RIDGEVIEW: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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Ridgeview is a collection of original short stories by Eric Freeze set in the fictional town of Ridgeview in southern Alberta, Canada. The critical introduction to these stories addresses issues of biographical and fictional writing. The introduction compares Saul Bellow’s Ravelstein to Ridgeview and argues that when authors fictionalize biographical elements, critics can no longer treat characters as though they existed in the authors’ biographical world.

Approved:

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this book to my wife, Rixa, and to my dalmatian Zeke, who is still very much alive.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the support of the Ohio University English Department and all the colleagues and peers who helped bring this collection to fruition. Finally, I would like to thank Joan Connor and Darrell Spencer for their mentorship and for teaching me the value of sentences.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Introduction: Fictionalizing Biography</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoot the Moon</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Beet Farmer</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Word from the Dummy</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poachers</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Prayer for the Cosmos</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torched</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blarney</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing on Stone</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Man Who Laughed His Head Off</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Fictionalizing Biography

_Fiction is subterranean, not terrestrial. Or it is like Tao: say what it is, and that is what it is not._ (Ozick 1)

When Flaubert first published *Madame Bovary,* he received a letter, the first of several from Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie, an aging, unmarried heiress who had followed Flaubert’s serialized novel in *Revue de Paris.* She praised *Madame Bovary* for its realism, to the extent of even questioning its fictive origins. She wrote:

> From the beginning I recognized [Emma Bovary] and I loved her as though she were a friend. I so identified with her experiences that it was just as though she was me. No, this story cannot be fictional, it must be true, this is an actual woman, you must have witnessed her life, her death and her sufferings. (Wall 230)

Mlle Leroyer de Chantepie was not alone in her sentiments. Other writers and critics were equally impressed by *Madame Bovary’s* authenticity and realism. Like Mlle de Chantepie, several people thought that Flaubert’s depiction of Emma Bovary was so precise and so detailed that she had to be an actual person, a woman or lover of Flaubert’s acquaintance. The novel generated its fair share of controversy over these allegations, which eventually drew attention from France’s second Empire under Napoléon III, a regime that controlled the presses and limited intellectual liberty (Balmand 191). In this
environment, an actual character like Emma Bovary posed a threat to the balance of society. If such an adulteress existed, Flaubert’s book threatened the rising bourgeois morality of the belle époque. After the book’s publication, controversy flared, and Flaubert was eventually brought to trial on the grounds that his novel was “an outrage to public morals” (Troyat 147).

More interesting than Flaubert’s bout with censorship, however, is his reaction to it. Though many biographical elements existed in Madame Bovary, he maintained that it was fiction, not biography, and that an adulterous Emma never existed. “Madame Bovary, c’est moi,” Flaubert famously told Amelie Bosquet in defense of his work. “Madame Bovary is me” (Wall 239). During his trial, Flaubert proved that Emma Bovary didn’t exist, maintaining that he created Emma from his own psyche. He argued that the character Emma died because of her adultery, and that he had manipulated the text so that the “immoral” Emma destroyed herself. He argued that he was “giving a useful warning” and that Emma dies in “the great tradition” and that “Shakespeare and Goethe treated death in this way, with a touch of irreverence” (Wall 237). Though his argument oversimplified the Madame Bovary’s morally complex ending, most likely so that he could win the case, the court accepted his defense and dropped the charges against Flaubert (Wall 237).

Why was Flaubert so defensive about allegations that a fictitious Emma actually existed? Numerous incidents point to Madame Bovary’s biographical origins. Flaubert, like Emma Bovary’s young lover, Léon Dupuis, had a prolonged affair with an older woman, Louise Colet. There is also the story of Delphine Delmare, a woman married to
a mediocre husband who incurred debts and died in ignominy not far from Rouen where Flaubert lived. Flaubert surely knew of her tragedy. Due to the success of the novel, this town, Ry, now claims to be the actual birthplace of Emma Bovary, a fact that has brought the town some celebrity. Florists now bear the name “Emma” and roads and a museum flout the fact that Flaubert’s fictitious character once lived and died in this small town. Geoffrey Wall explains:

> These days the quiet little country village of Ry is only a fifteen-minute drive away from the busy centre of Rouen. There, in the rich, damp Normandy earth, only a few feet from the door of the church, the best position in the graveyard, lies the body of the young woman who was, so they say, the original Madame Bovary. Here she is. If an imaginary woman can have a real grave, this must be it. Her name is Delphine Delmare. She died in 1848, at the age of twenty-seven, her name wrapped in a little poison cloud of local scandal. People said that Delphine Delmare killed herself. But Delphine’s headstone looks new. It can’t possibly be nearly 150 years old. The helpful official leaflet tells us that in 1990 she acquired a new tombstone, paid for by the local literary society and the chamber of commerce. The neat black lettering on the yellow slab leaves no room for doubt: *Delphine Delmare née Couturier*. Then, carved below the real name, there are just the words ‘*Madame Bovary*’. (Wall 198)
The example of Flaubert’s Emma shows how critical reception of a work often assumes that fictional characters have some origin rooted in actual life. In the case of Emma Bovary, even a town has seen fit to claim her history, creating a world to house the fictitious character. But fiction, even if it draws on biographical elements, is still fiction. As Flaubert says, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi”: Madame Bovary isn’t a real person, a person who existed before the language that brought her into being, but is a character who comes from the relationship between words on a page, with Flaubert, as author, drawing her out.

Flaubert’s critical reception and the subsequent co-opting of fictional elements by the town of Ry reveal a common tension in fiction: if an author draws from biographical details, how much of a work is fiction? The work of the literary critic often involves searching for and finding biographical elements that may or may not reflect an author’s actual life. But an author changes biographical elements and uses them to create an alternate, fictional world. This fictional world is linguistic; the characters and relationships developed on the page grow out of the relationship between words. The author fictionalizes biographical elements. The reviewer does a disservice to the author by merely reading through the prose and assuming that the biographical details are the author’s own.

This paper explores two texts that fictionalize biographical elements. The first is an article I recently published in *The Saul Bellow Journal* on Saul Bellow’s novel *Ravelstein*. The second text is my collection of stories, *Ridgeview*. Like *Madame Bovary*, both these texts borrow heavily from biographical elements. They have
characters that resemble “real” people from both Bellow’s and my own lives. But
*Ravelstein* and *Ridgeview* are fictional, not biographical works. Their characters exist
only in the words of each book, and they rely on the fictional medium for their existence.
Bellow fictionalizes biography by using a character who struggles with the constraints of
biographical writing, until he has written an anti-biography, a fiction woven around the
color character Ravelstein. My stories weave around the figure of “Ridgeview” and they use
imbedded narratives that allegorize fictional elements. Both *Ravelstein* and *Ridgeview*
ask the reader to participate in each figure’s construction, to populate the stories with our
own memories, bringing the stories to life through our reading of them.

**Reading Ravelstein**

In reading the recent reviews of Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein*, I feel like one reviewer
who says, “Ravelstein is a celebrated professor of political philosophy—a character
based, *so it has been said everywhere*, on Allan Bloom, author of *The Closing of the
American Mind*” (Webb 324 emphasis mine). The vast majority of the reviews let this
comparison govern much of what reviewers say about the novel—that it somehow
demonstrates Bellow’s attempt to represent Allan Bloom’s life. Very few of the reviews
deal with the novel on its own aesthetic terms; instead, they draw upon the wealth of
information about Bellow’s life to interpret the text. One reviewer accounts for Bellow’s
dependence on biographical details by saying, “It is very hard work indeed to keep the
biographical information about Bellow’s own life and that of his academic colleague and friend Allan Bloom out of one’s mind” (Jacobs 813). Although it is “hard work” to read Ravelstein without relying on biographical information, Bellow’s novel demands a different reading. Its form is fictional, not biographical, and it works against conventions of biographical writing to tell its story. The reviewer must focus more on how Bellow uses signs and metaphors to represent characters rather than on how those characters originate from a fixed source: Bellow’s and Bloom’s lives. The novel not only relies on these signs, it allegorizes them; the narrator Chick does essentially what Bellow asks of the reader, that she read a sign or character and give it meaning, life.

As a starting point, let me establish what Ravelstein is not. It is not biography or biographical writing. We can’t essentialize the character’s experiences and read into them as Bellow’s or Bloom’s own. Even the character Chick, as he goes about piecing together a fiction about writing Ravelstein’s biography, expresses this: “we aren’t doing psychobiography here” (17). To do “psychobiography” limits the subject matter and the fictional weaving of Bellow’s narrative to a mimetic model, where the actions, words, and description of the characters reflect or represent Bellow’s life. Since Ravelstein isn’t constrained by the beginning and end of Ravelstein’s life, and doesn’t use Bellow or Bloom as characters, a biographical interpretation forces the reader to strain, to impose a fixed abstraction, to psychoanalyze and misconstrue in order to make meaning.

Biographical conventions reveal how this works.

Paul Kendall outlines conventions of biographical writing in The Art of Biography. He recognizes that although contemporary biographies have a fair amount of
latitude in representing people’s lives, they are still limited to a chronological life span and the “facts” about that person’s life. He divides contemporary biographical conventions between literary forces and scientific forces. Scientific forces probe the facts, sift through them, categorize them, and explain them to a specific audience (118). More recent biographical criticism explores some of the nuances in contemporary literary biography, but with the disclaimer that “[t]here seems no doubt that the writing of biography is in some sense a ‘conservative’ activity in that it celebrates a known life of the past” (Batchelor 2). John Batchelor, in his anthology *The Art of Literary Biography*, explains that literary biography is a more traditional, rather old-fashioned form, and one that is not prone to the disruptive forces of postmodernism. In the chapter, “Biography: Cult as Culture,” Jürgen Schlaeger agrees:

> Compared with the images of our culture which post-modernism projects biography is, in spite of its intertextual construction, fundamentally reactionary, conservative, perpetually accommodating new models of man, new theories of inner self, into a personality-oriented cultural mainstream, thus always helping to defuse their subversive potential. (63)

Schlaeger explains that biography remains conservative, even though our postmodern culture may contradict its boundaries or conventions. Although arguably biographies incorporate some postmodern theory, authors usually use it to inform their overall project of presenting a person’s life to a specific audience. The biographer is still limited to a “self”—and although she may try to remake that self through a different biographical
approach, she is still limited, bound by the actions, behavior, and idiosyncrasies of a person’s life.

This is exactly the kind of project that Bellow works against in *Ravelstein*. He commences the book with a dilemma. Ravelstein has asked Chick, his longtime friend and admirer, to try his hand at biography—an exercise that he feels will bring Chick into public life. Chick takes him up on it, publishing a “short account of J.M. Keynes’s description of the arguments over German reparations and the lifting of the Allied blockade in 1919” (5-6). But Ravelstein isn’t satisfied and criticizes him for what he sees in the piece as a “rhetorical problem” (6). This is Chick’s only experience with biography, and Chick says that “too much emphasis on the literal facts narrowed the wider interest of the enterprise” (6). As a fiction writer, Chick is limited by the constraints of biographical writing. He is not satisfied with the “literal facts.” They are too confining, too predictable, too dependent on the representation of a person’s life.

As a response to biographical constraints, Chick reacts against different biographies he encounters: Boswell’s *Johnson*, Johnson’s own memoir of his friend Richard Savage, Plutarch, and Aubrey’s *Brief Lives*. All of these he finds problematic; for him “[w]hat line to take in writing a biography became the problem” (6). Bellow uses this “problem” as a sounding board for the rest of the novel. *Ravelstein* is about a friend trying to avoid writing a memoir, or rather a friend dissatisfied with the constraints of biographical writing. What we get instead is a fiction about biography. Chick’s ruminations explore an authorial dilemma; Chick wants to avoid the political act of putting together a collection of “facts” about a person into a pedantic form, yet he is still
constrained by his knowledge of a person’s life. In this sense, the novel has little to do with the lives of Saul Bellow and Allan Bloom, and everything to do with fiction writing. One review of Bellow’s *Ravelstein* echoes this conclusion: “The much publicized connections made between Bellow’s close friend Bloom and Bellow’s (and Chick’s) subject Ravelstein are to the point and beside it. They are, as it were, integral to Bellow’s sense of, or joke about, biography in this book” (Phillips 3). Though more complicated than a “joke,” Bellow’s treatment of biography is purposeful and counters the constraints of biographical writing.

Phillips best identifies how Bellow deals with Chick’s dilemma in his review:

> Bellow conveys just how characters, like other people, take on a life of their own in our words; that we are always speaking and writing from other people’s points of view, on their behalf. And often speaking in their voices back to them. That we might be full of other people—engaged in endless mutual biography—makes a more private sense of self difficult to account for. (5)

This leads me to the first unraveling of *Ravelstein*. To speak for another person or to write “from other people’s points of view” is an exercise in metaphor. It substitutes one thing for another and speaks back to the characters it modifies or describes. J. Hillis Miller describes this metaphorical substitution best in his treatise on narrative theory, *Ariadne’s Thread*. To Miller, “human relations are like the substitutions in metaphorical expressions” (171). A character is a composite of her relations; the figure of a given character depends upon metaphor or on the laws of language for existence. Miller
explains further that “the laws of language may be dramatized in human relations” (171).
Bellow does this by portraying the narrator Chick and his character-subject, Ravelstein.
On a linguistic level, Bellow dramatizes human relations merely by using the narrative
novel form, through his use of “fictional” characters. The word “Chick” or “Ravelstein”
are metaphors for a character. They replace, stand for, and signify a narrator-and-subject
relationship. Bellow then complicates that relationship through words, conversation, and
description. Miller explains how metaphors function:

Metaphors are peculiar. On the one hand they are an essential covering, a
web or integument of language that serves as a bridge over places where
the continuity of language would otherwise break and tumble us into a
crevasse or into a copse of undergrowth. Metaphors name the unnamable,
present the unpresentable, and thereby serve simultaneously as decent
covering and as revelation or unveiling. They make continuous a cloth of
language that otherwise would be rent, would fail to reach from here to
there in a sequential narrative or other web of words. (111)

In short, Bellow uses “Chick” and “Ravelstein” to “present the unpresentable.”
Linguistically, they stand for a relationship. The words “Chick” and “Ravelstein” are
what we read to metaphorically represent characters. We rely on these metaphors in
order to make meaning out of the text. The presence of meaning is the revelation or
unveiling Miller identifies. The covering or veiling is our dependence on the signs
“Chick” and “Ravelstein” to know the relationship. They are merely signs, metaphors
that can only be approached using words. The words both reveal and veil their relationship to a reader; in this sense, they represent what one cannot represent.

Many of the reviewers of Bellow’s novel do not take this metaphorical groundwork into account. They essentialize the relationship between the characters, assuming a real-life origin for Bellow’s story: the relationship between Bellow and Allan Bloom. But what Bellow addresses in his novel is that even “real” relationships are, in a sense, metaphorical or fictional. They are as dependent on the laws of language as the characters in a book. Both fictional and “real” characters require language for existence, and language perpetually undoes itself; it stands for what it cannot stand for; it represents what it cannot represent.

Examples of the limitations and necessity of language lie within the novels’ characters and their relationships. The character Chick realizes the duplicity of language in attempting to write Ravelstein’s biography. He allegorizes metaphor, thereby leading us to a realization of the laws of language. For example, Chick must grapple with both the inadequacy and necessity of using language to describe his friend Ravelstein. He does not want to give Ravelstein up to death as he mentions in the last sentence of the novel, but to use language to describe him so that the reader consciously creates and recreates Ravelstein, in the same “piecemeal approach” he finds himself taking in describing Ravelstein’s life. Chick acknowledges: “In approaching a man like Ravelstein, a piecemeal method is perhaps best” (16). By nature of his approach, Chick’s method is then figurative and metaphorical. His method is similar to the realization he has later on describing Ravelstein’s preference for irregular behavior. Chick describes
the Greek myth of Eros, of male and female sexuality where both male and female had
two sets of sexual organs. The description is metaphorical and Chick’s telling of the
story undergoes a series of substitutions. He says, “Looking for love, falling in love, you
were pining for the other half you had lost, as Aristophanes had said. Only it wasn’t
Aristophanes at all, but Plato in a speech attributed to Aristophanes” (24). Chick’s
repetition or re-telling of this story is yet another metaphorical representation. It isn’t
Plato at all, but Chick in a story attributed to Plato. Or it isn’t Chick at all, but a story
attributed to Chick, filtered through him as a metaphor. We could extend the metaphor
further, to the reader, past the author, to language itself. But everywhere there would be
language and metaphor, for they are the only figures that remain consistent. Chick is
conscious of this in his depiction of Ravelstein. Chick’s “biography” of Ravelstein can
never approach him. It can only mistake, figurate, and substitute. These constraints
constitute his struggle.

Chick’s struggle with the constraints of language become clearer in his dilemma
over how to begin a biography. He does not know how to go about it, and begins with a
long “footnote” about thinkers and politicians who form the fabric of his fictional world.
His footnote is an avoidance tactic, a way of writing about the character Ravelstein by not
writing about him. Initially constrained by the mimetic conventions of literary
biography, Chick approaches Ravelstein indirectly. This struggle or constraint becomes a
topic of conversation for him and Ravelstein, though Ravelstein feels that writing the
biography will actually be “good” for Chick and it will bring him into public life.
Ravelstein says, “by describing me maybe you’ll emancipate yourself” (12). By
becoming Chick’s subject, Ravelstein feels that he will emancipate Chick from an isolated sense of self—an “inwardness,” as Ravelstein calls it—that he finds inherently destructive and constricting. He laments Chick’s own propensity for seclusion and separation from the rest of humanity. But Chick begins to change, recognizing his own inner desire to be part of humanity.

Chick’s desire reveals a human dependency on communication and language. Chick finds his first exercise in biographical writing liberating because it puts him into contact with other people and ties him to a human web. Chick explains, “[Ravelstein] wanted me to write his biography and at the same time he wanted to rescue me from my pernicious habits. He thought I was stuck in privacy and should be restored to community” (9). For this reason, Chick writes a small biographical essay on Keynes, an experience he describes as being “like a holiday” (9). Ravelstein believes that Chick is “inward” (40) and Ravelstein later blames Chick’s problems with his wife Vela on his inwardness and his move to the country in New England. Ravelstein wants Chick to be connected to humanity, to communicate with others. To separate oneself by becoming “inward” is the antithesis to human experience that relies on metaphor and language for sustenance. Ravelstein’s own idiosyncrasies strengthen this conclusion.

Unlike Chick, Ravelstein is the epitome of an individual defined by his relationships. An impetuous networker, Ravelstein maintains contacts with people and humanity more than anyone else Chick knows. Chick explains that even “[t]he old expression ‘He has more connections than a switchboard’” (113) is inadequate for describing Ravelstein’s relationships with diplomats, students, lawyers, politicians, and
thinkers around the world. These connections are often human relationships that Ravelstein values and feels are necessary to his and their well-being. They are not relationships that overtly rely on abstraction. Early on, Chick mentions that Ravelstein wants him to engage in politics, “not local or machine politics, nor even national politics, but politics as Aristotle or Plato understood the term, rooted in our nature” (9). The kind of politics Ravelstein refers to are the politics of relationships—maintaining relationships through dialogue, conversation, and language. These are natural laws rooted in humanity that Plato and Aristotle used to disseminate their ideas. But Ravelstein fears abstraction, or lumping humanity into movements, politics, and machinery. Though a homosexual, Ravelstein despises “‘campy homosexuality’ and [takes] a low view of ‘gay pride’” (160). These, for him, are negative abstractions, because they deny the human element. They lump people into movements. Denying the human element is also at the heart of Ravelstein’s observations about Grielescu and the treatment of Jews throughout history. This level of abstraction is one that Chick says, “goes straight to your bones” (178). Nazi Germany turned people into an abstraction, to the point where the world felt that they would be better off without Jews.

Abstraction is the opposite of what Ravelstein represents: a linguistic knot in the fabric of humanity, defined by his relationships to other people. Abstraction also causes Chick’s problems with his wife Vela. Chick feels that he owes it to Vela to be a good husband. He buys into the institution of marriage rather than their metaphorical relationship. Vela and Chick share no bond or real connection, except for the abstraction of marriage. Their move to the woods represents, as well, a bourgeois abstraction that the
woods and solitude will be good for their relationship. But this is the exact opposite of what Ravelstein would prescribe or what he feels comfortable with. As the quotation chosen for the cover attests, “[Ravelstein] was there . . . to make certain . . . that the greatness of humankind would not entirely evaporate in bourgeois well-being” (53). Ravelstein visits as a proof of his friendship or relationship to Chick, but also to find out why Chick would live this bourgeois lifestyle, alone in the country.

A similar relationship to Chick and Vela’s is the Battles, fans of Ravelstein’s who come to him with their marital problems. They too have been seduced by the bourgeois move to the woods, thinking that the solitude and nature will do them good. But Ravelstein mentions that “Nature and solitude are poison” (154). The Battles are suicidal from their seclusion, and Ravelstein tells Chick that “[t]hey feel that way because there’s no community, no one to talk to” (154). Having someone to talk to, having language and a relationship with other human beings, is essential to Ravelstein’s worldview and to his perception that humans are inseparable from each other. There is no isolated, individual concept of self except for the combination of relationships any individual has, bound by language. To cut oneself off from these relationships is not only an impossibility, but it is also a suicide, death. The solution: restoration to community, politics (Platonic or Aristotelian), and language. At the end of his conversation about the Battles, Ravelstein mentions that in order to convince them of their happiness, he “told them their own story” (155). That is the only way that the Battles are able to continue living. Ravelstein’s advice works as a remedy. To have their story told back to them reminds them of their
relationship, of their connection, their humanity, their linguistic dependence, and hence their happiness.

Chick’s narration of the events surrounding Ravelstein’s life performs a similar linguistic function to Ravelstein’s narration of the Battle’s story back to themselves. First off, the words are there: the language that brings Ravelstein into existence. The very act of narration creates the sign “Ravelstein” that we read. Miller explains how signs function in narrative. He says that the sign “creates the reality to which it seems to refer out of its own aesthetic surface, out of its relation to other signs, and out of the activity of reading (or ‘reading into’) by which the spectator interprets it” (192). We are readers of the sign Ravelstein, a sign that we only know by its relationship to other signs that we read in the novel. We read Ravelstein through his linguistic relationship to other signs and other words, much like how he tells the Battles to read themselves.

But Bellow’s novel goes beyond simply reading a hermeneutic of meaning into signs. As I have said earlier, Ravelstein allegorizes linguistic relationships. Once we interpret Ravelstein and become corrupted by its linguistic reality, we become privy to how Ravelstein’s relationships and language speak back to our reading of Ravelstein as a sign. In this linguistic reality, Chick serves as the informant, the narrator who transmits the sign to the reader to be read. Chick mentions that “it was up to [him] to interpret [Ravelstein’s] wishes” (59-60) and write Ravelstein’s memoir. Not only does Chick write a memoir of Ravelstein, he writes Ravelstein himself. Later on in the novel, Chick reminisces, “Ravelstein would frequently say to me, ‘. . . I’d like you to write me up after I’m gone’” (128). Ravelstein’s entreaty to Chick to “write him up” is a very literal one.
Chick is the person to whom Ravelstein confides his biography, to create him, Ravelstein
the sign, textually. Chick is uncomfortable about this. He finds the task daunting. Chick
struggles to create the sign because he fears that he will die, that his creation of the sign
“Ravelstein,” the memoir, will leave him with nothing else to do in life. But, as Chick
says, “[T]here was no way I could refuse to do this” (129). And so he begins his
portrayal of Ravelstein, noting that “since I can’t depict him without a certain amount of
self-involvement my presence on the margins will have to be tolerated” (129). Chick’s
“presence in the margins” is his way of accounting for his bias, his reading of the sign
Ravelstein that he portrays. His presence in the margins is the evidence of paint on the
easel—the writer’s words. Chick relies on a similar metaphor: he mentions that
“[Ravelstein] had chose [him] to do his portrait” (160).

Ravelstein chooses Chick as the person to write a sign that speaks back to
Ravelstein. Ravelstein calls this “freewheeling” or “making remarks.” At one point,
Chick and his partner Rosamund discuss why Ravelstein chose Chick when other people
may have been better qualified to write the biography. Rosamund rejects these other
people, saying, “But they mightn’t have the color to put into it” (164). This reveals that
somehow Chick, the narrator/painter is unique; he draws upon “color” that others may
not have. It’s through Chick’s narration that Ravelstein’s picture emerges. And it’s also
through his picture that we come to know Chick. In this sense, Chick and Ravelstein are
interdependent. We only know them through their relationship, through their writing of
each other. Since Ravelstein chooses Chick and Chick Ravelstein, the image that we get
is of the both of them speaking to each other through the words of Bellow’s book—two signs that we recreate and read from a linguistic surface.

Miller explains further how reading functions in narrative:

Any reading is . . . an eisegesis, the imposition of a meaning over a substratum that can never be encountered face-to-face, in the presence of the present. . . . What the characters, including the narrator, do in the novel, the reader must perforce again do in reading the novel. (210)

Miller says that there is a “substratum” that can’t be encountered except through signs. As readers, we do what the characters allegorize—we bring them into being through reading them, imposing a meaning onto them. The characters in Bellow’s novel perform this imposition, discussing how it works for them as they read each other or how they create their fictional world.

Chick mentions several times the “pictures” that make up his world. For him, “pictures” are what constitutes living. Chick explains, “And so life—that is, what one incessantly saw, the pictures produced by life—continued. . . . When [Ravelstein] asked me what view I took of death, how I imagined it, I said that the pictures would stop” (149). Chick mentions later that this means, “that in the surface of things you saw the heart of things” (156). Or, in short, people read signs and live by them, and the surface pictures one reads constitute the “heart” of things. After Chick’s own brush with death, his understanding of sign reading, or of the “pictures” deepens:

We need to know—our deep human need, however, can’t be satisfied by these terms. We can’t climb out of the pit of “culture” and the “ideas” that
supposedly express it. The right words would be a great help. But even more, a gift for reading reality—the impulse to put your loving face to it and press your hands against it. (203).

This is a recognition that we can’t do without signs, that we can’t separate ourselves from the web of language that is humanity. When Chick has a dream during his recovery, he sees pictures that for that period of time constitute his reality. The attention he gives to them, doped up, sick, and recovering, is as much as he would if he were healthy. Chick explains that he “did not doubt the reality” (218). He recognizes the signs for what they are—signs that make up his world. “[T]his is what we go through” he says, “it’s what existence is like” (219). His existence is the reading of signs, of pictures that constitute his reality.

The most intriguing of these signs is probably the Greek myth of Eros. The myth demonstrates how characters read signs and live by them. Chick explains the mythology about Eros, a diamon, “provided by Zeus as a compensation for the cruel breaking up of the original androgynous human whole” (82). Because of this, as the myth goes, every individual seeks for another half, some completing element embodied in the human other. Chick then runs through examples in history of fictional individuals who exemplify this form, expressed in their lives:

In literature Antony and Cleopatra had it, Romeo and Juliet had it. Closer to our own time Anna Karenina and Emma Bovary had it, Stendhal’s Madame de Rênal in her simplicity and innocence had it. And of course
others, untaught, untouched by open recognition have it in some obscure
form. (83)

Bellow carries the Eros metaphor through the characters in Ravelstein. Several
characters have the desire for completion: Chick has it, Ravelstein has it, Rosmary has it,
Nikki has it, the Battles have it. As narrator, Chick reads this sort of longing or desire for
completeness everywhere through Ravelstein: “he insisted on telling me over and over
again what love was—the neediness, the awareness of incompleteness, the longing for
wholeness, and how the pains of Eros were joined to the most ecstatic pleasures” (95).
Later on Chick mentions that Ravelstein “thought—no, he saw—that every soul was
looking for its peculiar other, longing for its complement” (140). In many ways, this is
the central sign or figure of the book: a coupling of two halves, two interdependent knots
in a narrative line. But I would like to dismantle this figure a bit further. The underlying
assumption with Eros is that the two halves will make a whole, that the longing for a
complement comes out of some essentially human desire for completeness. If two
individuals reach this “whole” state, they should be entirely interdependent, not requiring
other relationships. But the Battles’ and Chick and Vela’s relationships show that this is
not the case. Eros is merely a force, a relationship between characters who are defined by
their relationships to other characters. Essentializing the Eros myth would have left
Chick and Rosamund floating in the bay, out of anyone’s reach.

But Bellow does not end the novel this way. He uses Chick as a narrator to show
a knot between two characters: Chick and Rosamund. I want to be careful looking at this
relationship, not to read too much into it. Instead, I prefer to leave with questions,
directions, tendencies. This is where Gloria Cronin in her recent *A Room of His Own: In Search of the Feminine in the Novels of Saul Bellow* leaves off:

[Int]ruezing is the devoted Rosamund, who on the one hand is the least stereotypical, most voiced, and perhaps most appealing of all Bellow’s female characters, but who, on the other hand, is young enough to be his daughter and functions as both intellectual companion and biblical helpmeet to the aging, ailing “great man.” (155)

Rosamund is, in many ways, polyvalent. She wanders off the page, resisting definition except through the language filtered through Chick-as-narrator. On the one hand, she does read as many of the tropes Cronin picks up on: Rosamund is surrogate, enabler, helping an older great male intellectual through the last chapters of his life. Yet she is also highly educated and replaces Ravelstein in the latter half of the book in long dialogues with Chick. As a fictional device, she serves as counterpoint to Chick and Ravelstein’s relationship, and helps to show how each of those characters brings the other into existence through language. In short, she allegorizes the narrative form that Bellow uses for his novel. Rosamund and Chick are free to “make remarks” about Ravelstein, to create him, to ruminate over the “facts” and to write themselves into the margins in the process. She exemplifies Miller’s hypothesis about fictional form: “My hypothesis then: the novel as the perpetual tying and untying of the knot of selfhood for the purpose, in the psychic economy of the individual and the community, of affirming the fiction of character by putting it fictionally in question” (98). Rosamund helps show a tying of the knot of selfhood not only in her dialogues about Ravelstein, but through her allegorizing
the central figure, the Eros myth, coupling with Chick-as-narrator’s language in the last pages of the book.

At the end of the novel, Chick realizes that the signs themselves can continue to live on beyond the world that he, Rosamund, and Ravelstein fictionally inhabit. Through Chick and Rosamund’s relationship, Ravelstein becomes a floating signifier that comes into existence through the signs of Bellow’s language. Ravelstein’s “existence” pervades the novel, and the reader is forced to recreate his sign each time she holds the book and reads the words. Chick explains how this functions, how the reading and rereading of the sign enables Ravelstein to cheat death:

No one can give up on the pictures. The pictures must and will continue. . . . [Ravelstein] did not accept the grave to be the end. Nobody can and nobody does accept this. . . . The flesh would shrink and go, the blood would dry, but no one believes in his mind of minds or heart of hearts that the pictures do stop. (223)

This permits Ravelstein to continue living, in a sense, because the characters are there. They are there for us to read, just as human beings are there to read. As Miller explains, “Our relation to a living person is like our relation to a sign, but a sign of the odd sort that has no preexisting reference. The person is created in our response to his or her face or figure. We read a personality into the face that confronts us” (199). We read signs as we do living people. We read fiction as we do living people. This is how Bellow earns the ending that he has, that “[y]ou don’t easily give up a creature like Ravelstein to death” (233). Ravelstein continues to exist because we are there to read the signs.
The first time I let my father read “Shoot the Moon,” he complained that I misrepresented the main character Sweet. When I told him that Sweet didn’t exist, that he was a fictional character, my father asked, “Who else is there in Raymond who rides an adult tricycle?” He was referring to Dave Court, an eccentric man who is well known in my hometown. The character bothered my father because he couldn’t dissociate himself from the image that he had of Dave—an image that clashed with the one that I had created, the character who now inhabits the story. “Dave didn’t drink,” he said. My father’s Dave was a devout Mormon, the kind who had probably never drunk a drop of alcohol in his life. My father’s complaint, I was about to see, would not be the only one in regards to my fiction. As my mother and siblings read the stories, they also objected, usually because the bits and pieces of themselves or others that they knew cropped up over and over again, and they assumed that I was talking about them. The world that I had created in fictional Ridgeview didn’t coincide with their own concept of Raymond, a real town where my family lived for almost fifteen years.

Why such resistance to the characters I had created in my stories? As I explained it to my family, the stories were fictional; I was merely cobbling together bits and pieces of what I knew about southern Alberta into stories through the medium of language. My collected stories were not biographical, were not even “based on a true story,” so to
speak. The relationships between the characters, the town, and the descriptions were metaphoric. The words I used did not represent some of the “real” southern Alberta, but were metaphorical substitutions, relying wholly on the language that brings each character or relationship into being. The stories caused my family discomfort because they read through these metaphorical substitutions, and assumed that the fiction reflected their own lives, giving the stories a biographical reading. But a close look at my stories shows how Ridgeview’s form is fictional. Several fictional elements reveal my stories’ fictional medium: how I weave the figure of “Ridgeview” throughout the collection, my use of imbedded narratives that allegorize fictional elements, and the purposeful misuse of characters who do have a biographical origin.

In writing Ridgeview, I found myself in a similar situation to Chick-as-narrator, working away at the figure Ravelstein until Bellow’s novel was there to read. Bellow uses Chick to write Ravelstein in a way similar to how I chose my numerous characters and stories to make up Ridgeview, the figure. But the setting of fictional “Ridgeview” is not a human being, able to interact and rewrite, to couple or conjoin with other signs to create meaning. Instead, it exists as a setting, a common knot in the fabric of the fictional lives of my characters. It is a word and figure that the characters share, although each story represents a re-reading or re-creation of the sign “Ridgeview.” It is, therefore, a multiple figure, or a “figure” in all the connotations of that word. Ridgeview is a shape and outline as well as a shifting connotation, a “figurative” place that shifts with each character’s description of it. As Miller explains, “Any use of ‘figure’ shimmers figuratively with all its possible meanings” (228). So Ridgeview, as figure, implies a
shifting connotation. Ridgeview is not a fixed place that various characters seek to understand or define, but a figure that changes with each characters’ reading of it. The consequent misreading of “Ridgeview” in each story serves not to pin down a more definite idea of what the fictional place “Ridgeview” must be like, but insists that each reading of a place differs, and shows that the figure itself depends on others’ reading of it. Ridgeview is not a literal geographical place, but a fictional place perspectivized by each character.

