Hold Your Tongue: A Novel

by

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Abstract

This novel manuscript explores Francophone Métis identity in Manitoba. Forced to consider his future after losing his job, and learning of his girlfriend's pregnancy, a young man reflects upon his family's heritage as he struggles to take responsibility. Tensions over language and culture, evoked and exacerbated by the deteriorating condition of his great uncle, drive the young man to make sense of his family's past. In this world, where family traditions are forgotten, where the French language is gradually subsumed, and where antagonisms flare up between rural and urban life, characters labour to make ends meet and assert their identity.

Preface

This thesis is an original work by Matthew Tétreault. No part of this thesis has been previously published.

To my family

Acknowledgements

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Introduction: On Métis identity and Franco-Manitoba

Who are the Métis today? This question continues to fuel debate across academic fields, political spheres, and legal circles. It is argued before courts, between Métis peoples themselves, and endlessly misinterpreted among the Canadian public. The word "Métis" itself has undergone various shifts in meaning, from identifying progeny of indigenous women and French-Canadian fathers, to demarking the peoples who comprised a new, indigenous nation centered around Red River, including the progeny of indigenous women and English-speaking fathers and eventually, as some would argue, encompassing all descendants of indigenous and non-indigenous unions in Canada. In her book, *Real Indians and Others*, Bonita Lawrence uses the term 'Métis' "to refer to those individuals who are mixed-race and non-status from western Canada" (21), while on the other hand, in his book, *Métis: Race, Recognition, and the struggle for Indigenous Peoplehood*, Chris Andersen argues that the Métis are "not a catch-all term for anyone who is Indigenous-but-not-First-Nation-or-Inuit" (24); rather that the term "Métis" refers to the "history, events, leaders, territories, languages, and culture associated with the growth of the buffalo hunting and trading Métis of the northern Plains" (24). Tensions inevitably arise between perspectives of the Métis as a collective of mixed-race—the progeny of indigenous and non-indigenous—individuals, and the Métis as the peoples of a post-contact indigenous nation formed through shared heritage, stories, culture, language, etc.; in other words, between individual genealogy and community belonging.

Further complicating, and perhaps also fueling, this tension is a continued reliance, by indigenous and non-indigenous writers alike, on historical tropes, stereotypes, and fixations with Métis exogenesis, the birth of the Métis Nation (Peterson and Brown 1985), which reinforces old racial hierarchies and reduces contemporary Métis figures to invisible objects and elides complex and increasingly urban cultural identities. Racialized conceptions of the Métis, as mixed-race, or

mixed-blood shifts Métis identity away from a contemporary ethno-linguistic cultural identity. In his recent collection of poetry, *Louis: The Heretic Poems*, Gregory Scofield gestures toward this racialized, mixed-race, conception of Métis people through repeated use of blood imagery, when focalizing a poem through Riel's great-grandmother, addressing a young Louis Riel: "What I say who you are / In the blood / You are in the blood" (13). When considered through contemporary debates surrounding Métis identity, this blood imagery, and its gestures toward an identity based on mixedness, linked to arguably the most important political figure of the historic Métis Nation, Louis Riel, greatly complicates contemporary discourses about Métis identity as it foregrounds biology instead of culture, language, tradition, community, etc. It individualizes Métis identity. Adam Gaudry, a scholar on Métis political history and Métis identity, touches upon this tension when he writes that "the discourse around Métis identity is coloured by more than a century of colonial government categorization and academic studies that omit the collective existence of a Métis people" (152). Consequences of this history of discourse, this elision of Métis peoplehood, is a widespread confusion regarding Métis identity.

Are mixed-race indigenous and non-indigenous individuals and communities in Eastern Canada appropriately considered Métis? Holding a mixed-race perspective, or understanding, of Métis identity, one could consider them to be Métis. While a perspective of Métis identity based on shared history, experience of place, stories, tradition, community, etc., what Chris Andersen dubs "peoplehood" (19), would hold that these mixed-race communities are not Métis. Tension is perhaps too soft a word for these opposing perspective, these claims, are in direct conflict; one subverts the other. This confusion created by the claim that the Métis spring automatically from any union between indigenous and non-indigenous parents, continues to subvert the notion of a Métis Nation based upon shared history, language, land, culture and traditions. As debate swirls

around the question, it creates a shifting boundary around Métis-ness. To put it coarsely, it seeks to answer: who is in, who is out? We would be hard-pressed to find a more delicate and complex question—it has been the driving force of entire dissertations. However, answering this question is not the purpose of this thesis. Rather, my work, if anything, further muddies the water.

My interest in this matter is both academic and personal, and this manuscript, a fictional exploration of Francophone Métis identity in Southeast Manitoba, examines through novel form the repercussions of decades, if not centuries, worth of identity confusion, cultural and linguistic assimilation, and the attempts to maintain one's culture, through the contemporary narrative of a young man struggling through significant life challenges—work, love, family—and confronting his heritage. At the most basic level, I seek to remind people, both scholars of Métis Studies and the Canadian public, that the French-speaking Métis, Riel's "peuple Métis-Canadien-Français" (110), have not vanished. Following Manitoba's entry into Canadian Confederation, both French and English-speaking Métis struggled against the subsequent influx of English-Canadian settlers, along with the overtly racist, discriminatory, and assimilationist policies of the provincial and the federal governments. While many Métis fled Manitoba, heading west, and creating a large Métis diaspora, some chose to remain. As Antoine Lussier, in his report on Métis identity produced in 1984 for the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, points out, "many French-speaking descendants of the original Métis list of 1818-1870 now consider themselves French-Canadians. No doubt many French-speaking Métis crossed the colour-line between 1870 and 1884 during the land grant fiasco" (32-33). Integrating with a French-Canadian population in Manitoba was not easy, not always successful, and often marginalising. French-Canadians in western Canada often faced significant discrimination following an influx of settlers after 1870. French language rights eroded steadily and the Manitoba Schools Question, for example, was a critical flashpoint.

The abolition of French as an official language in 1890, and subsequently the removal of French language instruction in public school in 1916, were serious blows to Riel's vision of a bilingual Manitoba. Jacqueline Blay, in her book, *Histoire du Manitoba français: Le temps des outrages (1870-1916)*, contends that the erosion of language rights and the political tensions and turmoil of the era so strained relationships between French-speaking Métis and les Canadiens-Français du Manitoba, that it split their political—and perhaps social—alliance, and ultimately weakened both groups. Blay writes that the "loss is enormous to both sides … it is the ultimate injury [to their political and social union] because it is an internal schism: McCarthy and Lord Durham could not have hoped for better" (365; translation mine). Within a generation, Riel's bilingual, Métis-led Manitoba, had crumbled.

With an awareness of this history, this manuscript attempts to explore what happened to Riel's "peuple Métis-Canadien-Français" (110) through its main protagonist, Richard, a young man re-discovering his heritage, and confronted by whispered stories of his family's past, as he struggles to make sense of it while he moves forward in life. The manuscript makes significant use of French, often through dialogue, which explores diverse spoken French dialets. This sense of the spoken word is reinforced by use of improper spelling and grammar, by contractions, and archaic registers, along with traces of Michif, woven throughout the narrative. In much the same way Maria Campbell, in her book *Stories of the Road Allowance People*, "put[s] into English the richness of a people's life and culture" (5), by the "translation" (5) of oral language into written language, by playing with the spelling and grammar to draw out the orality, and the accents, this manuscript seeks to bring to life the particular spoken French and 'Franglais' of Francophones in Southeast Manitoba. The use of Michif is limited, reflecting both its dwindling use, as well as the linguistic assimilation of users. Furthermore, it is worth noting that translating a diverse, spoken

language, such as Michif, to the page has its challenges (as there is not one Michif, but multiple Michifs, based for example on Cree verbs/French nouns, or Ojibway/French, etc.).

The manuscript relies heavily on French in some sections, and occasionally reads like a bilingual text. However, these bilingual sections reflect the lived experiences of Francophones in western Canada. The playwright Marc Prescott recognizes this reality, aptly writing in his play, *Sex, Lies et Les Franco-Manitobain*, "L'anglais icitte, ça s'attrape comme un rhume. T'as pas le choix que le parler. T'as pas le choix que d'être bilingue. Pis c'est ça que je suis; bilingue. Pas Anglophone, pas francophone: bilingue [You catch English here like a cold. You don't have a choice but to speak it. You don't have a choice but to be bilingual. And that's what I am: bilingual. Not Anglophone, not Francophone: bilingual]" (50; translation mine). The bilingual elements of the manuscript reflect upon the tensions and the struggles of maintaining a linguistic and cultural identity in an often hostile environment, not only French versus English, but also French versus French; and not only losing one's French and/or Michif as one acquires English, but also losing one's particular French. The bilingualism functions therefore as a celebration of cultural resiliency, as a stubborn, joyous, defiant cry: *nous sommes encore ici*. We are still here. The use of French in the manuscript provides an ideal vehicle for an exploration of these issues.

The manuscript builds upon settings, themes, and characters, such as the protagonist, Richard, previously established in my short story collection, *What Happened on the Bloodvein* (Pemmican Publications, 2015). By using familiar settings, for example the fictional town of Ste. Antoinette (a stand-in for Ste. Anne, MB), the surrounding countryside, neighbouring towns, and the city of Winnipeg, all regions I am familiar with, the manuscript explores more deeply the role of geography in the maintenance, transmission, and/or loss of culture. And so, as the protagonist traverses through these various spaces, Ste. Antoinette (French/Métis), to Steinbach (Mennonite),

and Winnipeg (English), the manuscript not only traces shifts in the languages and cultures of the spaces, such as Francophone farmers in Ste. Antoinette and the blue collar Anglophone factory workers in Steinbach, but also seeks to disrupts the imagined linguistic and cultural homogeneity of theses spaces. The manuscript attempts also to disrupt conceptions of the Métis as mixed-race by forwarding a Métis identity constructed around ethnicity, language, culture, and tradition: one grounded in the notion of peoplehood and inextricably linked to the events and history of the Red River Valley; more precisely, Saint-Boniface and surrounding Métis and Francophones villages.

My interest was in writing a realist, but somewhat minimalist narrative representative of both these spaces and the people who inhabit them, and to examine how cultures, languages, and the construction of identity shapes and affects an individual through their daily struggles—how one resists an assimilationist pull. Thus, my protagonist, as someone already '*a moitié assimilé*' [half-assimilated], stands at a precipice, a cultural chasm that he must confront. And while I had originally intended to write a semi-autobiographic novel, other than an intimate familiarity with the spaces represented and a passing similarity of experiences, the narrative and plot are entirely fictional. Structurally, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* proved indispensable to my creative process; aesthetically, Richard Ford's *Rock Springs*, Denis Johnson's *Jesus' Son*, and numerous other collections by Raymond Carver, Alice Munro, Margaret Atwood, to name but a few, have influenced this manuscript. Thematically, I owe much to Maria Campbell's *Half-Breed*, Beatrice Mosioner's *In Search of April Raintree*, and Gabrielle Roy's *Rue Deschambault*. And finally, I must acknowledge Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness*, which allowed me to imagine that this place, Southeast Manitoba, can be a fruitful space for literary exploration.

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Hold Your Tongue

Part One

1.

I awoke in the back of the old Buick with a train engine blasting through my head. I tried to sit up, but couldn't manage it. Sunlight beat my eyes like a drum. I rolled onto my side to keep from throwing up, and found my jeans caught around my ankles. The torn leather seat burned my skin: it was funny how, at a certain point, both the cold and the heat felt similar. Kicking my feet back and forth, I worked blood down into my toes, loosened the jeans from my ankles and pulled them over my hips. Keys fell from a pocket and landed among a pile of empties on the floor. The Buick stank of stale beer, cigarette smoke, and piss. Frost melted along the edge of the windows. And as I watched the sun drift over the farmyard, I knew there was no use going back to sleep.

In the tall grass by the tree line, I emptied my bladder. I watched smoke spiral up over the smoldering fire pit nearby. Empties lay scattered in a wild and sloppy ring. We had fed wooden pallets and broken chairs to the fire throughout the night, shot old fireworks over the farmhouse, and scared the cows into the back pasture amid the birch, aspen, and oak trees. Big J.P. Gauthier had thrown a pig roast to celebrate his inheritance; this land once belonged to my grandfather, so the story went, but he had lost it in a spell of bad luck. J.P.'s dad had recently left him the farm—his dad wasn't dead or anything, he had just moved to *La Villa*—the Old Folks' home in town—but for J.P. that was close enough. I surveyed the farm house, the barns steadily losing ground to the trees, the bush, the old fence posts of cracked oak, and the rocky pastures out beyond them. I fought a rising heat in my chest. Only thing I'd ever inherited was the old Buick.

Using my bank card, I scraped frost off the inside of the windshield. Shavings peppered the dashboard like dandruff. Someone had knocked the mirror askew, and I adjusted it so I could see out the back window again and I paused as the mirror cast my reflection back at me. I looked like my dad. I could see where all the creases and the furrows would deepen, where laughter and sorrow would etch time on my face—and, for a moment, I saw how this life would unfold, a path of labour and liquor, a hard path, and it frightened me.

Crisse, I thought, I'm still drunk.

I turned the ignition and the Buick started up fine. It jounced and rattled over the uneven ground as I made for the road. Weeds rustled against the under carriage. I watched a man appear in the doorway of an old Jayco tent trailer by the farmhouse. He waved to me, and then stumbled down the perforated steel steps into the yard, fell to his knees, and vomited. The fact that I hadn't been the only one too drunk to leave made me glad. Grasping blindly through the darkness, after the girl left, I had searched for my keys and had fallen asleep with the memory of her heat on my skin. What was her name? My knees and elbows ached; rusty joints that creaked with the cold. It was time to stop sleeping in the car; I had told myself this before, but now, it was time I listened. I took my cigarettes from the cup holder. The pack was empty and I hurled it into the windshield. Sifting through the ashtray, praying for a half-smoked cigarette butt, I found nothing but a roach, which I smoked to clear my head. There was no use stopping anywhere else. I had no money.

Oak and aspen loomed over the road and the ditches. Sunlight streamed through gaps in the canopy onto the loose gravel. I rubbed sleep from my eyes with my knuckles. A terrible thirst gripped my throat. I pressed the gas and a cloud of dust erupted in the rear view. The Buick tore out of the tree line into a clearing where the sky yawned wide and blue and the road unfurled like a gunshot. Story was an early settler had hacked a farm out of the bush, but the land was no good for farming, and slowly the land took revenge, and with every thaw the earth heaved fresh stones up to the surface, the stones chewed the farmer's ploughs and wrecked his blades, and eventually drove the farmer to sell the land. Then a concrete outfit came and tore open the land to haul away all the stone and gravel that the land had revealed until all that remained was a hole, a gaping pit, where nothing but weeds grew. Rusted chains lay strewn across the old access road that led into the pit, an old no trespass signs covered in dust. Folk would drive down into the pit, tearing over the mounds of unused gravel with their trucks and their quads and they would shoot at garbage—bottles and cans and makeshift targets—that they hauled in, and they would burn wooden pallets in bonfires that raged through the night while they drank and howled and their silhouettes would flicker like ghosts against the hills.

The trees closed in over the road again. The Buick roared up a small slope, a gravel ridge that sliced across the land like a long, thin finger, and I snapped the wheel to the right as a Dodge crested the ridge and barreled toward me. The Buick rattled over the washboard and loose gravel, and as the truck shot past me, spraying rocks like buckshot into my windshield, a loud and sharp

crack rang out. The man at the wheel of the truck lifted his fingers and, for a second, I thought he smiled, but then he was gone. The Buick plunged into the dust, the back end swaying wildly side to side, fishtailing over the crest, and I pressed down on the gas, straightening the Buick out, and managed to bring her to a rest at the foot of the ridge. Nickel-sized chips sparkled like fresh stars in the windshield. Coughing, I opened the door. The side mirror fell, shattered. A bitter heat rose up in my chest again and I painted the ground.

2.

"*As-tu vu ton père*?" my mother asked. She sat at her sewing machine in the living room and the machine chugged and whined and the needle hammered down like a jackhammer. Bolts of sunlight filtered through the trees and the glass in the windows and cast mottled shadows over the room, the furniture, my mother. "Have you seen your dad?"

"I was almost killed."

"*Son* truck *yé pas dans le* driveway."

"I could have died," I said.

"*Yé parti sans* warning. *Puis* y*a laissé son* cell *dans l'*charger too."

"Fuck sakes, did you hear me? I said I was almost killed."

My mother looked up and into the kitchen. "*Énerve toi pas là*."

My hands shook as I pulled a glass from the cupboard and poured water from a jug on the counter. I took a swig and coughed it up into the sink. It tasted stale, but that could have been the taste of vomit on my tongue, so I took another sip and swallowed the water.

"A truck nearly hit me on the ridge," I said.

"*Faut qu'tu* drive *à droite sur le* ridge. *L'chemin est plein de* maniacs."

"Fuck, I know that." I squeezed my eyes and groaned, and I leaned forward and stuck my head under the faucet and let water wash over my head. The water ran down my face, moistening my lips. The water tasted soft, salty and I spat it out. The tap water was undrinkable—it came out clean, and cold, and delicious from the ground, but it was hard, heavy with iron and it left a stain, turning everything yellow and brown. So the folks ran it through a water softener, so their whites stayed white, and the water became undrinkable. They fetched their drinking water from outside, and hauled it in using five-gallon jugs. Made no goddamn sense at all.

"What's a matter with you?" My mother set aside the dress she was sewing and stared at me. There were piles of dresses on the sofa next to her sewing machine.

"What the hell are all those dresses for?" I had asked her sometime last week.

She had told me *le comité culturel de Ste-Antoinette* was putting on a show for the winter carnival about the legend of the flying canoe, *la chasse galerie*, and she had agreed to mend and sew the costumes. Problem was that my mother was not very crafty; she kept messing up, sewing things together that didn't belong together, then having to yank out the thread and start over.

She came into the kitchen and slipped a hand along my forehead, like she did when I was a child. She scrunched her nose and I batted her hand away. "*Tu sens comme la marde*," she said. You smell like shit.

"J.P. Gauthier had a party," I said. Truth be told, I had no idea how I found myself out by Giroux—a half-faded dot-on-the-map of a town—at the farm. I had worked a half shift yesterday at the powder coat plant when Herb, the plant manager called us all into the lunch room and gave us our layoff papers. Only had a few weeks of work left before the plant shut down. Choked, the guys headed over to Fritz's Bar for a drink or two, but somehow somewhere along the way, we'd found ourselves peeling across hay fields in my Buick, dodging bales, and ripping over dirt roads toward the farm. I'd met the girl there, a friend of a friend, and I told her how I'd just lost my job and we snuck away from the bonfire, shared a joint in the Buick, and fooled around some. What was her name again?

"*Ton cousin*."

"God, what?"

"J.P. Gauthier."

"Oh," I said. "Second cousin."

"Mhm…"

"He got the farm. Threw a pig roast to celebrate."

"Is he still fat? He was always fat." She lifted a hand and shook her head. "Wait a minute, never mind. C*'est pas important*. *Écoute là, faut qu'tu trouve ton père. Menoncle Alfred a eu un* stroke. *Yé t'à l'hopital à Saint-Boniface*. Hey, did you hear what I said?"

Bending over the sink again, I ran soft water over my head to soothe the throbbing in my skull. Water dripped down my neck, soaking my rumpled collar.

"*Faut qu'tu* t*rouve ton père*, and let him know. He'll want to see him."

Alfred was my Dad's uncle. L*e p'tit frère à pépère*. He was more than just an uncle; he was my dad's godfather, *son parrain*. He'd become a sort of father figure to my dad after *pépère* died when my dad was just a boy. He'd taught my dad and his brothers to hunt and fish, taught them to tell edible berries from poisonous ones and taught them how to supplement their meager farm. Dad had grown up north of Richer near *la poche aux lièves*, and he had hunted and trapped small hare as far back as he remembered. I'd once seen a photo of him, Dad, when he was five or six years old, holding a small .22 rifle, a half dozen hares strung by their feet on his belt, a proud smile on his dusty face. Alfred stood next to him, his hand on Dad's shoulder. I had never known my grandfather, but I would have wanted him to be like *Menoncle Alfred*. I began to dry-heave in the sink.

My mother scrunched her nose again and backed away. I felt her eyes bore a hole into the back of my head. Her disapproval burned like a noon sun. Normally, I would have laughed it off and told her not to worry, knowing, that come the week, I would go to work and earn her respect back like a labourer's wage. But hours were down at the plant. Things had looked bad all fall and now with this layoff, I didn't know if I would ever have the chance to prove myself again. I was broke in more ways than one.

Eyes watering, I poured myself another glass and drank without thirst.

"*Écoute*, *Alfred* might not last long," my mother said. "So you'd better hurry. T*on père yé parti prendre un café au restaurant*, but the lady says he left a short while ago. So *dépêche*."

3.

I took the old Dawson Road and headed west into town, out of the bush where the shield began, and where the trees fell away and for miles around the land stretched as flat as the waters of some frozen sea. I'd always felt small on the prairie, gripped by some gut-clenching fear that the wind would one day sweep me from the earth. Larry Lechene told me once that some *métis* had originally built the town in the bush and not on the bald, windy edge of the tree line, but that some *indiens* had out of jealousy set fire to the forest and burned it to the ground. The forest had never grown back, and we'd been cursed to stare forever at the naked horizon. Larry said he read it in a history book, but Larry was a drinker and a bullshitter. I had never seen him with a book. I wondered if *Menoncle Alfred* knew the story.

I drove through town and stopped at the Petro for a pack of Players and a couple litres of gasoline. I had wrangled a few bucks from my mother on account of her making me drive around looking for my dad. She'd grumbled, but opened her purse.

I didn't recognize the kid working the counter, but he jutted his chin at me and nodded as if he knew who I was—just some nobody who'd happened to have been born here and never left. "How you doing," I said, and I grabbed my change and banged out the door before he answered.

I figured to start with the restaurant, and see if anyone could tell me where Dad had gone. Dad loved that old place. Some relative had built it in the '70s, ran it for a decade, then sold it to a French-Ukrainian woman who'd kept it going ever since. Dad spent hours there, nursing tepid coffee, and chewing the fat with old farmers. They would sit by the windows that overlooked the Petro and watch people fuel their trucks. They maintained that a man's truck was a window into their lives, their state of affairs: a new truck meant money, either a raise, new job, an inheritance, or like that lucky son of a bitch, *Frank Mourant*, a Lotto win; an old truck meant that things were steady—it revealed fidelity, loyalty and love; but a used truck meant trouble, either at work or at home, and that meant something to talk about, and time for another coffee. Their bullshit was elaborate and convincing.

I bit into a stick of pepperoni that I got with the cigarettes and scanned the gravel parking lot for my dad's truck, but it wasn't there. I knew he'd left while I had my head in the sink, but I hoped that someone had seen him, maybe knew where he was or knew his plans for the day.

The restaurant was half-empty, and quiet, except for the kitchen where cutlery and dishes rattled in the big dish bins. The restaurant ceiling hung low, and the lights buzzed softly, leaving the restaurant dim. Sunlight beamed through tangled blinds in the south window, and I waited by the counter with the register while my eyes adjusted to the light. For the first time that morning, my headache subsided.

"Sit where you like, Rich," said the woman behind the register. Her jaw worked up and down, chewing gum. She glanced up from the crossword puzzle on the counter, flashed her tired eyes, and her yellow teeth. In that moment, the familiarity burned like feet on frayed carpet. The woman resumed her crossword and I made for the washroom where I threw up the pepperoni.

I washed my face in the sink, and after a minute, walked into the dining room. I headed over toward a table of older men I bet my father knew, grabbed the table next to them, and found myself looking at the menu. And with the last of the money my mother had given me, I ordered a

stack of toast and a cup of coffee. The waitress ran the order to the kitchen. I leaned into the aisle and listened to the old men. Three of them sat there laughing and sipping coffee; they wore plaid, collared shirts, sleeves rolled up over their elbows, weathered oak arms on the table.

"B*onjour*," I said.

"*Matin*," they said, and they raised their cups and grinned. One said something to another and laughed. Nose hairs fluttered when they threw their heads back; fat jiggled under their chins.

"Boy, *t'a l'air un peu pâle là*. Had a rough night?" the joker said.

"*Un chi coup d'trop là, hein*?"

Sure, maybe I'd had one too many. I shrugged and they laughed.

The one with the John Deere ball cap pointed into the parking lot toward my Buick. "*Tu* drive *encore ce vieux bateaux*? *Pourquoi tu* drive *pas un* truck *à place*?"

"Listen," I said. "I was wondering if you happened to see my Dad this morning."

"I mean, *c'peut-être assez*, *pour un* Sunday cruise," the one with the ball cap continued. "*Peut-être driver la femme en ville pour shopper*. *Mais tu* beat *pas un* half-ton *pour l'ouvrage.*"

"Don't need a truck. I work in a factory," I said.

"Ho, ho, *dit moé pas tu travail encore pour les* Mennonites?"

"*Les viarges*!"

The one with the John Deere ball cap leaned toward me. "Do they make you pray before work?" he said.

I shook my head. I had seen these old jokers cross themselves over the sound of thunder, but I had to play their game or I wouldn't get anything out of them, so I said, "Absolutely, *et puis après chaque* break too."

They liked that and they howled with laughter.

"Oh that's a good one," the joker said. The one with the ball cap swatted the table and his face turned red. The quieter one recounted how they had run some Mennonites out of town in the late '70s when they'd nosed around—these Mennonites had the gall to think they could just build a window factory in town on account of the rail line that ran alongside the grain elevator. He said townspeople didn't want Mennonites moving in and ruining their French. I could almost picture the snow-capped *prête* leading the charge, waving his crucifix, and warning of assimilation like some impending apocalypse. Didn't seem to dawn on the old farmer that he told us the story in English or that there were hardly any jobs in town anymore. Most folk drove to Winnipeg and

Steinbach for work.

The waitress brought my toast and I lathered them in strawberry jam. I listened to the old farmers recount their run-ins with Mennonites over the years; the parking lot brawls after socials, the boycotts, the bloody hockey games. By the way old folks talked about it, things had not been easy between the French and the Mennonites; towns and villages only a few miles down the road seemed worlds away. I'd heard about some men and women who'd crossed those worlds, only to be cast out by both. My dad's cousin *Laura* was disowned for a time in the sixties after marrying a Mennonite man. They had moved out west, to Regina, to raise their children, and they returned only years later with their kids mostly grown, having never known their grandparents. I sipped at my coffee, and swallowed my toast. I'd had my own run-in with a Mennonite last winter, when I bought snow tires off a man from Steinbach. The tires were lemons and Larry and I'd chased him down to get my money back. We busted his truck window with a tire iron, but then lost him after he peeled out of the parking lot.

Listening to these old men, I realized how things had changed, that things like language and religion didn't seem like such good reasons to hate anymore. Things had gotten simpler—it was all about money: who had it, who didn't. The old men laughed and wiped their tears.

"My son-in-law's a Mennonite," the joker said. "*Un peux* weird, but *un bon homme*."

The others nodded and murmured, the heat gone out their voices.

I leaned toward them again.

"Listen, have you seen my Dad?"

"What about your Dad?"

"Was he here?"

"*Bin oui, y'était icitte*," the quiet one said.

"Sat with us for a while," the one with the ball cap rapped his knuckles on the table.

"We talked about trucks," said the joker.

"He happened to tell you where he was going?"

The joker and the one with the ball cap shook their heads, but the quiet one nodded. The others stared at him and blinked.

"*Y'avait pas dit qu'y allait à* Steinbach, *ramasser des* parts *pour sa* chainsaw?"

"*Non, non, non. Yé déjà été*."

While they worked it out, I sat back and chewed my toast and sipped my coffee. My head throbbed, and I wasn't sure if it was from the hangover or from listening to these old men bicker. I glanced around the restaurant and saw a few familiar faces, no one I ever spent much time with, but still familiar in the way that you bumped into them, over and over, in the weeks, months, and years, and you knew who they were, who their parents were, where they grew up and where they worked, and you knew if they were getting married or divorced, having kids, drinking or fucking your cousin, all by virtue of the fact that there wasn't much else to do other than talk about other peoples' business.

Finally, the quieter one cleared his throat and looked at me. "These two *là, y'écoute pas*," he said. "I'm pretty sure *ton père allait acheté des* parts *pour sa* chainsaw."

"That's great," I said. "He say where he was going after that?"

The joker and the one with the ball cap shook their heads.

"*Aider son frère clairé un* hunting trail," said the quiet one. The others stared at him.

"Did he say which brother?"

The quiet one shook his head.

"Thanks," I said. I drained the last of my coffee and then dropped a couple toonies on the table. I rose to leave, but stopped when I saw my car, the star-shaped chips in the windshield, and the spot on the door where the mirror had once been. I sat again and looked to the old men. "You know who around here drives an old, rust-coloured Dodge?"

4.

There was no point driving around. I could spend the day crisscrossing the land around town, going from uncle to uncle, aunt to aunt, looking for Dad, but we had goddamn cellphones nowadays, and I don't know why Mom hadn't called around first before sending me after him. I had been too hungover to think straight at the time.

In the Buick, I smoked a cigarette and thought about where Dad could be. We had family strewn across the bush from Ste. Antoinette to Richer to Ste. Geneviève and most still hunted, or at least, their children, my cousins, did. Some had moved away to Winnipeg, but drove out every fall to get their deer. I fiddled with the radio dial, scanning stations for something decent to listen to. Dad might have been at *Menoncle* Dave's. Dad spent a lot of time there. But *Menoncle* Dave

was getting too old to hunt, what with his bad leg and all. He had lost most of his toes to diabetes and he couldn't walk far or very long, and so he spent most his time in his wood shop nowadays, carving mallards and loons and eagles out of bass wood. He was pretty good at it too. He sold his stuff in the city, usually made a killing in winter selling pieces to Americans who braved the cold for a little *joie de vivre*. Lately, *Menoncle* Dave spent more time drinking than carving, Dad said, which was sad because Dave had made a name for himself. The speakers scratched and buzzed. I flicked my cigarette and ash dropped along the outside of the car door.

Heavy guitar riffs burst from the speakers and I turned the volume down some. I dug out my cell phone, and saw I had missed a call from my mother—I had no minutes to call her back—and texts from Larry and Becky. Larry wanted to get together tonight and drink. Becky wanted to know if I still planned to swing by her place in the city. I thumbed and shot off a string of replies. Maybe, I told them. Then I sent my mother a message: *Papa fixing chainsaw to help his brother. Can you call around?* I sucked on my cigarette and waited for word.

Some old grunge tune blared on the radio and I sang along—*I'm the dog who gets beat, shove my nose in shit*—and bobbed my head along with the tune. *Won't you come and save me. Save me.* I sang and bobbed and watched traffic zip by on *Rue Central*. A big, red, one-ton truck pulled into the lot and parked nearby. The driver stepped out. He shot me a quick wave before he disappeared inside the restaurant. I knew him from my hockey days when I manned the blue line for the Aces, back before Dad had moved us out to that patch of bush east of town, and I stopped playing hockey because the registration fees had got too expensive. I sucked my cigarette down to the filter and flicked the butt out the window. I had been so angry when we moved. I felt like I'd done something wrong and was being punished for it. You're not even changing schools, my parents told me. My sister had been even more upset, but being a couple years older than me, she said fuck it, packed her things and left. Moved to Winnipeg.

I knew, now, Mom and Dad had only wanted to share with us their own love of the land. They had moved away to the city when they were young, to look for work and for love, and they had spent their lives working to come back home. They had finally managed it, found something they loved. They spent hours in the trails that crisscrossed the acreage, watching the birds and the deer that came to feed in the yard. It was too late for my sister and me—we didn't give two shits about the bush. All we saw was the work and isolation. A few times after my sister left, I hitched into Winnipeg, showed up at her apartment in the middle of the week, and pleaded with her to let

me crash on her couch. I thought the bush was a prison, but she said I was being stupid. How can a prison have no walls?

Stop being dramatic, my sister said. If you want to leave, leave. Buy a fucking bus ticket and leave. It was easy for her to say that. She had a job, an apartment, a boyfriend, and said that she was going to become a musician. She had a shitty acoustic guitar that she plucked in between tokes from her joint. Good fucking luck, I'd said, and hitched a ride back home.

Leave. That's what a lot of people did. They moved to Toronto, Calgary, Montreal. Some went to Fort Mac or Lloydminster or Edson, hoping to get a piece of oil money. Most just moved to Winnipeg, where they learned to speak English and forgot to speak French and their memories turned into old movies dubbed in a foreign language.

"*Crisse*, I need a smoke."

As I went to light my cigarette, the phone buzzed, and I dropped the lighter between the seat and centre console.

"Fuck. *Allo*?" I reached for the lighter and flicked the radio off with my elbow.

"Fucking hello to you too, you asshole, and what the fuck do you mean *maybe*?" Becky's voice burst into my ear. Becky had just started university in the fall. After years of bussing tables at Fritz's, she'd returned to school and it was stressing her out. She'd told me only last week how she felt out of place, sitting next to 18 year olds every day, and living in the city for the first time.

"Shit, Becks, listen—"

"We need to talk about what I asked you. I need an answer."

"Becks, sorry, look, listen, this isn't a good time," I said, mumbling around the cigarette.

"Are you drunk?"

"What? No. I'm trying to reach my lighter, it fell between the seat and the—"

"So you don't want to talk to me because you can't reach your lighter?"

"*Crisse*. Hold on." I took the cigarette out of my mouth and placed it on the dash, careful not to bend it since the pack had to last me until payday, and said "Listen, I'm out looking for my dad, my *Menoncle Alfred* had a stroke. I need to let my dad know."

"Oh," Becks said. "Is he okay?"

"I haven't found him yet."

"Your uncle, I mean."

"I don't know. Mom says it's serious. Once I find my dad, I'll see about coming down."

"Are you sure? Aren't you going to see your uncle?"

I scratched the side of my nose and noticed dirt under my fingernails. "Hadn't considered it, to be honest, I probably should. He doesn't have any kids."

"That's horrible!"

"Kids aren't all they're cracked up to be, Becks."

"What? No, I meant, that you hadn't considered it! Isn't he like your *pépère*?"

"I don't have a grandpa. And there'll probably be a crowd up there. I hate crowds."

