

The Big Show

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ABSTRACT

The chase is on.

The Big Show with Tommy Le Van. Tommy is on the run. From his parents. Crazy babies. An over-excited Lamaze coach. A man on stilts. A nearly retired game show host. Police. Talking storks. A mover with a panty fetish. A bus driver named The Tip. And while they're all chasing him, he's running after his ex-girlfriend, trying to get her back in the hopes that everyone else will go away.

Around and around they go. And if Tommy stops he won't be able to say no. If he stops moving he'll have to settle down. Get a real job. Buy a house. Get a bank loan to pay off renovations on a deck. Have a kid, raise it, and watch the whole process begin again.

The cast of characters wants to make sure this happens. Tommy's a disruption to their ordered lives. He has to be assimilated back into the system before anyone else begins to question their role. They must get Tommy.

So Tommy has to keep moving. He stumbles through conversations. Falls on his face. Gets lost. But still he keeps moving. Stuck in a surrealist world that is a modern day city, however chalk full of over-the-top citizens.

The chase is on.

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The baby shot out of the darkness on the hoods of two prams. He kept his balance by clutching the middle of a yellow bunny print cotton blanket that was wound tight and tied to the handle bars of each of the prams. The baby took a clear pacifier out of his mouth, lifted it into the air, then pointed the nipple end at Tommy and wailed. Tommy Le Van, dressed in boxer shorts and a t-shirt, turned and ran, confused by what was happening, but aware that, if he didn't move, there would be a collision. He zigzagged, he stopped and made a sudden turn left, he tried running beside the prams, tried even running into the darkness that was all around him, but the baby and the circle of light he found him under, anticipated and followed his every move. Tommy felt the handle bars pressing at his back. Pushing him.

Over the side of a mountain. Surrounded by a cloudless blue sky, and full light, Tommy fell feet first past the rock face. He stretched his arms out, unsuccessfully, trying to grasp a lone tree branch that jutted from the rock's surface. Then the mountain disappeared, falling away, breaking into rocks, then stones, then sand, then reduced even further into microscopic particles. Tommy looked down, expecting to see the bits of mountain drift to the fast approaching ground, but the mountain was simply gone. Even more disconcerting, there was no ground heading toward Tommy.

The wind surrounded him. It ripped his ears. Punched his flapping arms and legs. Made it impossible for him to breath or to scream. Above him, the baby was meticulously untying an end of the blanket from one pram. With this done, the baby moved, like a construction worker dancing on a metal beam a few hundred feet above the city streets, to the other pram, the loosened blanket corner in his hand. The freed pram fell away like a booster from the side of a rocket ship heading into space. It folded in on

itself, the hood, axle, and wheels packing themselves into the frame, while the handle of the pram did three hundred and sixty degree revolutions around it, shortening itself with each turn, until all that was left of the handle and the frame was a small square that continued to get smaller.

Tommy caught sight of the other pram begin its disappearance. The baby drifted by, using the blanket as a parachute. Once the baby was gone, Tommy thought, he would be completely alone. Surrounded by complete emptiness.

He didn't have time to be scared. A pack of storks appeared out of nowhere, flying toward Tommy and the baby. The storks all wore black postman caps on their heads, and as the baby landed on the middle of one of them, it politely tipped its hats with its leg.

A pair of the storks picked up Tommy, each holding one of his hands with one of their wings. One of them bent its face close to him.

Stork 1 (*hiccupping*): "Alright sonny. We'll get ya home in no time."

Tommy: "What do you mean home?"

The other stork spoke this time, taking a swig from something in a brown paper bag before it did.

Stork 2: "Look, see under yer feet."

Tommy looked down. The space underneath him was no longer empty. The storks were flying him toward a giant red brick chimney that appeared attached to nothing.

Stork 1 (*to Stork 2*): "Which chimney is it?"

Tommy: "What do you mean? There's only one."

Stork 1: "So there is."

Stork 2: "Yes indeed. That was a close one."

Stork 1: "Indubitably."

Stork 2 (*passing the bottle*): "Reminds me of the time--"

Stork 1 (*taking the bottle*): "Oh, how could I forget."

Stork 2: "I hadn't said which time."

Stork 1: "You didn't need to."

Stork 2: "Oh, I see. Quite right, old man. Quite right. I'm sure this one will end up where he's supposed to."

They let go of Tommy. He fell into the chimney feet first, screaming. Rather than travelling straight down though, he dropped onto a slide which twisted in sharp turns for a minute before straightening out into one long stretch. There were tiny bumps on the slide that slowed Tommy down. He didn't know where he was going to end up, so it was with some surprise that he found himself slowly slipping through a hole in the wall of his and his girlfriend, Trudy Lane's, bedroom and into bed beside her. The hole closed behind him.

Lying in bed, in the dark, Tommy stared up at the ceiling. He was fine. He'd had a dream. He felt for sweat on his body. There wasn't any.

Tommy checked to see if Trudy was still lying beside him. He touched her and she swatted his hand away. He was relieved to see nothing had changed between them. He should really speak to her. Apologize for falling asleep in the middle of an argument.

Why was he letting her silence paralyse him? He needed to say something. But he had to say the right something. He needed to convince this time, not stutter, not

apologize. Say this is how it is, this is what's missing. Really use his index finger to accentuate his points.

He cleared his throat. Okay, say something now. Say something that'll change everything. He cleared his throat again. Come on. He knew what to say. He'd anticipated this argument. Countless times he'd quietly debated the many possible outcomes. If Trudy -- who lay in bed beside him -- were talking, she'd tell him what to change. She'd mark her points off on her fingers. She'd be rational. Coherent. Loud. Now it was his turn.

He had nothing. No, wait.

Tommy: "I just had the weirdest dream."

She didn't reply.

Tommy: "Trudy?"

Trudy: "I'm sorry, Trudy's not here right now."

This wasn't how tonight was supposed to go. Tonight was supposed to be like any other night. They'd come home from work. They'd make dinner together. They'd watch television. If the moon and stars aligned correctly, they'd have sex. He shouldn't have been getting into bed wearing boxer shorts and an undershirt, while she wore her white hooded sweatshirt, red t-shirt, striped blue jeans, and dark blue running shoes.

Tommy stepped carefully out of bed. He left the room. He walked down the hall, dragging his fingertips over the walls on either side of him. Feeling the solid paint streaks, the unsanded bumps, the many indents, that all added up to the imperfect walls. It felt good to touch something familiar.

He went into the washroom, shut the door, and sat on the toilet seat. He needed to

calm down. To breathe, to inhale through the nose, exhale through the mouth. What he wanted to do, what would have been such a relief, was to jerk off. This is how he'd coped all his life. He'd find himself in public washrooms, in his parents' den while they were out (often when they were in), and locked in his own bathroom, feverishly pulling on his cock. Thinking of Trudy's ass in one of the tight skirts that she wore to work. Or that woman he walked past on the street, her hair in pigtails, a necklace sucked between her lips. All the endless faces and bodies and positions that he could be a part of. Right now, to try jerking off, to fail to get hard, this was an embarrassment that, piled on all his others, he didn't need.

He stood up. Get with it. Wake up.

He washed his hands in the sink. Rubbed his fingers over his eyes. He leaned close to the mirror hoping to see some details of himself in there. Nothing though, just this night figure bobbing his head from side to side, imitating (mocking) Tommy. Really what was Tommy missing by not seeing his reflection? Was it the bald spot that he was trying to hide by shaving his head? His 28 year old traitor skin that, once a week, raised a new pimple on his cheeks or chin? Or could it be his darting eyes, which never knew what spot was the safest to focus on without escalating an argument further? Face it, at this very moment he was just another in the line of Le Vans who started somewhere, and ended up somewhere else. In his family's case that was Verdun, Quebec, and then Toronto. As his father, Milt said: "Don't ask where we actually started from. All I know is we're here now."

So deal with where you are, Tommy. Wait. Stop. He'd been in the washroom for hours. And Trudy was lying in bed thinking what? Maybe that he'd abandoned her?

No, that in the middle of a fight he'd gone to the washroom to take a shit? Worse, after falling asleep. He quickly got up and out of there.

As he hurried into the bedroom he tripped through a stack of hard plastic babies. He fell sideways onto the edge of the mattress, and bounced backward, stumbling and waving his hands frantically to regain his footing.

Tommy: "I'm okay."

Wishing that he wasn't. Wishing that he'd actually hurt himself. A broken arm, a bone jutting through his skin, some injury to divert the attention, change the tempo, the mood...the subject of their fight.

Trudy didn't reply.

He got into bed.

Tommy (*whispering*): "Are you asleep?" Hoping, not believing, that this might be true.

The silence made his ears itch. For a while he stared at the framed poster on the wall across from him. An Anne Geddes picture of three smiling potted flower babies that Trudy liked.

Tommy (*taking his time*): "Please say something."

She didn't reply.

Tommy: "Look, if you'd see it from my perspective--"

He let the sentence dangle. What point had he been trying to make?

Tommy: "You're really not being very helpful."

Still nothing from her.

Tommy: "I wouldn't behave like this."

Trudy: "Oh for god's sake."

She got out of bed.

Tommy: "What're you doing?"

Trudy: "I'm leaving."

He stood up.

Tommy: "Wait. We can work this out."

But before he could stop her the walls of their apartment fell away.

Everything went dark. The street lights went out. Tommy stood alone in the dark. Male Voice: "Strike set."

Four small beams of light went on. They bounced around the apartment, indiscriminately showing the kitchen counters, the toilet, the fridge. Tommy was surprised to see the fridge from his bed. There used to be a wall blocking it from sight.

There were noises. Clanging and rolling. Sounded like wheels. Multiple wheels. They seemed somehow to be connected to the lights. And where did the voices come from?

Tommy briefly glimpsed Trudy by the light from the hall, which illuminated the apartment when she left.

As the door closed he saw men, three of them, running around pushing shopping carts in front of them, the fourth, a small man, stood on the kitchen counter, using his light...a flashlight...as a pointer picking out items he liked. They were being burgled. Two flashlights went out.

Two of the men took opposite corners of the bed, at the end where Tommy normally lay his head, and began lifting up the mattress and box spring. Tommy fell

forward to the opposite end of the mattress. He grabbed the end that was being lifted, but one of the men smacked at his hand. Surprised and injured, Tommy imagined he could manage a co-ordinated and safe roll out of the bed on to the floor landing on the duvet he pushed in front of him. Instead he fell face first onto concrete, the duvet flopping uselessly at his side. He reached for the bed behind him but it was gone. He pulled the duvet around him for safety but one of the men started tugging at it. Tommy tugged back. The man tugged harder. Tommy reinforced his tug: his fingers tightened around it, his arms strained, his face reddened. The duvet was half wrapped around his body, and with one mighty pull was snatched from him, causing him to spin in circles.

The other flashlights went out.

A spotlight came up mere steps from Tommy. A man stepped under it. He was older, in his forties, short blondish-red hair, wearing a plaid button-up shirt and blue jeans. His most distinct feature was his nose, which looked as if it'd been repeatedly broken and never set properly. More likely, at one time, the nose had been set right, say the first time, maybe the second, but as he walked through life with a swagger, his cockiness had incited much annoyance in the strangers he passed, who all believed no one should carry that much confidence, and hoped with one wallop to the face, often dead-centre in the nose, that they could eliminate his edge; unfortunately for them, their unprovoked reactions only solidified in him his belief of his importance in the world.

As he walked aimlessly, the light followed him. He looked at Tommy. When the man spoke, Tommy realized the man wasn't the one who called to strike set.

Man: "It used to be one might hope to make a mark on history...it's far more likely history will leave at least a mark on you."

Tommy: "How's that supposed to help me?"

The man shook his head, disappointed, and stepped out of the light.

Another spotlight appeared, under which another man, this one dressed in a blue velvet suit, ran his hand through his short coarse salt and pepper hair. He looked at Tommy and smiled. A perfect-teeth, inviting smile. He put the index finger of his right hand to his lips, held it there for a second. He squinted, contemplating, then threw his finger toward the darkness. As the sound of applause began, the spotlight panned over twenty people sitting on lawn chairs, the first half set up on the floor, the rest on risers. The light lingered over Tommy's eighty-one year old neighbour, Ms. Gruener, who shook her cane in the air as she cheered.

Tommy wiped his sweaty hands on his face and through his hair.

The man let the noise continue. He bent over and brushed at his pant leg, as if affecting absentmindedness. Then he looked up, tapped his finger against his lip. There was silence again. The man solemnly addressed the audience.

Man: "Ladies and Gentlemen this is Rupert Rezen speaking. Tell me...what can we expect?"

A neon sign flashed on above Tommy's head.

Audience (*enthusiastic*): "Anything."

The sign went out.

Rupert (*cupping his ear*): "Sorry, I didn't catch that? What can we expect?"

No Sign needed.

Audience (*screaming shrilly*): "Anything."

Rupert: "That's right. Expect *anything*. Because who knows -- one minute you

think you've got the rest of your life thought out, the next moment, you're in a ditch crying for your mother. Your poor, tireless, mother. The woman who spent her whole adult life caring for you. Crying for you. Sweating for you. But most importantly, worrying for you. Let's give it up for mothers!"

An enthusiastic response.

Rupert: "Now, if there's anyone out there with heart problems, anyone who considers themselves to be the faint at heart, those amongst us who wish to remain chaste, I implore you, close your eyes. Because I present to you, the luscious, beautiful, spell binding, Jacqueline O'Rourke."

Rupert threw his arm out toward the darkness, and another spotlight went up. Underneath stood Jacqueline, in a red sequin dress. She kissed her fingertips and blew kisses out to the audience. She stretched her arm out, causing the slit in her dress to part, revealing one of her knee-high black boots fitted snugly below a naked thigh. More cheers. She bowed, showed cleavage. Tilted her head up, winked at Tommy.

Jacqueline moved gracefully, her long legs taking her to him in a second. She ran one of her hands through his hair, tilted his head back and kissed his lips, parting them with her own. She pulled her mouth away, looked into his eyes.

Jacqueline: "You like what you see, sailor?"

In spite of all the confusion, Tommy had an erection. He swallowed loudly. Looked into her eyes.

Tommy: "Yes. You're...pretty."

Jacqueline: "You're having indelicate thoughts about me aren't you?"

Tommy: "Yes."

Jacqueline: “You’ll have more when you go to sleep tonight.”

Tommy: “Okay.”

He could have pushed her away. He should have. Christ, Trudy had just walked out the door not five minutes ago. Sure, that door was gone, fallen away with the walls, but that was no reason to say, to hell with the door, to hell with Trudy. That wasn’t the way to solve the problem. This woman’s lips, though, they tasted like strawberries. Not like Trudy’s. Not like mouthwash and mint tooth paste.

Tommy: “I didn’t catch your name?”

Jacqueline let go of his head and he fell to the ground. He tried to peer under her dress as she stepped over him (he couldn’t resist). Her boot heel lightly pressed into his cheek. A small warning, he thought, not to push his luck. She helped him up. The circle of light was still on him. Jacqueline was standing beside Tommy, her hands stretched outward, displaying him. Rupert came toward Tommy on the other side.

Rupert: “How you doing, lad?”

Tommy: “I’m bewildered.”

Rupert (*laughing*): “That’s great. Bring the lights up a bit. Let’s give him a taste of our lovely, no, excuse me, *his* lovely audience. Ladies and Gentlemen, TOMMY LE VAN.”

Tommy could see the audience now. Not individual characteristics, but a sea of people bent forward, staring at him, their hands all neatly folded in their laps. His eyes must have been playing tricks on him. They laughed. They pointed at him. He looked at his boxer shorts, the head of his penis peeking out of the slit. He tucked it back inside, held it there.

Tommy: "Hey, come on."

Rupert: "Yes, I agree. Come on folks. Don't make him feel bad for being a full-blooded male. Nothing wrong with that. Eh, Jackie?"

Jacqueline: "No Rupe, there isn't."

Rupert: "That's right...and folks, I should know. I've had two wives. I've also had my share of casual relationships over the years. Some turned out not to be as casual as I thought. Know what I mean, Tommy?"

Tommy: "Does this have to do with Trudy?"

Rupert: "Whoa, son, I wasn't implying that."

Tommy: "Where'd she go?"

Rupert: "Joe, we have any word on Trudy's whereabouts at this time?"

Joe: "She left."

Another -- was that Ms. Gruener? -- yelled.

Ms. Gruener: "Yeah, she can do better."

There was a second voice, this one Tommy knew for sure. It was his father Milt.

Milt: "Tommy, go after her. If you don't act, you could lose that beautiful girl.

And then where will we be?"

Tommy shielded the spotlight from his eyes, scanning the audience.

Tommy: "Where are you?"

The spotlight shot to Milt. He stood up and waved to Tommy.

Milt: "I'm right here."

Rupert (*laughing nervously*): "Joe, we're losing control up here."

Joe: "Yeah, okay. Bring up the lights. That's it. Show's over."

The lights went up. Five feet tall, Joe Brody, came bounding toward Tommy. He moved one, two, one, two, his little legs marching quickly, his arms, hands fisted, swinging at his sides. He reached Tommy, looked up at him, scrunched his face up, stuck out his lips.

Joe: "What's the problem?"

Tommy (*taking a step back*): "I wanted to know about Trudy."

Joe: "You're better off."

Tommy: "What'd you say?"

Joe: "Come on, man. Be happy. She didn't die in your arms. Let her go."

Tommy: "But I don't want to let her go."

Joe: "Why not? She's no good for you. Learn to be self-sufficient. Learn to--"

Tommy: "Stop giving advice, you're terrible at it. Fine, you don't want to tell me about Trudy, then at least tell me what happened to my apartment? Did you have anything to do with that crazy dream I had?"

Joe: "Yeah, wasn't it great."

Tommy (*ignoring Joe*): "What are those guys doing?"

Joe: "They're striking the set."