“Shoot the Moon,” for example, starts with a brief description of Ridgeview that allegorizes mistrust. It is a rural town “settled by Mormon polygamists who the Canadian government welcomed to the area because of their knowledge of irrigation” (44). According to Brandon, (the name of the protagonist as we find out from “The Beet Farmer”), the town is generally poor and uneducated. Filtered through Brandon, the town is “provincial” or quaint, a place made for leaving. The language of his world is filled with evidence for this; for him, even the prominent character, Sweet, is part of a youthful idyll that Brandon leaves behind as he pursues his own profession. Brandon is a Stephen Hero, a George Willard leaving his Winesburg, Ohio, destined for better things. But as we read the character’s language and his own reading of Ridgeview and Sweet, we come to mistrust him. His language from the first line, “As a lawyer, I’ve learned how important it is to tell the truth,” reveals a sign that is shifting, dishonest, and untrustworthy—almost the opposite of what the narrator believes himself to convey. Ridgeview, then, filtered through the lying narrator is equally suspect. It is a town and
place that is fictionally characterized by the narrator, likely outside of the idyllic language that the narrator uses to describe it.

In “Poachers,” the connotative figure of Ridgeview gets a very different reading. Pudge’s Ridgeview has a shape that almost requires her absence. In her Ridgeview, she sees herself as a “spinster silhouette” and her son as a “blue-eyed freak” (87). Her experiences in Ridgeview are so negative that she feels like committing suicide. “I wanted so badly to project myself into the water, car and all, and drown myself like an unwanted kitten” she says (95). Pudge’s Ridgeview is an oppressive place, a place that differs greatly from the idyllic town portrayed in “Shoot the Moon.” But Ridgeview is also a place where she has chosen to stay, probably for what she feels is “a stable home life” (99) for Taylor. It is interesting, then, that Pudge decides to take Taylor up into the mountains to talk to him about his paternity. Ridgeview is also a place, as she has come to know it, that he needs protection from.

“A Prayer for the Cosmos” provides a nice, immediate contrast to the Ridgeview in “Poachers” and gives us probably the most comprehensive view of Ridgeview of any of the stories. Ironically, this Ridgeview is a place that feels oppressive to the same people who are oppressing Pudge in “Poachers.” The “yuppies,” as Pudge describes them, are Gale and Audrey Warden, a childless couple who own a Dalmatian. At the center of Gale’s Ridgeview are the Cosmos, the local high school basketball team. Although Gale spends a great deal of his time with the Cosmos, he feels that others value the Cosmos even more than he does. Dirk Hancock, Coach Dan Myers, and the parents at the Sportsplex are all people who he reads as being fanatical about the basketball team.
What is interesting with Gale is his complicity in this fanaticism. Every time he feels resistance, he ends up giving in. When he resists Dan’s coaching strategy, or Dirk’s treatment of his wife, or taking care of Otis, or letting Mongoose play, Gale is essentially resisting Ridgeview. He isn’t fanatical about basketball, not in the way Dan is, and yet he is still the assistant coach, still lets Mongoose play, and still uses basketball metaphors even when he’s trying not to. He openly expresses his distaste for how Dirk Hancock treats his wife, but then ends up letting him take her out of the play anyway. This makes Dirk’s observation that “You’re such a pussy, Gale,” (126) ring true. Gale doesn’t like what he reads in Ridgeview. He doesn’t like the controversies, the machismo, or the town’s behavior. But he submits himself to this reading and does nothing to change it.

In “Writing on Stone” the figure of Ridgeview changes from a place to live in or leave into a place to return to. Eric, the protagonist, returns to the town because of his cousin Mary’s death. The town hasn’t changed much since he was there as a child:

Doug Coppieters still mans the post office, dragging his palsied foot to the mailboxes. Stuart Heggie is at the Mercantile. The high school kids drive their trucks up and down the street, stopping to talk, reaching out to each other like they’re at a tollbooth with time on their hands. In Ridgeview, the streets are as wide as a three-lane highway. People park in the middle. Every dog on the west side of town is related. (176)

This Ridgeview has changed little since Eric left 15 years ago and it maintains some of the idyllic characteristics of the “Shoot the Moon” Ridgeview. But Eric doesn’t see its provincial nature as making it a place to leave, but a place to return to. In this sense,
“Shoot the Moon” and “Writing on Stone” represent two poles in a dialectic. One is a departure story and one is a returning story. Ridgeview, the figure, exists simultaneously at either pole as well as between them. The indeterminacy of the town’s presence and its characteristics keep shifting the figure of Ridgeview, showing that the town is at once a place to leave, a place to come home to, and a place that is neither. Ridgeview inscribes all of the stories, serving as a backdrop that gives the collection shape and figure. But Ridgeview also “shimmers” with the multiple connotations of “shimmer,” making each story a distinct reading of Ridgeview that breaks down the figure, producing different viewpoints that disrupt and conflict. The ability of the figure, Ridgeview, to be both the word and setting that bind the stories together and the word that implies its own disjuncture, shows its fictional origins. A fixed, “real” Ridgeview would require a more traditionally mimetic reading of the town and each individual story’s relation to it.

Other tropes also reveal Ridgeview’s fictional form. Perhaps the most involved is my use of imbedded narratives or narratives that ask the reader to participate in the reading and re-reading of the stories. Part of this participation stems from the natural process of reading. As Michel de Certeau explains in The Practice of Everyday Life, when we read, we inhabit a text. The act of reading is an act of creation; as we read, we create a series of memories or of locales that the text elicits. We create scenes and settings; we imagine the characters and their idiosyncrasies. Each reader will have a different experience reading and inhabiting a text. As de Certeau explains,

[The reader] insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes himself in
it like the internal rumblings of one’s body. Ruse, metaphor, arrangement, this production is also an “invention” of the memory. Words become the outlet or product of silent histories. . . . A different world (the reader’s) slips into the author’s place. (de Certeau xxi)

Reading is therefore an active process, not one where an author merely imprints her ideas on a reader as she would on a blank page. It’s an interaction that creates or invents memories and histories. J. Hillis Miller argues that this interaction between a reader and an author is actually a performance: “Reading is an act, a performative use of language. It is a happening that makes something else happen, though never anything that can be named ahead of time, promised or forseen” (Miller 225). The act of reading creates an experience using language, a narrative line that tangles around characters and figures in a story. The interaction between the reader and the text brings the characters to life as they are read, making the experience dynamic. Miller explains:

Each theoretical reading (to use an oxymoron) is irreversible in the paradoxical sense that it is productive. On the one had, it is impossible to go beyond it. It is a blank wall. . . . On the other hand, each such reading is unrepeatable in the sense that it leaves the reader in a different place from where she or he was before, unable ever to go back to the starting point or ever to be the same as a reader again. (Miller 224)

Several of my stories show how each reading is unique, performative act. “Shoot the Moon,” “Blarney” and “The Man Who Laughed His Head Off,” in particular demonstrate how reading changes each time a reader sits in front of the typed or written page and
interacts with the text. These stories allegorize the process of reading and re-reading by both inviting the reader to participate in the text’s construction and by showing storytelling in process through imbedded narratives.

My first story, “Shoot the Moon,” allegorizes reading and misreading, demonstrating how the main character has followed his own narrative line, his own reading of Sweet until it has done irreparable damage. When Brandon goes to visit Sweet the last time, he finds himself without the cues he usually relies on to “read” Sweet. He enters Sweet’s house and sees a shrine dedicated to the deceased Doris. The pictures are of a very different Doris from the one he knew and he begins to wonder about Doris’ relationship to Dave: “I realized that I had no real knowledge about the daily workings of their lives, of went on behind the closed doors of more than fifty years of marriage” (57). This realization begins to show the gaps in his knowledge and how he has read or misread Sweet. Immediately afterward, another observation confirms his naiveté. When Sweet makes a joke about his age, he “bray[s] out a donkey’s laugh” (57) that surprises Brandon. He says, “I suppose I hadn’t truly heard Sweet laugh before. He had always relied on others to pick up his jokes, perpetual laugher like Reg or Doris. But neither of them was here now” (57). Brandon finds himself without Reg or Doris to know when Sweet is joking, so Sweet laughs instead.

Because Brandon is without a referent for his encounter with Sweet, the conversations they have exacerbate his misreading. Sweet is quiet, so Brandon opens up and begins talking. He tells about his life, his goals, and his experiences because it is easier than trying to read Sweet, to try to figure out what he wants. “I didn’t know what
to make of his silence, so I kept talking,” he says (58). When Sweet remarks that Brandon was his grandson’s roommate, it reveals how far off Brandon’s reading of Sweet and narration of events actually are. Sweet isn’t interested in Brandon’s goals but instead wants to hear about his grandson, to know how he’s doing. When Sweet finally asks what his grandson is like, Brandon finds that he “do[esn’t] know any stories” (59). Prompted by Sweet’s apparent threat to throw the goblet into the fire, Brandon decides to make up a story, something to show that Sweet’s grandson Cameron is “tops” (60). But because of Brandon’s lack of knowledge and his misreading of Sweet and his motives, the story only reveals that Brandon doesn’t really know anything, but is instead self-centered and naive.

Brandon allegorizes reading in this section. He reads or misreads Sweet and follows the narrative line that Sweet provides until he is left with only one option: making it up. His own reading traps him and puts him in a situation where he must create to answer the ends of his narrative, even at his resulting expulsion from Sweet’s home. The reading is permanent and irreparable. Brandon, like Sweet’s son and grandson, is cut off.

In “Blarney,” the stories that people tell about each other also have real consequences for the characters. The embedded narratives here, the “Blarney,” reflect the characters’ reading and misreading of each other. Janice, like Patrick, is an outsider, an in-law whom the family tries to graft in through the ritual of storytelling. But unlike Patrick, the family hasn’t read Janice yet. Patrick has already kissed the Blarney stone, has already heard the story that Parry tells about John and Janice, and has already
responded by telling a story about the Goat Man. The result? Janice sees a Patrick who has been misread, a person with whom she feels a common bond. This is not at all the Patrick that she has heard about from other family members, the “bad dream” that John has told her about. Patrick belligerently stands for his misreading, and exposes the misreading for what it is by telling the truth, showing how his own “true” story has been as much a fiction as the outlandish stories that the Duggans tell after kissing the Blarney stone. By telling his own story of how he and Betty met, he shields Janice from having to finish the ritual. Although she has kissed the Blarney stone, she hasn’t given the Duggans the satisfaction of having her make up a story like the rest of them. Instead, she imagines the story that she would tell, later on while she and her husband are in bed:

She would tell a story then, curled up against his body. She would tell the story of the goat man, the bastard son of a bestial birth, Paul Bunyan stories from her childhood, or stories from Roald Dahl books she read as a kid. In her mind, she would re-tell them, make them her own. But as her mouth curved to fit the shape of the words, she’d find that she wouldn’t hear a thing. The words would be stuck between them, frozen in mid-air.

(167)

What Janice expresses here is the paralysis of her situation. Her in-laws have read her, invited her into the family on their terms. The family tries to coerce her into telling a story—a short anecdote like the other Duggans have done before her. But the story isn’t hers, it’s theirs; telling her story is like giving it away, leaving her paralyzed, without a voice of her own. This is why Parry’s story “scare[s] the hell out of her” (162). It’s a
story that relies on her compliance to the family and to Parry’s limiting way of reading her. Janice doesn’t want this reading and is afraid of it, afraid of what it might entail. When she thinks of a story, the only one that comes to mind is Patrick’s Goat Man story, with the Goat Man yearning to escape, “hoofs to the ground, head down like a battering ram, ready to bolt into the hills” (163). The end of the “Blarney” shows that Janice is trapped, wanting to escape but finding herself still tied to her husband, stuck between flight and complicity, with her words frozen in mid-air between them.

“The Man Who Laughed His Head Off,” the final story in the collection, also allegorizes fictional storytelling. “The Man Who Laughed His Head Off” uses a first-person, present tense narration to show story creation in progress. Chuck’s narrative voice dominates the page. He is bordering on a breakdown: he has lost his house, his wife, and his children and has decided to hole himself up in the woods. But the solitude is almost too much for him and he fears that he is losing his sanity. “I wonder if this is how people go crazy,” he says (204). Much like Chick and Vela’s or the Battles’ move to the woods, the solitude is poison to Chuck. The first person present tense helps to accentuate the desperation of his situation and the creation of his story in progress, showing how he reads the characters and events that surround him.

The first example of reading is through Chuck’s belittling comments about the man who has replaced him: “the gigolo’s got money, religion. And Benny, Connor, and Allie, my magnificent kids. One of those traveling gigolos who’ll give them presents. Origami dollar bills, Pennants for Connor. Plenty of plush” (201). He refers to the man as a “gigolo,” the first belittling insult he uses when referring to people surrounding him.
He calls the RCMP the “Mounties” and the man who owns the hardware store “Stumpy.”

These petty insults are part of how Chuck reads the people around him. Later on, when Benny arrives and Chuck calls Kendra, he gives us more insight into how he reads. “She’s told me that the gigolo is moral, dependable. Predictable, I translate” (206).

Chuck rewrites what he hears from Kendra, limiting the “gigolo” to “predictable” when she touts her newfound lover’s virtues. Chuck sees the gigolo as a stereotype who is undeserving of Chuck’s attention.

Chuck sees other events with more complexity. As he truly begins to interact with other people—specifically his son Benny—he is unsure of himself and vulnerable. When Benny finally shows up in the driveway, Chuck tells us how he wants to see Benny’s arrival:

   Slow motion here. This is how I picture it: Benny pulls the car into the driveway, opens the door and there’s a close up on his boots, a pair of steel-toed Caterpillars. He steps out of the car and looks lovingly on his biological mess of a father who is crouched over a flowerbed planting a cordless phone deep into the earth. Their gazes lock; the son knows instantly the pain, the anguish, the loss, the hurt, the duress, the longing, the loneliness, the depravity, the self-loathing his father has been experiencing. He strides toward his father leaning forward with his hands lightly outstretched. There is an embrace and one or either or both of them are crying, sobbing wet globs of snot into each other’s shoulders.
They’re shuddering, shaking, sharing the moment like emotional
lunkheads, and they walk into the house arm in arm. (205)

Here, Chuck employs cinematic techniques. He sees their meeting in slow motion and
even narrates a close-up on his son’s boots as he exits the car. Chuck wants to read high
drama here, a Pollyanna-esque feel-good moment in which he and his son understand
each other. But as he presents these events, he undercuts it, saying, “Chuck, this is a
flourish and you know it” (205). He is aware of how his selfish desires push him to read
his son’s presence at Parry Cabin, and his narration is the first evidence of insecurity and
how his voice suppresses the events around him.

The final scene in the story signals a departure from Chuck’s earlier, more
limiting readings of people and events. This time, he pays attention to his son. Chuck
has narrated himself into a dead end; his words have trapped him and limited his choices.
“This is where I’m trying to finish. The way my life has been going, what Chuck wants,
Chuck gets. And there’s no reason for him not to—not here” (210). The words have led
him to a truck chase with a possible “violent ending, a drunken ending” (210). The other
option he sees is the narrative ending in death. Then he says, “But during the chase, I see
that Benny wants it some other way” (210). He begins to watch and read the signs that
his son is giving him. He notices that Benny is worried. Chuck has narrated his son into
a dangerous spot. But Chuck also realizes that the narrative can change, that all he has to
do is alter the words to accommodate his son. “A wink or a nudge could do it, Chuck. A
flourish—a tap on the brakes to stop the truck, to stop the words from bearing down”
(211). This final realization, that words can save his relationship with his son, signal a
change in Chuck from a self-centered, pathetic, overpowering character to a father who
cares enough to try to repair the damage that he’s done. “Suck it up, Chuck. Suck it up,”
he says (211). This Chuck is a character, who like an author, is on the brink of change, of
showing how each word can alter the next, how language and meaning are indeterminate
and multiple rather than singular and deterministic. All it takes is another flourish,
another word to change the story forever.

The last fictional trope I want to explore is in “Writing on Stone.” This story
explores how even words that refer to “real” people can actually reveal how fiction
works. This story required me to stretch more than the others in the sense that it was
about Hutterites—people whom I had lived next to growing up, but had never really
interacted with. I started the story writing about a man who returns to southern Alberta
when he receives a newspaper clipping from his uncle about Mary’s death. I gave the
protagonist my own name, and the story began as a kind of personal exploration for me
about my own cousin Mary, who died in a plane crash. The resulting story, however, was
nothing like my own experience, and the metaphorical use of the names shows how the
story is fictional.

Initially, the words “Mary” and “Eric” represent individuals from my world.
They arbitrarily represent me and my deceased cousin. But once I place these words in a
story, their relationship becomes linguistic, dependent upon the language that describes
them. When I put “Eric” in Toronto, the relationship changes. When I add the word
“Hutterite” to Mary, the relationship changes. And the characters surrounding the
Writing on Stone Eric and Mary are comprised of words that do not describe my own
personal relationship to Mary. Hofen vetter, Martha pasel, Nicklus—all these words are foreign to the biographical Eric and Mary, but they belong to the fictional characters because of the word “Hutterite.” The language changes the characters and leads them to qualities that have little to do with tacking down biographical elements in the story and everything to do with how a narrative line leads from one word to the next.

For example, as the characters in the story became Hutterites, I found that I had to do more research in order to understand and more fully render the characters. This led me to a wealth of other words: pasel for Aunt, vetter for Elder or uncle. Reading Hutterite fiction gave me the idiom and syntax that Hutterites used when talking in English. It also gave me context and words that I hadn’t heard before: tauga nixer for a troublemaker and Nicklus for the fearful Christmas imp. As I employed these words in my story, the narrative line continued to develop, to push the story and characters in different directions, until by the end of the story, the two words “Eric” and “Mary” are almost unrecognizable from their biographical originals. Their own linguistic relationship had changed and redefined the words in relation to each other. If the story had been biographical, the words to describe “Eric” and “Mary” wouldn’t be allowed the same freedom. They could not defer their meaning, following the chain of words. Instead, they would always have to refer back to the original characters, the “Eric” and “Mary” that I would try to represent using words. As metaphors, these words also misrepresent the actual people, but the words would have constant mimetic tension, trying to contextualize an already existing, “real” relationship.
The end result of my collection of short stories is a similar one to Bellow’s *Ravelstein*. *Ridgeview* is not biographical writing, but a fictional rendering of biographical elements. Trying to excise these characters from their fictional realms, taking Ravelstein or Sweet out of the words that surround them is their metaphorical death. To attribute characteristics to a “real” person is to remove a character from the fictional web that is their home. The characters in my stories, like Mary and Eric in “Writing on Stone,” may have started out as composites of people I know. But the fictional rendering of biographical words and characteristics has created an alternate world, one that relies on the linguistic relationship between words. As a fiction writer, this relationship has become clearer to me. I no longer read, looking for the idiosyncratic details that most closely reflect an author’s life. Instead, I follow the narrative line through its knots and kinks until the line implies a figure. I look for the author’s paint on the canvas, the words etched in stone, and as I read, these words come to life.
As a lawyer, I’ve learned how important it is to tell the truth.

My story begins in childhood, before I really knew Sweet Court, the man who would inadvertently lead me to my profession. I grew up in Ridgeview, a town settled by Mormon polygamists whom the Canadian government welcomed to the area because of their knowledge of irrigation. The vestiges of their industry remained in Ridgeview in the form of homes, churches, and a system of canals that extended south of town, past our place, a block after the pavement had turned to gravel. One of the original canals was still there, unused. It was flanked by the old golf course, a name agreed on by the neighborhood kids to describe the adjacent four or five acres of abandoned land. The golf course, like the canal, had long ago submitted to the will of the prairie, the cyclical onslaught of wind and snow. Left was a shack of graying wood, two prongs of a fence, and miles of gopher holes and garter snakes. It got the name “the old golf course” for the golf balls that had claimed the area, driven from the suburban homes on the other side of the canal. These balls seemed to have fallen from the sky; some were old and caked with dirt, half-buried in the prairie soil. Uncovering them was like being on an archeological dig, and I amassed the golf balls in piles before the topsoil covered them up completely. I knew one great golfer in the area: Sweet. He had been one of the founders of the 9-hole Ridgeview golf course, and I often delivered to him the golf balls that I cleaned and put in an old egg carton and he gave me a dollar.

He told me stories.
“There was a golf course as old as time before the pioneers came,” he said. “It was the oldest golf course of all, God’s golf course.” He made a great straight man and I was horribly naive. The only way I’d know if he was telling the truth or not was when his wife was there, or my scoutmaster, Reg. They laughed like crazy even though Sweet frequently repeated himself and never cracked a smile, but I just listened to his stories, yearning to believe, not wanting to unmask him, to declare him a fraud. He told me about God’s golf course, how in the early years on the prairie, large boulders dotted the countryside. The prairie was the putting green and the boulders were missed putts. He described the boulders in such detail—so huge that some farmers just left them in their fields, like giant dolmens, protruding from the plains in the middle of their crops—that I believed every word.

One time I dropped off a box of golf balls and Reg was there in the living room. Sweet had a two bedroom bungalow that he and his wife shared until she died some years later. The front room housed a huge wood-burning stove that heated the home, a couple recliners, and the T.V. When company came, they got out folding chairs and a card table, and this setup was what Reg was motioning me over to when I stepped through the door with my carton of carefully polished old golf balls.

Sweet inspected the lot, holding each ball about two feet away so that he could see them clearly. “An old Titleist,” he said. “Good shape.” He placed the balls on a shelf next to a trophy of a golfer following through on his swing. “The Ridgeview open,” he said, then pointed to himself, “Champ.” The “Ridgeview Open,” as he called it, sounded impressive, but Reg and Sweet’s wife Doris laughed. “Oh, dear,” Doris said, in
her waning Welsh accent. “Stop teasing.”

“Always teasing,” Sweet said. “She accuses me, you know. Ever since I met her in London. Never believes me, even when I tell her the truth.”

“That’s because you never tell the truth,” Reg said. He laughed and Sweet shook his head.

“I’ve a mind to throw you out of my house,” Sweet said.

They both laughed.

Sweet got up from his chair and pointed to the door. “That has your name on it. And the back of my shoe. Send you out the door into the snow.”

“It’s summer, dear,” Doris said.

“They don’t listen to me,” Sweet said, sitting back down. He bent over, gave me a confiding look. “It’s because they’re getting old.” He pointed to his head, moved his finger around in a circle. “Crazy,” he said.

I started going to the Courts every week with Reg to play hearts. I suppose that I could rationalize my visits, say that I was bored during the summer, that I turned to hanging out with my scoutmaster and the Courts because the rest of my friends drove combine for their fathers or worked moving irrigation pipes. Most folks around Ridgeview would probably need that sort of rationalization. I know that I got my share of comments about my visits, as though I were some charitable soul for giving up my precious summer time. Sweet had a reputation. He was one of the only Catholics in a town full of Mormons and he had several eccentricities. I noticed this once when I was
with my cousin Ben buying Slurpies at Fast Eddies and we saw Sweet cruise by on his adult tricycle with a couple bags of groceries in the wire mesh basket out front. Sweet’s bike was the only one like it in town and he had ridden it as long as I could remember. I had never asked about it, never thought it unusual until my cousin pointed it out. I grew up with it. It’s like when I was younger and my parents used French words to describe things in English that they didn’t want others to understand. Words like “pété” for “fart” or “zizi” for “penis.” These words were a part of my Anglo lexicon and I didn’t realize that they weren’t part of everyone’s until I first started school and used the words—the alternate, appropriate, safe words that my parents would allow me to use in public—and kids teased me relentlessly.

“See the old guy on the trike?” Ben asked.

“That’s Sweet,” I said. My cousin Ben was from the Calgary and was staying with us for the week because his parents had won a trip to the Caribbean—which was about as far away as you could get from southern Alberta.

“Sweet?” he asked.

“That’s his name.”

I asked Sweet about his trike the next week over a game of hearts. I was young and frequently tried to shoot the moon by distracting everyone with questions or observations. If people were interested enough, they’d stop paying attention to the cards, not notice that I was playing low, counting until I knew that I had the highest cards in any suit. “Why do you always ride your bike?” I asked.

“A serious question,” Sweet said. “You’re trying to shoot.”
“I am not,” I said.

“He doesn’t have a driver’s license,” Doris said.

“You don’t have a driver’s license?”

“He’s trying to change the subject,” Sweet said. “You don’t fool me. You watch his cards.”

Doris said, “He never needed one.”

“But you have a car.”

“I drive it,” Reg said. “I’m their chauffeur.”

It seemed odd to me, but I guess it was something that they had worked out. For emergencies and whatnot.

“I used to drive until I had leg problems,” Doris said.

“What’s wrong with your legs?” I asked.

“Not trustworthy,” she said.

“You never know which way they’re going to go,” Sweet said. “Have a mind of their own.”

I led the ace of spades.

Sweet said, “I told you. What’s the matter with you people? I’ll get the grenadine.”

We put down our cards and waited for Sweet to stop clanking around in the kitchen and bring out a tin tray of ginger ale and grenadine. I relished these breaks. For all Sweet’s and Doris’s idiosyncracies and apparent poverty, they had great taste when it came to desserts and nonalcoholic drinks. They made a point of never drinking around
me—I was still a minor, and Mormon to boot. The grenadine and Canada Dry mixture was one of my favorites. They always managed to produce a bottle of the red syrupy stuff and at least a plate of gingersnaps or shortbread cookies. Sometimes they had homemade ice cream, churned from a vintage crankshaft model made from cedar and steel. Sweet flexed his forearms when I asked how he got the ice cream so smooth. “I hook these up to the crank and put them on automatic.”

When Sweet came back with the drinks, I shot the moon.

School started in the fall and I had less and less time to visit the Courts, though Reg would still encourage me to visit when I could. I found that I had talent in shop. My shop teacher, Mr. Rigby, noticed that I had an eye for detail, so he put me and another student, Jon Edwards, on the lathe. At first we just glued pieces of wood together, put them on the spindle, then gouged the hell out of them. Gradually we developed our own expertise; Jon liked bowls, I liked goblets. I made one with a ring around it that you split off and left hanging around the stem like an ankle bracelet and then a fluted champagne glass out of cherry that required me to keep the tools extra sharp to get down deep in the gullet. I made several more goblets out of various hardwoods and my mother proudly put them up on our mantle, so that they were visible to visitors. “My son works on the wood lathe,” she’d say. Besides the required projects, all I did was make goblets. They made excellent gifts and they gradually disappeared from the mantle and ended up with relatives or friends from school. A week before Christmas, I decided to give my favorite goblet, the one with the ringed stem, to the Courts.
I put the goblet in a box with a self-adhesive ribbon on top. I wrapped just the top portion of the box so that it looked entirely covered but fit snugly over the bottom half.

Sweet was there at the door when I knocked. He was singing “Eidelwiess,” slowly, just the chorus, over and over, scooping from note to note.

“This is for you.” I put the box in his hands.

“Come in, come in.”

He took me into the living room but didn’t invite me to sit down. Doris’ recliner was vacant. Sweet stopped in the middle of the room, then slowly opened the box. He grabbed the goblet lightly by the stem and held it up in front of him like one of my golf balls. “Beautiful,” he kept saying, “beautiful,” barely audible.

“Where’s Doris?” I asked.

“Gone to visit her sister.” Sweet placed the goblet on his mantle next to a picture of a man, woman, and child with a little boy. “See that boy there?”

“Yes.”

“He’s your age.”

The parents and the kid had older, fuller hairstyles, not too unlike the pictures of my parents when they were younger. The man had large bristly sideburns and wore amber-tinted glasses. The boy was in a two-toned velvet shirt, wide open at the collar. The mother—a flowery blouse with pink accents, green vines curving in a repeating pattern. The boy looked familiar, so I asked Sweet about him.

“He plays basketball. Inside all the time. Stinking and sweaty. Just like his father.” His arm wobbled as he reached toward the picture and knocked it over. “They
live in Lethbridge. Doris will phone and tell them when she gets home from her sister’s. She’ll phone them up.”

It was then that I noticed the faint sweet smell of alcohol on his breath.

“How far away is Lethbridge by car?” Sweet asked.

“About twenty minutes or so,” I said.

“They never visit, you know. You’re a good boy. You come and visit us. You made a goblet with your own hands. Better than my own grandson.”

Sweet stepped towards me and lifted his arm like a blind man reaching for a handhold. He found my shoulder and started to pull me in, to hug me. I became incredibly tense—this was so different from the jovial, sarcastic Sweet I knew—but I let him hold on. I could smell the alcohol strongly now and his skin was damp with perspiration that seeped through his work shirt.

“I have to go,” I said abruptly after he released me.

“A good boy,” he said.

I left.

School started up again in January. Though I had found the real reason for Doris’s absence, I refrained from visiting the Courts. Looking back now, I wonder why. I had always enjoyed the time in their cozy home and I liked the stories and banter. But when Reg phoned me to tell me that he was going over “in a couple days or so” I always said that I had something going on—which was partially true if I thought about it long enough. I was busy with homework and I was in the spring play—the Canadian debut of
Big River—though I had merely a bit part in the chorus and only practiced on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The next time Reg phoned me, he said, “You’ve heard about Doris, haven’t you?” Then I told him about my visit with Sweet before Christmas and how he said she was visiting her sister. “She’s in the hospital,” Reg said. “Her mind is going and Sweet isn’t taking good enough care of her.” I didn’t know what to say to that. Why had Sweet lied? I liked things to add up. I told myself that it was the least I could do to go and visit Doris. She would be happy to see me, I was sure; though as the pace of the semester accelerated through spring, I failed even in this resolve. In the meantime, I was also socializing with a crowd in Lethbridge. Two of the Big River cast members were from Lethbridge and once at a party, they introduced me to the basketball player, Sweet’s grandson, Cameron. He was tall and lanky and didn’t physically resemble Sweet, but I knew from the picture that it was him. Same squarish head, and, ironically, the same confrontational sense of humor.

“I used to visit your grandparents,” I told him. Don’t ask me why I put it in the past tense. Perhaps it was my concern that his family, for some reason, had elected not to visit them.

“How’s the geezer doing?”

“Fine, I guess. Doris is in the hospital.”

“Yeah, I saw her last week.”

“You did?”

Something about my tone must have suggested surprise. All I could think of were the damp arms of Sweet around me, the alcohol, the sorrow.
“Yes, we did.”

“Was Sweet there?”

“He never is. Least not when we’re there.”

“Why not?”

“He and my father don’t get along.”

“Oh,” I said.

I decided to visit the Courts again—this time at the hospital to see Doris with Sweet and Reg. Doris remembered my name, but not much else. The words came out syntactically jumbled in her quiet Welsh lilt. I could no longer rely on her to cue Sweet’s jests, but she seemed happy enough that we were there.

“The light’s on, but nobody’s home,” Sweet said. Right in front of Doris.

“It’s not that bad.”

“She’s a nut case, my dear sweet nut case. Loony as they come.” Sweet patted her shoulder.

“Oh, you’re abonible. Abobinable. Oh, dear, oh.”

“She understands everything. It’s when she talks that it comes out crazy,” Sweet said.

“Not crazy,” she said.

“There you go.”

“It was good to see you,” I said.

After saying our goodbyes to Doris and Dave, Reg stated the obvious, that she
was getting old. “She’s on her way out,” he said, like she was a fading fashion.

Reg’s words proved prophetic. By the end of the summer, she was dead.

I went to the University of Lethbridge in the fall, a step that almost signaled the end of this story. I saw Sweet often enough immediately after Doris’ death, but then my visits dwindled. I attended the funeral, was there for Sweet’s almost grotesque outbreak when he complained that the mortician had made Doris up “like a hooker.” And Sweet still ran his errands around town on his adult tricycle. But my life moved on. I had that insatiable optimism that sometimes occurs in youth when they first go to university.

Having spent all my formative years in a small town with its own provincial ideas and concerns, university was revelatory. Everything from the auditorium-sized classes that were large enough to house my whole high school to the fierce debates in my philosophy courses (my eventual major) startled and delighted me. I excelled in my first year, then moved out of the dorms and into some apartments on the west side of Lethbridge, on University Drive. I roomed with my cousin Ben and two basketball players, one of whom was Cameron, Sweet’s grandson. But this alone wasn’t enough to get me visiting Sweet. It was more the following year I spent as Cameron’s roommate. In school I had read George Kelly, a psychologist who believed that we all had what he called “core constructs” that dictated how we saw the world. As I got to know Cameron, I found that his core construct differed radically from my own, and I feared that a collision of both our world views could be disastrous. The prime difference between us, as it became readily apparent to me, was wealth. Cameron had been born to relative privilege. He
grew up in Milk River Estates, while I grew up in rural Ridgeview. His father Denver, as I found out, was a lawyer who had recently been appointed as a judge in the provincial courts. I see now that our differences may not have been as large as they seemed to me then. We were both from an area with rural roots. The only difference was that, while I embraced my background, Cameron was ashamed of his heritage and horribly spoiled. Once, after a party, I remember him complaining about his car. I ended up with him on the way to Boston Pizza at three in the morning. It was winter and the heater wasn’t working. “I only get hand-me-downs,” he said. I thought that he was complaining about his clothes until he mentioned the heater and how his parents were too cheap to get him a new car. The car was almost ten years newer than my family’s Ford Fairmont. Our only car.

Over the two years I roomed with Cameron, I also learned the reason that Sweet and his son Denver didn’t get along. They had been on shaky ground for years on account of Denver’s atheism. Sweet and Doris were Catholics and Denver’s rejection of their faith pushed him further and further away. The final severance took place shortly after Cameron’s birth. Cameron said that his parents tried a couple of times to regain contact after he was born, but they wouldn’t tell him about it until Cam was almost eighteen. Cameron’s family went over in spring, when Cameron was three months old. Sweet didn’t say a word while they were there, although Doris seemed pleased to see them. Then Sweet said something like “You’re not going to get him baptized, are you?” Cam’s mom protested and Sweet’s temper flared. Sweet accused her of seducing Denver, and called the baby “damned,” said that it might as well be still-born. Then
Sweet threw them out of the house for good. The encounter didn’t sit well with anyone and it kept both families aloof for over twenty years.