There was a muffled bang on the other end of the line, and I could hear something sizzle. The phone buzzed against my ear—another call—and I missed Beck's reply.

"Okay, well—anyway. Tell you what. I'll think about it. I mean, I would like to stop by. I could always swing by if I go see him. They took him to Saint-Boniface."

"I don't want to sit around all day if you're not coming," Becky said.

She hung up and I finally lit my cigarette and as I smoked I thought about her and me and whether I should finally move out to the city to be with her, or just call the whole damn thing off. We had been going together, on and off, for almost a year now and it had grown serious over the summer. I had told her that I loved her after a day of fishing on the Seine with her and her cousin and she had told me that she loved me, but she also confessed that she was moving to Winnipeg. She had left an open invitation to come with her, but after spending half my life in the bush east of town, I didn't know if I wanted to live in the city. Now Becky was getting impatient and I was starting to feel bad about it. I had to make a decision. She was the nicest woman I knew, and she deserved an answer one way or another. I didn't want to break her heart.

5.

In the glove box, I found my layoff papers. I'd shoved them in there when I followed the guys to Fritz's. Now I pulled them out, and lay them flat on my lap. I passed my hand over them, trying to iron the creases out. They'd gotten crumpled, the way I shoved them in the glove box. I squinted, and read the words over while ash rained down from my cigarette, and I swept the ash off with my hand then wiped my hand on my jeans.

"Termination of employment," I read. "Fucking *marde*."

My chest was tight and I leaned back against the headrest, took a deep breath, and tried to

think. I had no idea what I was going to do next, after the last few weeks of work ran out. I stared at the gravel lot and spotted the old farmers stepping out of the restaurant: they walked across the parking lot toward their pick-ups, in slow halted steps, their joints worn down, and their postures broken by years of riding tractors. I took another drag from my cigarette, was down to the filter, and I thought about what the farmers had said in the restaurant after I had asked about the rusted, brown Dodge. Despite all their elaborate bullshit, all they could tell me was that they'd spotted a handful of brown Dodge trucks around town, but they didn't know who drove them. I glanced at where the mirror had been and swore. I couldn't afford a side mirror.

I sucked on my cigarette again and smelled filter burning, so I flicked the butt through the open window. The cigarette hadn't done anything for me. I needed something stronger. Bending, I peered down between the seat and the centre console. There were always a few coins falling out of my pocket, and I figured there might be a couple dollars' worth. I reached into the crevice, felt around with my fingers, and pulled out a few quarters, a couple dimes and half-a-dozen nickels. I found a couple toonies in the cup holder under a bunch of crumpled receipts. Counting the coins, I smiled. I had enough for a six pack. So I shoved my papers back into the glove box, started the Buick, and drove over to the beer vendor by the grain elevator.

In the parking lot behind the old hotel, I chugged a beer down, then tossed the empty out the window. And for a moment, the tight spot in my chest seemed to soften, but my phone began to buzz—it was my mother—and my chest grew tight again.

"*Ch'pense, qu'j'lai trouvé*," my mother said.

6.

"He's one tough bird. The homecare worker said he called the ambulance himself. *L'ont trouvée à quatre pattes*, *dans sa cabine*, *téléphone dans main.* Can you believe that?"

"I know, Dad. You told us."

"*Trois fois déjà, Émile*," my mother said.

"*Imagine*, having the presence of mind. *À son age*." Dad shook his head and stared at the road while I drove. His little half-ton careened down the Number One, toward Winnipeg.

I'd found Dad at *Menoncle* Ray's, in the bush not far from home. Mom had called around and there'd been no answer at Ray's, so she asked me to swing by there and check it out. Having

just opened a second beer, I took my time driving through town, careful to avoid attention, and I stayed under the speed limit on the Dawson as I plunged back into the bush. I took a right where the land dropped sudden into a narrow valley, and I followed the road over a small bridge, over a wet, swampy creek and through *La Coulee*, a small hamlet that the people in *Ste. Antoinette* once called Stove Pipe City. Some folks called it *la vallée des voleurs*: the valley of thieves. Dirt poor French and Métis families had lived side by side until rich townsfolk had started buying wooded lots. I pulled onto Ray's property, cut the Buick's engine, and stepped out into the cool forest air. It always took longer to cool and longer to warm in the bush compared to town. Blowing into my hands, and rubbing them together, I worked warmth into my fingers. I spotted my Dad's truck in front of the house. Then I heard the chainsaws, ripping through wood. Took half an hour or so to reach my Dad and Ray, climbing over fallen trees, pushing through the underbrush. And finally, I reached him and he stared at me in wonder, shaking his head as I came through the bush, and I told him Alfred had a stroke, and he nodded, turned off his chainsaw, and we walked back to the house. I followed him home where he made some phone calls to his brothers and sisters.

After a quick lunch and a change of clothes, we jumped into Dad's half-ton and headed to the city. We didn't know if we'd be allowed to see Alfred, but Dad wanted to try, and Mom and I tagged along to keep him company. They asked me to drive since Dad was upset and Mom never liked driving in the city.

"*Imagine*," he said.

"Should have been in a home at his age," my mother said from the backseat. "Could have fallen outside and no one would have known."

"*Durerait pas en ville*," Dad said.

I drove and listened to them talk. Winnipeg wasn't far. Half hour and you were there. Not like the old days, Dad liked to say, when back before the government had built the Trans-Canada his dad had to take a horse and buggy into the city. Dad said even after he could afford a car, his dad had refused to get one, so used to getting around on a horse that he refused to buy a car until his horse died. But then p*épère* had died before his horse. I always thought that was stupid, bull-headed really, but I never said so. *Pépère* on his horse was one of the few memories that Dad had of his father.

"He shouldn't have been on his own," my mother said again and my dad shook his head.

"*Calvaire*, you don't get it, *hein*? *Yé bin trop indépendant pour être trappé dans une villa*

avec des vieillards. It would have killed him," my dad said.

"*Bin, là*, *être indépendant l'a presque tué*."

I laughed even though I knew it wasn't meant to be funny, and my mother flashed a weak smile in the rear view. My dad turned and glared at me.

"*Tu trouves sa drôle*?"

"*Non*, *non,* it's just sort of ironic, *non*?"

"Well I don't know about that, but Alfred is a lot more impressive than Joe," he looked at my mother through the rear view and nodded. "I can tell you that."

"What do you have to bring up Joe for?" my mother glared at the back of my dad's head, and he refused to look back at her and just stared out the window at the shelterbelts of trees along the highway. Whenever Dad was about to lose an argument, he brought up Joe.

Dad was never fair to Joe and I didn't get it. Joe was Mom's brother. He had run a septic cleaning service for the better part of a decade, had built it up from nothing into one of the major cleaning services in the area, but then he had lost it all in the divorce. He had been forced to sell the company off cheap to a competitor to pay his lawyer, his child support, and a thousand other bills that had piled up. In a way, I had admired *Menoncle Joe* for taking the risk, running his own business, being his own boss. For all his talk of independence, Dad had never taken that risk. I'd even worked with Joe a few summers as a kid, before I got my drivers; he'd paid me a few bucks for every tank we cleaned out. It was tough, disgusting work. I hauled these three and a half inch thick, fifty-foot length, steel reinforced hoses across peoples' backyards, laying them lengthwise from the truck to the septic tank, clamping them together, then hooking the hose onto the suction pump while Joe started the pump, then lifted the lid off the septic tank. I'd stand back and watch Joe fight that hose while it bucked like a wild horse. Joe stood with his feet pinned to the lip of the tank, he would lean back for leverage and the hose would shake and kick and bounce around in his hands, an incredible flow coursing through his arms toward the truck.

I remembered the noise: a frantic, sloppy, slurping sound like kids sucking up the bottom of a slurpee or a milkshake; the waste sloshing around like an aquarium in the back of the truck.

There was the smell: an unholy terror that poured from the tank the moment the lid came off. Years' worth of piss and shit and vomit that seeped into your overalls so that hours later and miles away, you'd catch sudden whiffs and start to gag or dry retch. Joe had planted forests of air fresheners in his truck, arrays of fresh-scented pine trees that dangled from the roof and sprouted

from the floor.

There were the complications. The items people flushed away that would sometime plug the hose: used condoms and tampons, small children's toys, little plastic soldiers, marbles, trolls with once neon hair, pill bottles, Q-tips, slimy clumps of body hair. Joe told me he'd once pulled a dead chicken from a tank on a Hutterite colony, an old farmer thought to rid himself of his dead birds by chucking them in the tank. He even found a cat once under a layer of straw bales, frozen against the outside of a tank. Joe said it must have sensed the heat of decomposition below and tried to burrow down to escape a cold winter day. He said the man cried when he told him about his cat, and right on his doorstep, he had given Joe an extra twenty bucks to get rid of the corpse.

Finally, there was the way that people treated him. Joe said people were happy enough to see him when he showed up, in the sense that they didn't want their own piss and shit backing up through their toilets and staining their laminated floors, but not once was he invited inside. They watched him work from their porches and decks, their driveways, their kitchen windows—some safe distance away where the smell and the sound was dampened, manageable. Some would not come outside, only squeeze their scrawny arms through a crack in the door to hand Joe a cheque or a handful of dollar bills. Joe got looks wherever he went, when he went with his truck. People would eye him and recognize what he did, as though they could see stink lines coming off him, and instinctively avoid him. I asked him once if this bothered him but he shrugged and said there was no shame in it, someone had to do the job, and he didn't mind. And besides, it paid the bills. I never really believed him. After some guys from school made fun of me one year, for smelling like an outhouse, I stopped working for Joe.

After he lost his business, Joe moved to Alberta and worked in the oil fields for a time.

The way Dad talked about Joe, I figured Dad was ashamed of what his brother-in-law did for a living. I remembered how he tried to stop me from working with him, said working a honey wagon was no place for a kid. He and my mom had argued about it and, God love her, she'd won that time. I don't think Dad ever forgave Joe. It seemed so stupid. I just didn't understand it.

And as we drove, hurtling over the prairie, the horizon never wavered, and it seemed we hardly moved at all. You had all the time in the world to think. And I thought about how similar Joe and Alfred were, these proud and stubborn men cut from lines of stubborn men and women.

"There's Deacon's," Dad said, knifing through the silence that had descended on us.

Traffic picked up around Deacon's Corner, with folks coming off the 207 from Lorette,

headed into the city, and it grew heavier again around Fermor. First thing you saw, coming into Winnipeg from the east, and cresting the overpass, was that expanse of gravel and steel that was Symington Yards, CN's big rail depot. Rail tracks spread out like some river delta of stitched up scars. Train engines clattered on the rusty tracks, shunting back and forth, and shuttling between the endless trains of cars. It reminded you who had built this town. We zipped up Lag to Marion, and took a left at the meat packing plant and cut through the industrial park. The air stunk of fuel exhaust and burning carcasses. Emergency sirens wailed in the distance. Dad's half-ton bounced over the pock-marked streets, all zit-scarred through years of frost and thaw, and we rattled over series of tracks. We hit the light at Archibald and waited as traffic turned and weaved in front of us. I glanced at the strip club—kitty corner from where a Tim's was going up—and stared at the nude redhead on the old, faded, acrylic sign. Big, leather-clad men argued before its doors.

"Light's green," Dad said.

I didn't like hospitals, but then, who did? After parking, we went inside, took an elevator up a couple floors and emerged into a dimly lit hallway filled with the echo of soft cries, muffled sobs. We passed rooms filled with *Menoncle Alfreds*, *des vieilles mémères*, and swollen, French-Catholic families holding vigil.

"This way," my dad said, and he charged ahead down the hallway.

"How does he know?" I asked my mother, but she said nothing, and took off after him. I grumbled a little and followed them.

Menoncle Alfred's room was crowded; you could barely see his bed through the crush of people jostling together like aspen in a storm, whispering, hugging, and laughing softly. A forest of gray hair, dark faces, red eyes. Dad waded in, and greeted everyone, then moved over toward the bed where he looked down at Alfred. Dad grabbed Alfred's hand, careful not to dislodge the tubes on his arm. Mom stood and chatted with her sisters-in-law. I didn't know where to stand.

"*Allo, Richard*," a few *Matantes* said.

"*Allo, Matante*," I said to a half-dozen ladies.

Menoncles came and shook my hand.

"*C't'un maudit temps*," they said. "*Un maudit temps*."

I stood off to the side, by the window, and looked out at the city to avoid looking anyone in the eye. I felt weak in the presence of my aunts and uncles; I didn't want to tear up in front of

them. They had seen death before, they still believed in God, *le bon Dieu et le Ciel*, and I felt out of place standing here with them, even though they were family. Their certainty, that whether or not *Alfred* lived, he would find peace, unnerved me. And so I focused on the cityscape outside; I studied the trees, the fiery elms fast losing their crowns. The sky was clear and blue, and the sun was bright, but weak, and it shone without heat. Leaves swirled like eddies in a stream, sweeping across the sidewalks, onto the roads, piling up next to the curbs.

"*Regard ça, j'ai reçu mon* harvester card *dans mail c'te semaine*."

I glanced at *Menoncle Roger*. He was wearing a camo-coloured ball cap, and talking with *Menoncle Alphonse*, showing him cards from his wallet and telling his brother how he was going to take a couple deer this fall. Roger had been the first to get his Métis card, way back in the 80s, when no one else had wanted to talk about their heritage. Apparently, it so upset *Mémère* that for a year she stopped talking to Roger.

"*Ah bin, ch'te* bet *ta hâte d'aller à chasse*."

"*Aye, baptême oui*. *J'étais en train d'installer mon* tree stand *quand'l téléphone a sonné*. *Annette à fallait prendre le* quad *pour me chercher*."

"*Vas-tu poigner un* moose *c't'année, Menoncle*?" I asked.

Roger smiled and shook his head.

"*Ch'pense j'ai fini chasser les orignaux, c'trop dur sur le dos, t'sé*."

A doctor came into the room to check on Alfred, and he paused at the door and blinked, as though surprised by the number of people. Everyone sort of hushed up while he looked over the chart at the foot of Alfred's bed and then looked at the bank of machines along the wall. He said a few words to *Matante Louise*, who'd asked about Alfred's condition. He said Alfred was stable. Everyone smiled and clapped each other on the back. Then the doctor told us not to stay too late, Alfred needed his rest, even though it looked like nothing could wake the old man, and to come back tomorrow if we liked. Then the doctor left.

After a while, I moved over toward the bed and looked down at Alfred. He looked dead, his gaunt cheeks sunk into his face, and his eyes sunk into his head. It was horrible to see. I'd last seen him in the spring, when I went over to his little house with Dad, not much more than a cabin really, and helped clear brush from the yard like we did every spring. He looked thinner, sicker. I couldn't stand the sight of him, it hurt to see, and I turned away and reached for my cigarettes.

"I'm going for a smoke," I told Dad and he nodded, then he grabbed my arm and said that they had decided to go for dinner in a bit to the Chicken Chef on Marion. He asked if I wanted to come. I shook my head, gave him the keys to his truck, and told him to pick me up later.

7.

I sat on a bench in the small park across from the hospital and I texted Becky. And while I waited for a reply, I lit a cigarette and studied the sky. The sky was clear and blue and the wind was swift. The elms trembled in the cool autumn breeze, their fiery crowns mostly bare, branches knocked together like a rattle-clatter of spoons. I lay back on the bench, and I tried to listen to the music, but city noise rumbled around me: truck tractors roared over the bridge; a passenger train squealed over the Red toward Union Station; sirens echoed off buildings and car alarms blared in alleyways. Much as I hated to admit it, I'd grown accustomed to that quiet patch of bush I called home—though, even there, if you listened closely enough, you could hear the insect-hum of the highway at night.

I sat up and stared at the statues in the centre of the park. An old explorer stood, his back like a two-by-four, knee bent, eyes pinned vaguely to the north-west horizon, a priest at his side, his crucifix raised like a shield against the wilderness. An Indian scout, kneeling below the white men, holding an arm up to keep their brilliance from his eyes, stared at the old burnt out ruins of *la cathedrale*. Riel's grave lay there at the feet of the old façade that towered majestic but hollow on the Red. A new church had risen from inside the ruins of the old, but it was never the same, a continual and haunting reminder of our once held dreams. *La cathedrale* was nothing but a prop for wedding photos nowadays.

Staring at the statues, I noticed some Latin etched into the stone beneath the scene, but I couldn't make heads or tails of it. No one spoke it anymore. Hell, hardly anyone spoke it back in the day either. I'd heard my parents tell stories of how priests gave mass in Latin, how the priests yammered while no one understood a thing, how they lorded language over the masses.

I flicked my cigarette in the dirt and crushed it with my steel toes.

The summer after I stopped working for Joe, I spent a few weeks with *Menoncle Alfred*, helping him clear brush from his property near Ste. Geneviève for a few bucks. He would handle

the brush cutter, a weed-whacker like contraption with a circular saw mounted at the bottom, and I would follow up behind him and gather all the wood and pile it up in the yard behind his house. Every few years we had to push back the forest, otherwise it would swallow the house.

Around suppertime, we would light the wood and watch the pile burn. One evening, after a hard day's work, we sat around the fire, talking quietly, when the sound of bells cut through the air, and Alfred sort of stared off toward town. He seemed to shake his head and sigh. Then he got up and walked to the house. I watched him go inside, and shifted around in my chair and glanced back toward the fire. Someone had to watch the fire, in the event it shot embers toward the house or the woods.

There was a sudden chill against my shoulder. I glanced up to see Alfred holding a can of beer against my skin. "*Tiens*," he said. "*Prend sa*."

"*Merci*," I said. We sipped our beers and stared at the fire. The bells chimed in the air. It was bright and hot, and the summer air was filled with flies and *maringouins*. The beer was cold, but tasted funny. It was one of my first beers, and I was not yet accustomed to its taste, and I had yet to acquire a liking.

Alfred nodded. "*Demain, j'aimerait bien finir la job*."

"Okay," I said. Alfred was paying me around 50 bucks a day to help him, and so I didn't mind coming around again tomorrow.

"*Mais j'aimerait bien aller à messe avant*," he said, looking at me. "You want to come?"

I grunted and stared at my shoes. Alfred explained how the priest came around only once a month nowadays and he hated to miss his chance. He was a tough old man who could scare the shit out of you if he wanted, but under the gnarled, wrinkled skin, and the hard blue eyes, he had a gentle soul. I'd never heard him raise his voice. After a minute, I had looked up at him and told him I would meet him here, after church. I wished now that I had gone with him.

I headed over to Becky's apartment, which was nothing more than the second story of a run-down, ramshackle two-story house on DesMeurons. Becky greeted me at the side door and I followed her up the stairs. I had visited her a few times already, and the place looked more lived in than before. Books lay scattered on the floor, dirty dishes on the coffee table, clothes crumpled in the corners. Her laptop flashed stars across the screen on the kitchen table. She took a couple beers from the fridge and handed me one.

"How's Alfred?" she asked.

"Too early to tell," I said.

"Bum a smoke?" she said. We crawled out the window onto the roof over the porch and I passed Becky a cigarette, lit it for her, and we sat there amid the canopy, and smoked. Becky was quiet; she kept biting her lip and glancing my way. Finally, she cleared her throat and said. "So?"

I cracked open my beer and shrugged.

"Well have you thought about it?"

"I've thought about it." I peeked over and saw she was waiting for more. "I don't know."

"You don't know," Becky said. She tapped her cigarette carefully and ash fluttered down onto the shingles and the eavestroughs. Music drifted through the first story window, up onto the rooftop where we sat. Becky pulled her knees to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs.

"It's a bad time, Becks."

"It's always a bad time."

I couldn't bring myself to tell her about the layoff—that, and the memory of the girl last night, kept my throat tight.

"If you don't want to move in, that's fine. Just fucking say so. Don't string me along."

"I'm not stringing you along. I swear."

"I got this place because I thought you'd like it. Do you know how long it takes me to get to school from here?"

"How long?" I asked, even though I knew she would tell me.

"Over an hour. A fucking hour, Rich. I may as well be living in the country."

I had told her that she should have moved to Fort Garry, or St. Norbert, instead of Saint-Boniface, but she hadn't listened. It was her own damn fault. I took a sip of beer and listened to her talk. She had gotten the place not long after she started school—had just moved into the city one weekend. Had called me up and asked my help moving her stuff. Said she'd chosen the place because it reminded her of home, of Ste. Antoinette. How's that, I'd asked. It was full of French people who don't speak French, she said. What a load of horseshit. I knew the house belonged to her cousin and he had cut her a deal on the rent to put up with the musicians on the ground floor. They practiced nonstop. After a few weeks, Becky had made a deal with them to limit, on nights when she had class in the mornings, their jamming to acoustic only, but a dozen drunks flogging their acoustic guitars at two in the morning and howling—*take a load off Fannie and, and, and*—

in harmony, didn't make much of a difference. Now she wanted me to move in with her, into this mess. I didn't know what to make of it; apart from living with the woman I loved, it didn't make a whole lot of sense. I thought about my buddies in the country, about Larry, and Trevor, and the other guys at the powder coat plant, and what they would say when I told them I was thinking of moving to the city. Thirty miles may as well have been the ends of the earth.

"Rich, are you listening?"

Down the block, a dog barked. Kids squealed in the backyard across the street, and a few houses over a woman yelled through a window. Some kid, carrying a 12-pack of Standard on his shoulder, rode by on his bike, weaving to avoid potholes. The bottles rattled like wind chimes.

I turned to Becky and watched her take a sip of her beer. Her hair was longer than before, it spilled over her shoulders, and she had dark rimmed glasses that made her eyes sharp, and she looked beautiful and smart and I knew she would do amazing things with her life. I suddenly felt jealous and possessive and I wanted to be there with her, whatever it took.

"Fuck," I said. "I don't know if I can afford it, Becks. I got laid off yesterday."

"What?" Becky grabbed my arm. "Are you serious?"

I took another sip of beer and blinked. The can empty in my hand.

"Yeah, came out of fuckin' left field," I said.

"Son of a bitch. That's… that's…" Becky frowned and pursed her lips, and after a while, she smiled. "That's OK. You'll get unemployment right? Rent here isn't much. And you'll find a job way easier in the city than out there. Am I right?"

I frowned and thought about it. "Yeah, I supposed so."

"There you have it! It makes sense!"

"I don't know," I said.

"This is perfect, Rich!"

"I guess so," I said.

"Oh my god!" Becky screamed and threw her arms around my neck and kissed me on the mouth. Her beer toppled onto its side. Foam squirted through the opening as it rolled off the roof. And as we kissed, I wondered what I had done to deserve such a woman, and I decided not to tell her that I hadn't promised her a thing.

8.

After dinner at the Chicken Chef on Marion, my parents picked me up from Becky's and we drove home. I took the wheel because Dad had had a few rum and cokes. He didn't say much, he mostly stared out at the streetlamps along the highway, until Deacon's, where we plunged into the darkness. I kept pace with the taillights ahead. Mom asked how Becky was doing.

"Fine, I guess."

My mother snorted and I watched her in the rear view as she shook her head. Dad stared out the window and sighed. This was another thing I had inherited: knowing when to hold your tongue.

At home, I sat on the porch and sent Larry a text. I lit a cigarette and waited. I stared out at the gravel drive, my dad's truck, my old Buick, the oak trees, the stars piercing the dark sky. A car tore up the gravel road and flashed by the driveway. There was a faint hum through the trees to the north, that distant, high-pitched whine of truck tractors hurtling through space and time at a hundred clicks an hour. Strafing endlessly, like clouds of mosquitoes.

My phone buzzed and I looked down. *Come on over*, the message read.

I tossed my cigarette into the coffee tin on the steps, and popped inside to grab my jacket and car keys. While at it, I grabbed a few of my dad's beers from the beer fridge in the computer room, and I placed them in a plastic grocery bag that I swiped from underneath the kitchen sink.

"Where you going?" my mother asked from the living room. An old John Wayne movie played on TV. Dad snored on the couch and my mother was reading a magazine under the lamp.

"Larry's," I said.

9.

Larry Lechene lived off the old Dawson road halfway to Richer with his mother and her boyfriend. It was a small house with an unfinished basement that leaked in the spring. You could see the old stains where melt water seeped in and ran along the wall. Larry slept in the basement. He had banged out a rough frame of two-by-fours and draped old bed sheets over the studs. Then in another corner, Larry had gathered sections of old carpet that Gerry Gagnon had offered when Gerry renovated his house, and Larry assembled himself a living room, complete with ratty sofas

and recliners, an old scratched-up cigarette-burned coffee table and a tube television he'd hooked up to a pirated American satellite signal. Larry knew a guy over in Niverville who reprogrammed cards whenever the satellite provider sent out a signal that fried pirated cards.

The basement was chilly, the concrete floor sucking away heat through the carpet, and a layer of smoke hung from the crossbeams like a panel ceiling. There were a couple people on the couches, watching television.

"There he is," Larry shouted, "Hurry down bud, game's half done."

A hockey game flickered on the tube. Habs were in Edmonton by the look of it.

I sat in the recliner and glanced around to the others. Al Verrier was rolling a joint on the coffee table. The Fleurette sisters, Marguerite and Céleste, redheaded twins from Marchand, said hello. I never managed to tell them apart, except when Céleste and Larry cuddled up side by side, because I knew they were going together. I noticed a guy on the loveseat next to Marguerite, and figured he was going with her, but I didn't know him. He was tall, by the look of his legs splayed out across the room, and his big feet wrapped in bright white socks. Blond, blue eyed. I assumed he was Mennonite or Ukrainian.

"Hey, I'm Rich," I said, offering him my hand.

"Jacob," he said.

"Steinbach?" I asked.

"Blumenort," he said.

Marguerite said they'd met at work, at the chicken rendering plant. I pictured their plastic overalls, their hair nets, their face masks, covered in blood and chicken guts.

"Romantic," I said. They laughed.

"Rich is French too," Marguerite said to Jacob.

"That so."

"So they tell me," I said. I leaned into the recliner and dug a can of beer from my plastic bag. I set the others on the floor next to the recliner, where the concrete would keep them cool.

"Speak it too?"

"Passably."

"Fucking shoot the puck!" Larry yelled at the television.

"Shit, so you guys are all French. How come I never hear you speak it, babe?" Jacob said, eyebrows tight, dumb smile on his face, as he turned to Marguerite.

Marguerite shrugged.

"Because you wouldn't understand us," Céleste said.

Jacob grunted. He sipped his beer to hide the scowl on his face.

"Al is Métis," Larry said. "He don't speak Michif though."

Jacob glanced over to Al.

"No shit?"

"Yeah, yeah. Got my card," Al said. He ran his joint along his tongue. "Dad always said we were. I never believed him 'til we looked it up."

"You do look a little dark."

"Jacob!" Marguerite said.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"You should see his Dad."

"Larry!" Céleste said.

"You've got a hell of a tan."

"Well no shit. We're fucking roofers."

Jacob took another swig of his beer.

"Fucking hit him!" Larry yelled.

Al held his joint up to the light of the television like some *hostie* that needed blessing. He sparked it, took a pull, and passed it off to Jacob.

"Thanks, Chief."

"You know, Rich here is Métis too, his family's been around as long as mine."

"Hey man, what the fuck."

"Well, aren't you?"

"*C'est pas d'ses affaires*. *Et puis* Larry *yé* too, by the way."

"Hey man, drag *moé pas dans sa*. We're just French."

"*Ostie d'menteur. Arrête de* deny-*er*."

"Just watch *la* game, *crisse*."

Jacob frowned, and after a while, said, "Well, you don't look it."

"Forgot the sash at home," I said.

"I mean, I never met a blue-eyed Indian. Ouch, what was that for?" Jacob cradled his side as Marguerite swung her elbow into his ribs. "He doesn't look Native."

"Rich!" Céleste said. "He didn't mean anything by it."

I stood over the table, beer running down my hand, spilling out the can I had just crushed in my fist. "Métis," I said. "Is not Indian."

"Dude, my bad," Jacob said. "I thought we were talking shit."

"Forget it," I said, and I sat down. "It's been a bad day. My uncle had a stroke." I reached into the plastic bag at my side and took out a fresh beer.

"My auntie had a stroke once," Céleste said. She paused to take a hit off the joint that was going around and glanced over to her sister. "Remember *matante* Flo? She was paralyzed down one side and never spoke properly again. She was such a good singer too."

"It's a joint, not a mike, Céleste," said Al.

"Oh, shit. Sorry, here."

"Way to make him feel like shit, Céleste," said Marguerite.

"What? Fuck Mags. She lived, that's what I meant. She survived. Isn't that something?"

"Fucking hit the net! *Calice de fuck*, this is why they're losing!"

The joint went around and we talked and smoked and drank, and Al rolled another joint, and Larry yelled at the television. Mags told Jacob about the day I'd showed up at her trailer near Marchand with my buddy Trevor and how he and Al had tried to cook honey oil and how it went so horribly wrong and how the explosion set the forest afire. Jacob began to cough and laugh and cough and wheeze and Mags helped him upstairs for a glass of water and they stayed up there for a while. Al bet that they were fucking and Céleste said it was none of our business, but Mags and Jacob returned shortly after and stared uncomprehending as Al whistled at them and grinned, and Larry flung an empty beer can at the TV. Then, Al showed me his Métis card and explained how to apply for one, and I shook my head and asked why I would want one, and I tried to ignore him and watch the game, but the game was no good. Somehow the Oilers were up five-nothing. The Habs had pulled their goalie, the coach was standing on the bench, spitting mad, and hollering at the referees. There was a period to go but it didn't matter, the game was done. Larry moaned and sucked on his beer. Jacob laughed. Al told me how there had been a big fight at a family reunion of his not so long ago over this whole Métis business, some of his relatives spoke of savages like they were skeletons in the closet and denied their heritage. He explained how his family had split into those who had looked at their past and connected the dots and recognized in themselves the story of a people, and those that couldn't bear to look back. And I thought about my *mémère* who

had spent her life avoiding the sun, picking chokecherries in long-sleeved shirts, afraid of the tan of her skin. And I remembered her harsh words after I invited her to a pow-wow. During the big flood in ’97, some folks from Roseau River had spent about a month in town, they had converted the legion hall into a flood evacuation centre, and after the waters receded, before they returned home, the folks from Roseau threw a big pow-wow as thanks for the town’s hospitality. *Mémère* refused to attend. *Son du bon monde les sauvages*, she’d said, *mais ça rien à faire avec moé*. Dad said she was afraid—afraid of being found out, afraid of being discriminated against. She’d been taught being Métis was a shameful thing, and that hiding it was a matter of survival. It was easier being French; those that could get by as French did. Nowadays, the whole thing was screwed up. People dug up family histories and the old folks looked on in horror, clutching their secrets, still afraid. *Mémère* had denied her heritage to the end. Only after she was gone did the family begin to talk openly about it, and even so, some still kept quiet. I sipped my beer and watched the Habs finally pot a goal. I wondered what *Menoncle Alfred* made of this Métis business.

Around when the hockey game ended, Larry’s mother and her boyfriend returned from a wedding social. As they stomped around upstairs, Larry suggested we drive over to Carlson’s, in Dufresne, for a few drinks and a bonfire. Fuck it, we said, why not, and we headed upstairs to get our shoes. Larry’s mom threw her arms around Larry and pulled him into the kitchen.

“Mom, what the hell,” Larry said and pushed her away. His mother’s boyfriend, Frankie, sat at the table and munched on a leftover steak. He grinned, and plucked fat from his mouth, and he wiped it on his plate, where it glistened in the 40-watt glow of the ceiling bulb. Larry begged us to hurry while he helped his mom into her chair. His mom pulled him down and laid a sloppy kiss on his cheek. There was a bottle of rye on the table, which Frankie free-poured into a pair of tumblers. Larry’s mother began to swat the air.

“Ho-lee, it’s smoky in here. Did you set the basement on fire?”

“How was the social *Madame Lechene*?” Céleste asked.

“Oh, it was lovely, *ma belle*! You should have come,” she said, and while she described the silent auction prizes, Larry asked us again to hurry. His mother frowned. “*Où qu’vous allez*?”

“Out,” he said.

Larry’s mother blinked and she turned and yelled to Frankie who was across the table and pouring another shot into his tumbler, to fetch some fiddle music since we were going jigging.

"Jigging!" Frankie spluttered. "They're not going jigging. They're going drinking!"

Larry combed his fingers through his hair and glanced nervous around the kitchen. So, I grabbed the door, swung it open, and shouted "Let's go!" and we filed out of the house, leaving Larry's mother and Frankie to argue where they had last seen their *Bernie Elastic and his Rubber Band* album. We packed into the Buick—I don't know why I was driving—and we cranked the radio, rolled the windows, then cracked open our beers, and tore out of Larry's yard, westward onto the old Dawson Road.

10.

The night was cold, and the stars glittered in ragged patches through the clouds, but our breath was warm and our blood pulsed behind our eyes and in our ears, and all that mattered was us. We turned off the main road before we hit town, zipped down a side street, and over a bridge to avoid the town police. Sticking to gravel roads south of town, where streetlamps flickered like lonely outposts, was safest. Across a canola field and behind rows of oak and maple trees, the old folks' home shone in the dark. I hadn't been this way in a while, hadn't seen the backside of the old folks home or been inside it, since my grandmother died in her sleep. The Buick rattled over a rise in the road where rail tracks curved onto a railway bridge over the river, and I heard Larry say this was the spot, the fucking spot, where Peter Sitwell had drowned two summers ago. Story was he had fallen in while fishing, drunk, and he was caught by the current, dragged through the culvert, and pinned to the grate where he finally drowned. And as we drove on toward Carlson's, I lit a smoke and I thought about all the god damn ghosts that haunted every corner of our town, and I wondered what it would have been like to never learn these stories, what it would be like to live ignorant of the past.

11.

Carlson wasn't happy to see us. Turns out Larry owed him some money and he'd thought to hash something out with Carlson with us there as some sort of moral support or something and we stood there and watched them argue. Carlson ran a junkyard of sorts and he collected cars and trucks and old engines. His yard was littered with discarded junk, bought cheap at auction, or off

people simply looking to rid themselves of stuff, which he sold to garages in town and weekend mechanics that banged things together in their backyards. I had bought a bumper from him in the spring, and thought to see about a side mirror for my Buick. He was a fair man, who sold parts at a fair price for cash, but somehow Larry had managed to get a used muffler on credit. He had yet to pay Carlson. Over the summer, Larry had punctured the muffler on his mom's Pontiac, tearing up the side of a gravel hill in the pits north of Richer, and he'd replaced the muffler without her knowing because she would have killed him. After a few minutes listening to him talk, Carlson punched Larry in the nose. Larry fell to his knees and spat blood while Carlson stood and glared down at him. Larry rubbed his nose and he mumbled that he had only come to talk. Carlson spat in the dirt and shook his head.