Two men, both in cut-off jeans, white undershirts, sneakers, no socks, and substantial biceps, (who, Tommy rightly guessed, were the ones who took his bed and duvet) slowly broke a part odd pieces of furniture. One held the light green three drawer dresser down, while the other took an axe to it. The man with the axe exhaled, "Uhhh," then axed it again. The second man, holding his hands to his face, moved away, and the frame, wood splintering, split in two. Trudy's panties, t-shirts and socks spilled out onto

the floor. The man set the axe down, picked up one of the pairs of panties, sniffed the crotch, smiled, and stuffed it into the waist band of his shorts. Then he shook his partner's hand, and they each took one half of the dresser and began carrying the pieces to the door.

Tommy: "Hey buddy, wait"

Joe: "Ah, leave them."

Tommy: "I won't. The guy, that one in front, he's taking off with Trudy's panties."

Joe: "Jake? That guy's a fucking pig. Believe me, you're better to let him--"

Tommy didn't listen. He ran and caught up with the men.

Tommy: "Hey, you, Jake is it?"

Jake slowly turned to Tommy. He had a blond moustache. A shaved head. The skin on his face was rough, cracked. He looked Tommy up and down, unimpressed.

Jake: "Yeah?"

Tommy: "Give me back the panties."

Jake: "Do I have to?"

Tommy: "Yeah, you do. What's your problem?"

Jake: "I like panties. Don't I, Alex?"

Jake pointed his thumb toward the other guy.

Alex (*matter-of-factly*): "It's his fetish."

Jake: "Yeah."

Tommy: "Well I don't care. Go take someone else's."

Jake: "Okay, buddy. Have them."

Tommy pulled Trudy's panties, blue with a yellow waistband, one of her lucky pairs, from Jake's shorts, and stuffed them in the band of his own boxer shorts. Jake shook his head in disgust, and walked out of the room with his section of the dresser.

Joe (*to Tommy*): "You know there's probably twelve more pairs of panties in that piece of dresser Jake just left with."

Tommy: "What?"

Tommy started to run after Jake, but Joe grabbed his arm.

Joe: "Relax kid, believe me. That Jake, he likes screwing with a guy's mind. I live with him, I live with Alex too, that's his sidekick, and those guys, those guys'll gladly bare their teeth for a little action."

Tommy: "What d'you mean, 'bare their teeth?'"

Joe: "I mean they like to rough it up. Don't worry about Jake, I'm dealing with Jake. And if you really want to deal with him, okay, sure, we'll arrange that, but later."

Tommy looked down at Joe, at this man in a black suit and black tie, who kept pulling at the roots of his hair, making in it all standing on end. Who was this man? Why was he in Tommy's apartment? Why were Tommy's parents coming toward him carrying lawn chairs?

Milt: "Tom, are you hurt?"

Milt took Tommy's hand, petted it lightly. Gave his son a concerned, timid, look, afraid at any second, as had been the case in the past, that Tommy might snap at him. Tommy looked down at his father, this small man who was towered over by his wife and son, in his green jogging pants, his favourites, and the t-shirt of an alligator biting into a garbage can, that Tommy had bought him, (the outfit as a whole which Milt always

referred to as his “relaxing clothes”), and for a moment Tommy felt sorry for him.

Tommy: “What are you two doing here?”

Pearl (*pointing at Joe*): “This young man--”

Joe: “Mrs. Le Van, I’m not a young man.”

Pearl: “Sorry, right. This guy here. He stopped by. Told us you might be in trouble.” To emphasize this, Pearl gave Tommy the once over. “I can see he wasn’t completely wrong.”

Tommy: “I would have put something on. I didn’t know I was going to have company.”

Joe: “That’s the spirit. Stick up for yourself.”

Tommy: “She’s got a point though. Do you know where my clothes went?”

Joe: “Right, no problem. Marice, get me that bag.”

A hulking, long-black-haired giant of a man, with a moustache -- really only the beginnings of a moustache, akin to that of a thirteen year old boy -- nodded violently, then lumbered out of the room. He ran back in carrying an overstuffed shopping bag which he handed to Joe.

Joe (*to Milt and Pearl*): “Okay folks, I need to have a private word or two with Tommy here, if you’ll excuse us. I’ll make sure to send him your way in a few minutes.”

Milt: “What do you want us to do with these chairs?”

Joe: “Line them up against the wall with the others.” He pointed to a wall where the other lawn chairs were neatly stacked. “Thanks for coming. Mrs. Le Van, thanks for the invite. We’ll all be there.”

Milt (*jaw dropping*): “And Jacqueline?” .

Joe: "Milt, I like you. You seem like a good dad. But when it comes to Jacqueline, don't even think it. She was acting with Tommy. That's her job. But you should know -- she and I, we're very serious about one another. You got me?"

Milt: "My apologies. I didn't realize."

Joe: "Not many people realize it. They see a guy like me they think "no way" which really--"

Pearl (*to Tommy*): "We'll be out in the car."

Tommy: "Yeah, fine."

Pearl: "You don't have to take that tone with me."

Tommy: "Mum, please. I'm trying to deal with this guy here. I'm in my underwear. I really don't want to debate etiquette right now."

Pearl: "So you don't want manners. That's fine. Come on Milt. Let's split."

Tommy's parents left. He grabbed the bag from Joe and began pulling clothes out of it. A pair of grey, black, and white striped pants, a long sleeved, tight-fitting army-green shirt, streaked haphazardly with red and black, a pair of well worn black shoes, and black socks.

Tommy: "None of these are mine."

Joe: "I thought you'd want something different. They're actually some of Rupert's old things. Your mum, she told us your sizes, and you two were pretty much a match."

Rupert, Jacqueline, and the man with the broken nose, who had all been hovering close by, made their way over to Tommy and Joe.

Rupert: "Well, I guess we're off."

Joe: "Oh right. Okay, Brown, you old pug." Joe shadow boxed Brown's face. "I

didn't know what you were on about. Jacqueline, beautiful as ever. You made me love you all over again. Rezen, okay, you keep it up. You two, don't forget the Le Vans' house. Except you, Brown. I'm worried you'll annoy people"

Tommy stood there, watching Joe kiss Jacqueline's hand, then shake the men's hands. He waited. He was polite to them. Said goodbye. Said how nice it was to meet them. Stood there in the ridiculously tight pants and shirt he'd been given, and waited. He knew he should just say to hell with it and go after Trudy, but part of him, most of him, didn't want to. Not yet anyway. Why pester Trudy when she's angry? That's what he always did to her. Or if he was angry, what she did to him.

Until tonight. No, tonight, Tommy had to give Trudy credit, she'd finally figured out a way to stop the cycle. He was pissed that she'd taken off first. Don't give her credit, he thought. Use her leaving as leverage against her. So, she had a problem with him not wanting a kid, that's fine, he had a problem with her taking off in the middle of an argument -- he liked the sound of that. He needed to get after her and quick and use it against her before he forgot it.

Joe (*to Tommy*): "Don't leave."

Tommy: "How did you know?"

Joe: "Because that's what I'd do. But you know what? She doesn't want to talk with you right now. She wants *space*. I'm saving you the effort here. That's exactly what she'll say. Isn't it? Be honest."

Tommy didn't say anything. He didn't leave either.

Joe: "That's right. Just give me a minute of your time. And I'll shake out some answers for you. First, I got to say how great you were in that opening sequence. I

couldn't have asked for better reaction time. You were believable right from the moment go."

Tommy: "All that stuff had to do with you? The baby. The storks."

Joe: "Yeah, all of it."

Tommy: "What'd I ever do to you?"

Joe: "You? Nothing, man. In my book, you're the best. Now listen, I've got to apologize for all that nice nice talk with my crew. I pour it on like waterfalls, but if truth be told, I can't stand it. Drives me nuts to say thank you for coming, oh what a lovely speech. Take Rezen. What a loser. The guy acts everything. He doesn't have an honest gesture left. Or Brown. I bring him in because I want him to shake it up, give some words of advice, but most people just get annoyed."

Tommy: "Yeah, I don't care."

Joe: "Sorry?"

Tommy: "Listen Joe--"

Joe: "Mr. Brody, please."

Tommy: "What?"

Joe: "Call me Mr. Brody. I insist."

Tommy: "No, I'm calling you Joe. You don't come in here, dismantle my life and then start telling me about some history buff."

Joe: "You want to know why I'm here?"

Tommy: "Of course I want to know why you're here."

Joe backed away from Tommy and produced a tennis ball from his pocket. He held it up, tapped it in the air gently, winked at Tommy, then bounce-passed it to him.

Tommy, on reflex, tried to grab it, but the years of athletic inactivity, of not doing any exercise other than weight lifting, had had more of an effect on his athletic skills than he was comfortable with, and the ball bounced through his legs, hitting the wall near the door. The empty space, Tommy noted, where Trudy used to keep her assortment of bags, and where their coat rack had stood. This was too much for him. He was angry. He went over and picked up the ball and, with all his force, threw it at Joe.

Joe: “Hey, what gives. I’m sorry, okay. Let’s play a game of handball, that’ll relieve the tension.”

Tommy ran at Joe. Joe crouched, flinched to the left, the right, trying to psyche Tommy out. Tommy grabbed him by the collar and lifted him into a bear hug.

Joe: “Don’t take advantage of a man’s size. Alright, ow, let me down. Hey Marice.”

Tommy: “I mean it.”

Joe: “Sure kid. MAR-ICE.”

Marice lumbered back into the room, his hair swinging from side to side. He grabbed Tommy from behind. Tommy tightened his grip around Joe. Marice tightened his grip around Tommy.

Marice (*gritting his teeth*): “You give on Mr. Brody.”

Joe (*gasping*): “Truce, kid, truce.”

Tommy nodded, his ribs aching already. As he lowered Joe to the ground, Marice released his grip. Tommy bent over, panting. Joe leaned against Marice’s arm, doing the same. Tommy took a few minutes to catch his breath. He waited until he was calm, until he was confident his voice wouldn’t shake, or he wouldn’t yell, or worse, that he would

start crying out of frustration.

Tommy: "Where is all my stuff?"

Joe: "We packed it away. It's gone. Marice, go help Alex." Alex had just come into the room. "Take those lawn chairs to the truck. We'll be fine here."

Marice didn't move.

Joe: "Tommy, tell him we'll be fine. He won't leave unless you promise."

Tommy: "But I could still attack you."

Marice: "Give me your word you won't."

Tommy: "Yeah, fine, Maurice, we'll be fine."

Marice: "It's Marice."

Tommy: "I beg your pardon?"

Joe (*to Marice*): "Hey buddy, he's not cool about the names. I'll try to explain it, later."

Marice nodded. He took Joe by the shoulders, straightened him up, then went to help Alex with the lawn chairs.

Joe: "Yoo-hoo, Alex."

Alex: "What d'you want?"

Joe: "I'm going to be a bit late at the house tonight. Be a good boy and keep your warty hands off my lady friend."

Alex gripped the lawn chair tightly. Anticipating his next move, Marice placed his hand on the top of the chair.

Joe (*to Alex*): "We cool here?"

Alex: "Yeah, fine."

Then the two men exited the room with a stack of lawn chairs.

Joe (*to Tommy*): “Look, with me, if you insist on calling me Joe, I can live with that, but Marice, he’s very sensitive about the name calling. He’s had it from all ends his whole life. Morris. Maurice. Maur-ice. It’s Marice. Simple, plain, Marice. I mean, you’ve seen the guy, he looks abnormal. His name, that’s all he has control over.”

Tommy: “I don’t care. He attacked me. I don’t owe him anything.”

Joe: “Right.”

Tommy: “And I don’t owe you anything.”

Joe: “Right again.”

Tommy: “So, for starters, did you have anything to do with Trudy leaving?”

Joe: “No.”

Tommy: “Are you lying to me?”

Joe: “No. We had nothing to do with that. She left of her own accord. They all do ultimately. Just up and go. Like the ground opens up and they’ve fallen in, right to the earth’s core. When I think about how much time, how much effort I put into being an honest guy, a man of my word, all the gifts I shower on her, all the hope, the dreams I plan that could end up getting me nowhere.”

Tommy: “Shut up. Who are you?”

Joe: “Joe Brody.”

Tommy: “Got that. What are you doing here?”

Joe: “Giving you direction.”

Tommy gave up. No one was going to give him an answer. He didn’t know where he was. He never knew where he was. Tommy realised, it was time for him to take a

stand.

Tommy: "You know what, I don't care why you're here."

This seemed to take Joe by surprise. He beamed. Slapped his hands together. Threw the tennis ball at the wall, and ran to catch it.

Joe: "That's it. That's what I like. That's what you've been missing in this process so far. A 'fuck you how d'you do' response. Yeah, exactly, you don't care. Strange guy comes into your house, you tell him to fuck off. That guy, he can do whatever he wants, because you, you my man, are happy as a pie on a windowsill, doing what you're doing. If a person comes by and steals you, then you're on a new mission. Your girlfriend walks out the door, doesn't like your plans, she can eat it, you're going to stick to yourself, not to her."

Tommy: "When did I say I was getting rid of Trudy? I was trying to tell you to go to hell, not her."

Joe: "What? No, wait. Tell me go to hell, I love it, but continue the process. Tell her too. You've got to. Don't fall into the trap man. I'm here, that's what I'm telling you. Now is the time to be strong."

Tommy: "You and I, we're done. I've got a girl to find."

Joe: "Wait, uh." Joe fumbled in his pockets as he chased behind Tommy. "Here, take this."

He waved a piece of paper at Tommy.

Tommy: "What is it?"

Joe: "My address. My phone number. A small hand map. Just the facts."

Tommy: "I'm not interested." He threw the paper in Joe's face.

Joe: "You'll come around. I've got real faith in you."

Marice was standing with his back to the open front door. Tommy tapped him lightly in the middle of the back, wanting to actually punch him, but couldn't. Communication of this sort -- angry thought to pass from brain down spinal cord to arm to fist to thrown punch -- was not the type of command process that ever reached Tommy's spinal cord. If, by chance, this thought had gotten to the spinal cord, it must have been hand delivered by an elderly man on a tricycle. It was quite possible that the man, a "punch" note pinned to his lapel, while riding the tricycle, was at this moment pedaling his wheezing senior's heart out somewhere in Tommy's brain, and one day would reach the arm, the message delivered, and without warning, the now unprovoked punch would be thrown. If Tommy were lucky this punch would hit air. If unlucky, well, the choices were endless, but hopefully, by some wonderful chance, it may very well hit the person who years prior had provoked the punch in the first place.

Marice's response to the tap was to giggle.

Tommy: "Could you please move."

Marice: "My apologies."

Joe: "Hey Marice, give me a hand with this ANYTHING sign."

Tommy didn't look back. In the hall, he passed two shopping carts packed full to the brim with his stuff. The apartment was a three floor walk-up, and as he went down the stairs, he saw a trail of Trudy's balled socks, a spandex shirt, a pillow case snagged on the radiator. He was annoyed to see that none of Trudy's panties had been dropped. He went through the lobby and out into the cold early October night. The split dresser lay in two parts in the flower garden, resting against each other like two passed out

drunks. Tommy wanted to, but he couldn't, go over and look at the damage. Worse, he noticed a lone pair of Trudy's panties, likely placed there to mock him, dangling from the ivy growing on the brick wall of the building.

Tommy needed to fight back. He needed to make a grand gesture. Have some flair about it. Maybe a pair of tap shoes, a cane, and a top hat. What an idea. Especially for a guy who didn't know the first thing about dancing. He was a bit of a stiff when it came to rhythm. He didn't want the tap shows, etc. to put his feet in beat motion. He wanted the click clack snap tap connected to the swing swing of his arms, head bobbing -- not to music -- but the beat of his walking step as he moved down the path. Of a guy in forward motion. With zip. A guy who knew people were eyeballing him. He wanted to give them a reason to watch, without their noses wrinkled because of him -- the sad side effect of working in dust. The odour of used books that permeated off him. He handled pocket novels, hard covers, atlases, used skin mags, all often delivered in grocery plastic bags and damp knapsacks. Books that had been left in basements, attics, the lower ranks of bookshelves, on front lawns, and under mattresses. He carried their smell on his fingertips. He left traces of them when he ran his fingers through his hair. When he scratched his face. His upper arms. If they stirred nothing else, a pair of tap shoes would give him a little breathing room from his normally stuffy life.

There wasn't going to be a pair of poxy tap shoes. They weren't going to fall out of the air. Well they could but they'd just land on his head. What he needed to do was walk like he wore them. His invisible suit of armour, their soundless click, just for him. He told himself he was in control. He wasn't going to waver. The old man inside him

peddled harder.

The sight of Tommy's refrigerator in the middle of the cement path, the sudden jolt of seeing it, unnerved him again. He stepped around it, and found his neighbour, Ms. Gruener, on her knees, dressed in a quilted housecoat, sandals, and her customary grey wool socks which she said she needed for her poor circulation. She was rifling through the contents of the fridge, loading the items she wanted into a cloth bag with *Support Your Public Libraries* printed on the side, throwing the items she didn't want onto the grass beside her.

Tommy: "Excuse me, Mrs. Gruener?"

Ms. Gruener: "What's that you say?"

Tommy: "I was just trying to get your attention, Mrs. Gruener."

Ms. Gruener: "Ms. Gruener."

Tommy: "Yes, I know."

Ms. Gruener: "You said 'Mrs.'"

Tommy: "Oh, it's Miss?"

Ms. Gruener: "Nah, it's M-S. I don't like people presuming."

Tommy: "I don't have time to argue about this. Why are you taking my food? No, don't answer that. Stop taking my food. Put it back, all of it, and leave it alone."

From the street, someone honked a car horn three times. The person's impatience annoyed Tommy but before he could do anything about it he saw a photograph of Trudy tucked under a magnetic T and L on the door of the fridge. He reached for it.

Ms. Gruener swatted her cane at his hand, then left its tip pointed at his face.

Tommy: "I just want one of my pictures."

Ms. Gruener (*mocking*): "I just want one of my pictures."

Tommy: "What is your problem?"

Ms. Gruener: "I never liked you. You don't remember -- why would you -- but you used to pass me on the street. You remember, you passed me the day it rained? I walked two blocks in the rain. And you, I saw you put your umbrella up and keep on walking. That same umbrella that you left dripping outside your door across from my wet clothes like you never even noticed them."

