

Hamish Hamilton

# Upfronts





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# THE ORENDA

Joseph Boyden



HAMISH HAMILTON  
an imprint of Penguin Canada Books Inc.

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Canada Books Inc., 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.  
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England  
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)  
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia  
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)  
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India  
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand  
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)  
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,  
Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published 2013

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 (RRD)

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*Publisher's note: This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.*

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

ISBN: 978-0-670-06418-2

Visit the Penguin Canada website at [www.penguin.ca](http://www.penguin.ca)

Special and corporate bulk purchase rates available; please see  
[www.penguin.ca/corporatesales](http://www.penguin.ca/corporatesales) or call 1-800-810-3104, ext. 2477.

## *Hunted*

I awake. A few minutes, maybe, of troubled sleep. My teeth chatter so violently I can taste I've bitten my swollen tongue. Spitting red into the snow, I try to rise but my body's seized. The oldest Huron, their leader, 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. The weight these men give their dreams will be the end of them.

Although I still know little of their language, I understand the words he whispers and force myself to roll over when the club swings toward me. The thorns bite into my back and the bile of curses that pour from my mouth make the Hurons convulse 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. With a low sun rising and the air so cold, noise travels. They are clearly fed up with the young Iroquois girl who never stopped whimpering the entire night. Her

face is swollen and, when I see her lying in the snow, I fear they killed her while I slept.

Not long ago, just before first light, we'd all paused to rest, the leader and his handful of hunters stopping as if they'd planned this in advance, the pack of them collapsing against one another for the heat. They whispered among themselves, and a couple glanced over at me. Although I couldn't decipher their rushed speech, I sensed 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 us. We had slowed them down all night, and despite trying to walk quietly I'd stumbled in the dark through the thick brush and tripped over fallen trees buried in the snow. At one point I removed my snowshoes because they were so clumsy, but then 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 once he'd accomplished the deed.

Now the snow covering the lake glows the colour of a robin's egg as sunlight tries to break through 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 feeling of 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, its excitement in 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 barely support my gaunt frame, that my chest has filled with a sickness that's turned my skin yellow.

I know dogs, though. As in my old world, they 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 travelling easy in the frozen air. When I bend to help the girl up, I see the others have already disappeared into the shadows of trees and thick brush.

My terror of being left behind for those chasing me, who will make sure my death is slow and painful, is so powerful that I now weigh taking my own life. I know exactly what I must do. Asking Your divine mercy for this, I will strip naked and walk out onto the lake. I calculate how long all this will take. It's my second winter in the new world, after all, and my first one I witnessed the brutality of death by freezing. The first ten minutes, as the pack races closer and closer, will certainly be the most excruciating. My skin will at first feel as if it's on fire, like I'm being boiled in a pot. Only one thing is more painful than these early minutes of freezing, and it's the thawing out, every tendril of the body screaming for the agony to stop. But I won't have to worry about that. I will lie on the frozen lake and allow the boiling cold to consume me. After that 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 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 that 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, my eyes frozen shut as I slip into a sleep that no one can awaken from. As the dogs circle me I will try to smile at them, baring my own teeth, too, and when they begin to eat me I won't feel myself being consumed but will, like You, Christ, 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 away from the lake's edge. After all, if she's alive, won't her people—my pursuers—consider sparing me? I will keep her alive, not only because this is what You demand but also to save myself. The thought of betraying Your wishes feels more an intellectual quandary than what I imagine should physically cause my heart to ache, but I'll worry about that later. For now I follow the others' footsteps as best I can, my thick black robe catching on the branches and nettles, the bush so thick I wonder how it is that the men I follow, and those who follow me, are not part animal, contain some black magic that gives them abilities beyond what is natural.

You seem very far away here in this cold hell, and the Superior's attempts to prepare me before I left France, before my journey to this new world, seem ridiculous in their naïveté. 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 ice. There is no warming your body and your soul by them. But Superior 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 trees that the bitter sun fails to penetrate.

## *A Man Should Feel Happy*

I stop to look up because the sun breaks, puffs of my breath shimmering 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, how many of us there are, what condition we're in, and especially that we drag a crow with us. The sun today is not a friend. If we all die today, it will be because of it. And the sun won't give true heat for three more moons, so it's useless. The Crow who tries to follow is worse than useless. And the girl. Taking her was a bad idea. I knew this yesterday like I know it now. I'm older, my love, but still haven't learned to listen to what my chest tells me.

I ask Fox to set a sinew snare where the path narrows, just high enough to strangle the first of their dogs, now howling across the lake and not so far away. With any luck, the others will be hungry enough to stop and tear apart their friend, for surely they've not been eating much 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 party of our enemy, both 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 hunting party when we found them in a gully. It was almost too easy. We shot arrows through two and the other two could barely put up a fight. They didn't even seem to care when Fox clubbed down one of the women, who at least 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 my weapon free. Yes, I'm older, but 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. He's big, thick through the chest and clearly strong, but is he not the most awkward man I've ever met? He is a holy one, though. I've watched him pray to his sky people for long stretches at a time, thumbing wooden and white metal 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 asked Fox to do it, my asking is the same

as if I myself had done it. Fox cut their throats with his knife so that they'd die quickly, ignoring 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 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 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 what was clearly a child through the forest. Fox looked at 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 were 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.

We shouldn't have followed our own tracks back out. This certainty of direction gives away too much to an enemy who's quick 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 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, something tickling me like blackflies buzzing my ears, waking me from an afternoon slumber. That's when I hurried my pace last night and my hunters knew then, too, what we all now faced.

Despite her slowing us down all night and as her people pursue us this morning, I still don't regret taking her. She contains something powerful. This has become more and more clear in the last while. I'm willing to take this great risk because of the promise of what's inside her. And if the Crow is able to not only keep up with my hunters but also keep the girl alive, he will have proved to me that both of them have something 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'll find the Crow first, and when they see their child in his arms they'll celebrate her survival with a feast that ends in the consumption of the Crow. Yes, they'll immediately send a much smaller party to pursue the rest of us, but these odds are better than what we now stare at. I point out the snare to the Crow as he stumbles up, breathing heavily.

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

## *Dreams*

I dreamed all of this. I told my father but he was too tired, too hungry, I think, to listen. I told my mother as well, but she, too, was tired and hungry. I see the arrow that strikes my father's neck before it even flies. I see the blood on the snow, steaming 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 and 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's 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 father's brothers and their children who aren't far from here. I will run faster than I ever have and I won't stop until I find my father's brothers or I am dead. Her eyes flash to me that if these ones here catch me I will wish I had died already. And then she bites the man like she's 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's a good thing 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 and cannot see or hear our parents dying, 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 before eventually going still.