"Fine," he said. "But we're not talking shop in front of everyone."

Larry and Carlson went off into the dark to talk business, and the rest of us made our way toward the fire pit where some people were flogging acoustic guitars. I saw who was singing and I nearly tripped on the grass. My stomach began to somersault while I stared, and recognized, the girl: her hair, her eyes, her lips. The girl I had fooled around with last night. I watched her sing—she had a beautiful voice—and I tried not to think how I would surely take her to bed if given the chance. I gazed inward in horror, unable to understand this incredible temptation to destroy what I had built with Becky. I wondered where this feeling, this desire to burn everything down and start anew came from: why was I suddenly intent on ruining the only good thing I had going? We stood around the fire and listened to the music, the guitars and the fiddle and the girl's voice, and I recognized the song, some old Hank Williams tune I'd heard my dad play, and the fire crackled over the wood, and we tapped our feet in time and shared our cigarettes. We had stumbled upon the meaning of life. And I wondered if love and hell was the same damn thing; how they burned endless and blinding, so hot that it hurt.

A train horn blasted through the music and a train bore down on us with speed. A rail line ran alongside Carlson's property and trains passed a couple times a day, carrying grains and cash crops, cars and chemicals that could burn your skin at the touch. All that separated the track from the yard was a shallow ditch filled with cattails and a short chain link fence. The horn cried once more, blasting through the song, shattering the rhythm, and everyone glanced up at the train as it

drew near. And when it appeared, its diesel engine chugging, wheels clattering over the rails, and blasting its horn again, Al Verrier hurled his half-drunk beer at it, and the bottle burst against the side of a grain car, exploding into a cloud of foam and mist. And suddenly bottles sailed over my head like hailstones as others tossed their drinks at the train, and the bottles shattered in showers of glass that sparkled in the firelight. We laughed and howled, and, for a time, believed we were happy, but soon the train passed, its only presence the haunting sound of its horn on the horizon, and as we stood around the fire pit, surrounded by the discarded ruins of others' lives, we looked vacantly into each others' eyes.

The girl saw me and I watched her eyes widen in recognition. I smiled, weakly, unsure of what to do. She came over and touched my elbow. "What the hell are you doing here?" she said.

"Was about to ask you the same."

She laughed and shook her head. "This is my cousin's place."

"Carlson is your cousin? No shit. I had no idea."

I tried desperately to remember her name. *Crisse*, what is it? "Listen, about last night."

"It's fine. Don't worry about it," she said. I could hear the sting in her voice.

"—No, no, no. I wanted to apologize if I did anything not cool."

"Oh," she said, her voice softening, and she smiled. "No, it was cool."

"Good, good. Listen," I said. "I've got a few beers in the car—"

She laughed. "That's what you said last night."

"Oh," I said. "Well did I have any?"

She squinted, and sort of looked at me sideways. "Have any what?"

"Beer," I said.

"Oh, yeah. In your glovebox."

"Thank God," I said. "I try to keep it stocked."

She nodded. "The beer was warm though."

"How's that possible? It was freezing last night."

"Well, maybe it was just cheap beer. It didn't taste very good."

"I'll make it up to you. Two cheap beers make up for a decent one, you know."

"I've never heard that before."

"Oh, it's true."

"Chantal," the guitarist shouted from his seat by the fire. "Come sing another song." He

waved the girl over, but she shook her head. Chantal, her name was Chantal.

"In a bit," she shouted. "I need a drink." Then she turned to me. "You owe me a beer."

"Sure thing," I said. We made our way to the Buick and climbed inside. The air was cold and dew had started to form on the windows. Our breath mushroomed white whenever we spoke. I started the Buick, so to warm the interior, and rubbed my hands over the vents as air poured in.

"It'll warm up soon," I said.

"Sure hope so, you're freezing me out."

I reached across the girl's lap and opened the glove box. Nestled in among my insurance, and my layoff papers, were the last few cans of Lucky Extra that I had bought that morning.

"You weren't kidding,"

"I never kid about beer," I said, then smiled.

The girl laughed, faintly. She cracked open her beer. "Cheers," she said.

We talked for a time and Chantal told me she had just moved to town from the city, and I laughed and told her I was planning on moving to the city. She told me about her job as a school teacher, and I told her about my layoff at the powder coat plant. Had two weeks of work left. We talked about the differences between growing up in the city and growing up in the country. How she went to the movies two, three times a week, gallivanted around on a transit bus, and how she hung outside 7-11 for hours at a time. I told her I learned to use a chainsaw at 13, drove my dad's truck on the gravel roads around town at 14, and shot and cleaned a deer at 15. She had grown up on Much Music and YTV and I'd made due with farmer vision: five fuzzy channels at the mercy of the clouds; six on a good day, when Fox beamed in from Bemidji, North Dakota. Fox had the best cartoons. And I told her how we passed the time, how we shot traffic signs from the back of pickup trucks and tore up gravel pits and had bonfires that licked the stars.

"You've got some stories," Chantal said.

"A few," I said. And the air grew colder, the dew on the windshield turned to frost, and the vents poured engine-warmed air into the Buick. For a moment, I was struck with déjà vu, and I saw Becky curled up in the passenger seat, rubbing her hands over the heat vents, and laughing, she told me about her cousin who'd won a ski-doo package at wedding social. Someone knocked on the window and broke my reverie and they asked about getting a ride back to Larry's. Chantal squeezed my knee and slipped out of the Buick.

12.

In the night, a black bear had overturned the garbage bin down at the end of the driveway and had strewn garbage across the yard. It had cracked open the lid and yanked the panels off the sides of the bin in its search for food. Mom had noticed the damage, Dad said, when she left that morning. We sat around the kitchen table and munched on toasted rye bread.

I glanced around the kitchen. "Where's mom?" I said.

"*À messe*."

I'd slept at Larry's on the sofa in the basement, until soon after dawn when I was awoken by the sound of him and Céleste through the sheets of his bedroom, they tried to move quietly, in whispers, but it made no difference as the sound echoed off the concrete walls. I snuck out of the basement and slept in the car until I could see straight enough and drive home without hitting the ditch. Dad was in the kitchen making toast when I arrived. We ate in silence mostly, after he told me about the bear. After breakfast, he asked if I would help him with the garbage bin. He wanted to repair it before the bear returned. My head was killing me, but I agreed.

Together, we fetched these old, weathered two-by-fours, and a couple sheets of plywood, from underneath a tarp behind the shed. Dad had salvaged the material from a jobsite some years back. The bear had really done a number on the garbage bin, had punched holes right through the panels, and Dad figured to replace them completely. He suggested that we cross-brace the panels so that the bear couldn't simply punch holes through them again. I fetched the sawhorses and lay the wood atop while Dad began to measure our cuts, jotting pencil marks on the wood. I plugged in his circular saw and Dad began to cut; the saw was loud and shrill. Wood chips flew up off the blade. I held the wood steady as Dad pushed the blade along the pencil marks.

Maybe we should just keep the saw running, I said over the noise, to keep the bear away.

Dad smiled faintly, said it was good idea except it would also drive away the deer and the birds and give your mother a headache.

Probably not such a good idea, then, I said.

After the wood was cut, I fetched the drill and we took apart the bin, replacing the lid and the panels, screwing them back into place. As we worked, I told him how I'd been thinking about moving to Winnipeg with Becky. Dad glanced up from the bin and nodded.

"*Tu pense tu peux l'affordé*?"

"Rent's cheap. And I'm thinking about looking for another job."

"Guess you'll have to, what with the layoff." I watched as he bent down and hammered a piece of wood into the frame, a cross brace to the side of the bin. The sound echoed through the woods, hammer on wood. It carried on the cold, crisp air. After a while, he looked up at me, and squinted. "Don't give me that look. Rumour is the plant's shutting down, Rich. It's a small town. *Pas facile garder des secrets*."

I knelt down in the gravel and grabbed hold of the small sheet of plywood we'd cut, and held it up against the side of the bin. Dad grabbed his drill and began to screw the plywood to the frame. "Unemployment should carry me for a while," I said. "Enough for me to find some work anyway."

Dad nodded. The drill whined and groaned, popping like a hammer when the screw grew tight in the wood. Dad reached into the bin and felt around, pressing his hand against the panel.

"Should hold," I said.

"Maybe," he said. "Wouldn't stop a starving male, we'd need steel for that, but it should stop the curious." Then he turned to me and frowned. "So, I guess you'll quit drinking then?"

"Excuse me?"

"You smell like a still, Rich."

"Well no shit. I haven't showered yet."

"I could smell it on you yesterday, in the truck."

I glared at him. "You're one to talk. I've heard you weren't any better in the day."

"*Bin là*, *j'veux pas fighter*. *Ta mère est inquiète* is all." And he looked out across the yard through the oak trees. He stopped on the Buick, his old car. The cracked windshield, the bumpers of different colours, a partly caved-in roof from the time Larry had jumped on it, all the scratches and dents along the doors, and the hole where the side mirror had been. "*Quessé ta faite au char*? What happened to the side mirror?" he asked.

"Wasn't my fault."

"Didn't say it was."

"Mom told you, *non*? Some guy in a truck sideswiped me on the ridge; an old, rust brown Dodge. He was in the middle of the road."

Dad nodded, though I couldn't tell if he believed a word I said. "Gotta be careful on that ridge," he said. "How much longer you think that car will last?"

"The engine runs fine, and there's hardly any rust."

"Wouldn't pass a safety, that's for sure. *Mais c'pas la rouille qui me concerne*."

"I'm not selling it, Dad."

"Not suggesting you do."

Dad picked up his drill and his saw, and carried them over to the shed. I watched him and listened to the noise coming through the woods. Someone was firing a rifle. Every few seconds a shot rang out. There was a slow, repetitive steadiness to it, as though the gunman had to cock his gun and aim anew each time. Gunshots were frequent enough this time of year, men and women readying for the approaching season. I grabbed the sawhorses and started after Dad. A faint hum pricked my ear. It grew louder: the engine-whine of an all-terrain vehicle, likely ripping through the crown land east of the property. Then a vehicle tore along the road, the roar of its wheels, the unmistakable ping-rattle of gravel bouncing against the undercarriage, and I glanced at the road, catching the tail end of a brown truck in the corner of my eye, angry cloud of dust in hot pursuit. I wondered if it was the same truck that had nearly killed me, but there was no way to know.

I placed the sawhorses in the shed. Dad was rearranging his tools on the wall. Still facing the wall, he began to speak. "*On était pauvres comme la gale quand j'étais enfant,* poorer than dirt. *Tu sais comment on s'en est sorti?*" He turned, and leaning against a worktable, crossed his arms. His stomach pressed against his shirt. He had gained weight ever since he started working less with his hands. Doctors had told him to ease off and that meant holding a clipboard, walking around, and supervising the guys, rather than swinging a hammer all day long. He ran projects in the area for a small construction firm out of Winnipeg, but even so, his hours were down too. He pitched in when he could. He'd worked hard his entire life and he couldn't stand sitting around. I studied him for a minute. I'd heard this speech, in all its variations, a hundred times before.

"Hard work," I said.

Dad shook his head. "Yeah, sure, but that's only part of it. It was smarts, and know-how that helped us out. Knowing how to build on our work, how to build ourselves up, how to make something of ourselves. *L'indépendance et la détermination*," he said, and looked me in the eye. "*Écoute*, anyone can work hard, that doesn't mean you get ahead. You have to be smart. *Regard à Menoncle Joe*, *travaillé comme un chien toute sa vie*, and it hasn't gotten him anywhere."

I rolled my eyes: again with *Menoncle Joe.*

"*Ta quetchose à dire*?"

I shook my head. I wasn't about to tell my Dad he was full of shit. I watched him wrap the extension cord around his circular saw and place it in a shelving unit. He began to fiddle with a bolt, spinning it around, nodding to himself.

"Think it's stripped," he said. "*Va falloir la remplacer*."

I rubbed my eyes, fighting a wave of nausea.

"Okay, so what are you trying to say?" I asked.

He pulled open a drawer and took out some pliers and a wrench. He clamped the pliers down on the bolt and began to turn it with the wrench.

"What do you think I should do?"

Still working on the bolt, he shook his head. "All I'm saying is *regard à les Verriers*; sure they're hard workers, but they're smart too. They run their own business. They're doing well."

"Joe ran his own business."

The pliers slipped off the bolt and snapped shut. Dad frowned and glanced at me. "*Puis* it failed," he said and he glanced at the bolt again and repositioned the pliers.

"That wasn't his fault," I said. "Mom said he had to sell it because of the divorce."

"And whose fault is that?" He looked at me. "And don't blame M*atante*. E*lle* n'*avait rien à faire avec la* business." He began to twist the wrench, and loosen the bolt. The nut and washer came off, and he fished the bolt from the hole. The shelving unit groaned, and the metal strained, under the added pressure, but it held. He pushed a new bolt into the slot, slipped a washer around it, and then spun the nut flush. He used the wrench to tighten the nut and bolt. Then he looked up at me again. "*Écoute*," he said. "All I'm saying is look at your aunts and your uncles—plumbers, carpenters, teachers and nurses. They know there'll always be work, doing what they do."

"So you want me to be a plumber?"

"It's an idea."

"I don't want to be a plumber."

"*Crisse*, then don't be plumber. *Fait qu'es tu veux*."

I watched as he headed back to the garbage bin and gathered the sawed bits of wood we had left behind, the odds and ends which he'd later use as kindling, and he began hauling it back behind the shed. I stood out, in the front of the shed, leaned against the wall, and had a cigarette. And as I smoked, I thought about what he had said. I always knew he had wanted better for me. I

wanted better for myself, but I'd never had a plan, never had an idea of what to do, and while the work was there and the money, as little as it was, came in, I made due. And now, after five years at the powder coat plant, they had cut back our hours. Thinking about it, they really hadn't done anyone a favour. They'd cut the night shift, brought the night shift over into afternoons, and said they were doing it so that everyone still had some work. Soon as it picked up, they had said, they would get us all back up to full time. Then we lost our benefits. Managers said benefits were for fulltime employees only and no one was fulltime except the managers. Guys grumbled, but most accepted it. What could we do? They said it was better than nothing, but truth is half-time was no good at all. Then they laid us off. Called us into the lunch room, and handed us our papers. Gave us notice, they said, by law they had to, but they didn't give us a damned day more than needed.

I sucked on my cigarette and watched my dad haul another armful of assorted lumber to the shed. The air was cool and a soft wind blew through the trees, knocking leaves to the ground. In another week the trees would be bare, nothing but skeletons. It had been a cool fall, strangely, after a hot summer. Just flipped one day like a light switch, when a bank of clouds had rolled in, over the land, and settled in for a week and soaked the ground with rain. There'd even been snow one afternoon, flurries really that melted on contact, but it had been enough to get people talking, warning each other that it would be a bad winter, a winter to forget.

13.

"Give it time. It'll pick up," Trevor said. He lifted a piece of aluminium off the floor and hooked it to a steel wire, then strung the wire onto the moving belt line above. Suspended above the floor, the piece wavered as it sought to balance itself despite its awkward shape. There was a jog in its length, like an elbow. We were painting parts for a bus manufacturer today: joints, and poles, and bolts that went over the seats where passengers sat. The belt line loomed a half-dozen feet off the factory floor, it snaked around the building, through the paint cubicles, through to the industrial ovens, and around to the rear of the factory where guys packed the cooked pieces onto wooden pallets, then it wrapped around again toward the front where Trevor loaded the belt with fresh pieces.

I leaned against the terminal and eyed the latest work order. Trevor's gopher was hauling parts from the warehouse—giant twenty-foot high open shelf stacks—to Trevor so he could hook

the pieces onto the belt line. The line inched ahead and Trevor took his time. The last order had to cook before we kicked the line up to speed again. Tim, who worked in packing, was sweeping the floor; and Justin, the forklift operator was asleep in his forklift. Brendon, the lead painter, had gone out for a cigarette, and I would have joined him, but I had started to ration my smokes.

"Wouldn't count on it," I said. I picked at the paint on my overalls. The powder was not supposed to stick without a current, an electromagnetic charge, which was how it stayed on the metal until it was cooked, first melted and then hardened into a candy-layer. But like a fine dust, the powder paint could work its way into the material and remain trapped there by the fibres. My overalls looked as though they'd been dipped in a dusty rainbow.

"Just you wait. Wife's been praying," Trevor said. "This layoff won't last more than a month or two at most." He had a damn cheery outlook that pissed me off, and a stupid grin that split his face in two beneath his thick, coke-bottom glasses. He still enjoyed work after all these years. I couldn't believe he had cut his hair and turned into a bible thumper.

Trevor had straightened out some after burning his eyebrows off in a honey-oil cooking accident a couple years back when the isopropyl had exploded and mushroomed into a fireball in the pines near Marchand. He had almost lost his marriage. The wife had chewed him out, forced him to church with her where she made him pray for forgiveness, and he had quit scheming for a time. He had done it for his little girl. All he did was for his little girl. He wanted the best for her, and while the wage at the powder coat plant wasn't much, it was enough to live on, but not much else. There was void, a black hole of expenses that he tried to fill with odd jobs, to make enough to pay for his little girl's swimming lessons and piano lessons and a thousand other things that he had never had the chance to do. I couldn't imagine what I would do in his place.

With his little girl now in grade school, his wife had taken a part-time job at the library in town, but the pay was crap, and it was mostly an excuse for her to get out of the house. Trevor's latest effort at gathering some scratch on the side involved selling cleaning products, but the real money maker was in recruiting folks to sell the product for you and kick the profit upward; more people you had under you, the more they had under them, the bigger the profit. Trevor had tried to rope me in, but I'd balked at the start up costs.

The lead painter reappeared, and I headed back to the paint station, and the line started to move again; the conveyor belt and the chains groaned and squealed, and metal swung softly back and forth beneath the line, and our paint pistols shot electrostatically charged powder paint at the

pieces hanging in the paint booths, then the pieces moved slowly to the ovens where they roasted and cooked, and the powder melted to coat the metal pieces in a thick, tough, glossy paint. Noise flooded the plant: the metal clank of the conveyor belt, the clinking of hooks, the forklift zipping around and beeping, the hum of the ovens, the roar of the sandblasting booths that shot sand over our hooks and clamps and ties, excoriating them of paint, to be reused. The ovens burned, baked, and blasted heat through the plant while we stewed in our own sweat. A batch of long, thin steel poles came through the paint booth—parts for a bus manufacturer in Winnipeg—and we sprayed them yellow. There was something calming about the work, about the motion of the line, and the way the pieces came through one after one another, and I just shot paint at them, and let my mind wander. The work was hot and dirty and repetitive, but it was peaceful and I would miss it.

Around noon, the afternoon shift started to arrive. Guys trickled into the plant, punched their timecards and headed toward their stations for the handoff. I laid my paint pistol down and removed my mask. I stood around with the second painter and shot the shit for a few minutes. He asked if I had seen the Suits walking around today, and I shook my head. No one walked around the plant in a suit, blue jeans and t-shirts usually. Heat and sweat ruined everything else.

"Herb gave them a tour of the place last week," Yvon, the afternoon guy, said.

"No shit," I said.

Once the afternoon crew took over, I clocked out and headed for the change room. I took off my overalls: my undershirt and shorts were soaked through and through, and I tossed them in a bag so I could bring them home for a wash. Before heading home, I swung by Herb's office. I passed the lunch room along the way and spotted some of the guys around a table, shooting shit, and I would have joined them, except I wanted to see Herb, and ask him about the layoff. Herb's office was down the hall, near the reception where customers waited. I peeked through the glass window in Herb's door. He was sitting behind his desk, and glanced up from his computer when I knocked, and he waved me inside.

"These fucking emails, Richard. Grab a seat; I'll be with you in a sec." He shook his head and moved his fingers over his keyboard. The keys clattered. "These fucking emails," he said. "I miss the time when if someone had something to say they picked up the goddamn telephone."

I nodded, scratched my chin and glanced around the office. It seemed brighter than usual, cleaner. All the clutter had been removed.

"If anyone ever offers you an office job, Richard: turn the fuck around and run."

"Doubt that'll happen, Herb."

He grunted, pushed his keyboard aside, and leaned back in his chair. He stared at me for a moment and I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze. "So," he said. "What can I do you for?"

"I was wondering about our hours, Herb," I said. He snorted and I scratched my chin. "If they'll be picking up again soon," I said.

"'Fraid not. You got your notice, didn't you?"

"Yes" I said, and watched him glance at his computer screen again. Herb was a big man, heavy, wide-set, and his stomach was the size of a beach ball. It hung over his belt and strained his shirts. Guys had a pool on when his buttons would pop. He had large, hairy arms, with a gold watch on one, and a silvery, medic-alert bracelet on the other. Despite the teddy-bear look, Herb was a hard ass, and he would sometimes walk through the factory and yell at guys for no reason.

"There you have it," he said.

"It's just, I thought, what with those guys walking around last week, that maybe business was picking up," I said.

He leaned forward, stomach folding like playdoh over the lip of his desk. He pinned me with his eyes. "Who told you that?"

"I just heard some of the guys talking, thought maybe we'd found some new business—"

He shook his head, his chins trembling under the motion.

"—because, I'm thinking of moving into a new place soon. If you guys decide to keep a shift going, I could sure use the hours."

"No one's getting hours," Herb said. "If things change, we'll let you know."

"Oh, but I thought, with those suits—"

"In the meantime, forget about those guys."

"OK, but—"

"Now listen, Rich. I've got work to do. These fucking emails, you understand."

I stood up and looked around his office again. Someone had removed the stacks of papers and the trash from the corners, the carpet smelled fresh for once. I doubted whether Herb's office had ever been this clean. I wondered what the point of it was. "Is there something else, Rich?"

"Actually, I was wondering about an advance—

"You know we don't do that here."

14.

That afternoon, I spotted an old, brown Dodge truck on the highway, a couple semi-truck lengths ahead of me. At first, I wasn't sure it was the one that had hit me, but the more I stared at its rusted tailgate, its ragged mud flaps, and its crooked radio antennae, the more certain I grew. I sped up a bit, passing a Reimer transport truck as I tried to keep pace with the Dodge. I wanted to see who was driving it. I wanted to look at its side mirror.

It started to slow down and drifted right into a turning lane off the highway. I followed it closely, desperate to catch up, but uncertain what I would do when I did. The Dodge turned, and sped down the municipal road, a long, straight stretch of gravel, and I turned and sped up after it. Dust rose up behind the truck and I plunged into the cloud. Dust scoured my bumper, my hood, my windshield. Felt like I'd stepped into the sandblasting booth at work. Through the dust cloud, I spotted the Dodge's taillights and I slowed along with it and watched it turn down another road.

Trees started to appear along the sides of the road, the ditches grew a little deeper, filled with gravel and shrivelled cattails. We were drifting east, out of the prairie, toward the bushland. Farmland gave way to pastures, hacked out of the bush. Ragged barbed-wire fences on old posts. Trees became thicker and crowded up along the road until you couldn't see the horizon anymore. It grew darker as the trees cast shadows across the road and the world narrowed around me.

The Dodge slowed again, its taillights flared red. One light flickered a little, like it would give out soon. The truck pulled into a driveway, on an old property shrouded by willow trees and pines. I slowed and watched the truck disappeared through the trees. I stopped along the edge of the ditch, and stared at the driveway. After a minute or so, I pulled into the driveway.

I soon spotted the house. It looked like a split-level bungalow with a half-basement and a concrete foundation. Big front windows looked out over the yard. Plastic deer stood in the grass. The driveway wrapped around itself in a cul-de-sac so you could just drive straight out again.

A man in a checkered work jacket stood next to the truck, lifting pieces of lumber out of the box, stacking them near the house. He turned and watched me park and step out of the Buick.

"Hey there," I said.

"Can I help you?" The man wiped sweat off his brow and stared at me as I approached.

"Yeah, I was wondering if you happened to be driving *la ligne à Faucher* last Saturday," I said. That was what some folks called the road with the ridge: Faucher's line.

He shook his head. "Why do you ask?"

I glanced at the truck, the box, the driver's door and the mirror. The mirror was still there, but it looked like it was all scratched up.

"Anyone else drive your truck?"

The man yanked his work gloves tight. He wriggled his fingers and tugged on his gloves and frowned at me. "Look," he said. "I'm a little busy here. What's this about?"

"Some truck, just like yours here, hit me the other day. Took my side mirror right off," I said. "See?" I pointed to the Buick. The man frowned again, deeper. Lines popped out around his eyes, the bridge of his nose. "I saw you on the highway, and thought it might be you, so I—

"So you followed me home?" the man said. "Are you fucking serious?"

"Well, I—

"Get the fuck out of here." He took a step forward, but I held my ground.

"Listen. I don't want to get the insurance involved. We don't need that. I just need to buy a used mirror. Let me see your mirror—

"Damage to my mirror?" the man laughed. "Buddy, they're not even the same height."

The door to the house opened, and a woman appeared. She had bright, blonde hair and a valley of dark roots down the middle. "T.J.," she yelled. "Is everything OK?"

"It's fine, hon. This man was just leaving."

"Ok," I said. "Well, maybe your wife was driving then. I didn't get much of a look at the driver, but this is the truck—"

The man shook his head. "No, I've heard enough of this horseshit. Who the fuck do you think you are coming to my house and accusing my wife? Get off my property."

"What does he want, babe?" the woman shouted.

"Nothing, he's just leaving."

Squeezing the steering wheel tight, I drove around the truck and back down the driveway to the road. The man watched me leave and I glanced at the son of a bitch in the rear view. It had to be him. Why else would he be so defensive. At the road, I looked around, trying to remember which way I'd come, and I spotted a mailbox, rising out of the ditch next to the driveway. It was obviously ornamental, no postal worker delivered mail this far out. A handcrafted welcome sign dangled beneath and plastic birds nested atop. Popping the Buick in park, I grabbed my tire iron, stepped out of the car, and smashed the box off the post.

15.

"Whoo-weee! What a shot!" Larry yelled and the can tumbled through the air and landed in the grass while the ping-snap of the aluminum echoed. Larry lined the rifle up again, aiming at the next can on the plank. We were out behind his house, in the small clearing amid the oak trees that one of his mother's boyfriends had cleared some years back. Larry's mother owned a couple acres that backed onto crown land. Larry had built a small shelf to hold bottles and cans or other small targets; it looked like a sawhorse with splayed legs at the ends and a two-by-four across the top. It didn't surprise me much; he'd worked construction out of a high school. The rifle cracked, and another can flew off the plank.

I'd been at home, looking at job boards over the dial up, when the ladies from *le comité culturelle* arrived to examine my mother's dresses for the production. I tried to ignore them, but they gushed, and laughed, and argued in the living room, and, after a while, I called Larry to see what he was doing. Larry lined another can and pegged it clean off the plank. "Nice shot," I said.

"Better believe it," he said. "*J'vais-m'poigner un* buck *c't'automne.* You'll see. Y*'en as une* bunch *dans les bois icitte.*"

"Yeah, right," I said. "Like last year, *quand t'as tiré une* doe."

"That was an accident. *J'l'avais pas planné*."

"You just couldn't help yourself, eh?"

"*Ch'tait trop excité*."

"Here," I said. "Let me have a shot." I grabbed the rifle and cradled the butt against my shoulder. "It's heavier than I remember."

"*J'ai changé les* sights," Larry said. "Doubt *tu peux feeler sa* though."

The rifle cracked. I dropped the barrel and glanced at the sawhorse.

Larry shook his head. "Tough luck. Try again. Aim *un* touch *à gauche là*, *non*, *non*, a bit to the left. The sights are a bit off. Still need to adjust them. Hold on, *té main y* shake *trop*."

"I'm fine."

"I can see they're shaking."

The rifle cracked.

"Dude, there's no way you'll hit anything like that."

"What the fuck." I slapped my hands on my thighs.

"Chill out, here, have a drink," Larry said, and he reached into the cooler behind us, next

to the lawn chairs, and he offered me a beer. Larry took the rifle and I sat down and watched him peg another can off the sawhorse.

"Where'd you learn to shoot like that anyways?"

Larry stared through the sights for a while. "Fred Vandal," he said. "Guy was sleeping with my mom when I was in grade nine. *Y ma appris comment* shooter, how to breathe, *t'sé*."

The rifle cracked and another can flew off the sawhorse.

"He took me hunting. *Ma raconté* how way back his people use to hunt with bows *t'sé*, so others wouldn't find out where the deer were hiding. Homesteaders and farmers. *Ma raconté* how *une foi* his dad *a tiré un* buck from inside the house. He was eating breakfast at the kitchen table and he saw it outside, *dans le champs d'blé*, *puis y'a poigné sa carabine*, opened the front door, and shot it dead. Just like that. *Y'avait besoin la viande*. They had big families in the day."

"Tell me about it, I haven't met all my cousins."

"That's right, you know."

"I tell you how we had a family reunion once, in Ste. Geneviève, doubled the size of the town. Had a baseball tournament too, 8-team round robin."

"Yeah, yeah. You told me."

Sipping my beer, I watched Larry adjust the sight on his rifle. "What happened to him?"

Larry shrugged. "I don't know, died I guess."

"Fred, I mean."

"Oh," Larry spat in the dirt, "My mom threw him out after she found out he was stealing from us. Turns out he was a gambling addict." Larry threw himself into the chair and let the rifle slip to his feet. He grabbed a beer and we sat there for a while, drinking, watching the sun move through the trees. A bird of some sort circled overhead and Larry said it was a falcon, but the tail was all wrong. It was too big to be a falcon. It was probably a hawk.

"Whatever," Larry said, and he took a swig of his beer. We smoked a joint that Larry had swiped from his mother's stash, and each had another drink. Larry watched me pull on the roach, and he frowned, and sort of leaned forward and looked away, then he looked my way again. "So, listen. What were you doing with that chick at Carlson's?"

I coughed a little and dropped the roach. It fell onto the lawn chair. I picked it up before it melted the plastic. Larry watched me closely.

"Nothing," I said. "We were talking."

Larry looked away and nodded. “I only mention it because Céleste and Mags love Becky, you know. Didn’t know if you were broken up or what.”

“No man, I’m thinking of moving in with Becky.”

“You’re fucking kidding. Why the hell would you do that?”

“Christ, you just asked me if I was still with Becky.”

“I didn’t ask if you were getting married.”

“We’re not getting married. Just moving in together.”

Larry shook his head and leaned back in his chair. The chair creaked, the fabric stretching over the aluminum. He kicked his heel into the dirt. “Shit, so *quand t’esque tu* move?”

“*Bin, ché pas*. *C’te semaine*, week after,” I said. “I haven’t decided yet.”

Larry stared at the last can on the plank. “What the hell were you doing with that girl?”

“Nothing, I told you. We were just talking.”

Larry shook his head. “I ain’t judging, Rich, but you’re asking for trouble.”

“If you aren’t judging,” I said, “quit preaching.”

Larry looked at me and frowned. I hauled on the pin-sized roach and ignored him, and he finally glanced away and spat in the dirt.

16.

Around noon, on Friday, Herb gathered the men in the lunch room and told us that the company had been sold. He said that the buyer was from out of the town, and that they would be re-evaluating the plant’s operation. No one knew what that meant. Herb gave us envelops filled with our last paycheques and a voucher for a frozen turkey from Grannies in Blumenort. He said the layoffs were going ahead and that the plant would shut down while the new owners examined the operation. He said they would either retrofit the place or strip it bare and ship everything and set up shop elsewhere. We just had to wait and see. It was possible they would hire us back; then again, we might need to apply like anyone else. Yes. Consideration would obviously be given for experience. Like after a punch to the gut, we were too surprised to even yell at him. We filed out of the plant, into the cold October sun, and stood in a daze, clutching our paycheques and turkey vouchers. Some left without a word while others milled about with a blank look in their eyes. We had known it would be our last day, but no one expected a fuck you on the way out.

Someone suggested Fritz's, and soon after a parade of beat up cars rolled out the lot like a funeral procession. We sat around a couple tables, ordered a couple pitchers of beer, and bitched about our luck.

After a few minutes, Yvon chugged his beer and stood up. "I gotta go," he said.

"We just got here, bud. Sit down," Hams said.

"Relax! Your wife doesn't know you're here."

"That's not what I mean," Yvon said, and he stumbled toward the washroom.

"Poor fucker," said Brendon. "Has a pea-sized bladder!"

The others laughed and slapped the table, but there was no heat in any of it.

"That's not it," I said. And I figured that Yvon would leave his wife, his kids. I could see him heading west to work the potash mines in Saskatchewan. I just knew he was done with it and he had decided, just now, around this table with us assholes, to leave his family.

Across the table, Trevor stared at his voucher. "Well, it sure is nice to get a turkey before Christmas."

"Yeah, real fucking decent of them," Brendon said.

"Pricks can shove their turkeys up their asses," Cecil said.

"I'll take your voucher if you don't want it."

"Fuck off, don't touch."

I sucked down beer and listened to the guys curse and yell and blame each other for their fucking misery. We drank some more and commiserated and we ordered another pitcher because EI was paying for the next round. We felt that if we drank enough the future wouldn't seem quite so bleak. That maybe, through the haze, a vision would appear to light our path. Instead, the guys turned to the slots and plugged their last paycheques into the machines.

The table emptied: Brendon, Hams and Cecil had migrated to the bank of slots along the wall; Justin was plugging quarters into the Big Buck Hunter and missing every shot; no one had seen Yvon in a while and we figured he'd left; Tim, Trevor and I snuck out to smoke a joint, and Tim puked on the gravel, then passed out on the cement next to the building. Trevor called Tim's fiancé and he asked her to come and pick him up, told her Tim would be outside, and we headed back inside to avoid the scene. We sat up at the bar and noticed that the woman who worked the bar had started her shift. We waved her over and ordered another round. She smiled and brought us some beers, placed the bottles on cardboard coasters, then walked down the length of the bar.

