

Behaving This Way is All I Have Left

Gonzalo Riedel

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at

Concordia University

Montreal, Quebec, Canada

November 2012

© Gonzalo Riedel 2012

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
School of Graduate Studies

This is to certify that the thesis prepared

By: Gonzalo Riedel

Entitled: Behaving This Way is All I Have Left

and submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts (English)

complies with the regulations of the University and meets the accepted standards with respect to originality and quality.

Signed by the final examining committee:

<u>Manish Sharma</u>	Chair
<u>Josip Novakovich</u>	Supervisor
<u>Mary di Michele</u>	Examiner
<u>Daniel O’Leary</u>	Examiner

Approved by Jason Camlot
Chair of Department or Graduate Program Director

Brian Lewis
Dean of Faculty

Date

Abstract:

Behaving This Way is All I Have Left is a novel that focuses on Hershel Wallischuk, a man whose refusal to grow up manifests in sad and frightening ways. When his first wife dies, he dodges her funeral and drunkenly kills a man with his vehicle. In the passenger seat is Ainsley, his friend's 16-year-old daughter, who he is sleeping with. The death of Hershel's ex-wife allows him to reconnect with his estranged son, who learns his secret, and through that secret the two form a bond that pushes all of Hershel's other relationships to the wayside. This novel questions what one's obligations are in growing up and in facing mistakes. It is a book of selfish people who hurt others for their own happiness.

Table of Contents

Behaving This Way is All I Have Left1

Behaving This Way is All I Have Left

1.

In my daydream, I had her bent over my desk, her hands feeling up the grains in the wood, skirt pulled up around her hips, panties tightroped between her spreading ankles, my face buried into her thighs. I pictured her exhaling patterns of hot breath into the desk, ashamed, moaning while the office watched. She would also be wearing a Santa hat. Everything else was decorated for the season.

Were this daydream at all honest, it would have included secret dinners, meetings in bars across towns, phone calls to Colleen that I was running late, stuck at some work function, meeting Marco for a movie, or catching up with Casey after a chance run-in—any excuse so that I could have sex with Vera in her St. Vital apartment, dirty laundry draped over the sofa arm rests, her cat watching, a *Friends* rerun playing on TV.

The fantasy wasn't entirely improbable. A year earlier we and a few others from work attended some PowerPoint conference at the downtown press club, an old basement bar that was once designated for newspapermen but now functioned as a catch-all small-function venue. Its history with print press was the reason we'd all crammed into this tight space, to watch some tech-savvy 20-year-old backhand our profession by outlining the newest innovations in online media. If it wasn't titled, "You are all Doomed," or something equally alarmist, then he'd undersold himself completely.

After the presentation, Vera and I had found ourselves across the street, open-throating gin martinis in a hotel bar, our legs touching under the table. When I lay my hand flat, she traced the veins in my hand to my knuckle, felt the smooth arc of my wedding band.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

“I’m thinking that the day is still early,” I said. “We don’t have to go back to the office. Colleen’s not expecting me back for some time.”

“And?”

“I could get us a room. Right now. No one would know but you and me.”

“You’re married.” Her voice lilted when she said this, spoken almost like a question, and then she smiled. “And I’m with Todd.”

We said nothing for a moment. She didn’t flinch when I brushed my fingertips along her wrist and toward her elbow.

I said, “You’re so beautiful. I don’t want to suggest something you’re uncomfortable with. But I’ve thought about this for a long time, and I’m sure it’s something you’ve thought about, too.” I inched in closer as I spoke, my fingers sketching slow patterns on her knee. “Just say the word and I’ll go get us a key.”

She let me work my hand up her leg, hide it under her skirt, massage her thighs. She played with her glass, rotating the stem between her fingers, studied the way the liquid lapped up near the rim.

“Sit tight,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

She walked to the ladies’ room, knew I was watching by the deliberate sway of her hips, and when she’d gone I looked over every detail in view, the muted sports highlights on the television, the esoteric brands of liquor displayed behind the bar, the other lone patron, ragged t-shirt, eyes up at the television, beer dwindling in front of him.

Vera returned. I don’t know what had changed her mind.

“I’m sorry, Hershel, but I can’t. Another time.”

We gathered our coats and I saw Vera into a cab, me opting to abandon my car for the night, to brave the cold winter air on foot, drunk, wincing away the fading daylight until a taxi became absolutely essential.

After our near tumble between hotel sheets, I flirted whenever I knew we were alone, resulting in a few bluntly-uttered sentiments that were overheard, and a subsequent destructive rumour that cooled me off for good. I am still waiting on her promise of “another time.”

The fantasies never stopped. She was still trapped in my head, her hair damp with sweat, my fingers in her mouth. And the Santa hat, of course.

Once I realized I was staring, I knew I had to return to work editing Roy Carson’s op-ed piece on the city’s rash of stabbings titled, “Downtown Winnipeg: The Epicentre of Stab.” I found the title unwieldy and would have pushed for something punchier like “Stab City” or “Cuts to the Bone,” except that Roy had somehow come into a position of clout due to a recent and celebrated exposé on the dangers of child exploitation. Groundbreaking work, I’m sure.

I tagged off with the night editor, got in my car, an 8-year-old second-hand BMW I found for near nothing. I cranked the heat to full blast until the rattling became too annoying. Back in the spring, the car was vandalized by some teenagers, and ever since then the heater made a ticking noise when pushed too hard. I abandoned plans to sneak a fast-food burger along the way. Colleen and I had been invited to dinner at Marco and Julianna’s; if past dinners were any indication, we would arrive and not eat for at least an hour and a half, and I’d be brooding like a sour prick before stuffing my face with very late, and very delicious, food. I ate a sandwich when I got home.

I wrapped up my presents for Annette and Casey so I could drop them off in the morning, second-guessing myself the whole time. I had an easier time picking out a gift for Annette, having known her style, lived with it for so many years. I'd picked out a nice sweater that she might have worn when we were married, hoping it would still fit. It was tougher with Casey. What do you get a 15-year-old boy you no longer know? I gave him gift certificates for video games and a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*.

I buttoned up a clean shirt and Colleen tried on everything she owned. She studied herself in profile. "That looks good, babe," I said. "Wear that."

"That's what you said when I was in my underwear."

"And meant it," which was true. Colleen always knew how to wear a dress.

Unlike me, she'd managed to keep winter weight off. Her hair had been recently lightened and was pulled back into a ponytail that took off a decade—as if I didn't look old standing next to her already. She settled on a conservative number that might have belonged to a college instructor or a minister's wife. It looked suspiciously like one of her work uniforms; she worked at a check-in counter at the airport. I suggested she hike her dress up higher.

"They're giving me dinner, Hersh, not dollar bills."

"You'll regret having that attitude when we throw our cars keys in the dish."

Julianna had the right idea. She answered the door in a playful yellow spring dress, and this deep into December I was grateful for any colour. Marco wore his standard button down shirt, sleeves rolled so he could handle the ingredients. It amazed and frustrated me to see how little Marco had changed in all the years I've known him, save for some grey hairs and a better wardrobe. But he was essentially the same man that

he was in college, the one who shared a booth with me and Annette and whatever girl he was dating, all of us huddled over beers, chatting about those inane matters we all thought were so profound.

“You want some wine?” Marco asked. “White wine with chicken parmesan. Sorry, still has to cook. I’d open that bourbon but I’m saving it for a special occasion.”

“Well, those chopped onions smell delicious,” I said. “Yes, wine.”

While the living room had been done up with some restraint, the kitchen was decorated in full-blown Christmas bric-a-brac—wreaths, garland strands, workshop elf salt and pepper shakers—as if they’d arranged the layout to mimic a circus funhouse, where one progressively descends further and further into the madness of Christmas. I wondered what the basement might be like.

“We got your Christmas card,” I said. The original photo was tacked to their refrigerator, the three of them, Marco, Julianna and Ainsley standing around a Christmas tree, all wearing their goofiest holiday sweaters. “It’s cute,” I said. “Very fun.”

Marco scraped the onions into the skillet. “Yeah, I know. It’s corny as hell. Usually it’s Jules and not me who pushes for the cheesy portrait things. But Ainsley’s getting older, there’s not many Christmases together, so I was actually the one who organised this.”

“Well, the panic doesn’t show. Only whimsy.” I compared the two photos of Ainsley on the fridge, the recent one of her wearing an elf hat and a knitted snowman sweater against the old one, the one I’ve seen a thousand times of her as a toddler, kicking up sand at the beach while her father, bearded in this photo, crouches nearby as if

calling her over. The degree of change was jarring to me, a man on the periphery. I cannot imagine how her father felt when comparing the pictures.

“She sure is looking like a little Julianna,” I said.

“Yeah, right, ‘little.’ She turns seventeen in two months. It’s crazy.” We downed and refilled our drinks in silence. “She says she’s seen Casey around her school,” Marco said.

“I didn’t know they’d ever met.”

“She knows you’ve got a kid at the same school and she’s met Annette a few times. I guess she’s pieced it together.”

I motioned at the stairway to the basement, where her room was. “She around? Hiding in her cave?”

“Out with friends.”

“Friends who are girls?”

Marco gave me an uncertain look.

Dinner was predictably delicious, and we all got comfortably lit on white, our chatter spanning across the gamut of idle pleasantries. We were discussing the quality of our town from the perspective of two divided camps—I called it a bog and Julianna called it a nice place to raise a family—when Ainsley arrived. Her hair was pulled back, similar to how Colleen had hers, and she wore a purple pea coat. Her cheeks were rosy red from the cold.

“Hey, guys,” she said, smiling at all of us. “Smells good in here. Did I miss anything?”

Ainsley and I cleared up our checklist of small talk conversations: school (“it’s good”), boys (“none”), university plans (“working on applications, but I don’t know”).

“Grab a seat,” I said.

“That’s okay. I should get my homework done and go to bed.” Ainsley said her goodnights and headed down to her basement bedroom. The four of us moved off to the living room and caught the rest of some television program on archaeology in Europe, and when it finished, Colleen and I bundled up and slowly drove the short way home, guided by the mounting snow drifts piling against the curbs. Marco and Julianna only lived a twenty minute walk from us, but we still risked it, half-cut on wine and all. Colleen had exhausted herself on too many drinks and had curled up in the passenger seat, humming along with the songs on the radio.

“Can you believe Julianna?” Colleen muttered.

I had no idea to what she was referring. It was common for us, after seeing friends, to ping-pong glib criticisms for a few minutes, but I was always reluctant to pick on Marco and Julianna. If anyone were off limits, they were. “It’s okay, honey. I’m sure she didn’t mean it.” I patted her thigh.

“Ainsley sure is getting pretty,” Colleen said.

I parked my car and killed the engine. “I guess she is. I really wouldn’t know.”

2.

God only knows when the last time I had any guests in my house was. Maybe not since Colleen and I bought the thing and we had the obligatory house-warming party did my home see more than five people at any time. I don't have the stamina. How Marco and Julianna have so many parties, get-togethers, hang-outs and shindigs at such a tiring pace is well beyond my comprehension. Sandwiched between dinner with Colleen and I and their annual New Year's Eve party, Marco hosted a poker game for various friends and colleagues. It was just four days to Christmas, and between my last visit and now, their home had suffered fresh casualties from a redeployment of Yuletide bombs. Their house, at this point, could be confused with one of those novelty stores at the mall that only sells holiday decorations. Julianna had left early to avoid the overabundance of maleness in the house, the veritable tornado of testosterone that threatened to destroy the neighbourhood and bang everything in its wake. Either that or she had other plans.

I had promised myself that I would behave, go easy on the drinking, not horse around like a jerk in front of Marco's coworkers, but I had somehow gotten sidetracked from this simple agenda, and by the time the game actually started I had unrepentantly drunk most of my beers. This jeopardized the gambling money I brought, causing me to risk all my chips nearly every hand on a series of reckless wagers, nodding my head to rocking tunes all throughout, until one of Marco's old work friends, Shane or Sham or something, called my 10-7 offsuit and knocked me out of the game.

Considering how pleasantly buzzed I was at that point, an achievement, I felt, I was more annoyed than upset, and I excused myself to the kitchen for a fresh beer. In Marco's house, the back entrance and the basement stairway intersect in the kitchen, so it

must have seemed to Ainsley that I was ambushing her when she came home. By this time I'd crossed a significant threshold in my drunkenness where I would communicate in a manner I considered jovial or charismatic but other people call loud. I forced myself to speak in whispers, below the clamour of voices and music from the other room. Something about her entrance, the slow-opening door and the ginger footsteps, told me she planned on sneaking in and out undetected.

"You're not supposed to be here," I said, grinning. "Your dad tries to keep you away from his drunk poker buddies."

"Hey, Mr. Wallischuk," she whispered, giving a look of shy discomfort. "I was just at a friend's house. Girls' night, you know." Her hair had been neatly brushed, makeup recently reapplied. Her legs were bare at the knee, and she wore shoes more appropriate for dancing than for braving a prairie December.

"Just girls?" I asked.

She descended a step, trying to separate herself from the conversation. I didn't pick up on the hint. When I didn't go away, she asked, "How's poker. Are you winning?"

"No, I got drunk."

"Don't let them take advantage." Down another step.

"My thoughts exactly."

"Listen, Mr. Wallischuk—"

"Hershel."

"Yes. Listen..."

"You should get out of here," I said, "before your dad sees you."

She relaxed, descended another step. "Thank you."

“Hershel,” I said.

“Sure.”

What happened next was something of an anomaly, the physics in which I’ve never understood. Ainsley stuffed her mittens in her coat pocket on her way downstairs, and when she took her hands out, a bag of pot tumbled out to the ground. The physics is a matter for smarter minds, but I do know that when Ainsley had reached the basement, she had left a sealable sandwich bag of grass on a stair behind her. I called her back and motioned to it with my chin.

“You dropped something.” There wasn’t a whole lot in the bag, maybe four or five grams, but it was enough to get her in serious trouble with Marco and Julianna.

She denied it on instinct. “Hershel, I don’t even know,” shoulders shrugged.

“Pick it up.” I glanced behind back as her lookout. “Seriously, pick it up.”

“But I don’t know anything about that.”

From the other room, Marco hollered out, “Hersh, get two more beers, huh?”

“Yeah, all right,” I replied, and then looked back toward the stairs.

Ainsley snatched the bag and fled into the basement to get whatever it is she came for. I returned to the poker table, hands filled with cold beers, and I waited for someone to win all the chips so that a fresh game could begin, and so I could hand over another twenty dollars to poor cards and shaky betting.

Part of what made spending time with Marco and Julianna frustrating was that it affirmed Colleen's insane response toward Christmas. She too smattered Christmas paraphernalia around the house like she was appeasing some deity, blasting all manner of mall-ready Christmas music, and muscling our entire living room into one corner to fit the grizzly bear-sized synthetic Christmas tree. Every December was like watching my friends and loved ones go insane. I could as easily tolerate Colleen's Christmas fanaticism as long as it didn't contradict my own annual tradition of avoiding all Christmas media until the early-24th, where I'd binge on holidays for the next three days like a junkie holed up in a hotel room.

What always got me early and emotionally—and I'd never confessed this to Colleen, though I suspect she knew—was a picture of Casey as a child, four-years-old, that had been protected in plastic casing and hung up on the tree as an ornament. Annette and I had taken Casey to see the mall Santa, and the moment he was sat down on Santa's knee, Casey, like every boy before him and after, lost his mind to anguish and exploded in an uncontrollable fit of hysteria. But just before the tears, Casey had in his face an unmistakable look of encroaching suspicion, and the photographer, bless his anonymous soul, captured that fleeting moment between scepticism and all-out horror.

That picture caught me off guard for the first few years. I don't even know how it fell out of Annette's possession and came into mine, let alone how Colleen ever managed to find it. Seeing the picture in our new house reminded me of that day with Annette and Casey, but for some reason the images that stuck out were comforting Casey after his meltdown in a nearby kitchenware store, and Casey's snowsuit-waddle back to the car. The picture put me in a vulnerable spot. I told Colleen I was probably just bummed out

by the holidays, which was partially true, I suppose. The next year I had forgotten about the picture, and seeing it again returned me to that same emotional place. Now, every year, I find myself seeking out that uncomfortable feeling, the way one does in listening to a sad nostalgic song, by waiting for a quiet moment alone with the Christmas tree and the picture and letting the swell of conflicting emotions shake me up for a few minutes.

The tree had been up for two weeks now—for my sake Colleen would wait to put it up—which meant for the past two weeks I had been working up the nerve to call Annette. I drank three Kahlúa-spiked hot chocolates before dialling their house number.

I should have guessed Francis would answer.

Francis suffered from a chipper demeanour best described as insanely insufferable. Goddamned happy every goddamned minute, unwaveringly, impossibly happy.

“Hello, Francis,” I said with my usual reluctance. “How are things? You sound stuffed up.”

“Sure am.” He coughed a lungful of mucus into the receiver. “Whole family’s got it, it seems. Annette’s been keeping the cough syrup next to the bed like it’s holiday cheer. Merry Christmas, by the way.”

“Same, Francis.” His mention of holiday cheer, coupled with his cultish glee, provoked me to warm up a fourth hot beverage. “Speaking of, is Annette around?”

“She’s out finishing her shopping. Can’t imagine how she does it. I’m barely as sick and I wouldn’t leave this warm house for anything. Must be in the genes, because Casey’s out with her.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t get it from me. Anyway, I’ll call back. I just wanted to see about something I sent. It doesn’t matter. Merry Christmas, if I don’t talk to you.”

“A pleasure chatting,” he said, though I’m sure *he* was sincere about it.

I just about called Annette’s cell phone, which she almost never answered anyway, but I chose not to. In hindsight, I should have tried.

I hung up and sat down on the couch, preparing to catch the last half of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, when Colleen texted me she was on her way home. I heated up some milk and peppermint schnapps, and when Colleen came home we curled up on the couch, our bellies warm with boozy hot chocolates, and we watched Christmas movies until we nodded off slowly, and Christmas Eve became Christmas Day.

3.

Tony’s birthday was sandwiched between the weeklong crunch of holidays, and some people in the office decided that we should treat him to drinks and celebrations, as if we had not specifically come in to the office to avoid all manner of celebrations. I knew little about Tony except that he worked as copyeditor, and was therefore hated, and that he recently split with his girlfriend of four years. The latter point was the reason for the party—Tony was a sad sack at the best of times, and the last thing we all needed on our conscience was Tony’s ill-timed holiday suicide to dampen office morale. And even though our lone goal was to not be depressing, we still went to a strip club.

Of course we all knew just how inappropriate this was, the office party strip show, and so no part of it had been advertised in office memos or emails. The venue

information had been circulated in hushed tones, discussed in private break room conversations and in the johns but never in any official capacity, even though we all knew what was planned. Still, this semblance of secrecy may explain why there were only seven of us: Paul, Hugo, both Ralphs, lone-woman Lauren, me and the birthday boy. Colleen okayed my participation after I described Tony's fragile mindset. She told me to behave.