I will not shake into my death, I tell myself in my dream, and again when I'm swallowed up in the arms of the fox man, who sneaked up behind me quick as a lynx, so I go stiff and wait for him to smash me on the head. Instead, he carries me to the big man who struck down my brother, and as I pass the others who are dead, my father, my mother, his two young hunters and their wives who squirted blood onto the men laughing 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 ring of blood circling his head like a bright ring around the moon in autumn, and his arms stretch out from him as if he's 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'll think I've turned to wood or ice and they'll leave me in the snow because my weight is not worth carrying, especially when my father's brothers and their sons and their dogs find out what's happened. These men who have killed my family, these men who I've dreamed of, they better start running now, for my father's brothers and their sons who will pursue them soon will never stop chasing until they're done with it. And so I'll stay heavy and stiff and let my feet and arms and head catch on the branches as these men try to carry me away. If I stay frozen they'll eventually be forced to drop me.

This morning my plan has worked and I watch my family's killers leave me soon after my father's brother's strongest dog sings out that he can smell me. But the other prisoner bends down to me, and he smells so bad that I want to throw up, his breath stinking like rotted meat. The wolf's hair on his face and his clothes the colour of charcoal 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 with a circle around his head and his arms stretched out and his feet relaxed, one crossed over the other. As the hairy man bends over me, I watch my tiny father arc toward me, his face catching the first morning light and his

body meets my lips and it feels warm and I see now that he's still  
alive because he's warm and I try to kiss him as he swings away and  
the stinky man picks me up and I hear my father's brother's dog in  
the distance sing out once more.

## *Protection*

I know that the one called Bird and his warriors can't be far ahead. I wish to God they'd wait. The dogs mustn't be far behind either, having gone quiet now that they're closer to me, their prey. 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 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 flint 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 slowly 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, and am sick to realize I might consider this because if she makes it then I, too, will survive it unscathed.

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 test the footing, feeling steadier now with a faint 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 in the frozen creek bed.

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 scratching her way up the embankment, its incline steep enough that when she makes it no farther than her own length, she slips back down again. It would almost be comical if not for the glare she shoots back at me, her eyes alight like some animal's. These ones can behave so inhumanly. Despite our dear Pope's teachings that possession of a soul raises all of us to men, I have seen with my own eyes what they'll do to an enemy. Forgive me, Lord, but I fear that they are animals in savagely human form.

I sit in the snow of the creek and fit the snowshoes back on my feet, tying the hide cords as best as I remember the Hurons showing me. I stand up and think to say something in parting to the desperate girl still struggling desperately to climb away, but

then think better of it. She won't understand my French, and my head is far too panicked to attempt the Huron tongue, which 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 at me as my arms reach out, and as I tense for her to claw 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 over 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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UNNAMEABLE COUNTRY

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HAMISH HAMILTON  
an imprint of Penguin Canada Books Inc.

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Canada Books Inc., 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,

Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published 2014

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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*Publisher's note: This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.*

Manufactured in the U.S.A.

ISBN: 978-0-670-06700-8

Visit the Penguin Canada website at [www.penguin.ca](http://www.penguin.ca)

Special and corporate bulk purchase rates available;  
please see [www.penguin.ca/corporatesales](http://www.penguin.ca/corporatesales) or call 1-800-810-3104, ext. 2477.

## *Light and Heat*

The universe is shaking. All the light enters the world in a great breath and we are asleep. What a shame.

Nearby seismologists studying earthquakes in the region record the spontaneous quiver of ground and sky with numbers to mean another inexplicable blaze, keenly located this time at a local news agency's headquarters.

Locals later on camera and microphone swear by a white bright flash and nimble flames along the walls of the building where they used to gather news stories on computer screens to tell minute-by-minute accounts of life at gunpoint in an unnameable country.

The television says a journalist's office becomes a half-dozen hot melted video cameras and tripod remains, says the odour of burning flesh though not a body in the vicinity for the previous eight hours. Reporters claim an eerie tone, single-pitch scream blue-violet to touch, voiceless, sourceless, irrepressible. Another mysterious fire somewhere far away.

The brief headlines in the major press refer to ongoing clashes between American forces and local goondas and troublemakers, no mention of spidersilk or burned fields of cultivation, peripheral mention of unverifiable rumours that they came in choppers by air and in Jeeps with fishglitter cannons in sunlight mounted shots and pulverized scream and glass.

My mother watches a television news program that morning on the unrelated event of hundreds displaced in our country's hinterland as she irons a spidersilk blouse for her hosiery shop racks. As the first customers and community ladies with flyswatters and fans for the heat walk into the store, pour her mint tea into glasses for themselves, sit on the sturdiest wickerwork chairs first, she knows in advance how her shelves clothing and sale items will become background that day for blaming, pontificating, arguing, finger-pointing.

She knows the president's recent negotiations with the American viceroy, his pledge to keep occupying forces in our nation until an undefined stability, and last week's discovery of the largest natural gas reserves in the region in the Gulf of Eden will carry the shop conversations until they return to the spontaneous fires: where will the next fire be, the ladies will ask. How many dead or injured this time, let's review the patterns again there are no patterns. The questions: divine origin or man-made hell-intent, what part does spidersilk.

At that time, yours truly is nearby youthful gangster-steps to veritable gentleman, face to face with the escapees of light and heat of my mother's television program, at a criss-cross of subterranean

corridors where netherworld refugees like the ones he commonly encounters as manager of a halfway house for the living dead have heaped and piled bags trunks pots and plates, have sprung tents, located pants and shoes on the floor of the labyrinth of government offices, on the run from the latest spontaneous fires village burn in our unnameable country.

Fire in the unnameable country: we wonder why. Why fire in the unnameable country that peaks flames through hospitals and schools, on a bus or a common home kaplowie. When did you first arrive. Who will we blame for the roar, buzzing cadence electrical wiring ablaze, the quake of walls shattered smithereens without faultlines, without warning. Whence comes the fire in the unnameable country that began long before my birth on a flying carpet.

## *Alauddin's Rug*

At the dawn of the microchip era, the past returns to the unnameable country, preserved by rumour. It was said that a certain Alauddin, a magician who had made a modest income once upon a time in English music halls performing sleight-of-hand routines, who had served in Alexandria in the British Army during the Second World War, who had died two inglorious deaths, first by dysentery and then murdered after quarrelling with an army sergeant over a woman before returning to life while floating down the Suez Canal, who had been picked up by a merchant marine vessel, migrated by the luck of his teethskin to California where he began to play small parts in Hollywood, who had wound up years later in Iraq from where he had just fled the Baathist regime for tax evasion, this selfsame Alauddin with a single name had flown to our unnameable country in the dead of night about a month earlier by flying carpet and was now offering rides daily on his fabled machine.