I had fantasized for years over Irene St. Pierre, the woman who worked the bar at Fritz's. I had imagined intricate scenarios that led us alone in a room to suck each other off. I had drunk entire nights away at the bar, with a hurting hard on, rubbing my dick through a pocket while I watched her work. I had watched her run up and down the length of the bar in a halter top, tight blues jeans with plastic rhinestone on the pockets. I had watched her baby-smooth arms shaking cocktails, opening bottles, pouring drinks. I had watched her smile at both men and women and laugh at their jokes. And I had imagined her dirty blonde curls in my lap; my head in hers. For a time, she was the reason I came back again and again. Then I had met Becky.

Becky used to bus tables at Fritz's. While I never had the nerve to ask the woman behind the bar for a date—Irene was unattainable—for some reason, I could talk to Becky. I chatted her up whenever she took our empties away and, after a time, I even asked her out. I'd figured to get at Irene through Becky, but what had started casual soon grew serious and what I had with Becky consumed me. Still, as I watched Irene work behind the bar at Fritz's, I couldn't help but wonder what could have been.

Trevor spotted a bowl of peanuts and he grabbed a handful and began to work the shells off, dropping the broken husks on the bar top. He sipped his beer and scattered the shells around the bar top whenever he swung his arm. The husks fell to the floor and flew onto his shirt where they clung like ticks to a dog. I shook my head. Every time, I thought.

Irene drifted back to us. "Why so down guys?" she asked.

"Got laid off," I said.

"Damn sorry to hear that."

"Oh, it won't last," Trevor said. "They'll call us back when things pick up."

"Like hell they will. They sold the fucking company," I said.

"Lots of that going around, what with the economy and all," the woman said. "Even seen guys coming back from Alberta lately."

"At least they come back with some cash in their pocket."

"Give it time, bud," Trevor said.

Irene smiled. "Your friend's right, things will pick up eventually, they always do."

"It's what we do 'til then that worries me," I said.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out. Becky says you're a smart guy, Rich," Irene said, and she touched my arm and smiled. My heart leaped up into my throat and I offered her a dumb smile in

return. I suddenly wanted to confess everything to her, all my fantasies and my stupid plans, but I resisted, knowing it would cause nothing but pain and resentment. Still, I grabbed her wrist, and I leaned toward her. She tried to pull away but I held her tight.

"Listen, Irene. I probably won't be back for a while, and I just really wanted to thank you for everything. So, thank you," I said, and let her go and she rubbed her arm where I had grabbed her. She stared at me as though she had never really seen me before.

"You're welcome, Rich," she said and, rubbing her wrist, walked away.

I turned to Trevor who was stuffing his cheeks full of peanuts, and I told him that I would see him when I saw him, and I walked out of Fritz's.

The sun had set. I had no idea what time it was. I stumbled, tripping over the loose gravel and caught myself on the tailgate of a pickup and thought for a second that it was the old, brown Dodge. I took a swing at it, denting the box panel, before I blinked and realized it was a red Ford, and it was too dark to see; the streetlamp flickered sporadically like some slow, sulphuric, strobe light over the gravel lot. I could hardly keep my eyes open. Things spun wildly around me, and I crawled into the back of the Buick, and I lay back on the torn leather seats. The spinning slowed, and I felt better. I thought about the woman who worked behind the bar and her soft, warm hand on my arm, and I recalled the scent of her perfume, and the red colour of her lips. Irene. I thought about the girl who I had met at my cousin's shindig, who I had met again at Carlson's junkyard, and I recalled the soft curl of her voice, the warmth of her breath, the colour of her eyes. Chantal. My jeans grew tight. I took my cock out and jerked off in quick, shameful strokes, and came into a fast food wrapper that I snatched from the floor. I lay there afterwards and stared at the ceiling. And as the air grew cold, and frost tinted the windows, I fell asleep in the back of the old Buick.

Part 2

17.

My feet were frozen. Snow had melted through my socks and soaked my toes. I wished I had thought to take my boots, but I had left them in the country when I'd moved to the city, and I hadn't yet had a chance to grab them. Lifting my eyes off the sidewalk, I brought my hand up to block the wind, and I looked down the street toward the hospital. The heavy, red neon cross atop the hospital was shrouded in snow. Snowflakes tumbled like drunks through the sky, and draped like blankets over the trees and the houses, the cars, the sidewalks. A snowplough rumbled in the distance, I could hear the scrape of its blade on the road. The snow had started early that morning before sunup, was the first real dump of the winter, and showed no signs of slowing. I tightened the collar around my neck, pulled the tuque tight over my ears, shoved my hands into my pockets and ploughed into the wind.

My sister had called from the hospital and asked me to come and sit by *Menoncle Alfred*. Monique met me in the lobby on her break and took me up to Alfred's room. I had only been the one time, in October, with my parents. The hospital was a maze to me.

Monique yawned the whole way up the elevator.

"Night shift?" I asked.

She shook her head and told me how she was working a double, covering for an evening nurse who'd hit the ditch on her way to work. Monique yawned again. We stood in silence. The elevator stopped and we moved aside, crowding along one side of the wall, when a man with no legs rolled his wheelchair into the elevator. He had a fresh cigarette in his mouth.

"It's going up," my sister said.

"*Ah bin*, c*alice*," said the man. He scratched his big red nose with a long, crooked finger, and gazed up at the bit-lights that blinked whenever we gained a floor.

Alfred looked rough. His eyes had sunk into his head, and his cheeks drooped like tarps weighed with rainwater. There was hardly any skin to cover his skull. Tubes and wires ran from his nose and his arms, his chest and fingers to a bank of machines along the wall. His chest rose and fell with the hiss of a contraption like a tire pump. The machines whirred without stop.

Monique stood at his side and studied his gaunt face. She had convinced me to visit him. I had been reluctant, not because of the storm, but because seeing him in this condition had made me tear up last time. “You can talk to him, if you’d like,” Monique said.

“Can he hear us?”

She shook her head. “He won’t remember.”

I sidled up next to her. “What’s the point then?”

“We don’t want him to be alone when he wakes up.”

“If he wakes up, you mean.”

“Imagine how you’d feel.”

I stared down at him. I could feel my chest growing tight. “I don’t like this,” I said.

“It means a lot that you’re here, Rich.”

“You said he won’t remember.”

“He’ll know. In his heart, he’ll know.”

“What a load of horseshit.”

Monique sighed and grabbed Alfred’s hand. She held his fingers in hers. Funny how she sounded like a nun and not a nurse, I thought: the woman who had told our mother on Christmas Eve that she did not want her fucking religion. This was back before I graduated high school. We were having Christmas in the city over at *Tante Yvette*’s, and my mother offered to pick my sister up from her apartment so we could attend midnight mass together like we’d always done, but my sister had refused, and when my mother pushed, my sister struck back.

“I don’t want your fucking religion,” she’d said.

Monique was never cooler than she was that night, and she was already the shit: sleeping with a punk rocker; living in a walk-up, brick shithole off Osborne Street; smoked cigarettes and dope; drank Jack from the bottle. She owned a beat up piece of shit half-ton and drove stick shift better than most guys. She taught herself to play guitar and she even played in a band for a while. Then out of nowhere, she decided to clean up. She dumped the punk rocker and stopped smoking dope, went to school and became a nurse. She met her future husband at the hospital—he worked with radiation machines or something—and moved in with him and had two kids.

Like a damn light switch—night into day, day into night—she had turned her life around. I always wondered what had prompted the change.

Monique brushed hair out of her eyes and tucked a few strands behind her ears while she studied *Menoncle Alfred*. She had small, dark rings under her eyes. A small crucifix caught light off the machines and glittered in the neck of her shirt.

The room was dark, the lights dim. The blinds were open and you could see the snow and wind whip the city below. Street lights nothing but hazy pinpricks. I fell into the chair next to the window and peered into the whiteout.

"Your double might turn into a triple," I said.

Monique looked up at me and frowned. We didn't see much of each other nowadays, and we didn't know what to say to one another anymore.

"John's got a 4x4." John was her husband, my brother-in-law.

"Lucky you," I said.

Monique glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed. "I gotta run."

"Back to the grind?"

"You know how to find your way out?" And as she was leaving, she paused by the door and glanced inside the room. "Listen, why don't you and Becky come over for dinner sometime? The kids would love to see you."

"I appreciate the charity," I said. Monique grunted and left.

I watched Alfred for a while, unsure of what else I was supposed to do. My feet were sore and I removed my shoes and rubbed my toes. But my socks were soaked, so I removed my socks and placed them over the heat vent under the window. The floor was cold, so I kicked my feet up on Alfred's bed. Bored, I told him about the layoff at the powder coat plant. I told him how I had been spending more time in the city lately, with Becky. Sleeping over at her apartment, spending days at a time in the city, but it weighed on me, and I found I missed the bush. I told him I wasn't happy about any of it. I heard myself speak, and I wondered when I had finally figured that out. I felt as though I shouldn't have admitted it; I hadn't given it a fair shake. I looked out the window again: snow swirled madly and battered the glass. Yawning, I glanced at the clock above the bed, but I couldn't seem to make out the numbers.

"*Tu pus des pieds*," said Alfred.

I looked at my uncle and blinked. His eyes were open; he glared at me feet.

"*Menoncle*?"

"*Pire qu'une shikak*," he said.

"Shit, I'm sorry," I said, and I yanked my feet off the bed.

"*Ta langue, Émile. Laisse pas ta mère t'entendre parler comme ça*."

"*C'est Richard, Menoncle. Pas Émile*."

He turned his head, sweeping his eyes over the room. "*Émile, quesqu'on fait icitte*?"

"*Ta eut un* stroke, *Menoncle. On est à Saint-Boniface*, *à l'hôpital*."

"*Baptême, y fait tempête. Les chevaux sont OK*?"

"*On est en ville*, *Menoncle*. *À Winnipeg*."

"*Un métis sans cheval, c't'un pauvre métis*."

"Hold on, *Menoncle*, *m'a allé trouver un docteur*." I leaped up and turned to the door, but Alfred grabbed me. His fingers clamped down like a bear trap around my wrist.

"*Laisse moé pas toute seule*, *Émile*."

"It's Richard, *Menoncle*. *Émile c'mon père*."

"*Ta mère ma laissé, t'sé. Après qu'à dit qu'elle me laisserait pas. Ma laissé toute seule dans les bois*." His grip tightened around my wrist.

"Owe, shit. Let go of me," I said, and I clawed at his fingers, trying to pry them loose.

"*À dit qu'ch'avait pas parler; ch'tait trop sauvage pour elle. À choisi mon frère à place, pa'ce qu'y savait parler. Y savait blender avec les français, t'sé*."

"I don't know what you're saying, *Menoncle*." I pulled at his fingers. I could hardly feel my wrist anymore under the pressure.

"*Mais ch'tait là pour elle quand yé tomber malade. Après son attaque de coeur. Misère*, *c'tait un maudit temps. On cherchait seulement le confort*. *'Tait pas not'e faute*, *mon enfant*."

I tugged at my wrist, trying to yank it from Alfred's grip. He was rambling now, cursing, spitting and drooling, barking at me not to let him go.

Alfred slipped the wire around my wrist, pulled the stick, and watched the snare tighten. I winced as the wire pressed into my skin, and then watched as Alfred loosened the wire.

"*Tu vois*?" he said. "*Une fois qu'le lièvre passe à travers, le fils se serre autour du cou*."

He handed me the snare and I flipped the length of wood over and studied the snare wire. I traced my fingers over the wire, wound around the wood, down toward the loop, where the hare would dash, and stop, snared.

"*Donne lui pas des idées*, *Menoncle*," Dad said. "P*eux c'faire mal avec sa*." He stood up, atop a ladder nearby, and he fished twigs and leaves and muck from the eavestroughs. It was late fall, the air was cool, tinged with frost. We had stopped in at Alfred's request to help him prepare for the coming snow. Alfred had grown old of late, the cold gnawed at his joints, and he'd begun to dislike heights, so he telephoned Dad and invited him over for a drink, and, after offering him a beer, Alfred asked if Dad wouldn't mind cleaning the eavestroughs. Dad grumbled. You had to admire the sneaky bugger's way of asking for help. Alfred and I sat and watched Dad work, and shouted instructions up at him, and Alfred told me stories of when he was younger, and how he wouldn't have blinked twice before running up a ladder, how he and his brothers would play on the roof of his old house, but his bones had grown brittle, and a fall now would ruin him.

Squinting in the cold light, Alfred looked up at Dad. He held a hand up, to block the sun. His hand trembled. "*Sa pourrait lui sauvé la vie un jour, Émile*."

Dad grunted and shook his head. The ladder creaked under his weight. This was the same old argument. Alfred was a stubborn old man, living in the past, Dad said. What was the point of crafting a snare when there were no more rabbits?

Alfred refused to admit it. He insisted the rabbits would return one day. He glared at Dad as Dad wavered atop the ladder, arms deep in the eavestroughs, and said, "*T'é comme ta mère*."

Dad glanced down at Alfred. "Leave her out of this."

Their voices grew louder, shorter, and they snapped back and forth at each other, and the snare wire grew tight around my wrist as I played with it. The wire bit into my skin, cut into me, and I began to bleed. I stared at the blood trickling down my hand, dripping from my fingers into the brown grass. I cried out in pain. Alfred turned toward me, colour drained from his cheeks. He grabbed my wrist and began to work the wire loose with his knobby fingers. Dad jumped off the ladder and ran toward us, but by the time he arrived, Alfred had already removed the wire from around my wrist. Dad grabbed the snare and hurled it into the bush.

"I told you this was dangerous," he said and Alfred sighed.

"Wake up, Rich." There was a hand on my shoulder, shaking me.

I opened my eyes and saw my sister looking down at me. I looked down at the welt, and the old, wire-thin scar beneath, and I rubbed my wrist. Alfred was asleep in his bed.

Monique squeezed my shoulder. "Come on. Grab your socks."

18.

When I had first moved in, Becky made room on her bookshelf for my knick knacks. I didn't have much, a small wooden carving of a fisherman in mid-cast, grim, comical expression on his face, hook caught in the seat of his pants. I had a framed picture of my sister, and her kids, a little boy and a little girl who looked up to me for reasons I could not quite fathom. I placed the few books that I owned around the picture frame: a spine-torn *Fight Club* I stole from the library after the movie came out and that I read like some holy text; a couple Tintin books an uncle gave me for my 10th birthday, when I still read French. I kept them out of simple nostalgia, the covers worn out, the colours faded, the words unreadable.

"This is great," Becky said when she opened a box with the word *clothes* written in bold across the top. "Oh! I remember these." She pulled out a pair of my underwear.

"Hey, don't stretch those."

She tugged and bit the waistband.

"Hey, stop that," I said. "You'll ruin them."

"Make me," she said, and leaped over the box and, waving my shorts like a handkerchief, she ran into the kitchen. Laughing, I chased her down and cornered her between the table and the window that overlooked the back lane, pressed her up against the wall, and then kissed her on the mouth. She closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around me. While she was distracted, I yanked the underwear from her hand and slipped them over her head. "Hey!" she laughed.

We put my clothes away in a small dresser I managed to lug up the narrow stairs with my dad; hung my shirts in the closet. We added my things to hers, and once the boxes were emptied, we looked over the apartment and saw that the barriers had fallen, and that our lives had collided together. We had swallowed each other whole. Becky ordered a pizza; we ate, and drank the beer that Becky had in the fridge. We lay on the sofa and Becky kissed me hard on the lips. I wrapped my tongue around hers. Her fingers dug into my skin and I slid her pants down from her hips and kicked them free with my feet; and I caressed her between her legs while she tore the zipper open on my jeans. I was rigid in her grip, soon as she took my cock into her hand. We rolled onto the floor and we used our mouths and our tongues; our moans overwhelmed the sounds of the city—the horns and tires and sirens—that roared through the windows. Like animals, we fucked on the carpet between the sofa and the coffee table, and we clung to each other long after we finished, clutching the fading warmth that seeped from our limbs.

I spent my days sitting around Becky's apartment, watching TV while she read her books and went to class. She would bus down to the University because she refused to lend me any gas money. My unemployment cheque hadn't come yet, and I was broke and had nowhere to go. The temperature nose-dived after the snowfall and air seeped into the apartment through cracks in the windowsill. I sat before the window and watched the traffic pass on the street while I smoked my cigarettes. Air whistled through the cracks and my legs grew cold. I ran my hand along the frame and located an air current, then another. I spent a few hours stuffing plastic grocery bags into the wall.

Saturday, we walked up the street to the IGA.

"You want oranges? Grab a few oranges." Becky said. She strolled the produce aisle, eyeing the fruits and vegetables, reaching out occasionally to squeeze a tomato, an avocado, a pineapple. I trailed behind her, pushing a grocery cart. One of the wheels squeaked continually, the ball bearing worn, and it kept pulling to the right, and I kept yanking the cart back on course.

"Rich, you forgot the oranges."

I turned back, grabbed a bag of oranges, and tossed them into the cart.

"You shouldn't throw them. They'll bruise like that. They rot faster when bruised."

"That's apples," I said.

"Oranges too. I learned that in Spain. Oh, come on. Let's get some strawberries."

I trailed after her, pushing the cart forward, watching her fill it with food, boxes of cereal and granola bars, cans of soup and beans and pasta. She paused for a while in sanitary aisle, and stared at a bottle of wipes, tracing her finger over the child's face on the label. I kept entertained by shoving the cart forward, just to see how far it got before the wheels pulled it into the shelves. Becky glanced at me and frowned, and I raised my hands and said "Last time, I swear."

At the till, I thumbed through the magazine rack while Becky watched the cashier ring up the groceries. Becky pulled a flyer from her purse, pointed to items on the page, and argued over the price. The cashier rang the item through again and punched a code. The machine again didn't recognize the price code and the cashier grabbed the phone next to the till and called the manager over the telecom. I slipped the magazine back into the rack, and pulled another free, and began to thumb through it. Mostly, I looked at the pictures.

Crossing the street with plastic bags bursting at the seams, I asked why she'd insisted we walk. Becky didn't live far, only a few blocks away, but a couple blocks, in the middle of winter while carrying a hundred dollars worth of groceries, seemed unnecessary.

"I thought you were out of gas," she said.

"You could lend me some gas money," I said.

At home, Becky whipped up a batch of Kraft Dinner. We ate in silence around the small kitchen table. Music rattled the table through the floor. Becky glared at the textbook on her lap, mouthing the words as she read, pausing only to chew her pasta. She dropped a noodle onto her textbook and cursed. I ate my share, then tossed my bowl into the sink and retreated to the living room to watch television. There wasn't much, we couldn't afford cable.

"Can you turn it down? I'm trying to study."

I grabbed the remote and lowered the volume. The image began to waver, flickering with static, losing its sharpness, and I rose to adjust the rabbit ears on top of the television. The image wavered and I banged the side of the television. Becky sighed in the kitchen. I considered asking Larry about getting us a pirated American signal, but I probably couldn't afford that either.

The faucet gushed and water filled the kitchen sink. I could hear Becky grumble from the living room. "Richard," she yelled from the kitchen. "You need to rinse your bowls. Look at this. These fucking noodles are totally dried on."

"Let it soak," I said. I tapped my cigarette in the ashtray and took a sip of my beer. There was a half-decent signal on the TV and I could make out a hockey game. The Saturday paper lay open before me on the coffee table. Becky had bought it earlier, without me knowing, and she'd circled a few jobs for me in thick, red ink, before dinner.

"It wouldn't have to soak if you rinsed," Becky snapped.

I glanced into the kitchen and watched Becky hurl dishes into the sink. Water splashed over the lip onto the counter. It ran down the cupboards and pooled on the floor. Becky kicked at the puddle and glared at me. I took the paper she had laid out on the table and I placed it over the water on the floor.

Becky turned and whipped me with the dish rag. "You fucking asshole," she said. I could see her eyes were red, and I apologized, and offered to take out the trash.

I thought about our first night together while I took the stairs out of the house and into the alley to haul the garbage into the lane: our future had seemed so open. Snow crunched underfoot, and warm light spilled from the first story windows. I glanced through the windows, and saw the musicians tuning their instruments. By the lane, I tossed the garbage into the big, blue bin, and I stood there for a while and studied the garages, the backs of houses, and the cross patch of hydro wires hanging over the lane. I listened to the traffic on DesMeurons, loud and clear. Fire engines howled a couple blocks south. How different this was from home: the strangeness itched beneath my skin in a spot I could not scratch. I glanced up at the house and imagined Becky sobbing over the kitchen sink, dishwater soaking through her socks. I reached for my cigarettes and opened the pack, and saw that it was empty. I hurled the pack into the snow.

Upstairs, I sat down to watch the rest of the hockey game, when Becky came and sat with me on the couch. “We need to talk.”

I glanced at her and frowned. “What about,” I said.

“I think I’m pregnant.”

I stared at her for a moment—she was shaking—and I looked away. “Fuck off,” I said.

“No, I’m serious. I think I’m pregnant.”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. I reached for my beer, but I couldn’t seem to grab it. My hands were trembling. “You’re just late, like, when it happened before, right?” I said, and peered into Becky’s face, hoping to pry this truth from her, but she bit her lip, and avoided my eyes. She sat back, hands on her knees, and shook her head.

“Never this late,” she said.

The news hit me like a punch to the gut. My stomach rolled up on itself, tight as a knot, and pulled my lungs down. My breath came out ragged, in short hard bursts; I couldn’t seem to suck in enough air. I struggled to my feet and bumped into the table. My legs gave out and I sat heavily on the floor. I lay back on the carpet while the room spun furiously around me.

The floor shook. I could hear music coming from below, could feel it rattling through the wood, the sound muffled by the carpet, but loud enough to seep through my skull, into my brain. *Up on Cripple Creek, she sends me. If I spring a leak, she mends me. I don’t have to speak, she defends me. A drunkard’s dream if I ever did see*—steel strings chugged over the bass guitar and the drums crashed and boomed and voices rose together.

Becky appeared over me, and I saw that she was crying. “Are you OK?” she asked. She bit her lip again, removed her glasses and wiped her eyes. “Come on. Let’s talk about this.”

“I— I can’t,” I said. “I need to get out of here.” I peeled myself off the floor, grabbed my jacket and my toque. “I’m sorry. I need to get out of here. I need some air.”

19.

Snow crunched underfoot and the air tore into my lungs like clouds of sharp needles. My breath mushroomed white and thick before me. As I ran into men and women walking their dogs, and I listened to children shout and squeal under piles of snow, I knew I needed to be alone.

Trailing north, I crossed Provencher and hugged the rail tracks that swept through Saint-Boniface. I veered off at a trailhead, passing by the welcome sign that towered over the trail. The park was named after the first white woman in the west. An old teacher of mine once remarked how incredible it was that this woman had bore children so far from civilization, as though other women in the west hadn’t been having babies all this time. I started up the trail, and the city fell away behind me: the old elms, oak trees, and the scrub bush that grew along the river swept over the city like a curtain. This was the same river that snaked through Ste. Antoinette, the same river that Becky and I used to fish, the same river along which we had made love in the dirt and where I first told her that I loved her.

I sat at the water’s edge, on an old, toppled trunk and stared out at the frozen water. The Seine spilled into the Red across from Point Douglas. There were tracks on the ice, dark and wet; someone had punched through, along the edge, and scrambled back on to the shore. All the snow that had fallen masked the water, obscured the bad ice from sight. Every fall, it seemed someone pushed their luck; some made it to shore, some drowned. The river would eventually freeze thick and hundreds would descend upon it.

Reaching into my coat, I pulled out a small joint I had been saving. It was the last of my pot. I didn’t know anyone in the city that dealt and in truth I couldn’t afford to keep smoking if I didn’t find work soon. Hell, I wouldn’t be able to afford anything with a fucking kid. I sparked it up, pulling on the joint, sucking the smoke in deep, and I coughed and choked, coughed and spat in the snow, and pulled on it again. I wanted to forget, wanted to turn this news into a dream that I could wake from, but the pot only deepened my dread.

I stared at the old wrought iron bridge suspended above the Red, its dark shape amid the strange sulphur glow of the city. Light bounced around between the clouds and the snow, casting a sallow hue on everything. I don't know how long I sat there, I couldn't hear the traffic anymore but I could make out a train shunting somewhere in the distance, the grinding sound of cold steel bouncing around in between the old brick warehouses across the river. Smoke and steam spewed out of chimneys, rising like pillars into the sky. Screams cut through the air, echoing from across the river, but I couldn't make out the words. The roach went out and I flicked it onto the ice.

The last time I sat along this river was during the summer, when Becky and I had taken her cousin, Jeremy the Indian, fishing, east of Ste. Antoinette. We drank a few beers and smoked a joint, and Jeremy had hooked a calf in the water—this dead, bloated, ball of fur bobbing on the surface. It must have fallen in during a late summer rain, swept away, and drowned. I wondered if the carcass had carried downstream, to the Red, but figured it had probably washed onto some beaver dam where crows pecked away its flesh.

I hiked back up the river bank to the trail, and followed it west. My feet sank through the snow. The icy surface shattered with every step and scraped my shins. My legs were numb with cold. I trudged ahead toward the fort. Its sharp palisade of pine logs, walls and towers silhouetted against the cityscape, and the smoke and steam and fog spreading over the city. Someone told me once this fort was built in the 70s, that the original burned down centuries ago, across the river. It was a truth I did not care for as it shattered my childhood notions; my imagined stories crumbled. Reminded me of the time Monique told me that God was but a figment of my imagination. What had I to replace it with? I touched the old wall, the rough, bark-covered palisade, and glanced at the bastion that overlooked the river. The fort was dark, quiet. I tried to envision the ghosts that roamed the land, all the men and women who had fought each other in this space over land and language, but I could no longer imagine it, this a sordid mess, filled with bullies and bigots.

I'd once tried, during the festival, to recapture the romantic vision that I had possessed as a child, and wandered the snowy grounds with Trevor. We were young and stupid and thought it would be fun to drop acid in public. We'd been sitting around the kitchen table for an hour or so, drinking beer at a buddy's place, in the city, staring at these quarter inch squares of blotter paper that smirked at us while we worked up the nerve. This was before Trevor burnt off his eyebrows,

before he had his little girl. After a few beers, Trevor tore a couple tabs off the sheet and dropped them on his tongue. I did the same and we chewed on the tabs.

We wrapped ourselves in parkas and toques and scarves, and tightened boots on our feet, and we grabbed fresh beers and headed out into the sharp February night. It was thirty below, but there was hardly any wind. We hiked the same trail I was on, coming through the bush, under the old railway bridge where high school kids smoked dope. We tried to sneak inside, but volunteers spotted us and forced us to line up at the gate alongside children with racoons on their heads.

Clutching a handful of bills, Trevor walked up to a trailer with slats of pine-bark nailed to the sides and he paid the woman at the window for the tickets, and we retreated to the parking lot to chug our beer and dump the cans in the trash bins. We smoked a joint between two Fords then made for the gate. Old men with hideous gashes in their beards, gaping wounds lined with sharp, crooked snags, and sloppy, red tentacles, guarded the entrance. Slowly, while salivating over our goose feathers, they scanned our tickets and pawed at us with their mitts.

Crowds jostled over the snow, kicking hay and woodchips around like mud, they poured from giant, circus-like tents like schools of fish, and streamed around massive surreal sculptures of ice and snow. Coloured lights pulsed purple and red. Campfires crackled on the outskirts. The fort stood in the centre of it all, 20-foot palisades jutting sharply into the air. They had replicated everything, right down to the flush toilets. Actors in period gear—blankets, animal skins, and fur boots—paraded about, yelling in old French. They fired blank muskets into the sky to the delight of the crowd. The acid began to take hold and we wandered into the fort; the walls blotted out the stars as we crossed the gate. We stood and watched the blacksmith craft nails and horseshoes for what seemed like hours and hours, mesmerized by the clang of the hammer on iron, the red glow of metal on embers, the hiss of hot iron in water. We listened to the blacksmith explain again and again while the crowd ebbed and flowed, how the voyageurs had few supplies, how they made do with what they brought from the east, retooling, reusing, recycling everything.

“He’s a fucking environmentalist!” Trevor shouted and the blacksmith’s face twisted big, and vile and ugly, sneering at us. The crowd turned toward Trevor and I pulled him away into the night. We wandered through the fort, peeking into the windows of the replica huts, at the college kids playing fur-trader, acting scenes out in front of crowds that lapped it up. We climbed one of the towers and walked along the top of the wall, and spotted the ice bar down below, where they served caribou out of cups carved from ice.

We hurried down off the wall and were swept along with the crowd. We pushed through toward the ice bar, and found ourselves pressed up against a wall of snow. Folks dressed up like bears sat nearby on hay bales and drank red wine and whiskey. We watched them roar and warm their paws over a campfire. The bartender shouted: Caribou! Caribou!

Trevor clawed my arm and yelled in my ear. I could hardly hear him over all of the noise. People were shouting and laughing, screaming with wild joy, and fiddle tunes screeched through the air. I could hardly see through the paint-shaking swirl of colour and furs.

And then the bears were gone, and Trevor and I were holding red sashes in our hands, we wandered through the tents, our feet sank in piles of soggy woodchips, and we suddenly pushed through a herd of buffalo decked in arctic jackets with fur trim hoods, rubber hooves, all huffing and snorting, jostling like cows, and we shoved our way to the counter where white light poured like high beams through the slit. We ordered a couple beers because we didn't know what else to do. A woman emerged from the light with a couple bottles. I recoiled in horror, frightened by the racoon that clung precariously to her skull and gnawed on her head. Strands of blood curled like hair down her face.

Trevor elbowed me in the ribs. "Pay her, pay the lady," he yelled.

I could hardly hear him over the fiddles.

"You have the pay the lady!"

I stabbed a 20-dollar bill at the woman. She clawed it from my hand, and I snatched my change in return. The racoon hissed at me. Clutching our beers, Trevor and I retreated to the back of the tent, and bunkered down on a bench.

"Jesus, God, look at those rats!" Trevor shouted.

"Those aren't rats. Those are someone's boots."

Rat-boots skittered across the dance floor and men and women writhed with the music.

Trevor clutched my elbow and moaned. "I think I'm going to throw up." He vanished and I held his beer in my hand. I curled up at the end of the bench and drank my beer. After a while, I drank Trevor's beer too. Then I glanced around and I wondered where the hell he'd gone. Men in buckskins, sand-coloured mukluks, and beaver hats loomed above me, like hunters surveying the plains. Muskrats clung to their chins.

"*C'est drôle comment tout le monde est Métis pour deux semaines*," one said.

The other laughed and the muskrat scrambled.

"*Les* fair-weather *Métis sont sortie pour la nuit*."

They began to laugh and their stomachs swelled, big as balloons, and I flinched, and fled into the cold. The grounds were mostly empty, stragglers drifted around the snow sculptures, and some folks stood by the shitters. Most everyone was inside a tent somewhere, but there were too many tents, and I didn't know where to start looking, and the stench of beer soaked sawdust, and soggy woodchips made me sick. The doors resembled ravenous mouths, tents bloated stomachs, trembling with indigestion.

"Trevor!" I shouted. "Trevor!"

"*Mon ami, vient te réchauffer au feu*."

I turned toward the voice, and I spotted a woman standing over a campfire, watching me. Dressed in a mix of skins and furs, she was a strange sight. The furs moved, as though alive, fox and muskrat, racoons crawling over her shoulders, chasing each other across her torso, her back, over her stomach, her breasts. "*Vient te réchauffer*," she said.

Drawn by the sound of her voice, the warm glow of the fire, I went to her. I approached the fire cautiously, peering at her through the light. I extended my hands over the flames, warmth bleeding through my gloves, chasing frost from my bones.

"*T'avait l'air frette*," she said, and she frowned. "You speak French?"

I nodded.

"*Ah bon, ça que je pensais. T'avait l'air frette là, ch'te watchait marcher* back and forth *entre les tentes, comme t'était perdu ou quetchose*."

"*J'cherchait quelqu'un*."

"*Bin, t'a trouvé quelqu'un*."

I smiled and the woman grinned, her big, brown cheeks splitting in two.

"*Peut-être tu la vu, yé t'un anglais—*

"*Ça d'l'air comme quoi un anglais*?"

—peut-être, *comme quelqu'un* who can't hold his liquor, *y'm'avait dit qu'y'avait mal au ventre, puis yé sorti, mais yé pas revenu.*"

The woman glanced down at the fire, grabbed a hefty stick from the ground and poked at the embers. She pushed the fire-ridden logs around. Then took a fresh log from a pile nearby and added it to the fire. "*J'en ait vu une* bunch *comme ça à soir*," she said. "*Ça fait des heures que je tendre le feu*. *Ch'tait tanné de jouer une blanche dans le fort, t'sé,* so *j'pensais que c'tait l'temps*

de jouer une métisse. *J'ai d'l'expérience, t'sé*."

Fire swept over the fresh log and flames burst from its skin.

"*Comment ça*?"

"*J'acte naturelle*," she said.

The woman reached under her furs and took out a wine skin. She uncorked it and pressed a stream of fluid into her mouth. She wiped her lips and offered me the skin. I squeezed a stream of liquid onto my tongue and coughed.

"Caribou?" I asked and passed the skin back to her.

She grinned. "*Ça te garde chaud la nuit.*"

I reached into my coat and pulled out my smokes. I couldn't remember the last time had I smoked, was hours ago, before we left the apartment. The woman stared at my hands. I looked down at the pack, then up at her. I offered her a cigarette. She smiled and reached over the fire.

"*Marsi*," she said.

We lit our cigarettes and smoked.

"*Tu vient d'où toé*?" the woman asked. I glanced at her and recoiled. The furs had come alive and they whirled over her body. I glanced around. Everything whirled softly, slowly, unlike the tumble-heat spins of a drunk, but how colours run when wet, paint runs down walls, and it all bleeds softly, slowly together, hard lines soften, like warm chocolate, edges blur, and the borders disappear. I could not tell where the woman ended and the ground began. Laughter erupted in the tent nearby. I thought my heart would explode.

"*Ste. Antoinette*," I said.

"*Ah bon, y'a des Métis par là, non? Moé ch't'originaire de St-Laurent. Mais, ça fait un boute depuis qu'j'ai mové en ville*."

I sucked on my cigarette and nodded.

"*Moi c'est Nicole*," the woman said, and she extended her hand. I stared at her mitten for a moment, then grabbed and shook it.