Sweet’s troubles eventually led me to want to pursue law. At the time, I saw a lawyer as someone who could smooth things over or act as a go-between for the estranged father and son. Following Doris’ death, for example, there were all sorts of documents and legalese that Denver and Sweet had to wade through. A lawyer was there to facilitate the decision-making process. I began to research law and lawyers. I put off the usual complaints about lawyers being two-faced or arbitrary. Though lawyers were still abstractions to me, I preferred to see them as individuals who metonymized justice and equity. I had no idea of what the profession would eventually require of me. I saw a lawyer as the person who helped others through their most difficult and trying circumstances. I was there to fight for principles and fairness, a sort of Dudley-do-Right for people like Denver or Sweet, whose personal differences kept them both from enjoying family.

I vowed to go back and see Sweet. But my own idealism was only part of the reason. As my father explained it to me, Sweet’s usually low-maintenance heart was beginning to give him troubles. The other reason was trivial. I knew that Sweet was probably going to die soon, and I wanted to retrieve the goblet that I had given him several years ago, the one that I hoped was still on his mantle next to the 60s photograph of his family and son. Strange, but at twenty-two I felt that my youth was slipping away. I was already planning on going into law at McGill and I began to put a real value on lost time. As I pursued my professional goals, I realized that I might never return to some of
the hobbies I had begun during my high school years. The goblet, for me, was possibly the best work I had done on the lathe and I didn’t have any examples of my own left. Since Sweet was going to die eventually, I wanted a chance to make sure that he knew that he could leave the goblet to me in his will. Retrieving the goblet may not have been my main objective for the visit, but I thought about it frequently enough. I didn’t have any plan for bringing it up and no amount of tact could make my request seem justifiable, but I felt that it was worth a try. At the very least I would be able to see my handiwork up close, to see if previous talents were as good as I remembered.

I applied for law school in January and heard by the middle of March that I had been accepted. It was the cause for celebration in our household. My father, a foreman at Ridgeview’s sugar beet factory, always resented leaving his education early and was happy to see that I had achieved academic success. Although I wasn’t one of the wunderkinds who went to Montreal directly from the two-year minimum of university studies, I had completed a degree in Philosophy and published a paper on Kant in a respectable journal, the latter of which I am sure helped secure my spot at McGill. Both were events that gave me some notoriety in a town of five thousand; Doug Coppieters from the weekly *Ridgeview Review* dedicated a half page to my success and even came over to take my picture. Cameron, on the other hand, had dropped out after his second year on academic probation. He had failed to maintain the grades that he needed to continue playing for the U of L basketball team and, as far as I knew, he wasn’t planning on going back. Whether or not this came as any surprise or disappointment to his family, I never knew. In the spring of my fourth year, he moved north to Fort McMurray to work
in the oil fields and I hadn’t heard from him since. This was all the news that I had to take to Sweet that April, when exams were nearing a close and I planned to work once again at the research station in Lethbridge for Dr. Moyer, processing plant clippings. Cameron’s story and my missing goblet were about all that I had on my mind as I knocked on the door of Sweet’s bungalow, and waited for the shuffle of feet.

“I thought you were the police,” he said when he answered the door. “I should have known better. Come in.”

The house was unchanged except for a Doris shrine that had replaced the photograph of Cameron’s family. In the center was a black-and-white picture of her in an oval gilded gold frame. Doris had her hair back with her head tilted slightly to the side. She wasn’t smiling, but the picture exuded a sort of poise and class that made me wonder how she had ended up with Sweet. The shrine had other pictures of him and Doris at their home with Doris sitting in her recliner. There was also a calligraphy copy of a love poem and the obituary that Reg had helped Sweet to write before Doris’ funeral.

Looking at the carefully arranged shrine, I imagined Sweet as a man who doted on his wife, submitted to her, loved her. I remembered his good-natured teasing that concealed Sweet’s adulation. But then I thought of his moments of excess or indulgence, his jokes at Doris’s expense and I wondered really who submitted to whom. I realized that I had no real knowledge about the daily workings of their lives, of went on behind the closed doors of more than fifty years of marriage.

“How are you, Sweet?”

Sweet settled down in Doris’s easy chair and nudged a crystal dish of sugar-free
candies wrapped in cellophane. I took one and un-crinkled the wrap until the candy dropped into my lap like a purple jewel. “Whenever someone asks me that, it makes me feel old.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s OK. I am, you know.”

“What?”

“Old.” Sweet opened his mouth and brayed. Very unexpected. I suppose I hadn’t truly heard Sweet laugh before. He had always relied on others to pick up his jokes, perpetual laughers like Reg or Doris. But neither of them was here now. Sweet needed something to fill the space, to let me know how to interpret his humor, so he chose to do it himself, wheezing like a sick animal.

“You’re not that old.”

“Are you kidding me?” he said. “I’m as old as they come. Liable to drop dead any minute.”

“Whatever you say.”

Silence. Sweet got up and walked to the kitchen, yelled back, “What’ll you drink?”

“Do you still have grenadine?”

“Sure thing.” He came back with a chilled liter of Canada Dry and a bottle of grenadine. He put the tray down and we mixed our own virgin drinks, then drank them, soaking up the silence. I felt more inclined to speak then, so when Sweet asked me how my studies were going, I let the words come out. I told Sweet about my schooling, my
experiences with living off-campus (incidentally mentioning that his grandson Cameron had been my roommate), and how I planned on attending McGill in the fall. Then I got carried away. I gave him summaries of my preliminary reading list, theory from the Greeks to the 19th century. I explained the rudiments of the Socratic method and I outlined my aspirations to eventually become a lawyer proficient in French criminal and English civil law. Sweet kept abreast of my conversation and sipped his ginger ale and rocked slightly in his La-Z-Boy. I didn’t know what to make of his silence, so I kept talking.

“My grandson was your roommate?”

“He was for a couple years,” I said.

Sweet put down his drink and brushed his hands quickly together. “I’ll put some wood in the stove,” he said. He opened the stove grate and warmth seeped into the room. It was evening and the spring was as unpredictable as ever, with a recent cold stretch and blizzard followed by a Chinook wind and then cold again. One day I counted four distinct types of weather: drizzle, hail, snow, and sunshine. A four-season day. Sweet tossed in two logs and nudged them with a poker. “What’s my grandson like?”

Sweet kept his back to me; whatever was in the stove was worth looking at. I started to explain how Cameron liked to play basketball and was doing well, as far as I knew. Sweet sighed and closed the stove grate and came back and sat down.

“He’s a nice enough guy,” I said. “Tall.”

“He’s like his father, isn’t he? That’s why you’re hedging.”

“Hedging?”
“You don’t want to tell me that he’s a sorry excuse for a human being.”

“I don’t know Cameron’s father,” I said. “But Cameron isn’t that bad. Two years is a long time to get to know someone.”

“Not long enough,” he said.

I felt suddenly defensive of Cameron. I honestly felt that he was a decent person, someone whom others looked up to. I didn’t necessarily approve of the choices that he had made in life, but I wasn’t ready to condemn him and I was curious as to why Sweet was so convinced that I was wrong. There was no mirth in his accusations. Just vehemence, malice.

Then Sweet did a strange thing. He walked over to the mantle and picked up my goblet. He shuffled back to the stove and creaked open the grate with his free hand. He sat down on a stool and held the goblet close to the fire. “Prove it,” he said.

“Prove what?”

“Prove to me that Cameron is a decent sort of person. Tell me something to show that he’s tops.”

“I don’t know any stories,” I said.

Sweet stared absently at the fire and twirled the ring of the goblet around its stem like a wooden hula-hoop. He held the goblet close to the oven’s mouth and looked at reflections of the coals on the polyurethane finish. I recalled how hard it had been to get all of the bubbles out of that finish, to make it smooth without any brushstrokes. Our shop teacher didn’t like us using the pneumatic sprayer for small pieces like goblets, so we used either foam brushes or ones with fine bristles to get the finish smooth.
“Sure you do,” he said.

I racked my brain for something that I could tell Sweet, something that would alleviate his grief and keep him from throwing my goblet into the fire.

“He was a good roommate for the most part,” I said. “I heard that he was a very good basketball player, though I don’t recall ever watching him play.”

“No kidding.”

“What do you want to know, Sweet?”

“Tell me a story,” he said.

I did remember one thing—a time when I had run out of money for the month and I was living on potatoes. I had concocted just about everything imaginable out of the miraculous tubers and had rationed them out until the end of the month—a couple of potatoes a day: potato puree, potato salad (minus eggs and green onions), grated hash browns. One day Cameron came home and saw me popping leftover baked potato from the day before into the microwave and he offered to take me out to dinner. Just like that. I appreciated it, but declined. Something about having his father’s money pay for it didn’t sit right with me. I was poor, but proud.

“He offered to take me out to dinner once,” I said.

Sweet thought for a second. “So he thinks he can buy you. So what.”

I started remembering other things, by association, but all of them had to do with money. The time Cameron footed the bill for our carpet cleaning, or the time Cam paid for the entrance fee to Waterton National Park on a long weekend. None of them was any good. Did his magnanimity extend to anything else I could think of? Nope. At least
not right now. So I did the next best thing: I made it up.

“I do remember one time he came caroling with us to an old folks home in Lethbridge. We went with a group of my friends who sang well, and even though he didn’t know all the songs, he came along anyway.”

Sweet fingered the goblet, his back still to me.

“They loved him there because he was so tall. He had to crouch to go through one of the doorways and almost hit his head on a piece of mistletoe. He blushed and one of the old ladies said, ‘He’s up for grabs now, girls,’ and everyone laughed.’”

The ring twirled and twirled.

“So I was worried he’d be all upset or embarrassed that he came along. I was feeling a little guilty, you know, since I was the one who talked him into it. But then he surprised us by going up to one of the ladies and giving her a kiss right on the cheek. It was a woman who was sitting in a wheelchair over near the Christmas tree. She smiled and patted him on the arm, then we finished caroling and went to another home. We must have caroled for two or three hours before people’s voices started giving out. I’d have to say that’s one of the better memories I have about your grandson. Really is a great guy.”

Sweet turned around, shaking his head and resting the cup on his knee.

“Well?” I asked.

He sighed, then tossed the goblet into the fire. I could hear the finish crackling, igniting the rest of the piece. He closed the grate shut.

“You’re a liar,” he said. “Get out of my house before I throw you out.” He stood
up.

I was stunned.

“You think I’m too old? I can do it, you know. Get out. Now.”

I got to my feet and grabbed my coat from the nail in the hallway. Sweet stayed within three feet of me the whole time and followed me out. When I closed the door, I looked behind me, and he was peering through the slats of his mini-blinds. I walked briskly down the driveway and pointed myself home, toward my studies, my future, and my eventual profession.
Friday usually found Brandon under or around the old tractor radials at the playground, looking through piles of gravel for a stone he could imagine into a superhero based on the colors he found after licking off the dust or tossing it in a puddle, rubbing it in his oily hands. This Friday was a holiday after Thursday’s parent-teacher conference, so instead Brandon was home, digging a hole in the backyard. He liked the solitude, the knowledge that he could put something in the ground and leave it there forever. No one else would know. Not his parents or his siblings. The more Brandon buried, the richer he felt.

Brandon wasn’t surprised when his mother drove up in their sky-blue Ford Fairmont and asked if he wanted to go into town with her. “Shopping,” she said, and asked if he could help round up the kids. Mom couldn't leave the children alone, so they went everywhere together. Brandon, his little sister, and his brother followed Mom through narrow aisles of supermarkets and down rows of plastic shoes in department stores. They were poor. “Catholic Charities” was just the name of another store; the clothing smelled different was all, like soft cheese or the boxes of old magazines Brandon found once in their attic. Now that was a place. Mom had forbidden him to go there; Brandon suspected it was where Dad stored Grandpa’s old .22, but wasn’t sure until he checked. He had to lean the bunk bed ladder against a wall to reach the crawlspace entrance, then use a flashlight to search through the piles of cardboard and old clothes until he found the rifle. Next to it was a box of magazines bound with twine. The covers
were mottled with black-and-white fungus, but he could still make out the contorted bodies of women, their angled gestures and swollen breasts. At the time, the pictures struck Brandon as funny, and the memory that remained with him wasn’t the pictures or the gun, but the mildewy Catholic Charities smell of the magazines, a smell that still had him on the point of laughing and retching.

In town, Mom stopped at Winners—a store that bought name-brand clothing that other stores like The Bay or Woodward’s couldn’t sell. The children’s section was filled with mounds of clothes on flat square tables surrounded by aisles and aisles of multicolored jackets and jumpers. The clothes had once been in neatly folded piles, the colors distinct and separate, but now they were mixed together like pitched hay bales. It was from one of these piles that Brandon’s mother pulled two new shirts. One was tan with a terry polo collar, and the other was a brown heat-sensitive shirt that turned red when you touched it. Brandon tried on the shirts and Mom ushered the kids up past the cash register. Brandon watched the clerk punch in the numbers. She was a girl—twenty or so, with glittery-shadowed eyes, and a mouth that looked as though it were on the verge of a yawn. The numbers were high and Brandon told his mother that they only had ten dollars left from Dad’s food allowance. She said, “Does this look like food?”

Outside, she opened the bag and gave him the shirt. He finally realized that the shirts were for him—the first new shirts he’d ever had. In the car he wriggled into the heat-sensitive shirt and did up his seatbelt, playing with the brown hem that his warm hands turned red.
On the way home, they stopped at the sugar beet factory to take lunch to Dad. Brandon expected Mom to leave him there in the car with his sister, but instead she straightened his new shirt and handed him Dad’s tin lunch box. Brandon didn't expect the old tin box, the remaining paint splotched like lichen. He couldn't remember Mom packing it, although the Fairmont had plenty of room to hide a tin box. The car hauled all sorts of things, and on long rides, Brandon would find crayons and glo-yos, or plastic Smurfs with their limbs chewed off, sandwiched in the hollow around the middle seatbelt, or underneath the beige carpet remnants Dad put on the back floorboards. So Brandon didn’t ask questions. He just took the box and went inside.

The factory was in the middle of campaign, the busiest time of the year. The day before, Dad didn't get home until almost 10:00, and work was at 6:00 the next morning. Campaign had him going for weeks like that, until finally the beets had produced all the sugar they would for that year. Because pretty much everyone was going to be busy, Mom told Brandon to lie low and make his way up to the main office that overlooked the rest of the factory. If Dad wasn't there, he could just leave it, then hurry back down to the Fairmont.

The factory smelled like molasses and swine. Brandon knew the smell from his Dad's Alberta Wheatpool overalls, the ones that Dad rumpled in a metal bucket in the mudroom, where he would scrape all the organic sludge from work off his boots with a putty knife. The mudroom wasn’t a room really, just a space for a bucket, Dad’s overalls, his gum boots, and a chipped cream-colored sink the size of a pasta bowl. But the smell in there was the same as the factory, the odor Mom tried to get his father to shed as soon
as he entered the mud room in his work clothes.

“You lost, son?” It wasn't his father, but a man with a straight-brimmed Wilbur-and-Ellis hat over a white hairnet and glasses. A brown beard like Castro’s.

“My dad works here,” he said.

“You're Turcato’s kid. Up the stairs—you'll find him.”

He used one arm to help lift himself up the stairs two at a time, with the lunch box swinging in his left hand, the way that the twelve-year-old deacons in his church carried the sacrament trays.

He didn't knock when he reached the door. Dad was there fumbling through the contents of a manila folder. His father still had on his overalls, with the dark stains like ink blots patched around his legs and midsection. Brandon handed him the lunch box.

“You got time to see the campaign?” he asked.

“Mom's in the car,” Brandon said. Dad put the papers back in the folder, gave his son a hat, and pulled him downstairs onto the production floor. They walked around a pyramid of sugar beets to where several men, many also in overalls, sat and drank out of large mugs.

“It's Turcato Junior,” one of the men said. He was an older man with a pear-shaped scar running from his cheek to the bridge of his nose. He wore a heavy cotton shirt with suspenders and his Wranglers had lines in the denim where his gut forced the material into rolls. Dad said that he was going to teach Brandon the trade, teach him how to be a real sugar beet farmer, and the men at the table laughed. “I’m going to work here when I grow up,” Brandon said. The man with the scar nodded approvingly. “Why not
work here now?” he said.

“That’s OK, Mitch.”

“Here’s a shovel,” he said. Then he pointed to the pyramid of beets. “When you’re done with that, you can go home.”

Dad turned to talk some more with the men and Brandon could hear the low rumbling of their conversation. Brandon knew how to use a shovel. Hadn’t he just been digging up his own backyard earlier that day? He went over to the pyramid and tackled it, shoveling the beets onto the still conveyor belt.

“Careful over there,” Dad said.

Some of the men laughed. One said, “The boy knows his place.” Brandon was happy and felt like this was who he was, a beet farmer. He knew certain things about who he was and where he came from, like all the interesting diagrams about conception that Dad showed him once. Dad had been to some college before taking a job at the factory and he wanted Brandon to learn. When Brandon was five, Dad drew a large and a small circle on yellow paper with faint blue lines and wrote “Meiosis” in block letters. Brandon followed the whip-like tail of the sperm and saw how it penetrated the egg, saw it split apart until it was a large ball of globes like the frog’s eggs he found in the coulees near Ridge Reservoir. Brandon was so absorbed in the splitting, the act of growing larger and larger and how the blueprint could take those same cells and make a person, that he never troubled with the sex part of things. All the goopy ways that adults could wrap themselves around each other were foreign to him, since, even in the intimacy of their own home, his parents would rarely do anything physical like kiss. So for Brandon, the
sperm just flew through the air, crossing the awkward spaces of sexual tension between his parents, and into his mother where it multiplied like cancer.

Brandon was sweating profusely now and his shirt turned red with the heat. The shovel was almost as tall as he was with a metal blade and a wood shaft. The blade was horseshoe-shaped and about a foot wide. The loads got smaller until he could only manage to get a few beets onto the conveyor belt. But he kept going.

The laughter from the group of men had by now subsided. The men gathered and watched with some amusement, talking back and forth to each other and remarking on Brandon’s form. Brandon put the shovel with the flat back of it on the ground, and scraped along the smooth concrete into the bottom of the pile, scooping up about four of the brown sugar beets like shrunken heads and heaved them onto the conveyor belt. He was tired and finally dropped the shovel with a clang. The man with the scar picked it up slowly.

“Like this,” he said. He pushed Brandon back behind Dad, then walked over to the wall and pressed a large red button and held it down for a couple of seconds. The conveyor belt whirred to life, taking the beets up and over a lip where they disappeared into a cylindrical vat. “Use your legs.” He held the shovel across his torso, so that the wooden shaft rested on his gut. Then he bent his legs and shoveled into the pile, and onto the conveyor belt in loads ten times the size of what Brandon had shoveled only moments before. The belt was a solid stream of beets, moving up and out into the vat, a long ribbon of brown.

The man with the scar turned off the machine after the last beets had disappeared
over the edge.

“You try,” he said.

He handed Brandon back the shovel. This time, Brandon held it like he saw the man do, bending down low with his legs and heaving small loads of beets onto the conveyor belt as fast as he could. It was easier when he lifted from his legs. The men, including his father, egged him on. “You’ll make a beet farmer yet,” they said. “Get your back into it—that’s right.” Brandon felt exhilaration, and although his choppy stabs into the pyramid of beets didn't compare to those of the man with the scar, he felt as if he was doing real, gut-wrenching work, the kind that he imagined his father did every day.

“Brandon!” It was Brandon’s mother. Brandon dropped his shovel and the group of men dispersed. Some congratulated Brandon on the work he had done. Others turned to go places, or were already working, concentrating on their tasks like blinkered horses. “You didn't have to keep him,” his mother said to Dad. “Now his shirt is all dirty.”

“We were just having fun. Leave it alone,” his father said.

“That's his good shirt,” she said. “I just bought it. Can’t you see?” She pointed at Brandon’s chest. “We don’t have the money.”

Dad argued, told Mom that he was just doing his job—if his money wasn’t good enough, she knew what she could do. Brandon tried not to look at either of them, but instead played with the bottom of his shirt. One spot of red for each finger imprint, like daubs of fresh paint.

When Brandon’s mother came back to the car, she closed her door, hard. She
waited a moment and held her head forward, with the chestnut curls of her bangs reaching down like ivy to the steering wheel. She breathed heavily, then turned her head toward Brandon. In the light, he could see the small crow's feet around her eyes, the gentle creases that, with the sunlight streaming through the cracked windshield, seemed larger, more definite. He understood, without realizing it, how his mother and he were different, tricked out with their own sets of problems. She reached up to twelve o'clock on the wheel, and started the car. The fan pushed lukewarm air through the vents, the air cold against Brandon’s chest, browning his shirt so that the dirt and molasses were less noticeable.

She turned the car’s nose to the road. “You smell just like your father,” she said.
A Word from the Dummy

It’s not easy, being green.

—Kermit the Frog

I can feel Gavin’s hands working up and down my back. He tweaks my shoulder blade and my left arm waves. He reaches, then presses his hand at the base of my neck and my head flops forward. I maintain the almost plastic smile that I need to play my part. I let my limbs loose, dangling like they are made of wood, waiting for his hands to move to where my muscles are twitching, ready.

“And now, I will drink this glass of water while my dummy Clyde recites ‘Hey Fiddle Diddle’ in falsetto.”

He reaches for a transparent bowler and I try to remember the words to the nursery rhyme. Every night it’s a different line. Sometimes I sing the Canadian national anthem in a burly vibrato, or songs from The Wizard of Oz or Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, depending on the audience. He’s pushed me out on a limb before. Once I had to make up the words to the US pledge of allegiance to a truckload of high school baseball players from Montana. Most of them—the kids that is—thought it was hilarious, but at the end of the show, a couple of the chaperones demanded their money back. And “Show Biz,” even if it was just summer stock, took that seriously. “You don’t know the pledge of allegiance?” Gavin asked after our number.

“Nope,” I said. And frankly I didn’t care. There was one girl three rows from
the front with red ringlets for hair who laughed so hard, she had to lean forward in her
seat and bobbed back and forth through the whole thing. That was reward enough.

“Let’s just hope they don’t have guns.”

His concern, like everything Gavin did, was an act. Our number opened the rest
of the evening up to Canadian-American jokes that riffed through just about every sketch
that followed. Sometimes you just had to find the pulse of a group, and that night
thrumming our neighbors south of the border was it.

I start my recitation, and this time I act like I’m gurgling. I try to sound like those
cartoons in the 40s where the characters are under water and the soundtrack warbles
and bubbles. I had done this before, several times. It all depended on what I thought the
audience’s expectation was and if my behavior would somehow thwart it. Sometimes the
irony was too thick for some—too idea-oriented. A real person pretending to be a
dummy, then screwing up the lines? Usually it worked. Funny.

Gavin stops drinking and I change gears, finishing the nursery rhyme in falsetto,
like I am supposed to: “And the dish ran away with the spoon,” I squeak. I turn my head,
mimicking a dummy, like my head is on a swivel, and look at Gavin who frowns
dramatically.

§

Ventriloquism: A dialogue with an alter-ego dummy, with roots in myth and history.
Popularized in the late 1800s. A voice dissociated from the performer, like the severed
head of Orpheus, bobbing in the river Hebrus, singing Eurydice’s name.

§
I first got the job at the old Empress Theatre in Fort Macleod after singing “Ain’t She Sweet” during an audition at the Yates in Lethbridge. The year before, the Great West Summer Theatre troupe had an argument about the leasing terms and decided to go elsewhere. When their troupe dissolved, it left an opening for a whole new set of local talent, so the Fort Macleod mayor opened up the summer months to bidding. The Star Singers of Lethbridge got the bid and held auditions at the Yates.

Gavin was there.

He made an impression. He had straight red bangs that hung almost down to his chin, and during the improv sketches, he always walked with purpose, pushing back with his feet so that he looked like he was moving far and fast without actually doing so. He kept his body at a near 45-degree angle to the stage and never, never turned his head away from the audience. When he sang “Stars” from *Les Miserables*, several fellow auditioners clapped. *Les Mis* was still new then, and popular. I remember that he forced a vibrato.

Star Singers hired four guys and four girls to make up the cast. I was the youngest of the group, and shy. “Shocked” would be the best word to describe how I felt. I was from Ridgeview, a town that had fewer inhabitants than the other cast members’ high schools had students. The rest of the cast had experience in drama clubs, show choirs, and improv. I had experience singing and playing the piano and violin, but had very little acting experience—just a few parts with the Puffin Players as a kid. I was surprised that they hired me. My mother wasn’t. “You should’ve seen yourself up there,” she said after I finished singing my audition piece. “A regular little showman.”
We had practiced the song “Ain’t She Sweet” with a few cheesy hand gestures and stage movements. When I sang, “Just cast your eye in her direction,” I swept a hand cross-wise in front of me like I was measuring the horizon. I molded my hands in the form of a woman’s curves. “Ain’t that perfection,” I sang. I smiled, slyly.

§

I take the back staircase down to the dressing rooms. John is there, donning his Maitre D shirt for the Roadkill Café sketch. I have five minutes to mess up my hair with gel and cover my face with bruise-like splotches of makeup. John’s eighteen, only two years older than I am, but looks thirty. He started bartending illegally at the end of grade ten, before he was even sixteen. He has three goals in life: to be a bartender, to be a professional actor, and to make a million dollars. “Two out of three,” he told me the first week that we worked together. He leaves and I turn to the mirror.

I’ve always prided myself on my face’s elasticity. How I can mold it like playdough to do whatever I want. There are twenty-four muscles in the human face, an infinite number of expressions. Gavin said that for hours, he would stare at his image, going through every nuance in expression, just so that he would know how his face worked. You had to be very particular, he said, to be an actor. That first week in May, Ben, John, and I were talking through the Roadkill Café sketch, just brainstorming for ideas while we watched Gavin loudly talking to himself on an empty row near the Empress stage. Ben, who later made a fortune in life as an image consultant, started laughing. “Do you need someone to talk to?” he yelled over. Gavin kept talking to the wall, “I don’t think so,” we could hear him saying. He shook his head. “Stupid, stupid,
stupid.” By the end of the summer, we’d all be doing the same thing, trying to get into character.

I’m backstage. In the dark, I can see Kelly changing into her Alannah Myles outfit. She attaches inserts onto her cream-colored bra to make herself more chesty. She only has a few minutes before we’ll be done with our scene and she doesn’t have time to trek down below the stage and into the hallway that cuts through the bottom of the Empress. Every day I think she’s embarrassed as I watch her undress, although I’ve seen her prancing in a bra and panties around Gavin without batting an eye. We often came into the girls’ dressing room for makeup or props and all four of the girls would be in various stages of dress. When Gavin entered through the swinging door, they greeted him like one of their own kind. When I followed behind, Kelly squeaked and reached for a towel to cover up.

“Waiter, there’s a fly in my soup.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Igor!”

It’s my cue. I stagger on stage, dragging a palsied right foot. I have cotton balls in my mouth and my face looks like it’s been run over by a semi. I dump a bag of black plastic flies into Ben’s bowl, wait for John’s clap, and I lumber back. Exit stage left.

§

Getting in character: never act a part. Forget everything you know. Imagine a photo album with pictures from your life. Slide them from the plastic and toss them in a fire. Watch the paper crinkle up like used cellophane until the smoke has stopped rising through the flue and the fire is cold. You’re ready to begin.
The first few days of practice, I wouldn’t talk. I could imagine Gavin, Jerri, and Janice meeting together and discussing my reticence as they would a lack of funding or a freak accident. They would look for blame, try to figure out a way to circumvent it. “He seemed so outgoing,” they’d say. “I had no idea.” Truth is, the cast intimidated me. There was Mindy Mathes, the brunette who had tap danced at the Jubilee Auditorium in Calgary, Josh who had won international awards in the Lethbridge Jazz choir two years running, and, of course, Gavin, the creative genius who was finishing up his second year in acting at UBC and had played any number of roles from Winthrop in *The Music Man* to the lead in *Saturday’s Warrior*. He would eventually star in Toronto’s alternative “Spin City” and have his own syndicated TV show bearing his name. The cast were all ostensibly extroverts and when we first rehearsed they swarmed the stage with impersonations and improv. It was like being in a room with Tracy Ullman and Robin Williams competing for air time and I was the straight man, the dummy who couldn’t talk. Some of the things they did embarrassed me, like when Gavin lined us up on all fours and checked if we were breathing from our diaphragms. He made us pant. “Good, good,” he said, the harder we panted. He seized our midsections like he was squeezing a bellows.

“We’re going to play Freeze,” Janice said. “Clyde, you should like this.”

I shrank into my seat.

“Jerri and I will start out acting a scene. At any point, one of you can yell ‘Freeze,’ then take the sketch any direction you want.”
They acted a birth. Jerri, who used to dance professionally in Chicago, played an orderly who had to take care of Janice until the doctor arrived. She pretended to hook up an I.V. and stuck a needle in Janice’s rear. Everyone laughed like it was a regular party. Janice, who had two boys of her own, puffed out her cheeks, held her abdomen, and hyperventilated. She leaned forward to take pressure off her back and John yelled “Freeze!” He tapped Janice on the shoulder, took the exact position that she was in, then pretended he was a golfer bending over on a putt. “Caddie,” he said. “Pitching wedge.” He placed the pitching wedge on the ground, swung hard, and threw his club when he realized that he’d missed. The caddy knelt down to pick up the imaginary club that John had thrown, and Gavin yelled “Freeze!” He took Jerri’s position with one knee on the ground, then raised his head and said, “Alice, dear Alice, I’ve been thinking about this a long time. Last night I withdrew all my government savings bonds and cashed in three hundred thousand aluminum cans to give you this.” He held his hands forward and said, “Creak,” as he opened the box. “It’s an engagement ring.”

John, as Alice, swooned, sat down on Gavin’s knee and put his hand in his hair. “For me?” he asked.

“Alice, will you marry me?”

John took his hand from Gavin’s hair and smiled, pretending to hold the ring in his hand. I yelled, “Freeze!”

§

Back in the dressing room, I notice it. A note, under a daisy in a vase.

Condensation has dampened a ring into the yellow post-it. “John,” it reads. “I consider
you my closest friend.” Gavin’s frenzied initials mark the bottom of the note. I had seen those same letters scrawled on so many programs when we stood in lines after every performance, thanking patrons on their way out. I often garnered attention from younger girls or older women, who thought my rendition of “It’s Not Easy Being Green” (replaced with the words, “It’s Not Easy Being Dumb”) hopelessly endearing. Gavin always attracted a different crowd—displaced urbanites or other actors, friends from Lethbridge or Vancouver. He scribbled his initials, “GC,” then added quips from old song titles or the Muppets. Now, looking at the post-it, I feel the weight of my intrusion. I have shared a dressing room with John the whole season, spent nights at his house, gone with him to parties and publicity events. And this square piece of paper somehow claims him, sets him apart. I put the piece of paper in my pocket and dump out the vase of water into the sink. The daisy lies limply across the drain. I pick it up, remove the petals one by one and put them down the drain until it’s just a stem with a yellow head. Then I tear the stem in two and toss it in the wastebasket. I leave in my costume to wait in the wings.

§

Break a leg: nobody knows where the expression comes from. It’s a courageous French actress with a leg brace, a Yiddish blessing. It’s kneeling for a bow or picking up coins thrown by an audience. But always, always, there is an envious soul in the wings, hoping for misfortune while wishing luck.

§

After my stint on Gavin’s knee, pretending to be a ventriloquist dummy, everyone
clapped. I had jumped in, just like the others, taken a spot and twisted it, molded it to what I wanted it to be. Gavin told us once how certain actors played parts, while others became their parts. “It’s the difference between mediocrity and stardom,” he said. The cast liked our sketch so much, they decided to put it in the show. “Bravo,” Janice said. “Belissima.” We practiced the sketch again, Gavin and I, to brainstorm lines. We hashed out details: drinking water, Gavin throwing his voice. It was high comedy. But I couldn’t hold the dummy smile for long. “You’ll have to do something about that,” he said. So afterwards, I sat in front of the mirror looking at my face, forcing an exaggerated smile and opening my eyes wide. After thirty seconds, the edges of my mouth started to twitch violently. My eyes began to hurt. I held it longer, a minute, two. My jaw wobbled, my cheeks shook. My face no longer looked like a smile. Ridges appeared, wrinkles. Tears slid from my eyes. After ten minutes, my wooden composure had turned into a seeping, soft, willowing face.

§

Every revue needs a can-can. We line up for our own tailor-made bit of political satire, singing “In the Navy,” replacing the word “Navy” with “Mounties.” Mounties have a high profile in Fort Macleod, home of the Empress theatre and the trading fort that the early Royal Mounted Police established to put an end to the whisky trade. Before the twilight years of the plains buffalo, the Mounties provided protection for the Blackfoot and Piegan tribes even amidst war and disease. If it weren’t for the all-but-complete disappearance of the buffalo, the stream of settlers west, and John. A. McDonald’s relentless lines of rail, the truce of mutual respect developed at the trading
posts might have worked. But, as in all stories of colonization, it didn’t. Now tensions exist between the neighboring reservation and the 40,000-plus inhabitants of present-day Fort Macleod. Downtown is strewn with fringe native Americans who still seek the wares of the whisky trade. The cast, all white kids from the suburbs, lock their cars in the parking lot behind the Empress. In the middle of the day once, we were accosted by a Native American wanting change for alcohol. He was drunk and had lines of spray paint stemming from his nostril to his cheek. One time we found the window on the driver’s side of Josh’s car shattered in pieces, his stereo stolen. We reported the theft and comforted Josh. “It’s OK,” he said. “It’s my dad’s car.”