Tony, the Ralphs and I taxied to the strip club, met the others there. The sun sets early in the Canadian prairie winter, so even though it was just suppertime, the night was as dark as it gets. Winnipeg is a small city that sprawls; while most cities grow vertically, Winnipeg bloats horizontally, a chaotic mess resulting in heavy gaps between neighbourhoods. To that end, it is clear when you've entered downtown, because it is one of the few areas that is truly compact, with pubs and offices sharing addresses along curved cobblestone roads, where tenaciously preserved historic buildings stand next to buildings that are simply old and ugly.

We arrived at the strip club, and one of the Ralphs attacked the food, filling his fists with ham and mustard sandwiches and dry-rubbed BBQ ribs. He insisted that the food was tastier than one might expect of a strip club buffet. That it resembled food at all impressed me, though not enough to eat it until four good whiskey shots warmed my stomach and I was game to try anything, whether it was really food or not. Amazingly, it did taste pretty good.

We took turns ordering for the table until the show began. The coloured blue and red lights dimmed. A Metallica song rumbled and drowned out our conversations so that DJ Rick, the strip club emcee, could entertain us with his coke-addled banter in between

cuts of the best classic and contemporary hard rock his CD collection had to offer. He prattled with the obnoxious patter of an FM radio announcer.

“Yes, yes, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to *Pole in the ‘Peg*, Winnipeg’s premier gentlemen’s establishment, your classiest venue for all things nude. Like to remind you that today is Four-Dollar-Friday, four dollars for any single shot cocktail or domestic beer. This should leave you with enough in your back pocket to buy a drink or two for some of our lovely ladies. And how about buying a drink for your man on the mic tonight, that’s me, DJ Rick, but don’t take that introduction the wrong way—I too am here for the ladies. Want to remind you all about our ‘no touching’ policy and our zero tolerance attitude here at *Pole in the ‘Peg*, so please, no coin throwing at or near the performers. Planning a party at *Pole in the ‘Peg*? Friend us on Facebook at *Pole in the ‘Peg* and use our coupon for 15% off catered meals for groups of ten or more. Now, who’s ready to party? Our first dancer is a bit of a legend here at *Pole in the ‘Peg*. Please put your hands together for the very sexy Melissa R!”

Melissa R strutted out wearing a lion skin booty shorts-and-vest combo, and had draped along her shoulders a matching lion skin throw rug that she lowered to the floor, the way a break-dancer lays down a mat, notable if the break-dancer intends on flashing his genitals to the audience. Either it was the effects of the alcohol or mild food poisoning from tainted buffet, but I really zeroed-in on her performance, the technical virtuosity in which Melissa R lifted and lowered herself up and down the pole, this pinnacle of human strength like a lady Hercules, half-woman/half-goddess, draped in the skin of the Nemean Lion, displaying her vagina for the room.

After five or six dancers writhed about for tips and drinks, birthday boy Tony, who'd become prodigiously drunk in the shortest time possible, crawled into a cab, prompting half the group to abandon the party, leaving the two Ralphs and I to change venues and head down the street. We stood in line with college kids for twenty minutes in the bitter cold, that kind of cold that burns earlobes and freezes runny noses. I asked the pretty young thing in front of me for a cigarette. One of the Ralphs drew full attention to our ages, regaling her about what this pub used to be like back when you could smoke inside. "Time was you'd have a cigarette inside before you left," he told her, "so that your hands wouldn't freeze in the cold." Her smile was patronizing.

I distanced myself from the Ralphs once we got inside, sending them off to seek out a table and some chairs and telling them I'd find them. They squirmed through a crowd of people that was thick enough to get lost in, which they did, and I stayed on the other side of the pub. The place was packed to capacity with first-year students learning how to drink in public, many unsuccessfully. Between the pub and the strip club, I'd be hard-pressed to find a girl over twenty-two. And like the club, this place mercifully pretended we weren't in the thick of the Christmas season. No streamers, no ostentatious Santa hats, and only classic rock and roll blaring through the speakers—your Stones, your Beatles, your Kinks. I felt immediately at ease, understanding it didn't matter I looked old enough to be their father. Perhaps it was important I was old enough to be their attractive professor. I was still wearing my work suit and tie, after all.

I stood in line for a beer. I slipped my ring into my pocket. Most girls didn't acknowledge me beyond a friendly smile, or a refusal to make eye contact; this is observable devolution, girls today have lost their innate ability to flirt. Near the front of

the line, my path converged with that of a girl who was mouthing the words to the song playing. We started talking.

Gloria, as she introduced herself, was average looking in a pretty way, curly brown hair, jeans and t-shirt. She seemed casual and confident, or at least had as much confidence as a girl her age can. She told me she was a Janis Joplin fan, and I told her that made sense. I bought her beer.

We talked and drank. She told me her friends were around somewhere. She would often dance to whatever was playing, though subtly, as if she didn't realize what she was doing. She tugged on my tie.

With fresh drinks we found ourselves at her table. I remember that she would roll the beer around in her mouth before swallowing, then bite on her lip. She didn't play with her hair but bunch it against her neck, trapping the nest in her fist. She didn't flinch away when my knee rested against hers beneath the table, both of us pretending to ignore the feeling while we went on talking. I remember how conservative she was when she kissed, like an uncertain newcomer to the sport, barely opening her mouth those first few kisses, and even once we'd relaxed she remained surprisingly coy.

The first time she kissed me was something of a cliché, but at her age clichés make up the bulk of communication. She'd gotten up for the bathroom, backtracked after a few steps, leaned forward and guided her lips to mine. Her kiss was terribly unsexy. The gesture worked well enough for me, but her kiss itself was too hard, her tongue too wet, and she seemed to be feeling for the grooves in my molars. In her defence, I was only half-focused on the kiss, preoccupied with scanning the crowd for gawkers and familiar faces, the two Ralphs, friends of Colleen perhaps, looky-loos all too willing to

blurt out what they'd witnessed in flurries of devastating tattles. But no one saw and if they had, no one cared. It didn't matter who I kissed or how old she was, so we did it again until it felt right.

She checked her texts and told me that we should join her friends at a nearby dance club. If I haven't yet illustrated how drunk I was by this time, allow me to elucidate—Gloria suggested that I, a grown man, should join her at a club, and my response was, "That sounds like a great idea!" We walked the few blocks to some place called Streetheart or The Streetlight or something; it does not matter as I am surely not the intended clientele. We passed the time in line pawing at each other, kissing and sharing cigarettes. We handed our IDs to the bouncer and I paid our cover charges. The bouncer scrutinized my driver's license as if I might only be masquerading as a 41-year-old man. He looked at the two of us together. I shrugged.

My time at the bar was a study in anthropology. I'd never believed it to be true but it was a truth worth reckoning: young people in groups don't dance so much as fuck each other over their clothes. Up to that point, I thought the stories I'd heard were alarmist myths. So not to offend the locals by shunning their customs, Gloria and I took our beers to the dance floor and drunkenly dry humped one another to the beat. Some kid in a crisp shirt high-fived me and yelled, "Good job, old-timer!" Gloria laughed at this and kissed me again. My hands found her hips.

The next hour turned hazy. We mixed shots at the bar, trying out every combination, feeling each other up all the while. We danced in a group with her friends, and then we moved off on our own. We stepped out on the patio to share a cigarette. I'd stopped smoking a long time ago, but nights like these allow for backslides. By this point

I'd noticed a few things that were suspect about Gloria's behaviour, mostly that she would let me get her drunk and then separate her from her friends. If I were a sexual predator, I would admit that she'd done a fair amount of the heavy lifting. I hadn't even brought condoms. What would we do if she wanted me to take her home? I supposed we could stop at a gas station or an all-night sex shop.

Halfway through the cigarette, I noticed the sway in her legs, the way they were ready to buckle. She told me she needed the bathroom, and she gave me a long, drawn out, very wet kiss.

She went in, and as I decided where to wait for her, either outside in the cold or inside with the chaos of people, I heard a familiar but surprised voice behind me. "Mr. Wallischuk?"

I turned around, and it took me a moment to recognize the girl who had seen me kissing Gloria. When I was sure standing silent would accomplish nothing and that I could avoid the confrontation no longer, I said to the girl, "Hello, Ainsley."

It hadn't occurred to me until later that Ainsley had no reason to announce herself. She'd have as easily snuck away; I'd have never noticed her, and I'm sure she'd say nothing later about seeing me kiss that girl. Were I in her position, having watched my father's friend kissing a strange girl in public, I'd certainly have made myself scarce. But Ainsley did the opposite. She even shouted my name.

I looked at her shame-faced, less for having done it and more for getting caught. I recognized one of her friends nearby, Amber or Amanda or whatever, chatting up some guy. If any other friends of hers were nearby, I didn't know.

I stepped in close to keep our discussion discrete. "Ainsley, I didn't know you were old enough to get into this place." I'd managed to say this with enough gravitas as to imply that she was the one who had done something wrong, not me.

My tactics had little effect. She laughed. "Yeah, I'm sure I'm in serious trouble now."

"Ainsley, I don't know what you think you saw..."

"Come on."

"...but Colleen and I, Mrs. Wallischuk and I..."

"I know who Colleen is."

"...well, Colleen and I have a bit of an agreement..."

"An agreement?"

"...where as long as I promised to be safe..."

"Like wear a seatbelt?"

"...like using protection, then she wants to hear nothing about what I'm doing."

"Is that so?"

I lit another cigarette. "Look, Ainsley, what I'm doing is on the level. There's, you know, there's nothing unseemly about this, though I'm sure it doesn't look that way. And I'd hate to show Mrs. Wallischuk, Colleen, I'd hate to show her any disrespect by bringing this up around her, or by starting rumours around your parents. Do you understand?"

“You have to admit,” she said, “this is way worse than when you saw me with that pot.”

“‘Worse’ isn’t really the right word. You cannot even compare the two.”

“It’s okay, Herschel. It’s not my place to say anything.”

“It’s not?”

“But you’re buying the next drink.”

“That’s all?”

“Two drinks.”

I studied the devilish smile, the reddish hue of cold on her cheeks. It looked to me as if she’d meant it.

“You don’t mean that.”

“Herschel, it’s okay. Really. We all need our secrets.” She took the idling cigarette from me and smoked it down to the filter. “Hey, I saw you dancing in there. Why don’t you come dance with us.”

“Let me buy you your drinks, and then I should go home,” I said. “There are limits as to how far I’ll court trouble.”

Ainsley kissed me on the cheek, quite unexpectedly.

4.

There was no coincidence I lived so close to Casey and Annette. Some years ago, when Colleen and I bought our house, she'd convinced me we should move into Silver Heights so that I could be close to my son, and that she could get to know him. As much as I'd wanted that, I knew even then that Casey and I couldn't have much of a relationship. For a time I insisted we couldn't afford to live in that neighbourhood, not on what a newspaper employee makes, but after my parents passed, and the insurance money came our way, I could no longer argue. At least Marco and Julianna were also close, and I never had to travel far for a New Year's Party.

Ah, New Year's. Who hasn't, at some point, been suckered by the allure of that great folly, the celebration that promises renewal through hours of heavy drinking and sometimes noisemakers. Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and all that. The real problem with this celebration is that for almost everyone, it pays off exactly once; that one New Year's Eve celebration in a lifetime, the benchmark by which all other New Year's parties will be judged and then subsequently fail to live up to.

My great New Year's, the one that ruined all others, happened near the end of my time in university, just before Annette got pregnant with Casey. She and I were twenty-four. Between Christmas shopping and family time, both of us had few chances to let loose before the start of the winter term. Annette and I had been invited to a house party hosted by a friend of a friend, a Robert Something-or-other. In the weeks leading up, my classmates Brendan and Kate promised it would be, in their words, "the greatest party that ever happened," and as the date neared, their advertisements lost their lustre, became a simple rallying cry more in tune with my expectations: "We are going to get drunk!"

The night of the party, I left my apartment to catch the bus to Annette's and I found, laying in the snow, tickets to one of those gala black-tie ballroom events: five-course meals, champagne at midnight, a hundred dollars a ticket. Annette and I could in no way fit in with a crowd of such swank and pomp—I was dressed for a mediocre college party, in a t-shirt that could be charitably described as “clean.”

Still, my years of scrounging for and saving every cent taught me to instinctively scoop up and pocket the tickets, even if they were to go to waste, even if it meant two poor bastards would miss out on their gala.

Annette and I picked up Brendan and Kate at the party. Outside, some dumb bastard teetered and swayed in the front yard, knees-deep in the snow, vomiting all his drinks and a half-eaten snack platter into the bushes with incredible gusto. It would be one of those nights.

The music, from poorly cobbled mixtapes of Guns N' Roses and Sonic Youth and Counting Crows, played noisily in the living room. The host's parents were spending their holiday in Tahiti, pity their poor home. I stuck with the three people in my group, and when they split apart to go mingle or stand in line for the bathroom or wander into the stoner room to suck on bong rips, I hung out alone in the living room, blithely bopping to some song, fidgeting the labels off my beer bottles until my friends returned.

When the dubious cassette of British raver music started up, Annette searched for me just to roll her eyes. “This party is terrible.”

“Kinda wish we went to this gala thing,” I said. She gave me a puzzled look and I explained about the found tickets that I'd stuffed into my pocket.

“Good God, Hershel, why didn’t you mention this earlier? This would have been way better.”

“We can walk there in about twenty minutes.”

“I’ll get my jacket. You find our shoes in the shoe pile.”

Annette and I made it to the gala sometime after the meals had been served, and neither of us could have been more conspicuous in our ragged jeans and smuggled-in beers. We openly mocked the pretentious bowties and ascots, hollered along with every familiar song lyric, and generally behaved like the biggest assholes in the room. There wasn’t any specific moment that tipped the scale and made it the best New Year’s party ever, but the whole night stands out as a piece, the ineffable wonder of a sweaty dance floor too packed with bodies, both of us too drunk for inhibitions, and we kissed and groped among the pristinely-dressed crowd, and when our money was spent and the lights came up to usher us out into the cold air, we sighed contentedly and stumbled to her place, my arms around her waist.

It’s always a bitter pill to acknowledge a particular apex in one’s life, and when January 1st came about, I knew that I had peaked, at least in regards to New Year’s Eve parties, and a part of me resigned to ever again having one as memorable.

Though this last one had come close.

Marco and Julianna had appointed themselves coordinators-for-life of mediocre New Year’s Eve parties, and after four consecutive years of such events, I wondered if they too had attended that same university shindig I’d gone to with Annette, taking notes on how to organise a party with the same transparent blandness, from the limp music to the token noisemakers to the generic banner: “Goodbye Whatever Year This Is!” The

only thing missing was the bong room, though that had been replicated in poor fashion with joints huffed out in the garage, should Ainsley arrive early from her own party and catch her parents mid-toke, a haze of dope smoke wafting through the vents.

In their defence, I hated house parties, and so did Colleen, but she was far less critical than I, and it was usually she who pushed me to hurry up so we could polish off the first bottle of Chablis before the year-end countdown. On the way home we would nitpick every facet of the party, because that's what we do, from the overly-loud sound system to Julianna's aloof friends. Still, we went because, as far as we saw it, Marco and Julianna needed the support. If they were going to develop aggressively mediocre parties full of bullshit pleasantries and diminishing returns on fun, they needed loyal friends who would humour their poor decisions no matter how often they occurred. Also, we had nowhere better to be.

Midnight came. Colleen wrapped me up in her arms and gave me a drunken smooch that suggested that I would, at the very least, be rewarded with a sloppy, awkward romp in bed, or would have if Colleen hadn't over-indulged and developed a rough case of woozy spins.

"Hersh, I think I need to go home."

"Of course you do," I sighed.

We stepped outside and, by a stroke of luck, a cab pulled up next door and let out a gaggle of high-heeled women in evening party dresses. I had the cab wait for me so I could guide Colleen into bed as quickly as she'd let me and I could return in the same cab. I don't know what compelled me to return to such a bland party, let alone muster up all that eagerness. I suppose I expected an improvement of things. I pattered about the

mediocre party, bored, pilfering whatever drinks I could until Marco and Julianna disappeared upstairs, leaving the remaining stragglers to clear out on their own time.

As far as I could tell, I was the last to leave, and when I did, I went out to the garage, lit an abandoned, barely-smoked joint, and stood out in the backyard. I heard the gate unlatch, whirled around and hid the joint behind my back from view of Ainsley. She was developing a habit of sneaking up on me.

She said, “Hey, stranger. Whatcha got there?” and moved toward me, taking dramatic, languid strides, dragging her feet. “I think they usually do that in the garage.”

“They’d be awfully embarrassed to find out you’re on to them.” I held the joint out to her. She waved it away, looked over my shoulder at the house windows for movement. “It’s okay,” I told her. “They’ve gone to bed some time ago.” I took her hand and pulled her against the house, underneath the windows, out of any possible view from inside the house, let her inhale the joint from off my fingertips.

“Is Mrs. Wallischuk not with you?”

“She drank like a teenager and went home sick.”

“So are you out meeting girls from the bar?”

“That’s cute.”

She took another puff and I dropped the blackened paper to the ground.

“So how was your party?” I asked. “Lot of people there?”

“It wasn’t that good. I was so looking forward to it, but it turned into a letdown. Not as much fun as it should have been.”

“You’ll learn to embrace that feeling,” I said. “Maybe New Year’s Eve is supposed to prepare us for a year of mediocrity.”

“Boy, your party must have been really crummy,” she said. “Mine was just, I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? Are you being coy?”

“I guess.” She rocked on the balls of her feet. “Do you wanna go for a walk?”

I was genuinely surprised by her offer. “You’re asking me? Yeah, I’d love to.”

We stuck to back alleys, hands in our pockets, and walked at a slow pace befitting the calm, cool night, the still air.

“So what happened at this party of yours?” I asked. “No New Year’s Eve kiss?”

She frowned at my condescension. “Kind of. There was this guy. It doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters.”

“It’s embarrassing.”

“These things always are.”

“I don’t know. I thought this guy was into me. I bought a dress to get his attention. Of course his ex Alison Salter shows up to the same party. She wasn’t even supposed to come because she doesn’t run in the same circles as us.”

“I think I can see where this is going. So?”

“It’s like you said. At midnight Harris is kissing Alison. I’m just, you know.”

“Holding your dick in your hands?”

“I guess so. It just sort of breaks your spirit.”

“If it makes any difference,” I said, “I did have a New Year’s kiss, and it was a drunken sluice of a mess.”

“You don’t look very drunk.”

“Exactly.”

“Harsh.”

“I expect I’m speaking in confidence.”

“That’s a pretty gutsy assumption,” she said.

“Are you going to tell on me?”

“I didn’t say that.”

We began to walk closer together, our strides in step, arms touching. She brushed her hand against mine.

“I’m just saying it’s not the kiss that’s important,” I said.

“Yeah, but who it’s with. My mom says that all the time.”