"Richard," I said. "*Tous le monde m'appelle,* Rich. But *vraiment, chu pauvres, t'sé.*"

Nicole smiled. "*Mon pauvres,* Rich," she laughed. "*Okay, plaisir d'te rencontrer*."

We sucked our cigarettes down to the filters then flicked the filters into the campfire.

"So, have you seen my friend? Y*é assez grand, pis yé maigre, pis y'avait peut-être une ceinture fléchée autour du cou*. *Y porte des grosses lunette* too, *comme le fond d'une bouteille de*

coke, *et puis ya les cheveux longs comme une queue-d'cheval*."

Nicole frowned, lips pursing like she'd sucked a lemon. She glanced toward the entrance, near the giant man of snow, still prone on the ground, and she nodded slowly. "*Ché pas si c'était lui là, mais j'ai vu quelqu'un comme sa partir, ça fait déjà un boute*."

"Son of a bitch," I said.

I stood around the cold pit where I talked to the woman all those years ago, and thought about what had happened next, how we talked for what seemed like hours, feeding fresh logs to the fire. Muskrats, foxes, and racoons whirled over her body with the pulse of acid, but I ignored them and stared her in the eyes while she spoke. We talked about our towns, about growing up in the country, how strange the city was. She told me how she'd had a hard time as a brown woman in this city. She told me about an old white man, who had followed her home one night and tried to kick in her front door, how she sat in the kitchen with a knife and telephone and waited to see whether the police would arrive in time. "*Faut qu'tu te* watch*, toujours*," she said. The man ran off at the sound of sirens, but for months afterwards, she saw him everywhere.

"*Faut qu'tu te* watch."

Taken aback, I found myself telling her how my mother told me we were Métis. We were driving through the city one day, headed for an appointment somewhere, when I repeated to her a joke about Indians that she found in poor taste. Gripping the wheel tight, she said to me "*T'sé on a d'l'indian dans'l sang, nous*. *On est Métis*." I glanced down at my hands, at my pale pink skin, and thought: Indian? I did not understand what this meant, and how it would later consume me in moments of confusion and anxiety. How I would ignore it, discount it, and try to forget it, like all the things that troubled me.

"*Bin là*," Nicole said. "*Être métis c'est pas juste dans'l sang*. *C'dans la culture, non*?"

I thought about it and nodded. "*Bin*, I guess so," I said.

Nicole nodded and she reached forward, touched my arm and asked for another cigarette. We began to laugh, and I gave her another cigarette, and we smoked, and laughed, and we talked some more, and finally, the lights flickered and went dark and people emerged from the tents and stumbled toward the parking lot. Nicole kicked snow into the pit. The snow hissed and burst into steam. She asked how I was getting home. I suspected she knew I was high, but I could not think of what to say, I could not even remember where I left the Buick. I smiled and shrugged.

She invited me home. She didn't live far. We rode in her little Honda Civic, bouncing on the uneven roads, mounds of snow scraping up against the undercarriage. She said she had a sofa I could sleep on. She couldn't in good conscience let me wander off alone into the cold. She'd be up a while to have a bite to eat and unwind. Her house was small; a square two-bedroom postwar bungalow she'd bought a couple years ago. She opened a bottle of wine and warmed up leftovers in her microwave. We sat on the couch. After she finished eating, she pulled a small wooden box out from underneath the couch, and showed me what was inside. I didn't have to look, the smell was so powerful. She asked if I smoked. I laughed. She asked if I wanted to listen to music and I said sure. She went and kneeled by the CD rack next to her TV, and she picked one and laughed, then slipped the CD into her player. "We'll keep this theme going," she said. Fiddle music burst from her speakers.

"Is that Bernie Elastic?" I said.

She shook her head. "Never heard of him," she said.

She came and sat next to me, and she rolled the joint and we smoked and after the cherry went out, she stamped the roach into the ashtray on the coffee table. I leaned back and, listening to the music, I glanced around the room. Nicole had a bookshelf filled with books, the spines all cracked, the books overflowing. I asked what she did and she shrugged and said she taught, and wrote, and acted, and directed, and did a hundred other things for next to nothing.

"Sounds more interesting than working in a factory," I said.

"Maybe it is," Nicole said. She sipped at her wine and sighed. Her legs bounced with the rhythm. She turned and looked at me, and smiled. "Do you want to dance?" She rose and stood in the middle of the room and began to move, to shift from foot to foot, her hips swayed, her legs and feet kicked to the rhythm. "Come on, let's dance." She reached down and grabbed my hands.

"I'm not much of a dancer," I said, and watched her feet kick, her legs churn, and tried to follow, but the music seemed frantic, the rhythm too fast. The room began to spin.

"Come on, *dance avec moi*," Nicole said, and she grabbed my arm, but I pulled away and fell back on the couch. The air around me trembled with the music. Nicole spun and danced, and broke into a jig. The music weaved through my head, so familiar, but I couldn't remember where I'd heard it before, and I watched Nicole dance. She seemed so happy. But the whole thing made me dizzy, and I closed my eyes.

After the tune ended, Nicole turned the music down and sat next to me. She reached for her wine glass, and drained it, then twirled the stem between her fingers, and watched as the last few drops of wine spread along the inside of the glass. “You don’t know how to dance, do you?”

“No, not really,” I said. I tried to look at her, but the wine had gone to my head, the acid pulsed, and colours ran off the walls. Nicole seemed so close, yet so far away. Her breath so hot, so near. I could see the air move between us. “It makes me dizzy,” I said.

“That’s okay,” Nicole said. “I like dancing. It’s a release, you know. Winds me down at the end of the day.” She nodded to herself and set the wine glass down. “Guess people have other ways,” she said. Then she reached over and kissed me. Her tongue was rough and smoky. After a minute, she pulled away and stared at me. She asked if I had ever been with a woman. I’d fooled around with a couple girls, but it never got serious, and I had never been all the way. Despite all that I had already confessed, I could not bring myself to tell her this, and I lied through my teeth. She smiled, faintly, and touched my cheek with pity.

She went to bed and I lay awake on the sofa for hours, staring up at the ceiling, watching shadows move in impossible ways. I thought again about the time my mother told me about our heritage, and what a strange thing it was, how it threw everything into question. It had risen up like a fog, thick and gray, obscuring my senses. I envied Nicole her clarity. I did not know how to dance.

I kicked snow into the cold pit and glanced up at the fort. I wondered what had happened to Nicole: was she still in the same house? Where had she ended up? I couldn’t remember where she lived, the colour of her house, the memories clouded with time, distorted through drink. All I knew is that she had been kind to me, had listened to my story. Would she remember me?

20.

I stood by the palisade and pissed on the pine-wood logs. The wind howled off the river, swirling around the oaks and the scrub bush, pushing snow up against the wall in small dunes. I could hardly feel my legs and I stumbled toward the sidewalk and onto the road, where I spotted a neon sign sizzling down the street, flickering atop a bar, beckoning me onward.

I sat up at the bar and ordered a bottle of Standard and a shot of Jack, tossed the whiskey down my throat, and chased it with beer. Music pumped out through speakers in the corners, and dusty bulbs cast dim light over the floor. Other than the music, the bar was fairly quiet. Men and women sat hunched over the slot machines, a couple at the bar. There was one table in the corner where a group of men were arguing, but whenever it seemed like it would turn violent, they burst into laughter.

An older couple drifted in from the slot machines and sat nearby. They ordered a couple whiskey sours. The woman sipped her drink and frowned. She asked the bartender if he had used actual egg whites and the bartender shook his head. The man said that it was fine, but the woman leaned over the bar and told the bartender they shouldn't offer whiskey sours unless they had egg whites. The bartender shrugged and the woman glared at him. They stood there awhile, swaying, and finally the man helped the woman onto a barstool. He bumped into my elbow.

"Hapologies," he said to me.

"Don't worry about it," I said.

"Tank you sir, you are a true gentle man." His words were slurred, but even so, I spotted something funny in his voice, as though he lacked a full grasp of the English language. And so, I listened to him talk with the woman, picking out the French words slipping like fish out of a net. I tossed the fish over, examining them closely. They were exotic, saltwater fish, and I wondered how they had washed up onto the prairie.

"*C'est un joli mec, Jeanette. J'aimerais bien te voire le baiser*."

"*Jean-Claude*!" the woman said, and she laughed, and said something else I missed.

"*Non mais, en faites Jeannette, j'aimerais bien te voire prendre sa bite*."

I was trying to decipher the man's French, when he turned to me and cleared his throat.

"Ah, hexcuse me, gentle man. Hi apologize for hour forwardness, but we was wondering if you would be hinterested in—*non mais, comment on dit baiser en anglais*?"

"Hold on," I said. "*Attend une minute, mon homme. Quessé qu'tu veux dire par baiser*?"

"*Ah, mais, vous parlez français*," the man exclaimed.

The woman glanced over the man's shoulder and frowned. "Have we met?"

"I don't think so," I said.

"You're not from around here?"

"I'm from Ste. Antoinette."

"They still speak French there?" the woman said.

Snorting, I turned toward the bar and took a sip of my beer.

The man placed a hand on my arm. "*Monsieur*," he said. "*Ma copine aimerait bien vous baiser, et je ne demande que vous me laisser regarder*." I looked at the man and frowned.

The barman came and said it was last call, and I ordered another beer and a shot of Jack for the road, the man glanced over at the woman and the woman shrugged, so they ordered a rye.

"OK," I said to the man. "I don't know what you want from me."

The man slipped off his stool and stood next to it while the woman slid from her stool to his. I watched them, curious at their strange evasion, and flinched suddenly as the woman placed her hand on my lap and leaned into me, her lips hovering fractions from my ears. I could feel her heat on my skin, her hand rubbing my leg, and I shifted uncomfortably on my stool.

"Come home with us," she said.

I don't know why I agreed, maybe the last shot had stiffened my spine, but I followed the pair outside, and down the street, toward their car. The man hurried ahead while the woman held onto me tight, arm around my waist, head propped on my shoulder. She smelled nice, of flowers. We caught up to the man next to a Ford Taurus. While he searched his pockets for his keys, the woman whispered filth in my ear. She stood taller than me and was quite a bit older, maybe forty or so: small wrinkles around her lips, crows' feet in the corners of her eyes.

We drove off together, the man at the wheel and the woman and me in the back seat. The car plunged ahead, its tires spinning savagely over the snow and the ice, and the woman reached over and bit my ear, her breasts pressing against me. The man watched us through the rear view. I soon lost track of where we were, and saw only quiet streets with dark bungalows, snow topped trees, and Christmas lights. A train clattered, not far away. We tumbled out of the Taurus and the woman pulled me toward the house. The man was already at the door working to unbolt the lock.

Inside, the man shoved a tumbler of amber in my hand, and I swallowed it, and coughed, and the woman pulled me toward the living room where she pushed me back onto the sofa, then she vanished down the hall. The man hovered in the corners, adjusting the lights dim, the music soft. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eyes, his lips curling, smirking. I drank the liquor he had given me and shifted uncomfortably. What was I doing here?

"This was a mistake," I said, but the man poured more liquor into the tumbler.

The woman reappeared, striding slowly into the living room. I tried not to stare, but she was hardly wearing anything: her stomach and legs bare, black straps straining over her rear and her thighs, breasts filling cups of see-through lace. She had small purple scars over her belly and her breasts sagged without her bra. She sat next to me and pressed herself against me, her hands rubbing my thighs, toying with the button on my jeans.

"No," I said. "No, this is a mistake."

Still, she unzipped me, and rubbed my cock through my underwear. I tried to move, but I felt weak. She grabbed my cock and it began to grow hard. I tried to stand up, but found my legs would not listen to me and the woman yanked my cock free and took it into her mouth. The man groaned and I noticed him in the corner, stroking himself, watching us. The tumbler fell from my hand, onto the carpet, and the room swirled around me. I thought of Becky and how I had failed her. I thought of our baby, the one whom I tried to erase, to forget, and how I owed it everything I had even, though I had nothing to give. I watched the woman wrap her lips around me and then wondered how I allowed this to happen.

I pushed the woman away and stood. She frowned and glared at me.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled and slurred and reached for my jacket. "This is a mistake."

"*Monsieur, ne partez pas*!" the naked man said.

The woman grabbed my arm and tried to pull me down onto the couch, but I knocked her arm away, and she screamed. The man reached for his pants, and the woman grabbed the tumbler I had dropped and hurled it at me. "Get out!" she screamed.

The tumbler struck me below the eye. I stumbled, bloodied, toward the door, and slipped out into the cold. I stood, and dressed, on the concrete steps while the city slept. The man and the woman yelled at each other in the house. Heat rose up in my chest, I leaned over the handrail and painted the snow. I felt better now. Shoving my hands into my pockets, I started to walk.

21.

I awoke in the bathtub when Becky yanked the shower curtain across the lip of the tub. I listened to her pee and tried to fall asleep, but the sound of the water swirling down the porcelain made me thirsty, and I lifted my head, and tried to climb out of the tub. I pushed the curtain aside and watched Becky wash her hands. She looked at me and said, "There's coffee."

I rolled out of the tub. After a minute, I pulled myself onto the toilet bowl, and I sat there. After another few minutes, I rose unsteadily to my feet, and leaned over the sink. I ran the faucet and splashed water over my face, my head. I sucked back water and coughed. I looked at myself in the mirror. The side of my face was red, swollen, crusted with blood that I needed to scrub off. I wondered how it happened. I slipped out of my clothes, soiled with sweat and blood, and stood in the shower while water ran off my skin. Afterward, I stumbled into the bedroom and tossed on a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt.

"We need to talk about last night," Becky said when I entered the kitchen.

I stared at Becky while the words sunk in, formed meaning, spawned nightmares. I tried to speak, but my tongue had dried up. I poured myself a cup of coffee, swallowed a mouthful of it, coughed, and swallowed some more. The coffee burned my tongue, my throat. Finally, sound emerged like air rushing out after a punch to the gut. "Listen," I said, and squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed the lids, willing my headache to stop. "I don't know what to say."

"Then you listen," Becky said. "I'm pregnant, and we need to figure out how we're going to deal with this. I'm not kidding, Rich. Stop laughing."

I couldn't help myself; it was either laugh or cry. Tears spilled from my eyes. I couldn't stop it: this weepy, hollow, booze-haze sentimentalism. Becky shook her head and glared at me. Frown lines swept across her forehead.

"Your eye, it's all swollen. Did you get into a fight?"

I touched the side of my face. Wincing, I pulled my fingers away. "I don't know," I said. "I had a couple drinks at the B, but after that." The memory of the forty-year old woman and the Frenchman was a stone in my gut. I began to dry-retch at the table.

"Jesus, Rich."

I retreated to the washroom and threw up my coffee. I slumped against the wall and slid to the floor. Becky appeared at the door, peeking inside around the frame. She clutched the frame and watched me. I fell over onto my side. "Fuck me. I can't deal with this now," I said.

"You can't deal with this?" Becky said. "How do you think I feel?"

Picking my head off the floor, I looked up at Becky. "What do you want from me?"

"What do I want from you? What do I want?"

"Yes! What do you want?"

"I want your fucking support!"

"Ah, shit. Not so loud."

"Damn it, you think I wanted this? I'm in fucking school!"

"Just get rid of it. We'll pretend it never happened." I dropped my head against the floor and stared at the ceiling. Music rattled through my skull.

—there's a hole in my bucket, and I can't get no beer—

Becky grunted. Her knees collapsed, and she slid along the doorframe onto her butt. She shook her head and began to sob. "I can't."

"Don't cry, Becks. God, please don't cry."

I rolled over to her and tried to sit up, but couldn't, and just dropped my head into her lap. She stared down at me, her lips trembling. I couldn't take the sight and closed my eyes.

"I wanted to go to school, Rich. I wanted to make something of myself."

"Damn it, you will. This is nothing. It's a mistake. We all make mistakes. We'll get rid of it and it'll be like it never happened and—

"No, I can't."

"Sure you can. Hell, you probably won't even miss any classes."

"No, I can't get rid of it. I won't."

"Oh," I said, and I bit my lip. I tasted blood and swallowed it quick. "Then … then, we'll figure it out. We'll find a way for you to keep going to school, and, and, shit. We'll figure it out."

I listened to myself speak and I hardly believed my own words. They were hollow, empty and forced. Yet when I looked up and saw Becky staring back at me, I thought maybe they could be true after all. All it needed was a little work. She touched my swollen cheek and I winced.

"What happened to you?" she asked. "You got into a fight?"

"Yes," I said. "That must be it."

22.

Alfred was awake. It was a miracle, my sister said. She toyed with her crucifix while she said it. What a load of horseshit, I thought. Alfred was a tough son of a bitch. Why not give him the credit he was due. Still, he was in a bad way: bedridden, confused, partially paralyzed down the one side. His tongue flopped strangely in his mouth and it was difficult to understand him. It would take some time before the hospital released him, if they ever did.

"*C'qui ça*?" Alfred said when he saw me.

"Richard*, Menoncle*."

"Oh," Alfred said, and he frowned, and peered into my face.

Monique touched his arm and said, "*J'vais revenir* checker *sur mon* break, *Menoncle*."

I sat in the old chair by the window and looked at Alfred. He was sitting up in bed, partly, and staring at me, studying my face, as though trying to decipher the mystery of my presence. He nodded to himself and moved his lips, though no sound escaped. I shifted in the chair and looked around the room. Someone had brought balloons to add some colour and a slew of get-well cards covered the small dresser along the far wall.

"Richard," Alfred said. He nodded to himself again. "*Ch'té pas reconnu*! *Qu'yé't'arrivé à ton oeuil*?"

I turned to Alfred. "*Rien, Menoncle*. *Chui juste tombé dans neige*."

He smiled, but only half his face moved. "*Pourquoi té pas à l'ouvrage*? *Au pow— pow— au pow— crisse*," Alfred sighed. The words wouldn't come and he couldn't roll his Rs anymore.

"*Quelqu'un a acheté* le powder coat plant, *Menoncle*. I got laid off. *J'ai pus d'job*."

"*Ah*, *non*. *Les anglais*?"

I shrugged. I didn't know who bought the place.

"*Faut'qu'tu les* watch *les anglais*, *Richard*. *Fai'tention, d'eux—y'vont tous prendres*. *Pis* watch *les français* too, *sont presque pire*. *Y'ont tué tous les lièvres*. *Nous ont arraché la langue*."

Alfred had told me once, one summer a few years back when I was helping him clear out some brush from around his little cabin, how when he was young a nun had shoved a bar of soap in his mouth, 'cause he couldn't speak proper French. She'd tried to wash the Michif out of him. He'd attended school in a small, one-room rural schoolhouse in Richer, where the nuns all spoke French, and taught in French all through the day even though it was illegal. Whenever the school inspector visited, they scrambled to hide the French books. One time, thinking it would be funny to embarrass the nun who'd shoved the bar of soap in his mouth, Alfred spoke to the inspector in French and even showed him his French book, and he'd laughed while the inspector yelled at the nun. He said she turned bright red and her cheeks swelled like a pair of ripe tomatoes. She'd beat him so bad with a ruler, afterward, that his father pulled him from school, and Alfred never went back; he worked the farm with his dad, after that, hunted for food, and eventually taught himself

to work wood and became a carpenter. But that's the way it worked in the day, he said: English gave you hell for speaking French, and the French gave you hell for not speaking proper French. What was a Michif to do? "Watch," he said. "Watch *les tous*."

I watched as Alfred fell asleep. He was tired and weak, and the doctors couldn't tell when or if he would ever be allowed to return home. Monique told me she thought he'd end up in a full care nursing home, or if he took a turn for the worse, a couple floors to palliative. But Alfred was a fighter, and it was a mistake to count him out. And as he slept, I thought about all the things I'd wanted to ask him, and to tell him, and I wondered if I would get a chance. The brief moments of wakefulness he had now were not enough for me to burden him with my problems. So I told him quietly while he slept about Becky and the baby and I told him about the night at the bar with the forty year old woman and the Frenchman, my gut wrenched up whenever I thought about it, and I wondered aloud what I should do about it. Alfred just lay there, sleeping. His chest rose up and down with the hiss of the breathing contraption. And the machines whirled and beeped and kept him alive. This was no good. I turned away, and I looked out the window at the city, at the snow blowing over the roofs and the cars below. I wondered if Nicole was still out there, somewhere.

Alfred was asleep when Monique glanced into the room. "Rich, you're still here?"

The sun had set and the skies turned grey and yellow and dirty. I glanced at my sister and I shrugged. Truth was I was avoiding Becky. I didn't dare tell my sister that. She'd want to know why. "Thinking," I said.

Monique came in and checked the machines. "Mom's been trying to reach you," she said. "Would it kill you to answer your phone?"

"No minutes," I said.

"Uh huh, didn't stop you when I called." She shook her head. "She says someone stopped by the house and asked about you. Said something about a mailbox?" The memory of the man in the chequered coat, hauling lumber out of the old dodge truck flashed through my head. Monique raised her eyebrows and I shook my head. "Well," Monique said. "You had better call her." She stared at me, studying me. I could see some of our mother in her, around the eyes and in the way she pressed her lips together when she considered an idea. She toyed with the crucifix around her neck. "Listen," she said. "You and Becky should stop by sometime."

23.

One day, after Becky left for school, I decided to drive to Ste. Antoinette. Larry said he'd been making a few bucks shoveling snow off people's roofs at the retirement park just outside of town. The folks there loved him. He'd do a whole row of trailers in an afternoon. The old women would bring him warm coffee and biscuits, and the old men would spin stories while he worked. Larry got the job after some ceilings had started to crack under the snow, and the park managers decided to clear every roof in the park. Larry said he prayed for the next big snowfall. Whenever it snowed, he saw dollar signs falling from the sky.

I sipped my beer and nodded. I had driven out to ask him for money. I had lent him a few bucks over the years and figured it was time he start paying me back. We sat in his basement and watched a Japanese game show on his satellite feed; contestants kept running through the course, hurling themselves at large, padded objects that flung them into pools of water below. "Listen," I said. "I was wondering if, now that you've got some money, you'd consider paying me back."

"Ho-lee, cut to the chase, why don't you," he laughed, and he reached into his pants and retrieved his wallet. He pulled out a couple twenties and handed them to me.

"Thanks," I said.

"No worries," Larry said. He turned to the television and laughed as a contestant flew off a platform, tumbling head over heels into the water.

After my beer, I told Larry that Becky would be mad if I wasn't home by dinner, and I left. Truth was I didn't feel like sitting in his cold basement anymore. I started the Buick and let it warm up while I scraped ice off the windows. Then I drove toward town.

I stopped in at the Petro and fueled up. The kid with the chin was working the till, and he jutted his chin at me, and I nodded at him. I hurried out and tore the plastic wrapping off the pack of cigarettes. The wind blew cold and I climbed into the Buick and thought about the drive to the city, the slick roads, the wind, and the sheets of snow sweeping over the asphalt like waterfalls. I light my smoke and flicked the radio dial, and I jumped when someone appeared at my door and knocked on the window. I saw a woman under a big, purple toque. I rolled the window down.

"I thought it was you," the woman said.

I looked her in eyes and frowned.

"Chantal?"

Chantal invited me over for a drink. I couldn't refuse. I followed her little Nissan home. She didn't want to drink at the bar; said last time she'd been she had got hit on by a high school senior, and thought it best to avoid the place.

We sat in her living room, sipping rye-whiskey from glass tumblers. I was on the couch, Chantal on a chair across the coffee table. She explained how she'd been lucky to find this place on short notice; she got her job in August after the high school chemistry teacher fell ill.

"This was old Joe Vermette's place wasn't it?" I said.

"I have no idea. I dealt with the realtor."

"I heard he moved to the old folks' home."

"That may be."

"Last stop before the cemetery," I said.

Chantal looked at me funny and began to laugh. "That's horrible," she said.

"Well, it's true isn't it?"

"I suppose it is, but why be so blunt about it?"

"Why paint a pig?"

"What? I've never heard of anyone doing that."

"Exactly," I said, and I tapped my nose with a finger, and Chantal laughed again.

"You're funny."

She rose and fetched the bottle of rye from the kitchen and poured us a couple more shots in the tumblers. I looked up at her while she poured my drink and stared at her nose.

"Pardon my asking, but did you have a nose ring?"

She nodded and touched her nose. "I stopped wearing it once I started teaching," she said. "The hole is mostly healed over."

"I always wanted to do something like that."

Chantal placed the bottle of rye on the coffee table and sat down on the couch next to me.

"Get a nose ring?" she said.

"No, like get a tattoo or something. When I was eighteen I saved up for one, but I could never decide what to get. At first, I wanted a skull with a sword through it, something real heavy metal like, then I figured maybe I should get a string of barbwire around my bicep instead. But it never happened. Blew a gasket in the Buick and spent my tattoo money fixing the engine."

"That's real original," Chantal laughed.

"Hey, I was eighteen."

"What would you get now?"

I sat back and thought about it. "Shit, I don't know."

Chantal smiled. "I got a treble clef when I was eighteen. You know, that symbol at the start of a musical staff … you don't read music do you?"

"Never learned," I said. "I play a bit of guitar, my sister too; she's real good with it. My *menoncles* are pretty decent fiddle players. And my *matantes* all sing."

"Well, let me show you," she said, and she placed her tumbler on the table and stood up. She turned toward me, lifted the bottom of her shirt and pulled her jeans down a little so I could see the ink on the left side of her pelvis. "That's a clef symbol," she said.

Without thinking, I reached up and touched it, tracing my finger along the swirling script. Her skin was soft, smooth. I stared at her pelvis, her stomach, her crotch. Small hairs popped out the waist band of her underwear. Realizing what I'd done, I pulled back and glanced up, and saw that Chantal was laughing.

"Tickles," she said.

We had another drink, then we went outside to share a cigarette and we huddled together under her eavestroughs and stared not at the snow, but at each other. I glanced away, at the snow tumbling through the sky, that same gut-wrenched feeling I had about the Frenchman and his girl seeping suddenly through my gut.

"I'd better go," I said.

"So soon?" she said, and she reached up and kissed me goodnight.

I tore myself away and managed to leave before the snow stopped falling.

24.

I circled the block again, and drove slow while I peered up at the houses and studied the doors and the steps and the numbers on the walls, hoping to spark some memory. I had been sure Nicole lived in Norwood Flats, but as I drove the streets, coming around again and again, I grew uncertain. After Becky left for school this morning, I had decided that this was a better use of my time than sitting around her cold apartment, but after driving around for an hour I wasn't so sure. It was something to do, something I needed to do, or so I'd thought. The Buick spewed warm air

from its vents, and the tires groaned over the snow-packed road. I slowed, and stopped to look at one particular house, a small, blue-sided bungalow that sat atop a swell of earth. The city was so damn flat that it was unusual to see stairs on a property, along the walk, but some houses around Saint Boniface were built over an oxbow. I stared at the house, the Christmas wreath on the door. A string of lights dangled from the eaves, and a large pine tree, with hardly any snow beneath it, towered in the front yard. Someone had constructed an elaborate nativity scene, using six-inch figures of a baby Jesus and a donkey and a bull-horned bison in its shadow. I popped the Buick into park and killed the engine. And as I thought about what to do next, I smoked a cigarette and I studied the figurine of the bison, its snout in the manger next to baby Jesus. This seemed like a good a place to start.

Taking a deep breath, I shouldered the door open, climbed out, and headed up the walk to the house. Upon closer inspection, the bison didn't seem out of place; was about as believable as anything else in the scene. I took the steps quick, two at a time, and knocked at the door. I waited a moment and then peeked through the dark window on the side, trying to spot movement inside. After a few seconds, I rang the doorbell. The sun flared weakly in the sky, and I covered my eyes as I scanned the block from the steps and peered at the other houses.

I heard the door move, the hinges squeal. I turned to see a dishevelled man in a housecoat glaring at me. "Hi, *bonjour*," I said.

"What do you want?" he said. He sort of leaned between the door and the frame, blocking the entrance, and stuck his head out so he could survey the yard and the street.

"Does Nicole still live here? I'm an old friend and—

"There's no Nicole here," he said, and drew back into the house.

"Maybe she's moved," I said quickly before he shut the door, and I pointed to the nativity scene, "I just spotted the bison there, next to Jesus, and thought that's just like her—

"What now?" the door swung wide and the man leaned out and glared at his pine tree.

"The bison in the nativity scene," I said. "That's just like her."

"Son of a bitch," he said, and he barreled past me, across the stoop, and down the stairs, and he bee-lined toward the pine tree in nothing but slippers. I watched as he plucked the bison from the scene and then stormed toward neighbour's house. His housecoat flared open, flashing his underwear, but he paid it no mind, and he waved the bison figurine over his head, and cursed at the house.

"You keep your fucking jokes off my property," he shouted. "You goddamn heathens!" And he hurled the figurine at the house. He spat too for good measure. Steam rose off his naked body. Then he stomped back toward his house, kicking up snow as he went, and he glared at me. "Get off my stoop," he said. He slipped past me, back into his house. The door slammed shut.

I shook my head and stepped off his stoop. I glanced back at the house and frowned. This was the street, if it wasn't the house. I would come back later, some evening. I started toward the Buick, but a dark spot in the snow caught my eye. The bison had tumbled back into a snow bank, and sat askew in the sun. I picked it out of the snow and went up and rang the doorbell, intending to hand the bison back, but as the doorbell faded, the house sat quiet, and I held the small statue in my hands, I decided against it. It was made of hard plastic, and it had incredible details, small horns and a hump on its back, hair etched in the plastic and small irises in its eyes that seemed to move. I slipped it into my pocket.

25.

On Sunday, we accepted my sister's invitation to come over for dinner. Monique owned a small bungalow in East Kildonan with her husband, John. They lived on a quiet street, embroiled in an escalating contest of festive spirit. Legions of red nosed reindeers guarded the street, and a battalion of Santa Clauses had fortified the roofs. There were enough Christmas lights along the street to light a runway. Monique's house with a single string of flickering lights along the eaves seemed strangely understated.

"You guys look like hell," she said at the door.

Becky smiled faintly. We'd been hauling over the Nairn Overpass when Becky suddenly asked me to pull over, then she popped open the door and threw up all over the sidewalk. Traffic coming down off the bridge swerved around us and lay on their horns. Becky retched, and I tried to ignore the sound, and recalled the last time I'd thrown up in the Buick in the middle of winter, how it seeped into the materials and frozen solid overnight, and how I sat there the morning after with a bucket of hot water and a kitchen knife, scrapping puke off the felt panels.

"Good to see you too," I said to Monique.

We piled our coats on the banister and followed my sister into the living room. John was on the couch, his feet up on the coffee table, his eyes glued to the TV. Football highlights flashed

across the screen. Monique pushed his feet off the table, and he sat up somewhat, and he reached forward to shake my hand. He pulled Becky down to kiss her on the cheek. My sister asked if we would like something to drink, and John said there was beer in the fridge.

"Just water for me," Becky said. My sister disappeared into the kitchen and Becky sat in the chair by the window. I dropped onto the couch across from John. He placed his feet back on the table and sipped his beer.

"Where're the kids?" I asked. Toys were strewn in front of the television. There'd been a smash up earlier, a dozen Hot Wheels piled on top of each other.

"Basement," John said. "Moved the 'ole tube TV down there after we got this beaut," he said, pointing to the TV. "42 inch, plasma."

I glanced at Becky. The houses across the street glowed blue and red, lights draped across the eavestroughs flickering between colours, casting shadows over the snow. My sister appeared with a tall glass of water for Becky, a can of Bud for me. John sighed and he tore himself off the couch and went to fetch another beer.

My sister watched him vanish into the kitchen. "Dinner'll be ready soon."

"Do you need any help?" Becky asked.

"Sure," my sister said and they disappeared into the kitchen.

John reappeared. He sat and slapped me on the knee.

"So, how you like living in the city? You got cable yet?"

"It's nothing special, can't afford cable."

"Oh Christ, your wrists must be getting a workout then eh," John laughed. I could see spit spray coming off his lips.

"Well, I found some rabbit ears," I said.

"Fucking hell. Don't tell me you're watching farmer vision? I hate farmer vision. I mean, 6 fucking channels, in this day and age, is a fucking travesty."

"It's not that bad."

"My ass it's not that bad. You need to find a job and get some cable."

"Shit, John. I just got laid off. My EI hasn't even come in yet."

"Screw that. Your sister says that was over a month ago. Time to get out there." He took a swig of his beer and belched. He glanced over at the television and admired his purchase. "You ever think about telemarketing?" he said.

"Can't say I have, John."

"Assholes, the whole bunch of 'em. But lots of telemarketing jobs in this city."

I thought about it. "Never saw myself as the type to sit at a desk," I said.

"Gotta be better than busting your ass in that factory."

I sipped my beer. "My dad says I should be a plumber."

"Ah, I hear they make a killing out west. But you should really be an electrician if you're thinking about a trade, not a plumber. You don't want to work with shit."

"I've worked with shit before."

John frowned and looked over at me and so I told him about *Menoncle Joe* and the septic cleaning business. John sipped his beer and shook his head.

"That's the problem with you people. You can't see you're better than that."

"Hey, Joe made a decent living."

John shook his head. "Sounds like horse crap to me," he said. He turned to me again and reached over, and grabbed my knee. "You know," he said. "What you should do, is go to school, and get a certificate or something, but at least get something temporary while you figure it out. I know a guy who works at a call centre; he could get you on there. Hell, he says they even pay an extra buck an hour if you speak French." He sipped his beer. "But enough of about that." And he pointed to the television and told me about the resolution.

I listened to him talk and thought about what he said before, how we were better than we thought, but better than what? What did we think we were? Goddamn John and his fucking dime store philosophy—I watched as he reached over and slapped my knee again.

"Got this beauty half-off, was a floor model you see," he said, pointing to the television. "Has a little chip in the corner there, but you wouldn't have noticed it unless I pointed it to you."

I sipped my beer and squeezed my eyes shut. John went on about the football game, how it looked great on his television. This was probably why the kids were hiding in the basement.

"Where's your washroom again?" I said and John blinked and glanced down the hallway. I made my way, careful not to step on the toys strewn like landmines in the carpet. In the mirror, I noticed my eyes were blood-shot and I splashed some water on my face. I could hear the kids through the floor, yelling in the basement, running around, and laughing. After a minute, I went out into the hallway. John's eyes were glued to the TV, so I veered into the kitchen. Becky and my sister looked up at me from the kitchen table.