We are high-kicking now. Ben struts in front of us. He’s wearing the same uniform: black pants with a yellow stripe, exaggerated saddle bags on the side, a red coat with brass buttons. But instead of our straight-brimmed porkpie hats, he sports a turban. Canada is a cultural mosaic, the turban implies. It will protect you, your religion, your freedoms. You can maintain your culture and still be a Mountie. We get to the chorus: “We want you as a new recruit,” we sing. Our buckles gleam in the lights, our leather boots clomp out the beat. The audience laughs and laughs.

§

How to spot a celebrity in southern Alberta: keep living your life. Don’t stay home, take your kids to soccer practice, work hard. The celebrities will come to you, ask you the time of day. You’ll see them in the checkout aisle, fingering a chenille sweater they’ve found on clearance. They’ll greet you in summer parades. At night, you’ll see them in fifteen-second spot commercials on channels 2 & 7. Don’t look away. Here’s
I was at the Salvation Army on the first Tuesday of the month, when they let you stuff anything you want in a bag for five bucks. The store was bustling with families, Hutterites, and farmers. My friend Gary was with me. He was also a thespian, having been in plays at LCI. He’d been in *Harvey* and *Sweeney Todd*, but only had bit parts and couldn’t sing worth beans. Gary hated second hand shopping because he was so tall. None of the clothes fit. I, on the other hand, was medium-sized, with an average waistline, average shoe size, average height. At the checkout my bag was full.

“Aren’t you in that show in Fort Macleod?” the lady behind the counter asked.

“Yes,” I said. Gary nudged me. This seemed to happen to me a lot lately. The woman didn’t ring up my bag.

“I want to thank you,” she said. She had auburn hair with a tuft of gray at the crown, saucer-sized glasses with filigree hinges.

“For what?”

“I have a seven-year-old son who we’ve been trying to get to take music lessons. He has an ear for music, but he won’t do a thing when we tell him to. But when he saw your number, the one with the fiddle, he all of the sudden wanted to play the violin. ‘I want to do that, Mom’ he said. Ever since then he’s been taking lessons.”

“Wow,” I said.

She handed me my bagful of clothes. “Take it,” she said.

“It’s only five bucks,” I said.
“That’s OK,” she said.

Outside, Gary turned to me and said, “Only you, Clyde.”

§

I was the only violinist in the cast, so it was up to me to play both the Devil’s and Johnny’s parts. When I was the devil, I slid a red headband with horns onto my head. I was lit up, the lights covered with red gels. As Johnny, I took off the headband and the light changed to white. On cue, I played the repetitive motif, complete with double stops and improvised flourishes. When the audience clapped, I tapped my feet on the black top in rhythm. When they didn’t, I moved with the music, dipping the violin neck up and down and playing runs along the fingerboard.

“The Devil Went down to Georgia” was Jerri’s idea. A number where she could dance and they could use my talent on the violin. She interpreted the story with her body, sheathed in devil-red spandex. I accompanied on the violin, with our piano/effects guy on a portable Roland. It was a serious number. But after almost a month of watching Jerri shimmy and jété on stage, Gavin had had enough.

“Bad reviews,” Gavin said one afternoon. He bought ten copies of the article. You could tell what the journalist thought by skimming the adjectives. “Brilliant” for Gavin, “endearing” for me, “nuanced” for Kelly, and “overzealous” for Jerri and Janice. Jerri and Janice were the directors and hadn’t yet arrived.

“What do we do about it?” John said.

“I think they should be cut,” Gavin said. Gavin was adept at passive voice. Decisions were made. That’s how the show progressed.
“They’re not that bad,” I said.

“She’s fat,” Gavin said.

“You’re so rude,” Mindy said.

“She’s a dancer. It looks ridiculous. And it’s the only serious piece in the show. The audience never knows what to do.”

Jerri entered through the Empress’s double doors wearing a flouncy skirt and a red beret. Fat? I hadn’t thought of her as such.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Gavin passed her a paper. I read over it while we waited for her to finish. “The two overzealous directors repeatedly interrupt the show’s flow, culminating in a passé performance of the choreographer in an otherwise satisfactory ‘Devil Went Down to Georgia.’”

“These reviews,” she said, shaking the paper.

No one said a word.

“We think it’s a little more than that,” Gavin started. He explained how we had been getting reviews like this from other sources as well, and that when Mark Campbell came, he was fine with everything except the directors’ bit parts to try to give the show narrative cohesion. “It’s improv,” he quoted Mark as saying. “You have to maintain that energy.” Jerri nodded for a while until she realized how what he was saying implicated, or rather extricated her, then she said, “Hold it. If I’m right, you’re telling me that you want me out.”

“Not so bluntly, but yes.”
Jerri stormed out. On her way, she called Gavin conceited, reprehensible. When Janice came in, they phoned Beverley, the CEO of Star Singers, their producer. Beverley asked for Gavin to come on the line, to explain his side. They argued for an hour while we waited, listening to the cursing and cheap shots. That night, we replaced Jerri with Kelly and Mindy who wore fishnet stockings and leather jackets, their 80s hair done up in red bandanas. The audience loved it.

§

After the number, Mindy complains about the push-up bra she has to wear during “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.” It chafes her skin, makes her boobs look too big.

“Why do women wear bras anyway?” I ask.

She stops in the stairwell and Gavin catches up. “Because, dummy, if we didn’t, our boobs would fall off.”

“Very funny,” I say.

“Look Gavin, he doesn’t believe me.”

“Some people never learn.”

They push past me. Gavin has his hand on her back, like an usher. We’re at the line of dressing rooms. “Could you help me out of this?” she asks. She takes off her jacket, lifts up her hair and scrunches it against her head. The bra is black. They go into the dressing room and as I pass I hear them laughing.

§

Why it pays to be gullible: you possess a wealth of positive traits. You believe, you trust. You have faith in people, the way a child depends on a parent. Your world is
filled with hope. You will always tell the truth.

§

At a party, I skunked the mayor of Fort Macleod in a game of ping-pong.

“Nice forehand smash,” he said. “Strong.” He complimented me, shook my hand like he was in a photo giving me a billboard check for a million dollars, though no one was around to see it.

“Thanks,” I said.

Bud Murray ran the Ford car lot until he had accumulated enough wealth to retire, then he worked as Mayor. Every summer for Canada Day, he waxed his ’57 Mustang convertible and rode it up and down Main Street, mere steps from the Empress entrance. He depended on attractions like our show for summer tourism dollars and this party was for us. That afternoon he played host on his estate just south of Fort Macleod, a corner lot in a gated community. He had a private pool, a barbecue and smoker. He insisted on cooking the meat himself, fending off jokes about leftover horse meat from the glue factory, one of Fort Macleod’s main industries. I liked watching how Mayor Murray could work his guests. He had the infectious laugh of a politician and knew when to dig or tease and when to lay off. He had seen the show seven times and talked with us after each performance. I went inside to get something to eat. Meat from the Mayor’s smoker sat in a stringy stack. I picked up a chintzy paper plate and scooped some of the meat onto a bun with a fork. I grabbed an orange pop and went outside to talk with Kelly and the mayor’s wife.

“Did I ever tell you that you remind me of my nephew?”
She hadn’t, but I wasn’t surprised. I had found that people often thought I looked like someone else. It was part of being an actor.

“I don’t think you have,” I said.

“He’s a regular comedian, just like yourself. Oh, he doesn’t act professionally or anything, but he was Gilbert Blythe in ‘Anne of Green Gables.’”

“Have him try out. He could be in the cast next year.”

“Oh, you’re so funny,” she said.

Mayor Murray came over from talking with Gavin and John, and removed a red-and-white apron. “This boy beat me in ping-pong,” he said, “right in my own house.”

“You’re too good a host,” I said. “You lost on purpose.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t think that,” Mrs. Murray said. “Buddy takes his ping-pong very seriously.”

“How about a rematch?” the Mayor asked.

“Sure,” I said.

The first game, the game I skunked him, we were almost alone in his downstairs family room. This time, his wife and Kelly followed us, as did other members of the cast: Gavin, John, and Mindy. We rallied for a bit and I missed the table on a smash and the mayor won service. He started with a back-spin serve that forced me to ease it over the net, lobbing it up. He backhanded it and it came right down the middle. I blocked but didn’t have the angle for any spin, so the ball landed on the table with plenty of room and a clear line for a forehand smash. The mayor put it down hard and the game was 1-0. I loosened up after that. The mayor must have figured that the serve worked, because he
led with it for the rest of his service. I countered the second and third balls with a side
spin and he lost both points trying to dig off the sides. On the fourth point, he somehow
got it from under the table and landed it right on the net and it skittered onto my side.
The next point I won on a smash dead center. I was up 3-2. By now a few more people
had gathered around. Janice and Jerri made their way up from the deck and they talked
and watched while the play intensified. Mayor Murray was keeping up. He held the
paddle traditionally and had a great shorthand with a fierce backhand smash. But he had
problems getting to the sides quickly enough; his girth made rounding the corners
difficult, and most of the time he would just let the ball go rather than relinquish his
dominant position behind the middle line. I played pen-style, with a weaker backhand,
but, like he had already mentioned to me, a powerful forehand smash—almost
unreturnable when it connected. But now my smash wasn’t connecting with the same
accuracy and we were nearing the end of the game. It was 19-16. I had a comfortable
enough lead, but it was my serve and I was nervous. The mayor was sweating under the
armpits and his bald head beaded up. Practically the whole party was there. I netted my
first serve. 19-17. “Don’t give up now,” the mayor said. He smiled, holding his paddle
between both hands, waiting for the serve. I tried backspin to his forehand and he
returned it with ease. I sliced sideways and the ball went down again to his forehand,
bouncing off the side, too high. He reached over for it and hit it hard to my backhand,
straight down the side. I backed up, tried to side slice it again, but the return didn’t
breach the net. It was 19-18. I decided to dead hit it—no spin, and fast to his forehand.
He was expecting spin and overcompensated, sending the ball too far and hitting me in
the chest. “Don’t take it personal,” I said. The mayor didn’t smile this time. I threw the ball over to him for the game point. He backspun it to my forehand and I smashed it home.

The mayor congratulated me again with not quite the same enthusiasm. “Twice in a row,” he said. “That’s what I like about you theatre people. Always have to be on your toes.”

“Thanks,” I said.

The mayor laughed. “You’re a performer, all right. Hey, is it true what Gavin says? That you’re just like your character in real life?”

The question caught me off guard. Certain things, I suppose were similar—the joking around, the sincerity. But other aspects, like my struggle to understand even basic concepts, my mimicry of Gavin, and the frequent confusion I felt were different. “I’m not sure,” I said.

“Ha, ha,” he said. “Yes, yes, that’s right. Always on, I see. What a character.”

He patted me on the back. I turned to the rest of the group to receive my congratulations.

§

We want you, we want you, we want you as a new recruit.

§

It’s the final curtain call. I’m backstage. I just went to change out of my black pants from “The Devil Went Down to Georgia” and back into the jeans and green t-shirt of my character. Gavin was there. And John. Gavin was holding John’s head with both
hands and kissing his mouth.

“Just showing John how to stage-kiss,” Gavin said. He smiled. John shifted his weight onto one foot, rocking away from Gavin. My pants hung on a nail and I reached for them, instinctively.

“Curtain call,” I said. I took my jeans and left.

Now I am waiting behind the curtain as Janice and Jerri finish their short dialogue, praising, as they do every night, the show-within-a-show that we collectively produced.

“And that’s show business!” Jerri says. The music swells and the audience claps. Jerri and Janice part for the wings. Kelly, next to me, says “where are they?” Gavin and John haven’t yet emerged from the basement. All of us are standing, hands locked, watching for their figures to come up the stairs. The curtain stays down until I see John’s head. Both John and Gavin rush for either side and Gavin gives the signal for the curtain to come up. The whole cast walks out together in a line. We move mid-stage, into the lights. Each actor from John’s end to Gavin’s end takes two steps forward for applause, doing something in character. John strikes a body-building pose, Kelly kisses her hand and waves, Mindy fake tap-dances. When it gets to me, I walk out, as I always do, looking disoriented, confused. I squint at the audience and they clap louder. I see a familiar head in the back, bobbing up and down, holding her stomach as the laughter comes rolling out.
In the fall of 1994, when I was forty, my twelve-year-old son Taylor shaved the neighbor’s dog, the Dalmatian. My neighbor, Audrey, phoned to tell me. We hadn’t talked to each other for years. Around supper time, the Dalmatian streaked through our yard and the phone rang.

I was excited because Audrey was calling, on her own, all the way from across the street. I was hoping to hear that she had forgiven me at last. I had Taylor after an affair three years into my marriage to Ross, the man who Taylor believed to be his biological father. In a town of conservative Mormons, Taylor’s birth made big headlines. I remember clearly his baby blessing, Ross holding him up in a white baby blanket, like an invitation to come see my son, the blue-eyed freak. Back before the affair, I wasn’t level-headed enough to anticipate the coming exclusions. I didn’t think that privacy would matter in Ridgeview. Our lives seemed so menial, so quotidian. How could they matter to anyone? I never could understand people’s gradual rejection. I imagined myself becoming a spinster in my old age, my home a place that children would hate to walk past. “There she is,” they’d say, eyeing my spinster silhouette, “the witch.”

“He was laughing,” Audrey said. She didn’t have the gumption to criticize him outright. I had to infer that his laughter was wrong.

“He’s a child,” I said.

“You really need to do something.”

“I’ve seen worse.” And I had.
“God help us,” she said, and hung up.

We could’ve had a different conversation. But all I felt from her was genuine contempt. Taylor produced the ruined shears when I asked, showed me how he did it, zip-zip in lines. “There were cowlicks,” he said. He explained how hard it was, with his friend Andrew holding the dog. To describe how the dog reacted, he made howling noises and jumped on the couch. It was one of those moments where every option for discipline seemed too lenient: confining him to his room, grounding him, making him mow the neighbor’s lawn, or forcing him to apologize. I thought all these things while my son was jumping on the couch. “Stop it,” I said.

After lunch, I went over to apologize to Audrey. No one answered, so I left a note. I could see the Dalmatian through the slats of the fence, just sitting there, paws in front like a Sphinx. A pink Dalmatian. Or pink in parts. I could hear his deep-throated growl, the kind he reserved for people like me, neighbors coming over unannounced. I quickly scrawled a note:

“Gale and Audrey,” it said, “I want to apologize for Taylor, and I’m sorry about the dog. If there’s anything I can do, just let me know.”

Stupid, I thought. Stupid letter. What was I going to do? Make their dog’s fur grow back? I opened the screen door and the dog barked. I slid the note inside and walked back to our place. Taylor was off playing with Buddy Mendenhall and wouldn’t be back for a couple of hours. I pondered what to do about Taylor. In the last few years he had become increasingly reckless. When he was eleven, he had started playing with
fire. Literally. Three neighbor kids witnessed Taylor lighting a batch of sticks next to the Coppieters’ garage. The Coppieters got the fire out before the whole building went up, but one side still had a fan-shaped charred area. And a couple months ago, Taylor was caught shoplifting Mr. Freeze’s from Fast Eddie’s Convenience Store. He had to do a month of community service for that one, ruining, as he claimed, his whole summer. He’d become questioning and rebellious. Then that afternoon, Taylor came home wanting to know about where his blue eyes came from, a question that Ross and I had staved off for the last few years.

“You’re home,” I said when Taylor walked in the door. “I left a note on the neighbor’s door. You should go over and apologize.”

Then it came out.

“Mom, am I adopted?” he asked.

“What?”

“Buddy Mendenhall says that I was probably adopted.”

“You’re not. You tell him you’re not. Some kids think they know everything. Buddy’s one of them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Why, honey, why?” I looked through the cupboards to distract myself. The sound of opening and closing cupboard doors filled the space. I found an apple in the fridge, rattled the silverware drawer for a knife and cut myself some slices. “Here,” I said. I cut out the core, handed Taylor some of my apple.

“Mrs. McDonald said that brown eyes are a dominant trait,” Taylor said.
“Yes.”

“But I have blue eyes. Dad has brown eyes.”

“So what,” I said. “You’re not adopted.” I had heard of instances where a recessive gene will manifest itself generations down the line—even to a family of all brown-eyed folks, though it was rare and unlikely. But I was sure he had to be from the affair, from Jack, a man whom I had met through my job as Ridgeview’s economic development officer. The big clue: Jack had blue eyes, Ross had brown. There were other indications of his parentage that were less obvious. He inherited Jack’s delicate frame, for one thing, and he had the same small, flat teeth that looked ground down. I couldn’t help but speculate about Taylor’s emerging features and character. Would he end up like my husband Ross, a man governed by habit and religion? Or like Jack, an impulsive son of a bitch who promised me the world for a few months of escape from my marriage to a boy scout? As Taylor emerged as a composite of these two men and myself, these kinds of questions plagued me.

“I’d be OK if I was adopted, you know. Some of my friends are. They even look a little like their parents. And we read this article in school about an adopted girl who found out she was a twin and now they’re best friends.”

“Well, you’re not. You don’t have a twin.”

“OK, don’t freak out,” Taylor said.

“I’m not freaking out.”

I decided to push the science lesson. Tell him what I’d told him before, what he’d most likely told his friend Buddy. “And blue eyes are a recessive gene. Sometimes crops
up. You just happened to get them.”

“That’s what I thought,” he said. He seemed disappointed. I told him to come here and give me a hug, as though I felt he needed it. He was reluctant at first. I explained how genes work, how there were exceptions. Each sentence, to me, contributed to a very persuasive argument—so strong, I found myself wanting to believe it, to keep it that way, keep telling him over and over, reinforcing the lie. Worse things had been done to children, and some people would say that he didn’t need to know. But I knew, even as I held him there, telling him that he wasn’t adopted, that my little gnawing conscience would get the better of me. Even if it jeopardized the image of his mother and his own fragile pubescent self. He had to know.

I sent Taylor out to play, then called Ross at work—hoping to hear some confirmation or support for my resolution to tell Taylor about his paternity. All Ross said was “Are you sure? Sure sure?” emphasizing the second “sure”—not the response that I’d hoped for. But I had decided. There was still toughness in me.

“The bastard probably already knows,” I said. A joke. It hurt me to talk like this. I waited for Ross to respond, holding onto the phone like it was a hot iron that needed to be there. Did he not get it? I blurted out one heavy “hah,” like a misdirected hiccup and broke out crying. He started to talk and it made me angry to hear him so sympathetic, like he wanted to hold my head in his hands, pat my back and say “there, there,” like in a bad commercial.

Ross said, “It’s not that bad. You’re right. We’ll tell him.” Always “we.”
“How?” I didn’t want him to answer me. The question was to get myself thinking, and I wanted the question to hang out there like a prayer, to float around until God or someone picked it up and gave me the answer, like a winning bingo number. “Bingo” I’d shout. “That’s it.”

Ross was quiet for a while. I pictured him with the phone wedged between his shoulder and his ear, his hand lightly holding the receiver, eating lunch while he talked on the phone. He had hands like dead fish and a hairline back to the crown of his head that he swept over in gelled streaks. “We need to find some way to talk to him, alone. (chomp, chomp) So he can’t go to other sources (chomp). Buddy Mendenhall. Or Brad Fish (chomp). Your Aunt Carol, maybe (chomp).”

“Audrey called me today,” I said.

“A surprise? (chomp)”

“Taylor shaved their Dalmatian. She called to tell me.”

“He did what?”

“He shaved it with the clippers. It looks like a pink Pinto.”

“I’ll be over in an hour. (chomp, swallow)” He hung up.

I decided to tidy up the house. Everything seemed to reveal Taylor’s recklessness: melted Legos, scattered looseleaf, comic books. I put doilies over the permanent marker on the coffee table, turned the chesterfield cushions upside-down to conceal burn marks from Taylor’s magnifying glass. Some things you can hide. Then there was a knock at the door.

“Audrey?”
If you were in the neighborhood, you might think that she was on her way to a business meeting: sensible pumps, grey skirt, cream blouse. Our yuppie neighbors. She was slim and fit and perfect, like one of those fake Christmas trees where all the limbs were symmetrical. “I thought you might want this,” she said. “I know you love to read.”

“Thanks,” I said. She handed me a book and before I could glance at the cover, she’d left, striding across the street. “Did you get my note?” I yelled. She waved back and went inside.

She had given me a “how to” book by Dr. Laura about raising kids. I flipped through the pages, skimmed the subject headings about being a role model, building moral character, and maintaining familial relations. I went upstairs and put it in the recycling bin. I knew what this book was about. I had already done everything wrong.

Ross came home a half hour later.

“Audrey is a priggish shit,” I said.

“Take it easy,” he said.

Ross paused for a second to give me space, then got out a stack of brochures and travel guides and spread them on the coffee table like in a hotel lobby. “I got these travel brochures from Gale. It’s been a long time since we’ve gone anywhere. What do you think about taking a little weekend trip? We could tell Taylor then, just our family, up in the mountains somewhere.” The brochures fanned out in an arc.

I shook my head.

Ross said, “You know Taylor’s going crazy because he’s getting older. Puberty is setting in and he feels less obligated to behave. Out there, I could clear that up in a
hurry.”

Like Ross was some new-and-improved acne cream.

Ross kept talking in his objective tone, as though he was looking at Taylor from some cloud in the sky. Despite everything, Ross held to his nuclear family notions. When I first told him about the affair, I was sure that it would destroy our marriage. I had already made plans to move to Lethbridge and live with my sister. But he insisted that he still loved me, that God would forgive me and that all our problems would be solved as long as we lived by the gospel and did everything together, as a family.

“This looks nice,” I said, to stop the lecture. I was halfway into a brochure about Gargantua Caves.

“Gargantua could work,” he said. “But you’d need a lot of gear. And training. It takes rappelling ropes to get down inside.”

I sighed. “I have to do something.”

“Maybe it could work,” he said, “but only if we did just the main level. No one would be up this time of year.”

“OK,” I said.

Ross got out the topographical map to show me the route into Gargantua. The trailhead zig-zagged up a steep gradient shown by the tight black lines. “It goes up up and up, waaaaay up,” he said, like the friendly giant on the TV show. Even from the map Gargantua looked huge.

“But how do we get in there,” I asked.

Ross pointed to where Crowsnest turned off. There was a gravel road, marked in
blue, heading west into BC. But the road kept going past the entrance to a valley, and past the trailhead he had just shown me. There was nothing—nothing but rivers and valley that marked the distance between the gravel road and the trailhead.

“And after that?” I asked.

“That’s why we have a 4x4,” he said.

I smiled. I had this ephemeral image of us riding a monster truck into the valley, cruising through the rivers and over gullies like they were junk cars, leaving tracks as wide as a house. Like we were going in to make a road, our tires spinning and spitting up mud and earth, carving a place for us in the landscape in the same way lovers carved their initials into trees. That’s where we went, we’d say, look at that. Straight as an arrow through the heart.

“I’ll think about it,” I said.

The next day, the old sadness started coming back. I had felt this way several times after the affair, when I found myself pregnant and finally realized that Jack was a player. At first I couldn’t bring myself to tell Ross about it. I still loved him. I took long secluded drives in the countryside, thinking about plowing into telephone poles. A favorite spot was the old make-out point on Ridge reservoir where teenagers would go on the weekend. You could see the whole reservoir from the point, the prairies and the foothills leading up to the grey-and-white line of the Rockies to the west. I rolled down the windows and locked the doors, made sure that my seatbelt was securely fastened. I wanted so badly to project myself into the water, car and all, and drown myself like an
unwanted kitten. It was an irrational sadness. At times I felt that I would go through
with it. But mostly, I just thought. I liked the shifty gravel roads and the dry solitude of
the prairie—the feeling of speeding east with the wind, just right so that there was barely
any resistance, like I was moving everywhere and nowhere all at once.

Then that weekend we were off to the mountains. Kananaskis country.

This is how it went: I continued taking long drives thinking of plowing into
telephone poles while Ross packed. Ross thought of everything: plenty of socks,
glimmering mess kits, travel alarms, freeze-dried food he picked up at Mountain
Equipment Co-op in Calgary, and sleeping bags, tents, ground cover, all techno-fabrics,
light as a dime. When Ross said to travel light, he meant to travel with gear that weighed
less. Taylor went along reluctantly, wondering why, all of a sudden, his parents were
ready to head for the hills together like Lewis and Clark. On the way up, Ross gave
several lectures while I drove. He went over a list of things to do: find a spot under a tree,
make sure to tie up the packs, don’t build a fire. I was getting addled by his constant
chatter, thinking all the time of the conversation that I had had with Ross the night before
about when we would tell Taylor.

“When?” I asked.

“Whenever the time is right. You’ll know when,” he said.

He was so convinced that I’d know when to tell Taylor that I knew something had
to be wrong. Then I made the big mistake of fishing Audrey’s book out of the recycling
bin. What I needed was definitive advice—a source that I could use to confirm my
decision. But when I turned to the chapter, “Indiscretions” I was disappointed with what
I found. Dr. Laura’s tone was right—she used strong qualifiers like “always” and “never,” superlatives like “best” or “least.” I got to liking the clear line of reasoning, the almost acidic way she could put down words. I read the chapter twice, each time sweating through the whole thing, reading as though someone had a gun to my head saying “Read this. Now.” And the advice was always the same, never wavering. Don’t tell your kid you’ve done something wrong if it’s no longer a problem. She used countless examples of parents sharing drug experiences or infidelities in ways that royally screwed up their kids’ lives. I tried over and over again to justify my own approach, my need to share my thoughts with Taylor, to have it all out between us, but in truth I was just stigmatizing the whole situation. If Dr. Laura was right, my kid was headed for a pretty sucky life. And there was no way for me or anyone to stop it.

The rest of morning, Ross rattled on about camp etiquette, all the way after the turn off of Crowsnest and past the bumps and creek crossings. Finally, we got up to the trailhead. So much for being alone in the wilderness. A monster pickup was there, parked and empty.

“I thought you said no one would be up this time of year.”

“Usually,” Ross said.

I felt sick. For me, the deal was off. I couldn’t talk to Taylor—not with other people around. And we were sure to meet them—there was only one trail, one campsite. My sorrow needed room. I could be one person in a huge crowd of people or a woman alone, but not this—one of two parties out in the middle of Kanaskis country. Someone
had mapped the same spot, made the same plans, and that was enough to keep me from wanting to talk to my son.

We started the hike. Ross said he hoped that the people were friendly. Then he gave a great lecture about poachers. Poachers, he said, had no regard for rules, like cars on highways with no speed limits. He quoted scripture. “If you are willing and obedient, you will eat of the good of the land,” he said. “If you refuse and rebel, you will be devoured with the sword.” The trail got steeper. I imagined Ross being mangled by a bear.

About mid-way, I knew that we were scaling the compressed lines on Ross’s topographical map. The pitch was steep and we were heading through shale. Each step slipped back half a stride. At a stump, Ross stopped and took off his pack. Taylor stuck out his arms and rotated them, and faked falling backwards as he sat down.

“Careful,” I said.

Ross took out a canteen and downed a few gulps of water, then passed it around. I was wondering about the other group. So far, we had just seen shale and scrub pine and no signs of people. Then Ross said, “Taylor, I bet you’re wondering why we wanted to do this trip.”


“Because I’m in trouble?” Taylor said.

“Ross . . .”

“No, Taylor, you’re not. Remember last week when you asked your mother about being adopted?”
“Mom told you about that?”


“Yes, she did, Taylor. And I think that she has something else to tell you.”

Taylor looked at me, surprised. I rubbed my shoulder with one hand. My shirt was damp where my pack straps had been. Ross came over, sat behind me on a boulder, then reached down to massage my back. I got up.

“Let’s go for a walk, kiddo,” I said.

I took Taylor by the elbow, the way I used to when he was naughty and I needed a corner to tuck him away. But we were going uphill, leaving Ross behind to guard our packs. Taylor kept up my pace for a while, then I let go of him when we reached a patch of shale and we both needed the space. Taylor said, “What’s wrong, Mom? Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?” repeatedly as we climbed until heavy breathing from exertion broke up the sentences into fragments punctuated by more and more silence. I stopped at a tree in the trail that grew straight out of the limestone and then up, forming an elbow of a trunk.

“Here,” I said. “Let’s stop here.”

Taylor hopped up on the ledge and put his arm along the trunk. I climbed up behind him and straddled him, wrapping my sweaty arms around him from behind. I was still almost a foot taller than my son, though I knew that wouldn’t last. He was just starting puberty, or so he told me, and Jack had been tall and wiry, six-two or six-three. I found myself thinking about Jack’s feet, the boat-shaped loafers that he commonly wore. Taylor’s shoe size had changed three times in the past year and his runners were starting
to get cramped again.

“How are your feet?” I asked.

“Cut it out, Mom. You’re all sweaty and gross.”

I pulled back and slid alongside him.

“When we get going down, you’ll have to tie your shoes a little tighter. I don’t want you jamming your toes in the front.”

“Is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

“No, it isn’t,” I said. “I want to talk to you about your father.”

I expected to cry. Each time I had pictured the scene, the tears would be there, on the surface, ready to flow at the mildest suggestion. But there I was, dry-eyed, telling my life’s history like I was some distant cousin who messed up. I told Taylor that he wasn’t adopted, but that he had a biological father whom I had known for just a short time.

“That’s where you get your blue eyes,” I said.

I told Taylor how Ross and I had wanted to give him a stable home life, that the affair was my fault not his, and that he had always belonged to us and not anyone else. I told him about the joy it had been raising him, and that Ross and I had given him the best of ourselves. I told my son what I had learned from my relationships with both men: that he, Taylor was the most important and valuable person in my life. I told him everything. That was it.

When we came back, Ross was reading his scriptures.

“I almost gave up on you two,” he said.
“You lugged that all the way up here? I thought you were all concerned about weight,” I said.

“Always room for the word of God. Hi, Taylor.”

Taylor grunted, then hoisted his pack around his shoulders, cinched up the straps and headed, sure-footed up the mountain. He was unusually quiet. I couldn’t read him. Ross waited until Taylor was out of earshot, then asked, “How’d it go?”

“You’re an asshole,” I said.

It took me about 3000 vertical feet, three blisters, and a lot of grunting to cool off. I had just bared my soul to my son and now he was ignoring me. Plus Ross had no right to expose me like that. I didn’t like how the weekend was stacking up. In my mind I had pictured the wilderness acting like a healing space that would leave Taylor and me hugging each other and chatting like we were both a couple of teenagers without a care in the world. I thought how I could rewrite the book that Audrey had given me. It would be short, like a recipe. *How to tell your son he’s the product of an affair: For BEST results, don’t agree to spend a weekend in the wilderness, don’t put yourself in an uncomfortable situation, and whatever you do, don’t tell your son that he’s a bastard until you’re on your way home.* Sound advice.

Finally, we reached the plateau. A six-foot cairn of stacked limestone marked the spot, as did a fire pit, two tents, and a row of packs strung between trees. But the camp was deserted. We unslung our packs and sat on a log.

“I got to take a leak,” Taylor said.
“Be careful.”

And I meant it. From the plateau where we were, Turtle Mountain was still shedding its stone face. Shale and rock abounded, as did sink holes and gullies. The terrain was wildly unpredictable and I didn’t want my son—my only son—going and peeing off some cliff like men like to do. Wouldn’t that be the final irony—dragging him all the way up here and then having some horrible accident that maimed him for life? We didn’t need any more scars.

So when I heard Taylor yell, “Helloooo,” I jumped.

We heard voices responding to him, yelling back. He had found people. Ross and I followed in the direction that Taylor had gone, down through the rock-strewn vegetation to an area that spanned a long sweep of shale. The group, as we could see now, was made up of Boy Scouts, Venturers probably, who had a bunch of ropes slung around a tree. Extensive rappelling equipment. The boys were taking turns descending over the lip of the natural limestone bridge and down into the mouth of a cave that swallowed the shale.

“These guys are going through the caves,” Taylor said.

The Venturer leader was a short, skinny man wearing an Aussie leather hat. He was mild-mannered and calm—not at all the kind of person I pictured leading a group of adventure-sprung teenagers into the backcountry.

“I’m Jake Duggan,” the man said.

We introduced ourselves.

“A great idea, taking your son up here,” Jake said. “This is the best time of the
year. Less crowded.” He talked quickly enough, but mumbled his words.

“But not this weekend,” I said.

“You’d be surprised. During the summer, we get four, five groups at a time.”

The boys rappelled and ascended on the rope. For long intervals, no one really talked. We just watched, arms folded, from a safe distance as the boys struggled on the rope, pulling an ascender attached to their feet up until their legs were cocked at a 90-degree angle, then standing and moving the ascender attached to their harnesses. One scout belayed for security. The whole system ran like clockwork with the ascender moving to the belay, then the belay descending, then the descender switching to holding the rope steady at the bottom. Some scouts took longer coming up and let their feet dangle in the air. Some moved swiftly as though they were climbing a ladder. But whatever speed they went, it always looked like work.

“Can I try, Mom?”

Taylor was earnest and Jake seemed to know what he was doing, so we consented. Big mistake. The scouts were eager to show us how to use the equipment and they eventually conned us both into trying—Ross going down in one sliding jump and me taking my time in increments, letting the rope tighten and then slack. Before we knew it, the troop had invited us along.

That night, I went to bed early. Taylor and Ross stayed out with the scouts for a campfire while I found the solace of my sleeping bag. I got myself completely ready on my side of the tent, with ample room for Taylor next to me and Ross on the other side. I
was idly hoping that Taylor would come to bed early, of his own volition, so that we could have time to talk. The rest of the evening completely derailed me, and I felt ousted by the Venturer’s plans to go through Gargantua the next morning. Jake had showed us maps of the five rappelling pitches that led through a complex maze of tunnels and rooms. In places, the caves were like worm holes just six feet high, almost perfectly symmetrical with sandy bottoms. Interesting, sure. But the more Taylor latched on to what Jake was saying, the more I wanted to take my son back down to the trailhead, to the car, on to more familiar signs of civilization.

“Pudge?” Ross unzipped the tent.

“Where’s Taylor?”

“S’mores. He’ll come in a while.”

I rolled over with my back to the center of the tent. I breathed slowly, like I had been sleeping. Ross kicked off his shoes and slid quietly into his bag. He rustled around for a bit, then stopped.

“I’m sorry, Pudge.”