“It’s a good lesson.”

“I don’t need you to give me lessons,” she said.

“Is that so?”

“Now who’s being coy?”

We’d gradually stopped walking. Ainsley had taken off her mitts, ran her hand along the width of my coat.

“Ainsley.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“That isn’t the point.”

“Isn’t it, though?”

Ainsley touched my chin with her palm, feeling the grain of each bristle on her fingertips along the heel of her hand.

“It’ll be our secret,” she whispered.

I held her around her waist, felt her hips through her coat, and when I couldn't decide which conflicting instinct to follow through on, I let her lead, let her guide my fingertips along her cheeks, along the warmth of her neck. My lips brushed her earlobe. "You promise?"

Ainsley kissed me in a way that was surprisingly relaxed, unforced, just aggressive enough, nothing like Gloria from the pub who needed to be coached. Ainsley and I found a rhythm, right away.

I felt for her thighs, rubbed her breasts through her coat. I kissed her neck and we swayed in place like a pair of drunks. She tugged at my hand, leading me back toward the house, and I let her lead, stopping her only to pull her against me, rub myself against her ass, bury myself in the crook of her neck. Ainsley encouraged this with one hand at my cheek, the other behind her back feeling my cock through my pants.

I'd expected to be interrupted by a set of headlights, a barking dog maybe, but the back lane was completely silent. She unlatched the gate to the backyard, and I winced at the expectation that Marco or Julianna would be standing in our path, their arms folded, witnessing the horror of their daughter and I in sexual embrace. But nothing.

Ainsley entered the house first, and I waited outside, back pressed against the stucco. Slowly, methodically, the ambient light from within the house dimmed to nothing as Ainsley searched the house for parents or lingering guests, shutting off the lights for every room she cleared.

After the perceived eternity of waiting had passed, in which I had time to wrestle anxiety but not reconsiderations, the back door opened and Ainsley guided me into the

house. I kicked off my shoes and carried them downstairs in hand, for fear I might track snowy footprints to the basement, and I quietly shut at the door at the landing.

We kissed the way to her room, groping at each other, groping at the walls to find our way, unbuttoning each other's coats, shedding them to the floor. I pulled at her dress until I had the hem up around her hips, felt how her panties hugged her body, hooked my thumb into the elastic. I hesitated. Ainsley freed the top buttons of my shirt, our hands fumbling it up and over my head. She unclasped my belt, my pants, pulled me on top of her, her bare legs squeezing my ribs.

"Ainsley, wait," I said. "I don't have anything. I don't have any condoms."

"It's okay," she whispered. "I'm on the pill. Just do it."

"Wait."

She shushed in a way that was somehow both a comfort and a turn-on. She hooked her toes into the waistband of my pants and slid them down, bunching them at my thighs.

"It's okay," she said again. "It's okay."

She directed my mouth to her neck, down to her tits, her feet pulling my ass closer.

And I was inside her.

The news was bad enough, but to get it from Francis struck me as insulting.

It had happened about three weeks into the new year. At my lunch break, when I saw he'd called and left a message on my voicemail, I expected an update on Casey, which was something that Francis would occasionally do, say when Casey finished top of the class or, conversely, got himself suspended. Both have actually happened. I was plenty interested in hearing about Casey's day-to-day, I just hated to hear about it from Francis of all people.

This wasn't why he called. I could tell by the catch in his voice.

"Hershel, it's Francis. I need you to call me back." There was a long pause. "I need you to call me as soon as you get this."

Normally I would put off returning his call, but the unusual urgency made me nervous. Something about this was very wrong.

"Francis, what is it?" I made myself sound chipper, so that if there was no great emergency, I could give the guy hell for needlessly scaring me.

"Ah, jeez, Hershel, it's Annette. Are you sitting down?"

"Sitting down for what?"

"I'm sorry to tell you over the phone."

"Jesus, Francis, you're scaring me. Just say it."

"She... Herschel, Annette's dead." Francis stopped speaking for long enough to collect himself. "Last night. In her sleep. I didn't even know until morning. I'm so sorry, Hershel."

My emotional response, I now realize, was like that of when Annette first told me she was pregnant with Casey. First came disbelief, then suspicion that something might have been done to prevent it. Annette couldn't be dead. Francis couldn't have slept through it. But when I fought with Annette, swore and paced and then pretended to accept it, here I said nothing, just let the bad news sink in that Annette was dead. Annette was dead.

I offered Francis my condolences and hung up. Then I cancelled my afternoon meetings, faked a stomach flu, and took the rest of the week off.

Some months after that New Year's with Annette, the one at the gala event, when she was pregnant with Casey but hadn't yet told me, my grandmother died, suddenly, of a stroke. I drank away the next seventy-two hours and subsequently had sex with our mutual friend Kate, who had just split with Brendan, resulting in the first of what would become many rifts between Annette and I. When the fights cooled off, Annette had to tell me she was near ten weeks along, that she was waiting for an opportune time to tell me, understanding there was no time more opportune than to have her husband smarten the hell up.

We would need a few more break-ups before it took for good.

I seemed patterned to repeat myself by seeking out solace in casual sex, this time finding it with Ainsley. After Francis called me, when the news was really starting to jangle my nerves, I sent Ainsley a half-dozen filthy texts and met up after her class, and

we fucked on the spare couch in our basement before Colleen came home from work. When she arrived, I told her about Annette's passing.

The next few days I'd received endless calls of consolation. I don't know how Francis could have dealt with it. Work had eventually learned what happened and let me take off as much time as I needed. When Marco called to offer his sympathies, I expected a confrontation about Ainsley, but it never came up. I still had not spoken with Casey. I'd always wanted to call but had never gotten as far as picking up the phone. It made me sick to my stomach.

I put on a black suit. Colleen was still getting ready. It was a Saturday. I told her I was going to pick up cigarettes, that I needed some for the day, but after I bought them I kept on driving. I don't know what pulled the strings that day, where the thrust that moved me forward came from, but I wound up at some pub twenty minutes away. Couldn't remember the last time I'd been there. Texted Colleen that I had something to do and would be back home soon. Drank three beers, the first one slowly, hunched forward with heavy shoulders, and the next two as quickly as I could.

Drove to another bar and knocked back two more. Flirted with the server. She'd seen better days, but she still knew a thing or two about a low-cut shirt. I'm sure I tipped well. Headed to a third bar, hazy-headed, half blinded from the afternoon sun. Checked my messages from Colleen. The first said, "Where are you?" and then "We are going to be late."

I looked at the time. She was right. We would be late. We would absolutely be late for Annette's funeral.

Drove through St. James, slowed past the house Annette grew up in, the one she'd pointed out to me some time a million years ago, then past the apartment block she lived in when we first dated, a brownstone that hadn't changed a shade in all these years.

I ignored Colleen's calls. Texted her: "Get undressed," though I wonder if she actually followed my intended instruction for her to get naked and wait for me. If she did anything at all, which I am certain she did not, she would have changed into comfy clothes and watched television.

The day became darker and the roads became slick. Drove to yet another bar, something more familiar. Downed more beers, changed it up with whiskey. Discussed philosophy with a drunk stranger. Bought a round for a table of less-than-gracious college kids.

Continued to ignore Colleen's texts.

Sang along shamelessly to some song Annette and I used to fool around to. Drummed on the bar and splashed tip money all over the place. Pissed in and around the urinal, laughed when it cascaded down the wall to the floor. Spat on the wall next to the mirror.

Drove toward downtown, the radio blasting another song Annette used to love. The sky tossed out flurries of snow. Annette loved it when it snowed.

Waited in line at a bar downtown, the one Gloria had taken me to. Drank two beers and most of a third until it tasted bitter. Offered to buy some girl a shot, tried to

dance with her but she slipped away when I wasn't looking. Chain-smoked three cigarettes in the cold.

Texted Ainsley. "I need you."

I attached myself to another group of girls, managed to buy some girl a tequila shot.

Texted Ainsley again: "Your sexy," and then resent it with the corrected apostrophe.

I choked back most of another beer while standing along the fringes of the dance floor. My phone vibrated. Ainsley: "Where are u?"

Me: "Meet me. Now."

I was already in the car when she'd texted me the address.

I picked up Ainsley outside some party for her high school hockey team. I'd expected to see the front lane cluttered with jocks, even in this kind of cold, all of them too drunk to speak, smashing beer bottles against the curb. But the street was quiet. Falling snow gently coated my windshield. I texted Ainsley that I was waiting out front.

I knew immediately what kind of boys were at the party from the way she was dressed. She wore a short yellow dress beneath her coat and black boots that stopped halfway to her knees. She caught me staring at the length of pale, exposed thighs in the space between her boots and her hemline, and she made an instinctive effort to cover her legs. I mumbled for her not to do that.

We cleared four blocks before she said anything. “I’m really sorry about Annette. You should have told me.” She noticed my puzzled expression. “My parents were talking about it. They went today to, you know.” She trailed off.

I pulled over, grazed my hand along her exposed thigh. She let me do it, but I could see her discomfort with my aggression. I put the car back into gear. “Yeah, well.” I don’t know what Ainsley expected when I’d picked her up, and I guess neither did I, whether I would sob into her shoulder or drunkenly roll on a condom and fuck her over the dashboard. I could find catharsis in either option.

We found ourselves in a neighbourhood that had once been familiar to me in a way that Ainsley would never understand, with the spilt-level house I’d lived in for five months with Eric Higgins from Intro Psych or the hockey rink penalty box where I had sex with Lisa Bradford one chilly November night. Ainsley watched me with jangled nerves, waiting for me to say something.

“How was the party?” I asked.

“It was okay. Do you actually want to hear about it?”

“No, I guess not.”

I turned up the radio and wheeled into an empty parking lot, a blank canvas from the freshly fallen snow, and I painted doughnuts into it, spinning out, riding the handbrake. Ainsley dug her fingers into her legs and into the door handle.

“What’s the matter with you?” I demanded. “You should be enjoying this song.” I hammered the beat against the steering wheel and peeled out back onto the street.

“This is just making me feel sick,” she said.

“Want me to stop?”

“Just slow down.”

I stopped the car suddenly and kissed her as hard as I could, feeling her up through her coat. We returned to the streets and sped along residential alleys, negotiating the black ice, weaving between parked cars and traffic that was surprisingly scarce for a Saturday night.

“Mr. Wallischuk, maybe we should pull off somewhere. Let you cool off. Maybe blow off some steam.” She laced this last part with a sultry tone so that I couldn’t miss the hint.

I winced when she called me “Mr. Wallischuk,” felt very old at that moment. It made me crazy. What had attracted me to Ainsley was that she never made me feel old.

“Don’t you have some goddamned Barbie dolls to dress up?” I am unsure if I had mumbled this or not.

I ordered a burger and fries from a fast food drive-thru and we ate in the parking lot. She told me she wasn’t hungry but I ordered for her anyway, and it sat uneaten in a paper bag at her feet. I wiped my hands on my suit pants while studying the annoyed look on her face. “I’m mourning,” I told her, by way of apology, and then quietly belched into my fist.

“Hershel, I can’t imagine what you’re feeling.”

“I wouldn’t think so.”

“But I’m here for you. You don’t have to do this alone. There are people who care for you.”

I said nothing for a while. “You know,” I said, after a time, “I was just going to say that I love pulling your hair when I’m fucking you. I’m pretty sure you like it, too. I

was going to say that, but I thought better of it.” I put the car in gear and sped out of the parking lot.

Ainsley told me I didn’t need to act like an asshole. She dressed it up with as sympathetic a tone as she could muster. I turned the radio back up to blaring.

“I love this song,” I yelled over the cacophony. “Me and Annette used to listen to this song all the time.” I turned up the windshield wipers to high because the snow had begun to flurry down in steady drifts.

“Does it make you sad?” I asked. “Does it make you sad that me and Annette used to have this thing between us? This history?”

I narrowly avoided a parked car, having mistaken it for just a mound of snow.

“I have memories of her,” I said. “Of Annette. Sometimes I think of her when I’m with Colleen. Not with you, though. I mean, I think about you when I’m with Colleen. I think about you a lot.”

“Herschel, I think you should stop.”

“She loved this song, too,” I said, motioning to the radio. The car skidded out some feet past a stop sign, partly due to the ice, partly slow response time. “I don’t even know what you listen to,” I said. “Me and her, we used to go to bars and get so drunk, and when this song came on she’d grind up against me. I hope your generation doesn’t believe it invented grinding. I don’t know who invented dry humping, but it’s been around before your generation and probably before ours, only we did it when we were done with dancing, not as a substitute for dancing.”

The windows began fogging up from the heat inside the car, so I opened the window a crack. I sped up.

“So in twenty years,” I said, “when I’m pushing my senior years, are you going to think about me, Ainsley? About the things we did together? Hold on to these memories. You’ll need them.”

I made a hard right, felt the tires skid, saw the figure across the windshield.

We heard it. Before anything else, we understood the sound. The first thump. Against the hood.

Whatever it was hit the corner of the car, at the headlight. It wasn’t launched forward, and it did not roll atop the roof.

It was sucked underneath and spit out the side. The second thump. The front wheels.

Once we stopped moving, the car had completely straightened out, sitting parallel with the curb. Whatever it was we hit lay behind us, in the street.

One of us turned off the stereo. We listened to our breathing, which had become increasingly heavier. I tilted the rearview mirror, made out the nebulous shape of a dark mound behind us.

“Maybe it was a dog,” I said.

“Don’t say that. I love dogs.”

I looked along the street, the houses on either side of us. At every house, the lights were off, as if by some miracle every person had gone out or gone to sleep. Everything was still. It would be so easy, I knew then, to shift in gear and drive away. What good would it be to know what we hit? To Ainsley, the best case scenario was bad enough, and it was pointless getting dirty with gory details.

“Aren’t you going to go see?” she finally asked.

I had to force the door open, with it frozen shut by the snow and sleet. The snow crunched beneath my boots as I stepped out. I stuffed my hands into my pockets.

In the distance I could tell that the thing we'd hit was not moving. I could make it out no better now than from the rearview mirror. Snow had already dusted it white, obscuring its true size. From where I stood it looked to be on par with a large dog, a German shepherd or a Great Dane. Whatever it was, its back was to the car and was determined to make this difficult.

I approached it with apprehension, shuffled a few steps, the slow creak of snow underfoot, looked back at the car. I'd left the driver's side door open, and the cabin was lighted up enough to show me that Ainsley wasn't looking back. I could tell her it was anything, a patch of ice, an apparition, Sasquatch, and then drive off.

So far I'd heard no neighbourhood dogs barking, seen no porch lights come on. Only by God's grace had no cars passed. To my knowledge, we had not been seen.

I moved more quickly now, praying that it was just some canine mongrel lying in the road. I circled around it and nudged it with my foot hard enough to roll it over.

A man. His bloodied face was unrecognizable, smashed in by the weight of the tires. His body was pretzeled, twisted into some ungodly contortion.

Ainsley opened the passenger-side door, looked back at it. It was clear she knew this was no animal.

I returned to the car, shook off the layer of snow that had fallen on my suit.

"It was a dog," I told her. "No collar. Just some poor stray."

I put the car in gear and drove away.

I woke in my own bed. Of this I was certain. A hot sunbeam crept through the curtain onto my face and pestered me from sleep. Late morning, I guessed, maybe early afternoon. My phone confirmed the latter. Waiting for me was a text from Colleen: “Feeling better?” She’d sent it an hour earlier, I suppose on her lunch break. I re-read those two words until they became meaningless. Was this a sincere question? Was she concealing how angry she was? I interpreted it every possible way. Of course she’d had every right to be furious at me. I read all the messages I’d sent her the night before, tried to remember what I’d said when I came home.

“We’ll talk in the morning.” I’m sure I’d said that. I said nothing else for fear of saying too much.

I wondered if Colleen had noticed anything amiss about my car when she’d left for work. I remembered parking my car in the garage next to hers the night before. I checked for blood, for any sign of the accident, but found nothing. I couldn’t help but feel that in my haste to get inside and climb into bed I’d botched my observations, missed some crucial detail that Colleen might have noticed. I could feel a surge of panic that, combined with the post-drinking queasiness, had me barrelled.

I thought about the drive home. I kept telling Ainsley it was a dog, it was a dog. She said nothing.

I remembered the icy roads. We had stopped at a red light when another vehicle, in the lane of oncoming traffic, skidded through the intersection and nearly waylaid us. We saw a flash, maybe that of a red light camera. Pulled over to get hold of myself. Rushed as I was to distance myself from the accident, I needed to stay focused. “This is

pretty intense,” I said, hoping she would respond in some reassuring way, but she just opened her passenger-side door and vomited out into the curb. When she had finished I got out and kicked snow over the mess. I let her out two blocks from her house, for fear that her parents might catch me dropping her off, and she gave me a look like nothing happened, like the entire night was some figment of her imagination, and she made the walk home without looking back.

I had expected that Ainsley would have contacted me sometime overnight, but by morning no message waited for me, so I texted her: “How are you doing?” Some minutes passed before I accepted that no immediate response was coming, and I would have to check on the condition of the car in a sober light. The first steps were awful. My legs wobbled and I clutched onto the bed frame to ease the whorls forming in the carpet. I leaned against the wall, considering a detour so that I might purge. It’s any wonder I actually got to sleep the night before, drunk as I was, let alone as quickly as I did.

I sucked in a few laboured breaths and vetoed the bathroom, saving what little energy I had to get myself down the stairs. Clutching the banister, I shuffled down each step, stopping halfway to sit.

The garage was connected to the house, and the door to it was in the hallway, near the entrance to the corridor. I approached the door slowly, imagining what Colleen might have witnessed: a crumpled hood, gore trapped in the grill, a run-off of blood and slush pooling onto the concrete. It made me remember the man’s face, the way it had been crushed under the weight of the car. I opened the garage door slowly, as if I could alter the things I’d see through sheer will and apprehension.

Nothing.

At least nothing unusual. No dents or pooling blood. Just my car and the empty space for Colleen's car. On the workbench, the car bra had been hastily folded. I had planned the night before to avoid suspicion by covering the car, but at last acknowledged that nothing could be more suspicious than draping a hit-and-run-car.

I scrutinized the car, catching a single blemish that I'd overlooked the night before, something that, as far as I could tell, wasn't there before the accident. The decal. For all my searching the night before I had missed it. The BMW insignia fixed to the car between the headlights had been cracked down the middle and half of it was gone. Just the outline remained, a swatch of hardened glue in its place, a discrete flaw that could fool anyone who didn't look hard enough.

Of course I didn't know what this meant, not yet. I could with no certainty confirm that the last night's collision had caused the breakage and, if so, what that meant to me. More importantly, how might the police interpret the half-decal if they found it at the accident site next to the man. Would it be treated as evidence? I pictured how he must have hit the car to knock the piece off, how he would have dragged it with him beneath the car.