To prove the veracity of his craft, the magician described to citizens their country from the air exactly as it was, and he unfurled his patterned peagreen carpet, which seemed more old than majestic, is actually ancient, he declared, from the century of Haroun al-Rashid, and which he claimed worked only by his direction. All this was true: he hovered several feet off the ground, rose twelve feet in the air, and when others tried to operate it similarly, the rug was unresponsive until Alauddin uttered some inscrutable open-sesame words which were once commonly understood, and clapped twice.

Nasiruddin Khan, enthused by descriptions of Alauddin by the nameless rebels positioned against the occupying American troops/  
Nasiruddin who: Nasiruddin son of Joshimuddin Khan, owner of the largest spidersilk fields in our country in the early 1900s, Nasiruddin owner of spidersilk factories that produced soft cloth light to lift but impenetrable to arrows, beautiful spidersilk that drove a century of fashion and brought the late-slaving British and later invaders, the Americans who still remain, Nasiruddin who later included pop manufacture—Capsicum Cola, Valampuri Coke, Mirror Water—to his productions, was the primary advocate of rebellion against the Hollywood enterprise that began before Hedayat was even seed-egg and swept up the entire country in a maze of scaffolding and unfinished construction and two-dimensional houses, your nation for a movie set, would you have this, Nasiruddin Khan ridiculed, as we watched the Horn of Africa turn to mist.

Nasiruddin Khan, enthused by the information that among the magician's past exploits was his disappearance of Alexandria

during the Second World War, thereby saving it from bomb attacks, thought of Alauddin as potentially useful to the rebellion but wanted to wait until proven he was not an American operative.

Watch him for now, he told his men. So for several months, Alauddin's rug becomes a household name, and his success invites other, less talented magicians, some capable of twisting wooden staffs into snakes, others lesser talented and repeating old rabbit-and-hat tricks, as the miracle of flight remains in Alauddin's grasp alone, since only he is able, with the magic carpet, to recreate the scintillating effect of the Maroon slave Amun's flight from the unnameable country and his perforation of the atmosphere through his calculated eviction by the colonial authorities at the dawn of our story elaborated elsewhere.

At street level, our city La Maga has become the ruins of a movie set, so Alauddin sets to work at sundown on the rooftop of the hotel where he stays, and watch watch: already they're stretching from outside hotel doors through first-level corridors up five flights of stairs to the rooftop where waiters serve patrons lined up to raised platform for rug and flight show.

For the price of an intracity bus fare, he takes up grown women, men, screaming children who cover their eyes as they climb above the clouds and dare not look as the ground becomes an encyclopedia map. How high, he asks each person, informing that after a certain distance from the earth you feel no fear because it no longer seems real.

Given his natural charisma as well as the fact that his carpet is potentially capable of freeing people from the checkpoints of

La Maga and throughout the unnameable country, he quickly becomes a threat to the occupying army, under whose hire it becomes clear Alauddin is not serving. At first they try poisoning him, which fails, since his first death from dysentery inoculated him against all attacks on the gastrointestinal. The sniper's bullet fired from a higher nearby rooftop at dusk when Alauddin is taking customers up into the sky misses the mark not once but four times as if the projectiles simply disappear before reaching their target. The operative responsible for strangulating the magician while he is bathing slips on a slight pool of water and lands badly on his neck, remains paralyzed for life, and Nasiruddin Khan denies the coincidental possibility of all these events and realizes Alauddin the Magician is meant to serve the cause of resistance.

In the small flat above the hosiery shop, the news of the flying rug excites even my world-weary Aunt Chaya, who has cut all ties with the world in permanent convalescence and decides to remain bitter against her sister, though Reshma has no interest in her German heart palpitation/her romantic interest, I mean and as I will later reveal fully. Alauddin briefly unites the sisters before Reshma's scheduled departure to Berlin to study at an art academy. The whole family shuttles to the hotel and lines up to test-fly the rug.

Evening, folks, only three at a time, Alauddin's young assistant directs my mother and sisters forward, leaving my father grounded. I don't mind, he shrugs under the shawl he has brought for chills, latest symptom of his curious illness.

Are you sure, my mother takes a step backward, but Reshma grabs her arm. We'll only be a minute, Mamun, says my aunt.

The signal of my arrival can be described this way: high high in the air, my mother is narrating aloud with eyes closed as her sisters shout, hold hands, as Alauddin directs the sights from the distant horizon Gulf of Eden backwards, and my mother tells the story already once upon a time in her mind though not yet distant past, once upon a time, your father and I met in a cemetery crowded with cirrus clouds, she tells, as the thrill of flight pushes me curious towards the world, down through the birth canal as the carpet rises, and in my mother's shock a scream flies eyes like butterfly wings flutter. I am almost here. Like death, birth is unexpected.

Afterward, we are home and an experienced neighbour serves as midwife. My head is appearing and the tension is everywhere along Shukriah's uterine walls her thighs abdomen vulva as the pale green walls breathe in and out in time to her hard labour breaths in-exhalations.

My father: I understand, Shukriah, it hurts, darling, but please just breathe. And my mother's roar: just tell me how you understand fifty-three hours seventeen minutes of constrict relax constrict relax/a scream interruption/my mother resets her huffing-puffing, swiftly regains rhythm/broken water, muscles seizing, tissues distending, surely torn now, and then maybe push out a miscarriage, she yells, because like you can empathize, you man. Recall, as if you have overheard, their loving words to each other just several hours prior, but can we judge, are we in any position to judge.

Meanwhile, I am caught in the midst, who is paying attention to me, where is the doctor/man, lowly cretin man who hot breaths

populated microscopic insects inside, my mother continues cursing, and another big push and something greymucus and pink is emerging emerging from my mother until finally my owl's screech ear-rending howl.

Out of the womb and into the sky: our neighbours still report to Shukriah that first wail they had waited years to hear, that entered their homes bustled furniture rushed window into the streets to rustle branches and tremble birds, thumb hearts in chests for one what the hell moment.

Everything is monochrome. There are some nearshapes. Light tumbles everywhere onto objects in the room. Some are near, others farther away. Correction: this is uncertain. A pungent odour. Is it from the elongated masses waving near me. (Myself. Limbs, I would later learn, and digits. Fragments of and little control over these. But myself nevertheless.) Or is the smell over there. Other smells, but these are more nuanced, indescribable. The smells go away when the elongated masses near me disappear and then a warm shape, bright, soft, singular, a clothshape, I would learn to feel.

Hark unto the sounds. Little sounds and the bigger sounds; the bigger sounds come closer and their shapes and movements become ordered: a wholething, a face, I will come to know, of either the one or the other, mother or father. I am frightened but no one is crying. Cover him more with the blanket, my mother says as my father carries me around the room, and his smell is heavy, weighs hashahasha from the nose, and then a yellow tinkle.

Ooh, he has soiled himself.