“For what?”

“For bringing you up here. I didn’t know there’d be people. I don’t want this to turn into some Scouting trip.”

I didn’t say anything.

“You two need time to talk things out.”

No kidding.

“Why don’t you both stay back tomorrow? I’ll go with Jake and give him a
chance to play tour guide. There’s plenty to explore around the plateau.”

“Maybe,” I said.

I kept to my side of the tent and Ross sighed. He moved some more until I couldn’t hear much of anything except the dull chatter of the Scouts at the campfire and the wind coming up from the valley. I was still awake when Taylor crept into the tent. He smelled like woodsmoke, earth, and pine. Then I went to sleep.

The next morning, I woke up before anyone else. I moved very slightly and positioned myself so that I could see Taylor clearly. Ross lay on the other side of the tent with his back to the both of us. He had always been a sound sleeper. Silent, never budged. Ross was great for things like that. He was always organized and dependable; he did dishes, kept his shoes on a shoe tree, always pressed his slacks. But love for him was overbearance. Had I been a different woman, I imagine that we could have had a happy life together. Me, Ross the forgiver, and our bastard son Taylor. One damn happy nuclear family.

“Taylor,” I said as he was getting up, “I was wondering if you would stay back with me today.”

“We’re going to Gargantua.”

“The Scouts are going to Gargantua. I think that Dad might go too. But I want you to stay here with me.”

“Why?”

Ross was awake now, calmly stretching, sitting up.
“I want us to have some time together to talk about yesterday.”

“We already talked about it.”

“Not really.”

“What more is there?” he asked.

“Nothing more.”

“Taylor,” Ross said, “I think what your mother means is that she’d like to be alone with you in case you have something to say.”

“Ross, I can handle this.”

“This sucks,” Taylor said.

“What was that?” I didn’t like the word suck. Taylor knew it.

“This whole thing. The trip, your lying to me. It all sucks. Now I finally find something worth doing up here and you don’t want me to go. Instead I have to stay back with my sucky mother in the sucky wilderness while my sucky father who isn’t really my father goes up the mountain with the sucky Venturers. It’s not fair. It sucks.”

It was the most Taylor had said to me the whole trip. A real breakthrough. Ross started to laugh.

“Shut up,” Taylor said. Ross laughed harder. “Will you tell him to shut the fuck up?”

That did a number on Ross’s evangelical ears. I could see him gearing up for a lecture, so I cut him short. “That’s enough, Taylor,” I said. “You’re staying with me this morning and that’s final.”
Another line I would add to my handbook: *Don’t force your bastard son to stay with you so you can brood and feel sorry for yourself while the rest of the world goes on a spelunking adventure.* I thought about this over our re-hydrating peaches-and-cream mush. The breakfast of champions. Ross was so ticked off that he ate his too quickly and burned his tongue. After breakfast, Taylor asked to go on a walk and I told him that he could if it wasn’t far. He chucked the rest of his mush into the fire pit and ran off while the Venturers gathered up their gear.

“Is Taylor coming?” It was a short, skinny kid with a coil of ropes around his neck.

“We’ll try to catch up,” I said.

The Venturers followed the cairns up to a shale trail that cut like a scar across the face of the mountain. I watched them for a good twenty minutes before Taylor came back with his hands cupped together.

“That must have been some pee,” I said.

“I found a toad.”

“Toads don’t live up this high.”

“What’s this then?” Taylor brought his hands up to my face and opened them, slowly. It was a toad all right. I flinched and the toad hopped into my lap, then onto the ground. We both watched it as it shuffle-hopped into some unseen crevice under a log.

“How about that?” I said.

“You’ll tell the guys you saw it?”

“Sure I will,” I said. Taylor sat down next to me. “You in the mood for a hike?”
I gathered up some gear: a couple of flashlights with extra batteries, our helmets, and some trail mix. I made sure we had coats and that we both had jeans and gloves. I led the way, following the cairns that dotted the limestone plateau. My intention at this point wasn’t quite clear. Another Dr. Laura no-no. I had no plan, no direction, and we were both unexperienced spelunkers wandering around a plateau filled with gullies and sinkholes. We made our way over to a green swath of water and moss with spikes of bear grass poking through the rock. I marveled at the way the mountain gave way, almost reluctantly, to bits of life. Here there were still late-blooming wildflowers, bees.

“Where are we going?” Taylor asked.

“I thought we could do some exploring. Maybe make it up to the glacier and slide down.”

We hiked in silence for a while. I wanted to talk. At first I thought I’d better not. I didn’t want to do the same dumb move that Ross did yesterday, unnaturally exposing a wound. This weekend, it was like both Ross and I were boxers, darting around Taylor in the ring, his eyes closing up, wanting his manager to cut them so he could finish. There was something hurtful about the whole thing, like he had been our little experiment over the last twelve years of his life. Like the Dalmatian, but bigger. I feared that he would get in some accident or hurt himself through his own mischief. His death could confirm so many things. But here he was, alive as ever, waiting for me to prod him again with questions.

“I want to talk to you, Taylor, but I’m not exactly sure what to say. About
yesterday. The whole thing.”

Taylor kept walking, then sighed and stop as though he had expected it. “OK. Shoot.”

Shoot, I thought. He said shoot. It wasn’t right. He didn’t want to talk. My timing was off. In a few years, a few months, a few weeks, maybe. Not now. “You don’t want to,” I said. Damn. Now I sounded hurt.

“It’s fine, Mom. Really. I’m twelve.”

“What an indictment,” I said.

“What?” Taylor said.

Fine. “How about you ask me questions?” I said.

“OK,” he said. “Why did you take us up here?”

“To talk to you.”

“You could talk to me at home.”

“I thought here would be better.”

“Why?”

“Because there wouldn’t be any distractions. No one else around. Ross said we would bond. You know, like a family. Beaver Cleaver and all that.”

“Who?” he said.

“Never mind,” I said. Up near the saddle, we could see the line of Venturers, cutting their way across. “I just thought it would be good to do something together. So you would know that you could come to us with any problems.”

“What, like I don’t come to you with my problems already?”
“That’s not what I meant.”

“So what did you mean then?”

“That we know what it’s like. We were kids once too.”

“Hah.” Taylor said. Not a laugh, just the word. “Sure you do. You know real well.”

“Regardless of what you may think, we care about you Taylor. We planned this whole trip for you.”

“No you didn’t. You planned it for yourself.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. A kid can change your perceptions about everything with a few words or actions, like Taylor shaving that dog, turning simple black and white to shades of gray and pink. Now I found myself suggesting that we catch up with the Venturers, realizing that had been my intent from the beginning. We picked our way through the rocks, moving swiftly, commenting only on the contours of the limestone, the saddle scraped clean by melting snow. When Taylor did talk again, he was less abrasive, like my son when he was seven or eight and more obedient. But I didn’t want to talk. Instead I stared at the steep drop to our left and looked for the cairns, lining them up like beacons. Was this trip, as Taylor suggested, just self-indulgence? I found myself thinking of an old friend, Peggy, who had died from an overdose on anti-depressants. I remembered seeing her once in the Merc, fingering through the lettuce, moving back and forth from head lettuce to leaf lettuce, just standing there in the aisle. I knew what she was thinking—head lettuce lasts longer, but doesn’t taste right. Head lettuce is more economical, leaf lettuce healthier. The sadness was there as plain as the
faces of her two teenaged sons, her 3-bedroom bungalow, her husband. Was her drug
self-indulgence? When she died, I felt the same sadness for her that I had felt sitting
behind the steering wheel, wanting to plant myself into a brick wall.

We reached the mouth of Gargantua, a giant gopher burrow in the side of the
mountain. The scouts were already on their way into the cave, but they stopped when
they saw us coming.

“Decided to join us?” Jake asked when we clambered up to the mouth.

“Couldn’t bear to stay away,” I said.

I found Ross and he seemed surprised, but he was smart enough not to say
anything. We would talk about it when we were home tomorrow night, lying in bed with
the lights off. I quickly changed into my coat and told Taylor to do the same. We duct-
taped our flashlights to our helmets and followed the scouts into the cave.

I’m not sure when the transition happened, but Taylor started hanging back with
me. I don’t know why. Perhaps he sensed that I was upset. Even so, I didn’t think he’d
prefer my company to the Venturers, but there he was. After the first pitch, Taylor
waited until I’d made my way down the rope, then he helped me off. I followed Taylor
until we came to a room with an almost flat eight-foot ceiling. Jake was waiting for us.

“This room lies between both provinces,” he said. He made all of us turn off our lights
and we stared into the dark and listened to the sounds of the cave. Gradually people’s
lights blinked on, the room sliced by rays of light. I flashed mine down at Taylor who
was nibbling on some trail mix. He picked through, neglecting the raisins. By now, most
everyone had left, their lights dimming in the distance. Taylor got up and I put my hand
on his shoulder. “Let’s sit here for a while,” I said.

“OK.”

Instinctively, we both turned off our lights. I listened to Taylor’s breathing, the
dull crunching sound of his teeth on the trail mix.

“Come here,” I said.

Taylor responded and came close to me, resting between the crook of my arm and
my breast like a lover. Taylor grabbed my other hand and held it straight up, spreading
my gloved fingers in front of us. In my mind I superimposed the image of my hand,
slender, nails painted, over the blank space. It was Taylor who broke the silence.

“Mom,” he asked, “how did you and Dad meet?”

“Ross? I don’t know. There’s not much to tell.” Taylor kept asking me, going
through every cliché in the book: did he sweep you off your feet? Was it love at first
sight? I realized that I had never really told him these things. It had always seemed so
drab and normal. So I told him. “I met him at school, when I was just finishing my
degree. We dated for a while; then he asked me to marry him.”

Taylor wanted to know the details.

“We just decided is all. He seemed to think that it was a good idea and I believed
him.”

Taylor let this sink in. “So how did he do it? Did he get down on one knee? Did
he take you someplace romantic?”

“You’re still too young to be worrying about romance,” I said.

“So did he?”
“No. It was like I said. We decided that it was a good idea. I don’t even remember where we were.”

I sat up and turned on my light. It was already getting weak. Talking about Ross made me uncomfortable, but if there was a time to tell him, to talk to him about our relationship, it was now.

“So do you love him?”

I acted like I didn’t hear. I fumbled through my pack for some batteries.

“Do you love Dad?”

I clicked my light back off and unscrewed the back and slid the old batteries out and put them in my pocket. I reached for Taylor in the dark, felt for the down-filled sleeve of his jacket. “I don’t know, honey,” I said. “I guess I do.”

A beam of light licked the corners of the room, lighting them up briefly, then moved elsewhere along the wall.

“Hello?” It was Ross.

“Wait,” I said. I put the new batteries in and we turned on our lights.

“Hey,” Ross said. He kicked a piece of shale. “We thought you were lost.”

“Just resting,” I said.

“Oh.”

Ross stood there, the obvious outsider, while Taylor and I struggled up and sat on the rock. I wanted to feel anger at the interruption, but couldn’t find the spark. If the room we were in could hold two provinces, it could handle one dysfunctional family. The last chapter in my own self-help book would be: *Don’t go spelunking if you’re
Finally, Taylor asked, “Dad, who is Beaver Cleaver?”

I was relieved. Ross laughed. “You are, Taylor” he said. “You’re the Beav.”
The spring the Cosmos won provincials, my brother-in-law Patrick, also my next-door neighbor, picked up a Mastiff/Lab mix from the pound and brought him home. The dog was good-natured, obedient, and square-headed, with a penchant for rawhide bordering on obsession. And he was young, plenty of energy. My wife, Audrey, and I were ecstatic. We owned a Dalmatian.

Our dog, Zeke, took an amorous liking to Otis, even though both the dogs were male and neither fixed. The first weekend we dog-sat, they exhausted themselves so much that Zeke slept for three days straight. Then we started to notice Zeke’s neck. Bullet-sized welts, scabs. We didn’t think much of it. The next time, I watched Otis clamp his mastiff-sized jaws onto Zeke’s neck when they played. Once Zeke squeaked like a mouse. Otis didn’t know the difference between a gummy chomp and a bite that’d take your head off.

Finally, I told Patrick about it.

“What’s the trouble?” he asked. He started humph-humphing, a sort of stunted laugh.

I told him: the welts, Otis’ play bites, how Patrick would have to take his dog to a kennel from now on.

“What about this weekend? It’s too late to call the kennels. If you want, I’ll just leave him at my place and you can check on him,” he said when I’d finished. I waited for him to say something else, maybe to apologize, but he didn’t.
“I suppose we could,” I said. “But it’s the last time.”

“Good. It’s settled then.” Then he closed the door and he left me there on his porch like he had meetings to go to. End of discussion. I heard the lid of his piano knock open and Patrick going at some show tunes with gusto. I thought about changing my mind. We were planning a trip in June after school got out and we hated having to take our dog to a kennel. But I had said my piece, so I left.

Patrick was from Louisiana. He met my sister when a traveling group of singers from the University of Arizona came through Lethbridge. My buddies and I made fun of the show even though we went and paid real money for tickets at the Yates. They had one song where the cast was dancing and smiling like they were all on a helium high. Nice, prudish fun. The kids looked like something off a soap commercial. Zestfully clean. My sister Betty loved it. After the show, they had interviews for recruits and she signed on for a year after high school. She traveled all over the world and met diplomats and students from Great Britain to Alaska. But then she ended up with some swamp-hopper from Louisiana who was in the cast. Patrick. He weaseled his way into the family and moved back to Alberta with her before they were married. She had faith in him. He transferred credits to the U of L before dropping out of drama after a couple years. Always told the family it was because of “professional differences” with one of the directors. So he went to work for an oil company, then worked as a librarian, then as a city worker, then for the municipal pound where he got the mastiff. Betty stayed married through a couple of kids, Gloria and Brady, until figuring out that her husband was
emotionally unstable and had a temper short as a matchstick. I won’t say all that he’s done, but it has been plenty. Now Betty’s gone to Edmonton with the kids and Patrick’s stuck with the house playing penny songs on the piano, old show tunes from high school to try and drum up some pathos. And he drives around during the day fixing potholes and picking up strays and cleaning the pound.

In short, everyone around here thinks he’s a fairly pathetic human being.

At Costco, I was looking at computers when I ran into a fellow schoolteacher, Dirk Hancock. We’d been talking about the Cosmos, the local high school basketball team, contenders for the provincial championship title. They were slated to play LCI at zones in a week and Dirk was complaining that he couldn’t go. Wife had to be at the playhouse for their production for *Big River*. It was the dress rehearsal and she wanted him home with the kids. “I’ll just take them to provincials anyway,” he said. But I knew better. Three kids under five at home and my bet’s on the husband to do what she says. Plus, I couldn’t see Dirk lugging around two toddlers at the Sportsplex. Just not his style. Then he got on this tirade about the playhouse and it taking up too much time. “Isn’t your old brother-in-law one of the head honchos for that thing?” he asked me.

“Yeah,” I said. Didn’t want to e-la-bor-ate.

“Doesn’t he know it’s provincials?”

The way Dirk said it, it sounded like everyone knew about provincials, like if you were born and raised in southern Alberta, you would know. You wouldn’t require *anyone* to go to some dress rehearsal when a bunch of teenage boys were playing their hearts out on the big court at the Sportsplex. I just shrugged. “We have to dog-sit for
“No shit,” Dirk said.

I could tell Dirk thought that was pretty funny. Me, the assistant coach to the Cosmos, dog-sitting Patrick’s behemoth during provincials while he emotes in blackface, laying it on thick as the only authentic southern drawl in town.

“Audrey’s taking care of him,” I said.

That night, I asked Audrey if she’d dog-sit for Pat.

“I thought you told him we couldn’t.”

“It’s the last time,” I said. “Kennel was full. He said to just check on him. Make sure he’s OK.”

“Why doesn’t he just leave him out on Heggie’s farm?”

“Would you leave him anywhere with other animals?”

Audrey sat back in her chair. It was time for pre-pillow talk. Always get everything out of the way. Never stay angry. Communication. Audrey’s always been a well-ordered person.

“Parsons just got the new fence up,” she said. The Parsons were our other neighbors. Like having a fence made dog-sitting just as much their responsibility.

“They have a rat terrier.”

“You let people walk all over you, you know.”

“This isn’t about me,” I said.

Audrey sighed. “I know,” she said.
Practice was about the only place I felt sane anymore. On the court, directing the guys. In a game or running drills, everything made sense. I’m the playbook maker, responsible for our offensive attack. That year we had talent and room for improvement. With help, I knew that we could make it to provincials, maybe even win. Brennan and Myers were good. As a center, Brennan had height and he could post up just about anyone. And “Mongoose” Myers, our quick point guard, had arms and legs like pistons firing all the time. And control. And a more-than-decent 3-point shot if he couldn’t work it inside.

Dan Myers, the head coach, was Mongoose’s dad. Our last game, the boys had trouble with defense, so we set the gym up with stations. One kid had the ball and another kid guarded him, trying to get the ball away. They went up the gym floor and back. Once they were finished, they ran sprints and did pushups on the baseline, the forty-five, and then the center all across the gym. After that, they were dog-tired during Dan’s speech.

Dan talked plays. The worry this weekend, he said, was the big guy, Lenzen, number 48, LCI’s center. Dan didn’t want him messing up our inside game, so he was putting a lot of pressure on Brennan to make good decisions in the paint and kick it back out to Mongoose if he didn’t have a shot. “If you do go up,” Dan said, “face him and go straight up with it. Try and get him off his feet, then come pushing up from underneath the guy to draw the foul.” OK, I thought. I could live with that. But then he introduced play five. We always reserved five for special circumstances. Usually it was a variation
on our pick and roll with one of the forwards and the center crossing through the key to
create a lane for the other forward, or it was an attempt at feeding the ball to Mongoose.
I didn’t have a problem with either of those plays. Another assistant might worry about
favoritism, but even though Mongoose was Dan’s son, he was still the best damn point
guard in the league and we knew it.

“ar summary, Dan said. “Anything you can if that boy starts
crowing you.”

I cleared my throat.

“Then if Mongoose runs five, I want all of you to stick to your man. I don’t care
if you have to step on their feet. Try to make it subtle, though. Pull on their jerseys or
nudge them a certain way. And then feed the ball to back to Mongoose as soon as he’s
open. Don’t play dirty, play smart.”

I don’t know what I expected. Hoosier goodness or something, but this was not
my style at all and the boys seemed to be lapping it up like wildcats. Dirty was exactly
how Dan was telling them to play.

I interrupted him. “Could I talk to you for a second, Dan?” Silence. All the
joking stopped. Dan followed me to the end of the room.

“I have a problem with the play,” I said.

“What about it.”

“It stinks.”

Dan laughed. “You’re just sore’s all.”

“No I’m not. You want the kids to respect you. They won’t if you’re telling them
to take cheap shots.”

He looked amazed. “We need every competitive advantage, Gale.”

“I don’t like it,” I said.

“No one asked you to.”

Dan was right. I was sore, sore that he had gone over my head like that, just jumped into the play without even talking to me beforehand. And the play did stink, elbows, pulling jerseys, “drawing” fouls. Dan sometimes took things to the extreme. Like the first week of practice where the boys couldn’t go home until they puked from the exercise. He never said it outright, but they knew. We all knew.

At home Audrey was doing Pilates. She scissored through the air and gasped, breathing in numbers like she was sucking on an inhaler. She stopped, stretched, and held her legs so they touched the ground over her head.

“These would do wonders for your abs,” she said.

Wonders. Gale Warden. 8th Freaking wonder of the world.

“They make me fart,” I said.

“You’re disgusting.”

I didn’t argue, but went to go out with our dog, Zeke. I gave him a warped square of rawhide and he pawed the glass on the rear patio door to go and bury it. Zeke came back with dirt on his nose. “Where’s your treat?” I asked him. He looked at me. “Go get it,” I said.

I didn’t really expect him to, but he pawed at the door again and I let him out. I
followed him to the garden, Audrey’s row of bulbs. Mole-sized dirt mounds packed down, waiting for warmer spring weather. He dug away at the end, brought me his rawhide with an expression like “What’s next?”

“I wish I knew,” I said. He put the rawhide in my hand and I wiped the dirt and dog slobber off on my jeans. On the other side of the fence, I could barely make out Patrick through the slats. He was kneeling in the middle of the yard with Otis.

“Say a prayer for the Cosmos,” I said.

Patrick got up. “You can’t stop Mother Nature,” he said. He had a trowel in his hand, terry cloth gardening gloves. “You should’ve seen it, Gale. Otis just jumped up and caught it—bam!—mid-swoop.”

“What did he catch?”

“A robin. A big, fat one.”

“A round robin?”

“Just buried it. You ever seen anything like that?”

No, I thought, I hadn’t. Only dog we ever had was Zeke and he was big enough, but not athletic. Never even chased gophers when we took him out to the ridge. Part of me kind of hoped he would. Otis, on the other hand, was a real champ. Had about every hunting instinct known to dogs and he wasn’t shy about showing it. He was kind of like Patrick, in a way. You know that old saying how an owner resembles his dog? Patrick was a showman, but only when other people were around. I knew. Being a neighbor, you see the days he sat just watching that 10-inch set on his patio. Working for the town was less than a part-time job. It was being in front of people that set Pat off. That’s why,
when they started up the town playhouse, he was the first in line. Give him a costume and an audience and the guy’ll do anything.

“So the Cosmos have a big game this weekend, eh?”

“Yeah. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that.”

“About the game?”

“No, about your practice. Your dress rehearsal. There’s a few people who’ve complained about it being at the same time as provincials.”

“We only have five days until opening night.”

“You could still move it back a day. Dirk Hancock says there’s no reason you couldn’t do it Saturday.”

“We have practice then, too,” Pat said.

“Oh.”

“These things take time.”

“Guess so.”

I said goodbye to Patrick and went back inside after Zeke took a crap on our lawn.

In school the next day I graded a test in Math 30. Some of the other teachers think I’m a pussy for taking class time like I do, but I always tell them that I’ll start taking work home when they start paying me. The government’s tighter than a banker’s ass. With math you can get away with it. Grading usually doesn’t take the whole class anyway. It’s not like essays or short answer questions. There’s only one right answer. Then afterwards I’ll look them over again, maybe give part marks for questions where
students did most of the work, but messed up on the calculation. It’s only fair.

At the end of class, I sat down to go through the tests and enter the marks into my grade book. I had a spare the next period. Not many students did well on this test. We were just starting to get into minor calculus, and the class didn’t get it, Mongoose Myers in particular. Most of the test was blank and I had to give him a failing grade. That wasn’t much of a problem in itself—I often have students bomb a couple of tests—but his overall performance in the class had been borderline, barely passing. Since we’d only had two major tests so far, this put him well below the benchmark for competing in school sports. I flipped through the test again and gave him points for any partially completed equations, but with the blank questions I couldn’t do much of anything. His score was dismally low, and I was more aware than anyone how much we needed him for provincials this next weekend, especially against powerhouse LCI. I resolved to talk with Dan that evening about it.

Practice went at a relentless pace. We decided we’d work hard until Wednesday, getting the boys ready. Then we’d back off on Thursday, act like we were going to drill them just as hard, but then let them leave after shooting a couple hoops. “Great work, boys” we’d tell them, hoping that the morale would carry over into the game. I loved little psychological tricks like that. During the practice, we ran play five with our starters up against the second string. The second stringers were taking a beating. They’d be boxed out, jabbed, and held just to clear a lane for Mongoose to snake through to the basket. One big kid—a Taylor—went down and his knee skinned the floor, squeaking like new rubber. The play didn’t stop, just slowed for a moment, the kids watching Dan
to see how they should react. “Stop like that in a game and I’ll bust your ass,” he yelled.

“How do you think the refs know to call a foul?” I watched from the sidelines, arms folded. This wasn’t the time to bother Dan, but I felt that I had something over him on principles. If I talked to him now, maybe he’d stop these kids from beating the hell out of each other. Sure enough, when I called him over, he broke up the play, sent the kids around the gym for laps and then to the showers.

“It’s Mongoose,” I told him. “He’s failing my class.”

“What about it?”

“Foreman won’t put up with it,” I said, half sure.

“Leave Foreman to me. He’s a prick anyway, Gale. He’d let him play if we put the pressure on. All you’re going to do is make a stink for nothing.”

“Probably,” I said.

“Controversy for controversy’s sake.”

I thought about that for a moment. We’d had our share of controversy the last couple years—the two super seniors we took from Milk River in ‘92 and then the effigy of a Brazilian exchange student that our players beat with a baseball bat at a pep rally. Letting a flunking student play would certainly get some headlines. “I don’t know, Dan. This whole thing—the five play, letting Mongoose slide for the game—just what exactly is he learning here? I mean his test was blank, Dan. Blank. Like he wanted to prove that he didn’t pass. Aren’t you concerned about his character?”

“When you start having kids, maybe I’ll let you talk to me about raising mine.”

“Dan . . .”
“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

At home, Otis was wrestling with Zeke.

“I thought you didn’t want him over,” I said.

“Zeke was bored,” Audrey said. “He was climbing over everything when I got home.”

The two dogs ran at each other, jumping in the air, their rib cages colliding. They used their forelegs like giant tongs to grasp each other, to try to get on top.

“What about his neck?”

“I put bitter apple spray on it.”

The dogs stopped for a second, exhausted. Otis snapped his teeth, just missing Zeke’s head. He licked Zeke’s neck. Then snapped again.

“Not bad,” I said.

“That’s what I thought.”

We both stood and watched out the screen door. Zeke still would try to fit his mouth around Otis’ neck, but Otis wasn’t returning the favor. He just bit into the air, then licked Zeke’s coat. Otis barked.

Audrey left to change for Pilates and I flicked on the TV to get some news before she claimed it for her workout. It was local coverage of an airplane accident—small craft—that flew into the hoodoos at Writing-On-Stone. The pilot was a woman—a Hutterite originally from Wolf Creek colony. Her family refused to be interviewed.

“Mongoose failed his math test today,” I said.
Audrey stretched on the floor, lying with her stomach down, her arms reaching for her feet. “Too bad,” she said.

“Myers wants me to ignore it.”

“What does Foreman say?” She moved onto her side and brought her right leg up perpendicular to her body.

“He doesn’t know yet. But he’d probably let him play.”

“Probably?”

“Probably.”

Audrey switched sides and extended her other leg upwards. I had seen this routine so many times before that I had the steps already worked out in my mind. Next she would sit, then do leg lifts, then scissors. Then the exercises for her abs.

“You should really talk to him, though.”

“Who?”

“Foreman. He’s the one who decides.”

“Myers is worried about making a stink.”

“It’s his son causing the problem.”

“That’s what I told him. Then he gave me a lecture about not having children.”

“He didn’t.”

“Did.”

“And what did you say?”

“I told him I’d see him tomorrow.”

“That really isn’t fair.”
“I know.”

Audrey turned the TV off and sat up. “He knows we can’t have kids.”

“I know,” I said.

Audrey stomped off down the hallway. She cursed over her shoulder.

“Sometimes I wonder why we don’t move to a normal town.”

I decided to go get some videos of pre-Jordan games from Reg, the guy who ran Fast Eddie’s, the only convenience store in town. I wanted to see Kareem and Magic Johnson in their prime, squeaking around in their Converse. Reg had years of them he’d collected and ordered special for sports junkies, and I went regularly, sometimes watching games over and over again, not only for the spectacular end-of-the-game shots or close championship games, but for the plays. I felt that I could, at times, look into some of those great players’ minds, see the court mapped out like a grid with players moving to their spots, drawing out the defense and getting the ball inside. It wasn’t far to the other end of town, but it was night, and in Ridgeview you see your students everywhere, and that was enough to keep me in my car. Outside of my context as a coach or teacher, I always felt awkward, like I should be telling the kids that they needed to be somewhere or work harder. In your car, you could just lift a finger to wave.

When I passed the playhouse, I noticed Dirk Hancock banging on one of the front doors. I slowed down. Then he walked to the side door and banged on that. His mouth moved and he dented the toe kick with his boot. I rolled down my window.

“What’s the trouble?”
“My kids not knowing their mother’s the trouble,” he said. He banged on the door again, walked back to the front double doors.

I parked next to his minivan and noticed his three toddlers strapped inside, terrified. Dirk strutted up the walk like a speedwalker and was banging and yelling again, and I went after him. Just as I passed the side door, Pat poked his head out.

“Gale?” he asked.

“Not me, him.” I pointed.

Pat pushed the door open and wedged a piece of wood underneath to keep it there, then walked out to where I was standing. “Is my wife in there?” Dirk yelled when he saw us.

“Calm down, Dirk,” Pat said. The front door opened and Dirk went inside.

“You’d better be here for this.” Pat motioned me to follow him.

We were right next to the stage where most of the cast stood arranged in a chorus. We skirted the band pit and came out in front when Dirk entered from the back and strutted up the middle aisle. His wife, Loralee, plucked herself from between two hefty sopranos and made her way down to meet him.

“Let’s take the Coda one more time, beat by beat and see if we can’t get the descant right this time, shall we?” Pat gestured for the band to start playing and the chorus sang, “I’m waiting for the light to shine” with a soprano up high trying to give it southern gospel grace. I kept to the side and watched the confrontation, Loralee waving her hands, shaking her head, Dirk folding his arms and finally sitting down. He pointed to the chair. Loralee walked curtly back to the stage, and gathered her things, then waited
to talk to Pat at the end of the song. Pat motioned me over and Dirk watched with his arms folded across his chest and his back straight up in the chair.

“Her husband wants her to leave now,” Pat explained. “He’s throwing a fit.”

“Looks calm enough to me.”

“Couldn’t you explain to him—you’re good at this, Gale—couldn’t you explain that we need Loralee in the play. She has a major role.”

“It’s not that major,” Loralee said. “You could get by with Geraldine on alto.”

“We need you in the second act,” Pat said. “You’re Alice’s daughter.”

“I only have a few lines. Geraldine could learn it.”

Pat shook his head. “Really I don’t know what to do. That man comes in here and just expects you to leave. Couldn’t you talk to him, Gale? Explain things to him?”

“I want no part of this.”

“Just talk to him.”

“This is a domestic affair.” I felt like I was some kid on the playground relaying messages back and forth between lovers, unable to face each other. I left and sat down next to Dirk in the audience. To his credit, Pat kept the troupe occupied so that they weren’t caught gawking at the angry Dirk who was ready to shut the whole thing down.

“You’re such a pussy, Gale,” he said.

“Whatever you said sure scared her. She’s ready to leave.”

Dirk laughed. “I just told her what the kids tell me.”

“Is it really that big of a deal?”

Dirk said. “I’m not leaving until she does.”
“Suit yourself.” I shrugged my shoulders to Patrick. Pat whispered something to Loralee and she took her bags and walked toward us. When she neared Dirk, they didn’t touch. But by the way Dirk followed her out of the building, he might as well have been holding her forcefully by the elbow, ushering her out the door like a criminal.

I talked to Mongoose the next day, pulled him aside at the end of class and waited for everyone else to file through the door so that we were alone.

“I’m going to have to report your progress in my class, Mongoose. Which means that you probably won’t be able to play this weekend.”

“It’s zones . . .”

“No one knows that better than me,” I said. “But I still feel that we need to stop this now. You might not get to play this weekend, but you’re limiting your progress in other ways.”

“Dad’s not going to like this.”

“I’ve already talked to your father.”

“I could retake the test,” Mongoose said. “I’ll do better this time.” Mongoose produced his largely blank test and handed it to me. I flipped through it, surprised at how generous I had been with the few areas where he had made some effort.

“The test is almost blank,” I said. “You can drop one test at the end of the semester. Maybe that will make a difference. But right now you’re failing my class.”

“The test is blank because you said that we shouldn’t guess.”

“That’s for multiple choice exams.”
“How was I supposed to know that? You always say it’s better not to guess.”

I had always been precise and clear when I talked about my grading; though quarter-right-minus-wrong was a hard concept for some to understand, everyone knew that it only applied to multiple-choice examinations. Perhaps it was my own desire to win against LCI that Friday or Mongoose’s apparent sincerity, but I found myself thinking, could be, you know. It was the first time that I had had Mongoose in any of my classes, so I surprised myself when I said, “I’ll talk with principal Foreman about it,” realizing, as I did so, that I had no intention of talking to Foreman or anyone else for that matter. Mongoose was going to play.

Audrey says I use too many sports metaphors when I talk about life and she’s probably right. But there is something about the shape of a basketball in your hand, the pressure from its weight as you cradle it in your palm with your arm cocked at 90 degrees that makes you want to tell the world. It’s like basketball, pure and simple. You aim, you’ve got your potential energy, you release. If it’s on target, you’re a winner. The way my life was going, I felt like a guard forced to play center in a game with no rules. I was getting tromped, walloped, beaten, and there wasn’t anything I could do to prevent it. Audrey saw me moping and tried to settle me down. “Think of Saturday,” she said. “It’ll all be over then.” She thought that I was fretting about the game, but it was more than that. It was waking up in the morning and feeling like a shit. The purpose of my profession was slipping away from me. The meager rewards of teaching were so ephemeral, so delayed. For every student saying “Yo, teach, thanks,” there were fifty
others wishing you’d never been born. It was enough to make me consider a career change more than once. I had always wanted to build something; I fancied starting my own business, or going into real estate, something that had immediate impact on people’s lives, where I could chalk up successes like, well, baskets.

“Coach Warden and I have been pleased with the work you guys have been doing these past few weeks,” Dan said. I anticipated the end of Dan’s speech where all the players would yell enthusiastically and Dan would have them shoot a couple hoops, then dress down and relax for tomorrow.

“No, that’s not true.” Dan didn’t even blink. The conversation was over before most guys even knew what was being said. But that didn’t stop the impact it had. When Dan let them loose, they were almost cautious in their excitement, as though we or the school or the county might hold some trump card that we were itching to play, to punish them for their good fortune, their efforts in making this year’s team the best it could be.

At the game, Foreman was dressed in black and white, the Cosmos’ colors. Big black deal with white sleeves, a letterman’s jacket from his own glory years over thirty years ago. Foreman had sausage-sized fingers and walked with a cane. The Sportsplex was full; even though it wasn’t in our hometown, a whole side of the building was swathed in our school colors.