The decal itself was a replacement, as far as I knew. When the car was vandalized in the spring, smashed in with bats by teenagers, the garage that fixed the damages replaced the headlights and the decal. I'd recalled them affixing a full decal, and not a broken half-decal, as I would have examined the repairs, but who can remember these things? I'd missed this information the night before, and I had been looking closely. I was on all fours, examining the car's underbelly, when I heard the telephone ringing.

I got up and lurched forward, staggering like a toddler learning new steps, nearly toppling over before snatching the phone.

“Hello?”

“You’re up.” Colleen. She spoke with the same inscrutable quality that made the meaning of her text so difficult to discern.

“I was in the shower.”

“At least you’re alive. I had to shake you this morning to make sure you were breathing.” The seriousness, the deliberate, matter-of-fact tone, there was no mistaking this for friendly conversation.

“That’s the last thing I needed,” I said. “To wake up dead.”

“We missed the funeral.”

“I know. I’m really sorry.”

“People kept calling, Marco and Julianna, friends of yours, they were calling the house when we didn’t go. It was embarrassing.”

“I can see how that would be embarrassing.”

“Herschel, what the hell happened?”

“We’ll talk about it later. I needed to blow off steam. I screwed up, I know.”

“I’m still pissed at you. I think I know you well enough to understand you, but I’m still pissed.”

“You have every right.”

We said nothing for a while. I could hear the commotion of airport bustle on the other end.

“Colleen, did I say anything strange last night? Did you notice anything unusual?”

“Everything about the past few days has been unusual. But no, you didn’t say anything. I asked you where you were but you went right to sleep. How much did you drink?”

“A lot.”

“You drove home?”

“It was stupid.”

“You could have caused an accident.”

“I know.”

I told her I loved her and hung up, replayed the conversation in my head, for clues on her end and potential slip-ups on mine, and then staggered to the toilet so I could at last throw up.

I pulled my knees to my chest, balled up on the couch, cocooned in a blanket, sipped hot coffee and watched TV, toggling between the local channels for any news about the accident. Ainsley still hadn’t responded to my text, which was a stress I could do without.

I was waiting for the police to arrive.

It seemed unfathomable that no one had seen the accident, written down a license number and a description of the drunk driver who’d stepped out of the car. It was not possible in this day and age that no one had witnessed a thing.

A figure approached the front door. I had waited for this, but it didn’t make me any more prepared. I could make out a shape through the window.

A fist hammered against the door. No ringing doorbell, but the *thump, thump, thump* pounding like a nervous heartbeat.

I muted the television and curled up tighter, as if any sound, any movement, might give me away. Strange to say, my immediate regret was having not showered, knowing that in police custody I might not have any chance to wash off the hangover sweat for some time.

The figure at the door waited for the response that did not come, and, giving up on that approach, the figure stepped away from the door and carefully surveilled the house before approaching the front window.

He—I could tell it was a man, but could tell little else—made a visor with his hands across his forehead and peered into the house.

I sunk deeper into the couch, slowly, almost imperceptibly, and looked back at him overtop the blanket.

He spotted me, frowning when his eyes reached the man-shaped mound on the couch. He pointed at me and pounded his fist against the glass—*thump, thump*—with such force I feared the glass would crack and cave in. Even still I did nothing, relying on the uncharacteristic hope that maybe he'd acknowledged his mistake, jumped to some conclusion, and only when I was certain he'd actually smash in the window and storm the house did I reluctantly shuck the blanket and approach the front door.

The figure was no cop. I saw no uniform, no cocked firearm. He was barely even a man.

Casey. My son.

He was maybe a foot taller from the last time I saw him, almost as tall as me now. His shoulders were broader than before, and his hair had darkened to a colour more like mine. It was clear he had been shivering off the cold; he wore no touque or hood, and his hands were stuffed into his pockets. He wore an army-green canvas parka peppered with rips and holes like it was a gift from indigent street kids. I recalled something Francis had told me some time ago about the quality of friend Casey had begun hanging out with. His eyes were sunken, exhausted. I couldn't tell if his was a look of discomfort or of contempt. As with Colleen, I picked up on the certain feeling of barely-concealed anger and, to his credit, there were a thousand good reasons for him to be angry at me, it's just I couldn't decide at that moment which reason was best.

“Casey.” I started to say something about how I hadn't expected to see him, but trailed off right away. His eyes refused to fix on any one thing, instead darting to my feet, the house, back to my face. He gave me the impression that he'd have rather no one answer so that he could avoid the one-on-one confrontation altogether and instead launch a brick through the window to be done with it.

I said nothing for a time. What could I say? We both silently shared the narrow threshold of the open doorway, letting the winter air cool the house. At last I said, “You look good.” This wasn't true. He looked terrible. In hindsight, it may have been my blatant insincerity that put him over.

“Where were you yesterday?” Now the anger was obvious.

“Casey, I don't expect you to understand.”

He interrupted whatever placation I had prepared by hoofing his foot into the door frame. I realize that using the same line on both my wife and son may have amounted to lazy hubris.

“Fucking asshole,” Casey snarled, punctuating with two more kicks into my house.

I examined the scuff marks in the wood and I sighed. “Do you want a beer?”

In the well-lighted kitchen, I could see that it wasn't exhaustion giving Casey's eyes a sunken half-raccoon look, he had a purple shiner on one side. “Your eyes,” I said, opening another beer for him, “Francis didn't—”

“No, definitely not Francis. I got into a fight with a friend.”

“Some friend.”

“I started it.”

“Any reason?”

He shrugged. “There's always a reason.”

We talked about his friends. Some were runaways and street kids, other pretended to be runaways and street kids (I wondered if Casey had ever acknowledged the irony of belonging to that latter camp). We talked about Francis, agreed he was a well-meaning, big-hearted dweeb. I'll give Francis credit for this, he did his best to take care of Casey in the days after Annette's passing. After the funeral, Casey left to blow off steam with some friends, and when he hadn't returned all night, Francis called relentlessly to make

sure Casey was okay. Since Casey managed to make a full escape and bunk up God knows where, I cannot say Francis was entirely successful, but how's a stepfather going to reign in a bull-headed 15-year-old?

Casey asked me about Colleen, which is fair, I suppose. If we could talk about his replacement father, we should talk about my replacement wife. In the time that Colleen and I had been seeing each other, the two had never met, much to Colleen's disappointment. She'd seen pictures of him occasionally but, like the Christmas picture of him on Santa's knee, they were all of young Casey, the Casey I knew from birth, and not the estranged son sitting on my couch.

I asked Casey about school and girls and sports, the kinds of things a dad should probably ask, and I received the expected two-word answers, at least until he'd had a few drinks in him and elaborated with some flair. Through Annette he knew I was close with Marco and Julianna, and he mentioned seeing Ainsley around his school, that he and a lot of the boys in his grade had crushes on her, though this last utterance may have only been admitted with boozy help.

The only thing we didn't talk about was Annette. Whenever a subject came up that tangentially acknowledged her, we tiptoed around it in obvious deference to her. I for one wasn't ready to face the embarrassment of missing the funeral, and Casey I suppose wasn't ready to release his anger through confrontation or forgiveness. We settled on a stilted emotional impasse.

What surprised me was that Casey knew how to drink, even at only fifteen. He packed away a constant rotation of beers, and I did my best to keep up in an effort that I'd

call heroic, considering just how shaky my stomach was. Should I have told him I was too hung over to keep up, that I drank my way through his mother's funeral?

This is to say Casey was proper-drunk for Colleen's arrival. I should have sent Colleen a head's-up text explaining that I would not be alone, but I knew this way I could prolong the inevitable talk I'd have with her about the day before. I was just happy that it was Colleen coming home; when I heard the lock unlatch and the door open, I half-expected it to be a police raid.

She came into the kitchen carrying a sack of groceries, pausing at the kitchen entrance to study me and Casey, and the countertops littered with empty beer bottles. Casey waved to her in drunken salute, his uncoordinated gestures exaggerated, as if learned from an orang-utan.

"Oh," she said, in a high-pitch lilt of surprise and possible annoyance. "Well, hello."

Considering she was walking in on a private conversation with her bathrobe-clad husband and an unfamiliar, drunk, 15-year-old boy, her reaction to the situation was amazingly restrained and diplomatic.

"Honey," I said, unburdening her of the groceries and guiding her toward him. "Colleen, I'd like you to meet my son, Casey."

I couldn't gauge her reaction, not the truth in it. I am unsure how she actually felt about this forced introduction, but she handled herself with the composure of a consummate professional. Years in the service industry will do that.

She shook his hand. "I've heard so much about you." This must have been a lie. I may have talked about Casey to her before, perhaps even at length, but at the time I

couldn't think of a single thing I'd said to her about him, and realizing that fact filled me with a mixture of shame toward myself and gratitude toward Colleen.

"I'm really sorry to hear about your mother," she said. "I'd only met her a few times, but she was a really lovely woman."

Casey drained his beer. "Yeah, it's been tough."

"Are you staying for dinner?" she asked. "There's enough here for three, I'm sure. We can stretch it."

"Pizza," I said. "We'll make what you're making tomorrow. Do you like pizza, Casey? I'll order one."

Casey nodded his head in a loose, liquored way, like he had no bones in his neck. "Sure, I like pizza."

"Good," Colleen said. "Hersh, I need to talk to you a minute. Casey, do you mind if I take your father away for a moment?"

"Go for it. I gotta take a piss anyway."

Colleen closed the bedroom door behind us. "So?"

"Look," I said quietly, "I think he just needs to spend a bit of time here. He seems a bit lost to me."

"He has a black eye."

"I'm sure that's a 'boys will be boys' thing."

I explained about his street kid friends, his mom, how he showed up to the house unannounced. I left out just how angry he was, though that may have been the established subtext.

I said, "I'm going to ask him to stay here a few days. He hasn't said anything, but I want him to feel welcome. Can we do that, Colleen?" It came out like an accusation somehow.

"Yes, Hersh, we can." I could tell by her tone that this conversation was not over.

Casey wasn't in the kitchen when we returned, nor the bathroom. I found him in the garage, leaning against the workbench.

"I like your car," he said.

"Then you obviously know nothing about cars. Don't worry, neither do I."

"No, I guess I don't. But I do know the thing is busted." He pointed to the broken decal on the hood.

"Yeah, I just noticed that today."

"Colleen seems nice," he said. "She kind of reminds me of Mom."

"Yeah, I guess she does for me, too."

We admired the car in silence for a moment. Finally I took him by the shoulder and guided him back into the house.

7.

Casey and I woke up at different times, each of us nursing our own suicidal hangovers. If either of us had an inkling of forethought, we would have tapered off the booze at dinner, knocked back whole litres of water and called it a night before the hour had officially become ungodly. Instead we emptied regrettable quantities of beer down our eager throats, curled up on the couch with what snacks we could find—a sleeve of

Colleen's disgusting whole wheat crackers—and toggled between vulgar cartoons and late-night talk shows until we settled on some blood-soaked action movie playing on a channel that promised an unfathomable lack of censorship. I must have asked him, "Is this okay?" a dozen times in regards to nearly everything: the channel, him sleeping on the couch, even the brand of beer. Unless it's used in the pursuit of sex, I know nothing about acting hip.

We nodded off sometime before the movie ended and the infomercials began, our near-full beers abandoned for sleep. Casey was a child the last time I saw him sleep, and other than looking full-grown, little had changed; he still had the same contented look on his face when he slept. My head grew heavier, and when I worried he'd wake to find me carefully studying him in repose, I lumbered to my feet and patted his leg as paternally as I could so that he'd stretch out along the length of the couch.

But did we ever suffer from excess that next morning. To my surprise, he woke up at a reasonable hour—before ten o'clock, reasonable for a hung-over 15-year-old with nowhere to be—which is when I heard the television turn on. I had woken at eight to call in a personal day to work, and I couldn't fall back asleep. By then, Colleen had left for work without waking me up.

Under the pretence of professionalism, of keeping up with current events should any stories develop, I asked Paul about the stories going to print. Paul laid out the bullet points on a new mandate in civic politics, a mugging in the West End, a suspected arson off Salter Street, and a town hall on rising transit fares.

"What about that hit-and-run in Silver Heights," I croaked out, throat dynamited by booze. "I saw something about that on TV. Anything I need to know?" I could have

easily telephoned the police on behalf of the media and gotten some first-hand answers, but I wanted to keep my name as far from the accident as possible.

Paul rustled some papers. “Yeah, something here. Alan Theroux, thirty-six, firefighter, found by some dog-walker. The guy was coming home from a poker match with friends. Theroux, I mean, not the dog-walker.”

“Any clues?”

“We ran it this morning. Did you read it?”

“You ran it? No, I don’t get the paper here. I read it at work.”

“We just kept the facts. That actually caused a little kerfuffle here in the office. At the accident, there was one of those logos on the hood. What’s the word?”

“A decal?”

“Yeah, a decal. They found it in the snow near the accident. Police don’t know if it’s from the accident or not but it’s all they have to go on, and they asked us not to include it so we don’t compromise any possible investigation. Well, Ralphie goes off on integrity and free press and all that. You know how he is.”

“So what did you do?” I asked. “Did you include it?”

“Are you crazy? I cut it out of the article.”

I changed the subject and we discussed some other stories, mostly about a recent bar stabbing from a week prior. We hung up and I researched what I could on the newspaper’s website. As Paul had intimated, the article on the accident was brief and vague and said nothing about a busted decal discovered near the crime scene, but the combination of the article and what Paul told me confirmed those early suspicions that the decal had in fact broken off when I hit this Theroux character. Alan Theroux, leaving

behind a wife and a 14-year-old, according to the article, a man I'd have never known if he'd only left the game five minutes later, if he had literally played his cards differently. It terrified me that this was the detail that changed everything, that put him on the road at that time, to get sucked underneath the car, to snatch half the decal off like some surreptitious message to the police.

I wondered how many cars on the Winnipeg streets would have a decal like mine, if this particular BMW logo was common here. When I first got the car I noticed how many cars on the road were like mine, but this was some years ago. I went through the phonebook and began calling garages until I found one that was open this early, spoke with the guy about purchasing a replacement decal.

“We don't have any here,” the guy told me, his voice gruff and impatient like he too spent the night getting drunk. “Sometimes we can peel them off totalled cars if we're lucky, but usually we have to contact the dealers off the website.”

Until then, I hadn't considered peeling the half-decal off my car, eliminating that piece of evidence that actually tied me to the accident.

So I set to work.

With a screwdriver and a box cutter blade I set out to remove the insignia as cleanly and carefully as my clumsy hands would allow. Times when my life depended on it, which I'll admit don't come often, I wish for the skilled nimble fingers of an artisan, to invoke their abilities with a simple magic incantation or some other such black magic because, goddamn it, I could not scrape this fucking thing off the car. Later I learned that professionals use heat to soften the glue and chemical solutions to wipe it clean. I knew none of this.

Eventually, I wedged the blade under the hard plastic, shimmied the much-sturdier screwdriver in its place, and struggled with the might of Holy Jesus to pry the logo off. In my blind tenacity, I might have realized that this amount of force might be more damaging than helpful, and by the time I wised up to this eventuality, I'd torn the decal off, leaving behind it a ghastly patch of bare chrome in its place. Though the entire decal was gone, the two broken halves couldn't have been more disparate, the first half having fallen off effortlessly, but the second half having been removed through obvious vandalism. Any officer could hold up the found bit of decal to the hood and see how the other half had been pried off. This limited my options: I could either paint my car or I could find a replacement decal.

It was around this time when ten o'clock came around and I heard stirring from the living room. I pulled myself from the horror that I'd inflicted on the car, and to what implications that entailed, buried the half-decal in a toolbox, and returned to the house.

"What were you doing in there?" Casey asked, seeing me emerge from the garage.

"Huffing exhaust," I joked, and when I remembered that Casey was only 15-years-old, I said, "No, I wasn't really doing that. Don't ever huff exhaust, Casey."

"I'm too tired for this."

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked.

"My head hurts."

"You should drink some water." I poured him a lukewarm glass and watched him gulp down what he could, wondering if I was handling this the wrong way. When I was Casey's age and I got sick from over-drinking, my parents tried to convince me that

miserable hangovers always result from any amount of booze. Perhaps I was neglecting my parental duties by easing him through this pain. This entire dilemma remained moot, since Casey's post-drinking stomach was in no way prepared to handle anything as unstable or acidic as water, and Casey ran off for the bathroom to vomit, palms comically clasped over his mouth. Score one for alcohol.

When he finally emerged from the bathroom, I considered offering him some pot, which tended to settle my own stomach and helped me survive hangovers, but I knew that in doing so I would have officially crossed a line from rascalion to villain, inarguably making me a terrible father.

“Do you have any pot?” he asked, wiping his mouth.

“Yes, I do.”

I unearthed an artefact from the bedroom closet, a vintage *Happy Days* lunchbox I'd used as a child—which may be more sad than charming, since it tended to resurface in me feelings of lost youth and wasted potential every time I used it—wiped away with my hand an actual layer of dust, and removed a pack of papers and a glass jam jar filled to near capacity which grass that was God knows how old. Some while ago I had decided that finding pot was a process too tedious to indulge in. When I was younger, I always had a handful of friends who were selling, but this luxury went the wayside as I got older, and since I smoked so infrequently, it had become difficult to stay on top of these things. I got tired of asking old friends or coworkers, speaking in embarrassed half-whispers like plotting conspirators. There are certain expectations one hopes will be met with age, and in my case, I hoped that when I turned forty, I would no longer need to shop around for a

pot dealer, so I bought a drug heist's worth of it, enough for me to live on comfortably until the next big score pulls me out of retirement. After a year I had barely made a dent.

Of course this excessive amount impressed Casey, and while I'm not proud of scoring that sort of victory with him, I would have used any available tool to reconnect with my son, be it a case of beer or a jam jar stuffed with drugs. I let the boy roll up a mangled joint the weight and girth of a traditional Bavarian sausage, and we traded it between us until I burnt my thumb and the roach unravelled into the couch fibres.

I immediately regretted finishing the thing off with Casey because within minutes of dropping the dregs into an empty beer bottle, I became overwhelmed by the simultaneous sensations of boredom, restlessness, clarity, confusion, ambition, resignation, comfort, and panic. I wasn't sure if I was talking gibberish or talking at all, as the synapses between my mouth and my brain had obviously become severed, maybe permanently, and I understood that for the rest of my life I'd have to communicate to others via hieroglyphs on slate. Also I became extremely thirsty.

Casey seemed to handle himself with more grace; I suppose the genetic makeup that causes one to get stoned and lose his shit skips a generation, like eye colour. He was intelligent and unselfconscious throughout, at least to the extent that a 15-year-old can be either of those things, and in those moments that he actually did trail off or stare beyond the horizon of our dimension, he'd shrug and say, "Sorry, stoned," knowing that that would explain everything.

