to turn the corner on Nora. John and Silvia took care of him. It was John who asked Rick Tobin

to hire on Henry for the overseas contract. John was home for two weeks to get his buddy back in shape. This job wasn't an Alberta job, he said. It's in the middle east. You're through with Nora now you need to break your relationship with the land. The land is her land or it's your land together and you can't walk it any more alone. The logic reminded Henry of those Sunday school sermons of ancient times when men walked with giants. The only thing keeping you standing, John said, is fresh air. Get that out of your system and you'll be set to go again. John, a big thick man with strong shoulders who had been in construction his entire adult life. He spoke of Henry as if he were an old shed built with found wood. Which he was. Which we all are. Henry had worked with John out in Kelligrews hauling busted cinder blocks into a roll-off container. They had lined up at coffee shops covered head to toe in spackle. If you sat in a car with John you realized his torso was long (his head touched the ceiling). He was telling Henry that Rick Tobin had won this contract in Afghanistan. It's a big one and it'll be hilarious and we get to hang out with Tender Morris. Tender Morris who was in the reserves and stationed in Camp Julien. Oh my God Tender Morris.

HENRY RETURNED TO WORK in Bull Arm and took an elevator every day down the leg of a module four storeys underwater to conduct stress tests on the concrete being poured there. It was a routine and he enjoyed how busy he was and how distracted he felt and insulated from the truth of Nora Power having left him. This enormous pillar underwater protected him from that truth and he

could lick his wounds. It was when he came back to the surface that he was vulnerable. And sometimes, when he could not sleep and he knew he was deeply alone in the world, he'd check Silvia's computer and there'd be an email from John out in Alberta telling him of the crazy things going on in the oil patch.

Henry spent his weekends in town – he rented that room in John and Silvia's basement. He played with their kids and took them to a restaurant on Saturdays downtown. Over lunch he saw a woman in a gallery falling a hundred times in three hours, one time for each Canadian soldier dead in Afghanistan. She did this in a gallery with a window onto the restaurant where he was eating a hamburger. He did not like art particularly, but there was something in the woman he liked. He was not shy. He was a guy who handled polyethylene tubing and connected electrodes to cured cement but he was not flummoxed about a performance artist. He crossed the street with the kids and opened the door to the gallery and asked the artist where she got the idea. She told Henry about this residency with the military. They have artists who accompany the army to the arctic or, in this case, Afghanistan. She returned and felt compelled to become each soldier that had fallen.

He never saw this woman again but it prepared him to think positively towards John Hynes's notion of a contract in Kabul.

FOUR

Rick Tobin was three years older than John and Henry but they knew him growing up. Little Rick like a bantam cock in his blue coveralls, all hundred and thirty pounds of him bounding into things. Rick had ambition and drive and he knew how to connect labour with materials and funnel them into the delivery of services to small towns along the shore where they all grew up. He married Lorraine Grandy and moved into her town which was down the road from where John and Silvia had a summer house and Tender Morris had been left a house there too.

One time Rick Tobin set some dynamite to blow up virgin land in a new subdivision that was being cut out of the woods. There was concern for the fallout, so Rick had everyone park their vehicles around the perimeter to act as a buffer. Rick pressed the button and the earth lifted a little. There was a whump and the sound of tinfoil crumpling. The surface of the denuded land was torn away and all was silent, and then soil fell on them, entire root

systems, and when they got up off the ground they could see that the windows in all the vehicles were blown in. The performance metrics on this job, Rick said, are a little askew.

A few years ago Rick had bought nine second-hand dump trucks from Alberta and shipped them here. He went half on a sawmill in Horsechops Lane and became principal owner of a lounge in Fermeuse, the Copper Kettle. He snapped up two big boats from the classifieds, forty footers, when the snow crab fishery collapsed. John explained that Rick Tobin was constructing an old folks' home down the shore, and he'll take the senior citizens out in the wilderness area on the crab boats they'll lose all their money on the VLT machines at the Copper Kettle.

HENRY WAS IN A BAR ONCE and Rick called him over. Hey Henry. Rick bought him a beer. Then said Henry there's a man at the door I have to have a word with. He went over there. Rick obviously a small guy. It got loud, and Rick wiped the floor with him, then took him outside and kicked him down the handicapped ramp. That guy owed me three hundred dollars. He's buying land in Costa Rica, John said, to grow trees. Teak wood, he said, you can't get your arms around it. He wants to set the sawmill right here and ship the teak up. He asked me to supervise the mill. You can have all the teak you want, he said. Teak is twenty-seven dollars a board foot, Henry.

FIVE

You can say no to Rick and that's okay, he'll find other people. Such is what happened with the sawmill. But this, John said, the money is good and Silvia is behind it. They had family to help with the kids. You sign on for a year with one trip home and four day stints touching down in the United Arab Emirates. Health, dental, a seven hundred thousand dollar insurance policy – put down one of my kids, Henry. Security provided by her majesty's government. Tender Morris is going to take care of us.

Rick sent the paperwork and Silvia printed off the forms and spread out the papers on the dining room table while the kids ate a bucket of chicken on the carpet with paper towels and root beer. John and Henry signed their names and Silvia witnessed it. Airplane tickets arrived as a pdf document on Silvia's laptop.