“Look at all the rooters,” I said.
He laughed. “Let’s just hope we give them something to root for!”

It was a joke between us: rooters/root. Ever since the doe-eyed exchange student from Australia came to Ridgeview two years ago and she told us that it meant “hookers” back home. Every game we had a whole lot of them. Hookers everywhere.

“What Mongoose playing tonight?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “Dan told me you had some trouble?”

“Just getting borderline marks,” I said. “He could use some outside tutoring.”

“That boy will go a long way,” Foreman said.

“I sure hope so.”

Foreman and I shook hands. I went onto the floor. The boys had just dressed down and were coming out in their warm-up suits. They took shots until we organized them into two lines for doing layups. Brennan dunked every so often, another psychological trick. Keep dunking and the other team notices, the fans notice. People get pumped up. The Sportsplex speakers boomed, “Unbelievable.” Fucking unbelievable.

We had our starters and the refs came over and introduced themselves. They made us check the boys for jewelry and watches, told us to play clean, a real best-man-wins pep talk. The boys had been fed plenty of that. Me, with my moral, you-reap-what-you-sow advice and Dan with his “Let’s clobber them” speech that I’d heard him give so many times. As usual, he waited until just before the game started, the boys all the time thinking, this is it, this is the big one. Then Dan just stood there and said, “Let’s clobber
them,” grinning on one side of his face like they were sharing a secret. The game’s all about secrets. All of it.

We sang “O Canada” and took our seats. Brennan set up against LCI’s center, tipped the ball away back to Mongoose. He had height but Lenzen, #48 was a bruiser. Big ham-sized legs and shoulders he used all the time to box out under the glass. I found myself thinking like Dan. With the right finesse, Brennan could draw the foul, even make dirt look clean.

We took an early lead. Mongoose executed plays easily, like a traffic cop out in the middle of rush hour. He pulled the ball out, brought it back to the top of the key when they couldn’t work an inside shot. The plays flowed seamlessly, with our pick-and-roll game shredding LCI’s defense. We ended the first quarter with a 12-point lead and our players in good spirits. At times like this, Dan’s advice was best: just ride the wave. Clobber them. I’d seen Dan relish a double-digit pounding even in exhibition games against 1A schools like Stirling or Warner. Never let up, he always said. Never get in the way of a good thing.

Near the end of the half we lost some of our lead. Gerry Palmer took a personal foul that sent LCI’s point guard to the line. The boys’ initial euphoria was dying down, and Lenzen started using his weight against Brennan. And there were three turnovers on bad passes picked off by one of LCI’s forwards. At halftime they had whittled down the lead to two points and I knew that we were licked.

You’d think that as assistant coach I needed to be more optimistic. I’d seen enough games to know that anything could happen in high school sports. Teams could
come from behind with a 30-point deficit to win. The starters could get benched in the second half on personal fouls. You just never knew. But I had this theory about energy that I generally kept to myself. I had tested it in my own way, observed the players, listened to the onset of foul language, oaths and trash-talking, and Dan’s incessant drilling from the sidelines. Dan didn’t know it, but so much of my theory came from him. Not his “advice” or no-holds-barred attitude, but his general comportment with the players. When we started off strong, like we had tonight, it generated an energy that Dan couldn’t see. Then if we lost our lead, he went berserk. Dan looked for blame in the players and targeted their weaknesses. He pushed the team captains harder. He yelled. The negativity grew until the team was blocked. They missed shots, they stumbled, all until the last whistle blew and we were out of the game.

At half time, Dan rushed to the dressing room with me tagging behind.

“What is this?” Dan asked, holding out a basketball in his hand.

The players looked incredulous. One of those answers that was so obvious that no one wanted to speak, even though everyone was thinking over and over again,

“Basketball, basketball, basketball.”

“Hmmm?” Dan asked.

“It’s a basketball, coach,” Mongoose said.

“That’s right,” Dan said. “It’s a basketball.”

I phoned Audrey on my cell after Dan’s inspirational speech. Control the basketball, he said. A simple task. It’s small, round, solid. But it’s much more. Control
the basketball and you are master of the game. The game could mean seasons; it could mean provincials, talent scouts. Everything came spiraling out from this simple brown leather ball. Control the basketball and you control the world.

“I’ll never use another sports metaphor as long as I live,” I said when she picked up the phone.

“Gale?” she said. “Aren’t you in the middle of the game?”

“Halftime. How are the dogs?”

“Fine,” she said.

I felt suddenly stupid there, holding the phone. I told Audrey that I’d see her in a couple of hours; then I bumped into Dirk Hancock on my way to the floor. “Enjoying the game?” I asked. He just smiled and raised a paper Coke cup to me. “That’s right,” he said, no kids in sight. I wanted to stop and chat, but Dan was waving me down. We only had a couple minutes of half-time left.

The buzzer sounded and our starters cleared the bench. The second half began like the first. We were, seemingly, in control. Mongoose ran the plays like clockwork, and we kept the game crisp and neat. He passed it inside and only drove for the basket when he saw a clear lane. Smart plays. But it wouldn’t last. LCI called a time-out and came back doing a full-court press that our boys weren’t prepared for. LCI stuck to their players and Mongoose was caught on an over and back for a change of possession. Our passes got weak. Dan yelled like hell. Brennan in particular was having problems. His strength was waning. Jockeying for position under the boards against the Lenzen behemoth was getting to him. He was losing agility on offense and his defense was
going fast. The other players were faring equally poorly and Palmer was in foul trouble. Dan called time-out. We were down four points.

“Palmer, you’re out for the game. Taylor, you’re in. I want you to help out on Lenzen when you can. Do anything you can to keep him from going up under the basket. Start running five if the lead gets to six points. Their guards are tired, so push them hard.” No criticism this time, just direction. Dan wanted to win the game.

The guys hit the court enraged. Taylor was a big kid, energetic, a follower. He kept in close and used the players’ bodies to screen his shoves. The kid was a magician. Only an expert would be able to see the inside nudges or see how his trash talk affected Lenzen and the other players. Dan’s wild card seemed to be working. Then it happened. Lenzen took a pass and was about to drive in. Taylor was in the lane at the bottom of the key. Lenzen came off his pivot foot and around a pick, right into Taylor, who grabbed at Lenzen’s jersey as he sprawled backwards. Lenzen lost his balance and fell over. The ref called charging and the LCI coach yelled, “Are you blind?” Taylor went to the line and sunk both baskets. Lenzen was pissed.

The play kept heating up when my phone started buzzing in my coat pocket. I chose to ignore it. We had two minutes left and we were still down a basket. Lenzen had three personals now, but it was near the end of the game and LCI couldn’t afford to take him out. Then Mongoose made a great play on the full-court press, snatching it away on a weak throw-in and driving for the basket. We were tied. LCI came up the court quickly, then passed it to Lenzen who was on the baseline. Brennan was on him and pulled his jersey when he went up. He missed the shot. No call and the Cosmos didn’t
wait for one. Lenzen yelled at the ref as he trotted back down the court, but by then
Brennan had already scored and we were up a basket. We were winning with less than a
minute left. Then something unexpected happened. LCI worked their way up to the top
of the key and got it inside again to Lenzen. Big mistake. Taylor and Brennan came at
him from both sides as he tried to power his way through. He took cheap shots from both
of them on the way in, missed the basket and Brennan fell backwards, drawing the foul.
Lenzen came down with the ball and slammed it to the floor so hard that it bounced
twenty feet in the air. Then he shoved Taylor who just shrugged. A fan threw a plastic
cup filled with ice water on the court. Three LCI guys came off the bench and Lenzen
tried to shake a referee who had him in a bear hug. Whistles were blowing everywhere.

It took all the refs, coaches, and several policemen to calm the place down. Both
benches had entered into the fray and several parents were throwing punches. It was a
mess. The refs met together and decided on a personal foul for Lenzen and a technical
for the team. Lenzen was out of the game and LCI was deflated. All we had to do
afterwards was clean up.

Dan was laughing. “That’ll teach him to lose his temper,” he said.

Taylor sunk the first two baskets and we were up by three. He bricked the last
one and Mongoose got the rebound for another basket. We eased off the full-court press
and the guys were already celebrating. They had reason to. We were, after all, going to
provincials. My phone was buzzing against my side again and I couldn’t ignore it any
longer. Someone was trying to get a hold of me. I’m a sucker for that; every time at
home, I’m the one getting the phone. Audrey just sits there, reading her book or doing
her Pilates and lets it ring. I wasn’t surprised when it was her on the line.

“It’s Zeke,” she said when I asked what was wrong.

“What happened?” I could hear the muffled voice of someone talking in the background—a man—repeating his apologies over and over again.

“We’re taking him to the vet,” she said. “Pat thinks his neck might be broken. He’s still alive.”

I heard the buzzer go. Our guys were off the bench, running to the center of the court, arms raised. The scoreboard had us up by seven points: 88-81. The Sportsplex erupted in cheers. I bent over, cupping my hand around the phone to hear more closely.

I pushed my way off the court and out to one of the concrete entrances, big enough for a Zamboni to get through. I heard a man’s voice on the line. It was Pat.

“I don’t know how it could’ve happened,” he said. “It’s not like Otis at all.” His voice was cornstalk dry.

“I’ll meet you there,” I said and hung up.

Leaving wasn’t as hard as I thought it would be. I caught everyone off guard while they were celebrating. I was sick of the game, the bad calls, Dan’s intimidation tactics, the Cosmos, the whole damn town. I thought of leaning over to Dan and saying, “I quit” about a thousand times, with vengeance. But instead I slipped out, like a thief, or a con artist off on a swindle. I raced to my car and sped the whole way to our vet’s in Welling. I imagined Zeke’s head, bitten by Otis, bloodied and battered. I thought of those cartoons where Bugs Bunny is in Elmer Fudd’s hunting breeches. They’re filled with water and Fudd shoots them, riddling them with holes. The water comes out,
streaming like a fountain. I thought of Zeke spurting blood that way, from his chest, his neck, his groin. I turned on the radio, which I rarely do, to give the air around me space, to fill up the empty car, give my anger something to gnaw on. When I reached the turnoff to Welling, I noticed an RCMP patrol car. It pulled me to the side of the road, its lights flashing like Christmas in my rearview mirror. I pulled over.

“Do you know how fast you were going?”

Do I know? Of course I do, I thought. I broke the law. I was speeding.

“I’m not sure. I wasn’t paying attention.”

The cop chewed me out, gave me a ticket despite my contrition. I wanted the cop to pull me forcefully out of the vehicle, cuff my hands behind my back and read me my rights like they do in the movies. I watched the car in my mirror. The cop had turned on the interior lights and he had his head down, like he was praying, filling out my inevitable ticket. I wanted to explain to him why I was upset and speeding during the LCI/Cosmos game when everyone I knew was either in the Sportsplex, or dressed in southern rags and pantomiming in blackface. I pushed open my door and put both legs out onto the concrete. He would understand, wouldn’t he? Let me explain?

“Get back in the car, please.”

The cop had a megaphone. Or something. I couldn’t tell where the sound came from, but there it was, like God, shaking his finger. I pulled my legs back in, and waited for my ticket, for the police officer to tap on my window with his stick, then hand the carbon copy to me and explain the reason for the fine. It would happen, I knew. It would happen because it had to. But damn it, I thought. Really. He had no right.
I met Jeb my first day on the roofing crew for Charlton and Hill. That summer, we worked the west end of the Ridgeview swimming pool roof doing tear off. I was on the manual tear-off machine, a cast-iron deal that looked like a giant pitching wedge with handles that I used to pry up layers of old tar, particle board, and yellow insulation. Dennis, our foreman, said we were putting on a torch roof, though neither Jeb nor I, both first year grunts on the job, had ever laid one. I jammed the tear-off machine under the roof and Jeb picked up the broken layers and threw them into a dumpster.

“You’re more likely to get injured as a roofer than a cop,” Jeb said.

“At least you can get worker’s comp,” I said. “The high life. Gary said last summer one kid smashed his thumb and got three weeks paid vacation. Doesn’t sound that bad to me.”

The machine didn’t seem to be working right. In the morning before break I had tried to remove just the top layer of tar and gravel. Jeb held it while I slid the machine underneath, tearing off the top layer in a long roll that would break when it got too heavy. Then Dennis told us to hurry up, that we looked like a couple of dainty bitches doing our nails. We pushed along the top layer for a while longer, aiming to tear the tar off faster, but then Dennis came over, flung me aside, grabbed the machine, and drove it underneath all the layers: particle board, tar, insulation, the whole bit. He heaved down like he was doing dips for his lats, and forced the roof up in chunks that we scrambled to grab. I tried doing tear-off like Dennis with mild success. Pushing under all those layers took too
much power for the long haul and the whole process was messy; insulation splintered all over the place. By the afternoon we were peeling off the top layer again in long strips. Quick and clean.

At break, Jeb kept complaining. None of us wanted to hear it. There were four grunts on the crew: a high school dropout doing temp work; Gary, who went to Lethbridge Community College and worked at Charlton and Hill over the summer to pay off gambling debts; and Jeb and me, the two university kids trying to raise money for tuition in the fall. Charlton and Hill recycled our kind like old newspaper. Other grunts had stories of guys showing up for work in sweats and a t-shirt and having to go home after ten minutes of shoveling gravel or doing tear off.

At first, I liked sticking around Jeb. He always got away with things. Like when he told Dennis he could meet us in Coaldale for the St. John’s school project. The job was closer to Ridgeview where Jeb was from, so he told Dennis that he’d meet us in Coaldale. “That way, I can get the kettle going and start working before you guys even show up,” Jeb said. It never looked like Jeb had done much work by the time we made it to the site, but the gig worked. Every morning he’d get a half hour more of sleep. He always landed the best jobs, sometimes going off with Alan in the morning to do metal flashing or sitting around and chewing the fat with one of the foremen, doing assessments or quotes on new projects. I went with Jeb once. Alan took us out to a property out in Lakeview with a low slope tar-and-gravel roof that had black liquid cement patched in spots. The owner was there—an older man with one of those wheelchair elevators up to the front door. Jeb got the guy talking, brought him out so that he could see us tromping
around on his roof, checking for tears or leaks. The man had one of those motorized wheelchairs with a joystick control for direction. Jeb asked him how fast he could get it going, like it was some sports car with 200 horses under the hood. The kid could talk. It was lunchtime before we left, and Jeb had managed to get us into the guy’s garage to look through a bunch of fly-making equipment. He even convinced the guy to let Jeb take a ride around the block in the electric wheelchair with the pink flag in back waving whenever he’d hit a bump. Jeb was fun on the easy jobs, but since we’d been on the pool crew he complained about the work incessantly. The first two days we shoveled gravel off the roof for ten hours and we were all sore. Then today at lunch Jeb told us that our chances of dying on a roofing crew were as good as if we were firefighters.

“If we go by statistics, one of us is getting it by the end of the summer,” Jeb said.

“I hope it’s me,” I said. “Worker’s comp.”

“You guys are both crazy,” Gary said. “No one is going to fucking ‘get it.’ I mean, who the fuck cares?”

“I care. Do you know how many people have already died in my graduating class? Four. Four guys all my age and I’m working on a roofing crew,” Jeb said.

The high school kid, Brent, was stretched out on the grass, shaded by the swimming pool roof. He pushed up on his elbows so he could see Jeb.

“If you’re so worried, why don’t you quit?” Brent asked.

“That’s what you would like, right? Just get me to quit and everyone will have a party.”

“You’re a moron,” Gary said.
The next day, it was windy. Wind can be disastrous during tear off. Jeb found this out while he was holding up a sheet of yellow insulation the size of a door. He lifted it up sideways into the wind, and when he turned, the board caught like a sail and it pulled Jeb to the edge of the roof. Dennis yelled, “Let go,” and the insulation flew off the roof and into the empty concrete pool. Dennis came over and said, “What are you, stupid?” and told Jeb to get his ass down there and clean up. We kept tearing off, trying to keep the heavier pieces of gravel and tar on top so that the insulation and particle board didn’t fly out past the dumpster and into the gravel alley that flanked the pool.

“Exactly what I was talking about,” Jeb said when he came back. “Next summer I’m working for my uncle. A nice desk job. Something where I don’t have to worry about getting blown away.”

“It was your own fucking fault,” Gary said. “Get over it.”

“A hazardous work environment. My uncle would never stand for this kind of treatment either—like Dennis, Mr. Cro-Magnon man. You know the intern my uncle had last year pulled in six figures and that was just a summer job.”

“Bullshit,” Gary said. “No one makes that kind of money.”

“Investment bankers do. It all depends on what kind of work you do for him. If you’re pulling in six figures, you’re doing him a favor. The more money you make, the more money he’s making.”

Gary looked like he was ready to throw Jeb off the roof.

“Almost lunch,” I said—the only thing anyone said until Dennis called break.
Then we got out of the heat on the roof and settled down on the ground next to the pool.

“So what’s an investment banker do?” I asked. I guzzled my four liters of Gatorade. Brent was already out, napping I think, and Gary ran across the street to get something from Fast Eddies, the local convenience store.

“You invest money for clients. The reason you can make a shitload of money is because of the commission. You make them money, they make you money.”

“Not a bad deal,” I said. A van drove up and parked not far from us and two men got out and walked into the pool building. “Hey, maybe they’re filling the pool.”

“About time.” It was Brent, talking through his hat. He had it over his face, brim covering his neck. “Could use a swim.”

“So what about this job,” I said. “You think he’ll let you work for him next year?”

Jeb picked through his lunch, fingered a bag of carrot sticks. “Depends,” he said. “This year he said that the company was worried about nepotism and they didn’t think that I was old enough for the internship. You have to be either graduated or graduating the following year. But I think he’d do it if he thought that I was qualified. Work for him, though, and you’d be making bank. And you wouldn’t have to be anyone’s slave.”

Gary came back with three pops and a sandwich. He carried all three pops with one hand, holding them by the necks. “Won two fucking freebies,” he said.

On Monday we started doing torch roof. Took a truckful of PVC roof cap and brought it along with a tar kettle and a couple pallets of particle board, tar paper, mops,
and blue foamy insulation. We worked the roof in layers. Brent and I laid the tar paper while Dennis fired up the kettle, then showed us how to nail. You let the nail dangle between your index and middle finger, then you pounded it in. Dennis nailed with one stroke, moving up and down the rows of tar paper like a machine. The rest of us started out with two or three hits each, and we sometimes missed. But the hammer didn’t hurt our hands, not if we held the nails right and trusted our aim. Then we started with the tar, called “hot.” Jeb got stuck with it even though he hated working with hot more than anyone. He was almost always behind. Dennis would yell, “Hot,” and we’d look over to see Jeb struggling with a black bucket of tar that he’d filled using the spout that led up from the kettle to the roof. Dennis would swear again and then Jeb would be running. If Jeb was late, Dennis held up the mop to show how it was already stiff. Dennis wouldn’t let anyone else touch the mop. There was technique to it, I guess. Swirling it in the right number or arcs. Making sure it was always moving. Dennis orchestrated when and where we should put the sheets of particle board and got upset when we slid them into each other, sending a lip of tar up through the cracks. It was slow moving, but by lunch time, we had half the roof mopped and covered with particle board. Brent and I climbed down with Gary and met Jeb and Derek on the ground in the shade. Jeb was covered with bits of tar, had slashes of it on his jeans, his gloves. Flecks on his shirt.

Jeb unrolled his sleeve, showed me his arm. “Damn hot burns right through the fabric,” he said. There was a wedge-shaped spot of pink on his arm the size of a penny. “Dennis has got me on hot on purpose.” He shook his arm out until the sleeve hung over his hand.
“You’re a fucking pansy,” Gary said.

That shut Jeb up quick. We ate in silence. Brent wolfed down his food and then started his ritual nap. Jeb scraped pieces of tar off his jeans, winced like he was picking scabs that hadn’t quite healed underneath.

“I have a friend who died last year working a summer job,” Jeb said. Gary didn’t look our way, but I could tell that he was paying attention, probably bristling with every word.

“Doing what?” I said.

“Oil rigs in northern Alberta. You know those great big trucks they use to deforest? He was driving one of those down a hill and the brakes went out. I heard that he tried to drive it off into the trees but lost control and he crashed. I went to the funeral, you know. Closed coffin service.”

“Will someone fucking shut him up?” Gary said.

“Another friend—his name was Jerry—he died roofing shingles. But it was from an accident he had when he was in high school. He was riding his bike at midnight out in the country and there weren’t any lights so he couldn’t see very well. Another woman—an older woman—was riding the opposite direction and they hit heads. Can you believe that? Smacked right into her. They had him in the hospital for a subdural hemorrhage. He was fine for a couple years, but then one summer he was roofing his house with his dad, got a headache and went inside to sleep it off. He never woke up.”

“Why are you even telling us this?” Gary said. “So your friends died working summer jobs, so what?”
“No reason. Just thought it was interesting.”

Gary ignored Jeb all afternoon when we started on the thicker insulation. I laid the sheets down and Jeb screwed them in. Then Brent and Gary rolled out the PVC roof and Dennis ran the torch, lifting up the overlap and melting the inside before pressing it down with the back of a metal hook. The torch fascinated me. Dennis moved with such precision, holding the overlap open with the hook and the side of his boot. I asked him about doing torch when it was break and he said that I could with a little training, and before I knew it, I had the job. The next couple days, I melted the rubber off the end of my steel-toed boots to the metal shank from torching. About that time we started to notice that the town was finally filling up the pool for the coming summer season. Jeb and Gary still kept at each other a bit, Jeb with his stories about working for his uncle and his paranoia about death, and Gary constantly cutting him down, betting everyone out of their pay or their lunches.

The beginning of the next week, the pool was full and we watched it almost constantly from the hot roof. The black PVC and the torch brought the temperature up past forty degrees Celsius. During the summer months it would get even hotter. Dennis was in a hurry now, and pushed us harder than before. The pool needed to open, but couldn’t until we’d finished the roof. It was almost June and kindergarten would be out in a week, then the rest of the schools near the end of the month. We still had about a quarter of the roof to torch.

“This is a real treat,” Gary said. “A bunch of guys on a hot roof and a whole pool
just sitting down there waiting for someone to jump in.”

“My uncle—”

“No one wants to hear about your damn uncle.”

“What about him?” I asked.

Jeb kicked out another roll of PVC. “There’s a company pool about this size on the roof of his office building. You’d never guess it. Just looks like one of those regular skyscrapers. But once you get on top, there’s a pool, sauna, racquetball courts, you name it. That way you can come to work and still get some exercise. It’s pretty common with commuter jobs at the TSE.”

“You’re full of shit,” Gary said.

“So how many interns does he hire every year?”

“Usually up to four or five, depending on the market. He’d have a spot for you if you applied. Actually you’d probably have a better chance than I would, because then he wouldn’t worry so much about nepotism. All you would have to do is let me know when you’re applying and I’ll tell him that you’re a friend of mine.”

“But I’m not even a business major. He’d want someone more qualified.”

“Business doesn’t have anything to do with it,” he said. “And being from southern Alberta is a real plus. My uncle says that they always have problems with the city-folk ivy leaguers skimming off the top. They’ll pay top dollar for a more rural intern because they usually have a better work ethic and they’re more honest. Seriously, you’d have a good chance.”

Dennis called break and Gary was the first to the ladder. I kept talking with Jeb,
buoyed a bit by Jeb’s bullshit.

“Next year, man, riding to work in a company car. Free country club pass, you name it.” Jeb climbed down the ladder and I held it, waiting for him to get off.

“Sounds too good to be true,” I said. We sat down in the shade next to Gary and Brent. “Like why would they hire an intern to make more money than full-timers who have way more experience?”

“Like I said, it just depends on how well you do. Sure you could come out with only 5 to 10K for a summer, but that still beats the hell out of working here. And then there’s the first-class treatment. You know, my uncle showed me one of the company cars that picks you up from work every morning. They have fucking computers in them. I thought it was a waste until he explained that it was actually more efficient. That way, you could check on the market wherever you were. When you get down to it, just a couple seconds could make the difference between making a pile of money or nothing at all. You just have to change the way you think.”

“Like hell,” Gary said. “You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“Why? Why can’t you believe me?”

“Don’t even start.”

“Just leave it alone,” I said.

“No—I want to know. What is it about working for my uncle that bothers you so much?”

“There’s no fucking way,” Gary said. “You work on a fucking roofing crew, for Christ’s sake.”
Jeb nodded his head, like he was really trying to figure out where Gary was coming from, saying, “hm, hm.” I ate my sandwich and passed Jeb my tapioca. I wasn’t about to get involved in the conversation, not at this point. Gary got up and headed to Fast Eddie’s. Jeb watched him leave.

In the afternoon, we were finishing up torching when a girl walked into the pool area. She wore a teal two piece and had bobbed hair and long slender legs that she dipped in the pool, testing the temperature. She looked young, maybe fourteen, but the guys didn’t care. We all practically stopped working. Gary rolled out the PVC slowly, like he was counting the rotations. Jeb just smiled. Brent said, “What I wouldn’t give for a piece of that.”

The girl walked up and down along the pool, then stopped at one of the lounge chairs to sit. How did she get in? I wondered. Dennis came over from torching the cap on the edges, looked, and said, “Quit your gawking, we have work to do.” We did, reluctantly. At break she was still there, face to the sun, lying out in front of the pool.

“Should be illegal,” Jeb said. “I mean, does she know what she’s doing?”

“She knows exactly what she’s doing,” Gary said. “Bitch wants it.”

“She’s only a kid,” I said.

“She’s old enough,” Gary said. Brent laughed. A kind of putt-putt laugh.

“How old do you think she is?” I said.

Gary said, “At least sixteen.”
“Not even close,” Jeb said. “Thirteen, fourteen, tops.”

“Why don’t you go find out?” Gary said.

“Why don’t you?”

“Hey, I’ll make you a deal,” Gary said. “If she’s closer to thirteen, I shut up and stop bugging you about your fucking uncle. If she’s closer to sixteen, then you shut up.”

Jeb hesitated a moment, then accepted. Dennis called the end of break, and Jeb was already through the door of the pool house. We scrambled back onto the roof and watched Jeb enter through the men’s room door out onto the concrete. His overalls were still covered in tar and his hard hat was on backwards. Jeb walked around the side of the pool and the girl kept her face immobile. Then she cocked her head and lifted up a hand to shield her eyes from the sun. We all watched from the edge of the roof, leaning our elbows on the foot-high cap. Jeb was about fifteen feet away from her when she noticed us on the roofline, gazing down at her like spectators at a cock fight.

“Get back to work,” Dennis yelled and we jumped up. Then the girl did a funny thing. She got up out of her chair. Jeb started to talk to her, held out his hand. She backed away and looked up again at all of us. Gary waved. “How about a ride?” he yelled. The girl turned and fled, running along the edge of the pool away from Jeb.

“Are you guys fucking deaf?” Dennis asked. We could hear Dennis behind us, yelling at us to hurry, to get our asses back to work, that we only had a couple of days to get the roof finished. Jeb yelled up from the pool, “I guess she doesn’t want to talk to us,” and shrugged his shoulders. The girl looked up at us one last time before heading into the women’s locker room and Gary bent over to get a better look.
“Fucking beautiful,” he said.

At break, all the guys could talk about was the girl in her two piece, what she looked like under her two piece, and what they would do when they found out. Real sick stuff—conversations about the size of their dicks, confessions of how young they’d had it and with whom.

“You guys are disgusting,” Jeb said. “That girl was probably only thirteen years old.”

“Why don’t you just shut the fuck up?” Gary said.

“You guys should look for girls with more class. The kind of girl you could take to a show.”

“I take Debbie to shows all the time,” Brett said.

“Christ, Brett, I’m not talking movies. I mean like a real live show. With celebrities and stuff.”


Dennis came over from the truck where he ate lunch and waved his arm. We all put on our hard hats, did up our overalls, and slowly made our way up the ladder, Jeb still jabbering about how to find quality women.

“My uncle’s company has these socials downtown. I went to one when I was a kid after a Maple Leafs/Senators game. At the game, they had this huge catered room that looked right out onto the ice, and afterwards we went to a restaurant on the CN tower. Imagine going up there, after it’s closed to tourists. You got the whole town of
Toronto at your feet and the only women you see are these high-class babes with degrees and RRSPs. You know Darla Blake from *Hockey Night in Canada*? She was there. My uncle introduced me and she said, ‘So you’re Stanton’s nephew.’ I about lost it. You know that she’s almost six feet tall? And that’s a woman who you can talk to.”

“I’d like to do more than that,” Brett said.

“You’re disgusting,” Jeb said.

The next afternoon, the girl was back. This time with a friend—a younger friend by the looks of it—also wearing a two piece. She was smaller than the other girl and flat-chested. The sight of her made everything that Jeb had said more believable; even Gary was embarrassed. And a man was there, skimming a fine net across the surface of the pool while the girls jumped in and out and sunned themselves on the deck. It was still torturously hot.

“You grunts quit gawking,” Dennis yelled. We only had a day to get the job done and there was still a quarter of the roof left. Everything was torn off now and we knew that we’d have to cover the whole roof today if we wanted to go home at all that evening. Couldn’t leave the roof exposed because of liability—even if the weather report said sunny weather for the next two months. Dennis brought on another guy, a machinist who sometimes did torch work, to do the PVC seams. This was a more specialized job that required a small hand torch to seal the roof lip and corners, those tight spots that a bigger seam torch like mine would screw up. Dennis coordinated the last few steps of getting the insulation and particle board ready for each new roll of PVC that we put down. It
was everything that we had done earlier compressed into a shorter time frame and it had to be done right. No room for glitches. By lunch Gary and Jeb had nailed and screwed in all the insulation and fired up the kettle. With the new guy torching the roof lip and corners, we were almost caught up to them and it looked like we should have no problem finishing the rest of the roof by early afternoon. At break, we sprawled down on the grass near the pool’s chain link fence in the shade of a leafy elm. I chugged a good portion of my 4-litre thermos, the Gatorade doing its best to replace what I’d sweat on the baking hot roof. The girls were still there, sunning themselves now, in plain view from where we were, under the tree.

“Looks like I won that bet,” Jeb said when he sat down.

“That was yesterday,” Gary said. “You never asked her. Could be her fucking sister for all we know.”

Jeb sighed. Gary got up, stiffly, and marched his way in the direction of Fast Eddie’s. The new guy came down off the ladder, sat with the rest of us in the shade.

“What’s his problem?”

“Lost a bet.”

The new guy laughed.

After break, the girls and the pool cleaner were gone. The pool was ready to be opened that weekend and the water was clear and inviting. The kettle had warmed up and Dennis pulled the spout over to the roof. Jeb hauled up the two tar-encrusted buckets and put them by the spout. Dennis came up with the stiff mop and Brett followed him,
then waited next to the stack of particle board, ready for Dennis to give the order.

“Hot!” Dennis yelled. Jeb pulled the line and waited for the gurgle of tar as it came up and out the spout, into the buckets. But nothing came. He pulled again, harder this time, but there was no familiar gurgle of the tube filling up. Dennis let the mop fall and went back down the ladder. We heard the kettle lid clang open. Smoke spewed out of the kettle and blew in our direction on the roof. We heard cursing, lots of it. Then the kettle clanged shut again and the smoke disappeared.

“Jeb!”

Jeb hustled down the ladder, taking the buckets with him. Then Dennis re-emerged on the roof, wiping his hands on his overalls. Splatters of tar covered his front like slick leaves. Without a word, he picked up the mop and let it fall in the large empty basin.

I wanted to keep torching, but with the delay down at the kettle, I was almost caught up. I clicked off my torch and closed my tank. Before long, Jeb appeared at the top of the ladder carrying a smoking bucket that he brought over to the basin and dumped in. Dennis swirled the mop around and Jeb went back down the ladder. Gary and Brett waited until Dennis had covered a full rectangle of space, then they lifted the ends of the particle board and laid it on top, exactly in the corner. Dennis waited for them to position it correctly and tamp it down, then swirled the mop around. A couple more pieces and I’d be ready to torch again. But Dennis had already run out of tar; one bucket wasn’t quite enough. Jeb made his way to the top of the ladder, this time breathing heavily. A thick slice of tar was on his overalls, below the knee. Dennis turned his mop upside-
down and pried at the stiffening head with his gloves. Jeb dumped the bucket too quickly this time and tar splashed over the edge and onto the roof—luckily not far from where Dennis needed to mop.

“Careful,” Dennis said, then dipped his mop in until the fibers were loose, and he mopped the next section for Gary and Brett. They finished the row and I re-lit my torch. The particle board would be good for a couple more rolls of PVC cap. Next time I looked up, Dennis had switched Gary and Jeb, but they were still behind and it was getting close to quitting time and we still had a couple rows left. With the kettle spout busted, we were going to be there longer, and that pissed everyone off.

Dennis called a late break at 5:00, when we were usually slathering a couple lines of tar paper with hot tar to temporarily seal the old roof to the new one on our way out. The guys were all exhausted, except for me and the new guy. Racing up and down the ladder carrying buckets of tar had worn them all out, even after switching. And the usual breaks of putting in new tar blocks to be melted in the kettle made for delays. We were going to be getting time-and-a-half for our work, but not even that mattered to Gary, Jeb, and Brett who were covered with flecks of tar from the sloshing buckets.

“Come here,” Dennis said. We all got to our feet and walked to where he stood, over tar that was oozing into the grass and partially onto the concrete sidewalk surrounding the building. “What the fuck is this?” Dennis asked.

“Tar,” Jeb said.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Dennis said. He took off his hard hat and wiped his head with his sleeve. He turned around and kicked a dried chunk of tar skittering out onto the
concrete. “You going to do something about it?” He looked straight at Jeb.

“I could,” Jeb started. “But I wasn’t the one who spilled it—wouldn’t it be more
fair to have whoever spilled it clean it up?”

Dennis just stared at Jeb. “If you worked as much as you talked, I’d be a
goddamn millionaire,” he said.