Around the time I calmed the assault of jitters on my arms and legs—my most common symptom of getting high—Casey sunk into the sofa, rubbed his stomach contentedly. The shakes in his gut had subsided. In just minutes he made the miraculous

transition from “somewhat better” to “maybe I can hold water” to “absolutely ravenous.” Prompted by a fast food commercial, he demanded, in his sweetest tone, that we take the BMW to the nearest McDonald’s and stuff our faces with egg sandwiches and hash browns.

“We can’t drive there,” I said. “The car is broken.”

“What?”

“No, it’s not broken. Why did I say that?”

“You’re stoned?”

“I guess so.” I fished for more excuses. “I’ll have to find my wallet. I misplaced it.”

“I can pay for breakfast,” he said.

“You’re fifteen. Where do you get money?”

He shrugged.

I thought about this. “Don’t you have school? It’s Monday.”

“Did you forget that I’m supposed to go to school?”

“I guess I did,” I said.

“I don’t have school on Mondays.”

“When do you have school?”

He shrugged again.

“This sounds suspicious,” I said. “I don’t think I believe you.”

“I can’t go to school. I’m too high.”

“Big deal,” I said. “I used to do it all the time. No, that’s not true. Don’t do that. Don’t go to school high.”

“Are we going to get breakfast or not?”

“We should walk.”

8.

Colleen pulled up her pyjama bottoms. “How long is he going to be staying?”

“Is it a problem he’s here?”

“Why would it be a problem? I haven’t suggested it might be a problem, have I?”

“Just covering my bases,” I said. “I’ll admit I have a long history of misreading these things.” I peeled back the bed sheets and crawled in. I was eager to sleep away the fogginess that came with getting high during the day.

She pulled her hair into a ponytail. “I’m not angry, Hersh. I’m not even annoyed, I don’t think. It’s just that this whole situation is taking some adjustment, and I just want to know where we stand. How long should I expect to be adjusted?”

“You always did have trouble adapting to new situations,” I said.

“You’re thinking about yourself, Hersh, not me. Remember when I wanted to get that Cocker Spaniel?”

“I’m bad with dogs. I thought we’d agree to let that slide.”

“It’s not important.”

We said nothing for a while. Letting that break in the discussion to occur was a mistake on my part because it allowed Colleen to circle back to what I’d been avoiding this whole time.

“What happened to you on Saturday?”

“When?”

“Come on, Hersh, don’t do this. Why did we miss Annette’s funeral? If you weren’t up for going, you could have said something. I’m not saying I’d have let you off without a fuss, but I’d have listened.”

“I know.”

“Do you? What kept you out so late?”

“It’s embarrassing.” I made a point to utter this with a tone of pathetic embarrassment. Maybe she’d take pity and let me off the hook.

“I’m sure it is,” Colleen said. “I’m sure it’s plenty embarrassing.”

“I had to go out and get drunk.”

“You don’t say.”

“Was it very obvious?”

“I don’t know how you drove that car back. Which, I have to say, was incredibly irresponsible. That almost made me more mad than anything.”

“‘Almost’?”

“Don’t get cute.”

“Look, I’m really sorry,” I said. “I had expected to just get some cigarettes from the corner. I didn’t expect to stay out all day. Just every time I tried to come home, I couldn’t. I really did try. I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Stop saying that.”

“Stop saying what?”

“That I won’t understand. What won’t I understand?”

I don't think I understood it myself, and I said so. "It's hard to explain. It was just so final." This was my refrain, the finality of things, though I'm not entirely sure how I'd managed to stammer my way through any sort of explanation, nor am I sure what of it was true, though I suspect I had tried to be as honest as possible, and whether or not Colleen was satisfied by my rambles didn't really matter to me at the time, just that she let the conversation end.

In the morning, Colleen was darling to the boy. She woke us up before leaving for work, having made a heap of French toast and bacon. She asked Casey if he'd be returning to school, calmly agreeing when he told her he'd need at least another day.

He wasn't the only one using tragedy to his advantage. I telephoned the office in the morning sometime around nine-thirty to tell them I'd be taking another personal day, which I'm sure they'd assumed since I was already an hour and a half late for work. What would they do, fire me? My ex-wife was dead. Paul gave me the breakdown of stories again.

"Fairly slow one today," he said. "Hoping the day picks up. Maybe this is the day for a triple homicide. We've got some major noise complaints from a neighbourhood in East K over loud construction work. That's page three right now, believe it or not. Um, the new Walmart is disputing new zoning violations. Better contact the Associated Press for that one. Oh, Roy Carson is writing an op-ed on stray cats. You can't see me but I'm making a jerking-off motion with my hand."

“Nothing else?”

“Nothing on that hit-and-run you were so eager about.”

“I wasn’t eager.”

“Well, whatever you were, nothing’s changed.” Paul shuffled some papers.

“We’ve got something about an art expo put on by local children, which should be a winner. We’ve got a petition against some of those faulty red light cameras. Lost cause if you ask me.”

“What did you say?”

“Oh, I just mean that the city will never admit any of the cameras are malfunctioning. The petition will mean nothing.”

“Before that. Which cameras?”

“There’s one at Portage and Westgate and the other at Corydon and Niagara. They’ve been ticketing cars doing the limit, apparently.”

It hadn’t been until after I’d hung up that I understood why this news upset me so much. It wasn’t the news itself or the petition itself that was disturbing. I replayed the details of Saturday night again, the accident.

I drove away from the body, snaked along side streets, got lost, pulled onto Corydon, stopped at the red light. Ainsley was saying nothing. An approaching blue sedan hit a patch of ice, skidded through the intersection.

I saw a flash. The photo flash capturing a panorama of the intersection. The sedan had committed an unintentional infraction, totally contestable. But that isn’t what bothered me.

Casey had been watching the way my face had twisted as I sussed out this new information. “Dad, are you okay?”

“Sorry. Yeah. Just thinking, you know, about Mom.”

“I know. I do that, too.” He had my laptop propped up in front of front of him.

“Can I get rid of this page?” he asked. He motioned to the screen.

“Just start a new tab.” I bit into my knuckle, lost in thought. “Wait, what page is that?”

He read the title. “Man, thirty-six, victim of hit-and-run.”

“What?” I looked over Casey’s shoulder and cursed myself for being so careless.

“I guess you were reading this for work?” I couldn’t tell if Casey was playing dumb or not.

“Yeah, that’s it. For work.”

Casey returned to whatever he was doing, checking email or browsing pornography—who can tell?—and we each scrutinized each other, looking for a change in attitude.

When I was sure he knew nothing, my mind returned to the accident.

I called Francis to let him know that Casey was still safe here. As much as I disliked the man, he deserved to know what had become of his stepson, or whatever it was he considered Casey to be. Burden, perhaps.

“How are you holding up, Francis?”

“The house is so empty. I don’t know. I keep thinking that maybe Annette’s out of town, or working late, or is out with her friends. And it’s getting easier during the day because I keep myself busy and out of the house. But it gets hard at night, right before bed. That’s when the house feels really empty. I keep checking my messages like maybe she’s stuck in line at the grocery or she had to take Casey out to buy clothes.”

“Gee, Francis, I don’t know what to say. Annette meant a lot to us.”

“I never asked you,” Francis said, “but why didn’t you make it to the funeral?”

“It’s a long story, Francis. But I promise I loved her, too.”

“She was a good woman.”

“Listen, why don’t you get out of the house for a few days? Maybe longer. Take a trip somewhere. Casey seems to be settling in here, and I’m happy to watch after him.” I said this last part within earshot of Casey and studied his face for approval.

Francis said, “Well, Annette and I *were* saving up for a trip.”

“She’d want you to go. I’m sure Casey will be fine with me.”

“That’s a nice idea, Hershel. I could do with getting out of here for a while.”

I hung up the phone, warm from the feeling that I’d done something selfless and kind. If this feeling was what I’d missed out on, I should have been nicer to Francis a long time ago.

Ainsley had finally responded to what I assumed had been a thousand texts, but after a dutiful count that number dropped to just twenty-two, and then to zero, when I purged the

messages from my phone. She responded to all twenty-two with a single claim: “Told nobody.” Of course this only answered one of many questions rambled out of the last few days, a sprawling digital paper trail of twenty-two messages, but if she could only answer one question, she answered the right question. As had been my general problem with the women in my life, I couldn’t suss out the tone of this particular utterance. All I was certain of was that Ainsley wanted me to quit texting her already, and to that, message received.

Just because the police had not yet arrived did not mean they were not due, and I could feel the acute squeeze of pressure. I did not dare take the BMW out of the garage, not for a second, so I walked to the nearest gas station, away from the house and away from Casey’s watchful eyes, and I had a taxi take me to the BMW to buy a replacement decal.

“I’m putting together a scrap book for my son,” I said, then cursed myself for telling such a weak and transparent lie. In the whole ride to the dealership, I apparently could not think of anything that reeked less of horseshit than that. The woman at the desk, clearly sceptical, said nothing. It’s not like she needed to hear my life story.

I paid cash, obviously. “No, I do not have an account here,” I said. “Yes, I would like a bag.”

At the hardware store I compared every package of glue to determine which would best affix the replacement emblem to the BMW’s hood. I approached the nearest

uniformed high school dropout for his professional opinion. “Excuse me, which adhesive best connects metal pieces?”

“What?” His dopey voice matched his dopey demeanour.

“I need to glue one piece of metal to another piece of metal,” I said.

“What kind of metal?” The tuned-out, couldn’t-give-a-shit attitude suggested I might have asked him literally anything, his thoughts on religion or assisted suicide, and received a default lackadaisical response.

“I don’t know. Tin. Aluminum. What are cars made of?”

He shrugged.

“But you understand the words,” I said. “I need to glue a metal thing onto another metal thing. A car, specifically.”

“What kind of car?”

“A grey one. It used to be silver, but then it got old.”

He stepped back and looked at all the glue products at once, maybe seeing them as a larger art piece that could only be understood with distance. “Why don’t you try welding?”

I could not tell if he was being intentionally difficult for kicks or if he was legitimately stupid. “Glue,” I said.

“Got it. How good do you want it to glue? Because this one costs more than that one by, like, six dollars.”

“*Seven* dollars. And that’s all you know about these glues? That one is more expensive than the other?”

He shrugged. “How much were you looking to spend?”

“Less than twenty-four dollars,” I said, “unless you have a bank machine here.”

He pointed to a package hanging at the wall. “This one here is twenty-one plus tax.”

“Thank you. I can handle myself from here.”

I left the store with the twenty-one dollar adhesive packed into the BMW bag, and I had another cab drive me home. My phone rang en route.

Ainsley.

I answered. “Hey, I was wondering when you’d call. How are you doing?”

“I need to talk,” she said. “Can we talk?”

“Of course.” I had planned to have the driver drop me off a block from home, but instead I had him pull over immediately, unwilling to let him hear any of this conversation. I shuffled toward home slowly, unsure how long Ainsley and I would speak.

“How are things?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

She sniffled. “No, I’m pretty far from okay. That guy we hit—”

“Ainsley—”

“That guy was someone’s dad. I mean, someone at my school. Some kid in grade nine. Everyone’s been talking about it.”

“I don’t know what to say to that.”

“It’s just I keep thinking about what if I were in that situation. How fucked up would that be.” She spoke in more of a sad whimper than anything else. I’d had Casey around to distract me from the accident, but Ainsley was not given any such distraction. She’d been forced to face the boy at school. “I’ve seen the kid around,” she said. “He

always had kind of a sad look on his face, you know what I mean? But now he looks broken. I can't even believe he's back at school so soon." I could hear her voice catch over the phone. It made me think of when Francis called me about Annette. "I know some people need to get back to normalcy, but how is anything normal after that? Everyone's been looking at him funny, I'm sure. But I actually have something to say to him. I want to tell him how sorry I am."

"Ainsley."

"I guess I don't know what he was like, what kind of person he was before his dad died. He's in grade nine, you know, I never paid any attention. But you can see how something's gone. He just looks weak. That's the way to put it. He's weak. It's just, I dunno."

She trailed off, and when she'd said nothing for a while, I cleared my throat.

"Ainsley, I want to make sure you know that you can't say anything to him."

"Jesus Christ," she roared, frustrated. "I know I can't say anything. God. You've told me, like, thirty times. I read your texts. I read all of them. I'm not stupid."

"Ainsley, calm down."

"One of the hardest parts about this is the way you've treated me. Like you're more worried about what I'd say than how I feel about all this."

"Hold on, that isn't fair," I said. "I *did* text you. I *did* ask how you were. You didn't get back to me. How am I supposed to interpret that? You think you're being disrespected, so you ignore me? That is a pretty childish thing to do. We're in this together."

“You keep saying that,” Ainsley said, “but is that actually true? Is it? I wasn’t driving. I wasn’t drunk. I have to live with all this guilt and all these secrets, and you’re telling me I have as much at stake as you, and I’m saying that isn’t true.”

“Ainsley.”

“What’s the worst that’ll happen to me? I’m not even seventeen. How much trouble can I get into?”

“You’re being irrational, Ains. Let’s wait a few days, get out on our own. Have dinner. Watch a movie. Get a hotel room, split some wine.”

“Give me a break.”

“Just promise me not to do anything rash,” I said. “You know what that means. If you have the urge to do anything, sleep on it first, clear your head. At least give me that. I know you’re angry with me and I hope that passes. But I need you.”

She said nothing.

I affected a sweeter tone. “Ainsley, I need you.”

“Fine,” she said, after a time.

I was near the house when we’d hung up. Grown up as she was, I knew Ainsley was capable of being as temperamental as any teenager—still, I saw this as a minor victory. She phoned me to throw my way an outpouring of emotions, and I did my best to suppress those emotions, perhaps even successfully. All was all right for now. In the meantime, I’d wait out a spare moment for everyone in the house to sleep or become otherwise preoccupied, and I could sneak into the garage, glue the decal back onto car, and then resume living my life as if nothing unseemly or felonious had occurred.

I entered the house. Casey sat curled up on the couch, knees tucked into his chest, my laptop shining artificial light against his face.

“Hey, Son,” I said, tossing my keys onto the coffee table. I liked the sound of that. In the years that I was in the picture, I never called Casey “son.” He was “kiddo,” “baby,” “boy-o,” or “brat,” or “crybaby” or “Rear Admiral Pants-shitter,” but never “son.” I could get used to this.

“It’s a beautiful day outside, Casey. Even for January. Very mild. I took off my gloves and everything.”

“Dad?”

“I mean, we’re some way from shorts and t-shirts, but if this keeps up, who knows?”

“Dad.”

“Yes, Son.”

Casey cleared his throat, paused to let this gravity of what he was to say sink in immediately. He did not want to repeat this or be misunderstood.

“Dad, the police were here.”

9.

“What do you mean ‘the police were here’?” I said. “Tell me what that means.”

“About an hour after you left,” Casey answered, his voice shaky. “Two of them. In suits, not like in uniform or anything. Like on those cop shows.”

“Did you talk to them?”

“Yeah. I didn’t want to, but they saw me through the window.”

“Go on.”

“They asked for you. I told them you weren’t here.”

“That’s good,” I said. “Told them the truth. That’s important. What else?”

“They asked to see your car.”

“My car?” His words were sinking in, making this realization a truly goddamned feeling. “What did you say?”

“I said it wasn’t here. They couldn’t look at it.”

“You told them I was driving it?”

“No, I just told them it wasn’t here,” Casey said. “Pigs, you know. Never give an inch.”

“That’s one way of looking at it.” I sat down to process all of this. “So what did you say?”

“Nothing. That’s the point. They just left. It didn’t seem all that urgent to them.”

We said nothing for a moment. I couldn’t help but feel that Casey was withholding some vital bit of information.

“Can I ask you something?” he said at last. “Does this have something to do with that hit-and-run?”

I looked at him for a while, cleared my throat. “What hit-and-run? Why would you ask that?”

“The hit-and-run you were reading about on your laptop. Over in Crescentwood. A guy about your age. You know which one I mean. You’ve opened that page like twenty

times. I checked your browser history. It turns out I actually go to school with that guy's son. Michael's his name."

"Okay."

"Somebody I know from school has been texting me about it. It's crazy. They're all talking about it."

"I don't see what this has to do with me," I said.

"It isn't any one thing. It's a bunch of little things. The way you've been talking to that guy at your work about the hit-and-run. Over the phone. I heard you. It feels like you're obsessing about it a bit. Maybe I'm wrong. Also, you're car is missing that logo thing on the hood, and you won't take it out to drive. There's something about that."

"That's crazy," I told him. "You got all that from an overheard conversation and a broken decal?"

"And the cops coming by, wanting to see the car."

"I guess I see what you mean," trying to play it off.

"About that broken decal. There's another thing. My friend, the one who texted me, he knows that Michael kid really well. He asked him some questions. Apparently at the accident site, cops found part of a decal in the snow. They don't know if it's related or what." He watched me for some time. "Look, if I'm right, you don't have to say anything."

Perhaps it was the earnestness in which he spoke to me, or it was the need to confess to someone, but rather than respond with a kneejerk denial, I said nothing. I'd hazard that I could trust Casey's need for my approval to keep him quiet. As if to affirm this idea, he said. "About the cops, not letting them see the car, I did good, right?"

“Yeah, Casey. You did good.”

Casey pulled his knees tighter into his chest and neither of us spoke for a time. I looked at the clock, then looked into the plastic bag that was still in my hand.

“Colleen won’t be home for a few hours,” I said. “Are you willing to help me piss off some pigs?”

We hunched over the car’s hood and examined the level of damage I’d inflicted on the hood, both during the accident and then after. By the inconsistency of glue residue, which was thick like cement, we could tell exactly where the decal used to be. I’d torn paint off outside the decal’s edge, like a child’s drawing that is coloured outside the lines, so even if we could successfully glue the replacement piece back on, the missing paint would be noticeable. I’d have to touch up the paint later with a matching colour. I smeared a glob of glue onto the car.

“What happened, Dad?”

“I had to pull half the emblem off,” I said. “Sort of mangled it. This stuff smells terrible. We really should be wearing masks.”

“No, I mean with the accident. You never actually told me about it.”

I pressed the new emblem against the car, watching the glue ooze out over the edges of the replacement piece. I told him what was important. The drunken obliteration was unimportant. Ainsley was unimportant.

“Why didn’t you stay? Call the police or an ambulance?”

I checked my fingertips for wet adhesive, worried I might glue my hands to the car, like that was all I needed. “I don’t know,” I said at last. “I don’t know how panic works.”

“Couldn’t you say anything now? Tell them you made a mistake.”

“No, Casey, it doesn’t work that way. Despite what your mom always tried to teach you, sometimes you can’t tell the truth. Sometimes you have no choice but to go out on a lie.” I blew air onto the glue to speed up the process. The fumes were giving me a headache. The garage had no windows, and I was not about to open the garage door to the neighbourhood, so we had to endure the smell until it dissipated into the house.

“Jesus,” I said to Casey, “you sure are getting an education with me, aren’t you?”