At least we know that works, Shukriah is laughing, gleaming. Bring him to me, please. Her smell means something like before, long ago. I am lifted closer, and then the smell is closer.

Then the dark but not so much. Like a whole thing though not quite. A shadow. The universe disappears; to say it another way, sleep divides time, though I know neither word. In the beginning, the world seems dislocated from my mother's stories while I waited in the red-lit darkness of her womb, in its lub-lub comfort mother heart, its swimming sense of already and always. (Later, I would conclude that even in these earliest times, I had realized the continuity with some distant past, but knew no origin could be deduced by this feeling, and that one could not conflate it with any notion of eternity; rather, tick-tocking on and on: only a vague sensation of existing, having existed, and persisting in time.)

What others observed in Hedayat was that he didn't speak a word after his introductory howl, went dumb, and scared his parents who thought he was deaf. He waited until his second year to take his first steps, then climbed out of his perambulator without warning one day and broke into a trot in a crowded marketplace covered with glass shards and husks of rifle shots, eggplant vendors and sweet sellers until Shukriah caught up with him, surprised by the deftness and surety of his steps.

When Reshma returned for holidays from her studies in Berlin, he was already four years old and she swore she could hear all the answers to her questions, and later verified that the quality of his voice was the same on these earlier occasions, though he did not move his lips and was still in the habit of pointing to indicate this

or that thing. He showed no prodigious insight in these early years, exactly dumb, but projected endless curiosity with his eyes and the hidden desire to match the world with what he had imagined it to be before he was born.

Recall, as if I have told you, in those days Mamun M. had not worked for a long time, and it was only through Shukriah's indefatigable and successful efforts to unfreeze his savings account from his playback singing days that the family managed to survive, even to pay Reshma's tuition and living expenses abroad. No one could locate his sickness anymore because he did not shit fluid, was no longer wasting thin away, displayed a healthy appetite, and had re-formed talkative friendships with Xasan Sierra, the cigarette vendor, as well as Confectionarayan Babu, the candy seller, among other neighbourhood staples. Mrs. Henry, meanwhile, my parents' downstairs neighbour who owned a hosiery shop where my mother began working soon after my parents moved to La Maga, had grown arthritic and suffered from chronic diarrhea, which she blamed on the equatorial climate and infested drinking water that grew no better if boiled, she claimed, and returned to England. Before she left, Shukriah convinced her to mortgage the shop to her, allowing the old woman to add to her pension and for the family to acquire a means of supporting itself for the foreseeable future.

AFTER NUMEROUS TRIPS to the local doctor, who was not an oncologist but who managed through conversation to prove (without actually proving) that Mamun M.'s illness was imaginary, my father decided he had let years of his life slip away into fabulism

as he lay in bed regurgitating the past, and began to impose upon the house strict notions of reality, cutting strings of remembrance and loosening events that seemed no longer plausible, including his discovery of his father's thoughtreel rubbish, he would say, that they can read thoughts with the shortwave, another way of controlling the public imagination with fear, and that jazz orchestra blowing about a windy hallway and the pressing of the body against the wall like a carpet beetle: true to an extent, but remembering the nightmare, my father would say before casting a gaze elsewhere in time.

Hedayat remains curious of his father's thoughts those days on the magician Alauddin's sudden rise to prominence, his opinions of his wife and sister-in-laws' flight on the magic rug, but at that time infant Hedayat's vow of silence was absolute, and he would not have revealed his clairaudience and grownup thoughts for all the curiosity in the world.

Grip, Mamun M. would declare, placing his thumbs and forefingers on his son's cheeks and pinching pinching invoking evolution, is what distinguishes our ability, our opposable digits, God bless, to manipulate the world and to make it human.

Shukriah, he would instruct with wagging finger: Tell this boy no funny stories beyond the grip of normality, and you too, Chaya, same-same, I am warning.

As an act of protest against the strict conditions of reality and human behaviour set down by his father's newly stentorian, masculinist voice, Hedayat briefly returned to a non-ambulatory state and acted as if he had forgotten how to walk, and when his mother yelled, see what you have done, Mamun, he showed

preference for scuttling sideways, his back arched, on his hands and feet like a crab, or to crawl about like a barbaric example of the canine tribe, until his mother cajoled him to return to his original silent, ambulatory state. Recall from press reports how at that time there lay strange fruit scattered everywhere in La Maga, which would explode out your raspberry insides and reveal the true colour of your hidden organs, you know what I mean: clusters of little fruits on the treebranches and lying fallen on the dusty streets, which they told you in school to avoid at all cost.

Come along, Niramish tells one lunch hour, his mixed vegetal odour a constant warning to others to stay away, but a friend to Hedayat since at school he is the only one who will tolerate his silence. Niramish's own two problems: first the smell of mixed curry vegetables stuck to yellow turmeric fingertips, effusing from clothing, detectable from a hundred feet away. Niramish Khaja, loyal companion, smelly child: it never bothered little Hedayat the slightest, and, in fact, he interpreted the constant smell as an augury of the future, as if it were an odour destined to grow thicker in time. Niramish's second problem: narcolepsy. In a stumbling sentence, halfway through his response to the teacher's question, sitting or standing up, even poised in his characteristic loping gait, in the schoolyard or in the cracked-mirror streets, anywhere without warning, he would fall into a stertorous nod, his head would slip and his double chin would quadruple, before the snoring sound came out and came out and out until someone pinched his nostrils, wake up Niramish, wake up, smelly child.

Hai, did it happen again, he would re-emerge with a loud snort.

Niramish, good-natured Niramish, a nutritious and well-meaning friend, would one day provide Hedayat with the perfect excuse. See him: running running toward the prize. Look, he shakes the tree, they fall to the ground, and he lifts them up out of the dust mound to see. And then the fire and the howling at these strange clusters of grapes. A mere ten steps away, Hedayat is thrown backward by an archangelic force and aside from a minor bruise on his forehead appears uninjured at first. You might say it was in consolation for his friend Niramish, who loses his right eye as well as three fingers of his right hand, pointer middle ring, and/or for the added reason of rebellion against father and father-prescribed humanity; whatever the case, Hedayat finds his hands curled up into hardened talons, unable to bend his thumbs and besotted by the added difficulty of fully working the digits of both right and left hands.

Doctors who probe observe take samples of the tendons bones nerves interstitial tissues conclude, nothing wrong, Shukriah Ma'am, seems altogether like a psychological matter.

The psychos, meanwhile, suggest all manner of cures, from hypno to shock therapy to antidepressant medication, all of which my mother refuses what we need is gently to pry open his mouth, she insists, this and nothing more, doctors sirs.

Whether the loss is a rational decision or an effect of the blast no one can decide until Hedayat, too, forgets, content to take multiple-choice examinations since his writing appears to teachers like a private hieroglyphics, and not altogether worried about the future.