"Going out for a smoke; want to come?"

The girls shook their heads, so I forced a smile, and retreated toward the front door.

John glanced at me from the couch. "Gonna freeze your balls off," he giggled.

I went around to the side of the house, to a small shovelled pathway between my sister's bungalow and the neighbour's fence, out of the light and the wind. I lit a cigarette in the dark and watched snow move in waves across the street while I smoked. It swirled around the plastic deer and piled up against the cars in the street. Out of habit, I grabbed my phone and checked it. There was a message from Chantal. She had been bugging me to stop by again since we hung out, and I had told her I would. I opened her message. The cigarette fell from my lips into the snow. On the small, thumb-sized display was a shot of her clef note, framed by the underside of her breasts.

"Uncle Rich!" the kids yelled. They threw their arms around my neck and I wrapped my arms around them, lifted them into the air, and twirled them around in the living room. Laughing, they scrunched their noses and yelled "You smell funny!" John glanced away from the television and laughed, and Monique said enough already and asked me to put them down.

"Don't you wish I was your rich uncle instead?" I asked.

"No!" my niece, Isabel, yelled and shook her head.

But Danny, my nephew, nodded. "Yes!"

John laughed again. "Attaboy," he said.

"OK, OK. You guys need to wash your hands before dinner," Monique said.

I lowered the kids and they ran off to the washroom. I glanced around. "Where's Becky?"

"In the bedroom, she wanted to lie down. She wasn't feeling well."

Frowning, I looked down the hallway. "Must be stressed about her papers," I said.

"Uh huh," Monique said, she arched an eyebrow and shook her head. "Well, you'd better check in on her, and let her know dinner's ready." She turned to her husband who was still on the couch, and said "Come on, John, let's get the kids fed."

I fetched Becky and we all migrated over to the dining room table and passed around the food that Monique had prepared: a roast beef with gravy and veggies on the side, and little warm buns like how Mom used to make. John opened a bottle of wine, poured Monique a glass, and he turned to Becky, but Becky placed a hand over her glass.

"None for me," Becky said.

"Just a taste won't hurt you."

"She said no, John."

"I was just being hospitable, hon."

"Give Rich some."

I held out my fishbowl and John emptied the bottle into it.

We ate in silence, mostly, wolfing down the mashed potatoes, tearing into the roast beef. I watched the kids push their vegetables around on their plates, the carrots, cauliflower, broccoli and peas. "*T'aime pas tes légumes*?" I asked Danny, and he looked up at me and frowned.

"Danny, Uncle Rich asked if you liked your vegetables," Monique said.

"Boy's fussy," John said as Danny shook his head.

"Doesn't he speak French?" I asked, and John shrugged.

Monique nodded. "Sure he does *avec* Mom *et Papa*. But we don't see them often. Maybe if you stopped by more often you could teach him, Rich."

Grunting, I sipped my wine and glanced at the kids. Isabel has slipped from her chair and was rolling around on the linoleum. Danny smashed his peas with his butter knife. John rose and took the dirty plates to the sink where he rinsed them, and then stuffed them into the dishwasher. Monique swirled her wine in her glass and glanced over to Becky.

"So, Becky," she said. "How's school?"

Becky took a sip of her water and shrugged. "It's tougher than I thought it would be."

"I'm sure you're doing fine." Monique said. She glanced down at Isabel who was rolling around on the linoleum and had started kicking Monique's chair. "Stop it, Isabel."

"I asked Rich for help with my history class, you know, about early Manitoba history and the Métis, and whatnot, but he was pretty useless," Becky said, and she pressed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose. She hadn't eaten much, she looked pale.

"Like I frickin' know anything about that," I said.

"Don't you?" Monique said. She swirled her wine glass "Grew up around enough, *non*?"

I frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I guess you never did listen, but geez, Rich. *La moitié du village 'tait Métis*."

"That's what I told him," Becky said.

John opened the refrigerator and glanced at the table. "You want a beer, Rich? Hon?"

"Can you get us another bottle of wine?" Monique said, and John disappeared down into the basement. The kids ran after him. I stared at my empty wine glass for a moment.

"Did you know *mémère* chose *pépère* over *Menoncle Alfred*?" I said.

Monique frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Apparently Alfred chased after her, but he was too wild for her liking. *Trop sauvage*, he says. So she chose his brother instead."

Monique stared off toward the wall. "Don't know if you remember, maybe you were too young, but *Menoncle Dave* said one time *comment c'tait dure être français meme, dans l'temps*, nevermind ê*tre métis*. *Pis tu cachait s'tu pouvait*. But *Alfred lui y'aimait pas caché*, *pis mémère aimait pas ça, tsé. Pis y'ont eu un* falling out *àcose*. *C'tait allentour du temps mémère a mové au village*," Monique twirled her empty wine glass between her fingers. "That was before *Papa* met Mom, why are we talking about this?"

"I don't know, I was talking with Alfred and got to thinking, is all," I said.

Monique stared at me for a moment and nodded. "Better take it with a grain of salt, Rich. Alfred is—" her lips pursed. "*Le pauvre homme*. Not all there. If you know what I mean."

Becky rose up suddenly, hands on her stomach. "Excuse me," she said, and she vanished down the hallway, into the washroom.

I glanced at the hallway. "Don't know what's up with her tonight," I said, and I flinched as Monique slapped the table.

"Cut the shit, Rich," she said, and grabbed my arm. "Becky told me she's pregnant."

"What? But— it wasn't—" I glanced at my sister and glared. "She had no right."

"Maybe not, but listen. She's scared as shit over it, and you're all over the fucking place. What the hell happened to your eye anyway?" Monique shook her head. "Isn't easy having a kid, while still in school too, I know," Monique snorted, and she tossed the bottoms of her wine glass down her throat, a few measly drops. She glared at the wine glass for a second before turning her eyes on me. "Didn't anyone teach you how to use a condom? Christ, well it's too late now. Time to get your shit together, Rich. Congratulations."

I watched my sister talk, watched her lips move and her eyes fix me with a stare. I shifted in my chair and tried to shrug it off, but she laid into me and I began to frown, thinking, what the fuck business of hers was this? How dare she tell me how to live my life? And I was about to say something when I noticed Becky in the doorway, staring at us, tears in her eyes, horrified.

"Didn't know which you wanted, so I brought a red and white," John said, coming up the stairs, and the kids rushed out from behind him, screaming. John held out the bottle of white and laughed. "Though, personally, I think the white tastes like piss," he said.

"Put it away, John," my sister said, and John blinked, and headed back down the stairs.

I rose and glanced around. "I think we'll take off."

"Thank you for dinner," Becky said, mumbling.

"You're welcome," Monique said, and she rose and showed us to the door. "And if you need anything," she said, and she touched Becky's elbow, "Anything at all. You let us know."

26.

Through the drafty window, I watched Becky leave for school, watched her trudge along the icy sidewalk and down the street toward the bus stop. She stepped onto the bus and sat by the window and looked back up toward the house. She'd asked about my plans for the day, and I had struggled to tell her anything.

I sat by the window for a long while after the bus took off, and pressed plastic bags back into the cracks around the window, stuffing them deeper inside. They kept popping out bit by bit, little wisps of white plastic sprouting from the walls. The floors shook from the music below.

After lunch of soup and stale crackers, I found myself on the sofa, watching who-knows-what through a blizzard of static on the television, and spied on the coffee table the business card that my sister had given me. She had slipped it into my hand when we said goodbye at the door. I knew my employment claim would be coming in soon, but it didn't matter anymore, I was going stir crazy. I grabbed the card and looked at it. It had the name of a call centre on it. I grabbed my phone, flipped it open, and stared at the underside of Chantal's breasts. I fought down a wave of shame, lust, and guilt, and all the things that made it difficult for me to breathe and think straight, and I dialed the number on the card.

The woman on the phone said they paid an extra buck an hour if you spoke French, so I decided to give it a shot, at least, until I figured things out. I drove over to St. James, out by the airport, to an old warehouse where the woman on the phone interviewed me in person. I had an old pair of slacks I'd last worn to a funeral, which I used. We sat in a small room, off the main floor where dozens of folks were crouched over computer screens, yelling into microphones that

sat over their head, and the woman asked about my experience and I lied about using computers at my old job. She asked about my French and I said I was raised French. She asked me to speak a few lines, and I tried not to wince while I listened to her speak, was like her mouth was full of marbles or something. I glanced through the windows behind the woman, at the parking lot and the piles of snow stacked toward the back. She had large breasts, which I tried to avoid staring at; even under a sweater, I could tell they were big and soft. I shifted in my chair, wincing while she said "Bond*jour*, comment alley *vouz? Je m'*apple, Karen. Q*u'elle* sort *de* experience *avez vou*z?"

My French was about as sound as an old barn, like it had served a purpose once, and was now half-rotten and crumbling in on itself, but hers was nothing but a couple clapboards stacked on top of each other. No structure at all. While I could hear my French slipping away whenever I spoke it, there would always be a foundation, a skeleton on which to rebuild.

"Spoke French all my life," I said. And I told her that, growing up in Ste. Antoinette, I had learned French early, and only realized later that most folks didn't bother learning it. Dying language some said. Speak Canadian, they said. Back in '95, things had got heated. Some folks told us to go back to Québec, didn't matter that we had never been. A few years before the whole Québec thing, the town built a French school across from the English school, and the only thing between them was an old soccer field. That winter, in '95, things boiled over during recess and a brawl broke out between the school kids. We hurled rocks and chunks of ice at each other, and we told each other to go back where we came from; teachers pulled us off each other. I punched this one kid in the face because he had a Ukrainian last name and he went to the English school. When I got home that night, my dad sat me down and he told me I was an idiot: turns out the kid was my third cousin. Wasn't his fault that he was an English-speaking French-Métis-Ukrainian. That's when I learned that things weren't so cut and dried, and that this idea of us and them was a load of horseshit. But I had grown up with the idea that to keep our French you had to circle the wagons; it took a while to figure out that this was the kind of doomsday bullshit that drove more people away than it saved.

I worked construction with him, this kid, one summer out of high school, before he went to university, and we laughed about the fight over a few beers at Fritz's. He said his dad had told him it wasn't my fault that I was a French-Canadian-Métis-Hillbilly.

The woman smiled, leaned forward—I stared her in the eye—and she offered me a job.

Becky started to cry when I told her about it.

“What wrong?” I asked, but she shook her head, and flapped her hands in an attempt to dry her eyes. Her eyes were red and tears ran down her cheeks, but she had the biggest smile I’d seen since I moved in.

“I’m happy,” she said. “I swear to God, I’m happy.” She threw her arms around me and sobbed. I tried to pry her arms away, but she squeezed me tight. She was holding on for dear life. I shifted under the pressure, unsure what to do, so I patted her on the back.

“It’s fine,” I said.

“I’m so happy,” she sobbed.

If this was happy, I thought, I didn’t want to see sad or angry.

27.

The work was easy enough, you answered the phone, read a few scripts, and typed down people’s names, addresses, and credit card information, but the pay wasn’t great and the location was awful. We sold all sorts of late-night-TV-crap to folk from a mouldy piss-stained shithole by the airport. You could hear planes take off and land through the roof, and water dripped from the ceiling into plastic buckets the managers had placed throughout the building. The carpet smelled like a racetrack and the lunchroom of rotten meat.

One evening, after a few weeks on the phones, I went out for a smoke. There was a picnic table along the side of the building, where folks sat and smoked, and in summer ate their lunches. Dean was on the bench, leaning back against the building, and looking up at the stars. The clouds had rolled out after the sun set, and you could see the stars, sharp as pins, through the air.

“Mind if I join you?” I said. Dean waved me over.

Dean and I had hit off alright. He had trained me that first week. He had taught me how to use the computers and the phones, taught me how to handle customers over the phone, what to say and what to do. I tugged my toque down over my ears and yanked the zipper on my jacket up to my chin. I sat across from him and leaned up against the building. I lit up a cigarette and blew smoke into the sky. Dean glanced over.

“How you doing?” he asked. “Getting in the swing of things?”

I glanced his way and nodded. “It’s not hard. Manager says they’re gonna train me on the French campaigns next week,” I said.

“No shit?” Dean said. “That’s quick. Usually they wait a few months. Guess they’re short on French speakers.”

“Guess so,” I said. I flicked my cigarette and ash rain down next to the bench. The snow was grey, dirty with the ash of a thousand cigarettes. We glanced up as a plane swept low across the stars. Dean sucked his cigarette down to the filter, then pressed the butt into the pile of snow next to the table. The pile looked like a porcupine with a forest of cigarette butts for quills. Dean had said the maintenance guys would shovel the butts off the asphalt in the spring, once the snow melted. Was easier than picking them one by one out of the snow.

“We had a bunch of them before,” he said. “Frenchies.”

I glanced at him. “You don’t say.”

“From some of those little French towns. Soon as we hired one all their cousins and their friends followed them quick. They’ve moved on now, though. Probably found something better. Tell you what; this place will drive you nuts unless you find some way to get off the phones.” He nodded and slapped the table. “Hell, that’s why I’m a trainer.” He started to gather snow off the table and roll it into a ball, but the snow was too dry, and the ball kept falling apart, reverting to dust. “Though, they don’t like taking Frenchies off the phones. Hard to replace, you know. May be why they never stick around too long.”

“Good to know,” I said.

“Only Frenchies we have left are Fahoud and Didier, but they’re in university and won’t be around much longer.” Dean kept talking, about others I had never met, and where they were, and what they had done, and while he talked, my cellphone buzzed against my hip. I reached into my pocket and pulled it out, and when I flipped it open, I saw that my mother had texted me.

“Anyway,” Dean said. “They got some funny French. Sounds like the movies, you know. What do you think about that?”

I flipped my phone shut and glanced up. “Sorry, what?”

Dean frowned. “I asked what you thought about their French.”

“Oh, I don’t know. It’s good. Very proper.”

“Didier’s from Africa, you know.”

“I figured. Do you know which part?”

"Hell, I don't know. The French part," Dean said.

I laughed. "That's a pretty big part. Fahoud is from Africa too. North Africa."

Dean shook his head. "No, he's from the middle east."

"He told me. He's from Morroco."

"Yeah, that's it," Dean nodded.

"That's in Africa, man."

"What? Fuck off!" Dean grunted and glanced at the parking lot. Someone had started a vehicle and you could see exhaust rising over the lot. I checked my phone and read my mother's message. She wanted to take Becky and me out for dinner next time she was in the city. I'd been avoiding her calls, letting them go to voicemail. I was afraid she knew about Becky's condition. Monique had a way of running at the mouth.

I stared at the phone, and sucked my cigarette down to the filter. Ever since that night at Monique's, when Chantal started sending me photos, I had the strangest feeling that this life wasn't really mine, that I was simply going through the motions.

Dean started up again. He talked about nothing in particular, and that suited me fine. And as he talked, I typed a message into my phone. Maybe dinner wouldn't be so bad, but either way, it didn't really matter.

28.

"*Et puis des galettes*," Alfred said, "*Y faut des galettes avec un* stew *au lièvres, Émile*."

"OK, *Menoncle*," I said, and nodded along, and listened to Alfred describe how to skin a hare and make a stew. I wanted to ask Alfred a question about my grandfather; I had started to wonder why he moved to Ste. Antoinette and how long he stayed in the village; when I thought about it, I remembered my dad telling me how he had grown up in the bush, on land a concrete outfit later bought and turned into a gravel pit; and I realized I didn't know the first thing about what really happened. I know it didn't matter, but I'd had nothing but time to think since moving to the city, and these questions had wound themselves around my heart like tangled fishing wire, a bird's nest constricting my heart. Alfred would not listen, however. Lost in his own world, he lay in his hospital bed and talked about food.

"*Ça fait un boute depuis que j'ai eu du gibier*."

An aunt appeared in the doorway with fresh flowers for Alfred's room. We greeted each other with a peck on the cheek, then chatted for a while, and we somehow managed to exchange pleasantries without saying anything important. It was strange how, at a certain point, one could have too much family, as though our tree had become overburdened with fruit and the weight of it snapped branches from the trunk. It became impossible to know them all: cousins I never met, aunts and uncles I never saw, who had moved away before I was born, family strewn across the land from here to the mountains. *Éparpiller par le vent*. Too many stories to know.

Outside, the wind blew hard and snow battered the skin. I waited for the light to turn, and then I started across the intersection. I heard a woman laugh and I turned to look, and there stood a woman in a thick goose feather jacket, with long, dark hair, where I'd just stood, speaking into a cellphone, still laughing, and I paused in the street. She seemed so familiar. Her voice, and her words, a gumbo tangle of English and French, sparked memories.

"Nicole?" I said. "Hey, Nicole!"

Horns erupted around me, and I glanced at the traffic light, and saw it had turned green. I leaped off the street, onto the curb. The woman looked back, briefly, at the commotion, and I ran up to her and touched her elbow, but when she turned again, flinching, frowning, glaring at me, I shook my head. "Sorry," I said. "I thought you were someone else."

29.

We met my parents at the Chicken Chef on Marion for dinner. My mother waived at us from a table by the window when we arrived, and she stood, and greeted us warmly, planting us with her lips on our cheeks. She made a fuss over Becky. My dad tried to stand, but he grimaced instead, and fell heavily into his chair.

"*Y c'est fait mal au dos*," my mother explained. "*En pellètent d'la neige*."

"Nothing a couple drinks won't fix," he said, half-shouting.

We sat: me across from Becky, next to my mother; Becky next to my dad; and we looked around at each other. My dad glanced out the window at the small short-box with a worn fan belt that ripped out of the Safeway parking lot and pass the restaurant. You could hear it squealing up the small hill, climbing the side of the old oxbow, weaving over the ice.

Becky cleared her throat and asked if they'd waited long.

"Not too long, *temps pour un* drink," my dad said.

"We went to visit Alfred," my mother said. "But he's come down with something—

"*Attrapé une grippe*," my dad said.

"He was fine when I saw him this week," I said.

"*Bin*, y*'é t'en* bad shape, *là*. *Crisse d'hopital va'l tué*."

"—so *ont n'est pas resté trop longtemps*."

The waitress came over to fill our glasses with water. She told us about the specials, and took our drink orders. My dad ordered another rum-and-coke and my mother glanced over at him and frowned, but said nothing. Becky ordered an iced-tea and I got a beer.

"So, how have you been? Any news?" my mother asked after the waitress left. I shrugged and looked around the restaurant. There weren't many people, the tables mostly empty. The staff stood by the door to the kitchen and yawned.

Becky told my parents about university, how it was at once inspiring and frightening, and how she had struggled to adjust. My parents nodded along, and pretended to understand, but they had no experience, had never gone to university, and they couldn't fathom her ordeal. You could see it in their eyes; the way they sort of glazed over. Becky sighed and sipped her water.

The waitress brought our drinks and took our food orders. My dad drained his first drink and handed the empty glass to the waitress. I took a swig of my beer.

After the waitress left, my mother said "Your friend, Larry, broke his leg."

I choked on my beer, spluttering a little.

"I ran into his mother. O*n c'est* bumper *dans au IGA* à Steinbach," she said. "*À dit* he fell off a roof, *la semaine passer*, *puis y'a besoin une couple de* pins *dans jambe*."

"I should give him a call."

"I tried to tell you," Becky said. "Céleste called me, but you haven't been home. And you never answer your phone." She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and stared at me.

My mother nodded. "*Y répond jamais*."

"Would it kill you to answer your phone?" my dad asked.

"Works been busy," I said, and I looked at my parents. "I got a job."

"Monique told us," my mother said. "At some call centre, right?"

"Says its just temporary, until you find something better," my dad said.

I frowned and took another sip of my beer. My dad grimaced and took another sip of his rum and coke. Becky glanced around the restaurant, then repositioned the cutlery on her napkin.

"So, *quessé tu fait là*?" my dad asked.

"Answer the phone mostly, take people's orders." I shrugged and toyed with my napkin.

"Doesn't sound too exciting."

I glanced up. "We sell dick pills to men who can't get it up."

My dad coughed, as if choking on his own spit, and he took another sip of his drink.

"Rich!" Becky said.

"What? It's true. It's our top seller."

"*Bin, c'est pas polit à table,*" my mother said.

Becky looked horrified. She clutched her glass of iced-tea and drank half of it.

"You've got no shame. *Tabarnacle*, don't you see you're better than that?" my dad said.

"Better than what?" I shot back.

"You're just like Joe," he said, shaking his head.

The table clattered and my mother shook her fist. "*OK, j'en ait eu j'usqu'icitte à propos d'Joe*," she said. She waved her hand over her head.

My dad tossed back the bottom of his drink and leaned over the table, glaring at me. The waitress arrived with our orders; she glanced nervously around the table as she placed the food in front of us. My dad gestured for another drink. "Enjoy," the waitress squeaked.

After the waitress left, my dad cleared his throat and leaned over the table again.

"Let me tell you," he said, and he told us how when he had first moved into the city, he'd had a hell of a time finding work. And beyond the fact that most companies didn't want to hire a French guy, when they found out he was Métis things only got worse. The only work he got were the shit jobs, the muck work. He got work digging trenches for sewer lines and was lucky even to get that. After a while, he told people that he was just French—he couldn't hide his accent—and things got a little better. He watched as those who couldn't hide got shit on, called halfbreeds and ignorant savages. He saw the injustices, but knew not what to do, and so he kept denying, hiding like his mother had done before him and had taught him to do. After his father died when he was still young, his mother had decided to move the family to Ste. Antoinette, but the French weren't much better so *y fallait blender* she'd said, *comme les français*. This was why she and Alfred had had a falling out, he said. Alfred had never been one to hide.

He met my mother in the city, at a cousin's social in Saint Boniface. They hit it off, right away, connecting over a shared history, experiences, values and heritage, discovering the sweet comfort of being one's self in front of the other. They did not have to hide at home. Not even six months after they met, they were married in a big catholic ceremony in Ste. Antoinette. And only a year later, Monique came along. I arrived a few years after that.

Then Dad got promoted at work, given charge of a small crew, and he started to work his way up, to manage larger and larger jobs. He'd become their lovable "Frenchie."

When Joe and his septic cleaning service appeared, things went downhill again. Joe too had never been one to hide. When he started his business, bought his vacuum truck and painted it, he'd emblazoned a big, blue infinity symbol on the back of the tank. *Métis owned and proudly operated*! Wherever he went, his truck shouted it to people. Soon, folks were stopping my dad in town to talk about his *beau-frère*.

"*J'savait pas ta femme était métisse, y me dissait. Pourquoi ta marié une métisse*?"

My mother snorted. "*Qui ta demandé ça*? *'Tait tu le vieux Durand? Yé't'un raciste, lui*."

"*Bin, là*," my dad cleared his throat glanced away from my mother. He looked at me and said, "*Si Joe 'tait un docteur, personne sen crisserait si yé métis, mais yé pas un docteur, yé t'un* labourer, *pis* so what *si y'avait sa propre* business. *Y travaillait dans marde*. *Ya pas d'fierté*, *là*, *dans marde, t'sé. Non*," he shook his head. "*Non*, *c'est sale*, *pis c'est tout*."

I tried to follow. "So what?" I said. "What does that matter?"

My dad slammed his fist on the table. "*Quessé tu pense ça fait quand on* advertise *qu'on n'est yaenk bon q'pour travailler dans marde*?" he said.

My mother was trembling beside me. "*Tu t'entend tu*, *Émile*? *Tu pense tu chi pas comme tout le monde*? *Moi j'mais jamais caché*; *j'ai jamais advertisé pa'ce que c'est* no one's business, *mais c'pas la meme chose que se cacher*, *ou denier*. *Maudit menteur*."

"*Bin*, *là*, *Collette—*

"*Bin*, *là*, *rien. Té comme ta mère. Le nez fin et pis tu te pense mieux qu'les autres. Arrête, OK? J'en ait plein du cul*."

No one had touched their plates much, except Becky, who, while we talked, had cleaned hers neat. She'd stripped the flesh off her chicken wings, and piled the bones on the side. I tore a strip a flesh from my chicken breast and chewed it without tasting. The waitress brought us more drinks; we grunted at her, our mouths full, when she asked about the food, and she retreated from

our table. Dad swallowed his drink, quick, and Mom glared at him. Becky avoided eye contact. I sipped my beer.

My dad chewed his food and stared at me. "*Écoute*, Rich. O*ublit Joe*. That's done now. We can't fix that," he said. His words had started to slur together, his lids drooped over his eyes. "Just, take some pride."

"How the hell do you expect me to do that after that story?"

"*Maudite tête dure*!" He slammed his fist on the table.

My mother touched my arm. "*On est encore icitte. Ça count pas pour quetchose?*"

"*Maudite tête dure*," my father said again. "*Tu vas voir comment c'est pas facile une fois que ta une femme et des enfants*. You'll change your tune."

"A wife and kids is the last goddamn thing I want," I spat the words at my father, but the words hung over the table like poison gas. Becky stared at me, blood in her eyes. I realized what I'd done, how I'd revealed something I'd kept hidden from her. How it must have struck her like a blade between the ribs. She rose and excused herself. I watched her retreat to the washroom.

"Shit, Becks, listen—" I called after her, and I rose to follow, but my mother grabbed my arm and yanked me down.

"*Laisse-la*," she said. She shook her head and sighed.

"*Maudite tête dure*," my father muttered and he reached for his drink.

30.

Becky and I didn't speak after we returned home. She locked herself in the bedroom and sobbed. I could hear her through the walls. I sat on the sofa and listened to the howl of the wind through the cracks in the window sill, and tried not to think about what had happened. I had told the truth, ugly as it was. It was the truth, so I told myself. Still, it gnawed at me. I wandered into the kitchen and looked inside the fridge. I grabbed a can of beer and stared at it. It was a leftover from when Dean had swung by a few nights ago; we'd sat on the sofa and smoked pot and drank beer while Becky wrote a paper in the kitchen. She'd asked us to be quiet, but after a while, and after a few beers, things had got loud and she'd kicked Dean out. We argued over it, and gone to bed angry. The whole thing had spiralled out of control, the matter unsettled, left to stew.

Was funny how things worked out: Winnipeg had been nothing but misery. Since the day I moved into the city, things had started to sour on me. I'd been behind the eight ball from the get go. I just couldn't get ahead. I dropped onto the couch and sipped my beer, and through the static I watched some cop show on TV. Someone had been murdered and someone had to pay. I had no clue what was happening. I drained my beer and fetched another. I heard Becky stirring.

The door to the bedroom opened. Becky emerged and she paused in the living room, and looked briefly into the kitchen at me, then glanced away. She tossed a couple bed sheets onto the couch, and grabbed her laptop. Then she vanished back into the bedroom; the door slammed shut and the sound echoed over the television.

31.

Sometime after lunch, I texted Dean and asked if he wanted to shoot some pucks. Becky had left early to study at a library or something. She hadn't exactly said. Since waking, I'd been thinking about what to say to her, but I grew tired of waiting so I said fuck it. I swung by Dean's place in South Osborne. After stopping by a vendor to pick up a six pack we drove around in the Buick looking for an empty rink, and we found one in Saint-Boniface where the ice hadn't been cleared in a while, had a couple inches of snow piled overtop, but there were some snow shovels in the benches, and so we laced our skates and cracked our beers and spent half-an hour cleaning the ice. We skated back and forth, pushing the shovels across the ice, gathering snow against the sides, and then tossing snow over the boards. The wind howled in our ears, blasted our faces and stung our eyes whenever we gathered speed, so we retreated to the covered benches to drink and warm up. Once the ice was clear, we tossed some pucks onto the rink and skated around with our sticks, skating to the pucks and blasting them toward the empty nets. We picked up speed, skated up and down the length of the ice, and looping around by the boards and back up toward the blue line, we passed the puck back and forth, until someone finally slapped the puck into the net. One puck clanged off the crossbar and sailed over the chain link backing and sunk into the snow bank behind the rink. Dean went and sat a while out of the wind.

He cracked open another beer and shouted instructions to me as I lined pucks on the blue line and slapped them toward the net. Hand lower on the shaft! No, no. Not like that. Lower!

"I've played hockey before, you asshole!" I shouted.

"Then quit whiffing your slapper!"

I retrieved the pucks in the net and blasted them against the boards. There was something satisfying about the heady thud, the cold crack of rubber on wood. I channeled all my frustrations through the stick, into the arc and swing, into the motion, the violent sweep and follow through. I felt more like myself than I had in weeks, and for a moment at least, I thought maybe, Becky and I could get through this. But, like a stick after a slap shot, the tension sprung to its original form.

Dean hollered for me to come over. I skated over to the bench and sat, and we smoked a joint, and finished our beers. We talked awhile about living in the city, how it was different from living in the country, how you could go through your day without ever seeing anyone you knew, how you could lose yourself in that crowd and forget where you came from, who you were.

"You can be whoever you want to be," Dean said.

I wasn't sure what he meant. I had always figured that people never changed. Not really. They were always who they grew up to be: products of their past.

Dean hefted his hockey stick and brought the shaft up to eye level. He looked down the length of the shaft toward the blade. Then he pressed the blade against the ground, and he leaned down on the shaft, testing the flex. I watched how it bent, how it returned to its shape.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not sure, feels a bit off. It might be busted up inside."

He hopped back onto the ice and skated around and tested his stick. I closed my eyes and listened to his skates cutting across the ice, the sharp scrape whenever he stopped, the shower of snow, the slap of his stick blade, the puck hitting iron. There was a sudden crack, wood splitting, and the chain-link rattled. Dean swore. I opened my eyes and saw his stick blade tumbling in the air behind the net.

"Guess you were right," I said.

We took off our skates, dug the pucks out of the net, and searched the snow banks for the ones that had gone missing. My legs felt funny, unused to walking after a couple hours on skates; suddenly having to work again for every step was jarring. I leaned against the Buick and wiggled my toes to work blood into them. Dean stood by the door to the Buick, hands tucked in his pits.

We chucked our things into the backseat. I started the engine and let the engine warm up. We lit a couple cigarettes and watched wind blow snow across the lot. The sun was dropping low

and shadows spilled out of everything. I flicked the radio on and began to spin the dial, settled on a classic rock station—*There's* n*o time left for you, No time left for you, No time, no time, no*—

Dean kicked garbage out from under his feet, pushing it back under the seat.

"Damn," I said. "The mirror's off again." Dean watched as I rolled the window down and adjusted the side mirror.

"What happened there?" Dean asked, and I told him about the brown Dodge truck in the fall, how I'd gotten a replacement mirror off an old Pontiac, from Carlson, and drilled it into the door. The colours didn't match, but it didn't matter. I told Dean how I had followed this one guy home, but nothing came of it.

"It's a bit *broche à foin*, but it works."

"What's that?"

"Jury rigged," I said. "Jury rigged."

Dean nodded and scratched his chin. "I'm hungry," he said. "Let's get a burger."

We drove over to the Sals on Marion and ordered a couple cheese nips. Dean grabbed a booth by the window and we watched traffic funnel toward the Norwood Bridge as we ate. Cars kept pulling into the parking lot, stopping, and with the engines still running, the drivers ran into the Shoppers or the Liquor Mart. Smoke and steam poured from the exhausts. We ordered coffee to wash down the nips, and I went to the washroom while we waited for the waitress to refill our cups. I sat on the shitter and checked my phone. I typed up a message for Becky, erased it, typed another, then finally decided not to send it, and headed back into the restaurant.

"I miss the days when you could have a cigarette inside. We used to spend hours smoking and drinking coffee at the Sals by Deacon's Corner," Dean said when I slipped into the booth.

"Deacon's? What the hell were you doing out there?"

"I grew up in Lorette."

"No shit?"

"Moved away when I was seventeen."

"I had no idea."

"I loved that place."

"Didn't know Lorette had anything going for it."

"No, Deacon's."

"Oh, that was a weird spot."

"Loved that placed," Dean said, and he nodded to himself.

"My dad used to take me there," I said. "He would always get the Salisbury steak, and I always thought that was real classy, until I found out it was only ground beef. Then I wondered why he just didn't order a nip instead."

Dean shrugged. "More meat," he said. "And less bread."

I scratched my cheek. "You remember the game machines they had in the tables?"

"Oh yeah, I remember those. They never worked."

"I always thought that was sad. I begged my dad for a quarter every time and I'd plug it into the machine, and nothing would happen."

"Someone probably spilled pop on them."

"My dad would make a fuss every time and get his quarter back from the lady at the cash register."

Dean laughed. "Good on him."

"It was embarrassing. This grown man arguing over a quarter."

"Still, at least he didn't let them screw him."

I nodded and sipped on my coffee. Dean glanced through the window. There was a man standing outside of the liquor store. He had a cup in his hand, and he held it out, and rattled it at whoever walked by. "I didn't go for the games," Dean said. "I went for the atmosphere."

"That's weird."

"It was great. You had all these people stopping in to grab a bite to eat and cup of coffee. You could just sit there and listen to them talk, their accents, their stories. If you listened enough, you heard some crazy stuff. I used to cut class with some buddies from Lorette Collegiate and we would drive over to the Sals and sit there for hours. Truckers have the best stories. I would listen to them talk about their life on the road and I'll be damned if it didn't sound like the thing to do."

"So why aren't you trucking?"

"Had a DUI."

After we finished our coffees, we drove to Club St-B to pick up a twelve at the vendor. I told Dean about that patch of bush around where the Seine dumped into the Red. We could drink and have a fire and chuck our empties out onto the ice. Dean nodded and told me he knew about

the place. He rode the monkey trails that criss-crossed the rail hill, the bush trails that mountain bikers used in the summer. Local kids would hike up there to hang out, drink liquor, smoke dope and chuck stones at the passing trains.

The Buick swerved over the ice and I spun the wheel to centre her in my lane. The roads were slick with fresh snow, and the warm southern air had caused grooves to form in the ice atop the pavement. I could see tracks of cars that had been shot out toward the curb. The Buick pulled right and I spun the wheel counter-clockwise, then it pulled left, and I spun the wheel clockwise. Dean hollered for me to slow down and I slammed the brakes. The Buick began to spin, and not all at once, it happened so slowly, you could have climbed out and watched it happen. The back end was suddenly leading the front end and the Buick skid sideways in front of the hospital. Cars slammed their brakes, and let us pass. The Buick caught a snow bank and it stopped. Fat, bloated snowflakes settled on the windshield.

"Fucking winter," said Dean.