Once the adhesive had hardened, we left the garage, heads swimming. I cooked a batch of vegetarian chilli and ate my first healthy dinner in days. We watched television, speaking only periodically. I asked him when he planned on returning to school, and he asked me when I planned on returning to work, so neither of us answered each other’s question. I heard Colleen’s car pull into the garage. She had a look on her face like she was working out a problem.

“Hey, babe,” I said. “There’s chilli on the stove. Should still be warm.”

“Thanks. What’s going on in the garage?”

“What do you mean?”

“It smells like paint thinner.”

I shrugged.

“Does it have something to do with the logo on the hood of the car?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“The logo. The decal. What’s wrong with it.”

“I didn’t know anything was wrong with it.”

“There is,” she said. “It’s sliding off your car.”

Colleen pulled off her bra, and I grinned at her like the leering creep I was. She threatened to cover herself back up.

“No, leave it off.”

She gave me an affected frown and pulled her oversized bed shirt on, a t-shirt of mine that she’d adopted some time ago.

“So you replaced the logo on your car. That’s curious.”

I crawled under the covers. “What do you mean?”

“Come on, Hersh. I’m not stupid. I noticed half of it was missing on Sunday before I left for work. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?”

This time it was me who affected a frown. Whenever I wanted to change a particular subject, I’d make a face of mock sadness and, bless that woman, she’d usually let the subject pass, but her expression told me I wasn’t escaping with a simple pout.

“Colleen, we don’t need to discuss this, do we? The thing just fell off. Happens all the time.”

“You came home Saturday night drunker than I’ve seen you in a long time. It’s a miracle you didn’t choke in your sleep. Something knocked that thing off. What happened?”

“Look, I don’t know what happened,” I said. “Remember when my car was vandalized and they replaced that piece? I guess they didn’t glue it back right. Don’t ask me how these things work.”

“It was minus twenty-five degrees that night, Hersh. You’re telling me the piece cracked in the cold and the glue gave out?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you fixing it yourself? Why don’t you take it to the garage? It’s obviously the garage’s fault that happened.”

“They said it was past warranty.”

“Really?” she asked. “What did they say about it? Exactly what did they say?”

I stammered, and Colleen called me out on my bullshit.

“Hersh, you’re a terrible liar. I know you hit something. Amazing you didn’t kill someone. What was it? A tree? Telephone pole? You must think I’m an idiot.”

“Don’t say that.” I sucked in a deep breath. Feeling for half-truths was easier when she wasn’t suspicious of every word coming out. “Yes, I hit a streetlight. I don’t even know how it happened. I pumped on the brakes, same as always, but it was so rough outside the tires skidded out, slid over the curb, and I hit the pole. That’s never happened before.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I was embarrassed. I knew you’d be disappointed. I was so tipsy.”

“Drunk.”

“Right. And I knew that you’d be upset at me for getting into an accident. I didn’t want you to get mad.”

“Well, of course I’m mad,” she said. “Jesus, Hersh, what if you hit a person? That was really irresponsible of you.”

“I know.”

“Very few things piss me off that much. Promise me you won’t do anything that goddamned stupid again.”

“I can promise you that. I just hope you’ll forgive me.”

She said nothing for a lengthy enough time that I wondered how she might respond. She sat up, angled her back toward me, tucked her hair to one shoulder. The way she knew my pout, I knew what this meant. A whole lot of backrubs would go toward making up for this.

10.

Wednesday was when it all started to go wrong.

I had been duped into a false sense of security, assuming the day would move along pleasantly enough. I spoke with Paul for some time when I called in another personal day—he had no new information on the accident, which I took as encouragement. I showered, set up a pot of coffee, served up some pancakes and eggs to the family. Colleen had a late start to the day, her shift starting at eleven in the morning, so the three of us enjoyed the rare luxury of relaxing over breakfast, one of the last times we could together share a mutual sense of peace.

The knock came just after nine, three heavy, ominous thuds fist-hammered against the door. No one got up to answer, not at first. I shrugged to Colleen.

Casey gave me a nervous, conspiratorial look, and, in case I might not pick up the gesture, he said rigidly, “I wonder who that is,” almost shouting.

I made my wary shuffle to the door, closing the door to the garage along the way. The replacement decal had come almost completely unstuck overnight and now dangled from the car like a gangrenous digit ready to come off. I should never have risked it; the car should have been moved by this time. In the interim from the kitchen to the front door I considered a handful of suitable hiding spots for it: Marco’s garage, a lake, a field outside of town. Leaving it here had been careless, I now knew that.

To be clear, if this was the police, I had no clear plan of action. The police would ask to see the car, and Colleen, unaware what was at stake, would usher them to the garage and show them my sloppy patchwork, my attempt to conceal evidence. The police would check the dumpsters of a nearby neighbourhood and find fragments of the matching half-decal that I’d broken and thrown away. Without even introducing the hit-and-run I was committing felonies. I thought about saying something to Colleen, a warning to keep the police out of the garage, but I said nothing, hoping to remedy the problem myself.

I opened the door to the two men. Just as Casey described them, they were not uniformed like beat cops but well-dressed, with wool overcoats atop their suits. The one to my left was in his 50s, portly, with short black hair and a thick moustache, ambiguously foreign, Greek or Italian or French Métis. The one to my right was closer to my age, sandy blond hair, cheeks reddening from the cold. His clothes were better-fitted and he carried a take-out coffee. Behind them, parked at the curb, sat an unmarked white police cruiser.

“Good morning, Mr. Wallischuk,” the older one said, confirming my name with another glance at his notepad. “Hershel Wallischuk? Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Looks like we disturbed your breakfast,” he said, peering into the house. “Our apologies. We shouldn’t be long. I am Sergeant Chartrand, this is Detective Sergeant Hollister. We are from Winnipeg Police Services. We just need a minute of your time.”

“Okay. I guess.”

“You are the owner of a 2002 BMW 325xi, license plate HBQ 366?”

“Uh, yeah, that’s correct. Yes.”

“Do you mind if we come in, Mr. Wallischuk? We’re letting the heat out of your house.”

“Can I ask what this is about? It’s nine in the morning.”

“We spoke with your son yesterday,” Chartrand said.

“My son?”

“He didn’t mention anything?”

“No. Hold on.” I turned and looked down toward the kitchen. Casey was saying something to Colleen. What he said to her exactly I’d never be entirely certain, but it would have dramatic consequences on the way Colleen would understand my situation with Casey and the car.

“Casey, come here.” My brain fired synapses of thought, failing me, as he padded down the hall. I could tell Colleen too was lost in a thought. “Casey,” I said, “did these officers come here yesterday?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

I spoke calmly and slowly. “Well, why didn’t you say anything, for God’s sake? It might have been important.”

“I don’t know, Dad. My head hasn’t been all here.”

“That’s understandable.” To the officers, I said, “It’s been a tough week.”

“I’ll bet,” Chartrand answered, looking at what was left of Casey’s faded black eye. “Can we come in?”

“Sure, I guess. It’s cold out there.”

They stomped in like lumbering animals, and I refused to give more room than they needed for fear they might muscle past and force their way to the garage.

“So what can I do for you?” I asked.

“We just need to confirm a few things for our records,” Chartrand said. There was an auto accident on Saturday, and there’s reason to assume your car was in the area around that time. I want to be clear that we’re not suggesting anything, Mr. Wallischuk, we just need to eliminate a few possibilities before we can move on with our investigation. Were you out anywhere on Saturday night?”

“I was here,” I told them.

“All night? Do you have anyone who can confirm this?”

I wasn’t about to drag Ainsley into my explanation, and Colleen couldn’t be counted on to provide for me an alibi. “Yes, my son, Casey. Isn’t that right, Casey?”

“Right, Dad,” Casey said carefully.

“That was the night of Annette’s funeral,” I said. “My ex-wife, his mother. We came and spent the night here.” Colleen slowly came to join us from the kitchen, standing

in the fringes at the hallway like a skittish cat wary of strangers. “That’s Annette Henkowitz,” I added, “in case you need to check that.”

“I’m sorry to hear about your loss,” Chartrand said.

Hollister finally spoke. “Mr. Wallischuk, are you the only driver of your BMW? Does anyone else in the family drive it?”

“Only me,” I said. “Casey’s too young to drive and my wife Colleen here has her own car. I’m sorry, you said there was an accident?”

“A hit-and-run,” Hollister said. “With a pedestrian. Over in Crescentwood.”

Colleen was just behind me now. “Hit-and-run? Was anybody hurt?”

“The pedestrian died,” Chartrand said. “Hence our coming around to pester you with questions. We can actually clear this up quickly if we take a look at your car and confirm it wasn’t yours. Do you mind if we take a look in the garage?”

Colleen spoke again. “What makes you think my husband might have done it?” studying my response, I am sure.

“We haven’t jumped to any conclusions like that,” Chartrand said. “It’s just we have a theory that it was the driver of a BMW that caused the accident, and we have a photo taken from a red-light camera of a BMW near the accident site around the same time. We know this probably means nothing but, like I said, we need to rule out possibilities, which is why we’re here. If you’ll just let us take a look at your car.”

“Red-light camera?” Colleen asked. “Do you have any proof of this?”

“We have the image on a tablet computer in the car,” Hollister said. “I can get it and show you but I’m telling you, we read the license plate number from right off it, HBQ 366, clear as anything.”

“So if you could just let us take a look at the car,” Chartrand said, “we can get out of your hair and let you all finish your breakfast. Can we keep our shoes on?”

“No, you can’t,” I said.

“‘No,’ we can’t keep our shoes on?”

“‘No,’ you can’t see the car.” I do not know where this sudden refusal came from. For all I knew I had no power to keep the officers from barreling their ways into the garage, finding the evidence slathered in a wad of cheap glue and sliding off the car. If I was to rationalize my decision, it was to force an impasse for long enough that I might get rid of the car, but in all truth the response to deny them access was entirely kneejerk. Up until that moment I was making things up as I went, but for now all I could do was barricade their path without any further plan.

It was Casey who had the idea. “‘No,’ the car isn’t here. It was stolen. It’s gone.” He said it quietly, as if the statement could be qualified and then retracted merely by the volume in which he spoke.

The officers looked to Colleen and me for physical responses. “Is this true?” Hollister asked.

“It happened on Friday,” Casey said, becoming bolder in his lie. “Before the funeral.”

“That’s right,” I said. “I came out the car on Saturday—so we could go to Annette’s funeral—and it was gone. The garage door had been opened.”

“Did you report this?”

“I guess not,” I said. “It really hasn’t felt like a priority. You don’t really think of these things when you’re dealing with tragedy.”

“It’s been really hard,” Casey added, “what with my mom gone.”

“So you’re saying this happened on Friday?” Hollister asked.

“Friday night, Saturday morning. I got home from work on Friday around five-thirty, so sometime after that. I’m sorry I didn’t report it. It might have saved you a visit.”

“Someone would have come by at some point,” Chartrand said.

None of us said anything for a time. It was clear that the way Casey and I surfaced raw emotions over Annette had quieted the officers for long enough that we should all observe a tactful moment of silence.

It was Colleen who spoke first. “Who was hit?”

Chartrand consulted his notes. “Alan Theroux. A firefighter.”

“Did he have any kids?”

“A son. Michael, aged fifteen.”

“Oh, my God,” Colleen said, staring at me. “That’s Casey’s age. Hershel, can you imagine?”

“Truly tragic,” I said. “No, I really cannot imagine.”

At that moment, I wished that I had told Colleen everything, about Ainsley, the accident, everything. The bulk of it would be coming out anyway, what she hadn’t yet clued into, and while the three of us stood as literal obstacles to the officers’ intrusion, I couldn’t help but worry, as she’d certainly intended it, that I should fear instant retribution, that she should let them into the garage and thereby hand me over into their custody.

Chartrand must have sensed something, because he asked if they could take a look in the garage to confirm what Casey and I had said, but he posed the question to Colleen

so directly that to speak on her behalf was to invite more scrutiny than was already present. “Would you mind?” Chartrand asked. I truly didn’t know what Colleen would do. I eyed my shoes and my coat, figuring with the two officers in the garage I could slip on my shoes and run out of the house, getting a head start and hopefully making it out of the neighbourhood. I’d find a shady second-hand auto dealership and buy up something that could get me as far as Vancouver.

But Colleen didn’t hand me over. “Yes,” she answered. “I do mind.”

Hollister said, “Look, I know it’s been a difficult week, and the last thing you all need are cops coming through your home to corroborate your story, but it’s pretty essential we check and see if the car is there. We’re hardly asking a lot.”

“I can’t believe you,” Colleen said. There was such hurt in her voice that for a moment I thought she was speaking to me and not to the police. “We were just getting ready to leave so we could visit Annette’s grave. We haven’t been there since, and we thought it would be a nice gesture to go together. You’re right, we have been through enough this week with her death and the car and us taking in Casey. We were just hoping that after today things could get back to normal. If you need to look in the garage, go ahead, but I hoped our word would be good enough. Now, I think we’ve been cooperative, so, Officers, if that’s all the questions you have, I’ll ask you to be on your way.”

She choked up and began to sob. God bless her, she sobbed! In between laboured gasps, she repeated that they could go ahead and check. The younger officer deferred to the older one for approval, but Chartrand motioned a curt “no.” The two waited for her sobs to abate so Hollister could tell us all, “Look, we’re sorry to bother you. And we’re

very sorry for your loss. Perhaps we can speak another time.” They opened the door and quietly backed out of the house, sorry they had ever entered.

Casey and I waited with discomfort for Colleen to pull herself together—the officers had left, she could end the act—but when I heard the pained gasps of suppressed wails, I knew that this was no mere show to get us off the hook. She breached the dam, started something that couldn’t be stopped, could only be played out. I tried to thank her for what she had done, maybe distract her long enough so that she could stop crying, but I could only putter about and look down at the floor. She swore under her breath and waved us off with an amount of shame, climbed the stairs to the bedroom and slammed the door behind her. She had to get ready for work.

Colleen left for work without a word or a moment of eye contact, and not just with me but with Casey, perhaps having realized he knew this whole time about the hit-and-run, and feeling just as betrayed by him as by me. We listened for the garage door to close behind her, hoping to God that Chartrand and Hollister hadn’t stuck around to catch sight of our blatant lie, the BMW in the garage, through the open door, but that they actually left like they said they would.

After a while, I said to Casey, giving a pathetic half-shrug, “What do we do now?”

He paused for a lengthy, deliberate thought, taking his time now, a far cry from the snap-decision schemer who had lied to the police. “I know some people,” he said. “I

told you about the kinds of people I'm friends with," referring to the street kids and runaways in his circle, the ones he had provoked into doling out black eyes. "I know a couple of guys who've done something like this, but for just a bit of money, almost nothing really, they can make that thing, your car, they can make it disappear."

"What does that mean? It'll be gone? What happens to it?"

"That's not really something for you to know, or me either. We just give him the keys and he'll make sure no one ever finds it."

"Why didn't you suggest this before?"

"Don't blame me. I thought we just needed to fix the damage."

"Yeah, me too. So how does this work? With the guys you know, I mean."

"Just give me your keys," Casey said. "And get me three hundred dollars. Someone will come get it and then it'll be gone."

"Give you the keys? Casey, the police will be looking for that car. What happens if they get caught?" This confidence unnerved me. First he had convinced the police that the car was stolen and now he was planning to manifest that lie. Just as unnerving was the pride I felt in his persuasion.

"I can't let you do it," I said. "You'll get caught, and I can't let you risk that."

"Dad, let me help. Go grab the money, see a movie, do some shopping, whatever. But you can't be here."

"This makes me nervous. Will you be here when I get home?"

He shook his head. "I'll have to help ditch it. You need to make sure you're gone at least three hours, four hours. When you come home you can report the car stolen."

I sat down for a moment. "Three hundred dollars? That's it?"

“Then it’ll be gone for good.”

Finally, I said to him, “Let me check upstairs. I might have the money.”

11.

Marco called me during the movie. I had left my ringer on by mistake, and thus entered the ever-widening pantheon of fantastic assholes who let their phones ring in a theatre. The woman with the two screaming infants told me to shut that thing off. The old man who’d coughed throughout the movie shushed me.

I took the call out in the lobby. Marco must have called from work, which was uncharacteristic of him. “We have to talk,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Can you come over tonight? It’s important.”

“Is everything all right? Julianna? Ainsley? They okay?”

“They’re fine.”

“You’re not dying are you?”

“I’m not dying.”

“Can I get a run-down? Something to prepare for? This sounds serious.”

“Just come over.”

I returned to the movie, this child-friendly fluff about a family that solved crimes for some reason. The only available matinees were movies for children. This movie was the third in a series, in which the family pooled their skills to clear an American president of murder. I returned to the scene in which Bruce MacGuffin, the family patriarch, had

been accused of treason by the man who was impersonating the vice-president. It amazes me that I can recall specifics, considering I was hardly present and barely paying attention, my mind instead on where the BMW might be, maybe at the bottom of a lake or crushed, cubed, and melted into raw material. I tried to stay optimistic, but I was overwhelmed by ugly, dominating thoughts of Casey and his band of misfits being pulled over on their way out of town, unlicensed, underaged, in a stolen car that was part of a hit-and-run.

By the time this interminable movie was working toward the grand action sequence, the helicopter transforming into a submarine or some other such idiocy, the act of actually relaxing in the theatre became impossible. Casey told me he would call or text me when the business with the car had been settled, and so far, two hours after leaving the house, no acknowledgement had been given. How long does it take to dispose of a vehicle? Three times I began typing up a querying text, only to stop and erase the message halfway through. If Casey really had been caught and was in custody, it would be best to let the situation resolve itself without implicating myself. Our brief encounter with the police suggested he could lie his way out of a jam.

The film trilogy had reached its natural and unsatisfying conclusion and I sought out comfort in the adjacent mall where I looked at the clusters of teenagers that could have easily been Casey in another life, had he been more selective in his friends. This is to say the mall offered me no comfort.

I returned home to an empty house, paced through every room like a lost apparition, as if the movement alone should provide me solace, maybe dictate what my next move should be, but the reverberated echoes of footsteps and creaks in the floorboards only emphasized my helplessness in the situation. This must have been how Francis felt in his house after Annette's death, and any attempt to fill that silence was immediately responded to with a parody of loneliness. Casey would be gone until God-knew-when, and I doubted that Colleen would be rushing back home quickly after her shift to see my face; our visit that morning from the police, and the realization she'd been duped for days, was bound to have developed in her an anger that could not be simply apologized away.

I turned on the television to fill the house with sound, but its single source of noise mocked how empty the house was, so I also turned on the radio in the bedroom and the fan in the bathroom to fool myself with the drone of white noise. I opened each cupboard door and cabinet, as well the fridge and freezer doors, at least a half dozen times before I settled on spaghetti, finally relaxing from the microwave hum of thawing ground beef, the hissing of boiling water, the crackle of oil and onion in the pan. I cranked music from the living room.

I watched old Bugs Bunny cartoons while I ate, washed the dishes, locked myself in the bedroom and jerked off to Internet porn, put a load of laundry in the wash.