We worked the same as we had before the break until I had finished torching my
seam. Then Dennis sent Jeb down to clean the tar off the concrete with a wire brush and
solvent. Dennis waved me over to help lay the fiberboard. Gary ran hot for us and we
started laying the last line, a task that took a while longer because we had to cut each
piece to fit with a utility knife. We were right against the edge of the roof now and the
ladder poked up in the middle, so all that Gary had to do was dump the hot in the basin
when he got to the top.

We were in the last corner when we heard it. I was kneeling on a piece of
fiberboard, cutting out two lines to fit the last couple angles. Dennis had already mopped
the tar and it was cooling, waiting for my piece. Brett and I both were tamping it in when
we heard a dull thump like a struck timpani. Then Jeb screamed. We all craned over the
edge and saw Jeb running in the parking lot wearing a thick swath of black tar from his
overall pocket to his shoulder blades, his arms straight out. The fabric clung to him like a
wet t-shirt. We saw the overturned bucket, Gary on the ground next to it, looking as
shocked as we were. Dennis ran to the ladder and shimmied down, missing most of the
steps, then sprinted to his truck, opened it, and went after Jeb with a fire extinguisher.
Parts of Jeb’s clothing were smoldering. Brett and I were transfixed by the scene. Only Gary seemed conscious of what had happened. He ran over to where Dennis had smothered Jeb with foam and the two of them helped Jeb to Dennis’ truck. Dennis peeled out, leaving black streaks on the pavement.

We all made our way down the ladder.

“Fucking moron,” Gary said. “Fucking dropped the bucket.” He was shaking as he patted his pockets for his smokes, then he lit up, still swearing.

We finished capping the roof, Brett and Gary both taking off before Dennis’s Chevy rolled slowly back into the lot. It was almost 7:00. We were hungry and dehydrated, but the project was finished and our torches and tanks were on the lawn, ready to go. Dennis explained how it happened, that it was Gary who had dropped the bucket on his way up the ladder, sending the hot onto Jeb who was crouched over, cleaning tar off the cement. “Didn’t even need any more hot,” he said, like it was a waste. He went up on the roof with us and surveyed the finished job—the parallel lines of PVC glistening like silver where the sun struck it, interrupted only by the shadows of heating vents and the roof lip. “One big fucking job,” Dennis said.

Jeb got worker’s comp for the rest of the summer. He visited the crew once, three weeks later. He looked the same as always, though when he lifted the back of his shirt, we saw the bandages and shrinking areas where the tar had puckered the skin in third degree burns. He would have scars.

“Still get paid,” he said.
We were all still on the crew and I was worried about Jeb and Gary turning on each other. But Gary apologized. He treated Jeb like he was a visiting dignitary. Jeb seemed to like the attention. Gary showed him around the elementary school gymnasium we were working on—another large job that we started as soon as school was out. He introduced Jeb to the three other guys working with us, mostly temps or students looking to make a couple bucks. Gary told Jeb how we had already gone through four other grunts a week before. One of them was an overweight kid with a lisp. Gary called him “blubberbutt” to his face until the kid left two days later.

“The guys were fucking pansies,” Gary said. Jeb laughed and told us how the rest of the summer was paid for, that he was reading all the books he needed to for his fall classes during the day so that he could keep his time open for scoping babes. “They pay for everything,” he said. “Royal fucking treatment.”

“Shit, man,” Brent said. “You said it.”

Gary said that Jeb was the luckiest guy in the world.
The first time that Janice met Patrick, he was standing on a concrete bench in an amphitheater near Waterton National Park. It was dusk. He carried a diamond willow walking stick with a globe of silver bells at the top, for the bears. He wore a beard and had brought a dog with him, a 150-pound mastiff-lab mix that was friendly and licked her hand when she reached down to pet him.

“You’re not supposed to be here, Pat,” John, her husband, said. Jan didn’t want John to run Patrick off. Pat was a former in-law, a Yankee like herself. Earlier John had complained that she wanted to leave the Duggan reunion early, but now she had a reason to stay. A reason besides the family traditions that John was so proud of. Janice was traditioned out. John held to traditions the way a limpet clings to a rock, and as John had explained to her, this next family tradition, the Blarney stone kissing, was the most important of them all.

“I’m not leaving, if that’s what you think,” Pat said. “I just got here. Went and paid forty bucks for a dinky campsite in town. I’m staying a couple nights is all.”

“That’s not it. You’re not supposed to be here.” John pointed to the ground. “Betty will be here in a while and you need to be gone. You know that, for Christ’s sake.”

“I don’t have to talk to her. I’ll just stay up here and watch. No harm in that.”

Pat sat down on the concrete pew and his dog jumped up beside him, laid his massive head on Pat’s lap. John took off his hat and bent the bill of it with both hands,
then put it back on his head.

“Nice dog,” Janice said.

“Otis here? He’s OK, I guess.”

Jan heard the crunch of tires on gravel, doors opening and closing. The way that
the men were acting, Janice felt like she was in a coliseum with the lions circling their
dinner. John was right. Patrick wasn’t supposed to be here. He had a restraining order
put on him two months ago for trying to contact his ex-wife, John’s sister, Betty. Patrick
was not going to be a welcome sight.

“Shit,” John said.

Jan could hear John’s family now. It was hard not to. Voices floated up through
the trees that shielded their view. Soon they would be here, the Earl Duggans, the Jolly
Duggans, the Parry Duggans, as well as the families of the four Duggan daughters who
had all married homesteading men and taken their names.

“I remember the last Blarney stone kissing I was at,” Patrick said. “It was right
here, in Waterton, three years ago. Betty was pregnant with Gloria, and Brady was only a
couple years old. Reunions help you take stock of things, you know?”

A few relatives made their way into the amphitheater, stopped, then admired the
half-cord of wood that was stacked in a log-cabin formation in the fire pit that dominated
the floor. Then they looked up.

“Wait here, hon,” John said.

Those first few moments, sitting up in the amphitheater while the rest of John’s
family gawked and stared, were oddly the most relaxed that Janice had had since their arrival at the Duggan family reunion two days ago. She liked Patrick, liked listening to him drawl away in his Louisiana accent, telling stories about how he and Betty met. Janice didn’t fear him the way that she thought she would. John always talked about Patrick the way you did a bad dream. He had been the one who had broken up John’s sister’s family. He was the one who couldn’t hold a job. He was the one who lost his temper so badly that he went at the side of their three-bedroom Ridgeview bungalow with a chain saw. But Janice didn’t see any of that now. Just a sad, abandoned man with a dog.

The family came in, filed into the rows wearing matching t-shirts: “Dug by the Duggans” in block letters. No one sat within several feet of them. Soon, John came back.

“You can stay,” he said when he reached them. “But Janice and I are going to be right here. No funny stuff. You pull anything and you could wind up in jail.”

Patrick laughed. “See what this family’s like? They love you so much that they hate to see you go.”

One of the uncles, Parry Duggan, made his way to the center of the amphitheater. He wore a grey Scout blanket with two-tone handkerchiefs and badges from jamborees sewn into the wool. He raised up his hand in a limp salute and there was silence from the benches. Janice had seen other in-laws use this sign to quiet down large groups at the reunion. It was Great Grandpa Berg’s sign, and its expression meant reverence.

“It’s time to kiss the Blarney stone,” Parry said.
The Blarney stone kissing, he explained, was the culminating Duggan ritual towards adulthood that gave anyone who had kissed the stone the gift of credibility. Parry said that the Blarney stone was a rare fossil, harvested from the depths of the Welsh coal mines before Great Grandpa Berg immigrated to Canada.

“Anyone twelve and older who had not yet kissed the stone, may now come down and do so,” Parry said.

Some of the family, teenagers mostly, got up and formed a line behind Parry. Then three men brought out a large stone and placed it on top of a stubby log, turned up on its side.

“This is the wacky part,” Patrick said. “They hold you over the stone so that your body isn’t touching the ground. Then you all take turns telling stories. You can make up whatever you want—the crazier the better—and everyone is supposed to believe you. Last time, I told the one about the Goat Man. You know the one? I started out and said, ‘The Goat Man had quite an identity crisis. You see, his mother was a goat.’ ”

“Good one,” Janice said.

The three men at the bottom started lifting up the teenagers with one man holding the legs and the other two men holding each hand in an arm wrestler’s grip. They dipped the teenagers down one by one and the kids kissed the Blarney Stone amid claps and cheers.

“You might want to get down there,” John said.

Jan resisted. She was a little agoraphobic and the Duggans were numerous. Plus she had a horrible experience earlier on that day playing Survivor, a watered-down
version of the TV show that John’s mother Brenda had organized. Brenda had divided the family into five teams of about twenty and sent them up into the hills with a ball of twine and a stopwatch. The teams had to lash together a stretcher out of deadfall and carry their teammates down to the lake. Whoever was first won. There were no other rules. Half Janice’s team lashed together a stretcher while the other half tried to sabotage the other teams. She saw grown men wrestling over scraps of wood and kids being tossed aside because they weren’t doing the knots right. When Janice’s turn came to go down the hill, part of the stretcher broke, so that Janice was half-carried, half-dragged down the mountain. The men on her team couldn’t bear to waste a moment to re-tie the wood and Janice had the bruises to prove it.

“It’s OK,” Janice said. “I think I’ll just stay here.”

The last of the kids, a college student by the looks of him, had made it through kissing the Blarney stone without mishap. Parry put his hand to his forehead like he was on a ship sighting land. He pointed up into the audience. “I think that we also have a new in-law. Janice, why don’t you come on down?”

Janice was hoping that the awkwardness of having Patrick next to her would be enough to stave off any attention. So much for that.

“They won’t you let you get away with not going,” John said.

Still she resisted. Couldn’t he see that she didn’t want to go? She wondered if it would be offensive to refuse. Kissing a Blarney stone shouldn’t matter so much, shouldn’t be so important. But it was. The proof was there in the seventy-or-so aunts and uncles packed into the rows. She got up. “If I don’t make it back, donate my organs
Jan wished that John would stand up for her more. At home he was never so thick-headed. Like last night. Brenda mentioned that the front roller on her vacuum cleaner wasn’t working anymore, so John took it downstairs, spread its innards all over the withered linoleum floor, and left Janice alone with her in-laws who badgered her for six hours with marital advice. Even when she complained later, telling John that he was an electrical engineer, not an electrician, and that she had felt abandoned up there with his parents, all he did was shrug it off.

“What am I supposed to do?” he said. “What’s wrong with being helpful?”

They were lying in bed, his hand across her breast, one leg wrapped around her thighs.

“Nothing’s wrong with being helpful,” Janice said. “It’s nice. But do you have to be helpful all the time?”

“Oh, so you want me to be mean?”

Janice sighed. “Sure,” she said. How did the conversation get away from her? That’s was the how it was with John—in his mind he had done the right thing and he couldn’t see it any other way.

At the bottom of the amphitheater, Parry guided Janice over to the three men who stood around the Blarney stone. Up close, the stone actually appeared to have fossils in it, bits of ammonite and shells. She wondered how it truly got here, a time-traveler from the bottom of the sea. Janice kept her eyes down so she didn’t have to see anyone
straight on, so she could kiss the stone then go back to her seat. She gave her hands to the two men, and someone lifted her legs from behind. Janice watched the shuffle of feet moving closer to the stone. She felt herself dipping down so that the rock filled her vision. Pausing for a moment, she pursed her lips. Contact.

After kissing the stone, Janice didn’t feel any different, definitely didn’t feel the need to b.s. or tell stories. Uncle Parry helped her into his arms for a congratulatory hug, even though she only reached for him for steadiness, not an embrace. She took her time climbing the concrete steps to her seat.

Then Parry told a story.

“As most of you know, Janice is from the states and just married into the family,” Parry said. “This story is about her and John when they first moved to Edmonton. Janice had just come to Canada with John, not knowing how cold it could get in the winter.”

Patrick leaned over to Janice. “What an asshole. Last time he told this, it was with me and Betty, six years ago.”

“One winter,” Parry said, “the temperature dropped to absolute zero. ‘If you had told me how cold it got up here,’ Janice said, ‘I never would have come.’ But as she said the words, they froze in the air. All John heard was an ‘i’ that sounded like a hiccup. He could see her mouth moving but there was no sound. ‘You’ll have to speak louder if you want to talk to me,’ he said. ‘You don’t have to whisper.’ Janice waited for John’s response, but there was nothing. All she could see was his upset expression and his hands and mouth moving to argue back. ‘Don’t you make those gestures at me,’ she said.
‘Are you afraid to tell me what you really think? If you don’t answer me this minute, I’m going to write my mother to spend the winter. I know how well you two get along.’ But John couldn’t hear her and had no idea why she suddenly stomped into the room waving a letter in her hand. And though he despised his mother-in-law, he could do nothing to prevent her arrival the next week. In the meantime, they continued to argue, issuing threats and oaths against each other with increasing vehemence. Janice was convinced that her husband was condescending, that he was ignoring her out of spite for having invited her mother to stay with them. John, on the other hand, couldn’t understand why he was getting so much attention from his wife without her ever uttering a sound. And when his mother-in-law showed up, he was furious. He slammed the door as soon as he saw her. Then Janice, the mother-in-law, and John went crazy. They yelled and yelled, chasing each other all around the house until finally they were exhausted.”

Parry paused and bent down to the small children in the front rows. They leaned in close to hear his every word, trying to comprehend this dysfunctional family who would argue and argue while their words froze in mid-air.

“Finally,” Parry said. “Spring came. The temperature began to rise above absolute zero. The three of them had long since given up talking to each other and had settled into a quiet routine of going about their business. John felt that he and his mother-in-law had come to an understanding and their mutual silence suited him fine. Janice was increasingly pleased with the husband’s tolerance of her mother and finally felt that they no longer needed argument to express their feelings. They were happy. Then another strange thing happened. It was Janice who first noticed it—the occasional word that
would suddenly pierce the air: ‘few-had-told-me,’ came the words, slowly, like crackling ice. ‘Did you say something dear?’ she said. ‘No, I didn’t,’ John said. Then their words rang out clearly in the warming air. And do you know what they heard?’

Parry leaned forward, whispering the last part, drawing the children closer.

“What?” one of the children asked.

“I NEVER WOULD HAVE COME YOU’LL HAVE TO SPEAK LOUDER IF YOU WANT TO TALK TO ME YOU DON’T HAVE TO WHISPER,” Parry said. Everyone jumped. “The words kept coming and coming so fast and loudly that they all ran around to try and find something to stop their ears. Two months of frozen words thawed all at once so that their small house was filled with angry noise. John and Janice began to regret that they had ever spoken to each other so harshly, and wished that they had said more tender things during those two months of winter. John and Janice certainly learned a lesson,” Parry said. “Didn’t you?” He looked up into the audience.

“We sure did,” John said.

“See, that’s why John and Janice are such nice people, especially during the winter. They’ve learned that every word counts and that kind words are a lot easier on the ears.”

Jancie was upset and embarrassed. She didn’t like being the butt of an elaborate joke. So this is how they welcome you to the family. She folded her arms, pushed her back up straight.

“Careful,” John said. “He’s just having a little fun.”

Whatever, Jan thought. The story scared the hell out of her. Since the reunion
she’d been teased, then ignored, then dropped and dragged on her butt like a rag doll. Now this. John put his arm around her and she shrugged it off. Her husband was so easily moved at times. Give him a blanket and Bambi and he'd cry all night.

“Thanks for being a good sport,” Parry said, waving up to them. “Now for those of you who kissed the stone this evening or for anyone who has a bit of Blarney to share, the time is yours.”

Patrick leaned over, kept saying, “I can’t believe it. The exact same story. Everyone probably knows it, too. Betty sure does.”

Janice asked, “Is Betty even here?”

“Sure, sure she is,” Pat said. “She wouldn’t miss our story. Might hide behind her new lover. But she’s here. There she is.”

Pat pointed with his stick. Janice could see Betty’s blond bob, noticed the man next to her, the dentist that John’s family was so proud of. Betty had started dating him two months after the divorce.

Pat said, “Betty always said that she wanted someone with imagination. You know how much imagination a dentist has? Zilch.”

The teenagers who had kissed the stone popped up one by one to tell their stories. Each had a zinger ready to go. The college boy started it off. “Once I went camping with Uncle Parry up in Crowsnest Pass when I was a five,” he said. “He wanted to make us a fancy stew up at the plateau above Gargantua. ‘Nature’s stew’ he called it. He put everything he could find in there: dandelion heads, pine needles, weeds we picked up on the trail. And then a can of chicken gizzards he said tasted best at high altitudes. Then
he burned it and fed it to us. It was so gross that we threw it behind some bushes when he wasn’t looking. It was that bad. So this last spring, me and Rob went back there and guess what we found? The bushes were dead, the ground clear. Except for one thing. There was this skeleton. Rob said it was a bear. But the bones were in a strange position. We looked closer. Then we figured it out. Its paws were wrapped around its throat!”

Parry shook his head. “Those boys never did appreciate fine cuisine.”

Patrick got even more upset. “I can’t believe that you can stand this shit,” he said loudly.

But they didn’t stop. The rest of the kids followed Jake’s lead. Most of the stories were short, sometimes anecdotal. One teenager told a story about shooting a gopher three hundred times in the head with a .22 before it stopped moving. Another told about the time she ate so many beets that her urine turned purple and her mom sent her to the emergency room for internal bleeding. All the stories passed by quickly.

“Now it’s your turn,” Patrick said. “Your happy welcome to the family.”

Janice didn’t move.

“Janice, you got any Blarney in you?” Parry yelled up.

She didn’t. She didn’t have any Blarney in her and she didn’t want to. The only story she could think of was the story of the Goat Man that Patrick had told her. She could picture the mythical figure now, a beast with a bare torso, stubby horns in its hair. The man whose mother was a goat, conceived in ignominy. He was here now, hoofs to the ground, head down like a battering ram, ready to bolt into the hills.

John massaged Janice’s shoulder, whispering gently, “It doesn’t have to be a long
story—just a little one. Honey? The whole family is waiting.”

No.

Then Patrick stood up. “Leave her alone,” he said.

Immediately the attention shifted.

Parry said, “Janice?”

“You can’t ignore me,” Pat said. “I’ve kissed the stone. Some of you may not remember, but I did. I’ve got a story to tell and it’s a good one.” Patrick stepped out into the aisle and Otis jumped up onto the concrete bench. “It’s a story that started ten years ago,” he said. “One you may be familiar with. It’s about a man who came to Canada with a singing group. He was from Louisiana and had never been this far north before.”

“Maybe we should let Janice tell her story first,” Parry said.

“The man didn’t think much of the place until after the show. He met this girl who ended up auditioning for the following year. She had quite a voice, let me tell you. The next year they were in the cast together and they traveled everywhere: Hong Kong, France, Spain, and all over the US and Canada.”

There was movement down among the Earl Duggans. A couple of men made their way up to Patrick.

“I think that’s enough, Pat,” Parry said. “Let Janice go. She hasn’t had a chance yet.” He was still being very diplomatic, even though men were grouped all around the aisle and Pat’s dog let out a throaty growl.

“They were the perfect pair,” Pat said. “Everyone thought that they were the cutest couple. They started dating. After a year, they went up and visited her parents and
that sealed it. The next year they were married.”

The men ushered Pat down the amphitheatre, but kept off a little. Otis was barking now, making the story hard to hear.

“After a couple years they had a baby girl, then a boy. But the man had trouble finding work that suited him. This bothered the woman. Pretty soon, she lost interest in him, even though they went through all the paperwork for him to immigrate to Canada. After several years, they split up, then divorced.”

He was at the bottom of the amphitheater now. Parry had stopped trying to speak. Men were shouting and Pat signaled that he was leaving, bowing extravagantly to Betty, three rows up.

“Not a happy story, is it?” Pat said. “Now the man can’t even see his kids when he wants to. And the woman has gone and shackled up with another man. Nothing like true love.”

Pat made his way out of the amphitheater, swinging his walking stick to make room. Parry and another man were consoling Betty, who was crying and yelling, “You’re going to jail.” Several people followed Pat out to the parking lot. Through the trees Janice heard the doors on a car slam shut. An engine revved. Parry got up and dismissed everyone, reminding them about the reunion breakfast and admonishing them to drive safely. But people didn’t need direction. They were already getting up, cousins, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews. She wondered how John would explain this outbreak, his uncles chasing Pat out of the amphitheater. How about the stories? They way that they treated her? She could almost hear him now, trying to justify everything.
“They’re simple folks,” he’d say. “You need to humor them a little.” They got up and
John pushed into the flow of relatives shuffling along to the aisle and then down the
stairs. Other kids walked on the benches, jumping from one to the next down to the
bottom. John, she knew, would never do the same. She knew the same way that she
knew how he would try to brush Patrick’s outburst off with a joke. They would lie in bed
like they had the night before, his right leg draped across her hips, his hand resting on her
breast. “Guess he should have listened to Parry’s story the first time around,” he’d say,
laughing as he gently massaged her. Janice would want to respond. She would open her
mouth to speak. She would tell a story then, curled up against his body. She would tell
the story of the goat man, the bastard son of a bestial birth, Paul Bunyan stories from her
childhood, or stories from Roald Dahl books she read as a kid. In her mind, she would
re-tell them, make them her own. But as her mouth curved to fit the shape of the words,
she’d find that she wouldn’t hear a thing. The words would be stuck between them,
frozen in mid-air.
It all started from a letter, a newspaper clipping of a tiny Cessna, crashed on the edge of a line of hoodoos. In the photo, a Mountie stood to the right of the wreckage, leaning over it with his hands at his sides, reverently, like he was bowing to a dojo. Four days previous, the ten o’clock news showed the same scene, only with blue smoke leaking out of the wreckage and into the sky where it fanned out against the push of a Chinook wind. It was March and there was no snow in southern Alberta.

My name is Eric. I’m a journalist and the article interested me on a professional level. But had I been one of the reporters on the scene, I would have covered the story out of guilt, for sending my cousin Mary the application for flight school. Mary was the pilot who flew the Cessna into the sandstone wall, a cousin whom I was in love with as a child. I had been working in Toronto for the past fifteen years, long enough to lose contact with Mary, long enough to forget whether to turn before or after the plaster Allosaurus in Milk River to get to the hoodoos at Writing on Stone Provincial Park. And even though I sent a card, a letter, I still couldn’t figure out why my uncle Elias Hofen, a Hutterite farmer who opposed me as much as he did Mary leaving, mailed me this article, an original, clipped out of Sunday’s *Lethbridge Herald*.

So that night, I called my sister. Four rings and then a beep. *You’ve reached the Andersons*. Laura shut off the machine and I heard a familiar hello—different from the recording. “Elias Hofen-vetter sent me an article about Mary,” I said. I wedged the cordless between my shoulder and ear, then pulled the string for the collapsible stairs and
climbed up to the attic.

Laura was alarmed at the news. Not the accident—that she had heard—but at my uncle’s apparent gesture of good faith, the address scrawled in his own hand: Wolf Creek Hutterite Colony. Newspaper without a note.

“He knows you liked her,” she said. “It’s not you he hates, it’s Mom.”

“You don’t know that,” I said.

My mother’s family was still mysterious to Laura and me. Their beards, dark clothes, their unwritten Tyrolean German dialect. Every other Saturday, they wandered into town in truckfuls, Luddite passengers using machinery for the good of the colony. Mom sometimes pointed them out, saying, “There’s your Elias Hofen-vetter,” or “There’s your Martha-pasel.” A wink or a nod was the only recognition of our family of four—the awkward family who bought their clothes, watched TV, and listened to music.

Mary was the only one I knew.

In high school I snuck into the Wolf Creek colony at night. Past the coulees near Ridge reservoir, the lines of silver grain bins. Later, when she was twenty-five and could choose to leave, I sent her an application for flight school. That was four years ago. Now, to Hofen, Mary was the casualty of a family of outsiders.

Laura said, “Remember when she followed your Houdini act? All tied up with her fists rubbed raw?”

“I do,” I said, though it wasn’t my act that stood out. It was right before Christmas at the only family reunion that I could remember. The colony had a history of celebrating Christmas with a Nicklus, a character somewhat like our Santa, but much
more grotesque. Where Jolly St. Nick gushed a sort of overflowing charity and well being, the Hutterite Nicklus was a fearful figure: stooped, grimy, with a charcoal face and a rope wig for hair. My parents hadn’t prepared us for him. He lumbered into the room while we were talking and growled at the children in dialect. To us, he sounded angry and we crowded against my parents, listening for their translation: “He says that if you aren’t good, you’re not going to get any presents this year.” The Nicklus put his arms above his head and roared at a small group of kids who screamed, then laughed. The parents shushed them and the Nicklus left a trail of presents that each child scooped up and opened eagerly. My parents then gave us each a gift. I received a set of magic ropes like ones that I had learned how to use from a friend. I started to show my cousins how they worked after everyone had recovered from the dreaded Nicklus and performed a series of escapes, sliding myself through the rope until I was free. Then Mary wanted to try. I showed show her how to make the rope work, but she got the knots wrong and fell onto the floor. The colonists thought it was hilarious. But Hofen was angry, considered my performance worldly and vain, drawing too much attention to individual talents and abilities. He ordered the colonists to stop laughing, chided them for getting too riled up. Then he took my mother aside and we left, abruptly.

“I saw the accident on the news.” Laura said. “It was lumped into a ten second aerial shot. Seems like the conservationists were more concerned about the damage it did to the park.”

“It’s things like this that make me think that God is a crook.”

“A crook? I always thought of him as a slick used car dealer. Or a manly looking
I tried to imagine heaven, Mary walking up to the pearly gates and God slipping her into a used white Lexus. Leather upholstery. God dressed like a nun.

“Our virgin Mary,” I said.

“Don’t kid yourself,” she said.

I like to avoid death. Real death, the deaths of people I know. Death in packages I can handle: humor, like the Darwin awards or the guy James Bond sticks with a spear gun, saying “I think he got the point.” As a rule, I don’t attend funerals. Memory is the reason. I had a recurring nightmare when I was seven years old where I imagined that I was stuck to the ceiling staring down at myself sleeping. From my perch I watched the covers rise and fall, then stop. The feeling afterward, waiting for what I comprehended later to be my own death, wasn’t fear or anxiety, but guilt. It was wrong to be there, up on the ceiling, while the rest of me shuddered and died.

So when I bought the ticket to Calgary, my mom couldn’t believe it.

I told her, I thought it might cheer people up.

My mother was there to pick me up at the airport, and on the way down to Ridgeview, she said, “Mary was a good pilot.”

She said this to me like Mary hadn’t crashed. Hands at ten o’clock and two.

I said, “She barely had her license. She was just learning.”

“I don’t think it’s so simple,” she said.

“What do the police say?”
“They looked at the black box, reviewed the ‘evidence.’ Sounded like a quickie to me. And the media’s been having a heyday. The Writing on Stone ‘Tragedy,’ they call it. My word.”

“I thought that you’d be more moved.”

“Mary? I am moved. Moved and mad. I can just hear the Elders now, reciting the whole experience like it was a signpost for disaster. No one should ever have to leave that kind of a legacy. Dead for the communal cause. It makes me sick.”

We passed Nanton, the spring water capital of Alberta. The plant had shut down because of cheaper competitors. I imagined all the water, pooling in rock cavities, erosion, wind, the sound of the water running through sandstone. I wanted to see the hoodoos. I told my mother this.

“I want to see the hoodoos.”

“You what?”

“Where Mary died. The spot.”

“It’s your life,” she said.

My mother has rejected much of what the colonies taught her, except her enduring work ethic and certain family traditions. My parents moved out of Wolf Creek colony before I was born. They were young, baptized members of the community and their departure meant excommunication. Even after my father died, she wouldn’t talk about it, but I knew what it had meant for my father. He took an interest in taxidermy as a youth, starting with his moonlighting during the winter to make some extra pocket change
trapping animals for their pelts. Early on, he learned the chemicals for tanning leather, for preserving the supple feel of the skin. He bought books on taxidermy and hid them in a chest in his attic. He became skilled at his trade and word got around. People from the community began coming to him, offering to pay handsomely for his trophies. My mother still had several of his creations: pheasants taking flight, foxes bent in a crouch. He had an eye for detail and his molds were accurate and full. He truly enjoyed what he did. But the colony preacher usually dictated what Hutterite colonists could and couldn’t do. Taxidermy signaled private enterprise and individualism, though at heart, I believe, my father was simply an artist, cobbling away with his tools, trying to create a living thing out of clay, glass, and flesh. As my mother explained it to me, my father didn’t care about making profits or advertising. He simply worked to support his hobby and was honestly shocked when the colony preacher ordered him to stop. When my father wouldn’t, Elias Hofen-vetter confiscated his taxidermy equipment, any trophies he had in progress, then put them in the central square where he burned them in front of everyone.

A year later my parents moved from the colony, though my mother said that her husband, as she knew him, was gone.

The next day, we drove to where Mary died. Writing on Stone started as I remembered it, a small mound growing to a mountain by the time we reached Milk River. At my request, Mom showed me the crash site, where for a moment the globular world of the hoodoos and Mary’s Cessna blended together. It was before the Allosaurus statue that we turned, heading east, then wound down the road to the park.
Mary’s crash site was over to the side, before the first of the larger hoodoos rose cliff-like against an oxbow in the river.

“There,” Mom said.

There was a slope in the sandstone, then a dark gouge. The gouge was lighter at one end; it was coffee-colored, laced among the rocks like a stain. The wreckage had been removed—but by whom? And how did the Cessna get there, fallen out of the sky?

Mom said, “They say the altimeter or whatever you call it went haywire. Flew right into the ground. She was going to fly up north around Bear Lake Copper Mine, maybe do something with an oil company. That’d be a lonely life. Could you imagine, way up there? She must’ve been running away from something that caught up to her.”

I knew what my mother wasn’t saying. Suicide. Which wasn’t fair, I thought, not for Mary. Or was it? I squatted, rubbed my hand across the sandstone. Tan, then black like a tire.

The government calls the park Writing on Stone because of the murals of buffalo hunts painted on the cave walls deep inside the hoodoos. The hoodoos themselves are just adornment—glandular spires and grottoes of sandstone created by erosion. After seeing the crash site, we went to the murals. Took the guided tour, the whole bit. I was hungry, and it was unseasonably hot. But I had never been before, my umpteenth time to Writing on Stone. It was my mom who finally convinced me to go. “I know how much you like coming home,” she said. Mom called it home, though I felt more like a tourist in southern Alberta than anywhere.
During the tour, the guide pointed to a pair of eyeglasses carved into the stone and told us that they were two Native American warriors fighting. “Each circle represents a warrior behind a shield” he said. I took his word for it. There were four people on our tour: my mother and me, and a younger couple who appeared to be in love. The guy had on a pair of Wranglers and he wore a sweatshirt with “LCI” emblazoned on the front in green-and-yellow letters. The girl was much shorter. She reached up, put her head in the space between his shoulder and collarbone, pocketed her hand in the back of his jeans. She wore her hair pinned to the sides of her head, and when she turned to him, looking up from the spot nestled near his shoulder, her face looked like a half moon.

We reached a large room with three lines on top of an etched horse the size of a child. The tour guide pointed to the buffalo and fished for explanations. The couple, uninterested, moved next to the wall. I heard the rustle of clothes.

In high school, late at night, Mary and I used to exchange fantasies. Hers were predictable: there was always a man, a room, flowers, and a featherbed, but no sex, just kisses. I would start my fantasies with elaborate settings: private beaches, penthouses, Roman baths. I described the scent of the place, the steam from the baths, the wildflowers, ambrosia. I’d have the couple undress, not touching, then gradually embrace. Mary and I held hands. Then I’d have the woman reach for his penis and Mary would hit me on the shoulder. We could toy with each other this way for hours. There was a quonset that the colonists used to store wood where we knew no one would interrupt us. We’d glide through in the dark until we found a dry spot to lie on our backs.
“Come on,” I told her once, “you don’t even have to feel your way.”

“Let’s stop here,” she said. I remember that at the side of the quonset there was a sliding window that was open. Just one spot where threads from an outside lamp streamed through. Mary held out a hand. In the light, it looked like her fingers were orphaned from the rest of her body. I reached for her fingers instinctively, to hold them before the moment was gone, washed out by the autumn night.

“Tell me another fantasy,” she said. It was safe—two cousins—no fear of relationships, commitment, duress.

We groped for each other in the dark.

The tour guide asked another question, demanding that everyone, all four of us participate, raise our hands if we knew the number of national parks in Alberta, and who could tell him what they thought the curving lines from the neck of the engraved warrior represented? The girl in love answered with a question: “A headdress?”

“Right,” the tour guide said. Then the guide explained how the native Blackfoot used to hunt, why they recorded their exploits in these caverns. The Blackfoot used animal oils and grease for paint, giving their figures life.

Back in Ridgeview, my mother told me that whenever I visit, I spend all my time hiding. “You don’t phone anyone,” she said. “People have a right.” Truth is, news catches up with me. In rural Alberta, I always feel pursued. It’s not like Toronto. People know me there, sure, but here it’s everybody. Doug Coppieters still mans the post office,
dragging his palsied foot to the mailboxes. Stuart Heggie is at the Mercantile. The high school kids drive their trucks up and down the street, stopping to talk, reaching out to each other like they’re at a tollbooth with time on their hands. In Ridgeview, the streets are as wide as a three-lane highway. People park in the middle. Every dog on the west side of town is related.

My mother’s comment bothered me, so I called Laura again. I told her about Writing on Stone and that Mom thought I was in hiding.

She said, “Have you been to see Elias Hofen-vetter yet?”

“How do you stop in and see someone you’ve never really talked to?”

“You don’t. You phone and ask first. And be polite.”

“That’s a thought,” I said.

“Do Hutterites have phones?”

“Sure they do,” I said. “They’re not Amish.”

“There you go. Look in the phone book.”

Downstairs, my mother turned on the stereo. Classic rock, Righteous Brothers. Her music.

Laura said, “Maybe you could try stopping by when it’s convenient, with an introduction. Go on Sunday, after supper. How long are you staying?”

“Until Monday.”

“He did send you the note. Take it as an invitation.”

The Righteous Brothers sang, “You’re my soul and my inspiration.” High and in harmony.
“And what should I say?”