Eyeless-fingerless-eyepatched and the other finger-gnarled, Niramish and Hedayat form quite the pair. During trips to Confectionarayan Babu's candy shop, they stand in the shadows of the crowding children, the fat smelly pirate and his gnarly-fingered friend, crackling laughter, whoops and hollering: they are the butt of all the mobile playground's jokes. Narayan Khandakar, meanwhile, or Confectionarayan Babu, as he is known to everyone, is a gentle creature, and when the cete of badgering children have departed or distracted by arcade games, he invites, psst come on, you two, not out of pity or even to favour the son of one of his closest friends, Mamun M., but out of a spontaneous fatherly love, and pulls the string of the incandescent bulb in the cellar stairwell, and from dark corners the light spreads into bright shapes, the yellow fruits that break apart spilling candied seeds, the blue sugar packets that make you froth rabid at the mouth, the sweet toothpaste meant for eating, Confectionarayan Babu's many succoured potables, his bars and candies of all shapes.

That box over there, he never bestows a favour without first requesting they lend a nominal hand: please push it to this here.

Though Hedayat is more or less crippled at such tasks, he leans with his weight against his elbows against the box.

Here, let me do it, his friend remains better equipped despite the damage of the exploded grapes.

Never are they allowed more than one bowl or handful of candied almonds, but none of the other children are allowed to drink from the gushing fountain that feeds the vending receptacle

for iced drinks or to try the newest American chocolate bars; just being in that wonderworld is tantalizing enough.

Most important for Hedayat, he provides foil to father Mamun with impressions of a life world the son never imagined: Don't be so hard on your old man, he would say. He's not a bad man, and if you only knew, boy, what subterranean hallways he's seen, what a thoughtreel looks like.

Narayan Khandakar and my father would chatterbox in Xasan Sierra's cigarette shop, talking talk and playing cards in enclosed urban tin hut eat Saturday night meets Sunday morning, and Hedayat knew he knew the man and trusted the sweet seller's judgment.

The pair sought refuge in the air and sights of the sweet cellar in their single-digit years, their mothers never quite at ease with their lingering hours, but Confectionarayan Babu always insistent they remained under his strict supervision and that a code of good behaviour always applied. It would be there that Hedayat would speak for the first time. This monumental change, however, would not have been possible had a stranger not come to town.

# BOY, SNOW, BIRD

Helen Oyeyemi



HAMISH HAMILTON  
an imprint of Penguin Canada Books Inc.

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Canada Books Inc., 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,

Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published 2014

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Manufactured in the U.S.A.

ISBN: 978-0-14-318743-1

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## ONE

Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them and believed them to be trustworthy. I'd hide myself away inside them, setting two mirrors up to face each other so that when I stood between them I was infinitely reflected in either direction. Many, many me's. When I stood on tiptoe, we all stood on tiptoe, trying to see the first of us, and the last. The effect was dizzying, a vast pulse, not quite alive, more like the working of an automaton. I felt the reflection at my shoulder like a touch. I was on the most familiar terms with her, same as any other junior dope too lonely to be selective about the company she keeps.

Mirrors showed me that I was a girl with a white-blond pigtail hanging down over one shoulder; eyebrows and lashes the same colour; still, near-black eyes; and one of those faces some people call "harsh" and others call "fine-boned." It was not unusual for me to fix a scarf around my head and spend an afternoon pretending that I was a nun from another century; my forehead was high enough.

And my complexion is unpredictable, goes from near bloodless to scalded and back again, all without my permission. There are still days when I can only work out whether or not I'm upset by looking at my face.

I did fine at school. I'm talking about the way boys reacted to me, actually, since some form of perversity caused me to spend most lessons pretending to absorb much less information than I actually did. Every now and then a teacher got suspicious about a paper I'd turned in and would keep me after school for questioning. "Has someone been ... helping you?" I just shook my head and shuffled my chair sideways, avoiding the glare of the desk lamp the teacher invariably tried to shine into my eyes. Something about a girl like me writing an A-grade paper turns teachers into cops. I'll take the appraisal of my male peers over that any day. Four out of five of them either ignored me or were disgustingly kind, the way nice boys are to the plainest Jane they know. But that was only four out of five. Number five tended to lose his balance for some reason and follow me around making the most extraordinary pleas and offers. As if some kind of bug had gotten into him. Female classmates got "anonymous" notes that said things like: *So—I fall for you. Probably because I can see and hear. I see you (those eyes, that smile) and when you laugh ... yeah, I fall. I'm not normally this sincere, so you might not be able to guess who I am. But here's a clue ... I'm on the football team. If you feel like taking a chance, wear a blue ribbon in your hair tomorrow and I'll walk you home.*

The notes I received were more ... tormented. More of the "You've got me going out of my mind" variety. Not that I lost any

sleep over that stuff. How could I, when I had a little business going on the side? Boys paid me to write notes to other girls on their behalf. They trusted me. They had this notion that I knew what to say. I just wrote whatever I thought that particular girl wanted to hear and collected dollar bills on delivery. The notes my friends showed me were no work of mine, but I kept my business quiet, so it stands to reason that if anyone else had a similar business, they'd have been discreet about it too.

When my hair started to darken, I combed peroxide through it.

As for character, mine developed without haste or fuss. I didn't interfere—it was all there in the mirrors. Suppose you're born in the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the year nineteen hundred and thirty something. Suppose your father's a rat catcher. (Your absent mother is never discussed, to the extent that you nurse a theory that you're a case of spontaneous generation.) The interior of the house you grow up in is pale orange and rust brown; at dawn and sunset shadows move like hands behind the curtains—silhouettes of men with Brylcreemed waves in their hair gathered on the street corner to sing about their sweethearts in seven-part harmony, the streetcar whispering along its track, Mrs. Phillips next door beating blankets. Your father is an old-fashioned man; he kills rats the way his grandfather taught him. This means that there are little cages in the basement—usually a minimum of seven at any given time. Each cage contains a rat, lying down and making a sound somewhere between twittering and chattering: *lak lak lak lak, krrrr krrrrr krrrr*. The basement smells of sweat; the rats are panicking, starving. They make those sounds and then you see holes in their paws and in

their sides—there's nothing else in that cage with them, and all your father does to them at first is give them water, so it stands to reason that it's the rats making the holes, eating themselves. When your father's about to go out on a job, he goes to the basement, selects a cage, and pulls its inhabitant's eyes out. The rats that are blind and starving are the best at bringing death to all the other rats, that's your father's claim. Your father puts three or four cages in the trunk of his car and drives away. He comes back late in the evening, when the job's done. I guess he makes a lot of money; he does business with factories and warehouses; they like him because he's very conscientious about the cleanup afterward.