With Casey still gone and my nerves too jangled for any possible confrontation, I asked Marco if we could postpone our meeting, or if he could at least do me the service of dropping me some hints.

"It's important you come here," he said over the phone.

“Just a suggestion as to what we’ll discuss. Please, it’s been a very stressful week.”

Marco was unconvinced by my pleas, so I packed up to go. I texted Colleen and let her know I’d be gone. I nearly added that “I’d be home to talk about things,” but I knew such an enigmatic message could only serve to enrage her.

The night was especially cold, a bad one to have made a twenty minute walk, and once I’d reached Marco’s house my face had started to numb. Like me, he had the house to himself, but it was clear he found comfort in the single sound source coming from the television. He answered the door with a lowball of straight bourbon.

“Have a seat,” he said, motioning to a dining chair. He had already placed in front of the chair an empty glass and the bottle of whiskey I saw a few weeks back. It had been significantly dipped into. He uncapped the bottle and filled the glass halfway. “Want anything in it?”

I shrugged. I found the incongruity of his presentation unnerving. Were he in good spirits, the things he said could easily be taken at face value as those of an earnest and polite host, and I might have perceived things that way except that Marco hadn’t yet smiled. He usually led off all his greeting with an exaggerated, toothy grin, but despite the alcohol, Marco was completely sober in attitude, almost frighteningly so.

“Marco, what’s this about? I’ve been so nervous about meeting you.”

“Nervous? Why nervous? Here, drink up.”

I took a ginger sip, like the drink was poisoned, but he clicked his glass against mine and, following his lead, I drained the thing in one go.

“That whiskey is terrible,” I said.

He uncapped the bottle again and refilled our glasses. “Don’t I know it. Surprisingly pricey. The second swig is better. You just need to get past your expectations.”

“So where is everybody? I figured something had happened to Jules.”

“Jules is fine,” he said. “She’s having drinks with a friend. Ainsley, well, I don’t know what that kid is up to.” Marco laid his cell phone on the table. “You always understood girls, though. Maybe you have an idea.”

“What?”

He swigged a hefty gulp and winced. “Honestly, forget what I just said about expectations. This stuff is rancid.”

“What was that you were saying about Ainsley?”

With his fingertips, he spun his phone in place like a top. I took to be a nervous quirk, but I realized he was drawing attention to it when he scooped it up mid-spin and toggled the buttons with an aggressive determination.

“What are you doing?”

He read off the screen, starting sentences but trailing off every few words. “‘I can’t wait to get back in your room...’ ‘I can’t wait to kiss you...’ ‘I love how your thighs feel against...’ No, I can’t read this out loud.”

“Read what out loud?”

He handed me the phone and had me scroll through the texts, all of them varying in coherency and vulgarity. They commented on what the sender wanted to do to Ainsley, where, for how long, which ways he planned to fuck her, how hot she was when he fucked her, and so forth. It journaled, quite accurately, my single-minded thought process

in the brief time we were sleeping together, Ainsley and I, between New Year's Eve and the night of the accident. Each text I read compounded that feeling, that singular ache in my stomach that I'd felt at the officers' arrival, that knowledge that I'd been snared in a trap and the overwhelming instinct to chew my way free.

Marco kept control of his voice, even when he inched his chair back as if to rise to his feet and lunge across the table. "Do you have anything to say?"

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"From her phone, you idiot. She's been so withdrawn this past week I looked into it. And I find it filled with dirty texts from you?"

"Marco, don't get angry."

"Don't you dare, Hersh. Don't you dare tell me how I should feel. If you have any sense in your head, you will not say that again." He scrolled through the texts and read a particular graphic one all the way through, adding, "She's my daughter, Hersh. This isn't innocent fun."

"I know."

"So you're sleeping together. That's it, right?"

I sighed.

He said, "I want to beat your head in so badly."

"I don't blame you."

"This isn't funny, Hersh."

"I know." I watched him pace back and forth a few laps. "Did you tell Jules?"

“Are you kidding? No, I didn’t tell Jules. I don’t know what all this means between us but if I tell Jules then we are definitely done as friends. She’ll cut your balls off, that’s for sure.”

“Colleen can’t know,” I said.

“I don’t give a shit what your wife knows. You think I care about that? I just can’t have it getting back to Jules.”

He read another text. “‘Please don’t tell anyone. I’m sorry. It’ll be all okay.’ This was a couple of days ago. What does all that mean?”

This was after the accident, when I was trying to convince Ainsley to keep calm. I studied Marco as best I could to make sure he wasn’t guiding me into another trap, that this had nothing to do with the hit-and-run.

“You didn’t talk to Ainsley about that?” I asked.

“I talked to her, now I’m talking to you. This is when she got all weird, and I want to know why.”

“Weird, how?” I asked.

“Withdrawn, crying and all that, locking herself away. Teenage stuff, but really intense. I was worried.”

It was with reluctance that I said anything at all for fear that Marco planned to call out my lie and accuse me of killing that man. “Yes, that. That’s when I broke up with her.” Marco’s expression hadn’t changed. I went on. “I knew it was wrong, us being together. I think I let her off hard.”

He refilled our drinks and drained his in two gulps. “So you’re done seeing her?”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Hershel, I’m serious. I don’t want you seeing her.”

I said nothing, just waited to see if the lie had worked.

“What? Is that going to be a problem?”

“No.”

“I’m pretty furious we have to have this conversation.”

“I know.”

“Jesus, Hershel, what were you thinking?”

I began to wonder at some point how closely Marco’s interrogation with Ainsley matched his interrogation with me, if all he did was reverse our names or if there was a fundamental difference between her grilling and mine. I emptied my glass to avoid answering his question. He didn’t really need to hear a response.

“Mind if I refill?”

I went to the freezer for some ice, and when I opened the door I looked, as I always did, at that framed photo stuck to the refrigerator, the one of young Marco and toddler Ainsley at the beach. Seeing it made me uneasy.

I returned to the living room and doused the ice in another drink. After a difficult silence, I asked where this leaves us. “Can you forgive me?” I asked him.

He really considered this. I could see him weighing the practical implications involved for us to remain friends, and I was truly relieved when Marco raised his glass in toast.

“Drink up, Herschel.”

“Marco, it makes me very happy to hear you say that. I was afraid this kind of thing might damage our friendship irreparably.” I opened my throat and swallowed that

foul whiskey in two gulps. We slammed our empty glasses on the table in dramatic fashion and laughed in the comfortable way only old friends can.

“Now,” Marco said after the laughter had calmed, “your punishment.”

“Excuse me?”

“Lay your hand flat on the table, Hershel. We can still be friends, I think, but I am still livid with you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Lay your hand flat on the table,” he repeated, “and I am going to hit it with this bottle. I may break some bones, but you should understand that broken bones is kind of the point.”

“Marco, this is a joke, right?” I pictured how my hand would be crushed beneath the weight of the glass.

“I’ve given this some thought, Hershel.”

“I don’t believe you have.”

“And I won’t be satisfied unless I hit you either in the hand or in the face. Would you rather I hit you in the face?”

I was already nursing the phantom wound with my good hand. “I would rather you didn’t hit me at all.”

“Consider this a gesture in the name of friendship,” he said, cheerful from drink.

“Please lay your hand down now.”

“You’re just trying to scare me.”

“Maybe I am. But do it anyway.” He lightened the weight by pouring another, smaller glass for himself. “And please close your eyes. This is an expensive table, and I don’t want you flinching.”

Until he had ordered that last command, I did not believe he would really do it, but telling me to close my eyes chilled me with the certainty of what was to happen. Still, what else could I do, we’ve been friends for years.

When I tightened my eyes shut, he told me, “Hershel, if you take away nothing else from this experience, please remember this feeling for as long as you can.” By the time I knew I should flinch away, the bottle had mashed my hand, the shock of pain felt up to my shoulder. And just as Marco wanted, bones had been broken. I could hear it happen.

I spent many minutes tying my shoes with a recently-busted hand. Marco watched me struggle and curse, loop the laces into crude knots and get the hell out of his house. He offered me nothing for my hand, which is to be expected, I suppose, so I packed snow against it and cooled the swelling on my return home.

Colleen was sitting in the living room, watching television, an empty plate of leftover spaghetti and a near-empty wine glass on the coffee table in front of her. She gave me a look of reproach when I went in to kiss her hello, so I backed away and circled the house to look for Casey.

“He isn’t here,” Colleen said. “Casey isn’t here and neither is the car. What do you know about this? Is it even worth asking, or will I just get more lies?”

“Colleen, I’m sure you feel betrayed.”

“I asked you about the car. Days ago, I asked what happened to it and you told me you hit a pole. I have to wait for the police to arrive so I can figure it out myself. Do you realize how humiliating that is?” She got up off the couch to meet me at eye level, so I knew this was going to be a real argument.

“You’re *humiliated*? That’s what this is about?”

“Casey knew about the accident, didn’t he? Was he in the car with you, Hershel?”

“Of course not. No one was in the car.”

“So how does he know about what you did, Hershel? Why does your son know about it but I don’t? God, Hershel, you don’t even know him.”

“Take that back,” I said, pointing my finger. “You have no right to say that. We were estranged, now we’re not. You have no right to say I don’t know him.”

“I don’t think I know you. Hershel, you ran over a man. Somebody’s father.” She scooped up her dishes and carried them to the kitchen, an old habit of cleaning when agitated. “I had to lie to the police. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? I was willing to lie for you, and you can’t show me the respect of even telling me why I lied to them? How could you just have driven away like that? Who are you?”

She had begun washing the plates, so I talked into her backside. “Colleen, I wasn’t thinking clear. I panicked, I drove away. Once I got my bearings, it was too late to do anything.”

“So you’ll just pretend it didn’t happen?”

“What would you have me do? I was drunk, I made a mistake. Turning myself in wouldn’t change anything.”

“You didn’t have to lie to me about it.”

I was almost shouting now. “Yes, I did. Is this something you really wanted to know about? Turn around so I can talk to you. It isn’t like I kept it from you because I like lying. This is something you’d have rather not known about. You wouldn’t be upset if you hadn’t known.”

“I’m mad that you lied. And I’m mad that you trusted Casey before you trusted me. How do you think that feels?”

Taunting now, I said, “Again, you’re telling me what bothers you is the humiliation.”

“For the last time, Hershel, it’s about trust.”

“So what, you don’t trust me? You think I can’t answer a question? Ask me anything, I’ll answer it.”

She finally gave me her full attention, save for some pacing. “Okay. Where’s your car now?”

“I can’t answer that.”

“Hershel!”

“Look,” I said, “it’s not that I don’t want to, I just don’t know the answer.” I relayed the conversation I had with Casey and how I left him with the car and the keys and short stack of twenties. “But, I don’t know, he should be back by now.”

“Have you tried calling him?”

“Of course I tried calling. What do you think? I’ve been trying all day.”

“Well, I can’t exactly trust you to do the right thing, now, can I? It seems you’ve just been making one poor mistake after another here.” Colleen had finally stopped pacing long enough to look at my mangled hand, which had swollen to the size and colour of a grapefruit. “Jesus Christ, Hershel. What happened?”

“Oh, this.” In the entire walk home, I hadn’t bothered to doctor a convincing explanation as to why my bones would need resetting. “I slipped. Um, on some ice and I landed—”

“Never mind,” she said. On her way out of the kitchen she swore loudly enough to make me flinch.

I slept on the couch that night. It wasn’t entirely related to our fight—Colleen and I had had our share of fights in the past, which I will admit usually stemmed from a more innocuous secret than a dead man crushed beneath my car, say, a late-night call from a coworker or a found condom wrapper in my coat pocket, but I wasn’t on the couch because of our fight or because of the dead man—though if Colleen knew about my tryst with Ainsley, the same girl from the photo on Marco’s refrigerator, she might have made me haul my sorry ass downstairs.

In truth, I slept on the couch because I needed to know the precise moment that Casey had returned home.

It was a minor miracle I’d slept at all. I woke to the click of the door latch, the living room still lit by the television’s ambient glow.

Casey, hooded like a burglar, in that army green jacket too goddamned light for a winter this punishing, locked the door behind him, sat on the couch next to me. I'm not sure how he'd made it back to the house, but the way he'd blanketed his hands and face suggested he'd walked a long way to get here.

"Hey, kiddo."

"Go back to sleep, Dad."

"I was worried," I said. It didn't make for the sweetest-sounding welcome. "Is everything good?"

"The car's gone," he answered.

"That's not what I meant."

"Everything's fine, Dad. You should go on up to bed."

"Yeah, I should."

But I only pulled my legs up tighter into my chest, making sure Casey had enough room to sprawl out on the couch, and I closed my eyes and fell back asleep.

12.

Around dawn I managed to trudge up the stairs and round out my night in my own bed, and despite my lack of sleep I was still the first one out of bed; Colleen was off work for the day and sleeping in, and Casey was right exhausted from a full day of secret felonious activities.

I called in and reported the stolen BMW, caught hell from the operator for doing it a week late, but when I justified my tardiness with Annette's passing, the operator

apologized and finished filling the report in a professional manner. I hung up and dialled Sergeant Chartrand's direct extension, told his voice mail that I was sorry for my family's behaviour the day before, and that their surprise visit had manifested in an ugly way, and if he and Detective Sergeant wanted, they were welcome to come and peek inside our empty shell of a garage.

Casey and I managed to have a pleasant yet mindlessly benign conversation over breakfast, saying nothing of course about anything regarding the last twenty-four hours. Colleen conversely said nothing at all save for, "I'm going out. Not sure when I'll be back." She had carried with her a gym bag that might have been filled with sporting attire but what I suspect to have been two or three days' worth of clothes, enough to keep away long enough to clear her head. She eyed both of us with a vacant glare.

"I don't think she likes me very much," Casey said.

"Don't take it to heart," I told him. "I doubt she likes either of us very much."

He motioned to my hand, which now resembled an old eggplant, soft and spoiled in places, and when I pressed my thumb into the swelling the imprint remained for whole minutes. "What happened to your hand?"

"It doesn't matter." I downed the last of my coffee. "Hey, how do you feel about spending the day at the hospital?"

The waiting room was surprisingly empty. Canadian hospitals aren't known for their quick service, and decades of paring down necessities means that any person requiring medical attention might wait seven to eight months before seeing a doctor. I acknowledged the empty chairs to the receptionist.

"Dead in here," I said.

She frowned. “Is that a joke?”

“I thought so. I’m here to see a doctor.”

“What’s the reason?”

I showed her my hand, hoping it might disgust her, but she just noted what she was looking at, then took my personal information and sent me back to my seat.

Casey asked me once more what happened to my hand, and if I’d had greater foresight, I’d have parlayed a negotiation, trading information about my hand for information about the car, but instead I gruffly beat the question down, conceding only that it was the consequence of some poor decisions. Having completely silenced all open dialogue, we sat in silence, me not talking about my hand, Casey not talking about the car. When he wasn’t responding to texts, Casey and I diagnosed the other patients from afar. Most patients just clutched their stomachs, and our default assumption was that they’d all swallowed some disgusting bodily fluids.

My phone rang, an unfamiliar number. I expected a misdialled call or a telemarketer, something innocuous, so I answered from my seat, but when I heard Ainsley on the other end, choking half-sobs into my ear, I raced off to the fringes of the waiting room so the two of us could speak privately.

“Ains, what is it? Where are you calling from? What’s the matter?”

“I’m calling from a payphone,” she said. “My dad found out about us and he took my phone away.”

“Yeah, he confronted me last night and it didn’t end well. He got hold of our texts. Is that why you’re calling? Because of your dad?”

She said nothing, just cried hard into the phone. The line crackled, either from the poor payphone connection or the awful signal inside the hospital, and when it had cleared she was still crying.

“Ainsley, you’ve got to talk to me. Where are you? I can come see you right now.”

She pulled herself together only long enough to say these words: “I’m sorry. I’ve made a mistake.”

“What’s going on? What are you talking about?”

Through the crackles and pops: “Please, don’t be angry.”

“Ainsley, this isn’t funny.” But by then the line had disconnected. Just silence. I dialled the number back but only received an automatic message.

Puzzled, an uncanny nausea forming from Ainsley’s vague and ominous apology, I returned to my seat next to Casey, who was answering another text.

“Dad?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m confused about something.”

“Confused about what?”

“You know Ainsley Henkowitz, right?”

I looked at him. “Say that again?”

“Ainsley Henkowitz, your friends’ daughter. The cute girl we talked about the other day.”

“What about her?”

“My friend just texted me this. It’s been all over the school.”

I tried to interpret her apology but could not make sense of it. “He texted you what?”

“She talked to that kid Michael. Son of the guy you hit. And I don’t know what any of this means.”

“What any of what means?”

He read the text carefully to himself, making sure the information was all there.

“She told him she was there at the accident when his dad died.”

The receptionist assured me my wait would only be another half hour, which was still an excruciating length of time since the painkillers I’d taken for my hand had worn off. We rode out what time remained with Casey dialling his friends and finding out what he could.

I emerged from treatment a good three hours later, my broken bones x-rayed, reset, and plastered. I had hoped that by then Casey’s information would be clear and concrete, but it remained vague and circumstantial. Ainsley had approached Michael, the dead man’s son, and confessed to being in the passenger seat, but when he pressed for details she refused to divulge who was driving. She had a sudden change of heart and withdrew the comment, resulting in a shouting matching with Michael in the hallways until they were detained by the principal. Or so the rumours went. Neither Casey or I knew what to do with this information, nor did we know where we should go, so we

circled the block and bounced ideas back and forth, and when our faces ached from the cold we hailed a cab that took us to a warm diner near home.

Francis called to check in, said he had purchased an RV and would be gone for some time while he travelled, slow as could be, out to the East Coast. "I just want to make sure you were serious about watching Casey for a while longer."

"Yeah, I was serious. Do you want me to run this by him? He's here now."

Francis said, "No, I talked to him an hour ago. He helped me pick the East Coast. Annette always wanted to see PEI. I'll be leaving tomorrow. I need to get away for a while."

"I think Annette would like that," I said, actually meaning it. "Keep in touch." I don't understand how Annette's death impelled in me the urge to be civil with Francis. Maybe I'd just been too preoccupied to really dedicate the time and attention required to truly hate Francis.

"Looks like you're stuck with me," I told Casey after hanging up.

"Colleen's gonna love that."

"My wife doesn't have any problems with you," I said. "She just needs to blow off steam. I imagine she'll be out of the way for a few days."

I was entirely wrong. Colleen was at the house when we'd arrived at home, but it looked like she'd arrived for only a brief stop, because her boots were wet from the snow and she was still wearing her jacket. I followed her around while she gathered up her thing in the hopes I could engage her in conversation.

"I had the doctors fix my hand," I said. "It turns out I'm now bionic."

“The police came back today,” she said, squashing any possible repartee of good jokes.

“Yeah, I told them they could come by.”

“How about giving me a head’s up,” she said. “I wasn’t sure what stories you’re telling anymore.”