SIX

They flew west to Toronto and then east to Frankfurt and south to Kabul. In the airport in Toronto they saw a woman with a golden retriever on her way back to Connecticut. John asked her about the dog. She was bringing the dog to a family. She was blind and the dog was eleven years old and starting to fail, so the dog had to go and she would get another dog in two weeks. But she was heartbroken about the dog.

The only thing interesting about the Frankfurt airport was a ceramic fly that told you where to point your stream of piss in the urinals.

Tender Morris met them at the airport in Kabul. He was in a green jeep called an Iltis. I'm to escort you to barracks, he said. Tender a tall, rangy man with red hair and long, involved tattoos – he'd been their hockey goalie in high school. You'll stay where the tradespeople camp out, he said. A secure area, inside the wire. A separate facility from the army station but protected by our

Canadian compound. He smacked the steering wheel hard when he said protected. Beds are better, food is better, wages: better. So fuck you and fuck your benefits. I'll tell you the one thing before you get all superior on me: you're not as safe. Tender's eyes patrolling the small houses and gates and vast blank areas of sand and rock and garbage. He was a reserve who volunteered for combat and was enjoying every minute of it. He was alive. On that note I got to show you something, he said. Under your seat, John.

John pulled out a heavy padded envelope. Inside, wrapped in clear bubblepack, the shapes of flat heavy things. John tore off the tape. Two Sig Sauer automatic pistols slipped onto his lap.

I couldn't find ammo and I want those back when you go back, Tender said.

TENDER DROVE THEM into Kabul. There was a pig's head on the ground beside a shaded cart and boys on skateboards zipped through the white rubble of an old government building. They drove through this into a quieter neighbourhood with high metal gates and the tops of established trees, their leaves covered in dust. Tender stopped the jeep behind a line of new black cars and climbed out and rapped on a gate made of galvanized metal. It was very loud. The sun was just setting. A rusted slit opened in the gate and Tender told them he had two civilians who'd like to eat. They're looking for Chinese food, a voice said, just the top of a lip available at the slit in the gate. The gate pulled open and they walked into a cement courtyard. Razorwire on the walls. The lip of the man was not there.

Look, Tender said, and took Henry in a headlock and rubbed his head. I heard about Nora. This is a good spot to forget about Nora.

I need to get her out of my head too, John said.

The building was stucco and inside it suddenly got dark, men at small tables with white tablecloths, a music in the walls, men from various nongovernmental agencies and tourists, Tender said. There were guns on the table. Two men studying the steel tang in a big knife, passing it back and forth almost in wonder as to how the metal got in there. A string of lamps shone over a buffet table with stainless steel trays full of coloured vegetables and oily meat. The light bounced in a dazzle off the food but the food itself was dead. Around the buffet were perhaps a dozen Chinese women in tight tops with their bare arms collecting white plates. They had red bows around their necks that somehow kept their dark hair pinned up and they were listlessly bending over the food to prepare the plates and then delivering these plates into corners of the darkness with some accelerated urgency.

They took a table near the back wall by a hall to what was the washrooms and one of the servers came over. Her fingers touched the edge of the table. In bored English: what would you like a drink. She was wearing a simple black-and-white outfit and you saw her midriff directly in front of your eyes – there was a lively rhinestone stuck to the belly button – and her shoulders were bare and a number of buttons undone at the cleavage. Her skin was as alive as the food was dead. She was serving the food and opening up tabs on cans of beer and glasses of crushed ice and soda and small plastic bottles of hard liquor like you get on an airplane.

This man here needs a full service, Tender said about Henry. And we're his friends who will take care of his bill.

I might need a little dessert, John said. Or watch some dessert.

They ate and drank and Henry asked about the barracks and Tender said it was not a problem.

They were all suddenly ravenous and ate plenty of the food that seemed to drink on the light in the room. The crushed ice and little bottles kept arriving. The ice was almost the same as the ice of home but there was no doubting that everything was different here. The air rubbed the surfaces of things in a different way. Henry drank his drink and another little bottle arrived and the screw caps required a little elbow work. The cap she is very small. Henry, the next day, could only remember being led down that hallway past the washrooms where the quality of the paint and the cleanliness of things seemed to become less interested in convincing you things were high grade. There was music in a ceiling grate. Lie down here, sir. A ceiling and the top of a heavy curtain that he guessed covered a window. Or perhaps it gave you the comfort of a window but there was no window. He was taken care of on a rubber mattress and a cloth on his belly and then his friends brought him back to a bed with a thin camping mattress and the sun was already hanging over the low, flat city.

SEVEN

Rick Tobin was part of a larger contingent that repaired water and sewage and revamped wiring and took care of waste management for the Canadian forces even as they were participating in the draw-down of operations at Camp Julien. We provide warehousing, Rick said. Transportation, bulk fuel management, vehicle maintenance, food services, communication services, camp maintenance, electricity, water supply and distribution.

Rick used up all his fingers.

Everything, he said, to operate this facility and maintain it.