So that's Papa. Cleanest hands you'll ever see in your life. He'll punch you in the kidneys, from behind, or he'll thump the back of your head and walk away sniggering while you crawl around on the floor, stunned. He does the same to his lady friend, who lives with you, until he starts going for her face. She'll put up with a lot, but not that. One day she leaves a note under your pillow. It says: *Look, I'm sorry. For what it's worth, I'd say you deserve better. Take care of yourself.*

You don't get too upset about her departure, but you do wonder who's going to let you bum Lucky Strikes now. You're all of fifteen and you're a jumpy kid. You don't return people's smiles—it's perfectly clear to you that people can smile and smile and still be villains. One of the first things you remember is resting your head against the sink—you were just washing your hair in it, and you had to take a break because when your hair's wet it's so heavy you can't lift your head without your neck wobbling. So you're resting,

and that clean hand descends out of nowhere and holds you face down in the water until you faint. You come around lying on the bathroom floor. There's a burning feeling in your lungs that flares up higher the harder you cough, and the rat catcher's long gone. He's at work.

Where does character come into it? Just this: I've always been pretty sure I could kill someone if I had to. Myself, or my father—whichever option proved most practical. I wouldn't kill for hatred's sake; I'd only do it to solve a problem. And only after other solutions have failed. That kind of bottom line is either in your character or it isn't, and like I said, it develops early. My reflection would give me a slow nod from time to time, but would never say what she was thinking. There was no need.

A couple of teachers asked me if I was applying to college, but I said: "Can't afford it." Actually, I was pretty sure that the rat catcher could, but I didn't want to have that, or any, conversation with him. He hit me when one of his caged rats bit him. He hit me when I pronounced a word in a certain way that made him think I was acting stuck-up. (He told me that the difference between him and other people was that other people would think about kicking me in the shins only whenever I used a long word, but he went ahead and took action.) He'd hit me when I didn't flinch at the raising of his arm, and he'd hit me when I cowered. He hit me when Charlie Vacic came over to respectfully ask if he could take me to prom. I seem to recall he began that particular beating in a roundabout way, by walking up to me with a casserole dish and dropping it on my foot. There was almost a slapstick element to it all; I got a

sudden notion that if I laughed or asked “Are you through?” he’d back off. But I didn’t try to laugh, for fear of coming in too early, or too late.

There were times I thought the rat catcher was going to knock me out for sure. For instance, the morning he told me to run downstairs and blind a couple of rats real quick for him before I went to school. I said NO WAY and made inner preparations for stargazing. But he didn’t really do anything, just pointed at my clothes and said: “Rats paid for those,” then pointed at my shoes and said: “Rats paid for those,” and pointed at the food on the table and said: “Rats ...”

He imitated them: “*Krrrr. Lak lak lak lak.*” And he laughed.

The unpredictability of his fist didn’t mean he was crazy. Far from it. Sometimes he got awfully drunk, but never to a point where he didn’t seem to know what he was doing. He was trying to train me. To do what, I don’t know. I never found out because I ran away almost as soon as I turned twenty. I wish I knew what took me so long. He didn’t even hit me that night. He just sat in his easy chair snoozing after dinner, like always. I watched him and I woke up, I kind of just woke up. He was sleeping so peacefully, with a half smile on his face. He didn’t know how rotten he was. He’ll never know, probably never even suspect it.

My feet walked me into my bedroom while I thought it over. Then I gave my mattress a good-bye kick. I didn’t pack much because I didn’t have much. There was only one really important thing in my bag: a flag that Charlie Vacic had wrapped around my shoulders once when we were watching the Fourth of July fireworks

over at Herald Square. He said it was a loan, but he never asked for it back. Ever since he'd started at medical school people talked about him as if he'd died, but he was the same old Charlie—he wrote to me from upstate, and he mentioned the flag, and that night. I'd written back that I was still looking after the flag for him. It took up a bunch of room in my bag, but I couldn't just leave it there with the rat catcher.

I did look for the key to the basement, but I couldn't find it. Hard to say how much of a good turn it would've been to set those rats free after standing by while they'd starved, anyway.

Three times I opened and closed the front door, testing the depth of the rat catcher's sleep, trying to make the softest click possible. The third time I heard him shift in the chair, and he mumbled something. The fourth time I opened the door I didn't have the nerve to close it behind me, just ran. Two girls playing hopscotch outside Three Wishes Bakery saw me coming and hopped right out of the way. I ran six or seven blocks, the street one long dancing seam of brick and bicycle bells, hats and stockings, only stopping to turn corners when traffic lights wouldn't let me pass. I ran so fast I don't know how my pumps stayed on. A crosstown bus, then a subway ride to Port Authority. "Nervous" simply isn't the word. I stayed standing on the bus ride, stuck close to the driver, looking behind us, looking ahead, my heart stirring this way and that like so much hot soup, my hands stuck deep in my pockets so my sleeves couldn't be grabbed. I was ready for the rat catcher to appear. So ready. I knew what I'd do. If he tried to take me by the elbow, if he tried to turn me around, I'd come over all tough guy, slam my skull

into his forehead. I stayed ready until I got to Port Authority, where the priority shifted to not getting trampled.

I really wasn't expecting that kind of hullabaloo. If there'd been more time I'd just have stood stock-still with my eyes closed and my hands clapped over my ears, waiting for a chance to take a step toward the ticket counter without being pushed or yelled at. Folks were stampeding the last bus with everything they had—it was as if anyone unlucky enough to still be on the station platform turned into a pumpkin when the clock struck twelve. I tumbled into the bus with a particularly forceful gang of seven or so—a family, I think—tumbled off the bus again by way of getting caught up in the folds of some man's greatcoat, and scuttled over to the ticket counter to try to find out just where this last bus was going. I saw the rat catcher in the ticket line, long and tall and adamant, four people away from the front, and I pulled my coat collar over my head. I saw the rat catcher get out of a cab and stride toward me, veins bulging out of his forehead, looking like he meant nothing but Business, I whirled around and saw the rat catcher again, pounding on the bus window, trying to find me among the passengers. Okay, so he wasn't really there at all, but that was no reason to relax—it'd be just like him to turn up, really turn up, I mean, a moment or two after my guard came down. I saw him at least twenty times, coming at me from all angles, before I reached the counter. And when I finally did get there, the guy behind it told me it was closed for the night.

“When do you open up again?”

“Six in the morning.”

“But I've got to leave tonight.”

He was basically a jerk. “Jerk” isn’t a term I make free and easy use of. I don’t go around saying *Helshe/it is a jerk*. But this guy was something special. There I was, looking right at him through the glass as I wept desperately, and there he was, petting his moustache as if it were a small and fractious creature. He sold me a ticket five minutes before the bus left, and he only did it because I slipped him an extra five dollars. I felt a bout of sarcasm coming on when he took the money, but made sure I had the ticket in my hand before I said: “My hero.” I was going to the last stop, on account of its being the farthest away—the ticket said the last stop was Flax Hill, and I’d never heard of it.