Tommy pushed her cane away from his face and pointed a finger down at her, as she was still crouched in front of the fridge.

Tommy: "Now listen, that story has nothing to do with you stealing--"

Gruener squatted low on her haunches. She bent her head forward and prepared to lunge at him, her body quivering. She didn't have enough strength to push herself off, teetered, then fell forward onto her chest. Without pause she swung her cane wildly in his direction. He ran toward the street.

Ms. Gruener: "Wait. Please, come back. Help me. Please."

He was about twenty feet from her.

Tommy: "Are you serious?"

Ms. Gruener: "Ow. My bones, they're breaking. Oh, my shrinking bones." She covered her face with her arm, snivelling.

Tommy turned around and cautiously came toward her, his hands held in front of him for protection.

Tommy: "Okay, I'm just going to help you up."

As he leaned over to take her by the shoulder, she looked up at him, her nose

running, tears on her cheeks. She laughed. Bared her teeth. Popped her dentures out with her tongue. Pushed them back in with her hand. She swung the cane up and connected with his knee. With his one good leg he stepped on her cane, immobilizing it, and reached over her to pull Trudy's picture off the fridge. He waved it triumphantly in her face.

Tommy: "Take all the food you want, if you're that desperate for it."

She lamely grabbed for the photograph, letting go of her cane in the process. He slid it into the grass, then stepped away from her.

Gruener didn't chase after him. She stood up, did a little twirl. Then She pointed her finger at him.

Ms. Gruener: "I always knew you would fail."

By then he was at the entrance to the building. Someone honked their car horn again. And again. Rapid honks. Excited to see you honks. At first Tommy thought the noise was coming from the white moving van parked at the curb, that Alex and Jake were leaning against with marked disinterest. Then he saw his mother step out of the Le Van family car, a light blue station wagon, nestled behind the van. She walked over to Alex and Jake, and offered them sandwiches from a yellow plastic container.

Tommy had overlooked the car because of his abject shame at its insistence, no, its very obstinacy, to continue to function. That his parents had driven it sparingly over the years, using public transit to get to work, and kept it protectively shielded under a tarpaulin in their garage, only bringing it out on special occasions, went some way to explaining its amazing life span. But Tommy felt that the car itself took strength from the fact that while parked, idling, and manoeuvring around the other cars, with their car

phones, CD and DVD players, power windows, GPS technology, and all the other advancements that drivers and passengers have come to depend on in their never ending battles with the vehicular lifestyle, the Le Van station wagon was smug in the knowledge that it could roll just as strongly as any bus-sized SUV from Point A to Point B.

Milt lay into the horn. He was standing on the road, on the driver's side, his arm stuck in the car.

Milt (*waving*): "Hey hey, Tom. Over here buddy. Come on, we've been waiting for you."

Tommy skulked down the apartment steps, his head low.

Tommy: "Mum, quit feeding these creeps."

His mother held the container out for Tommy.

Pearl: "Nonsense, Tom these men aren't creeps. They're just trying to do their job."

Jake saluted with the egg salad sandwich he was eating, leaving a small glob of mayonnaise and egg in his hair.

Jake: "Good to see you, too, *Tom*."

Tommy stepped toward Jake. Alex shoved half a baloney and mustard sandwich in his mouth as he moved to intercept Tommy.

Alex: "Come on, brother, let's not get interesting."

Tommy (*holding up his hands*): "I'll leave it."

Jake: "Good idea, sport."

Milt came around the side of the car, a cell phone in his hand.

Milt: "Tom, there's someone that wants to speak with you."

Tommy took the phone. Held the mouthpiece.

Tommy: "Who is it?"

Milt mimed zipping his lips. His eyes big. His grin wide with anticipation.

Tommy waved him away.

Tommy: "Trudy?"

Woman (*annoyed*): "Who?"

Tommy: "Oh, sorry. I thought you were my girlfriend--"

Woman: "Like I told your father, I'm not interested."

Tommy: "Interested in what?"

Woman: "Tell Milt I said hi." She hung up.

Tommy closed the cell phone. Clutched it hard in his hand.

Tommy: "Who was that?"

Milt: "That was Sara. I met her at the grocery store. I really think you'd like her.

A very nice figure, if I do say so myself. I think you two would have a lot in common."

Tommy: "She said no."

Milt: "Ah well. Don't worry. I have a couple more lined up for you at the insurance office."

Tommy: "I have a girlfriend. You remember? Trudy? The girl you work with. The girl you already set me up with? Do you remember her at all?"

Milt: "Of course I remember her. I love Trudy. But Tom, I'm worried. I saw Trudy leave. I'm worried she might not come back. And if she doesn't, what're you going to do? I had Sara's phone number in my wallet for just this kind of situation."

Tommy: "Well don't worry, Trudy's coming back. I'll make sure of it."

The four of them laughed at Tommy. Jake and Alex sprayed bits of sandwich -- saliva-wet bread and egg -- onto the roof of the car.

Tommy: "What's going on here? Stop laughing. You two," to Jake and Alex, "Don't waste any more of my mother's sandwiches. And you two," pointing to his parents, "You're on my side from here on out. Understood?"

Pearl (*tipping her straw hat*): "We're always on your side."

Pearl's clothes were suspicious. White gloves. Wide brimmed straw hat. Large lens, prescription sunglasses. A fitted black silk dress. Tommy checked her feet. Satin pumps with palm trees embroidered at the toe. Her special occasion outfit. The one she said made her feel incognito.

Also, oddly for a weeknight, Milt wore his olive green jogging pants and red jogging shirt. Items, Milt had long ago agreed with Pearl, he would relegate to the weekends because of their multitude of stains, tears, and wear. Discussion of the outfit intensified early last year, with Milt unaware Pearl had sneaked them into a garbage bag full of clothes for the church rummage sale. Milt realized the clothes' disappearance only when his bachelor friend, Duke, called to say that by a strange coincidence he'd just bought near exact copies of Milt's favourite leisure suit, stains and all. After much heated communication with both Pearl and Duke -- his friend being more uncooperative about parting with the clothes than expected -- the weekends were agreed upon as the days all the parties could live with that Milt could wear the clothes, as long as guests weren't coming over. The concessions Duke won were bank holidays and labour day, inexplicably the only times of year that the Duke-mystique was able to mesmerize ladies into his all-accepting arms. Duke thought, incorrectly, that if he were to slip the clothes

on after the passions, the aura-a-la-Duke would continue to burn strong in his new lady's eyes far into the next new year.

Tommy (*to his parents*): "What are you two up too?"

Alex swallowed. Ran his tongue over his teeth. Making sure he was decent.

Alex: "You shouldn't dig at your folks like this."

Pearl: "He's right."

Tommy: "I'm trying to get some equal footing here. Can everyone understand that?"

Milt took Tommy's hand. Weak, shy, always cheerful, Milt. He looked up at Tommy with his expectant, helpful face, his tiny hands in Tommy's, the hands that -- when free -- rubbed constantly on his jittering left leg. Milt, who used to seem tall, always tall, and big, and knowledgeable. Who religiously, but unsuccessfully, tried to comb down a grey swirl of hair on his head before going to work everyday. And can be counted on, in the middle of weekly family dinners, while Tommy and his mother were arguing (almost always about Tommy's future plans) to say, 'I was just thinking about this wonderful girl I met at work today. She'd be perfect for Tommy.'

Tommy: "What is it dad?"

Milt: "Do you really think Trudy will come back to you?"

Tommy: "Of course. We're just arguing."

Jake snorted.

Tommy: "Oh, what. You've never argued with a girl. I'm sure the panty sniffing goes over really well."

Jake (*dropping his head*): "We've all had our love troubles."

Alex put his arm around Jake's shoulder.

Alex: "He's very sensitive. Come on Jake-O. Those were just words. You're stronger than words. Say it with me."

Jake (*slowly*): "I'm stronger than words."

Alex: "How's that feel?"

Pearl went over and hugged Jake.

Pearl (*whispering*): "I'm sorry, Tom, I can't help it. He looks so vulnerable."

Alex (*to Tommy*): "Please understand, everyone has fetishes."

Milt: "He's right Tom. How many times have you and Trudy argued about blowjobs."

Tommy: "How do you know that?"

Milt: "Trudy and I have talked about it on our way home from work."

Pearl: "Oh Tom, why do you insist on them so much?"

Tommy: "Can we please not talk about this."

Milt: "Tom, it's perfectly normal. Everyone wants it."

Alex (*putting up his hand*): "Actually, I don't like them. I think too much when it's happening. You know, should I be touching her? What should I be thinking? All the thinking makes it difficult to maintain an erection."

Milt: "Oh dear."

Jake: "I worry about the taste of my semen. To me it tastes fine but to my special lady, will she feel the same way?"

Alex: "You better not be speaking about Jacqueline."

Jake's fists shot up in front of him.

Jake: “And what if I am?”

Alex: “You’ve got no deed on her, that’s what.”

Jake: “And I suppose you do?”

Pearl (*getting between them*): “Gentlemen, gentlemen. Don’t let a woman come between you.”

Jake (*shadow swinging at Alex*): “That’s a warning. You want to feel my pain, believe me, I’ll hand-deliver the message.”

Alex wildly threw his hands up attempting to defend himself. Pearl was close to him. When his hands went up they met the underside of her hat, knocking it off her head. The hat went into the air. Jake watched the hat fall. He didn’t register what it was. He thought an object had been thrown at him. He stormed after it, keeping his distance, fists at the ready. When it landed he brought his muddy boot down hard on its top, cracking the straw.

No one moved. Everyone, including Jake, was in shock about the hat. Tommy suppressed the urge to charge Jake. He wanted to stuff his hand in Jake’s face. Wanted to yell the guy down into submission. But he told himself to hold back. Engaging Jake right now would impede him. It would draw Tommy into this guy’s circumference. What Tommy wanted to do was to create as much distance between himself and Jake as he possibly could. He needed to get back to normal.

Tommy (*calmly*): “I think you both better move on.”

He didn’t know if this would work. For the seconds between him saying it and them reacting, Tommy wasn’t sure if he should brace himself or relax.

Jake picked up the hat and handed it to Pearl.

Jake: "Sorry Mrs. Le Van. I let my heart get the better of me."

Alex went behind Jake and rubbed his shoulders.

Pearl: "You two have to stop letting your squabbles get the better of you. Look at all the unnecessary harm it's causing."

Alex: "You're right."

Jake (*to Alex*): "Sorry buddy."

Alex: "I know it."

They hugged.

Alex (*to Tommy*): "We'll be out of your way now."

They walked up the apartment path, turning to wave to the Le Vans, and then went into the building.

Milt: "Those two are in love."

Pearl swatted him on the top of the head with her hat. The roof of the cap flapped up and down when she did this.

Pearl: "Don't be puerile."

Milt: "I didn't say lovers."

Pearl: "But that's what you meant."

Milt: "Yes, I did think they were a bit queer."

Pearl: "They're friends."

Milt: "How do you know?"

Pearl: "Oh please. They're just working things out. Right Tom?"

Tommy: "I don't care. They're gone, they're not my problem anymore. All I want to do right now is find Trudy and talk with her."

Milt: "And work things out?"

Tommy: "Sure."

Ms. Gruener: "And you can all have happy little families and grandie kids."

She was standing on the path step before the sidewalk, both hands resting on her cane.

Ms. Gruener: "And don't forget all the lovely Christmases you'll have with pastries and fat hams."

She performed a slow two-step, then stepped down onto the sidewalk. She came toward Tommy. He backed away. She began to wobble. To fall forward. He caught her. She turned his catch into a hug. Wrapping her arms around his waist. Madly rushing her hands up and down his back.

Alex and Jake walked down the path and passed them, carrying the bedroom wall with the Geddes picture. They went up a ramp into the back of the truck facing the front of the Le Van Station wagon. They banged it down on the floor of the truck on top of Tommy's bed frame. Jake kicked over a hamper full of Tommy's dirty clothes as he made his way, through the carrier section, to the front of the truck. Alex stayed to check off the apartment items on the list Joe had made for him.

Tommy watched this, then looked down at Ms. Gruener, who was smiling up at him, as she slipped the picture of Trudy up her sleeve.

Ms. Gruener: "Hello, handsome."

Tommy: "Are you coming on to me?"

Ms. Gruener: "What if I am?"

Tommy: "But I'm not interested."

Ms. Gruener: "You are."

Tommy: "But you just implied that you were."

Ms. Gruener: "That's what you want me to do."

Tommy: "It isn't. I swear to you."

She cooed: "Oh Ducky, don't be afraid to admit it."

Alex pulled the back of the truck closed. He locked it. He stepped down and went around to the driver's side. He picked up several orange traffic cones, fit them on top of one another. He banged the side of the truck with his open palm and disappeared toward the driver's side.

Tommy: "Dad, can you give me a hand here?"

Ms. Gruener: "Oh, I don't need help. Just let go of me. That is, if you can handle it, lover boy."

He let go. Ms. Gruener didn't fall over. She waddled off, giggling. She went back up the step. Turned to them again. Held the picture of Trudy up. Tommy saw it. She tore it into pieces.

Ms. Gruener: "Bye bye lady friend."

She took the ripped bits of picture and dropped them from her eyes mimicking crying.

The truck's warning signal began to bleep. Tommy looked away from Ms. Gruener. Hypnotized, he watched the truck slowly pull away and move down the street, the occasional branch dusting its roof as it went.

Somewhere in the cosmos of time, possibly the moments echo resounding in Tommy's

ears as he sat in the back seat of his parents' car, one of his ancestors stood on the sand floor of an arena filled to the brim with saliva-spewing spectators, all impatiently awaiting the release of a Minotaur into the ring to kill him. Truthfully, the Minotaur was the tallest man in the village, decorated in a handmade bull's head -- unfortunately, poorly designed by the slave, Hatruse, who, in his defence, wasn't given the proper materials or time to craft a professional looking beast, hence the reason the left horn drooped low to the side. If the ancient Tommy had known of these failings, he may have chosen a different course of action, rather than what he did do, which was to look down at the twig of a bat he was given to defend himself, and decide, with absolutely no fanfare -- really, people were quite upset that they wouldn't get to see their neighbour squirm a little before being slaughtered -- to sit down and accept his fate. The Emperor, lifting his silk handkerchief into the air, a nubile young slave giggling around each arm, frowned slightly. For him, this was a courageous act -- a man able to accept his fate -- and it annoyed him that he should have to let such a brave citizen die. If nothing else, this man would have made a perfect food taster. But the audience reaction, the pent up aggression that his people felt, and would undoubtedly turn on him if he cancelled the show, was a future he did not want to participate in. He dropped his arm and a minute and a half later Tommy was dead. The brief show was not enough bloodlust for the crowd, which was already displeased with another tax hike and the Emperor's insistence on taking Minotaurs out of their natural habitat for sport, and they turned on him anyway.

If Tommy had been attuned to his ancestor -- if he hadn't been unconscious of the reverberations of the past -- then he might not have dismissed the odd feeling that came over him as mere *deja vu*. His reaction to the change in his mood, the sudden feeling of

unexplained exhilaration that rose in his chest, as it rose in the ancestral Tommy as he lay down on the sand floor, was akin to someone who passes through an unseen spider's web on a quiet back street late one summer's night, a web so faint that the walker is never sure, even as he's rubbing it off his face and legs, whether it actually existed. Had Tommy been conscious of this long distance connection he surely would have taken some solace in his own situation. Especially if he knew that when his ancestor was alive the punishment for refusing to give your lover a child was death.

The back seat of the Le Van station wagon had always been Tommy's space in the car. As he sat there, in the middle seat listening to his parents chatter at him from the front, he ran his hands over the baby blue nylon seats, the stainless material that had stood its ground against soda pop; the candy nubs of lollipop sticks; a mixture of ketchup, mustard, relish and hamburger juice; scratches; pen, pencil and pencil crayon markings; farts; and any number of infinite possibilities that could befall the back seat of a family motor vehicle. For Tommy, the impenetrable and timeless state of the back seat magnified his present life which he feared was pummelling backwards into adolescence.

Milt, who sat in the passenger seat, turned to face Tommy.

Milt: "I quite liked that woman, the one of Asian descent. I found her very captivating. You like her too?"

Tommy: "No, I was a little busy."

Milt: "That's a shame."

Tommy: "Look, can you stop trying to hook me up with every woman I meet. When does Trudy enter into the equation?"

Milt: "She's there. I mean, where do you think we're going?"

Tommy: "I have no idea."

Pearl was driving fast, weaving between lanes whenever the cars in front of the Le Vans slowed even the slightest, beating yellows, honking down pedestrians if they looked like they were trying to make a late green.

Pearl (*yelling*): "That's right, you never know. The question you should be asking is not where we're going but where are you going."

Tommy: "Oh, not this. I don't need a lecture."

Pearl: "No, you need to stop drifting through life."

Milt: "Don't lose the plot."

Pearl: "Exactly. Play a part, for goodness sake."

Tommy: "I'm tired of hearing you say that."

Pearl: "Milt, hand him the list."

Milt slipped the list over the edge of the seat, let it hang there. When Tommy didn't take it, Milt began tapping it against the seat.

Milt: "Tommy, read me. Learn how to improve your life. I'm your friend."

Tommy grabbed it, glanced at it, then threw it on the floor.

Tommy: "Are you kidding me?"

They hit a hard red. The car screeched to a halt.

Pearl: "Milt and I worked hard on that."

Milt: "Indeed we did."

Pearl: "That's you ten years, twenty years, thirty years down the road."

Milt: "Though we're willing to admit that when we got to the thirty year mark we were more speculative. Ten and twenty we feel are pretty accurate accounts of who

you'll be."

Pearl nodded at a couple of young guys in the car beside them, challenging them to race. She revved the station wagon, and as the light opposite turned red, shot the car through the intersection, the clear winner, her challengers too busy waiting for the green.

Pearl: "That's the salary you can expect, with nominal raises, dimes, quarters, that you can expect if you stay working at the used bookstore."