Rick Tobin, believe it or not, was also a mini-soccer coach. He organized Afghan children on the army base and dribbled out free soccer balls inflated by his own tire pump he'd packed in his checked baggage.

They had to wait to use the computers to Skype home. It was one of the services the trades and soldiers shared. Tender was talking to his girlfriend, Martha. Stripped to his waist with dog tags on

his collarbones, a tattoo of some kind across the back of his neck, he sat with other soldiers in the dark at blue screens manoeuvring the cursor over to the panels that allowed their loved ones to see their faces. John Hynes sat next to Tender, his face turned from concentration on figuring out the connection to a relief at seeing the top of Clem's head too close to the built-in camera, Silvia grabbing at the shoulders to get him and his sister steady and then all of them synchronized to a connection no longer staggered. Tender's girlfriend on the screen now. Martha Linegar. Did Henry know Martha. How vulnerable they all looked sitting on steno chairs at the little booths inside the tent that reminded Henry of a jumpy castle.

You want to grab this one after me, Tender said.

It's okay, Henry said.

Say hello to Martha.

Hello Martha.

She waved at Henry while she looked a little up, into the green dot he guessed that made sure you were being screened properly. My god, Henry thought, how can it be I have no one to talk to.

The toilets were at the far end of the compound and these too were prefabricated and there were instructions in several languages about how to sit on the toilet and how to keep the toilet clean. Henry Hayward realized that these two sections of the compound were the most important to keep functional. Although bedding was crucial and the canteen too. But you did not think of these because there was enough to eat and the cots were adequate. The screen and the toilet were the furniture he would sorely miss if

he were off compound overnight or on an extended sortie. If he were a soldier. Of course he did not have to worry about this, he was a subcontractor. He had to push tubes full of wiring through tunnels in the ground and thread them under rivers to connect up the busted grid and listen to sonar equipment for a clear contact. But they did all sorts of work. One time they had to rewire an Afghani house. He was surprised at how modern the house was, there was not a traditional bone in its body. He was with John and Rick one afternoon when they had to cut through a door with a reciprocating saw and enter a hallway while Tender Morris, attached to their civilian unit, kept a lookout for Taliban. Got your pistols, he said. There were tea sets and some plates and small pieces of furniture that looked like they had been handed down from someone old but the rest of the infrastructure was brand-spanking new. A set of particle board bunkbeds and three teenaged Afghans in windbreakers dancing to a stereo and playing bongos and electric keyboard.

EIGHT

During their ninth week there was trouble in the southern provinces and, after a security assessment from Ottawa, funding was restricted for the contract Rick Tobin serviced. A civilian support worker had been injured by a rocket attack. They were violating the mandate, Rick Tobin said, that they be used in a stable environment. It was Thanksgiving and the minister of defence had flown into the base and told them directly their revised plans. The minister had served turkey and dressing and mashed potatoes and was celebrating the draw-down in troop allocations as if this were something to be positive about. It was one of those ceremonial dinners where the minister makes sure the national papers have photographed him wearing a festive apron.

The minister explained to Rick Tobin that their contract was being adapted to meet the desire of operational deployment. There was a troop ceiling in place and now certain hybrid situations for support trades were being considered. Would they ride with the

military. Dressed and armed for robust situations. What do you think about that, Rick said to John and Henry. Either that, or we go home. Henry Hayward looked at John.

You have to live on the edge, John. Or youre taking too much room.

Easy for you to say, John said. He was serious. You don't have kids.

Henry had never heard John pull this card before. And he didn't like how humourless he was. The powers that be penciled in their request and that's how they lingered on at Camp Julien. Tender Morris thought it hilarious that they would be coming out on patrols after they did small arms training and a twenty-day soldier qualification course. You have to be issued new apparel, Tender said. And a beret that needs shaping. Tender showed them how to do the shaping.

You get a razor, he said, and you shave all that fuzz off. Use a single blade razor and draw it over the inside and the outside. Do it lightly. Now, put the beret on and pull the string so it's snug. Tie it off and cut the strings at the knot.

John: Why not burn the strings.

Tender: Trust me you don't want fire next to a beret. Now youre ready to shape it. Put it on and hop in the shower. Turn the water on warm and just let it run over your head. No stay in there. Ten minutes. Okay get out now and dry off, here's a towel. Keep the beret on. Let it dry on your head. Keep pulling it over and combing it down. Leave it on until suppertime. And keep it in that shape, don't fold it or flatten it. Not until it's completely dry.

I'm going to wet mine and put it under my mattress overnight.

Tender Morris: Wet it and blow-dry it. You can shave it close and put it in the freezer, that works too. Shave, shape and freeze.

John: Then tie it and burn off the strings down to the knot.

Jesus no fire. Shave it until it's flimsy but don't get any bare spots. He showed them how. John stood in the doorway with his wet beret on his head, pointing it at the sun.

It's like wearing a solar panel on your head.

You got to remember, guys, it's an ongoing process.

Why not use a straight razor.

Soldier, this is a don't ask don't tell army.

It doesn't matter if the razor was straight or not, girl.

I use a razor that cuts both ways.

What about a grill lighter.

Your beret will stink.

And with that they started going out in the jeep.

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