The music was loud when I reached the landing, phone in hand. My mother looked small. She had refinished the kitchen and it seemed immense around her, her dark hair pulled up in a bun and her forearms bare on the counters. She snapped beans on the counter and moved to make space, pushed a yellow bowl towards me.

I walked close to the sink with my hands clasped behind my back. It seemed ridiculous that my mother should still be there when her kids were elsewhere. Me in Toronto, Laura in B.C. Nothing in the area except bad memories, scars in the earth, disgrace.

“Laura thinks I should stop by the colony.”

“Do you have an invitation?”

“Uncle Hofen’s clipping is as good as any.”

“That’s what you think,” she said, shaking her hands into the sink. She reached in the cupboard for a pot, placed it under the running water. “They want you to think you’re welcome. For all you know he sent it to you to show you what you did to his daughter.”

“You can’t always expect the worst.”

She put the beans in the water, brought them over to the stove to boil.

“It’s too bad Mary died, but you can’t go thinking that will make Hofen or anyone out at Wolf Creek come associating with us Gentiles for the long haul. Even if they are family. You’re cut off and that’s it.”
I took a walk down Main Street the next day. It was cold, so I stopped at the Mercantile to warm up. The Merc hadn’t changed its sign in fifteen years, white with blue curlicue lettering. Home Hardware was next door, though I always thought of them as one store because the aisles were connected in back. You could walk a beeline from the frozen meats straight to a row of air compressor accessories, hoses, and pneumatic attachments. I took my time down the aisles, rubbing my hands together for warmth. Then the front door opened and several Hutterite women came in. I forgot that it was Saturday, the day they stocked up on canned goods that they couldn’t get elsewhere, sometimes buying extracts or ingredients for the lavish communal meals they made where they fed the men first, then ate with the children at a separate table. The women’s kerchiefed heads disappeared around a corner. I watched the polka dots and the colorful fabric of their dresses. I didn’t know if they were from Wolf Creek, but I thought that I’d check the hardware department anyway, looking for the men’s black felt hats. I passed rows of pliers, screwdrivers, and gardening supplies before I saw three Hutterite men lined up at different places along a row of plumbing parts. One of them held up a copper elbow joint and fasteners, showing them to a shorter man with glasses. The third man was the farthest from me, but I recognized him by his height—Elias Hofen-vetter. I hugged the end of the aisle and picked out two different paint rollers wrapped in cellophane. I couldn’t decide whether or not to approach the group. You see, I wanted to talk to Hofen. But I was curiously afraid. Instead, I waited and bent down on the ground so that I had access to a bin of brushes. The tag said that they were on sale, so I took a couple and I kept watching Hofen until he left the rest of the group, walked over an aisle
and started going through a pile of metal boxes. I pretended to be searching through
some light switches and outlets, all marked down to 49 cents. I picked out a couple and
moved closer. His beard was the same as the pictures I’ve seen, the same as I
remembered him as a child. There were only a few brief memories I had like this, shades
of my uncle now rifling through pieces of metal. I was grateful and confused by the
encounter. Under scrutiny he bore almost no resemblance to Mary. He had a foreboding
profile: chin hidden under a beard, his head bound by the black felt hat. Only his nose
resembled Mary’s, with its round tip and nostrils. On his head, it appeared small, dwarfed
by his other features. But I was positive that it was Mary’s nose, a living reminder of the
daughter he’d buried a week before.

I counted out five smaller electrical boxes, then moved back down the aisle to get
covers for the outlets and switches. Authenticity. Three switches, two outlets, covers for
each, and five boxes. By this time, my Uncle had moved back down the aisle, so I
gathered everything together and stood behind him in line. Still no recognition. I could
smell his coat, a mix of barley feed and engine oil. His hands were shaped like wrenches.
I watched him go through the line, pay cash for his products. He put the receipt in a bag,
then waited and turned around, stopping to talk in line with the Hutterite behind me. The
cashier ran up my total and I got out my checkbook. “No personal checks,” the cashier
said. It was a girl, perhaps a Mendenhall. I couldn’t place her.

“I think my mother has an account,” I said.

“What’s her name?”

My finger held a check over the plastic flap. I unclicked my pen and the cashier
finished bagging my outlets. I put the checkbook in my pocket, then made the mistake of looking left, behind me, to Hofen and the other Hutterite standing in line. Her name? I thought. What is her name? I gave the answer over the counter, grabbed the bag and fled.

At home, my mother looked through the bag. Saw the outlet covers, the switches.

“Some things I picked up at the Merc,” I said.

She held up a pink roller. “You going to do some painting?”

“I didn’t mean to buy them.”

“You didn’t mean to?”

I told her the story, Hofen standing at the checkout counter, jumping when he heard her name. I could see him through the window, his image blurred by the swinging door, the advertisements frosted into the glass. My mother laughed and laughed.

For a long time, I was in love with Mary. We were cousins, kissing cousins, and we went through great lengths to meet. We found ways for her to shirk domestic chores, to free up time to see each other on Saturdays when she came into town. One night, in the quonset, we planned to go bridge jumping. The next day Mary was supposed to be gathering chokecherries and saskatoons with the other girls from the colony, but a friend said that she would cover for her. When you were in the brush, it was easy to get away. Berry picking could take hours.

“I don’t have a suit,” she said.
“I’ll think of something.”

I found an old swimsuit of my sister’s, then a pair of shorts and a t-shirt. I met Mary at one of the irrigation canals a couple of kilometers down from the ridge spillway, not far from Wolf Creek. The bridge that crossed it was used by service vehicles and it was only accessible by an overgrown gravel road. Our old conversion van navigated the potholes and brome grasses that claimed the middle of the road, and I waited for Mary there, parked on the bridge, watching the skyline for her approach. I should have been able to see her for miles, her black dress contrasting with the prairie taupe. But she surprised me by appearing from under the bridge, sliding the van door open, and jumping inside.

“Turn on the air conditioning,” she said. “It’s so hot.”

I got in the driver’s seat and turned it on. Mary loved the tiny deprivations of Wolf Creek and always made it a point to let me know she was different from the more orthodox Elders. She was always surprising me, producing pirated cassette tapes of country singers and sometimes cigarettes. At the time, I took her caprice and daring as signs of good faith, of interest; the more I persisted in my affections, the more she showed me what she knew about the world. Now, I see that those same gestures may have revealed an insecurity, a twinge of inferiority or shame.

“I got some things for you,” I said. I hoped that the suit fit, though I had the t-shirt and shorts just in case. I wanted her to feel comfortable, to have fun.

“I’ll need help out of my dress.”

I hadn’t thought of that. “OK,” I said.
I turned on the radio. It was Johnny Cash. I helped her undo the buttons on the back of her dress, and she slowly unsheathed herself, like she was peeling off a layer of skin. She wore a cream cotton slip and there was a distinct tan line where the high cut of the dress met her neck.

“I’m glad that you brought the van,” she said. “For privacy.”

I hadn’t thought of that either. In fact, I had merely thought of the van as a vehicle for jumping off. Without it, the water was only three or four meters under the bridge; with the van you got a couple more.

“I brought one of Laura’s suits,” I said.

“Thanks.”

She turned towards me and reached for the suit. She brought it slowly to her chest and she smiled. I kissed her then, sweetly. She dropped the suit and kissed me back, lying down next to me. We stopped kissing and she laughed, then guided my hands to her breasts. But when I reached for her hand and fumbled with the knot on my shorts, she withdrew. “This is enough,” she said, taking my face in her hands.

Mary changed into her suit and put on the t-shirt. “So as not to attract attention,” she said. I put some towels on the hot van roof, then we climbed on top and jumped off—first together, waving hands and screaming—then separately, me diving. Mary still jumping straight, moving her arms in circles as she sliced through the air and into the water. We jumped and dove until we were both worn out. Mary stretched out on the roof of the van and I leaned over the bridge railing, casually throwing stones into the water and looking for carp. Then I noticed a Chevy barreling up the road, kicking up dust from
the gravel that spread out behind it like the tail of a comet.

“Mary,” I said.

She looked up and squeaked, then jumped right off the roof and into the water. She splashed around to the side and waited there. I leaned over and she waved at me. “Go, go,” she said. But throw me my clothes!” I found her dress, her practical shoes and underwear and threw them down to her. I watched long enough to see her black polka-dotted kerchief land in the water and see Mary wading out to it. I ducked into the van, started it up, and left in the direction opposite of the approaching truck. I knew most likely who it was behind me, but I left Mary there anyway, in my cowardice.

A week later, I received a letter in the mail from Elias Hofen-vetter himself, forbidding me to come near the colony, much less see his daughter.

Saturday night, I searched downstairs for my old childhood trunk. It was in the cold storage room, next to a bag of wheat. I dragged it along the cement, lifted it over the doorjamb and took it into the family room. The box was disorganized but comprehensive, a collage of my life. I didn’t know what I was looking for. I read old journals from grade 2, looked at class pictures and old report cards. There were Christmas ornaments made out of clay, a story I wrote about a werewolf, letters I received from old girlfriends. I read each piece of my history as though they were artifacts and I was trying to piece myself together. “Eric is an alert and sensitive child,” one teacher wrote. Another said, “He draws inappropriate pictures.” At one point, my mother came down and told me that she was going to sleep. I told her that I would see
her tomorrow. I looked at my watch. It was past midnight. I took off my watch and threw it on the couch.

The pile enthralled me.

I found several high school mementos: pictures of graduation, a gold rope for academic excellence, petrified shells from a choir trip to Vancouver, and a box containing old toenails that fell off after a skiing accident. Then I found two scribblers full of poems that I wrote while I was in love with Mary. The cover was missing from one and the pages were curled and water damaged. I had kept the poems to myself, hid the notebooks so that no one would know that I had written them. Strange. The measures I took to ensure their secrecy eclipsed those that I had taken to keep in contact with Mary. I didn’t know why. Perhaps it was because age had made me aware of the taboo of two cousins in love.

Underneath the poems were clothes and a mop with an attached comb headpiece. For a Nicklus, my Halloween character of choice for years. Simple, scary. Not sure it was a man or a woman, the eyes blacked out with charcoal. I put the wig on. The corded wig drooped down over my eyes. I reclined on the couch and fell asleep.

I woke up in the afternoon alone. There was a note on the couch that read “Out to help Gloria with her chickens.” That was my mother. Even when people came to visit, she couldn’t stop working. I got up and went into the bathroom. My eyes were red from sleeping in my contacts and my face was streaked with lines from where I had slept on the corded wig. Pathetic. I had less than a day left to see my uncle, and here I was,
hiding. I resolved to go to Wolf Creek that night.

I went to the colony in my mother’s Honda. I had been drinking. I was still in the cord wig but had added the getup that I found in my trunk downstairs and blackened my eyes with charcoal. I was a Nicklus, ready to hit the colony and raise hell. On the road, I didn’t like how my mother’s car was handling. Was it that I was drinking, plowing my way through the new gravel, artificially trying to drum up the courage to meet my uncle dead on? Or had I just been away for so long, that I had forgotten how to negotiate the shifting surface? Each corner I took almost sent me fishtailing, the new gravel spitting off to the side. I was overadjusting. I forgot that driving on gravel was like driving on ice. Just let the car go where it wants. Don’t jerk the wheel, decelerate by downshifting, don’t use the brake.

I saw Wolf Creek’s lights near the bottom of a hill. There were more quonsets, more outbuildings and residences, all with the same white clapboard siding, and all devoid of any exterior decor. Something about the place always made me feel guilty. I signified worldliness. Since moving to the city, I had an acute understanding of economics. In the colony, everything was literally black and white. The clothes they wore were black, the buildings white. The only color permitted was on the women’s dresses, but never in the church except for weddings. An outsider like myself was marked. There were watches, jewelry, icons on your clothes, your vehicle. Even driving in a car, to them, was worldly. It wasn’t a truck or a van, something that they could use for the colony. Even the lower middle classes, which made up most of Ridgeview, were
I had written an article once in *The Globe and Mail* entitled “The Paradise of the Prairies,” describing the simple rural life and communal living of the Hutterites. In it, I praised the Hutterites’ division of labor, their industriousness, their harmonious living. I summarized their history, their migration to the US and the martyrdom of two conscientious objectors who were drafted into the US army during WWI and beaten to death by their fellow soldiers—an event that prompted the Hutterites’ immigration into Canada. I glossed over the usual contentions of their being wealthy landowners who put rural farmers out of business. I called the colonies “pearls of Canadian multiculturalism,” a “vibrant patch in the fabric of Canadian identity.” I’m not sure why I chose such a rosy slant, but the feedback that I received was tremendous. “Excellent,” my editor had told me, “just the kind of cross-cultural understanding we need.” But now, sitting in my ditched car, idling about fifty meters from Wolf Creek, I felt like a jackass.

You see, I was more than a little drunk. It was Sunday night, almost midnight. Wolf Creek had long finished its religious services and the children had said their prayers. Hofen was probably curled up next to my Martha-pasel in bed at the far end of the main longhouse. I was a Nicklus, the fearful Christmas imp with a mop of corded hair and charcoal for eyes, wearing a beggar’s garb, my pants split in the knees and seat, the heels of my boots worn down to the wood. I left the car where it had fishtailed into the ditch and walked the rest of the way to the Colony. There was no gate, just a grid of gravel roads in between white houses, lit up by occasional lights. When I passed the quonset near the entrance, exterior lights came on. I wandered to the nearest longhouse,
tried looking through the drawn shades. I knocked. The windows opened, a child peered out, screamed. More lights. I found an open door; no one locked them there, and I held the knob and waited for my dizziness to subside. A man came while I was pressed up against the pane and I turned my head, squishing my charcoal nose against the window. He was wearing his pajamas, a woolen one piece, and he pushed the door open. Was it my uncle? Elias Hofen-vetter? I felt the man’s thick hands on my collar. *I’m Nicklus,* I thought. *Aren’t you afraid?*

I wanted the man to be angry with me. To use the strap, like the German teacher. Ten whacks on my open palm. I wanted him to break tradition, get out the gun locked away in his attic, the one they used for gophers, and point it at me, force me staggering off their property.

More lights. People. A boy in a cap, girls in white nightgowns. Men shouldered their way through them, in front.

The man said something to them angrily in dialect. Then I heard a laugh. Another of the men responded. I pulled at the thick cords of my wig and it slid off my head. My head was slick with sweat, even in the winter cold. More laughter.

“A Nicklus, eh?” one of the men said to me. “Thought you’d scare us good?”

The man swung me onto his back like a sack of flour. I tried to tell him that I could walk. He shouldn’t bother. I heard the low rumbling sounds of the men talking. The crowd dispersed. People helped me through a door, turned on lights in an austere room. No carpet. A cot. I was placed on the bed, my worn boots removed. Then I was turned on my side and tucked in, like a baby.
I woke up the next day horribly hung over. I had missed my flight. Someone had removed my clothing and placed me in one-piece pajamas. The room was spare, without any wall hangings. The floor was tile and the bed I was sitting on nestled comfortably in a corner. The bed had no end posts, no decoration carved into the wood. Flat, straight, simple, and sturdy. I got up and walked to a small table and two chairs at the end of the room that were next to a large window. Outside children played a game on stilts. A boy, on the brink of adolescence, controlled it. He had that pre-puberty command of his body and the stilts functioned like extensions of his legs. The other children, girls in their winter dresses and boys in black jackets, tried to keep on their stilts, but failed. The one boy was king.

The door opened. “Thought you’d like some coffee. Wake you up.”

My uncle, Elias Hofen-vetter walked through the door balancing a tin tray carrying two glasses and a pot of coffee. I imagined it was rare for a Hutterite man to be serving, but I realized that I didn’t really know. Was it normal for him to be there taking coffee with me rather than in the communal mess hall with the other men? I wanted to ask him.

“Thanks,” I said.

Hofen Elias drew the other chair away from the table and bent with difficulty to sit down. He seemed remarkably old. His beard was gray and white and the hair on his head was thinning. He wasn’t wearing his hat. He crumpled his hands together in his lap, the fingers intertwined, caked with calluses.
“You gave us quite a scare last night,” he said. He didn’t say it accusingly, but I wondered at his sincerity. Too many years in journalism, trying to minimize biases with forced objective prose.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Quick to profane, quick to apologize,” Hofen said.

“I guess.”

“Still a young tauga nixer.” He laughed.

“A troublemaker?”

“That’s right.”

I’m not a coffee drinker and the coffee was lukewarm. I took gulps, one by one. I was conscious of the sound each gulp made, the opening and closing of my epiglottis, the liquid sliding down. Hofen nodded as I drank.

“Eric,” he said, “why are you here?”

I put the coffee mug on the table. “You sent me the article from The Herald. About Mary. I’m not sure that’s why I came or not. But here I am.” Outside the king-boy gathered up the stilts from each of the children. He and another boy carried them to a longhouse running parallel to the one we were in and stood them up in a diminishing drift of snow, held only by the shadows of the building that flanked it.

“They’re going to ruin the wood,” Hofen said. He shook his head.

“I’m sorry about Mary,” I said.

Uncle Hofen suddenly stood up and walked to the window.

It was the boys. I could see them, too. They picked out icy chunks from the
sliver of snow and flung them at a group of girls using slingshots made from old inner tubes and willow branches. Hofen abruptly opened the window and yelled across the field. They stopped immediately. The one who had been so proud on the stilts gathered up the four slingshots from each of the boys and gingerly walked to our window.

“That’s Marcus,” my uncle said. “The boys will follow him anywhere. Could lead them right off the colony if he wanted to.” The boy brought over the slingshots and Hofen closed the window, shutting out the early spring chill.

“Must be hard,” I said.

“Only when they don’t come back. The boys, you know, they go into town and get a job. Get a few dollars to spend in the world. Then they notice that people think they talk funny. They try to meet English girls and find they have nothing to say. That’s when they come home. Everyone welcomes them. Welcome even people like you.” He sat down and handed me one of the slingshots. They were finely made, sturdy and practical.

“What about Mary?” I asked. “Would you have welcomed her?”

Hofen smiled, a mixture of sadness and pity. “What do you think, young tauganixer? Of course I would have. She was my daughter.”

My uncle reached out for the slingshot that I was fiddling with and I started to cry. No real reason for it except being hung over and wanting forgiveness. I had done wrong. I wanted to rewrite this story, change the way that I had come here out of the darkness. But time had taken that option away. I had my life. I thought how, in a few hours, I would be waiting standby in the pre-flight lounge at the Calgary airport, then
flying east. There would be questions in the office: How was your weekend? Where did you go again? I’d catch up with the writers who covered for me and then I’d go to lunch with the Leisure editor to sample a new restaurant downtown. So different from me, the Nicklaus, crying over a wooden toy while my uncle watched me cautiously, wondering how the two of us came to be there at the same table, occupying the space with our sorrow.
She’s a darling, that one. I’ll call her “wart-blossom.” A rose by any other name, eh Chuck? It’s the same flower. Purple-throated hybrids. Kendra would like the purple. Purple, purple, purple, I love purple. Good ol’ Brenda, Glenda, Kendra. She hated it when I twisted her name for the sounds. “They’re not me,” she’d say. “I’m Kendra, your wife. Chuck . . .”

I’d needle her forever just to hear my name.

In the garden, I feel like I’m planting weeds. Dug up, the garden could grow plenty of alfalfa. A whole forage crop. Mow it, riding Thor, that’s my mower. Or it is now. Willed to me by my Uncle Parry with the cabin, the woods, the Canadian wilderness, all part of the package. Who would’ve guessed? The lucky recipient, a winning lottery number. A rookie hockey card picked up by Antique Road show. Oprah says there’s unclaimed money out there. Piles of cash, pieces of paper, deeds in your name. That’s the ticket, Chuck. Move out of Moon River so that the gigolo can move in. Kendra won’t have to lift a finger. The gigolo’s got money, religion. And Benny, Connor, and Allie, my magnificent kids. One of those traveling gigolos who’ll give them presents. Origami dollar bills, Pennants for Connor. Plenty of plush.

Gardening can be art.

I once had an English teacher who wrote a sonnet every day. Italian, Petrarchan, Shakespearean, and then some combinations to keep himself from getting bored. He never read them to us. Just told us about them. Wanted to preserve the memory of his
sonnet-writing more than the sonnets, so when the biographers showed up forty years later, they would talk to his students, his friends who knew him, then search his home for the thousands of sonnets and publish them posthumously. People would read them and find them meaningful, because, of course, he was a professor of English, and, of course, he died.

That’s how I like to think of my gardening.

My cabin sits in a dimple between two foothills surrounded by evergreens. There is a lawn. It’s been over a week since I got here, hauled my bare essentials in a trailer. That was a trip, Chuck. Never knew how far I’d pull off to the side of the road. In the ditch and out again, like the Dukes of Hazard. There’s a story there. Heading down a hill like a grizzly’s bearing down. That’s the right verb, isn’t it? Bearing kids. Bearing down, more than I can bear.

The flowerbed is a bean-shaped swimming pool. Two pitcher’s mounds connected by mulch. A cell in the middle of meiosis. Five potted rose bushes at the center of each mound and I’m good to go. More hybrids. Purple and white and red all over.

Chuck, the phone is ringing. Chuck, go get it. It’s your wife, Chuck. It has to be your wife. Damn it, I can’t make out the words. At the end, it beeps.

The Parry Cabin is an encroachment. I’ve seen it with the forest pushed back, kids rushing unhinged from its doors. Plastic table cloths on picnic tables, a porch full of people. From the driveway, it was like a bourgeois sigh. And now. Well, things grow. Uncle Parry planted a Douglas Fir that obscures the sun. Inside, dishes pile up. My
dishes, Chuck’s dishes. Piled up after a week of precious solitude. Who’s idea was it to move out here anyway? It was mine, Chuck, all mine. You are here for good.

I play the message.

“Chuck, dear, Chuck, are you there?”

I’m here honey. I’m always here.

“Pick up if you’re there. Benny’s gone. He took the car. Have you seen him Chuck? He didn’t come home, Chuck.”

I go back to my gardening, and I bring out the cordless and put it in my mailbox. I pretend that the phone can hear me. Hello, phone. My alter ego. What do you say to a round of cards? Gardening’s getting dull and my hands aren’t used to the shape of a hoe. Hands full of blisters. What do you say? You’ve got some poker face. That’s an advantage, phone. I’ll never know what hit me. I plunge my trowel into a wheelbarrow full of dung.

Now that I’m a local, Waterton feels like a movie set. I go to Zum Burger Haus, a restaurant bar that serves burgers on Kaiser buns and has Heineken on tap. Tables made from hewn logs, the tops cross-sections from trees the size of Sequoias. Main Street is all t-shirts, waffle cones, and hiking boots. I find myself turning the corner, past the theater, to the one hardware store in town. A monopoly. In the mountains, you can do that. Inside, I pretend to look at hoses. They have three kinds, one with a ten-year warranty. I like the idea of warranties.

The shopkeeper is a man my age with a mustache like a dead hamster. God, that’s
ugly, Chuck. Tawny, grey, and white and it’s covering a harelip. He’s got one hand on
his utility belt. Only thing I can see on it is a tape measure. I notice that he’s missing his
left index finger. Just a small stump at the knuckle. What the hell, I think.

“Do you got any fencing?” I ask. Extend my left hand straight out. “I’m
Chuck.” Guy looks at my hand like it’s got a disease. I’m sick of talking around people,
and truth is, I want to know, so I say, “What happened to your hand?”

“Grain auger,” he says. As if augers explain everything.

“Hell of a stump,” I say. “I’d put some ice on that.”

“I think you’d better leave,” he says.

Damn it, Chuck, you’re a dick head. Two days of seclusion and look where it
gets me. I take the hose up to the cash register. Stumpy takes his time, doesn’t talk. I
wonder if many tourists come in here.

The grass is always greener, my mother always said. The phone is still in the
mailbox when I drive up and unload the hose. I don’t even need a hose. Good move,
Chuck. I wonder if this is how people go crazy. That’s why I second guess myself when
the phone rings. Twice in one day. Since I’ve been here, that’s a record. I pick up this
time, shoulder the hose.

“Chuck, did you get my message? Benny’s gone. Did he phone you?”

“No.”

“We have the police looking for him.”

“The Mounties.”
“They think he might be heading to see you.”

Of course he’s heading to see me. Mr. Gigolo is a weenie.

“That would be nice,” I say.

Kendra says, “This is serious, Chuck. We’re all very worried over here. He needs stability. If he contacts you, tell him that. Tell him we want to take care of him.”

“I’ve been doing some gardening, Kendra. You’d like it here.”

“I’m sure I would. You take it easy, Chuck. Remember what I said.”

I don’t hang up the phone. Chuck isn’t ready to stop talking. There is something reasonable about Kendra’s voice that I like. It sounds better than mine. I can hear what I say like an echo in the receiver. Different from the voice I talk to myself in. I don’t hang up. I wait. I’m plugging the pause for drama.

“Kendra,” I say. “I did something wrong, didn’t I?”

“That’s not something I want to talk about, Chuck. You want to place blame. I’m not going to let you.”

“You should really come out here. Bring the kids. We’ll have a barbecue.”

“I have the barbecue, Chuck.”

“Ever seen a rose with a purple throat?”

“Hang up the phone, Chuck.”

Impulse tells me the phone is a dud. It’s time to burn the thing, and I’m not talking displaced rage. How can a phone say words like that? Take it easy, Chuck. It’s a phone, a phone. E.T. phone home. I decide to plant it. Cover the cordless with soil and mulch. And this is what I’m doing when Benny drives up and honks. Cheeky kid.
Slow motion here. This is how I picture it: Benny pulls the car into the driveway, opens the door and there’s a close up on his boots, a pair of steel-toed Caterpillars. He steps out of the car and looks lovingly on his biological mess of a father who is crouched over a flowerbed planting a cordless phone deep into the earth. Their gazes lock; the son knows instantly the pain, the anguish, the loss, the hurt, the duress, the longing, the loneliness, the depravity, the self-loathing his father has been experiencing. He strides toward his father leaning forward with his hands lightly outstretched. There is an embrace and one or either or both of them are crying, sobbing wet globs of snot into each other’s shoulders. They’re shuddering, shaking, sharing the moment like emotional lunkheads, and they walk into the house arm in arm. Chuck, this is a flourish and you know it.

“Hey, Dad,” Benny says. “Could I use your phone?”

Benny looks the same as when I saw him last week. I even think they’re the same clothes. I walk around and around him while he makes the call back to Kendra. The phone smells like earthworms and I’m glad that I didn’t mangle it. “I wasn’t going to let you just let him abandon himself out here,” he says. I only get snippets of the conversation. He tells her outright that he’s trying to convince me to move back to the city. So conscientious. He’s a keeper, Chuck. At least there are some things I haven’t fucked up.

“I’m not going back,” I say when he gets off the phone.

“What are you doing out here, Dad? There’s nothing here. It’s in the middle of
the woods. In the winter you won’t even be able to hike here.”

“Why did you run away? You know we’ve been worried. Your mom has been worried. You know that, don’t you?”

“Sure, Dad, sure. Just take it easy, don’t get all whacked out.”

Benny puts the phone on the hook, picks up his duffel bag and takes it into the bedroom across from mine. He kicks a mound of laundry from the hallway into my room. Chuck, this house is a mess. I wander around the cabin, running my hands through my hair. I do this when I don’t know what else to do. Now what? Chuck, there are things.

I phone Kendra when Benny is in the shower. The gigolo is there I can tell, huffing in the background. She’s told me that the gigolo is moral, dependable. Predictable, I translate.

“I’m not coming back to town,” I say.

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“You can call off the posse, now. The Mounties. Tell your gigolo he can stop pretending he’s worried.”

“He’s not a gigolo.”

“Benny came to see me,” I say.

“He’s not staying out there. If he doesn’t leave by tomorrow, I promise that you’ll never see him again.”
Outside, I hook up the hose to the back spout, and pull it around the side of the cabin before I spot a bear in our front yard. A black bear, full grown, with its paws in my roses, digging like a dog planting a bone. No time to get crazy. I don’t want to scare it off. I lay down the hose and walk to the front porch with my hands in my pockets, slow. I have only seen a bear once before, after a ribbon of SUVs and station wagons on the road down from Redrock Canyon. It was up on a hill, lumbering through the spines of bear grass, crossing a clearing. Five cars on the shoulder, cameras and camcorders out the window. At one point, the bear stopped and sat on its haunches like a squirrel rotating a nut, watching the tourists in a row.

But this is the first time, close.

The bear sniffs, its brownish muzzle moving in an arc, leading it up facing me, then down, and away. I watch the black bulge of its haunches as it skirts the driveway, then heads into the trees. I listen.

“Dad?”

Benny will believe me, about the bear. I tell him when we park the truck near a wedge-shaped church just off Main Street.

“When you were in the shower,” I say. “Just before you came out.”

“There wasn’t anything there, Dad. You’re delusional. Why don’t we just pack our stuff tonight?”

“We’re celebrating. First night out with your dad.”

Benny doesn’t know this, but it is my goal to get him pissed drunk. He’s sixteen,
but looks twenty. With me he’ll look even older. Chuck and upchuck. We get off Main Street and head to a local bar called the Thirsty Bear. No tourists.

I’ve seen this bar before it was a bar. They called it the Armory, but it was basically just a big warehouse with a stage for shows on the weekends. The stage is still there, but the permanent tables and chairs, the rustic, rocky mountain décor fill it up, make it look stuffy. It’s still early and we take a table over near the bar.

Before Benny can say anything, I’ve ordered us two Molsons.

There’s a band doing a Crash Test Dummies cover, a sped-up “Superman.” Now there’s a song you can’t forget. It’ll stick, Chuck, forever. I sing along, “‘the world will never see another man, like him.’ Benny, you’re not drinking?”

“You know I’m a minor.”

“Drink up, Bud,” I say.

I fiddle around with my Molson. Somebody’s going to have to drive us home, and it’s not going to be me. Hell with it. I take Benny’s drink and order him a Root Beer. This is when the hardware guy walks in, four-fingered hand behind a dumpy-looking blonde. He sits at the bar with his girl.

“Benny,” I say, “how would you like to make fifty bucks?”

“I’m not going to drink, Dad.”

“All you have to do is say something to a friend of mine.”

“Why?”

“You see that guy over there? Just go up to him. Ask him if he isn’t ‘Stumpy’ who owns the hardware store. But you have to say ‘Stumpy’ or it’s a no-go.”
“I don’t think so, Dad.”

“He’s a friend of mine,” I say. “It’s a joke between us.”

“Why the fifty bucks, then? What’s the joke?”

Benny isn’t budging and I’m not sure that I want him to. Some test of faith for the little bugger. But it doesn’t matter because now Stumpy is looking my way. He’s coming over.

“I don’t think you should be here,” he says.

I push back from the table a bit and hold my hands like I’m in a stickup. “I’m just having a drink here with my boy.”

“This is a local bar,” he says. “I’ll give you a bit of time to get your stuff and go.”

The guy walks away.

“I am a local,” I say. Only Benny can hear.

“I thought he was your friend,” he says. I stay for a few minutes out of pure meanness. Truth is, I feel pathetic. I am “the ugly” in the good and the bad. And Benny keeps nagging for us to go home, to head back to the cabin. We leave the bar and go to Zum’s.

Zum’s isn’t far from The Thirsty Bear, but it’s frequented entirely by tourists. People from all over Europe, some Asians. Not hardly one damn Canadian. We stay for a while and I try to get Benny to pick up a couple girls from Montana. They wear long pants and new ropers. I can’t tell how old they are, but they’re between Benny’s and my ages, so I figure that levels the playing field. But Benny’s not interested and the girls aren’t buying. This makes me feel very old.
When we get back into my Chevy, I see Stumpy and his girl. They are on their way to a truck the size of a house. Monster wheels. A regular show-stopper, Chuck. Benny sees me watching them and I tell him to drive by. “Drive by,” I say. He drives by. Good kid. It’s a show-down, so I roll down my window. “Hey, Stumpy,” I say. That’s enough to get him chasing us.

This is where I’m trying to finish. The way my life has been going, what Chuck wants, Chuck gets. And there’s no reason for him not to—not here. A violent ending, a drunken ending. Say, a truck chase. Benny at the wheel, winding through the foothills, Waterton behind them, a scattershot of light. They’re listening to music and trying to outrun a Tonka truck with mammoth-sized wheels. There will be a gun, a bear, a crash, tires spinning in new gravel, a drive in the ditch, then up a ravine and through the front doors of the Parry Cabin. That’s high drama, Chuck, the clincher. Maybe it should end in death? I remember my mother’s funeral two years ago. Kendra says I could still be reeling from it. She used a persuasive metaphor I can never forget. It wasn’t ripples in the water or the domino effect. She said some things happen to you like getting sprayed by a skunk. You can bathe in tomato juice all you want and you’ll still smell like shit. Kendra didn’t mince words. Death, it could be. Like Mom. When she died, she couldn’t physically control what went in or out of her body, but she still had her mind. Catheters everywhere. Most people would get depressed by this. Maybe she was, but she didn’t show it. The nurse would remove one bag of liquid feeding into her bloodstream, hook up another and my mother’d say, “Looks like it’s time for dinner.”
But during the chase, I see that Benny wants it some other way. Benny looks in the rear view mirror and wiggles the wheel back and forth. There’s a fair amount of play in there. His eyes focus on the two beads of light behind us. He’s pleading, wondering what went wrong. He wants to pull over, let the monster truck fly by. Benny’s drunk father will acquiesce, apologize. He’ll tell Benny jokes. Like the one about the man who laughed his head off. That’s a good one, Chuck. Hah hah hah, thump thump thump.

What’s that sound? A man laughing his head off. “You’re such a moron,” he’ll say and then laugh with his dad. Benny wants Yogi and Booboo stories in the dark, barbecues with his father wearing a white mushroom hat. He wants dates and nostalgia. Benny remembers his father siphoning gas from one car to the next, because one had broken down and the other was empty, just so Benny wouldn’t miss a date with Candice. He smells Chuck’s gasoline breath. He sees the marks the hose made around his mouth.

Suck it up, Chuck. Suck it up.

A wink or a nudge could do it, Chuck. A flourish—a tap on the brakes to stop the truck, to stop the words from bearing down.