Milt: "Which will eventually close. Eaten up by some megastore."

Pearl: "The prospects -- the land, the savings, the weight gain -- you'll amass."

Milt: "The fact that Trudy, sadly, will leave you after year four."

Pearl: "She may have beat us there."

Milt: "I know. I was as surprised as you were. She's a mover, Tommy, you have to admit."

Pearl: "Where was the talk of an engagement? Of property?"

Tommy: "We talk about the future."

Pearl: "Yeah, right. Milt, show him the book of achievements."

With two hands Milt lifted a photo album over the side for Tommy, who took it without fuss. He was hurt his parents' thought so little of him. They were being ridiculous of course, but to see people, people he knew, take the time to chart his life, to put down on paper that their expectations were so low, to identify his fears own fears so precisely. His private fears. The fears that kept him from sleeping. And someone else, without even being told, had put them down on paper exactly as he, well, exactly as he'd feared. Their *truth* was too much for him to process in one second.

He looked down at the photo album. On the cover was a drawing of young boy in

blue overalls, no shirt, bare feet, pronounced red cheeks, a smile on his face. He held a pennant which read "Our favourite son." Tommy hoped his parents had never shown this to other adults.

He opened the book. On the first page, at the top, one of them had written in blue marker on a small piece of white paper: EDUCATION. The first two photographs, both eight by tens, taken at his high school and university graduations. His mother took the photographs -- she insisted on taking all family pictures -- from a distance, and the focus of both pictures was Tommy receiving his diploma.

The next five pages were grouped under the heading FAMILY. There was a tilted picture of Milt, Tommy, and Pearl standing in the kitchen; Milt and Tommy on the beach. Tommy scanned this quickly, searching for anything too incriminating. Nothing yet he couldn't live with.

He stopped. The third section was called SPORTS. It was two pages. Tommy had never played sports. Well not on any school teams. He wasn't athletic enough for them, wasn't strong enough, was afraid of being hit by a ball. There were two occasions, though -- two teams that were exceptions. Milt had convinced Tommy when he was ten to join the YMCA's youth basketball league. These weren't real teams. These were teams kids got on because their parents paid for them. Every kid got to be on a team! Every kid got to play! Both teams cheered each other at the end of the game!

Tommy and nine other kids were handed solid yellow shirts with numbers and YMCA printed on them and double dribbled around a gymnasium for three quarters of an hour every Saturday for thirteen weeks. The photographs were of these glory years. Two shots per year. The first shot of the whole team, the retrogrades, the fat, or sickeningly

underweight, definitely undersized, asthmatic, half blind, snotty, warty, gangly, boys and girls, the kids who are always about to cry, or about to faint, who huff feet behind the active kids, who look like they may need paramedics at any second.

There were always a few ringers in the picture, standing and sitting straighter than the rest of them, smug smiles on their faces, who used people like Tommy to test their game out, to improve their skills, putting the ball through wide open legs, even once throwing a pass off the head of one of Tommy's team mates. Tommy wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't been there, hadn't seen the ball connect with the forehead of Dale Lee, then watched the timid smile form on Dale's lips. The smile of low self esteem from someone who lacked the confidence to feel anger, who, sadly, was happy just to be included. The ball bounced once, then into the hands of Mike Paust, the league's best player, who finished the play off with a textbook lay-up.

Tommy looked at the team photograph, at all the kids who stared straight into the camera, kids dumbfounded and nervous, possibly a little over-excited about the pizza pies and free orange drink and complementary plastic trophies with an androgynous figure in perfect winning-shot pose, lined up off camera on fold-out brown tables to mark the end of another championship season.

The other photograph, was a posed picture of himself, basketball in hand, off camera, being told to look like he was making the winning shot, replicating over the two years what he believed this should look like, eyes squinted, mouth pulled back, forehead flat, ball hovering around his stomach.

Tommy closed the book. This was not how he saw himself any longer.

Tommy: "Where are we going again?"

Pearl: "To win Trudy back for you, dear."

Tommy: "I really don't need your help."

Milt handed him a ring box.

Milt: "What do you think of it? We realize it probably won't fit her yet, but you tell her it's just a place holder. Girls love that."

Tommy didn't even bother opening the box.

Tommy: "I'm not going to propose to Trudy."

Pearl: "Well, then you're going to lose her. Okay boys, hold on tight, we've got her in sight."

Milt: "You go for it, dear."

Pearl: "You know it."

Pearl leaned over -- one eye still on the road -- and kissed Milt on the lips.

Pearl: "Tommy, there goes your future." She pointed across the street at Trudy, who was walking at a high pitch.

Pearl swung the car in an illegal U-Turn. She didn't take much notice of the bus coming the opposite way. She took enough notice, she would argue, to see that it wouldn't smash them.

The bus driver, Stu "Tipper" Klamdowsky, had a different opinion. With all due respect to Mrs. Le Van, he felt that his assessment of the situation had the voice of experience -- the voice of the road -- to back it up. How could one overlook the raw facts at Klamdowsky's disposal? Here was a guy who'd been with the transit commission twenty-two years. Fifteen of those with buses. In those fifteen years there had only been four *incidents*, that's twelve days missed. That's nothing, that was enough time for a

couple of beers and a how-do-you-do to his mother. Not to be overlooked was the fact he'd been doing night shift for seven of those years, and with his seniority he could have had any of the ripe spots on the schedule. The Tip didn't need to help the drunks, the lonely-hearted, the old maids, the prostitutes, the insomniacs, the cleaning people, the teenagers with no place better to go, the mistresses, the homeless, the criminals, the gumshoes, the men and women working late, even the rats, find their way through the darkened city. He could have taken the day shift, dealt with the sleepwalking public in the morning on their way to work and fed off their manic freedom on their way home. But why should he? There were plenty of drivers who wanted those plum morning shifts. Guys and Gals who wanted to come home at the end of the day and spend time with their kids, with their wives and husbands. Those were people who had no integrity, no responsibility for their positions, who argued the hell out of their patrons if they were even a nickel short. The Tip had kids. The Tip had a wife. The Tip had patrons ripping off the company a nickel and then some. But what The Tip also had, what everyone else in the commission lacked, was a respect for the road, a respect for his position, for his patrons, and his city. The Tip was more than just a bus driver. More than just an employee. He was a captain of the road. No, he was *THE* Captain of the road. When he was in charge his bus lightly kissed the rear-view mirrors of parked cars. He snuggled up to late-night bikers at traffic lights. Sweetly whispered the street names his patrons could look forward to next. And made love to the taxi cabs and other late night vehicles with which he shared the road.

What he didn't do was run red lights. He didn't speed. He didn't yell at people from his window. He didn't swear at his customers even when they deserved it. And he

certainly, under no circumstances, never mind the sheer girth of the bus which made it almost impossible (though if anyone could successfully surely it was The Tip), would have, in the middle of on-coming traffic, at the prime time of eleven at night, made an illegal u-turn. That was sheer adultery of the road, man. And The Tip didn't play that way.

As he took a swig of coffee from his orange thermos, The Tip tried to subtly express this story to the Le Vans, who found themselves full stop in front of traffic, the turn unsuccessfully stopped mid-u. He squinted his eyes. He glared at them. Drivers behind him, mere amateurs, sat on their horns. The patrons began to chatter, the chatter rising toward a full out situation. The Tip took action. With a steady hand, he took the small black speaker from beside the steering wheel. He placed it against his lips. Pressed the TALK button down.

The Tip: "Ladies and Gentlemen, everything is under control. I'll have us back on the road in a moment."

The Tip opened his window. Motioned to Milt to do the same. Milt obeyed.

The Tip: "Sir, it seems we have a problem."

Milt: "I'm sorry. We're trying to rescue my son's sweetheart."

The Tip: "I see. I wonder if this could be accomplished parked at the curb?"

Milt: "Of course, yes. With all the confusion though, with your bus, and our car, we've lost our focus. That's her there. Our Trudy." Milt pointed to Trudy, who had stopped like everyone else, to see what all the commotion was about.

Tommy: "Dad, leave her out of this."

The Tip: "How long have you two been together, son?"

Tommy: "Two years."

Milt: "Two glorious years."

The Tip: "I guess you've proposed to her?"

Tommy: "No."

Milt: "To my mind, I think they're already married."

Tommy: "Dad, I told you to stop saying that."

The Tip: "That girl's a gem, son. You don't want to wait on your laurels with that one."

Pearl: "See, we told you."

Tommy: "Enough. I'm not interested in marriage."

His parents gasped. The Tip shook his head, surprised that he could still be shocked by the young. His passengers began to call out again. The Tip's voice wavered slightly before he caught himself.

The Tip: "Ladies and Gentlemen. I apologize for the delay. We are currently dealing with an incident out on the street."

Pregnant Woman (*excited*): "What we got? A pile up?"

The Tip (*pointing at the station wagon*): "We have a young man out there who doesn't believe in marriage."

The passengers huddled together at the window. Smushed their faces against it.

The Tip: "He's the one in the back. His parents, who as you can expect are in shock, are the couple in the front." The Tip pointed to Trudy, who stood beside a street performer on stilts, still watching to find out what had happened. "And that's the fellow's girlfriend."

The passengers clambered to the other window. Two of them took photographs of her with their phones. One filmed the incident with his.

A man and woman slapped at one another as each tried to open one of the bus windows. During their struggle, they managed to open it together.

Man and Woman (*to Trudy*): "Marry me."

From another window, a blind man yelled.

Blind Man: "Dump the loser."

Tommy opened his car door, yelled to Trudy.

Tommy: "Don't listen to them."

Trudy looked at him. Realized who he, and who the passengers on the bus were talking to. She saw Milt and Pearl waving rapidly at her. Saw The Tip, his fists pushed against his cheeks, his elbows resting on his steering wheel. Again, she made eye contact with Tommy. She was searching. Looking for recognition. A glimpse of the feelings she had had. The man on stilts, seeing the huge crowd, took the opportunity to make a few extra bob. In an undisclosed Western country, two army officials laughed about an Armageddon joke with the punch line "BOOM." Satellites continued to orbit the earth's atmosphere. Asteroids streaked passed stars, veered close to planets. The frozen waters of Mars remained frozen. Trudy, reliving snippets of the past, met, got together, and broke up with Tommy. Tommy stood frozen. His body in the process of leaving the car entirely. One foot on the road. A hand on top of the open car door. Doubts bordering his thoughts.

Neither knew how they had come to be here. The passion they had for each other, the movement beyond the self into another's arms, beyond the mundane drudgery of

days, melting away as they stood there. All of the promises. The dreams shared. The meals eaten. The television watched. The coitus performed. The laughter laughed. The smiles smiled. The toothbrushes borrowed. The love loved. The memories piled on top of each other. The innocence of their lives, drifting, passed. Could it be? Gone? Forever?

Trudy bolted down the street.

Tommy went after her. Milt and Pearl called to him but he didn't look back. He passed The Tip, who was heading off the bus to help the Le Vans move their car.

Tommy pushed through the crowd -- they pushed back. The man on stilts lost his balance. He swayed. His arms spun wildly. His legs opened. Tommy walked through them. People called out to him. Teenagers who had previously been spitting and ashing their cigarettes on people, mocked him. Tommy pushed past all their voices, their catcalls, their reprimands, their commentaries. "Guy, hey guy, where you going?" "She hates you." "...and he's a movie star?" "What a dumb face." "The girl was crying." "Hey you faggot." "Did you see the parents?" "Awful car." "What's going on?" "And then that guy said fuck marriage." "Terrorist." Arms grabbed at him. Legs kicked his shins. A baby bit his shoulder. A man offered to sell him flowers.

Half a block later Tommy shot out of the throng of people into open sidewalk. A block away he saw Trudy. She ran into a drugstore at the corner, oblivious to him. She hadn't left by the time he reached it. The doors to the store opened automatically. He saw her immediately, sitting in a make-up chair near the door, catching her breath. She didn't see him. He kept his distance, not wanting her to scare her any further.

Tommy (*softly*): "Trudy."

She didn't hear him though, so he raised his voice.

Tommy: "Trudy."

Trudy (*screaming*): "What do you want?"

Tommy: "I just want to talk."

Trudy: "Okay. Sure. Let's talk." She slowly stood up, her hands protectively in front of her. "Let me get my balance."

They could do this, Tommy thought, they could work through this. Everything could return to normal. She pushed the chair in front of her and took off down the make-up aisle, pulling lipsticks and eyeliners off the shelves as she went. He saw her, at the end of the aisle, run toward the opposite end of the store. She must be heading for the back exit. He took off after her, going down the tooth paste aisle parallel to the cosmetic aisle Trudy whipped through. A man in an electric buggy blocked his exit. Tommy went left. The man steered left. Tommy went right. So did the buggy. They stopped, both dead centre in the aisle. There wasn't enough room to pass the man on either side.

Tommy: "Don't move." He climbed on the side of the buggy. Pulled himself close to the man. "Back up."

The man, already confused by all the action, did what he was told. He backed them into the other aisle. Tommy stepped off. Shook the man's hand. Headed for the emergency exit sign. The door stood at the end of a small corridor. He stopped short though. Across the door was a notice: *Alarm will Sound*. No alarm. She was either in the store or had worked her way back to the front. He hit the bell on the pharmacy counter beside him hoping someone could help him.

Trudy stood up from behind the desk wearing a white coat.

Trudy: “Yes, sir?”

Tommy (*laughs, startled*) “What’re you doing?”

Trudy: “You’ll need a prescription?”

Tommy: “What’re you talking about? Speak to me. Please.”

Trudy: “Are you a member of our Drug Community? If not, I’ll need your phone number.”

Tommy: “I don’t want to talk about the drug community. I want to make things better between us.”

Trudy: “Well, I’m sorry sir, but you’ll need to see a doctor first.”

He (*grabbing her collar*): “Do you see me? Do you know who I am?”

Trudy: “You’ll need a prescription for cyanide sir. That’s not an over-the-counter drug.”

Tommy: “Acknowledge me.”

Trudy: “There are rules you have to follow.”

She wrenched herself out of his hands. Pulled her jacket off and threw it over his head. A moment later, the fire alarm went off. Tommy threw the coat off. It landed on the head of the man with the buggy, who crashed into the heart rate machine.

Tommy ran through the emergency door. Outside, a motion detector went on above his head. He was standing in an alley. The alley was surrounded on three sides by red brick buildings. There were two blue containers -- four feet by eight feet -- for garbage, one green container -- three feet by five feet -- for medical waste. The containers were part of an attempt, long ago abandoned, to raise the character of the alley. The alley prevailed, though, maintaining its alleyness. There was a hole, two feet off the

ground, in the pharmacy wall. A thick green ooze inched its way down the wall into an ever-increasing puddle of itself. The basement windows, on all sides, were grated. Several cracked and broken windows, opposite Tommy, gave the impression that the building was abandoned. People slept in the alley. Couples used it for quick fucks. On their breaks, drugstore employees passed joints and sexual innuendoes to one another. This was an alley of secrets, of brief calm, through which Trudy was now trying to make her escape over a ten foot fence at the end leading to the street. She would have accomplished this much faster if her sweater hadn't snagged on the top of the fence.

Tommy ran to her. Held his hands up meaning to catch her.

Tommy: "I can help."

Trudy: "No you can't."

Tommy: "But--"

Trudy: "Sorry, what I meant to say is I don't want your help."

Tommy: "What were you playing at in the drugstore?"

Trudy: "Hey, you were in a pharmacy, I was speaking pharmese."

Tommy: "Trudy--"

She steadied herself with one hand. The fence continued to weave.

Trudy (*pointing at him*): "No. I don't want to hear it. You had lots of time to talk with me. You could have done it when we started dating. You could have done it when you suggested moving in together. You could have talked to me the day we moved in."

Tommy: "But if I had--"

Trudy: "None of this would have happened. Yeah, funny that. I wouldn't have wasted two years of my life living with you."

Tommy: “There you go. That’s exactly why I didn’t say anything.”

Trudy: “Hey look. I’m a woman with plans. With future acquisitions to acquire. I can’t afford to have some dead-end-dreamless...AH-HA.” She’d untangled herself. “Please, if you’re ever thinking of stopping by, remember to drive fast and take chances when you’re coming over.”

She brought her foot over the other side. She jumped to the sidewalk. In a crouched position, she took stock of herself. Nothing broken. Tommy watched her run off. He grabbed the fence, meaning to climb it. He hit the hidden gate with enough force that it swung open. He found himself on the other side, still holding the fence with both hands, watching Trudy run up a flight of stairs and into a children’s elementary school. He chased after her. He wasn’t thinking *all we need to do is talk this through*. There was no *oh I should say this to her*. Or *I can’t believe she’s wrong about....* There was no *about* anything. He had no plan. For him there was only focus. Reach Trudy. Talk to Trudy.

He pulled open one of the baby blue doors. Passed the concrete landing layered thick with years of grey paint. Attempted to leap up six stairs to the first floor. Grabbed for the railing, in his mind to pull himself up, but didn’t account for its scaled down children’s measurements. The toes of one foot hit the top step awkwardly. He stumbled into the hallway.

A janitor, a man in his early fifties, who wore a white jump suit, the name Julian sewed over his heart, and grey, laceless sneakers, sat in a yellow plastic chair, a book folded spine up on his leg. He held it up to show Tommy. Displayed on the cover were two topless women, from the waist up, French kissing. The embossed silver title read:

WET WEATHER.

Julian: "You like mysteries?"

Tommy: "Not right now."

Julian: "Neither me. I usual got a cover on my books. I use this." He held up a false cover. A knife stabbed through a heart. Title: *TRANSPLANT MURDER*. "What you like?"

Tommy: "I'm looking for a girl. Have you seen her?"

Julian: "I seen many girls."

Tommy: "She would have just come through here."

Julian (*disappointed*): "Oh. That one. Well I told her to follow the arrows. She'll be on up in the class by now."

Tommy: "What class? She expected to come here?"

Julian: "You joking right now?"

Tommy: "No. Am I supposed to be here? Am I expected?"

Julian: "Expecting you should say. Though, if its my opinion, from the size of your wife, I'd say you're both a little early for the classes."