Inside the vendor, a man in a greasy parka stood by the counter, squinting at the beer list on the wall. Dean grabbed my arm, and pointed through the vendor's door to the bar. There was a girl on stage, prancing around in her underwear.

"Come on," he said. "Let's drink here."

We went back outside, around to the street, and through the front entrance where a three hundred pound man wearing sunglasses and an OBO Security t-shirt patted us down and charged us 5 dollars just to get through the door. I went and ordered a couple beers while Dean picked out a table in pervert alley, up against the stage. The bartender placed a couple bottles in front of me, and as I frowned, he shrugged and said the draft selection was no good. I grabbed the bottles and went to join Dean. He had picked a spot so close to the stage you could see the girl's stubble.

"Thanks," Dead said. "I'll get the next round."

After a bit, Dean went and took some cash out of the ATM by the pool table, and bought a pack of smokes from the machine on the wall, then he tossed a couple fives on stage so that the girl spread her legs in his direction. He slapped the stage with his hand and howled like a dog. I went to take a leak and as I stood at the urinal, staring at a poster telling me to drink responsibly, I overheard a guy, by the sink, talking on his cellphone. His voice cut through me, and tore away the scab from the night Becky had told me she was pregnant.

"*Non mais, Jeannette, c'est une très bonne nuit pour chasser du gibier. Il a des très beaux mecs, ici, ce soir.*" The faucet gushed and I missed whatever else he said.

I tried to glance over my shoulder to look at him, but my neck wouldn't stretch that way. He walked out of the washroom. I finished quick, washed my hands, and headed out after him. I tried to spot him, but the place was filling up fast despite the storm. The girl on stage was down to her birthday suit, and a crowd of perverts had surrounded the stage; they were all slapping the stage and hurling 5s and 10s at her. The music was loud, the base trembled. It felt as if my heart was in a paint shaker. People hollered at each other across the tables. They'd lowered the lights, and you could hardly see the other side of the room. The floor was sticky from spilled drinks. My shoes tore along like Velcro. I went and ordered another beer and a shot of whiskey.

While I waited for the barman to bring me my drinks, I overheard two men that sounded like the one from the washroom, and I glanced around and spotted the pair along the bar. They were sipping on mixed drinks and eyeing the stage. They had slick, gelled hair, and wore shirts with collars carefully popped up. Sleeves rolled. They wore bright chains around their necks and flashy watches around their wrists. They talked about the girl's ass in that odd, salt water French.

The barman brought my drinks and I shot the whiskey and chugged my beer and listened to the two men talk. They weren't even talking about the girl anymore, but every word they said made my blood boil. Their easy, educated French snaked into my ears, rattled around in my head then slithered down and wrapped itself around my heart, squeezing. Watch *les*, *Menoncle* Alfred had said, *les français sont presque pire*. The English had tried to stop us from using French, and the old barn had stood unused, falling into disrepair, but it was there nevertheless; but the French that came after had torn down our barn, and tried to rebuild it, the way they thought a barn ought to be built. Now the old barn that had sprung, rooted in this land, was gone; nothing but a fading memory in the mind of some old folks.

People squeezed in around the bar, jostling everyone about, and I found myself shoulder to shoulder with the two Frenchmen. "V*ous pensez qu'vous êtes si bon, hein*," I said.

The two men glanced at me and blinked. How to make them understand? I tried to take a step toward them, but my foot landed wrong and I stumbled. I grabbed the bar to steady myself, and I ended up jutting a finger at them instead. They frowned, and glanced at each other, unsure about what exactly was happening. The whiskey was hitting me hard now, and I couldn't help it.

"*Avec votre crisse de langue pure*. What a load of horseshit."

"*Non, mais, c'est quoi ton problème*?"

"*Laisse le*," said the second. He grabbed the first by the arm and pulled him away, and I took another step toward them, but I stumbled and caught myself on the bar. Someone bumped into me, and I glanced over my shoulder and spotted the man from the washroom.

"You!" I shouted.

The man looked at me and blinked, and I before I hit him, I saw that he recognized me. I clipped him on the cheek and he stumbled back and fell and he stared up at me with a bewildered look in his eye as I shouted obscenities at him.

The barman yelled. Folks scattered like ducks in hunting season and I felt the hand on my shoulder, but never saw the security guard's fist.

I sat on the curb afterward, rubbing snow on my face. Dean crouched next to me, and told me how I'd crumpled after the first punch. I tried to stand, but my hands sunk into the snow and I toppled onto my side. Blood jack hammered inside my skull and it oozed out beneath my eye and dripped down my cheek. I grabbed a handful of snow and stamped it over my face to staunch the blood and the snow turned red in my hand. It dripped red through my fingers.

Dean tossed my coat over my shoulders. "What the hell got into you?" he said.

I coughed and wiped snot from my nose. I tried to stand again, but slipped. "Sonuvabitch deserved it," I mumbled.

"Yeah, sure," Dean said. "Come on, I'm getting cold."

I felt his hand slip under my arm and he helped me to my feet. We started to walk toward the Buick, but I slipped, and fell into the snow again. I lay there, squinting up at Dean who stared down at me and shook his head. The street lamp behind him flared like a halo. Everything started to spin: the snow, the lights, and the trees and cars and houses. Dean's face began to melt, all his features sheared by the soft wind and the passage of time. I closed my eyes and moaned. I felt his hands on my hips, on my thighs. I tried to push him away. He shoved his hands into my pockets.

"God damn it," he muttered. "Where are your keys?" Something jingled, and his hands disappeared. "Alright," he said. "Sit tight."

I lay back in the snow and watched flakes swirled around the street lights. I could feel the cold against my skin, but it didn't hurt to breathe, and the air softened the swelling on my cheek, the cut in my skin. Snow fell around me and I thought this wasn't so bad. I could sleep here.

"Come on, wake up," Dean said. I opened my eyes and spotted his big nose, hovering inches from my face. He shook me by the shoulders. "Come on," he said. "It's time to go." He helped me to my feet, and into the Buick. I sprawled out into the passenger seat. Dean climbed into the driver's seat and fiddled with the knobs and buttons. Music blared out of the speakers. "Son of a bitch, where are the lights," he said. He killed the music. After fiddling with a couple switches on the steering column, and causing the wipers to squeal across the windshield, he let out a cheer, "Got em." He glanced at me and sighed. "Alright, let's go."

The Buick juddered. Snow crunched underneath the tires. I shut my eyes and listened.

32.

Snow piled against the boxes on the ground. The box lids fluttered loosely in the wind. I spotted my name inked roughly in black felt. So this is it, I thought, this is how it ends. I took the box into my arms—it was light. I only had a few shirts, a pair of slacks, some socks, and gitches. Three books and a statue of a fisherman with a hook in his pants was all I had in the world, other than the Buick. I looked up at the house, the window with the cold draft that no amount of plastic could stem, and I realized I had lost the only thing of value I'd ever had. The lights flickered, and shadows spilled against the ceiling. And I stood there, in the snow, thinking of the all things that I wanted to tell Becky, and I stared at the window while snow swept into my shoes.

Part 3

33.

Winter came in hard and cold. The north wind cut up your skin in minutes and froze cars solid to the ground, rooting them in ice and snow. Batteries died suddenly in the night, and block heaters tethered to electric outlets became life preservers. Holed up at Dean's for the past month, I had to park on the street. I couldn't run an extension cord from the house—Dean told me a city worker had been electrocuted and killed after he ran over an electric cord clearing snow from the sidewalk on a riding snow blower—and so, I had to run out two or three times a night to start the Buick, whenever the temperature dropped 30 below, to keep the engine from freezing solid. And I would sit in the Buick with the motor running, bundled up my parka, toque, and mitts, and have a cigarette, and think about the guys from the powder coat plant. Christmas had come and gone; I wondered if they'd found work or were still bumming on E.I. The holidays had been rough. I had spent them working at the call centre, making double time. I had told my parents that Becky and I were taking some time apart, to think about our future, but truth was Becky and I hadn't spoken since she threw me out, and I figured we were finished. It had all happened so fast with too much heat, like milk on a stove, and had burned up quick.

Dean lived on Jubilee, in a hundred year-old, pre-war house that he rented, and he had let me crash there. After a few days had turned into a few weeks and we sort of became roommates, I gave him some cash for rent and built myself a spot in the corner of the basement. The cracked concrete floor was cold, and I bought a space heater and a couple throw rugs at Canadian Tire on Boxing Day, and it made a world of difference. I would lay there late at night, on an old, sagging single-bed mattress and stare up at the unfinished ceiling: the crossbeams, and the braces, and all of the intricate woodwork that allowed life above to unfold without worry. I had a little radio that I played softly, tuning to a rock station. Some nights, when an old familiar tune came on over the waves, I would think of Becky and wonder how she was doing.

The phones lit up over the holidays and I threw myself into work; I worked 10, 12 hour days, 6, 7 days a week. I gave up hope of ever finding Nicole again, and forgot about her; and I forgot about Alfred too, unable to face his deteriorating condition. Chantal and I texted back and

forth for a while, sent dirty photos and fantastic descriptions of what we would do to each other, but one day she did not respond, and I forgot about that too. I spent my evenings driving around the city, hours at a time, listening to the radio, losing myself in the lights and smells and sounds of the city, but gas wasn't cheap and more often than not, I ended up smoking in the car in front of Dean's place. One evening, I found in my glove box the small, plastic bison that I had rescued from the crazed man in Norwood Flats. I wiped the dust off and placed it on the dashboard. And it stood, and surveyed the city through the windshield. I left it there, on the dashboard, as I drove to work and back home again, and to the store and to the mall, and the cheap seats Cinema 8 on Pembina, where I could catch a movie for a lousy 2 bucks. It became a comfort to me, a resilient friend who stood by without judgement.

I spent New Year's Eve in the city, hitting on a Filipino girl who thought I was funny, but who left with another guy and I ended up jerking off in the basement at 3 in the morning, sad and alone, unable to come because I was too drunk. And I stared at the ceiling, at the crossbeams and the braces. Dean and Esther were upstairs. I could hear them through the floor, telling each other lies, making wild, impossible promises that they wouldn't remember in the morning.

Esther was a girl from work that Dean told me he had been trying to bed for months. All night he had hounded her, and gravitated around her like some pathetic moon. I'd watched them dance; she moved in close and slipped her hands along his body, only to push him away when he reached to kiss her. She would smile, tease him; her eyes fixed on his, and invite him for another round. I couldn't stand to watch and retreated to the kitchen where I ran into the Filipino girl.

We'd worked together a couple shifts and got along, chatted briefly between calls when we had the chance. She'd lived in the city her whole life and found my stories about the country exotic and captivating. I told her about Larry and Al and how we'd once strapped a lawn chair to the box of a pickup truck and rode around on gravel roads, and how we blasted traffic signs with a shotgun. I told her about the time in Marchand, at the Fleurette's, when Trevor and Al had once tried cooking honey oil, only to send a tangerine fireball up into the sky. I described the fire, and the black charred trees, and how pine needles crackled in the sand. It was my best story. The girl laughed and touched my arm. Others stopped to listen and a crowd gathered around me. Then the well dried up. I ran out of stories. So the crowd asked me to pronounce things in French, because it amused them. So I strung some words together, and they clapped their hands and laughed.

We downed jello shots and passed a couple joints around the room. I followed a couple into the washroom where we did a line of coke off a magazine cover. An old Sports Illustrated. It was a fine time, until the girl reached into the man's jeans, and he lifted her shirt. I slipped out of the washroom and followed some others outside. We smoked cigarettes under the eavestroughs, and peed in the back lane. Strangers walked by and hollered at us. Happy New Year! A boy from work, no older than a high school whelp, suddenly bent in half and threw up on a snow bank, and we yelled at him, and shoved him into the snow, and rubbed snow into his face until he cried out for us to stop. So we left him there, alone, and went back into the house as the countdown began.

I spotted the Filipino girl, who'd laughed at my stories, and I sidled up next to her, placed a hand on her hip, pulling her close to me, but she glanced up and, frowning, she pushed my arm away. A man wearing a flat-billed ball cap, carrying a couple cans of beer, squeezed through the crowd toward the girl and the girl grabbed a beer and smiled up at him.

The clock struck midnight and people started to yell. Happy New Year!

Arms and lips and hair flew around the room as people shook hands, hugged and kissed. Couples drilled tongues into each others' throats. Dean shook my hand, squeezed it tight, while he shouted *Happy New Year* in my ear. The music grew louder and people huddled together to shout into each others' ears. Dean and Esther vanished up the stairs; the Filipino girl disappeared with the man in the flat-billed ball cap. Someone threw up in the planter in the corner.

Then the house seemed empty, and I couldn't find anyone. There were people flat on the floor in the living room, smoking weed and listening to music, but I did not recognize them, and I had no patience for their words. My bladder screamed and so I made for the washroom, only to find the girl sitting naked on the cabinet, a man's face between her legs. I closed the door gently, and then stumbled out through the back door and peed in the yard. After, when I looked up at the sky, and saw only a blanket of piss-stained clouds, I thought this was a hell of a way to start the year. I could hear someone scream in the distance, cursing. Sirens raced by, out front, on Jubilee; cops or paramedics, I couldn't tell.

I drifted back inside and through the house, spying upon people with whom I had worked less than a month, and I wondered who they were. And I realized that I did not know them. They were strangers to me.

34.

A few days later, I worked up the nerve to phone Larry and he called me a jackass for not phoning him sooner. He had broken his leg falling off the roof of a house trailer. He'd missed the pile of snow below and landed on the icy driveway, twig-snapped his femur and had been laid up ever since. He had spent the holidays in his basement, drinking beer and watching television. His mother brought him food and drink, turkey leftovers and cold *tourtière*. Céleste visited whenever she could, but with her job, bad roads, and the demands of her infant son, she didn't have enough time. So with my hours down at the call centre after the holidays, I drove out to see Larry.

"'bout time, *mon crisse*," Larry said when I arrived.

He tried to rise out of his chair, but his cast was large and heavy, from heel to crotch, so I waved him off, and he sat back in relief. I reached down to shake his hand and he pulled me into an awkward half-hug, a single-arm slap on the back. He offered me a beer and we sat, and stared at the television for a while, before he glanced at me and cleared his throat.

"So how you been?" he asked.

"OK," I said and then I told him about living in the city, how it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. How the snow routes and the parking bans didn't make a lick of sense, and how the city had already towed the Buick twice because I parked in the wrong spot and couldn't figure out the damn street signs. I told him about the noise and lights and the neighbours and the traffic, and all of the things that added upon layers of stress and rage. I told him about my new job, about Dean, and the call centre, and the weird city kids that worked long hours even though they were in high school; the job didn't compare to the powder coat plant, it was stressful and dissatisfying and left nothing of your work for you see at the end of the day, but it paid the bills and would tie me over until I figured things out. Still, I was broke most of the time, spending all my money on alcohol and pot and cigarettes—I was up to a pack a day—and I couldn't afford to go out. I didn't mind, I hated crowds. The mall was a hellhole and the restaurants were overpriced. I drove around for fun. I would drive for hours, aimless and without desire, and I would stop in new places, and sit and smoke and stare at the plastic bison I had anchored to my dashboard.

"What did you expect?" Larry said.

"It's not all bad," I said. "There's this spot by the river, where the Seine dumps into the Red. The city gets so quiet there; you can hardly here the traffic over the wind and the snow." It was a place of serenity where you could contemplate a life without complication or contention.

Larry listened to me ramble and he sipped his beer and nodded along. With a grimace, he leaned forward. “OK, but what happened with Becky?”

I stared at the floor. The throw rug was ragged, worn down by a thousand feet. Finally, I glanced up at Larry. “I don’t know,” I said. “Really don’t.” I took a sip of my beer; it tasted stale, like it had been left out overnight. “She threw me out, is what happened,” I said.

The stairwell creaked behind us, and I glanced over my shoulder. Larry’s mother carried a basket of dirty laundry down the steps. She smiled in my direction, and then veered toward the laundry machine across the basement. I watched her work, lift the lid on the washer, and pour in the detergent. The basement had never been finished: wide open floors, with bare concrete walls, and steel telecaster posts under tripled 2x8 support beams. I turned to Larry again and watched as he thrust a finger at me.

“All I know is that Becks thinks you want nothing to do with her or the kid,” he said. He was red in the face, his eyes narrow, and his lips snarling, covered in spit. I’d never seen him like this. He shoved his finger at me again. “You gotta be straight with her,” he said.

I knew Becks and Céleste were close, and Céleste must have been leaning on Larry. And I remembered about Larry and his father. He had told me once how he’d never known his father. His father had left him when he was nothing but a pile of blubbering fat on the floor, still unable to walk, or talk, or shit without a diaper. Growing up, it had hurt Larry deeply to see others with their fathers. He had had men in his life try to fill that role, like Fred Vandal, who’d taught him to shoot and hunt, but who had ultimately let him down.

He chewed me out, and I bit my tongue and listened. Then his mother appeared, laundry basket on her hip, and she nodded and said, “Let me tell you.” And she dropped the basket to the floor and sat next to Larry. She reached out and grabbed my knee, and stared at me for a bit, and then she began to speak. She told me about Larry’s father, and how they had fallen madly in love together when they were barely adults. They had both dropped out of school, eager to start work. He got a job at the bakery in town, and she cleaned beds at the hospital. They were married in a small ceremony that their families could hardly afford; they rented a small house across from the high school. At first, when they sat together at home for supper, and watched their ex-classmates walking home from school, they laughed, convinced that they had made the right decision.

Larry’s dad had promised her the world, and Larry’s mom didn’t doubt he would deliver. They were happy for a time. Yet, as in all things, there were problems; life didn’t go as planned.

Larry's dad worked long hours, starting early at 3 or 4 in the morning. Larry's mom worked late. They hardly ever saw each other. And no matter how long and hard they worked, they could still hardly afford their house. Then the convenience store started selling sliced bread shipped in from the city, and the bakery let Larry's dad go. The wage at the hospital wasn't much, not enough for Larry's mom to support the both of them, let alone the baby on the way.

It was not long after Larry was born that his dad left, headed west for Alberta to work the oil boom. At first, his mother believed it was for the best, and that Larry's dad would send home money for her and the baby, but after months of near total silence, she understood that he wanted to start over. He wanted nothing to do with her or Larry.

"Only thing he ever sent were a few short letters," she said. "I can show you."

"He doesn't want to read those old things," Larry said.

"Pish-pash," she said and headed up the stairs.

Larry grimaced and sipped his beer. I thought of my own dad, who had grown up without ever really knowing his own father. *Pépère* had died when he was very young, and Dad had only known him through the stories that his older siblings told. I drained my beer and was about ready to stand when Larry's mother reappeared and dropped a shoebox full of letters in my lap.

35.

I left soon after. Larry's words had sunk like a hot stone in my gut, burning my stomach, causing steam to rise in my throat: *you gotta be straight with her*. As I drove into town, I mulled the words over. I swung by Chantal's and knocked on her door, but the lights were off, and there was no answer, so I left. I stopped at the Petro to fuel up, and I glared at the kid working the cash register as he nodded his chin at me and I swiped my change from his hand. He looked hurt, but I paid it no mind, shoved the change into my pocket. I stepped outside and climbed into the Buick.

The sky was dark and though it was not yet evening, street lights flickered to life and cast a sulphur glow across the Petro and the parking lot. My stomach rumbled, and I felt a sharp pang behind my eyes. The beer had worn off and left me with a headache. I decided to grab something to eat and headed over to the restaurant.

I grabbed a seat by the window. It was same table the old farmers had crowded around in the fall, when I asked them about my dad, the morning I learned about Alfred's stroke. It seemed

like years had passed since then, but in truth it was nothing but a few months. The waitress came over and greeted me by name, and I looked up at her and smiled, and could not for the life of me remember her name. I had seen her a hundred times before, had bumped into her at the arena, at the liquor store, and at a social or two over the years, and yet I couldn't remember her name. She took my order and ran it to the kitchen. And as I watched her go, I stopped myself from reaching out and touching her elbow. I wanted to apologize, to confess to her that I did not remember her name, that somewhere along the way it had fallen out of my head.

My order arrived and I ate quietly, staring out at the parking lot. I had ordered a burger, with a side of fries, and they tasted fine, though the fries were a little soggy, and the burger was burnt, and I wondered if the cook had snuck out for a cigarette while preparing my food.

I stared at the parking lot and chewed. A reflection in the window caught my eye; a man seated at another table was dousing his plate with ketchup. I didn't recognize him, not that it was unusual, people came in off the highway to eat from time to time, but there was something about the way that he smiled, half-apologetically, as the ketchup bottle squirted and blasted air through the sauce-clogged tip, that seemed familiar, like I had seen that smile before. I couldn't place it. I shrugged the feeling off, and stared through the reflection into the lot again, but the lot was dark, the glow of the street light by the Petro insufficient to light the restaurant's lot. The restaurant's own light flickered on the street corner, the bulb nearly burnt.

There was a flash of light, a truck turned into the lot, sweeping its high beams across the parked cars and trucks, and I spotted, for an instant only, the old, brown dodge truck that had hit me last fall—it was parked only a few spots down from my Buick. The food turned to sawdust in my mouth. I pushed my plate away and stood. I dropped a 10 on the table, and walked out of the restaurant, toward the truck.

The air gnawed at my skin, and the wind swirled around me, but I paid it no attention. I placed a hand on the hood; the metal was cold to the touch. The truck had been parked a while. I drew my hand across the grill and the headlight. The housing was cracked, but the headlamp had been replaced. It was hard to tell anything in the dark, but I was certain that this was the truck. I glanced toward the restaurant, through the large floor to ceiling windows, at the men and women at the tables, eating, paying me no mind. I stood and waited by the truck until the man came out, and when he did, I spit in the dirt and watched him near. He was thin and tall, with half-combed hair that danced in the wind. He spotted me and smiled half-apologetically.

"Hey," I said. "Is this your truck?"

The man glanced toward the old, brown dodge. "That old thing?"

I nodded and took a step in his direction. "Yeah, I was wondering if you happened to be driving it last fall. Same truck clipped me on *la ligne à Faucher*, took off my side mirror," I said. It all came out, faster than I could think it. "I was driving an old Buick," I said, and pointed to it.

The man snapped his fingers. "Yes," he said. "I've been looking for you!"

"I've been looking for you!" I said.

"You smashed up my headlamp," he said. "And the fender's scratched to shit. You owe me for that."

I flinched, frowning. "No fucking way," I said. "You owe me for a side mirror. You were driving in the middle of the fucking road."

The man looked at the Buick, then back at me. He crossed his arm and shook a little, and I realized he was shivering. "Tell you what," he said. "Let's call it even."

"Even!?"

"Hell, it looks like you got yourself a new mirror, and I got myself a new headlamp, and the fender don't need nothing on an old truck like mine."

I spluttered, unable to form coherent words to waylay his argument. "*Mon crisse d'enfant d'chienne*," I said.

"Well I don't know what that means, but it seems to me that we're even," he said, and he smiled again, half-apologetically, one corner of his lips curling upward. He stepped forward, and stabbed an open hand toward me. "What do you say?"

Reluctantly, I grabbed his hand and shook. The man's smile deepened, but did not touch his eyes. I felt a twinge in my heart, a feeling that he had tricked me, that he had taken something from me and fooled me into thinking I had agreed to it.

Watch les.

I pulled the man toward me and swung my free arm into his stomach. The man cried out and bent over as air burst from his lungs. He toppled, winded, onto the gravel lot. While the man wheezed and coughed, I climbed into the Buick and started the engine. The man moved, pushing himself up to one knee, and he glanced toward me, seeking me through the light, the windshield. He rose to his feet and stared at the Buick, then shambled over toward his truck. We were hardly even, but it was over.

36.

Toward the end of January, le *comité culturel de Ste-Antoinette* held its annual play. They were putting on a show about the legend of the flying canoe, *la Chasse-Galerie*, with a twist: the characters were Métis trappers instead of French-Canadian lumberjacks. My mother had told me they'd hired a big city director who "wanted to shake things up," and so, decided that the women would play the men's parts, and men the women's parts.

"It's a bold step in the radical modernisation of our folklore," she told me over the phone. I knew those weren't her words. When I asked what they meant, I could hear her shrug. "*Ah, bin, t'sé. Les temps y change*," she said.

When I arrived, the show was already underway, and there were no seats left, so I bought a standing room ticket and stood at the back. The lights were dim and they flickered softly, and I tried to spot my dad in the crowd, but could not make anyone out. I knew that theatre wasn't his thing, playacting made him uncomfortable, but my mother would have dragged him along.

A woman stood on stage; I recognized Madame Jolicoeur, my high school math teacher. She paced back and forth in a buckskin outfit, kicking up Styrofoam snow. She wore mukluks on her feet, a red sash swayed on her hips and a racoon hat bobbed on her head. She began to speak, though I could barely hear, and half-a-dozen women in fur outfits and hideous fake beards, burst onto the stage. On their backs, they carried bundles of supplies to exchange for beaver pelts. One girl held a wine skin high in the air for the audience to see. They walked across the stage, and the lights flickered and dimmed. The women stopped and pretended to make camp. They piled their supplies in the corner, and sat around a campfire. Reddish light burst up from the circle of stones, and burning wood crackled through the speakers. After they sat, they complained about being out *en dérouine* on New Year's Eve while their men were stuck at the fort. The old bourgeois had an eye for the men, and the women feared for their virtue. One woman cursed Madame Jolicoeur.

"*On aurait pas du t'écouté*," she said.

She said they should have stayed on an extra night, should have waited until *après le jour de l'an* to depart. A blizzard had caught them by surprise and cut them off from the Indian camp. Now it would take days to reach the camp. They would miss the New Year's Eve festivities, for nothing, and their darlings would be forced to dance with the bourgeois' men: dirty Scotsmen on the company's payroll. The women shuddered and sighed in unison and together wondered aloud

what they wouldn't give to be back at the fort.

On cue, a cloud of smoke burst from one corner of the stage, the lights flashed, changing colours rapidly before settling on a deep, dim, red. Music whistled sharply over the sound system and the lights turned bright red, focused on the actor emerging from the smoke. The devil strode out onto the stage and the audience gasped when they spotted and recognized under the red-hose tights, the red coat flecked with goat fur, the red painted face and bony horns poking through his hair, the town priest, Father Lesage. He held a flimsy pitchfork like a staff, and he slowly waved his arm to the crowd as he did every Sunday. Then he turned to the women and after an awkward obligatory moment of hysteria where they shouted warnings to each other, and reached for their knives and their axes, the women paused to listen to the devil/priest as he offered them a chance to reach the fort by midnight. With a snap of his fingers, he produced a canoe; a canoe descended slowly from the rafters on a squeaky pulley, and swayed a couple feet off the stage floor.

The devil/priest offered the women his flying canoe on condition that they do not curse or swear or take the lord's name in vain during their journey, and that they return to camp by sunup, lest they forfeit their ever-living souls to the devil for all of eternity. Then the lights flashed, and the sound of thunder thundered over the sound system. It felt just like mass.

The women huddled together, and they whispered nonsense loudly enough for the crowd to understand it was nonsense, then turned to the devil.

"You have a deal!" they yelled and squealed, and pretended to jump into the canoe. The devil/priest vanished in another cloud of smoke—you could see Father Lesage scrambling down the stairs, off the stage—and the backdrop behind the women began to scroll sideways like toilet paper, and the trees painted on the backdrop grew smaller, shorter, falling away, making way for the clouds and stars and a silver crescent moon. And with their feet sticking out the bottom of the canoe, the women paddled through the sky.

I felt a hand on my arm, and I glanced over and spotted Chantal. She stared up at me, and tapped her lips, as though she was holding a cigarette. It had been a few weeks since we'd talked, and I thought she was upset with me, so I smiled when I saw her, and I nodded, and followed her out of the hall, into the cold, and around to the side of the hall where she punched me in the nose. I crumpled against the wall and sat heavily on the cold concrete walk. I stared up at her while my eyes watered and she glared at me. "What the hell," I said.

"You've got some nerve, showing up here," she said.

I wiped blood from my upper lip. "My mother helped put this on."

"I know. I met her."

"Oh," I said, coughing. I held my head against the wall to stem the blood from my nose. Laughter echoed from inside the hall.

"Nice woman. Can't believe you're related to her," she shook her head. "You know," she said. "Your mother told me the funniest thing."

"Did she now?" My voice cracked and I tried to spit, but my mouth was as dry as the air around us; cold, and dry, and heavy, sinking, crushing us in its frigid embrace. I wiggled my toes to see if they were still there. Chantal crossed her arms. Her winter jacket crinkled.

"Said you were going through a rough patch," she paused, and dug her heel into the hard packed snow. "Said you were feeling real low these past few months."

"That's true," I said, and I flinched as she crouched and placed a hand on my knee.

"Said you had left the woman who was carrying your child," she said. Her hand clamped down through my jeans, and into the skin. "You fucking jackass, why didn't you tell me you had a girlfriend?"

I spluttered half formed words and Chantal snorted and shook her head. She released me and stepped back and I rubbed my knee. "Listen, I'm sorry. I should have told you, but, the truth is I was fucked up. I didn't know what was going on. I just lost my job and moved to the city, my head was fucking spinning, and I really like you—" there was an explosion of light and heat, and my cheek stung.

She rubbed her hand. "You're a fucking jackass, Richard."

I leaned back against the wall. "Well," I said. "Now you know."

Chantal glared. Her hands were shaking. I watched as she reached for a cigarette, and her lighter slipped out from between her fingers and fell to the ground. I picked it up and handed it to her, and she stared at me in the eyes. I felt her rip my gut apart with her mind.

"It's over now, between Becky and me," I said. "She threw me out, 'bout a month ago," I said, and I reached for her hand again, but she pulled away.

"Serves you right," she said, and she glanced at her cigarette and frowned. "Fuck it." She hurled the cigarette into the snow and walked away.

After a while, I picked myself off the ground. I stumbled out of the alley and walked past the door to the hall. I headed for the Buick. I had parked it down the street, a couple blocks away. I had a gram of weed in the glove box I suddenly wanted to smoke. And as I walked through the empty street, passing the dimly lit houses, the dark storefronts, and the run down shops, a pickup truck rumbled by me and lay on its horn. I watched the driver lift their fingers off the wheel, and I waved in return. The truck slowed, its taillights burning red and disappeared down a side street. When I glanced again toward the Buick, I spotted the Liquor Store. The liquor store was inside the insurance place: Fiola's Liquor and Insurance. A small neon sign flickered in the window. I went inside, and I stood and stared at the selection of mickeys.

"So, you're the other guy," the man at the counter said.

I glanced at him and frowned. "Sorry?"

"You know, when people say, 'you should see the other guy'," he said, and he waved his hands at me like it meant something, and he began to laugh. "Well, you're the other guy."

I touched my face and winced. My nose had stopped bleeding, but it was sore and tender, and probably turning colours.

The man laughed and said, "You need the insurance before the accident."

"Not here for insurance," I said.

"Ah, of course," he winked. Who the hell was this man? I glared at him for a moment, all I wanted was to tell him that this wasn't what he thought it was, but that didn't matter. I turned to liquor. There wasn't much selection; the liquor section consisted of a couple walls and a shelving unit on the floor. Took up maybe a third of the building in all. Wasn't much, but in a pinch, it did the trick. And it beat a drive out of town. I bought a mickey of Jack. The man behind the counter wished me a goodnight and I stepped outside. The cap came off easy and I took a swig.

The Buick was cold, and I didn't feel like sitting in it, but I had to find my weed. I rooted through the glove box, looking for the baggy. I couldn't seem to find it, and I wondered if maybe I had already smoked it. Papers fell to the ground and stuck to the floor mat. I sat up and rubbed my eye. Hell, I must have smoked it. I stared out the windshield, toward the hall, and I caught a glimpse of the plastic bison, silhouetted against the street lamps. I touched it with my fingertips. It seemed to calm me, like a meditation stone. It focused my thoughts. I felt better in its presence. So I shoved it in my pocket and climbed out of the Buick.

The second act was underway. I found a spot at the back again, along the wall, out of the light, to watch the chaos on stage: men in women's dresses, and women in buckskins, all jigging to the rhythm of the fiddle and the clatter of spoons, the devil/priest and the old bourgeois twirled around arm in arm. They danced and drank and celebrated early into the morning, until out of the dark window light appeared in the predawn, and the women realized that to keep their promise to the devil they had to leave. They twirled their men around—their dresses spun, revealing a forest of dark, hairy legs. The men clambered off the stage; they dragged the bourgeois with them as he waved his fists at the men. The crowd laughed and clapped. And once again the canoe descended from the rafters. From the shadows the devil/priest watched them embark—Father Lesage turned to the crowd and, in a loud, faux-whisper, reminded them of his deal with the women.

"Their souls will be mine!" The light grew brighter through the dark window on one side of the stage. "They cannot hope to succeed!" the devil/priest laughed.

The painted scroll behind the stage once again began to roll, but this time in reverse, and the canoe swept up into the sky, and zipped back toward the women's camp, but the canoe began to wobble, and the women jostled, and bumped into each other as they paddled, and one woman leaned over the edge and pretended to vomit. She dumped multi-coloured streamers and sparkles from her sleeve and winked to the audience.

"*N'oubliez pas l'*deal *avec le yiable*!" Madame Jolicoeur yelled. "*N'oubliez pas l'*deal!"

The women muttered and paddled furiously. "*Vite*, *vite*!"

"*Awaye*! *Rame*! *Rame*!"

"*Misère*!"

"*Ah non*! Watch *ta langue*!"

"*Maudite affaire*!"

The canoe rocked across the sky, a comet ahead of the dawn, and the women cursed, and swore, their rum-loose tongues unfurled in the wind. "*On va perdent nos ames*!" they cried.

But the devil/priest stood up behind his bush and frowned. "What did they say?"

And the women looked back at the devil/priest, now floating behind them in the sky, and they began to laugh. "*Li deal 'tais aen aanglay*!" one said.

"*Li jhyaab ayow namaakaykway disseu kiiyanaan*!"

"*Abayn, li jhyaab n'a yien disseu nous*!" a woman shouted.

"*N'é yaenk hen taanfaan d'sh'yaen*!" another yelled, and the women began to laugh—the sky scrolled behind them, and they carried the canoe off stage.