“Flax Hill? Whereabouts would you say that is?”

“New England,” my hero said. “You’re gonna miss that bus.”

“Where in New England? I mean ... what state? Vermont, or what?”

He studied me with narrowed eyes, selecting a nerve, the fat juicy nerve of mine he’d most like to get upon. “Or what,” he said.

He drew the blinds down over the counter window, and I ran. There were only two seats left on the bus—one beside an elderly man and one beside a coloured woman who was sleeping with her head laid up against the window. The man smelled somewhat urinaceous, so I sat beside the woman, who opened her eyes, asked me if she should get up, nodded, and fell asleep again when I said no. She looked just about worn out.

Across the aisle, a baby started screaming, and its mother bounced it up and down on her knees, trying to soothe it into good behaviour. But the shrieking went on and on, primal, almost

glad—this protest was righteous. I couldn't make up my mind whether the baby was male or female; the only certainties were near baldness and incandescent rage. The kid didn't like its blanket, or its rattle, or the lap it sat on, or the world ... the time had come to demand quality. This continued until the mother, who had been staring into space, suddenly came to and gave her child a particularly vicious look, along with a piece of information: "I don't *have* a baby that acts this way." The baby seemed taken aback, hiccupped a few times, and fell silent.

I held that talisman ticket of mine smooth between my hands right up until the bus pulled out of the station, even though deep down I knew there was no way the rat catcher could have figured out where I was. It wouldn't have occurred to him that I'd leave the state. Maybe he wouldn't look too hard. Maybe he'd just shrug and think, *Well, that's cut down the grocery bill.* (Actually, I knew he would be murderously mad—I could almost hear him bellowing: "I'm a RAT CATCHER. No two-bit wretch runs out on me, even if she is my daughter!") *Don't think of his face*—Flax Hill, Flax Hill. With a name like that, it was probably the countryside I was going to. Moonlight, hay, cows chewing cud and exchanging slow, conversational moos. It was a scenario I felt doubtful about. But I was game. I had to be.

As pillows go, my bag served pretty well. I listened to the drumming of the bus wheels on the road, made a note that running away from home was as easy as pie once you'd made your mind up to it, and fell asleep with my limbs carefully arranged so as not to touch my neighbour's.

MINISTER  
WITHOUT PORTFOLIO

Michael Winter



HAMISH HAMILTON  
an imprint of Penguin Canada Books Inc.

Published by the Penguin Group  
Penguin Canada Books Inc, 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, U.S.A.

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,

Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

First published 2013

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Manufactured in the U.S.A.

ISBN: 978-0-670-06715-2

Visit the Penguin Canada website at [www.penguin.ca](http://www.penguin.ca)

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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 construction 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 had lived down here

just after trade school in a one-room apartment on Colonial Street. He paused at the window now and the door where his mail used to come—his life before Nora.

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 further 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 transports servicing the offshore industry and a coast guard search and rescue vessel and a military tug 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 Henry 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. The sun was a magnificent thing. He had to be back at the Bull Arm site Monday morning and he knew he'd pay for it, this being up all night. But he was thinking there might be early activity at Nora's house. 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 what is called an aubade. But Nora was asleep and there was no man with her and the alert daylight made him stagger to the house of his best friend, feeling small and without a shell. He felt himself evaporating and it scared him. He let the sun warm his shoulders and kidneys and fill him up, the sun pushed him to John and Silvia's. He found the hidden key and let himself in and their dog, Wolf, did not make a sound but smelled his hand and knew who he was and followed Henry downstairs into

the finished basement. Henry felt with his hands for any sleeping kids and fell into the guest bed with Wolf and hugged the big dog.

He woke up remembering Nora Power had broken up with him.

She had come into their bedroom about two weeks ago and, he realized now, tried to break up with him. 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. He drove his car to the site—it took ninety-five minutes—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 edging into 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 Sadie explained the milk was running back down the straw. Then they ran around the house with their Star Wars lifesavers.

### T H R E E

Henry's buddy John Hynes had a contract with Rick Tobin and was gone to Fort McMurray for three-week stretches. It was mining, not oil. Henry had been thinking it was the work at Bull Arm that had made Nora stray from him, but Silvia didn't mind John 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 frosted window pane saying please, Nora, please until her father's waist arrived and said Henry, Henry. Her parents were over for dinner—it was one of the family things Nora did that Henry loved. He stared at her father's belt through the window that Henry had caulked the year before, the yellow wool vest Nora's father 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. The corner was tall and sheer and almost so acute it might have been an eighty-eight-degree angle. It had taken a hundred days to have Nora agree to go out with him in the first place so he felt another campaign of a hundred days would convince her to let him return. But it was Christmas and no return occurred. John Hynes and Silvia took care of him. It was John who asked Rick Tobin to hire on Henry for an overseas contract. John was home for two weeks to get his buddy back in shape. John, his hair dark and thick and cut short and his handshake arriving just before a generous hug, his lanyard ID still around his neck, the little slap the lanyard gave as he walked towards you, touching him under each armpit in a self-affirming manner. John loved people. He always found something in you to love. That nose that had been broken on the job several times, set by John himself. This job isn'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 contract started in March. Springtime, Henry—start anew.

This logic of land and season 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, not a big man, but with strong shoulders who had been in construction his entire adult life. A man used to turning slowly. 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 rolloff 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 was in the reserves and now he's stationed in Camp Julien. Oh my god Tender Morris. They had gone to trade school with Tender and then Tender had joined the reserves.

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. Sometimes on the weekends, 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 mining sector.

Henry spent his weekends in St John's. He continued to have drinks in bars, but one early morning a man next to him called for a pint and the bartender told him there was none left. Can I take the keg home on my bike? No. Okay let's have five tequilas.

Tequila's the only thing that's true, the bartender said.

Man: She is hard and cynical about everything except a deep sentimental attachment to anything dealing with animals.

Henry paid his bill and left. He promised himself not to hear that type of language again: caustic truths with no self-mockery. He did push-ups and vowed he would get his life together. He remembered the man who had lived in this finished basement for a few weeks during 9/11. Noyce was his name. A stranded passenger that John and Silvia had befriended through Colleen Grandy. This man Noyce fell in love with Newfoundland and bought a house around the bay near John and Silvia's summer home in Renew. Noyce was strong in the way a bird is strong, big chest and hollow-boned. Ready for perky flight and a ruddy, round, sunburnt head with just a horseshoe of golden hair at his ears, hair that he kept a little long. He wore torn T-shirts and necklaces children from the Amazon had made for him—strings of wood and feathers and beads and strips of black rubber from sandals perhaps.