Tommy: "She's not my wife."

Julian: "Not your wife? Well, your lady, boy has she got a surprise for you."

Julian pointed at an orange construction paper arrow pointing up a flight of stairs.

"Better hotfoot it up there. And get your proposal speech ready."

Tommy: "I'm not going to marry her."

Julian: "But you're the father right?"

Tommy: "What?"

Julian: “That’s why you’re all here tonight.”

Tommy hit the stairs. Julian’s laughter following behind him. There was an arrow on the landing to the next flight. An arrow through the doors taped on the wall. So this was how it was going to turn out between them, Tommy thought. He’d finally been caught in his lies. Finally had to come out with the truth. There should have been feelings of relief when he told her what he really wanted from the future. What he didn’t want from it. After two years, all the not-saids unravelled between them. The relief lasted all of about no seconds because he stepped into these messes. But now...he was heading...he was almost to the door. Arrows pointing him now to the inevitable. He ran as hard as he could but still he didn’t make any distance. His exertion was a lie. The sweat, the heavy breathing, the blurred vision, all consequences of running on the spot. The hall kept getting longer. His legs spinning out of control. Surely the ground under him wearing away. God, let it. Let me fall through the floor. Let me disappear. Don’t let me face her. Don’t let me hear those words. Let Julian be wrong. I can’t be a father. Not that. Not ever.

He gave up fighting himself. He burst through the open door.

In the center of the room, crouched and lying on more than a dozen blue mats, were husbands and their pregnant wives. The women lay on their backs with their knees up. They wore yoga pants and baggy shirts. The men wore jeans and sweaters. Many had beards. In unison, the women sat up, the men turned their heads. They all looked at Tommy.

The instructor, who stood at the back of the class, clapped her hands.

Instructor: “People, continue your breathing exercises. I’ll deal with this

deadbeat.”

The woman came toward Tommy, dressed in matching pink jacket and skirt, white blouse underneath, and a thin red tie. A whistle hung around her neck. Her blond hair was pulled back in a bun, her complexion pale, her lips bright red.

Instructor: “I am Dana Katz. You are disturbing my class. You are disturbing my class’ foetuses. You are disturbing me. Why?”

Tommy: “I was told my girlfriend might be here.”

Dana: “I see. And did you knock your *girlfriend* up? Because that’s the only reason you have to be here right now. Is that the reason?”

Tommy: “I didn’t think I had.”

Dana: “You don’t think so. God, how many times have I heard that. No, why should you think so, eh? Why should you think so after your scum is out of your system?”

Tommy: “It’s not like that.”

Dana: “It’s always like that. Always. Maybe I’m wrong though. Maybe, after thirty-seven years of teaching, after twenty-five years of child rearing, after eighty-six combined hours of natural labour, I’m wrong. Am I wrong? Eh? Am. I. Wrong?”

Tommy: “In this case maybe.”

Dana: “And why’s that? Can’t your cum work? Are you infertile?” She put her hand to her mouth. “Oh my god. I’m so sorry. You’re infertile aren’t you? I’m such an ass.” She blew her whistle. “Class, I want you to hear this. I’ve just made a biggie of a social faux pas and I don’t want you to make the same mistake. We have to remember that not all of us are fortunate enough to bring life into this world. Do you understand

me? I'm trying to teach you to show some sensitivity to abnormals like this fella here."

One of the men put up his hand.

Dana: "Yes, Glen?"

Glen: "Couldn't he adopt?"

Dana: "Glen has a point. Have you investigated alternative methods to natural conception."

Tommy: "No. But I wouldn't anyway."

Dana: "Oh, I see. Well we have to respect him. Some people aren't emotionally equipped -- in my book, aren't mature enough -- to raise children who aren't of their own flesh and blood. Sad really, when you consider all the little bodies out there yearning for a hug. But don't you worry about them, mister. I'm sure some other mommy or daddy will come along and give those lost children all the shelter and love they deserve. So just leave it to someone else, you prick."

Tommy: "What's your problem? I've got no interest in children. Big deal."

There was a collective gasp from the group. Dana stomped her foot on the floor angrily. She stomped her foot again. In all her years.... She had never seen.... She was too angry to think on.

Dana: "What? No kids?"

Glen: "But that's not right."

The Mums: "He has to have kids!"

The Dads: "How could he not?"

Dana: "He's an idiot. When he's settled down he'll change his mind."

The Mums: "Yes, he's young."

The Dads: “He’s restless.”

Glen put his arm around Tommy’s shoulder.

Glen: “I was like you once. I was selfish. But then I got a good job. I got married.” Glen lightly tapped his wife’s chin with his fist. “We bought a house. I should have been content. But still there was something missing.”

The Group: “A void.”

Glen: “Yes. An emptiness.”

The Group: “And then?”

Glen’s Wife (*lifting her hands from her belly*): A son.

The Group clapped.

Dana (*to Trudy*): “You heard enough?”

Trudy, who’d been hiding at the back of the crowd, pushed through the couples.

Trudy: “Yes. See, everybody, I told you. Now enough with the kid gloves, let me at him.”

Tommy: “Trudy. I didn’t know....”

What could he say? She was pregnant. He was going to be a father. For years he’d said to himself never. No way. He’d been so careful. Practiced ejaculating into condoms. Mastered pulling-out with them on -- he always held the base of the condom in place when he came to prevent it slipping up and any sperm slipping out. If a girl wasn’t on the pill he insisted on using contraceptive foam, which he made sure to carry in his knapsack at all times. He even faked orgasms with his girlfriends the week before they were to have their periods -- marking down the expected date in his agenda book and counting backward from the day before the last date which they’d had it.

He never said anything about this to any of them. In fact not to anybody. Not about the agenda book. Not about his method. Not about children. If anyone asked he said, "Someday." Knowing that at his age that this was the appropriate answer to give. Yes, someday off in the future. When he settled down a bit. And when that someday came, he guessed this to be in his mid-thirties, with his answer starting to wear thin, well then he was going to tell people he wanted to focus on his career. Or something. He really hoped that he'd find out he couldn't have children because then people would feel sorry for him rather than just think his choices were wrong.

The pregnant women and their husbands formed a circle around Tommy and Trudy. Dana, stood between the two of them. She gave Tommy the once over. She gave Trudy the once over. She blew her whistle.

Dana: "Go get him, girl."

Tommy (*quickly*): "Why did you let those guys destroy our apartment?"

Trudy: "I had nothing to do with those people."

Tommy: "Well, I didn't organize it."

Trudy: "Look I don't give a fuck. You did or you didn't. You're a liar so even if you say no, I won't know. Maybe in two years you'll come to me and say, oh yeah, those guys that threw everything out, I hired them."

Tommy: "Oh come on. We've lost everything."

Trudy pushed up the sleeves of her sweater.

Trudy: "You should have told me you didn't want a kid."

Tommy: "Can we talk about this in private?"

Trudy: "No."

Tommy: "But, I mean, we need to deal with our baby?"

Trudy: "What baby?"

Tommy: "Isn't that why you're here? Isn't that why you're so angry?"

Trudy: "No. I'm here because the janitor said this was the best place to hide."

Tommy: "So you're not pregnant? We're not having a baby?"

Trudy: "Jesus, no. Me being here is just an accident."

Tommy: "Oh thank god." He was almost weeping. He moved to hug her but Dana pushed him back.

Dana: "Keep your distance."

Tommy: "Sorry. Trudy, we need to sort this out. We've had a misunderstanding."

Trudy: "Would you take some responsibility? We're not having a misunderstanding. You want to go one way with your life. I want to go another. That's all there is to it."

Tommy: "Don't be like this."

Trudy: "Do you hear that everyone? He wants me to change what I'm like."

The Crowd heckled him.

Dana: "Typical."

Tommy: "Be quiet. This has nothing to do with you."

They grew silent.

Trudy: "What do you mean this has nothing to do with them? Look at them. They're going to be fathers and mothers soon."

Glen: "Actually, we have two kids already."

Dana: "I have four."

Trudy: "That's wonderful. This guy," motioning to Tommy, "He'll never have them. Because the world's too mean. And he doesn't think he'll be a good daddy."

The group pointed at Tommy and jeered.

Tommy: "Oh, like none of you regret your kids. Like none of you have a Billie or Judy selling drugs and stabbing the teachers. Kids you can't control. That you wish didn't come from your gene pool."

A few couples lowered their heads, ashamed.

Dana: "Don't let this guy talk you down. You're all parents. You're all the best parents anyone can be. Say it with me, I'm going to be a great parent."

The Group: "I'm going to be a great parent."

Trudy (*to Tommy*): "You see. You see. Face it, you're just saying you don't want a kid because you're scared. But sooner or later, by break or by mistake, you'll be a proud dad."

Glen: "You'll truly understand the meaning of Father's Day."

The Dads: "Here here."

Tommy: "What do I care about some crayon made card? Or a hat of macaroni? Do any of you still have these gifts?"

No one did.

Tommy: "I thought not."

The group hesitated. Trudy punched her fist into her open palm.

Trudy: "You think you're so slick, Mr. Single. Mr. Bachelor. Wait until you're in your fifties. You'll be happily calling yourself uncle to all of your friends' kids. Every time you see those kids you'll be reminded of how obsolete your life has become."

Tommy: "I object."

Dana: "Overruled."

The Group cheered.

Tommy: "I won't marvel at the little tykes' little fingers and toes. I won't think how precious life is when I see them. I will see snotty children crying, screaming, wanting. Those dear little hands stretched out for more. I will see the disgust on your children's faces when they look at you with contempt and then horror, when they're told they look just like you."

Trudy: "Well, who wants to look like you?"

Tommy: "I won't give them the chance."

The crowd booed. He shrugged his shoulders at them. Dana frowned. Blew her whistle.

Dana: "Okay, calm down everybody. Trudy, take a second."

Dana moved in close to Tommy.

Tommy: "I have nothing to say to you."

Dana: "Look, buddy, from here on out, if you're asked a question, don't pull any more bullshit tough guy answers. Nobody came to see any of that. Understood."

Tommy: "Great. Fine."

Glen (*cupping his hands over his mouth*): "Why didn't you tell her you didn't want kids."

Dana: "That's ten points for Glen."

Trudy: "Because he wanted to live his little life with his selfish prick."

Tommy: "Well, I told you, didn't I? I was man enough to face up to my lies, prick

and all.”

Dana: “I warned you about that shit.”

Trudy: “Why did you tell me?”

Tommy: “I told you because...”

He didn’t have the answer. Because she needed to know. That was a lie. Because he felt guilty. True, but a lie. Ah, the lie. He’d made the one. He’d added a second. A dash of a third. He was building up a wall of them. He’d had so many, he’d been worried they’d need to get a bigger apartment. There was the one about the children’s names he liked. The age he’d like to retire. Neighbourhoods he’d like to settle down in. The good old questions Trudy had the answers to. God, he was jealous of her organization skills. Her passion. No laughter, please, but he was actually jealous of her passion for her job. She worked in insurance. She was passionate about insurance. And he wasn’t. Not that he had to be, but maybe if he had been....

The circle leaned their ears toward him. Waiting to see if he could swing the balance. If he could somehow sway their opinions. He wasn’t going to. He couldn’t. He didn’t want to try, knowing that he’d fail.

Tommy: “I told you because, in the end, you needed to know.”

Trudy: “But why not a year ago. Were you bored? Was this your way of ending it? Being dramatic?”

Tommy: “No. Nothing like that. I guess, I didn’t know what your reaction would be. I thought there might be a chance you’d feel differently about the whole thing. I thought we could work through it.”

Trudy: “Oh.”

He asked it. Even though he knew.

Tommy: "Can we?"

Before she had time to answer, a cell phone rang.

Dana searched everyone's face, pissed. The cell phone, her mortal enemy, strikes again. The beast with a million heads. All yammering away. In business meetings. Church. School. Potlucks. Now, its digital buttons had beeped their way into her Lamaze classes. She was getting too old for this. Before she knew it, mothers and fathers would be talking to their foetuses on them. "What would you like for dinner." "Don't kick so hard." Not that any of these fuckers ever scolded their kids anymore. Oh no, nobody ever says no. That's being insensitive. Now parenting was all about sitdowns and working things through. How do you work things out with a teenager who's only form of communication is to slam a door in your face? The phone kept ringing. God, she hated her job.

Dana: "Answer that thing right now."

It was Trudy's. She went to the back of the classroom and got her bag. Dana grabbed the phone from her, pushed the TALK button, and blew her whistle into the receiver. She handed it back to Trudy.

Trudy: "Hello? Oh, hi Milt. Are you okay? Oh, no, we just had a bad connection for a moment there." She frowned at Dana. "No, I'm okay. How are you? You did. How's the car? Oh my god, I'm sorry. Can it be repaired? Well, I hope so too, I know how much you love it. Just a second." She handed the phone to Tommy. "I'm sorry. I can't do this anymore."

Trudy motioned to the circle to let her pass. They opened up for her and she left.

Dana blew her whistle at her back. This accomplished nothing.

Tommy took the phone.

Tommy: "Hi, Dad."

Milt: "Tommy, what's going on? Where's Trudy?"

Tommy: "She left."

Milt: "But you two are talking again, right?"

Tommy: "Honestly dad, I'm not getting into this with you."

He heard his mother in the background:

Pearl: "What's he saying?"

Milt: "Trudy's gone again."

Pearl: "Where to? The wagon's not a hundred per cent, but we can still crank her."

Milt: "Tommy, you there? We're coming to get you. We'll all go after Trudy--"

He took the phone away from his ear, ignoring Milt, who was still talking. The circle had come apart, and the couples and Dana were milling about watching Tommy and waiting.

Dana: "Well?"

Tommy: "What?"

Dana: "Are you going to follow her?"

Tommy: "No."

Dana: "Oh, that's right. You never change. You want to be stubborn. It's always about your wants and needs."

Tommy: "No it's not."

One of the women pointed at him, one hand on her belly.

Pregnant Woman: "Why do you hate me?"

Tommy: "I don't even know you."

Dana: "She meant it metaphorically, you asshole."

Glen held up his hand. When nobody turned to him he spoke up.

Glen: "Do you find pregnant women unattractive?"

Dana (*spitting*): "Oh yeah, I bet that's it. It's a sex thing with you. You want to keep your women tight and fit. Make sure they never gain that baby weight."

Tommy: "You want the honest truth. I'd say you," he pointed at Dana, "probably you shouldn't have kids either."

There were murmurs of acknowledgement from The Group.

Dana: "You what?"

Tommy: "Look at you. You're yelling. You're wound tight. You look like you're angry all the time. You're probably raising kids to act the same way."

Dana: "I want you to know that this is only my outside personality. I behave much differently at home. Besides, my husband is a very timid man. I have to compensate for a lot in my relationship. I'm a good mother. And if anyone in this class thinks they're bad parents then you get the hell out of here right now."

The lights went off. Julian began closing the door.

Dana: "What're you doing?"

Julian: "Oh my stars. I didn't notice you all."

Dana: "How could you not? We're a classroom full of people?"

Julian: "Okay, yeah I saw you. But you know the rules, school closes at eleven."

Dana: "Look, Jules, I've got more important things going on here than some

asinine rules. This punk is trying to convince everybody not to have children.”

Julian (*shaking his head*): “Don’t have kids? You don’t have kids, you don’t have life. Seems to me, people got to have kids.”

The judgement passed through the group with the fury of one collective slap across their faces. Waking them up. Reviving them. Turning a once fruitful discussion of ideas into a single-minded note. What were they thinking? How could they listen to Tommy? He was talking about life. About their little unborns. About the future of all humankind. What arrogance. What audacity. To say no to children. To have the gall to question them as parents. They wanted nothing more than to raise their little ones to be future leaders. No! Their children were future leaders. Their children were great, and all the parents just knew it.

Dana led the charge. The verdict was in. The sentence had to be read.

Dana: “You are going to have a child.”

Tommy, sensing the shift in mood, began slowly backing himself to the door. He threw the cell phone toward Julian, who caught it in the air and began listening and talking to Milt.

Tommy: “No I’m not.”

Dana: “You will change your mind. You will settle down and change your mind.”

Tommy: “No.”

Glen: “But everybody needs to experience the wonders of birth. I’d experience it myself if I could.” He punched himself in the groin. Fell to the ground. “Blast you, stupid penis.”

Tommy took off. The group, Dana in the lead, went after him. The husbands

trailed their wives, the gay couples chased their surrogates, all giving words of encouragement, reminding them to breathe. Tommy had about ten feet on them.

Dana: "We'll chase you forever if we have to."

Tommy: "Your waters will break. You'll have to give up."

Glen (*limping*): "For someone against childbirth, you sure do know a lot about our waters."

Dana: "You tell him, Glen."

Tommy reached the first floor. He picked up speed. He jumped down the small flight of stairs, through the front door, out onto the sidewalk. He was home free. He was like the wind. In no time they'd be back behind him panting, holding one another. Dana would kick the ground. Spit on the floor. He checked to see if he was right. The group was still ten feet behind him.

Dana: "Losing steam, loverboy?"

Tommy: "Never."

Direction didn't matter. What Tommy needed to do was lose these people. He needed space to think. Time to relax. In his head there were so many different discussions, different situations. They were swallowing him up. Even as he'd been saying no to babies, he'd felt himself wavering. Not because he'd wanted to, but because it would have made talking to them easier. Not just them though, it would have made everything in his life easier. If Trudy had stayed, if they'd had time alone to hash things out, he honestly believed he may have convinced himself, convinced her, that he wanted children. He even thought he would have gone through with it.

The group gained five feet. Then Tommy got a break. As he hit the intersection,

the lights for him turned yellow. He was able to reach the other side but the group was forced to stop at the corner.

Glen (*yelling*): “We have to think of our kids.”

What Tommy didn't see as he ran off was Dana step out into the middle of the road and stop a police car. The police officer pulled over.

The Officer: “What's the hurry ma'am?” He noted the pregnant ladies. “You lot going to need an escort?”

Dana: “No, officer. We're actually trying to get our hands on a motherfucker who's denigrating us.”