The devil/priest threw his arms up and he turned to the crowd and, in an affected voice, he said "*Misère*! D*je ne lez comprend pa*! I can't understand them!" He shook his fist at the sky. The women's laughter echoed through the hall. They had tricked the devil. The lights dimmed, and after a few seconds, the lights returned and the actors appeared on stage. The actors bowed and the crowd rose from their seats and applauded.

37.

People gathered in small circles and chatted for a while after the lights came on, and the hall emptied slowly. Cast members emerged from behind the stage, and I spied Chantal rushing to meet one of the men who'd worn a dress, and I recognized him as someone with whom I had once played hockey, and I started to laugh. Then I spotted my mother, next to the stage, folding costumes. I made for the stage, and approached her slowly, clearing my throat as I neared.

She glanced up and smiled. "*Richard! Ch'pensait pas t'allait venir*," she said and reached to touch my elbow. Then she frowned. "What happened to your nose? You're bleeding!"

"It's nothing," I said. "I slipped and fell. Don't worry about it." I touched it and winced; I could tell it was swelling up. I gestured toward at the stage, "This looks pretty nice, good job."

Her frown deepened, but she nodded. A woman appeared at mother's side, and whispered into her ear. My mother turned and laughed, and she hugged the woman and congratulated her. I stared at the woman, at her long, dark hair, flecked with gray like sleet against an evening sky, at her big brown cheeks, how they split in two whenever she smiled. "*Ah*," my mother said, "*J'ai quasiment oublié, laisse-moi t'introduire à mon gars, Richard!*"

The woman shook my hand.

"*Richard, c'est—*"

"Nicole?" I said. The woman flinched and pulled her hand away.

My mother blinked and glanced back and forth between us. "You've met before?"

"I don't remember—" Nicole said.

"*C'tait au festival*, a couple years ago," I said to Nicole. "It was late at night, it was cold and you were tending a fire. *Ont c'est parlé pour une couple d'heures*."

The woman seemed perplexed, her eyebrows rising with my every word, and she shook her head. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I don’t recall.”

“I told you everybody calls me Rich, but *vraiment chu pauvres*.”

There was a flicker in her eye, but she said nothing, and simply shook her head.

“Well,” my mother said, clapping her hands. “It doesn’t matter. Let me reintroduce you.”

“Yes, of course, *bien sure*,” Nicole said.

“Nicole is our creative consultant,” my mother told me. “She wrote the adaptation!”

Nicole smiled, briefly, though it seemed more of a grimace. My mother explained that it was her idea to add Michif to the play, and I nodded, pretending to listen, but I had grown tired of it. My father appeared through the doorway, Styrofoam coffee in his hand, and he approached warily and I nodded and said hello. After a minute or so, feeling horribly out of place, I told them I had an early shift in the morning. I glanced at Nicole again, but she looked away. I wished them goodnight.

When I reached the door, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned to see Nicole.

“*Mon pauvre*, Rich,” she said. She lowered her eyes. “I’m sorry about that.”

I stared at her. “What was that about?”

She smiled weakly. “How about we grab a smoke?” She pulled me outside, and dragged me around the corner, and I flinched instinctively, thinking she would hit me like Chantal had, but she offered me a cigarette instead and we stood there in the cold and smoked. Nicole sucked on her cigarette. The cherry tip lit her face and I could see her eyes were glued to mine. “*Écoute, là*,” she finally said, blowing smoke out through her nose. “I wasn’t about to admit, especially in front of your mother, that you’d spent a night at my place,” she shook her head. “I mean, I’m not sure that’s something your mother needs to know.”

“You offered me a place to crash.”

“Because you were high as a kite,” Nicole said and shook her head. “You’d have frozen to death otherwise.”

“You do remember. You saved me,” I said.

“Sure, if that’s what you want to call it. How can I forget? I don’t usually invite strange men into my home, you know.” She tapped her cigarette and crossed her arms under her breasts. “But you seemed nice enough.”

Frowning, I stared at my shoes. “Well, you don’t have to tell them that part.”

Nicole skewered me with a look. “Don’t you remember what I told you?”

I reached back toward that time we had stood around the campfire, drinking caribou, and smoking cigarettes, how I stared at the frenzy of animals that swirled over her body, furs come to life, and I’d shuddered and looked into the fire.

“*Faut que tu te watch*,” I whispered, and Nicole nodded.

“*Toujours*,” she said, and then she snorted. “Well, maybe you don’t have to worry about that. *T’é t’un homme blanc*, after all.”

“Fine,” I said. “I get it.”

Nicole nodded. “I’m glad,” she said, and glanced down the alley, toward the street. “I had better get back inside.” And she tossed her butt into the snow, and the snow hissed for a moment. She turned to leave and I reached out and touched her elbow.

“You know I’ve been looking for you,” I said.

Nicole stopped and turned toward me. “What do you mean you’ve been looking for me?” Her voice was suddenly tense again, brittle and sharp, cold like fresh river ice.

“I don’t know how much my mom told you,” I said, and I glanced up at the sky through the slit in the alleyway, the sliver of dark between the buildings, “I lost my job a couple months ago and I moved to the city with my girlfriend. I got her pregnant and she kicked me out because I couldn’t decide if I wanted anything to do with the baby.” I glanced at Nicole. “Anyway, I was in a bad spot, and I suddenly remembered how you were kind to me and how you helped me out that time, and I wanted to see you again, just to talk, to thank you, and, and, hell I don’t know, it was a stupid idea,” I said, and I flicked my butt to the ground, and I squashed it with my shoe. I shoved my hands into my pockets. My fingers bumped into the bison. I pulled it from my pocket and held it out into the light. “I took this from in front of a house I thought was yours,” I said.

Nicole frowned and stared at the plastic bison. “I’ve never seen it before,” she said. “But, it doesn’t matter. I don’t know what you expect from me.”

“Ah, well, I was hoping we could talk.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know,” I scratched my head and frowned. The bison seemed smaller than before, as though it had shrunk to the size of a finger. I twirled it around my palm.

“Do you want to talk about how we made love on the sofa? Is that it? You want to revisit

that? Or how about the next morning, when you left without a word? *Non*," Nicole said. "*C't'un peu tard pour parler de ça; une couple d'années trop tard*."

I stared at her as she spoke, and watched her eyes grow hard, and her hands curl into fists. And I recoiled as she stepped toward me and thrust a finger in my chest.

"*C'est trop tard*, Rich." She sighed. "*Mon pauvre*, Rich."

"I don't remember that," I said. "I swear, I don't remember."

"Well, isn't that convenient."

"I just wanted to talk to clear my head, to figure out what to do, that's all. I'm sorry about what happened. I don't remember, and I'm sorry about that too. *Chu* fucker *dans tête*."

Nicole snorted and shook her head. She leaned back against the hall and glanced down to the street again. People were leaving the hall, making their way toward their cars and trucks. She stared at the street and sighed. "I thought you were better than that," she said.

"So did I," I said, and I barked a short laugh. "I'm trying to be."

Nicole turned and stared at me. Her eyes narrowed and her lips pursed. I glanced away. "I understand, Rich. But, I can't help you," she said. "I'm not your mother."

As I watched Nicole vanish around the corner, and I twirled the bison around in my hand, and the cold gnawed my fingers to the bone, I realized I hadn't told her about Alfred, and how it had shattered me to see him lying up there in bed, broken. He had been an anchor I did not know I had. His stroke had cast me adrift. Nicole was right, she was not family, but I did not see how it mattered. I began to laugh. I did not know what else to do. I slipped the bison into my pocket and made for the Buick.

38.

My hours were down at the call centre, and I suspected it was only a matter of time until they laid me off. It was a union job, and I had no seniority. They'd taken me off the French calls because my French was so bad the folks in Québec couldn't understand a word I said. I'd started looking for something else, and kept thinking back to what John had told me, that I should take a course and get a certificate, but something held me back and every time I started to look, I would begin to smoke and drink, and forget all about my tepid dreams.

I found a rink near Dean's place, where I would spend hours skating circles around old, rusted goals, slapping pucks into ragged nets, the pock-marked boards. The longer I sat still, the longer I had to skate afterward. I'd play pickup games with some local kids, or skate alone in the afternoon while everyone was at school or at work, and after an hour or two, I'd sit on the bench, suck in the cold air, and stare at the crisp blue sky, the wisps of icy clouds and the trail of a plane high above. Monique had told me once, when we were teenagers, that this was flyover country.

Occasionally, I would head to the river. Some folk had cleared a trail for miles and miles along the river, and you could skate for hours around the twisted bows of the Red. I'd skate from one end of the trail and to the other, and I would do it over and over again until my legs turned to noodles. I liked the city from the river, away from the streets; it was warmer, more inviting. One day, I skated down to the forks, but I grew annoyed dodging people stumbling slowly around on rented skates, and I turned around, and started back up the Red. And as I passed the hospital, the giant neon cross bleeding into the sky, I stopped and looked up at it, and thought of Alfred, and I felt a twinge in my heart, and a wave of sadness washed over me. I considered heading up to see him, but I was cold, and exhausted, I smelled of sweat, and I didn't have the energy, so I moved on, away from the hospital, under the Norwood Bridge and around the river bend. I didn't know I would never see Alfred again.

At the trailhead, I sat for a while and rubbed my thighs. My muscles had knotted up, and I felt a little dehydrated. A man offered me a sip of water from his water bottle, and I drank a bit and felt better. I thanked him, and he smiled. We talked for a bit and he told me that he had never seen ice and snow, and never felt such cold before coming to this country, but that after a couple years he had grown accustomed to it, even started to appreciate it, and he believed that if he left, he would miss it. I laughed and told him I hated it, the ice and the snow and the cold and the way that you had to plug in your car all through January or run out two or three times a night to start the engine to ensure it wasn't a frozen block of ice in the morning, but that I too would probably miss it if I moved away. I passed his water bottle back to him and I watched as he wobbled away on skates down the trail. I kicked off my skates, tossed them over my shoulder, and hiked up the riverbank toward the street where I'd parked the Buick. I threw the skates into the trunk, where I kept the spare tire, and I sat in the Buick for a bit and had a cigarette. I opened the glove box and checked the pager that work had given me in case they had called me in for an evening shift, but there was nothing. The engine whined in the cold, but started up like always.

The front door wasn't locked, but I thought nothing of it. I tossed my skates on a mat by the wall, and kicked off my shoes. I glanced into the living room, expecting to find Dean, but the room was dark and empty. There was a light on somewhere. I made from the kitchen.

"Rich? Is that you?" I heard a woman's voice.

I peeked into the kitchen and blinked. "Becky!"

Becky rose from her chair and stared at me, and I stared at her. She looked different, in a way, fuller; her cheeks were filled with colour and her hair glistened under the soft kitchen bulb. Her breasts had grown and her belly pushed against her shirt. She looked into my face. "Dean let me in," she said. "Let me wait for you to come home."

"Oh," I said. "Well, that's OK," I said. I didn't know what else to say. "It's good to see you. You're looking… I mean… with the baby… ah hell. How are you?"

"I'm OK," she said. She smiled briefly, but her smile did not touch her eyes, and I could tell she was sad, her eyes were red, and the skin around her eyes looked swollen, like she'd been crying, and I thought it was my fault, and it felt like someone had reached down into my stomach and yanked my guts out. She removed her glasses and wiped her eyes, then shook her head.

"Your parents didn't know how to get a hold of you, Rich," she said.

"Well… I'm out of minutes," I said.

"I figured," Becky nodded.

I glanced around the kitchen, at the dark window that reflected our sorry reflections back at us, warped and faded, disjointed through the double pane. "What's wrong, Becks?"

She took a step toward me, brushing her fingers along the table. "I'm sorry, Rich. I really wish I didn't have to tell you this."

"Damn it, what is it? Is something wrong with the baby?"

"No, it has nothing to do with that. Your parents tried to reach you, but they couldn't get a hold of you. And then it was too late. They didn't know Dean's address."

"What are you talking about?"

"So they asked me to tell you."

"Becky, I swear to God—"

"Alfred is dead."

She touched my arm and all my strength failed me. My knees buckled and she caught and held me, and I held onto her while her words rang in my ears. Alfred is dead.

39.

When I was eight years old I spent a weekend alone with *Menoncle* Alfred. My sister had a ringette tournament in Grand Forks, North Dakota, and my parents took her down to the States. I guess they figured to do some shopping while they were down there, so they dropped me off at Alfred's on Friday. And as I stood there, before this tall, weathered man, I was suddenly afraid. I had spent time with Alfred before, running around in his little house, and playing in his yard, but always in the company of my mother or father, never alone. Now, as this white-haired man with dark wrinkled skin stared down at me, piercing blue eyes skewering me, I wondered who he was and why my parents had left me with him.

He ushered me into the house and showed me the room where I would sleep. The house wasn't very big, heck it was nothing more than a hunting cabin he'd winterized, and patched up, and added on over the years, but it was enough for a single old man who didn't have much. The room had a small, single bed—a cot—and a small dresser that was filled with old photo albums and hunting clothes.

I lay on the bed and played Gameboy while Alfred putted about the house. He had an old tape deck with which he played his fiddle music, but his tapes were so worn that sometimes they would stretch out a note or slow a whole section and Alfred would curse softly: *mosusse*. After a while, I heard a pan on the stove, and the smell of cooking drifted into the bedroom. My stomach rumbled, but still I did not move. A short while later, Alfred poked his head through the doorway and smiled.

"*As tu faim? Viens mangez.*"

There was a simple meal on the table: sausage and potatoes, with a side of beans. Alfred was seated, eating, and I approached slowly. I placed my Gameboy next to my plate and climbed up onto the chair. Alfred stared at the Gameboy, and, chewing a mouthful of sausage, waved his fork at it.

"*C'quoi c'machin*?"

"*C'est un* Gameboy," I said.

"*Quesque ça mange en hivers un* Gameboy?"

I thought about it for a moment and looked up at Alfred and said, "*Des batteries*."

He threw his head back and laughed. He laughed, and coughed, and wiped tears from his eyes with a napkin he grabbed off the table. I began to laugh. And we laughed together.

"*Des batteries*," he said. He shook his head and smiled. "*Comme on a d'besoin un autre* joker *dans famille*," he said. "*Okay, ferme ton* Gameboy *avant qu'tu gaspille tes batteries, et puis mange, avant que sa refroidit*."

The food was simple, but delicious. I chewed on the sausage and blinked, unable to recall anything like it before. Alfred watched me devour my plate. He chuckled and pushed a few more bits of sausage from his plate onto mine.

"*T'aime le chevreuil, hein*."

And he told me how he still hunted every fall, and took a couple deer which he made into sausages and jerky and steaks, and all manner of cuts, which he stored in a large chest freezer he kept in the room with the small single-sized bed where I was to sleep. As I listened to him speak, I was fascinated by this man who hunted for his food. He preferred to hunt *à flêche* but no longer had the strength to draw a bow and so he used his old *carabine*. After we cleaned our plates, he fetched his rifle from a cabinet in his bedroom and he held it before me, and he let me touch the stock and the barrel, but not the trigger. He said I wasn't ready to touch the trigger. He would ask my father if he could teach me to shoot, and teach me to hunt.

The next day he took me outside and showed me his property. He owned a couple acres of bush, birch, aspen, and some pines, south of Ste. Geneviève where the land was swampy, and the spring melt usually cut off the roads. I had been before, having spent long afternoons running through the trees around the small house with my sister, Monique, while my parents visited with *Menoncle* Alfred inside, but I had never seen the property through Alfred's eyes. Now, with him pointing the way, the property was suddenly new again. Everything had a name, a reason, a story behind it. He pointed to the old weathervane atop his cabin and said it had been a birthday gift; his late brother had bought it out east when he served in the military. Alfred described receiving it one day, when he was a young man, and living at home with his parents on a small farm north of Richer. His brother had fought in Europe *contre les Allemands* and he had not seen him for six long years. He had tried to join the army, but his feet were too flat, and the recruiter told him that the country needed farmers.

He pointed to a wooden wheelbarrow, filled with dirt and flowers. He laughed and said it was the ugliest thing he had ever seen, but his sister's daughters had made it for him one spring a

few years back. He didn't have the heart to get rid of it. When he said it, his voice cracked, and I looked up at him and I saw tears in his eyes, which he wiped away with his knuckles.

Alfred had never married, and had never had kids of his own, despite how he loved kids. He spoiled all his nieces and nephews. He was a staple at Christmas and Easter and New Year's Day. Folks wondered why he had never married. *Trop tétû pour une femme*, they figured. No one knew his brother had married the girl that he loved, and that he would spend the rest of his years pinning for her, even after she forced him to stop teaching her children *la vie des sauvages*. And so, after the falling out, he retreated to his small cabin in the woods to live his life, and his nieces and his nephews would come to visit him, and they brought their children for him to see, and for a time he was happy.

I reached up and touched his old, wrinkled hand, white hair sprouting from the knuckles, and he took my hand into his. He led me around the cabin and he showed me an old deer skull. It lay on a stump, chalk-white, and staring at us through its empty sockets. Alfred said he had killed it two years ago. It was the biggest deer he had ever seen in all of his years hunting; he had never seen a bigger one. Its rack branched out over its head like the crown of an old, gnarled oak tree. It took his breath away. And when he finally killed it, he felt a piece of himself die alongside it. Meat filled his chest freezer to the brim. And when his old age cheque had been lost in the mail, and he had nothing else to eat, it had kept him fed, but it had cost him something he knew not he had been paying. Its destruction had brought ugliness into his life, and he would not know beauty again.

Tout ce qu'on fait, nous coute un prix, mon enfant.

We stood there and stared at the old skull, and Alfred took out his pipe, packed it *avec du bon tabac*, so much that it spilled over the sides and rained down onto the skull. He spoke softly, said a few words that I did not understand, and he nodded, satisfied, and lit his pipe. He smoked, slowly, and I watched as smoke curled out of his nostrils, and up into the sky. I could not see his sadness, only his strength. I wanted to be like him.

Menoncle Alfred never taught me to shoot, to hunt. I don't know what happened. It never worked out. Once I turned 13 my dad took it upon himself to teach me, but by then it was a chore that neither of us enjoyed.

40.

The service took place in Ste. Antoinette and I drove out with Becky because she insisted on being there. She knew that Alfred had been a grandfather to me. Over the pock-marked streets and the rail tracks, over the bridges to the highway past Deacon's, we talked softly about nothing in particular. Before she'd appeared suddenly earlier in the week with news of Alfred's death, we hadn't seen each other in months, hadn't spoken or exchanged texts, but as we plunged deep into the open prairie, we began to peel away the layers of mistrust and resentment that had formed up between us.

Becky told me about her struggles with school, how difficult it was to keep her grades up. It was a constant battle that every night left her exhausted and defeated, and she would fall asleep with the terror that she would fail, and bring our child into a world no better than the one she was born into.

I squeezed the steering wheel, knuckles white, and I clenched my jaw. She hadn't said a thing about me, yet I felt as though she had slapped me. I glanced over, and stared for a moment, before turning to the road. "I'm sure it'll work out," I said.

Becky shrugged and looked out the window at the dirty, snow blasted fields, coated in ice and grime, at the soft grey light strained through low-hanging clouds. For a time, we raced a train engine pulling a hundred train cars. After a while, Becky spotted the bison figurine. It had fallen on its side, slid along the length of dashboard, and gotten wedged in the crevice between the dash and the windshield. She grabbed it and held up in the light.

"What is this?" she said.

"It's nothing," I said. "Just something I found."

She picked away the dust with her fingers, wiped the statue clean, and then placed it back on the dashboard. It wobbled, fell over onto its side, and slid into the corner. Becky snorted.

"You know," she said. "Growing up, I used to watch my grandma carve little animals out of bass wood. She painted or marked them with a wood burner, and then she would sell them for a few bucks. Enough for a bottle of peach schnapps, or apricot brandy, and she would be happy." Becky reached for the small plastic bison and held it in the light again. "She made a bison once, but she got the dimensions wrong, and it ended up looking like a cross between a pig and a cow. She was so embarrassed that she threw it away." Becky twirled the plastic bison around her grip. "She didn't understand a lick of English, you know. Only spoke French."

I glanced at her. Becky was staring at the field, caressing the figurine. “I didn’t know she was French,” I said.

“She died a couple years ago,” Becky said and she glanced over at me, her lips scrunched together, pulling to the side. “My mom lost her French young, and my Dad never spoke it. That’s why I never learned it.” Then she smiled. “*Ree-shard* was my grandpa’s name.”

I snorted. “The ‘d’ is suppose to be silent,” I said, and I started to laugh. “You do that just to annoy me don’t you?”

Becky smiled. She placed the bison back onto the dashboard and glanced out the window. We passed a grain elevator, and I recognized across the snow-stained field, against the backdrop of a barren shelter-belt row, Carlson’s two-stories of white-sided aluminum. Becky pointed to it a second later. And then she grunted, and placed a hand on her stomach.

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“Nothing,” she said, shaking her head. “Baby’s kicking.”

“Oh,” I said, and I glanced at her belly, protruded under her seat belt, her shirt. “Hey, so I was thinking,” I said, and bit my lip, “If you need a ride to the doctor or anything, next time, just let me know, okay?”

Becky looked at me, and I kept my eyes on the road ahead while she studied my face.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

The church was packed. It was as though everyone that Alfred had ever met, and known and loved over the years, had descended upon the small church, crowding through its doors, and squeezing into its pews, spilling into the aisles. And once the pews were filled, they opened the galleries to the mourners and well-wishers.

Father Lesage waited as a parade wound through the doors, and filled the benches. Late comers stood at the back. Becky and I sat with Monique and John and the kids, behind Mom and Papa. I watched the crowd grow: aunts and uncles, and cousins by the barrel-full; acquaintances, friends, familiar faces, strangers. I spotted J.P. Gauthier perched on a pew like some fat gargoyle, red-faced, and struggling to breathe. The Verriers, Al, his father and mother, had picked a spot in the gallery upstairs. I spotted old Joe Vermette, the man whose house Chantal had bought in the summer. Next to him was the man who’d sold me the mickey of Jack. A few rows over was the kid from the Petro with the jutting chin, turns out he was a second cousin; and a few pews down

was the waitress from the restaurant. I spotted the old farmers who nursed their morning coffees into the early afternoon, and Madame Jolicoeur, my old math teacher who had traded in her sash and mukluks for a sombre two-piece outfit. I gazed out over these familiar faces, astounded over their presence, and their soft, sad words buzzed in an incomprehensible din. I listened and picked out a story or two about Alfred: how he used to give away food, meat that he hunted and trapped, to folks in need; how he had done a thousand things I had never imagined and how he lived a life I had never conceived.

Noise crackled over the speakers, and Father Lesage's voice echoed through the church. The chatter dropped off as folks turned toward the altar and Father Lesage thanked everyone for coming. The service was in French, and Father Lesage spoke softly and without hurry. He began with a prayer and the crowd stood, and then kneeled, then sat, then stood again. The benches and the pews groaned under our weight, the floors trembled under our feet and the walls shook under our voices as we murmured in unison: Amen.

Amene, Alfred used to say. *Amene vite*, *amene*.

After a while, Menoncle Roger went up to deliver the eulogy. He stood behind the lectern and stared into the crowd. "*Baptême*," he said, and glanced nervously at the priest and cleared his throat. "*Dur à croire qu'on est icitte pour les funérailles à Menoncle Alfred, le vieux batard*," he paused and glanced over at the priest again. The priest motioned for Roger to continue, so Roger turned to the pews and started over. "*Baptême*," he said. And he told us about Alfred, how Alfred had lived a long and full life, filled with both joy and misery, with love and hardship, and how he had lived a simple life in the bush away from town, and in a way this was what we most admired about him: his strength, his character.

Alfred loved to hunt, and Roger told us about the time he and Alfred had gone hunting by St-Labre. They'd sat in a tree stand most of the day without spotting a single deer. After a while, Alfred had climbed down to relieve himself and Roger set his rifle aside, and figuring there was no way a deer would show with Alfred tramping through the bush below, he leaned back against the tree to rest his eyes. Then crack! A gunshot tore through the calm. Roger nearly fell from his tree stand and when he opened his eyes, he spotted Alfred not 20 feet away, his pants around his ankles, *cul à l'air*, and his rifle held triumphantly over his head.

"*Le crisse avait tirer un chevreuil pendant qui chiait*!" Roger said. "Le *vieux pet* y*'avait pas même le temps de s'essuyer*!"

The crowd laughed and our laughter echoed through the rafters. The priest was red in the face. He cleared his throat, trying to signal Roger to wrap it up, and finally he walked over to the lectern and elbowed Roger aside.

"*Merci*, Roger," he said.

Roger shuffled down the stairs while folks wiped tears from their eyes and laughed.

41.

After the service, we made our way to the legion hall for a bite to eat. Folks gathered to chat and share memories of Alfred. They hugged and kissed and remarked how long it had been since they'd last seen each other. I haven't seen you since you were this high! And they gestured toward their knees. A few men and women brought food out of the kitchen, sandwich meats and bread, cheese and crackers, which they placed on a table for folks to pick. We lined up to fill our paper plates. Someone brought out a large Tupperware of deer sausage, and we picked it clean in no time. Then, balancing our food, we shuffled off toward empty chairs to sit.

We had just sat down with Monique and John when my mother appeared and she smiled weakly. I looked up at her and saw the weariness in her face. Her skin was puffed, red, as though she had been crying. I was struck by all the lines and the creases that time had etched on her face, the unmistakable betrayal of her age. Only last month, she'd seemed so happy and vigorous.

"Mom," I said, and I rose and wrapped my arms around her. She squeeze me briefly, and then pulled away.

"*Ton père a besoin d'l'aide déhors*," she said.

"Okay, sure," I said. I grabbed a pickle off Becky's plate and popped it into my mouth—Becky glared at me—then followed my mother past the kitchen, to a side door wedged open with a chair. Cold air poured through the doorway into the hall. A truck idled outside, and men talked loudly over the engine. I pushed the door open and stepped outside. My father was standing with Alphonse, his brother, by the box of an old dodge truck, pulling two-fours of Labatt's toward the tailgate.

"*Ah! L'voilà, le jeune homme fort*," Alphonse exclaimed. "*Té venue nous aider*?"

"I guess so," I said.

"Good, good," Alphonse chuckled.

"*Tiens Richard, prend les une fois qu'ont les as tiré à la* tailgate," said my Dad.

I grabbed a case and hauled it inside. Matante Louise spotted me and pointed me toward a table to place it on. I hauled a couple more cases inside.

"That's it," said my dad. "Last one."

"*J'espère que c't'assez*," said Alphonse.

"*Bin, c't'un funérail quand meme, Alphonse*."

"*Ouain, mais c't'une grosse famille, Émile*."

I smiled and nodded. "I don't know half the people in there," I said.

My dad frowned. "If you came around more often," he began, but Alphonse cut him off with a laugh.

"*Moé non plus, Richard*." He glanced at the door and clapped his hands. "*Bin,* I guess *ma aller parker l'truck.*"

We stood off to the side and watched Alphonse hop into his truck. He kicked it into drive and rolled away, then spun the wheels so the truck turned, and then came back toward us and the parking lot out in front of the hall. And as he passed, I noticed its colour, a reddish-brown, tinted with rust, and I spotted the gauges, clawed into the fender, the wrecked lamp casing and the new headlamp, and Alphonse, waving briefly, a flick of his fingers, a sheepish grin on his lips.

"Son of a bitch," I said.

And I thought of the man in the red chequered coat, and the mail box I had shattered and splintered in the ditch. His eyes flashed through my head. Surprised, offended and confused over my presence, alarmed that I had followed him home, his defensiveness suddenly understandable. A pit opened up in my stomach. And then I thought of the other man, the one I had confronted in the parking lot of the old restaurant. How we had argued in the cold and the snow over fault and responsibility. His eyes flashed through my head. Uncertain, searching, trying to peel away at the truth in my accusation, surprised when I lashed out at him, then kneeling in the snow, coughing, trying to catch his breath as I drove off into the night. And the pit grew, and I felt sick. I stepped back, away from the Alphonse's truck, and bumped into the wall.

My dad glanced over at me and frowned.

"Three brown trucks," I said, and I began to laugh. I slapped my thigh, and I laughed.

My dad stared and shook his head. "What's so funny?"

I wiped a tear from my eye and shook my head. “It’s nothing, I’ll tell you later.”

He nodded and took a deep breath and looked out over the field next to the hall. I leaned back against the building, and took out my cigarettes.

“Give me one,” he said.

I blinked and glanced at him. “Since when do you smoke?”

“It’s been awhile. *Avant ta naissance*. I could use one now.”

“Sure,” I said, and I handed him the pack.

We stood and smoked, and our smoke swirled up into the sky, and we watched it rise and vanish into the mist above, the dirty grey clouds, the mud-soaked light. Though I could not bring myself to believe it, I hoped Alfred was up there, *dans l’ciel*. My dad began to cough and he bent over at the waist and spat in the snow. He glared at his cigarette.

“Now I remember why I quit,” he said. “Nasty habit.” He took a last drag then flicked the cigarette out of his hand.

“Yeah,” I said, and I sucked on my cigarette.

He looked over at me. “How are you, Richard?”

“I’m okay,” I said, and shrugged, and he stared at me and said nothing, and I shifted my weight around, and glanced at the field and the snow. “I’m okay,” I said again, and I realized that it was true. He nodded. I turned toward him. “I was wondering what happened to Alfred.”

“*Bin, y voulait être crematé*,” he said. He scratched his cheek and looked out over the lot, at the snow that stretched out beyond the cars and trucks. Trees dotted the horizon like pinpricks, a brown picket fence where the prairie ended, or it began, depending on your perspective. “*On va éparpiller c’est cendres alentour d’sa cabine au printemps*,” he said.

I stared off at the trees, barely visible over the field and the mud-cloud light, and thought of that old cabin north of us, in the bush out by Ste. Geneviève, and its bright, yellow walls. “Let me know when it happens,” I said. “I’d like to be there.”

My dad smiled. “Of course,” he said, and shook his head, as though he could not imagine another way. He looked me in the eye. “*Écoute*,” he said. “Don’t stay out here too long; it’s nice and warm inside.” He lifted the case of beer off the ground, and turned toward the door.

“P*apa*,” I said. He paused and glanced back. “How are you?”

He shrugged, glanced at the door and then he fixed me with his eyes. “I’m okay,” he said, and he smiled. “I’m okay.”

42.

Inside, people laughed and cheered, and spoke in voices that rose and fell, and ebbed and flowed with sadness and joy. They lifted their drinks and saluted each other and talked of Alfred. Someone brought out an old ghetto blaster from the kitchen, and plugged an old cassette into the tape deck. Fiddle music burst from the speakers. Kids ran squealing the length of the hall, rolling and jumping, climbing the stage, leaping off, their winter boots thumping heavily on the floor. In a wild mess of curls, Isabelle came running up to us and threw herself to the ground and began to roll underneath the table. Monique leaned over and glanced at her daughter, and Becky shifted in her chair.

"Oh boy," Becky grunted. We turned to look and she held her belly and smiled. "Baby's kicking," she said.

"Probably doesn't like the noise," Monique said.

"No, no, I think she does. She's dancing," Becky said.

"Jigging," Monique laughed.

I frowned and stared at Becky, the unmistakeable bulge under her shirt, and the spread of her fingers on her belly. "Hold on a second," I said. "She?"

Becky stared into my eyes. "Surprise!"

Monique clapped her hands and laughed.

"It's a girl?" I asked and Becky nodded. I reached toward her, and she took my hand, and placed it over her belly. I felt the heat of her belly warm my fingers.

"*Une petite métisse*," Monique said. "*Félicitations*!"

I glanced between my sister and Becky and a dumb grin spread across my face.

I twisted the cap off the bottle and took a sip of beer. It was a little warm from sitting out on the table. The hall had emptied some, mourners having had enough and leaving in groups, but a number still remained, nursing their drinks and sharing stories. I spotted John standing with my dad and Menoncle Roger. Roger pretended to aim a rifle and fired at an imaginary buck. Dad and John laughed. I spotted Matante Louise's kids, sitting around a couple big tables: they were older than me, maybe a dozen years, and their own kids were almost fully grown. The teenagers hadn't stuck around long, but they had stopped in for a time. The older folks were in no hurry—sad as it was, funerals and weddings seemed to be the only time everyone got together anymore.

I meandered over to the food table and tried to find something to eat, but it seemed it had been picked over by a vulture. I grabbed a couple cheese cubes, and popped them into my mouth, but the cheese was hard and warm, they tasted like dirty socks, so I spat the cubes out and tossed them into the trash bin.

I felt something tug at my sleeve. I glanced down and spotted my niece, Isabelle, staring back up at me. "*Menoncle* Rich," she said. "Can you dance with me?"

I glanced toward my chair. Becky was busy talking to Monique and didn't seem to be in a hurry to leave, so I crouched down and grabbed Isabelle's hand. "Sure thing," I said.

Isabelle smiled. She dragged me into the centre of the room where kids twirled without rhythm or step, and we began to dance, to jig. Isabelle had seen it done before, *au Festival*, but she'd never taken any lessons, and her boots were heavy and her feet slow and clumsy, and she stomped around the floor like a pile driver. I laughed and shook my head. I began to dance. Up and down, I went. My feet dashed and kicked below, a flash of colour on the pale floor. After a while, my legs grew sore and my body warm. Sweat sprouted from my brows and leaked down my face. I felt terribly alone on the floor, unable to stop, unwilling to stop. My legs churned and muscles fired and feet kicked and dashed, and all the anger and fear and disappointment that I'd carried for years poured out through my legs. And I spun with furious energy across the floor and glimpsed the strange familiar faces staring back at me. And they struck me, in their quiet sombre joy. How I'd missed them. And I thought of Alfred, dying up there, in his bed, on the sixth floor of a hospital so far from his home in the bush and how I'd missed my chance to see him. I would never see him again. But as his music blared relentlessly from the ghetto blaster, he appeared by my side, in his old, ragged jeans, his mud-stained cowboy hat, his knobby fingers flashed across the thin neck of his battered fiddle, and his cowboy boots clattered in time on the floor, and so I danced, and I danced, and I cried, and tears rained down my cheeks and splashed the floor, and the floor grew wet like the soil after the Red spills its banks, and when I looked up, I saw Becky and Monique, and my parents, and aunts and uncles, cousins and friends watching me, clapping, and I howled and kicked my feet until they hurt. Alfred was with me, and so I danced. I danced.

Fin

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