“How am I supposed to give you a head’s up if you won’t talk to me?”

Scornfully, she said, “It doesn’t matter. I let them into the garage. I figured it didn’t matter. They poked around for a few minutes and then they left.”

“‘Poked around’? What does that mean?”

“Hershel, don’t even. I don’t want to be involved in your lies.” She motioned to Casey, who was across the room, pretending not to be eavesdropping. “Hey, you,” she said to him. “You neither, okay? I don’t want you telling me stories either, all right? I swear, everyone in this house treats me like an asshole.”

Casey feigned indifference. “Whatever.”

“It isn’t like that,” I said to Colleen.

She clutched her purse. “Yeah, I’m sure I wouldn’t understand.” She slammed the door behind her, and we felt the shock of it rattle the house.

“Now do you see what I mean?” Casey said when we knew she’d gone.

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

“So what do we do now?” he asked.

I checked my phone for messages, and when there were none, I said, “These painkillers aren’t very good. Do you want to get drunk with me?”

Marco called me halfway through beer number five. I had been knocking them back with considerable speed; Casey was only on his third beer. Sometime around my second drink I'd decided that in this race to inebriation, experience would pummel youth by a brutal margin. I was afraid Marco's call would be the distraction that cost me the lead.

"We need to talk," Marco said.

"Last time you said that I got my hand broke."

"Are you drunk?"

"Yes. I'm also loopy on painkillers, thank you very much." I could tell Marco was thinking about some way to proceed, which promised a good deal of dramatic pauses that I was in no mood to endure. "Out with it. What do you want?"

"I talked to Ainsley," he said.

"I know. You took away her phone."

"Hershel, look, she said some distressing things at school. I don't know how to say this."

"Say whatever you need to say."

"She's been telling people she was involved in a hit-and-run on Saturday."

"Old news," I said.

"What?"

"Just get to the point."

“Hershel, don’t be so cavalier. I need you to focus. She says you were the one driving.”

“She told you that, huh?”

“I didn’t really need to persuade her.”

“Your daughter is a great girl but she’s terrible at keeping secrets,” I said. “What did she tell you?”

“Everything, I think.”

“And? What do we do now?”

“We talked about this, me and Ainsley, and we both think it would be best if we all pretended this never happened.”

I cleared my throat. “Marco, I hope you see the irony in this very phone call.”

He backtracked. “What did you mean when you said ‘old news’?”

I ignored the question. “Marco, don’t let Ainsley talk to that Michael kid. It’d be bad news for us all.”

After one of those damned long pauses, Marco said, “You know, Hersh, I tell you this as a friend, but I told her to report you. They’d go easier on her.”

“That makes sense,” I answered, with drunken candour. “I’d probably do the same.”

“She says she won’t report you.”

“Score one for me.”

“You’re drunk, Hershel. Get some sleep.”

“Before you go,” I said, “I’m sorry about everything with Ainsley.”

He let out a deep sigh. “Go to hell, Hershel.”

Casey and I drank until we'd exhausted the beer supply, and after a brief texting correspondence with an enigmatic stranger, he told me he had to run off and pay his mysterious friend for disposing of the car.

"Listen, Casey, there's something I've been meaning to say." I took a deep breath as if preparing to say something profound, but nothing came out.

"It's okay, Dad. I'll be back."

Casey bundled himself in his tattered jacket and left. I flipped through channels, found an old Bruce Lee movie, watched until the frequency of redundant commercials made me bored and fidgety, so I filled up the time as best I could: made a sandwich, urinated, tidied Casey's mess of bedsheets on the couch (the couch was beginning to smell like a teenager had been sleeping on it).

I toggled through the contact list in my phone and texted Gloria, that old-soul college girl with the curly brown hair that I'd met after the strip club. She replied ten or so minutes later, told me she'd love to rendez-vous at the same downtown pub where we'd met; that was her word: "rendez-vous." I stumbled into my coat and had a cab take me there, stopping first at a convenience store for a pack of cigarettes and a fun-size pack of rubbers.

Unlike last time, I arrived early enough to beat the line-up, but the place had already filled a good deal. Gloria and two girls her age were seated at a table wedged in the corner of the room, and I approached and hugged Gloria for as long as she would let me.

“Hey, beautiful,” I told her. “Glad to be seeing you.”

“Oh, my God,” she said in a ditzzy, girlish tone. “What happened to your hand?”

“Gang brawl,” I said. “You should see the other guys. Black all over. And I’m not talking about their bruises.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I found out what she was drinking and matched it with a fresh one. I dedicated my first swig to washing down some painkillers.

Gloria introduced her two friends, Betty and Bertha, maybe, or Thing One and Thing Two. Who can remember? I noticed Gloria introduced me to them with a flippant eye roll, something that Ainsley or Casey might do if embarrassed, but I was unsure if I’d misread the gesture so I said nothing.

I hugged Gloria around the waist. “Do you want to get out of here?” I asked.

She flinched away in annoyance. “I’m here with my friends.”

I winked at her. “Let me know if that changes.”

I drummed my fingers on the table, sang out loud, ordered a round for the table, tossed my busted arm over Gloria’s shoulder, letting the cast dangle next to her ear. The advantage to wearing a cast was that I didn’t need to hide my ring, since I had worked it off my finger before my hand swelled up, and now it was sitting atop the nightstand.

“Listen,” Gloria said, in the way one does when delivering bad news, “we’re getting out of here.”

“Great, where are we going?”

“No, you don’t understand. Me and my friends are going. Get what I mean?”

“Not really. Where’s that we’re going to?”

Friend Bertha, seemingly offended by my obliviousness, jumped in and said, “Where doesn’t matter. You’re not coming with us.”

Gloria winced in apology. “Please don’t be angry. It’s not you.”

“Oh, fuck off,” I said.

“Don’t talk to her like that,” Friend Bertha roared. “She said you’re not coming, you’re not coming.”

“Mind your fucking business, Bertha. I’m talking with the girl.”

Gloria motioned for her friends to sit this one out. “Look,” she said to me, “you’re really nice and everything. It’s just that my friends and I made plans. I’m sorry if you got the wrong impression.”

“I got the impression you gave me.” I’m sure I was shouting now, judging by the looks I was getting. “So save your platitudes for the next one, you idiot.”

“I’m sorry you’re upset. Just please keep your voice down. You’re acting like a child.”

I scooped up my coat. “You may learn this on your own one day, but let me explain it to you. When you reach a certain age, acting like a child is all you have left.”

On my way out, I booted an empty chair, catching it by my ankle instead of my foot, and the chair was launched into the pool table. I laughed at the sight and limped out into the street.

I staggered along the downtown streets, considered entering every drinking hole available but opted for the walk, feeling the cold air against my numbing face. Worried about sobering up just minutes after abandoning that last beer, I dry-swallowed two more pain pills and worked a smoke from the pack.

A small group of thugs approached me on Main Street. I hate betraying my age and my automatic suspicion by calling them thugs, but this was a knee-jerk assessment based on the way they carried themselves, dressed in oversized parkas and fitted hats titled at every which angle, baggy pants, low-hanging backpacks. Between them they passed king cans of beer concealed in brown paper.

One of them said, "Hey, you got a smoke you can give me?"

"What?"

The boy in front motioned to the pack in my hand. "Those. You got any you can give me?"

I lit the one in my hand and returned the near-full pack to my pocket. "Sorry, no. This is my last one."

"Come on, man," the boy said. "Don't be like that."

"Be like what?" I asked.

"Don't be a dick."

"Fine." I reopened the pack and tossed a cigarette onto the ice, at the boy's feet.

The boy lifted his arms, incensed. "What the fuck?"

"I'm sorry, that was rude. There are, what, five of you?" I took out four more cigarettes and tossed them next to the first one.

"Guy, what's your problem?"

“Don’t call me ‘guy,’” I said. “What, should I be intimidated by five children dressed like ballers on Mom’s dime? Do kids say ‘ballers’? Don’t answer that, I could give a shit. There’s a reason your vernacular changes every two weeks, it’s because that’s how long it takes for you to all realize you talk like assholes.”

“Say that shit again, motherfucker.” The boy stepped over the pile of smokes and crowded me. He was almost as tall as me but clearly had no weight on his bones.

“Should I also say that shit slower? Because otherwise you’ll have me repeat myself over and over, and we all got to be home sometime, so please clarify for me, for the sake of moving this along, which part should I say again?”

“Fuck you, old man.”

“There it is,” I said, grinning at the kid, blowing smoke in his face. “Nice classic language, something that’s been around for some time. Concise, not terribly clever, but something in line with what I’d expect from your mother’s failed abortion.”

The boy’s rejoinder was not clever, and was entirely physical. He shoved me. I stumbled back but managed to retain some manner of footing, drunken limp and all.

I stepped back to him. “I want you to understand, kid, that I couldn’t give a goddamn how tough you and your lackey friends think you are. I’m not scared. You can carry yourselves with all the tough-guy bravado you want, but it doesn’t matter. So let me say right now, from my lips to you and your dumb generation, go fuck yourselves.”

The boy swung, connected with my jaw. My head was swimming with painkillers, so I felt little, but I did lose focus when my neck wrenched to one side on the impact. I grabbed him with my functional hand and pummelled punches into his face, hammering the cast into his nose.

Were this a fair fight, I might have had him.

But it was not a fair fight. There were five of them and only one of me.

One of his friends pulled me back. Another tackled my legs. I landed on my back, heeled my foot into somebody's face. They took turns hoofing kicks into my ribs and stomach. I rolled away, somehow climbed back to my feet, and I charged back into the fray.

And then I saw the knife.

The lead boy, the confrontational one with the bloodied nose, gripped me by the shoulder and pulled me into the blade.

Painkillers be damned, I felt that blade, every bit of it, puncture my stomach.

I keeled over, staggered, watched the five boys scatter like rodents into every direction.

And then I fell to the sidewalk, scrambled for something to hold, flopped onto my side, and waited for the crowd to form, for the clamour of strangers, for sirens, while I sucked in what air I could, struggling to breathe.

14.

I woke with a sudden need to vomit. The attending nurse shushed to calm me, told me I was fine, that the immediate nausea was a response to the anaesthesia, while she and another nurse jiggered with my IV.

“Get me a bucket,” I demanded, too weak to shout. “Right now, bring me one.”

“Settle down. You'll be fine.”

I tried explaining that I wasn't ashamed of throwing up, but that I didn't want to subject this poor hospital staff to cleaning up my sick, but only a grunt came out, so I tried to swing my legs over the side and find a garbage can myself, IV cables be damned.

The attendant weighted my shoulders down. "Just sit back, for Pete's sake."

I finally deferred to her better judgment when the nausea passed over me. After a few heavy breaths I was left with about a dozen questions that I prioritized.

"How many times was I stabbed?"

"Four times," said the attendant, a matronly fifty-something who would have looked as comfortable slinging diner hash. "Honey, you ticked off the wrong folks."

"Youth is a cocksucker," I muttered.

"Ain't it the truth?"

"How long will I be here?"

"Two days if your luck holds. Although we may push for something sooner."

"What does that mean?"

The attendant laughed. "Not for nothing, but you woke up swearing at us a few times. Said some nasty things to the staff."

"My subconscious has a temper," I said. "I'm sure I'm sorry."

"I'm sure you are, too." She smiled like she might press me for a slice of banana cream pie.

"Is my family here?"

"If they are, they'll see you when you get moved."

I nodded off and re-awoke in another room, as promised, a curtain drawn between me and some stranger who communicated through coughs. Colleen was ushered in some time later.

“God, Hersh.”

I was sluggish from the medications. “Don’t just stand there. Come hug me. I’m too weak to bite.”

She gave me the most pitiful hug humanity has ever witnessed, a pantomime of a hug, should my brittle body be crushed under the weight of a real hug.

“I survived a stabbing,” I told her. “I’ll survive a hug.”

“Jesus, Hersh, what happened?”

“It doesn’t matter. Where’s Casey?”

“I left him a message to say I was coming. I don’t know.”

“Listen, Colleen, about the way I’ve been behaving. Well, I don’t really have an excuse.” I pointed to my stomach with my broken hand. “Lesson learned, huh?”

She kissed my head. “Don’t talk like that.”

What remained of my luck held out, and the hospital discharged me a short while later. The blade had missed every major artery, as if my assailant was fixing to botch his attack, and I was wheeled out to the car with a prescription for antibiotics in hand.

Casey never came by.

I had texted him a few times, but he hadn't responded. I asked Colleen if she had seen him after my attack. She told me she saw him once at the house after her first visit to the hospital, then said little else but alluded to an argument they had, the specifics of which I've never fully understood. Like the thing he'd whispered to her in the kitchen the day the police had arrived, it was a detail still unknown to me with ramifications I would not grasp until some time had passed.

I considered calling Francis to see if he'd spoken with Casey, but I decided not to, should I ruin his trip by worrying him.

After a day or so, Casey finally texted me: "I'm glad ur okay."

His eventual response hadn't provided relief the way it should have. I was still upset by his no-show at the hospital and when I read the text I felt an immediate compulsion to hurl my phone into the wall, but when I lifted my arm the pain in my stomach flared up and my phone tumbled to the floor.

After a few days, the wheelchair was substituted for a cane, and after a long hiatus I returned to work. The staff parted a path for me and applauded as I made my way to my desk, like a scene on a cop show where an officer returns after being shot on duty.

"We almost got you a cake shaped like a switchblade," Paul said, "but we figured that would be in poor taste."

"You can all go to hell," I said, and everyone laughed.

When I came home, Casey still hadn't returned. I phoned him, but his voicemail was full.

On a weekend shortly after the stabbing, when I was feeling stronger and less reliant on the cane, I walked to a nearby coffee shop, and while I waited for my drink I spotted Ainsley chatting with a boy her age, a couple of open notebooks laid out between them. He was fit, broad in the shoulders, with trimmed brown hair and glasses. His leg was touching hers beneath the table. I watched Ainsley for long enough that she could not avoid my gaze. She looked at me for a time, or maybe through me, an emptiness in her expression like she was seeing an apparition that made her feel weary and defeated. She returned her attention to the boy across from her, and I approached them.

“Hi, Ainsley,” I said, interrupting whatever stimulating conversation two 17-year-olds are capable of having.

“Mr. Wallischuk, hi.” She continued looking at me with those vacant eyes as if to indicate I was entirely unwelcome.

“I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” I lied. I hoped I was interrupting something of terrible importance.

“We’re just working on something for school, Mr. Wallischuk.” She motioned to the boy. “This is Harris.”

“Oh, *you’re* Harris,” I said, shifting my cane to my bandaged hand so that I could shake his. Harris extended his arm and gave Ainsley a puzzled look. I explained, “I’m friends with Ainsley’s father. I’ve known her for quite a long time. Oh, I nearly forgot. Happy birthday. It just passed, right?” She nodded and thanked me. I hovered over Ainsley, hoping to jog up some of that familiar chemistry between us, but she only gave

Harris an apologetic look that reminded me of how Gloria looked at her friends in the pub the night of the stabbing.

“Well,” she said, “it was good seeing you. I’ll see you around, I guess.”

“Yeah, maybe.” I gave the boy a curt nod. “Take care of yourself, Harris.”

“Nice meeting you, Mr. Wallisford.”

“Close enough,” I said.

Another week had passed before I saw Casey again. Colleen had stepped out for groceries, and I was watching television alone.

He telephoned me first. “I know we haven’t talked.”

“We can talk now,” I said. “Come over.”

I paced the house until I heard the knock on the door. He was still wearing that same jacket, still as inappropriate for the season, though with the early break in the winter cold, I was less offended.

“You didn’t have to knock,” I said. “You live here.”

“I guess so.”

“Where have you been?”

“Living at my friend’s place.”

I let him into the house. He took his shoes off but his jacket stayed on. “You never came by,” I said. “After my attack.”

“I’m glad you’re okay.” He looked to the ground. The way his eyes moved reminded me of the first day he came, the day after Annette’s funeral. Casey was just as aloof this time, but more apologetic than angry.

“Why didn’t you come?”

He shrugged.

“I’d wondered if you’d gone off to live with Francis.”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said. “He’s gone, too.”

We said nothing for a while. I offered him something to eat. “You look hungry.”

“It’s okay.”

I said, “I hear you didn’t get along with Colleen when I was gone.”

“Is that what she said?”

“She didn’t really say anything.”

He sat down on the couch, leaned forward and tented his fingertips together.

“She’s still pretty mad at you,” I said. “I was mad for a while that you never came to visit me but I’m over that. She’s mad about something different, that business with the car. I think she’s just being territorial. I’m probably wrong.”

“That’s actually why I came by,” he said. “I need to talk to you. About the car.”

“What is it?”

Casey’s eyes moved about the room, the floor, the television, the pictures on the wall.

“The guy who got rid of it,” he said, “who we paid to get rid of it, he actually kept the car.”

This should have floored me with panic, but instead I could only feel sad. “What do you mean? Did anybody find it?”

“No, nothing like that, But he didn’t get rid of it. The car’s still around. He wanted to know, well, he wants more money to get rid of it.”

I sat down next to him. Something was wrong about this. The late visit, his shifting focus: this wasn’t about the car.

I said, “You’re not planning to live here any more, are you?” It came out less as a question than a statement.

“I don’t know. Colleen doesn’t want me here.”

“That doesn’t matter. I want you here. Colleen will get over it. That’s the one thing I know about her, she gets over things.”

He shrugged.

“So you need money?”

“Not me,” Casey answered. “My friend. He won’t get rid of the car until then.”

“I see. And how much does your friend need?”

Casey’s eyes again surveilled the room, as if assessing its value. He thought about it. “My friend wants five hundred dollars. He figured that would be enough. You know, that it won’t be a problem for you to get hold of that amount.”

“No,” I said, “five hundred won’t be a problem.” I got up slowly and put on my jacket. “Are you sure I can’t make you a sandwich?”

We got into my courtesy car and drove to the bank. Casey waited outside for me to withdraw the money he asked for, which I bundled inside an envelope along with another five hundred dollars.

“There’s some extra money in there. I hope it’s enough.” I shifted my weight on the cane. “Can I drive you anywhere?”

“It’s okay.”

“Listen,” I said, “you’re always welcome to come stay with me.”

“I know.”

“And if you, you or your friend, if either of you ever need anything, more money or anything like that, you can come see me any time.”

Casey stuffed the envelope into his coat pocket. “And the car, you know…”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Casey tried to say something, stammered, and trailed off. “Thanks, Dad. I’ll see you around.”

In that moment I felt the weight of his goodbye, and I hugged Casey tight as I could, hugged my boy like it was the last time I might ever see him, hoping he might change his mind and come home, but instead he pulled away when the hug had ended, and I put my full weight on the cane and watched with a growing sadness as Casey left, rounded the corner, leaving behind only his tracks in the snow. I stood and waited for him to return, and when I was sure he would not come back, I returned to the car, fired up the engine, and drove back home.