The Officer: “What? You a lynching party? Because if that's the case, I have to warn you, we outlawed that--”

Dana: “Hell no. We've got a messed up kid who doesn't want to have children.”

The Officer: “He's probably infertile. You should really be more respectful--”

Dana: “No. He thinks he's too good for it.”

The Officer: “Oh he does does he. Well, we'll see about that. You all better hop in.”

Dana: “They're too many of us.”

The Officer: “Well, then, a couple of you get in.”

Dana: “I really don't feel comfortable leaving anyone behind.”

The Officer nodded, impressed by Dana's leadership skills.

The Officer: “Give me a second.”

The Officer stepped out of his car. He waved to a bus that was heading past him. The bus slowed down, The Tip opened the door.

The Tip: "What seems to be the problem, officer?"

The Officer: "I need to commandeer your vehicle, sir. I've got a kid on the loose that's distressing pregnant women."

The Tip: "That's terrible."

The Officer: "I know. And in this day and age with all the choices at their disposal. Apparently, he's too good to be a father."

The Tip sat up a little straighter.

The Tip: "Officer, I know this character. Load these people up and I'll follow behind you."

The Officer: "This is really a police matter."

The Tip: "No, now it's personal."

Dana and The Officer helped the women and husbands onto the bus while The Tip explained the situation to his passengers. None of them got off. The man with stilts, who had taken his stilts off and which were now resting in the chair beside him, thrust his fist in the air, and spoke the sentiments of the rest of the passengers.

Man with stilts: "This is a job for all of us."

The Tip followed behind Dana and the Officer. They drove several blocks but there was no sign of Tommy. He had disappeared. The group's next course of action -- the only option as far as The Tip could see -- was to head to the boy's parents' house, whose address The Tip had been given after the accident, and wait for the kid to show up or call. He led the way, calmly manoeuvring through the city's quiet night streets. The only movement he saw, beside the police car behind him, was from the bus's shadow, reflected by the street lamps, as it continuously trailed, moved parallel, and finally passed

on the nearly dark store front windows that the bus was nestled between.

*

Driving east along the lake front into the city, and to their left -- if they are driving west this description will reverse -- drivers and passengers will see skyscrapers, billboards with electronic information blipping by underneath, condominiums -- built or under construction -- inhabited and for lease, a sports stadium parented to a tower, diverging levels of highway, other cars, buses, the homeless in tents underneath the highway, traffic lights in varying degrees of stop and go, streets diverging off east west north south throughout the city -- the connecting glue of cement, gravel, and tar that make up the visible foundation of these streets, the invisible being the sewer systems, the pipes, the electric wiring, the cables, that is needed to keep the city moving in its constant state of flux.

To their right, the drivers and passengers have the contrasting sight of the lake, its naturalness a tonic to the artificial that battles it on all sides. The lake manages to stay afloat even as it's attacked by the people, the houses, the amusement parks, the ferries that crash through its waters, the planes that fly overhead, the litter, pollutants, and human waste sunk into it. There's the occasional dead body that slinks by. And yet in the lake's flow, its movement, its restlessness, its very identity, resounds the perfect image of the city. Did the lake forge the identity of the city with its muted impenetrability? Or over the last century, has the city shaped the lake's behaviour with its indelicate constructions and citizens?

For Tommy Le Van, the answers remain obscure. To solve the city's mazes and

secrets, to understand the magnitude of the lake, would be keys to his escape. They were his jailers, keeping him chained to the city streets and behind the city walls. Granted, his inability to make decisions, his fear of change, and his lack of courage, didn't help him. But when he needed to press responsibility on somebody the city took the brunt of it. Its vastness making him feel as if the city were fenced in on all sides, with sentries guarding from turrets, and a drawbridge that was opened once at dawn and once at night, and only for those with the King's seal -- in blood. For ye, Tommy Le Van, dare not enter the wilds beyond, cause yer passage is ravoked. He was trapped. He'd been trapped before he met Trudy. Trapped after he met her. He wanted a way out. To where? For what? Another job in a used bookstore in some other city? Is that what you aspire to Tommy Le Van? Quietly, embarrassed, he has to admit that yes that's what he wants. He wants space. He wants distance from everyone he knows. That would be glorious. In twenty-seven years he hadn't been anywhere. He'd been outside the city limits to Kingston, Wasaga Beach, and Peterborough, but these didn't count as character-building journeys. They were trips taken with his parents.

Tommy wanted to be somewhere else. He stumbled down side streets then out onto Yonge Street, oblivious to the police car and bus that past behind him. He stopped at a store window which was lined with television sets of varying sizes and brands, all piled on top of one another. He saw himself on all the screens. Some displayed his face. Some showed him head to toe. He waved at himself. Twenty Tommys' waved back. God, did he really look like that? All that rough skin. That puzzled look on his face when he was thinking 'God, do I really look like that'." How was somebody with that face and that disproportioned body going to escape the city, he wondered.

The channels changed and he was watching himself on different channels. Different station insignias in the bottom right hand corner. Where was the camera that was putting him on those screens? He pressed his face against the window but couldn't see it.

Tommy: "That's weird."

As he said this, a car passed by, its windows wide open, and Tommy's voice coming from the speakers, saying 'That's weird.' That couldn't have been, he thought.

At the corner he stopped to let a couple pushing a baby carriage pass him. The husband waved at Tommy. Tommy ignored him, but the husband, not to be missed, waved with both his hands.

Tommy: "What is it?"

Husband (*pointing at the baby*): "Don't you just love him?"

Tommy bent over to look in the baby carriage. The baby that looked up at him had Tommy's face. Not the face he had as a baby but the face he had now. The face didn't change expression. It remained frozen in surprise. Tommy must have looked horrified because the couple laughed.

Wife: "It's just a mask."

She lifted the Tommy mask off the baby who stretched its hands out at Tommy.

Husband: "Look, Janey, Becky likes the nice man."

Janey: "Oh, Chip, isn't this wonderful?"

Chip (*to Tommy*): "Sir, don't you just love her. It would be swell if you could take a photograph of us holding our daughter."

Becky: "Ga-ga."

Tommy: "Now's not a good time."

Janey: "How's that?"

Tommy: "I'm not interested."

Chip: "Oh, sure, we get it. What you mean is that our baby's not good enough for you."

Janey threw the Tommy mask at Tommy.

Janey: "Thanks a lot, asshole."

Chip gave Tommy the finger as he and his family walked away.

Tommy picked the mask up off the sidewalk. The mask really was of him, he hadn't imagined it. He tried imitating his face. A woman screamed. Tommy looked up to see what was going on. The woman was pointing up at a giant video screen on the side of a building that displayed Tommy's grinning face. He stopped grinning. Someone else screamed. He didn't blame them. This Tommy head floating against the side of the building looked like it was going to break through the screen and start eating people. This wasn't the only screen. In the cement park diagonal to the street corner Tommy was standing at, there was screen, about twenty feet in the air, five feet by five feet, that stood on an oversized TV stand. And another one down the street, on the side of a different building.

These Tommys were too much for Tommy. He was suffocating in himself. He ran north, not seeing Marice come on the screen behind him.

Marice (*shouting*): "Tommy, hold up."

Marice ran after Tommy. With his long stride, Marice was able to catch up with Tommy quickly.

Marice: "Stop running."

Tommy (*realizing who Marice is*): "You."

Marice: "Yes, me."

Tommy: "You know what's going on, don't you?"

Marice: "I do."

Tommy: "Am I going crazy?"

Marice: "No, you're not."

Tommy: "How did I get up on all those screens?"

Marice: "It was your turn."

Tommy: "My turn? Who said so?"

Marice: "I wouldn't worry. You won't last. You'll settle down soon, and this will become a distant memory."

Tommy: "But I didn't want to 'last' in the first place. I don't want to settle down."

Marice: "I can understand that. Most people don't want to give up. It happens though."

Tommy: "You know what, I'm not interested. I'll look after myself."

Marice: "I wish I could let you. But I've got my orders."

Tommy: "Orders? From who? My mother?"

A car, a brown Rabbit, screeched to the curb blocking Tommy from crossing the street. Jake got out of the car. Grabbed Tommy by the shoulders.

Jake: "Let's go, buddy."

Tommy kicked Jake in the shins. Jake ignored it. Tommy kicked Alex as he was pushed into the back seat.

Marice: "Let him be wild, guys. Let him get it out of his system. You want to hit something?" Marice turned in his seat, held his hands up, palms out. "Punch as hard as you want at these babies until you tire yourself out."

Rupert: "Folks, let's welcome back Tommy Le Van."

Tommy looked around, expecting to see another audience sitting in bleachers across the road. They weren't there though. It was just Tommy and the clowns in the car.

Tommy punched one of Marice's hands.

Tommy: "What's the matter with you guys? You don't go around grabbing people off the street."

Alex: "We're doing you a favour. We're running interference for you, buddy."

Tommy: "No. You're interfering."

Jake: "Well, *excuse me*."

Tommy: "Am I in debt?"

Marice: "Are you?"

Alex: "He means with us."

Marice: "You don't owe us any money."

Tommy: "Okay. This is what's going on. You've got me mixed up with someone else. There's been some sort of identity theft, right? That's popular."

Marice held out a picture of Tommy. The picture was taken when Tommy was 4. Minutes before the photograph had been taken he had accidentally fallen off a dock and into a lake and Milt had been forced to scoop him out. When Pearl took the photo, Tommy was sitting on a rock near the lake, soaking wet in his jeans and shirt, his

unhappy face in his fists.

Marice: "That's you, right?"

Tommy: "Where'd you get that?"

Marice: "Your parents gave it to Joe. He gave it to me."

Tommy: "So it is my parents who're behind this."

Marice: "The only thing your parents are behind is caring for you."

Tommy: "Okay. So Joe's the problem. You guys are all employed by him--"

Jake: "I'm no monkey for that guy."

Alex: "Jake and I have our own moving company. We rent a floor of Joe's house."

Jake: "His mother's house."

Alex: "He's a momma's boy."

Marice: "Show some respect for the dead."

Jake and Alex: "Sorry, Marice."

Rupert (*clearing his throat*): "Perhaps I can help here?"

Tommy: "Are you going to tell me who you are?"

Rupert: "Rupert Rezen. A pleasure to meet you."

Rupert held his hand over the back of his seat. When Tommy didn't take it, Rupert turned the shake into a wave.

Rupert: "Fair enough, I guess. Your life's upside down. You don't trust us. You don't trust me. Your girlfriend's gone--"

Jake (*petting Tommy's shoulder*): "Trudy's gone. I'm so sorry. Had I understood that, I'd have approached you differently. Kid gloves and such, I swear."

Tommy: "That's wonderful."

Rupert: "Is it fair to say you don't know if you're coming or going?"

Tommy: "Pretty much."

Tommy was so tired of fighting. All the running around, his adrenaline levels racing. He had nothing left. He sat back in his seat.

Tommy: "Where are we going?"

Marice: "Your parents'-- for a late snack."

Well, that did it. His parents, of course. Lose Trudy. Back in the nest. Maybe they didn't plan this but his parents would certainly be happy with the result. Little Tom-Tom, home to roost.

Marice: "Joe will be there. His lady friend, Jacqueline."

Alex: "Hey. Jackie's not tied to anyone."

Jake kicked the back of Marice's seat. Alex slapped at his head. They poked each other, calling Joe a cheat. The car swerved into the opposite lane.

Rupert: "You guys are making me really nervous back there."

Marice: "Calm down. Alright, I guess Jacqueline isn't tied to Joe. He hasn't given her a ring yet. If she wanted she could leave at any time."

Jake: "Is that fucker proposing to her? Be honest. I can take it."

Alex (*snivelling*): "I'm not ready. I've been trying to save for one. I just kept putting it off. Worrying that she'd say no. Maybe though, maybe she'd say yes."

Jake: "She'd say no."

Alex: "Show me some mercy in my moment of pain."

Marice: "Nobody's proposing to anybody."

Jake: "Let's keep it that way. And as for you--" Jake waved his fist at Tommy.

“You better not get involved with Jackie. Don’t even be pleasant to her.”

Alex: “Only if he can help it.”

Jake: “That’s what I meant.”

Alex: “Like hell you did.”

Tommy grabbed Alex’s fist in mid-throw.

Tommy: “I’ll be civil. Okay?”

Jake: “Good.”

Alex: “Yeah.”

Rupert: “Fellas, you mind if I have the floor?”

Marice: “Go right ahead.”

Rupert: “Thomas, we’ve all dealt with our share of women problems. I’ve had mine, the boys back there with you, they’re dealing with the little square love thing that they’ve got going on with Joe and Jacqueline.”

Jake: “It’s not a square, Rupe. That’s my heart you’re talking about.”

Rupert: “Right you are. My point is just that we’ve all been there. And for what? For what?” He hit his steering wheel. “I’m fifty-nine years old. I’m a nearly retired game show host. I certainly didn’t end up where I expected to. I grew up wanting to be an archaeologist. I wanted to dig up bones. To dig cups that are two thousand years old. Can’t you just see it? Finding some insignificant clay cup that has pushed itself along through the years. That’s something.”

Outside their windows, skyscrapers passed by. The buildings did not have uniform heights, though they all shared the same generic box design. They were not stacked chockablock down each street. There was distance between them, allowing each building

to breathe, to have the space to contain itself, even as it was loomed over by other larger buildings. Around some buildings was open space, twenty feet of grass, cement benches, sculptures -- all made of metal, no curves, but hard edges as if warning pedestrians away from touching or even looking at them. All the buildings had expansive lobbies, with at least thirty-foot ceilings, that workers filed through during the day filling it with their bodies and noise, using it as a passageway. The foot traffic rarely ballooned into a crowd unless one or more of the elevators had broken down. If there was an unexpected or heavy storm this could stop people at the revolving doors, where they milled about watching in awe, or cursing themselves for not being properly prepared. Highly uncommon would be a blackout of the entire building. If this did happen, the workers arrived on the first floor in droves. Often, people stood around awaiting instructions, or crowding the concierge's desk demanding answers. And then the concierge -- really the only person meant to fill the lobby's space behind a little booth with swivel chair -- who always came dressed, even on casual Fridays, in a non-descript navy blue suit, was allowed to break from this rigid character, and over the suit wore an orange and neon yellow vest with EMERGENCY printed in large black letters on the back, and held a crackling walkie-talkie in one hand, a megaphone at the ready, handle up, on the desk. The importance of the concierge, who until that moment had seemed insignificant in comparison to the space he or she filled, was finally legitimized.

As Tommy watched the buildings pass, he saw the same scene played out in front of many of them. A concierge huddled with cleaning people in the late night cold, smoking and chatting, the cleaners distinguished by the white aprons they wore. They were all so small compared to the lobby windows they stood in front of. He leaned over

Jake and tried to see the top of one of the buildings but he couldn't. He would have had to open the car window to do so. No, the people back there, their combined height didn't amount to any significance against those resolute bodies. They were consumed by that height. By the surrounding heights.

Why were they passing all these buildings? These should have been in the opposite direction from where they were supposed to be going. His parents lived in a residential street, far from the business district.

Tommy: "Where are you taking me?"

Rupert: "To your parents' house."

Tommy: "Yeah, but we're going west on King Street."

Rupert: "Absolutely."

Tommy: "My parents live north of Yonge and Lawrence."

Rupert: "Okay. Gentlemen, I have to apologize, I've lost track again. I'll right the situation in no time."

Rupert took a right at the next light and began heading north.

Rupert: "Actually, while we've got a moment, and since Tommy hasn't heard me sing--"

Jake: "No fucking way man. Don't push me to the extreme."

Alex: "Yeah, seriously Rupert. Every time we do a gig with you, you force this on us."

Rupert took a CD out of the glove compartment and fed it to the player which sucked it in.

Rupert: "Well, fellas, I don't care what you want. I've got a new audience here.

That means fresh ears. And he's exactly the demographic I'm going for. The 18 to 34's. That's the age that's buying retro music. Not some forty year old movers sharing a one-floor house together."

Jake: "Are you being derogatory?"

Alex: "The gay thing...even if you're sarcastic...that's not funny. We put up with that so much."

Jake: "I can't even go skins to move stuff anymore. It's always shirts because of all the innuendo we get."

Rupert: "Oh, be quiet."

From the speakers the beat of drums then what sounded like the clap of hands to the rhythm of the drums. A woman sang *The night we met I knew I needed you so*. Rupert hit pause.

Rupert: "You heard that, right, Tommy?"

Tommy: "I heard it."

Rupert: "Okay. Here's what I want to do. This is my take on the song. And normally, just so you know, I do this with my eyes closed."

Marice: "No, you're not."

Rupert: "I said 'normally'. Okay Maestro. And a one, and a two." He paused. Took a breath. Exhaled. Sang: "The night we met-- No. Sorry. If I don't hit that THE I fall apart. Here, take the wheel, Marice."

Marice (*taking the wheel*): "Please don't do this."

Rupert: "Take the damn thing before I lose my temper." He held up his hands. "What do you think if I put them in my pockets? Or behind my back? Or I was even

thinking of using them as a guide for the words.”

Tommy: “How would the last one work?”

Rupert spoke the first line of the song, emphasising each word with the pound of his fist in the air.

Tommy: “I’d keep them in your pocket.”

Rupert: “Thank you. God, see how helpful this is. Okay Marice, I got her from here.” Rupert began driving again. He tapped the steering wheel, whispered: “One, two, three.” Then: “*The night we--* is that too deep?”

Tommy: “No.”

Rupert (*looking at Tommy*): “*The--*”

Tommy: “Too soft.”

Rupert: “*The.*”

Tommy: “I don’t know. No.”

Marice: “Break slowly.”

Rupert did.

Rupert: “What was wrong with that one? I liked that one. Oh never mind.

Alright. Here we go again. *The night we met I knew--* Shoot. Crap. I’m pulling over.”

Tommy: “No, that time was good.”

Rupert: “Are you kidding? I spoke the line, I didn’t sing it. I’ve got to sing.”

Tommy: “But it worked.”

Rupert: “No, I want to sing it. I’m going to sing it.”