Henry would receive strength from the walls of this basement just as that man Noyce had. Noyce is a spiritual man and so will I be. On Saturdays Henry played with John and Silvia's kids and took them to lunch at a diner downtown. Over hamburgers and pea soup 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 his hamburger. He did not like art particularly, but there was something in the woman he liked. Henry was not shy. He was a guy who handled polyethylene tubing and connected electrodes to cured cement but he was not flummoxed by 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 made him think about John Hynes's notion of a contract in Kabul.

## FOUR

Rick Tobin was three years older than John and Henry and Tender Morris but they knew him growing up in the west end of St John's. Little Rick like a bantam cock in his blue coveralls, all hundred and forty pounds of him bounding into things. Rick had energy that bewildered Henry and he was not the first to realize Rick could channel this force into ambition and drive and learn how to connect labour with materials and funnel them into the delivery of services to small towns along the shore. It floored him, how successful Rick was. He had married Colleen Grandy and moved into her town which was down the road from where John and Silvia had a summer house. Renew's. Tender Morris had been left a house there too by a great-aunt, a house Tender Morris was going to fix up some day if he ever got out of the military. Henry asked Rick if he worried about leaving the city for such a small place.

I'm never home, Rick said. If Colleen is happy then I'm happy.

Henry had visited Renew's a few times, but living in a small

place was not something that had appealed to him. He appreciated a city giving you a movie to watch, rather than having to constantly make your own movie. Rural areas were for excursions.

Henry and John and Tender, in their twenties, had gone to work for Rick. One time they 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 of the blast site 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 dumptrucks from Alberta and shipped them here. He went halves 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 up the shore, and he'll take the senior citizens out in the wilderness area on the crab boats and then, if all goes well, they'll lose all their money on the video lottery terminals at the Copper Kettle.

Henry was in this 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

**Y**ou can say no to Rick and that's okay, he'll find other people and other plans. Such is what happened with John, and the sawmill and Costa Rica went bye-bye. Tender, oddly enough, moved to Nova Scotia and stayed in a Buddhist monastery. Then he returned and joined the reserves. Some kind of spiritual vexation, John said. And this Kabul gig—the money is good and Silvia is behind it.

She's not delighted but she's okay with it, Henry said.

They have 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 will take care of us.

Live a dangerous life. The one unsmooth element in the story of Rick's life around the bay was the rumour that his wife was having

an affair. Colleen Grandy. That spiritual American who had lived in John and Silvia's finished basement and bought the lightkeeper's house in Renews. Noyce. Everyone seemed to know about this affair except Rick. Or if Rick knew he did not let on and, like the fight in the bar over three hundred dollars, he wasn't the type of man to absorb nuance. Who is to know how couples arrange their lives? On financial matters Rick had life solved and he wanted to share that solution with his friends. He sent the international paperwork and Silvia printed off the forms and spread out the duplicate 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 initialled each page of the agreement and signed their names and Silvia witnessed it. Airplane tickets arrived as a PDF 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—John will talk to anybody with a 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. His real name was Patrick, but he'd been called Tender since high school—he'd been their hockey goalie. You'll stay where

the tradespeople camp out, Tender 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 reservist who volunteered for combat and was enjoying every minute of it. He was alive. On the safety issue 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 dull metallic Sig Sauer automatic pistols slipped onto his lap.

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

The gun was heavier than it looked and Henry shoved it in his jacket pocket and made sure the velcro flap was sealed.

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. Tender drove through this into a quieter neighbourhood with high metal gates and the tops of established trees, their leaves covered in dust. He 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.

You, Tender said, have to be good.

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 non-governmental 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 vegetables and 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 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 English that was both bright and bored: 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 bellybutton—and her shoulders were bare and a number of buttons undone at the cleavage. 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. Tender shoved him. 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 they ordered more food. 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. He slammed her with a beginner's zeal, John whispered. There was a burr to everything. Henry drank his drink and another little bottle arrived and the screw caps required 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 the establishment was high grade. There was music in a grate. Lie down here, sir. A ceiling and the top of a heavy curtain that he guessed covered a window. 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 the jeep and the compound and to a bed with a thin camping mattress, the sun was already hanging over the low, flat city.

## SEVEN

Rick Tobin came over for the first three months. He was part of a larger contingent—SNC-Lavalin—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. They provide warehousing, Rick said. Transportation, bulk fuel management, vehicle maintenance, food services, communication services, electricity, water supply and distribution.

Rick used up all his fingers and he hadn't even gotten to the Nepalese who took care of the cooking and cleaning.

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 and Nepalese 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 Groves. Stripped to his waist with dogtags on his collarbones, a tattoo of some kind across the back of his neck, Tender 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 him, his face turned from concentration on figuring out the connection to a relief at seeing the top of his son's head too close to the built-in camera, Silvia grabbing at Clem's shoulders to get him and Sadie steady and then all of them synchronized to a connection no longer staggered. Tender's girlfriend on the screen now, a beauty. The beauty came from a confidence to be on a screen projected over eight thousand miles. Henry knew Martha. She was a physiotherapist—that's how Tender met her, a hockey injury. She wasn't from St John's, was she. No, she didn't know Colleen and Silvia and Nora the way they knew each other from school. But they had included her. How vulnerable they all looked sitting on steno chairs at the little booths inside the tent that reminded Henry of a time when he took John's kids, Clem and Sadie, to 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 was a soldier. Of course he did not have to worry about this, he was a subcontractor with Rick servicing the structure put in place by SNC-Lavalin. 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 Afghan 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 particleboard bunkbeds and three teenaged Afghan boys in windbreakers dancing to a stereo and playing bongos and electric keyboard.

## EIGHT

They worked through the spring and into the hot summer until there was trouble in the southern provinces and, after a security assessment from Ottawa, funding was restricted for the services Rick Tobin provided. A civilian support worker had been killed in a rocket attack. They were violating the mandate, Rick Tobin said, that they be used in a stable environment. It was the first of July and the minister of defence had flown into the base to celebrate Canada Day and told them directly their revised plans. The minister had served wild turkey burgers and hotdogs from a train of barbecues with red maple leaf flags on toothpicks punched into the buns. He was celebrating the draw-down in troop allocations as if this was 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 while doling out maple-custard ice cream.

The minister explained to Rick that their contract was being adapted to meet the desire of operational deployment. We have to achieve mission success while operating within an imposed troop ceiling, the minister said. 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 them. He had John and Henry alone in a bubble corridor. Either that, or we go home.

Henry Hayward looked at John. You have to live on the edge, John. Or you're taking too much room.

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

Henry had never heard John play this card before. And he didn't like how humourless he was. But they got on board. The powers that be pencilled in Rick's 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 you're 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.

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

Tender Morris: Wet it and blowdry it. You can shave it close and put it in the freezer, that works too.

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.

Tender 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.

They received ammo and a clip for their Sig Sauers. They started going out in the jeep.

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