Tommy: “I was just suggesting--”

Rupert: “No. That’s fine. That’s great. I just don’t feel the same way as you.

I'll try again and this time I'm singing it. And...go, *The night I loved you... I knew...I needed it slow.*" Rupert slapped his hands together. "That's the best one yet.

That's what I need."

A cell phone rang. Rupert patted his breast pocket. Took out a palm sized silver cell phone.

Rupert: "Oh shit. Tom, would you take this for me? My ex-wife, the second, Marjorie. I can't do it. Not right now. Not after nailing the song."

Tommy: "Let someone else."

Jake: "I'll owe you."

Alex: "Me too."

Marice nodded as well. Tommy grabbed the phone from Rupert.

Rupert: "You're a decent guy, Thomas."

Rupert turned his CD back on. Tommy waved for him to turn it down. Rupert waved back at him, but didn't comply. Tommy put the phone to his ear. At the other end was a man, a drunk man.

Tommy (*whispering to Rupert*): "It's a guy."

Rupert: "One of her friends. She'll be the one screaming in the background."

And sure enough, there was a woman screaming. The man, who talked in a stilted voice, repeated everything that was yelled to him to say.

The Man: "What little cooze are you trying to impress now. I know it. I know you are doing it. You are having a good time at being alone?"

Marjorie got on the phone, not before yelling at the first speaker.

Marjorie (*to The Man*): "I've heard better crank calls from a person on their death

bed.” (To Tommy): “What’s that music? Oh, look who wants to be the man and impress the ladies. Listen, minstrel, your voice sounds like rocks being thrown at abandoned houses. Give up the dream, before someone smashes your face. You are nothing. You do not exist. Time will forget you. But before that happens, make sure you drive Alison up to school.”

Tommy (*whispering*): “She’s saying something about Alison?”

Rupert (*grabbing the phone*): “What’s wrong with Alison? School? I know that. I’ve already organized that with her. Yes, the two of us are going up on Thursday. No, I wouldn’t miss it for the world. FINE. Yeah, alright. You be careful too.”

Rupert closed the phone, slipped it back in his breast pocket.

Rupert: “That Marjorie. We sure drive each other nuts. Anyway, it was about Alison. My daughter, Thomas. My greatest achievement. Marice, get that picture out of the glove compartment for the Tom-Man. The eight by ten. Yeah, thanks.”

He handed Tommy a picture of Alison. Blond, shoulder length hair, in jeans and a t-shirt. Standing beside the open trunk of the car Tommy was now in. The trunk packed full of boxes. Alison waving goodbye. She looked normal. Pretty. The kind of girl that a father would be proud of. A girl who loved her father. Ambitious. In some ways, similar to Trudy.

Rupert: “Tom, isn’t she great?”

Tommy: “She’s not really my type anymore.”

Rupert: “No, I don’t mean like that. Anyway, she’s taken. She’s got a steady beau.”

The rest of passengers had their heads leaned against the windows, looking bored as

they watched the street pass by.

Tommy: "You must be proud."

Rupert: "Here's an funny anecdote. I think you'll appreciate this. Do you know when I realized I was her father? It wasn't right after the birth. Which, I suppose, was what you were expecting. No, it was actually a full week after Alison had come home. Marjorie wanted to go out for a while, have some time to herself. So I said go. I'll man the fort. And I did. I sat in the den watching this action movie, *Bullet Head Wound*. And at some point Alison starts crying. My first reaction was Is anybody going to get that kid? Then of course I thought, yeah, you. You're going to stop that little girl from crying. That's your responsibility. I couldn't believe it. I picked her up. I walked her around. And that's when I finally realized, this is my kid. She's mine and she's staying. Weird, huh?"

Tommy: "Why tell me that?"

Rupert: "To show you. To teach you that we're all scared about raising kids."

Rupert threw a cue card out the window.

Tommy: "Well thanks for that." He checked their direction. "Two blocks from now take a left."

Rupert: "You got it."

Tommy folded his arms over his chest. Watched the car turn. Watched the houses pass by on both sides.

Tommy: "It's on the next block. 132."

Rupert: "Right."

Tommy looked at the people he was surrounded by. Half asleep. Unperturbed by

anything. These guys didn't really know what they were doing. They were just doing it. Meanwhile Tommy was going along with them. Being led. What's the matter with him? How many times had Tommy dreamed of thwarting imaginary bank hold-ups. Of being commemorated for a act of genius. Of kindness. Individualized for nothing else but living in the skin of Tommy Le Van. He carried these thoughts, these desires, inside him, hoping that one day, some day, somehow he'd be called upon to act. Why couldn't this be that time.

Tommy: "That's the place."

The car pulled up to the curb in front of Tommy's parents' house.

Rupert: "And here we are. Gentlemen, wake up. Let's nosh."

I'm ready, Tommy thought, as he stepped out of the car. He tripped on the curb and fell into Marice, who righted him and patted his shoulders before sending him on in front of them.

The Le Van house was detached, one floor, with a finished half sunken basement, a front yard with a maple tree, a plot of grass surrounding it, and small garden around the brown porch. The five of them walked up the cement path, Tommy in front, Marice, Rupert, followed by Jake and Alex who kept trying to pass one another. Sitting on the steps on either side, were two of the pregnant couples, who had left enough room in the middle of the stairs for a person to walk between them. They waved and smiled at everyone. On the porch, in two deck chairs sat Dana and a pregnant woman, with Glen sitting on the banister, resting a paper plate, of chicken and potato salad, on his leg. There was a giant candle, five feet high, with four different wicks on it, all lit.

Dana (*holding up a beer*): "Tommy, good to see you. Tommy's friends, good to

see you.”

Tommy: “What’re you doing here?”

Dana: “Cop drove me.”

She pointed at the police cruiser down the street. Tommy was surprised to see a transit bus parked behind it.

Tommy (*to Rupert*): “She with you, too?”

Rupert: “Not me. You, Marice?”

Marice: “Not one of ours.”

Dana: “Hey guys, I’m me, nothing more. Now go in. Say hello to the Le Vans. Talk with the little snapper. And keep your eyes out for any of my class. Make sure none of them are drinking. Especially the men. Especially those pansies.”

Marice opened the screen door and the five of them went inside. There was a small hallway, with shoes scattered in it, that they had to tread carefully over. Jake kicked a few as he walked in. The hallway went right into the dining room, a dining table in the middle, with a white cloth covering it. On top of that were four candles, in pairs, at either end of the table. Between these were four barbequed chickens, on individual white plates, that had been pre-cooked at the store, two large light green bowls, one with potato salad, one with coleslaw, also store bought, a stack of paper plates beside the salads, an assortment of plastic forks and knives in a pile beside them.

Pearl (*from the living room*): “Help yourselves. Drinks are in the fridge. Papers cups are on the kitchen table. If you insist, there are real cups in the cupboard above the toaster. Tommy can show you where those are. And there’s beer if you boys want. But be sensible.”

Tommy pointed carelessly toward the kitchen. Jake and Alex didn't notice, they attacked the table. Jake filling one plate with the salads while Alex went to work picking the remaining legs and wings of the chickens, then cutting pieces.

Alex (*to Jake*): "You want chicken skin, right?"

Jake: "Oh yeah. That's where all the barbeque sauce is."

Tommy: "Remember to breathe when you eat."

He walked into the living room. There were two couches in there, one long, one short, and a wooden rocking chair close to the entrance. The long, three-cushion couch sat underneath the windows looking out onto the porch. Joe Brody sat on this couch, between Pearl, who still wore her dress and satin pumps, but had taken off her wide brim hat and set her sunglasses on her head, and Jacqueline, who had changed, and was now dressed in tight red corduroy pants, a white cardigan open to reveal a purple shirt, and flip-flops. Joe still wore his suit.

The smaller, two-cushion, couch was adjacent to them. On this sat Milt, who had changed into jeans and a grey hooded sweatshirt, and Duke, who was wearing Milt's jogging suit and his own immaculate white runners. Duke held out his fist for Tommy, and Tommy touched it with his own.

Duke: "Now the party starts. Looking good my boy."

Tommy: "Hey, Duke."

Pearl: "Nice to see you."

Tommy: "Mum."

Milt: "Son."

Tommy: "Dad."

Joe: "Tommy, this is your life."

Tommy: "I know. Pretty bad."

Joe: "I'm only sorry that Trudy won't be joining us. Alas, she is gone. Wandered off the stage to find a new part to play. And not, I repeat, not with you."

Tommy: "Is that your advice, judge?"

Joe: "Absolutely."

Milt: "Oh, please let's not talk about Trudy this way. She's gone to stay with her mother for a few days. And while she's here, Tommy, have you been formerly introduced to the lovely Jacqueline?"

Jacqueline held out her hand for Tommy. As he was about to shake it, Jake and Alex, carrying a sagging plate of food in each hand, darted into the living room. Jake shook his head convulsively at Tommy.

Jake: "Hands off."

Tommy took her hand and kissed it.

Tommy (*to Jacqueline*): "Lovely to see you again."

Jacqueline (*smiling*): "You have quite the charmer, Mrs. Le Van."

Pearl: "He has his moments, I'll give him that."

Jake: "You better make sure it's only a moment."

Tommy: "I'm being polite."

Alex ignored the fight. He sat by one of Jacqueline's feet. Held up food for her which she declined. Seeing this, Jake immediately sat down at her feet. Offered her his food. She declined this as well. The two men crossed their legs, glaring at one another. Alex rested a plate of chips on the floor beside him. Jake rested a plate of carrots and

celery on the opposite side.

Alex: "Hi Jack."

Jacqueline: "Hi Alex."

Jake: "Hey baby."

Jacqueline: "Hello Jake."

She said her hellos to them affectionately. Joe lay his hand in her lap, watching them watching him do this.

Tommy turned to see where Marice had got off to. He was leaning against the door frame into the living room, his hands behind his back. Marice smiled at him. Rupert sat across from Marice, in the rocking chair, his arms on the rests, his eyes closed.

Tommy (*to Joe*): "So is this the best you can do?"

Joe: "We haven't even started yet."

There was laughter from the kitchen that was situated next to the living room.

Joe: "Hey, keep it down in there. We're trying to sort some business out."

The Tip stuck his head out of the kitchen.

The Tip: "Oh, the kid's here. Why didn't you say something? Come on folks, the real action's in the living room."

Out of the kitchen came three sets of pregnant couples, one being the gay couple and their surrogate, The Tip, The Officer, Ms. Gruener. And then came the man with the stilts, which he'd tucked under his arm.

Man with stilts: "My name's Tony, if anyone is interested."

Ms. Gruener tried to pull one of the stilts away from Tony.

Ms. Gruener: "Thanks, Tony. If you insist."

Tony pushed her away.

Tommy (*pointing at Ms. Gruener*): "I might have guessed."

Ms. Gruener: "I missed you too, you sexy beast."

Joe: "Yeah, me and Jackie brought her. The old lady said she was lonely. Rupe get up, let the lady sit down."

Ms. Gruener patted Rupert's arm.

Ms. Gruener: "There's a nice strong fellow."

Rupert blushed. Ms. Gruener sat in his lap, wrapped her arms around his neck, and began rocking him.

Joe banged on the window.

Joe: "Alright you lot, come in. Might as well get the whole crew in here."

The other couples filed inside. They all stood in the living room. Dana order her class to sit on the floor. She stood hovering over them, her eyes on the action in the living room, and the police officer, who she found appealing.

Joe: "So, it appears we've got a problem."

Tommy: "Several."

Jake: "Damn straight."

Joe: "Not now, Jake. So, Tommy, you don't want children. That's made your mother very nervous. And if there's one thing I can't stand, what hurts me more than anything else, is an mother upset."

Pearl (*to Joe*): "I'll speak for myself. Tommy, you better have a kid."

Milt: "I second her motion."

Joe: "Find another Trudy and make her happy."

Joe kissed Jacqueline on the cheek. Jake stood up. He waved a drumstick between Joe and Jacqueline. He was almost hysterical.

Jake (*motioning the chicken leg at Tommy*): “I thought we were dealing with this guy.”

Tommy took the drumstick out of Jake’s fingers and bit into it. Then put it back in Jake’s hand.

Joe: “But we’re in love, Jake-o.” (*To everyone else*): “Sorry folks, these guys are my tenants. We’ve been having a bit of a kafuffle about this lovely prize.”

Joe went to kiss Jacqueline again but she backed off.

Jacqueline: “Joey, I warned you about calling me a prize. I’m not a thing to be won.”

The crowd was getting antsy.

Dana: “Come on. Get on to chastising Tommy. We don’t care about your silly love affair.”

The Crowd: “TOM-MY. TOM-MY.”

Pearl: “Calm down. Calm down. We have neighbours, everybody.”

The Crowd (*whispering*): “Tom-my. Tom-my.”

Joe: “Listen Tom, you need to pull yourself together. You’re falling a part.”

Tommy: “True enough.”

Joe: “You need to focus your energy. To carve a niche for yourself in the world out there. Set up stakes.”

The Crowd hissed.

Joe: “What’s the matter with you lot?”

Dana: "No speeches. We want action."

The Crowd cheered.

Tommy: "What action? You want me to impregnate one of you?"

Dana (*pointing at Jacqueline*): "What about her?"

Joe, Jake, and Alex, with coleslaw running down his chin, all stood up.

Joe: "Now, just you wait a second. I'm asking the questions here."

Dana (*to Jacqueline*): "I didn't mean to cause you any offence. You were merely an example."

Joe: "Look kid, you need to wake up. You need to start being responsible for your life. How much savings do you have?"

Tommy: "None."

Glen: "How much property do you own?"

Tommy: "None."

The Officer, who had been scribbling the answers down in a black leather notebook, walked, his knees bent, his back slouched forward, toward Tommy.

The Officer: "So you've got no land, eh. Would it interest you to know that people are buying up condominiums all over the downtown core as we speak? Huh, you want to talk about that?"

Tommy took the book and pen out of the officer's hand and drew a happy face at the bottom of the page. The Officer grabbed his notebook back.

Tommy: "What you're talking about doesn't interest me. I don't have money to even think about buying a condominium, let alone a house, or savings."

Duke: "It's capital, son. Capital."

Tommy: "Well, I don't have that either."

The consensus among the crowd was that Tommy lacked inner drive. When word reached Milt, he became upset. He tried to stand. The couch was so small that he and Duke were almost in each other's lap. Duke had to put his hand under Milt's ass and push, while The Officer pulled Milt up by the shoulders. Milt dusted off his pants. Wiped his mouth.

Milt: "Tommy, there's something I need to tell you. This is something that your mother and I have kept from you for too long."

Tony (*dropping his stilts*): "Oh my god, Tommy ate his conjoined twin while he was in the womb."

Some members of the Crowd began to gag.

Milt: "No. Everybody calm down. That didn't happen. No, it's about his mother and myself. Tommy, please son, be honest here. Why don't you want a baby?"

Milt held Tommy's hand.

Tommy: "Dad, look--"

Milt: "Is it because of me, son?"

Tommy: "What do you have to do with it?"

Milt: "I'm not fancy. I'm not exciting. Why have a kid that might be like me. That might end up like your old man."

Milt was looking at his shoes. What could Tommy say to him? Tommy could tell the others where to go. But to Milt? To his father? How could he pile another failure onto this man who obviously was consumed with them? Especially when the failure was the son to continue the father.

Milt: "Your mother and I, we tried after you. We wanted more. You were the best, Tommy. You make us so happy. And we wanted more."

Pearl: "We couldn't. We just couldn't."

Duke stood up. Put his arm around Milt. Wiped tears out of his eyes.

Duke: "I got nobody except this guy right here. He is the most loyal guy anybody could ever meet. He talks my name up to the women he meets. He always has a seat ready for me at the dinner table. I'm even wearing his clothes. I want you all too remember that. The very shirt off his back not two hours ago is now on me. If that's not what makes a guy fancy, I guess Duke doesn't know the meaning of the word."

Joe: "Look, Tommy. Your parents need a grandchild. Maybe grandchildren. How can you deny them that?"

Tommy: "Be quiet."

Joe: "No, it has to do with you. Who's going to look after you when you're sick? When you're old? When your mother and father, god forbid folks, I hope you're immortal, but really, when they pass away? You can't rely on yourself forever."

Tommy: "Look, why is it so important to you that I have a kid? What's it to you?"

Joe: "What's it to me? What's it to me? Maybe it's nothing. Maybe I don't care."

Tommy: "Good. Please leave."

Joe: "Don't get smart. We all have a stake in this."

Tommy: "Is somebody paying you? Is it the government?"

Joe: "This isn't a conspiracy. I'm talking about a full-blooded kid who is turning his back on that."

Tommy: "Where are your kids? I want to call them and see what kind of a father

you are.”

Jake: “He doesn’t have any.”

Joe: “Pipe it.”

Jake: “Make me.”

Joe: “Believe me, it’s coming.”

Tommy: “So you’ve got no kids.”

Joe: “No.”

Tommy: “You infertile?”

Joe: “Hey, drop it. And before anyone asks, it ain’t impotency. I’ve got issues, fine.” *(To Tommy)*: “It doesn’t mean you have to too. I know you more than you think. I went through what you’re going through. I’m trying to stop you making the same mistakes. Is that wrong? Tell me, am I wrong?”

Dana: “How’s the girlfriend feel?”

The Crowd: “Jack-ie. Jack-ie.”

Jacqueline: “I can’t have children.”

Joe: “Don’t say that.”

Jacqueline: “Why not, it’s true.”

Joe *(standing up)*: “No it’s not. It’s me, alright. She’s covering for me. My sperm are useless. Are all of you happy? Now, enough. You’ve all gone too far. You won’t stop until you’ve got my blood.”

They clapped.

Dana: “And don’t forget Tommy’s.”

Tommy: “Thanks. I was worried you were forgetting me.”

Joe: "Listen to me, Tom. Jackie and I, we could adopt. We'd get ourselves a Chinese baby like all the celebrities are doing. I'd find a way. But I can't. I can't have some kid watching me getting older. Taking care of me. Forcing that on them. But that, what I'm saying, that's a sick worry to stop a man. Don't let it suffocate you. Go for it. I'm telling you. Make life. But don't go back to Trudy. That's my warning to you. She walked out and as far as I'm concerned that's the limit of her."

Dana: "What about Tommy's responsibilities?"

Joe: "I'm trying to give him a positive spin."

Jacqueline: "Joe, you're being harsh."

Joe: "Baby, don't criticize me in front of everyone."

Jacqueline: "Oh, relax."

Joe: "I'm sorry."

Jake: "You're as bad as Tommy."

Joe: "What'd you say?"

Jake: "What I said."

Joe: "Yeah, I know, and that's the problem."

Joe shot up from his seat, fists at the ready. Alex and Jake shot up, spilling their plates all over the floor, their fists up as well.

Joe: "Make your moves, boys."

Dana (*blowing her whistle*): "Nobody move. Can I have all the pregnant people move to a safe area." (*To Tommy*): "Where would that be exactly?"

Tommy: "Take them to my old room, beside the kitchen."

The Officer: "Dana, you got the situation contained?"

Dana (*jubilant*): “Oh yeah. You know I do.”

The pregnant women and their partners complained that they didn't want to leave. They whined. They pleaded. Finally it was agreed, for the safety of the babies, that they should all remain out of harm's way, but as a concession, they could leave the bedroom door open.

As the pregnant parties were herded into Tommy's room, Duke helped Milt and Tommy helped his mother quietly slip out of the room. Joe, Alex and Jake didn't act as if they noticed. The two watched Joe and he watched the two. Sweat could have dripped off their faces and none of them would have made a move to wipe it away. That might have been misunderstood as reaction and each was aware of the importance of throwing the first punch. Of what that punch would symbolize to the crowd, but, most importantly, to Jacqueline.

Joe (*rolling his fists*): “Come on, boys.”

Jacqueline: “Joe, this doesn't impressing me. And you two, you need to grow up. You should be ashamed of yourselves.”

They responded to her through gritted teeth.

Joe: “This is deeper than you Jacqueline. These punks want to prove to me they've got the better of me. Isn't that right? You need to topple the giant?”

Alex: “That has something to do with it.”

Jake: “Jackie, I'm sorry, I can't lie to you, but it makes me so angry he's your man.”

Jacqueline: “But I don't love you.”

Jake: “That may be, but that doesn't change my heart. And without Joe, I got

nothing else to direct all this useless energy at.”

The Tip, who had remained quiet till now on purpose, having known all sides of a brouhaha in his illustrious career, realized the situation wasn't going to defuse itself with mere words. He stepped between the group.

The Tip: “Gentlemen, you've made your points. I think it's time cooler heads prevailed here and you all moved on.”

The Officer, who had finished rounding up all the pain-in-his-ass preggies, called from the living room:

The Officer: “Let 'em go. Sometimes the only thing that'll calm fellows down is if they bang some heads.”

The Tip: “That's not really been my feeling over the years.”

The Officer: “Oh really. And what makes you such an expert on brawling.”

The Tip: “I'm a bus driver.”

The Officer: “Oh, right. I forgot about you. Guys, you better listen to the man. He knows what he's talking about.”

Joe: “It can't be done folks. I'm sorry, Jacqueline, but this has got to go down.”

Jacqueline: “Then I'm leaving.” (*To Tommy*): “Give me a hand up.”

The Tip moved aside to let Tommy in. He moved between the three men, reached down and helped Jacqueline up.

Milt (*in the kitchen, to Pearl*): “They'd make a nice couple.”

Pearl: “Yes, she's very elegant.”

Milt: “And she doesn't seem to want a child.”

Pearl: “I know, that would be Tommy's problem solved.”

Jacqueline did a three sixty bow to everyone in the house.

Jacqueline: "I'm not staying to watch you all hurt yourselves."

Joe: "But Jacqueline, don't leave. I promise this won't take long and then we can get back to arguing with Tommy."

Jacqueline (*to Tommy*): "Doesn't that sound tasty?"

She lightly ran her index finger from the nape of Tommy's neck up past his adam's apple, pulling her finger away at the tip of his chin. As she moved up his neck, Tommy shivered. Little pins of pleasure began to form at the tip of his brain. His eyes felt heavy. And then she was striding to the door. Rifling through the shoes until she found her sneakers. She stepped out on to the porch, went to the window and waved to Tommy. Maybe to the Crowd in the living room. Maybe to him. He thought to him. She bent down and blew out the candles on the porch. Her darkened figure moved to the stairs and disappeared.

Milt: "Like I said, perfect."

Tommy stumbled into the living room. He was foggy. Maybe he was tired. The Tip had resumed standing between the men, who for all intents and purposes, had not moved, other than to periodically blink and swallow.

Tommy (*to Alex and Jake*): "What's taking you so long?"

Jake: "Yeah, from what I just saw reflected in the window, we should go after you."

Tommy: "Do it then."

They didn't.

Joe: "The woman that just left, she was loyal, Tommy. She's stuck by me through

everything.”

The Officer: “She’s certainly flirtatious.”

Joe: “With all due respect, Officer, you’re overdoing your part.”

The Officer: “You know I could have you all arrested.”

Joe: “Call the paddy wagon then.”

Jake: “Can the detective routine and let us play.”

The Officer (*to The Tip*): “This is your show.”

Dana: “What about me?”

The Officer: “Fine. Whoever. I’m staying out of it. I didn’t see anything.”

Tommy: “If you want to fight, go outside. Not in my parents’ house.”

This hadn’t occurred to any of them. Each was so caught up in standing their ground that they’d overlooked being guests of someone’s home.

Joe: “Mrs. Le Van, I think I speak for everyone when I say what a wonderful time we’ve all been having.”

Jake and Alex: “Here here.”

The Crowd gave a round of applause from the bedroom.

Pearl: “Well, you’re all welcome.”

Tommy: “That’s great. Aren’t they such gentlemen.”

Joe: “Tommy’s right. We took this too far. We all forgot our manners.”

Jake: “I’m willing to concede this.”

Alex: “Me too.”

Joe: “On the count of three then, we drop our stance.”

The Tip: “Good call, gentlemen. This takes guts.”

Jake: "Thank you. That means a lot to me."

Joe: "One."

Alex: "Two."

Jake: "Three."

Rupert Rezen's cell phone began ringing. Everyone took this as a positive sign. Everyone except Dana. Nothing had been solved at this party. The food was terrible. Her class was stuffed into a small room. This had to change. She lunged at Rupert, who had been patting the head of a sleeping Ms. Gruener. Dana ripped the phone from Rupert's pocket. She ripped the pocket. She hit the TALK button.

The person at the other end, a very drunk socialite, was doing his best to repeat, verbatim, Marjorie's chidings.

Man: "You dreamer asshole. I've never met a more miserable sod--"

Dana: "What'd you say to me?"

Man: "You are filth? You are scoundrel?"

Majorie (*to Man*): "Learn to be threatening. Then maybe your wife would have some respect for you." (*To Dana*): "You never made plans with Alison."

Dana: "I beg your pardon?"

Rupert: "It's my ex-wife. Please."

Dana pushed Rupert's hands away from her.

Dana: "I don't know who this is but when I find you I'm going to put you through the motions. Is that understood?"

The Pregnant Couples, The Tip, The Officer, Tony, his stilts under his arm, all trying to get a piece of some action, swarmed Dana.

Ignoring them, Ms. Gruener went about her business. She got up out of the chair. She fixed her bag under her arm. She shuffled to Tommy.

Ms. Gruener: "Hello, sweetie."

Tommy: "Now's not the time."

Jake: "Is this your grandmother?"

Ms. Gruener: "No dear. I'm nobody's granny." She hugged Tommy. "You make me so happy."

Tommy (*pushing her away*): "That's great."

Jake: "Lady, back off. Tom-Tom and I are trying to discuss matters."

Tommy didn't think. The long incoming message was received. Tommy's arm, hand in a fist, shot out and connected with Jake's chin. The second hit, was a surprise to Tommy, even to the panting old man in Tommy's brain who was now hooked up to oxygen. The hit was especially surprising to Jake who went stumbling into Joe. One of Jake's flapping hands smacked Joe in the forehead. They both fell into the small support wall that stood between the front hall and the living room.

The support wall, like the whole house, in fact like many of the houses on the street the Le Vans lived on, was built in the early 1950s by the family-owned company, Ernie Pore and Sons. The problem with Ernie Pore and his sons was always one of money. They never saved. They spent as they went. Playing cards. Betting the ponies. Buying two new black and white television sets. Ernie's real obsession was women, and while there have been no records kept, one would be hard pressed to find a more successful lady's man living on the city streets of Toronto at that time. The sons of Ernie and Sons were actually from four entirely different mothers, only the first being from the woman

Ernie called wife -- actually he called her “mother” and she called him “father” -- though she raised them all as her own. What this meant for the family business was that when it came to house- building, Ernie Pore cut corners.

This might have been a problem if it weren't for Harry Ruse -- Ernie's most trusted employee and ancestor of Hatruse -- who, even with the wrong materials, was still able to craft some of the finest houses of the century.

Problems would arise though. The Le Van's support wall falling over was only the first step. The top of the roof sagging minutes later was the second. After fifty odd years, the neighbourhood, now slowly being invested in by young, highly motivated, double- income mums and dads, lattes in one hand, five thousand dollar strollars -- state of the art, headlights, breaks for the kids, a line of clothing to match -- was finally going to pot. And in another decade many of the trees that stood on people's front lawns and lined the street, hell, many of the lawns themselves, would all be gone, as the construction of condominium communities began in earnest.

But that was for another day.

A cloud of plaster dust rose in the Le Van's spacious new living space. The power went out. Glen, being a full time conceirge, took a pocket flashlight from his pocket and in a calm voice began telling people to move to the back exit. Nobody knew where that was. Glen ran into the kitchen. Milt and Pearl were still in a state of shock. They stood there watching Alex, who felt left out, charge in the direction of Joe and Jake.

Glen: “Where is your back door?”

Milt (*pointing to it*): “It's there, it's there.”

Glen threw open the back door. Secured the screen door. A motion light, on

battery, went on underneath him. He ran back to the dining room. Took his wife's hand. Made her take another person's hand and so on. He led the line-up of pregnant couples through the kitchen and out into the backyard. To keep them occupied he had them do exercises from their Lamaze classes while he ran back into the house to make sure everyone else was out of the building.

Glen wasn't prepared to see Ms. Gruener and Dana throw the rocking chair through the front window. Dana picked the phone up off the couch where she left it.

Dana: "There's more where that came from."

Marjorie: "Wait'll you hear him sing 'Be My Baby' for the thousandth time. Then talk to me about punishment."

Ms. Gruener rubbed her hands together. She wanted something else to smash. The Tip and The Officer each took one of her arms, lifted her up and walked her, feet running manically in the air, out into the backyard. The Officer handcuffed her to the aluminium and green mesh wire fence. The only source of fun left her was her repeated attempts to try and trip Tony when he came by on his stilts. The crowd was very receptive to their act, throwing quarters and loonies into Tony's upturned hat. Applauding when Ms. Gruener managed to grab a wood leg and shake Tony a little. He didn't lose his balance but lifted his free stilt and swung it over Ms. Gruener's head.

The Officer and The Tip went back in to stop the fight but Marice had beat them to it. He had Joe and Jake by the scruffs of their necks. Marice's arm span was wide enough so that neither could reach the other. Unfortunately for Alex, he had run right into one of Jake's fists and knocked himself unconscious. Jake for his part, felt horrible about what had happened.

Jake: "I'm sorry buddy. It's Joseph's fault. Even though it was my fist."

Tommy stood in the same place. Covered in dust. Eyes streaming. Coughing. He wiped the dust from his eyes. Opened them. He saw people moving their mouths but he couldn't hear what they were saying. They reminded him of x-rays taken of heads, of the darkened eye sockets -- the absence of eyeballs, and the alien jaw -- alien to him because he couldn't associate those pieces of connected white bone with the parts he felt under his own flesh.

He saw Joe hanging from Marice's outstretched arm. Joe was pointing at Tommy and trying to say something. No, Joe was yelling. Tommy shrugged his shoulders at him. What could he say? I can't hear. Everybody seemed to be yelling and pointing.

Tommy tried rubbing the dust out of his mouth. His hand was covered in dust and he spread that over the dust that he took off. He could still taste dust. He tried again. Still dusty. He looked at his hand. It was covered in dust. He must have been dustier than he thought. He scratched his head. Dust went up in a plume.

He wasn't scared of his sudden deafness. He was happy with the droning silence.

Behind him, the front of the Le Van house collapsed.

Julian, who Milt had given directions to over the cell phone, was coming up the Le Van's path, when the front of the house began to crumble. He saw the roof fall inward crushing down on the front windows shattering them out onto the street in innumerable distinct shapes. A lucky squirrel leapt into a neighbour's tree from the chimney as the bricks came away from it. Bricks landed in the eaves trough and bent it in two. Weeks of old rainwater and the fall's first batch of leaves were sent spilling out into the garden. A few moments later the front of the house followed suit: dust; cement powder; asbestos;

glue; staples; nails; a mouse carcass; planks; tape; string; plastic buttons; and whatever else Harry Ruse could get his hands on to help erect the Le Van domicile, spread itself out over the flowers, the bush that divided the Le Van front path from that of their neighbours, and the Le Van's empty driveway (the ailing station wagon tucked safely in the garage at the side of the house). For Julian's part, as he watched this happen, he carefully stepped backward to the sidewalk, crossed the road, and headed home. This obviously wasn't his kind of party, he thought.

Bricks fell by Tommy's feet. A plank swung by over his head. He felt the breeze the plank created. He turned around just as the front of his parents' house finished spilling out onto the front lawn. Dust billowed off him. He'd have to deal with this outside. He swung his arms in the air, trying to create some breathing room. He took a step forward. So far so good. Another step. Okay. He headed for the kitchen. He passed Joe and Jake, who supported Alex on his should, and Marice who was leading the three of them to the backdoor. Joe slapped Tommy's back, propelling Tommy into the kitchen. Milt and Pearl caught him. They began feeling his arms and legs. Pearl kept snapping her fingers at his eyes. Milt yelled in Tommy's face.

Milt (*yelling at Tommy*): "Wunwing Rowen."

Tommy yelled back that he'd like a glass of water but they didn't hear him. Or they didn't seem to because he didn't get his water. He went to the fridge, which was beside the door, and grabbed one of his dad's water bottles.

Tommy: "I'm going out for a bit."

Outside, the pregnant women were in the garden, naked from the waist down, their legs spread open, their birthing partners animatedly breathing. The women's eyes were

bulging, their hands pounding the ground and their partners. Glen was beside his wife, naked as well, his legs open, mimicking her every movement.

The Group (*yelling*): “Push.”

To Tommy, their voices were like the far away static of a distant radio station that comes through only briefly late at night as one scans the frequencies.

Tommy looked behind him, suddenly worried that the back of the house was going to collapse. It remained untouched. The people who had been inside were starting to come out. Tommy backed up to give them room. They got closer to him. Dana was saying what? No, she was saying move. She was pointing at the pregnant women. She pushed past him and went down into the garden. She ran to the first couple. Bent over and scolded the woman's dilating vagina, then fainted. Dragging her by the feet, The Tip pulled her into the garden.

Tommy watched Pearl, Milt, Duke, and The Officer climb over the neighbour's fence and run into their house. A few minutes later Pearl and Milt came out with their arms full of tea towels, Duke brought out a pot of water, followed by The Officer with a jug of water, which they began to distribute amongst the group.

A fireman came through the back gate with a ladder in his hand, saw the multiple births going on in front of him and called for back-up.

Tommy leaned against the fence near Ms. Gruener. She couldn't reach him, and rather than keep stretching her arm uselessly, set to work trying to pull the handcuff off the fence, one of her legs braced against the aluminium post stuck in the ground. He saw her doing this and poured the bottle of water over her head to calm her down. She ran her hand over the water dripping off her face and tried flicking as much as she could onto

him.

Tommy couldn't stay. He put his hand on the top of the fence, the green wire pressing into the palm of his hand. He was quick about it, the fence buckling in the middle under his weight. He hadn't done this since he was fifteen. He fell over the side into the neighbour's backyard. He stood up and kept going. He opened the back gate and ran down the driveway out to the street.

In lights in all the houses up and down the block were on, the neighbours were out in their housecoats, their negligee, their y-front underwear. They were clapping. They were holding up signs -- bristol board and permanent black marker messages that said things like "What did the stork bring?"

There were nine ambulances, labelled with giant red numbers on both sides, lined in numerical order against the opposite curb. The neighbourhood cheered as Glen and his wife, a new born baby wrapped in three tea towels in her arms wife, raced from the backyard and in to the ambulance marked number 1.

Glen (*pumping his fist in victory*): "She's five pounds three ounces. She has all her fingers and toes. We couldn't be happier. She's a real winner."

As he passed by, Tommy saw another couple running toward the second ambulance. He didn't look back though. He didn't hear the sirens. Or see Tony chasing him on stilts for a half block before giving up -- realizing that there was a much better financial reward if he stayed to impress the onlookers.

For Tommy, all the action was behind him. He hailed a cab on Yonge Street. As the cab drove away, Tommy turned to see if anyone was chasing him. The Le Van Station wagon, with Milt, Pearl, Duke, and Julian, was driving side by side with the

police car, driven by Dana, The Officer in the passenger seat, holding her hand. Behind all of them, was The Tip, driving his bus, with Joe, Marice, Jake and Alex yelling directions. The nine ambulances, driving one to nine in a straight line, followed behind them. Then the fire trucks.

Tommy told the cabbie to take side streets, to speed, to beat lights. The cabbie's gas tank read full. Surely he could outlast them? He opened the back windows and let the air whip over him, blowing dust off his face and hair. He didn't look back again, afraid to see how much they were gaining on him.

Meanwhile, above the city streets, higher than the tallest skyscraper, brighter than the brightest electronic advertisement, an unwavering full moon stood nailed to the night sky.

