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# A Collection of Borrowed Exaggerations

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

A Collection of Borrowed Exaggerations

by

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A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
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## **Abstract**

By following characters who navigate a city they do not entirely understand, this thesis examines the roles that space and place play in the evolution of identity. As twenty-first century picaros trying to take advantage of a place they feel takes advantage of them, my characters demonstrate the effects that space may have on how we view ourselves and those around us. My thesis draws primarily on the spatial theories of Timothy Cresswell, Edward Soja and Jean Baudrillard, and the picaresque studies of Ulrich Wicks and Marina Brownlee. As long as we continue to construct spaces designed to appeal to some users while excluding others, space will remain a major factor in identity construction. As the characters in my thesis prove, not everyone responds to the spaces around them with the best of intentions.

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*Tracie*

*xoxo heart heart heart*

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## Prologue

Hicks, he always says that being paranoid and being right aren't mutually exclusive. Maybe your paranoid friend who's sold drugs, stolen drugs, stolen cars, stolen money; who once stole a dog, who's picked pockets, shoplifted, scammed, lied, cheated and otherwise hustled his way around the city for the last decade—and that's just the shit you are aware of—maybe he's got a point and maybe you listen, because for all that, he's somehow managed to carry a clean record into his mid-twenties. According to Hicks, every if is a maybe, and a lot of maybes, they become definitely. When that guy says there might be a chance that all the money you have, somebody might have murdered for that money, you listen to that guy.

You have to be careful.

Careful like taking the drug chemicals out of the car you plan to launder that money in careful?

Yeah, that kind of careful.

## Chapter 1: The Bank Card

### 1.1

Standing at the Soup Depot counter waiting on two bowls of chili, Willey casts his exasperations onto the food court lighting. The Scotia Centre betters thought wise to install colour-changing lights above the eating area. Blue to green, green to red, red to purple, then back to blue again, but always somewhere in the key of seaweed.

The server, a red-haired girl who's only worked at Soup Depot for a week, pours coffee for another customer, a customer whose order came a full minute after Willey's. Red, she puts a spoon in the man's cup of soup, pops a lid on his to-go cup of coffee. All the time there's the pot of chili right there.

At the far end of the food court Willey can see Hicks by the window facing 7th Avenue. Dwayne Fucker Hicks. Fucker's not his real middle-name, of course. It's Asshole. Dirty-blond spiky hair, burnt-orange leather jacket. Pleasurably distressed, Hicks once said, talking about the jacket. Inverted pleat, triple-button breast pockets, oversized point collar and where the hell did Hicks ever pick up terminology for different pleats? Look at him sitting there, alone at his table, leaning his chair back on two legs, his hands clasped behind his head. Hard to miss through the algae light, acting like he owns the entire mall.

And what of that jacket, Willey? Willey waiting for his chili with his standard issue grey hoodie and black jeans. Not so much jealous of Hicks's jacket, as the proportions necessary to wear it. You scour a city to find vintage outerwear. Specialty shops and thrift stores, garage sales and swap meets. Always coming up

empty, then there she hangs in the dark recesses of your long-gone father's bedroom closet, and will that jacket fit you? Hicks pretending to read the newspaper, scanning the thin crowd around him. A lion-fish alone at the end of the aquarium.

That has to be some pot of chili. Able to elude a ladle for most of five minutes now. And this, the meat day of Willey's diet. The red-haired girl takes the order of the man three customers removed from Willey's order, and just look at this guy: a suit guy, a preener by the look of him. Carefully messed up hair. Manicured 5 o'clock shadow. Thin. A pretty man, like Hicks is pretty. A man comfortable in lighting that changes colour. A man used to receiving his order on time and all at once. A man not dieting. Willey, he's been on his diet three weeks. Five days a week, no meat. Saturdays and Thursdays, meat, as much as he wants, but nothing processed, no beef jerky, no Pep 'N Cheds. To date, 0 pounds lost.

It's not about weight loss, Willey's inner Willey says. It's about living healthy. Exercising, taking walks. Red's talking to the thin, pretty man. Red, she smiles at the pretty man and asks him how he's doing, says he looks good today. Gloss black dress shoes. Charcoal suit.

And now Nanay, the owner of the place, now she's talking to the man, and they're all smiling like one big happy family, and where's Willey's chilli? Nanay is ma in Filipino. Pa is pa. This is a Nanay at Pa restaurant, and Red and the pretty man, they're the son and daughter. Adopted.

Willey can see mauve peeking out from the end of the man's sleeve. He can see the thick links of a gold watch on the man's wrist. Willey watches the man punch his BANK CARD number into the debit machine.

He sees the number as clear as if he were punching it in himself, and at this crucial moment in his life, finally, finally, and unfortunately, Red acknowledges his wait and says, Sir, your chili is over on the pick-up counter. Willey, he can only stare dumb at her as he silently and intently repeats, repeats and re-repeats the four digits of the man's code. A man can only afford a person so much attention under these circumstances, as much as Willey would love to look deep into her eyes, step toward her, take her in his arms, sweep her off her feet, take her out to dinner, hide diamond rings in ice, offer foot massages, have a kid, ponder divorce, hang a jacket in the closet, leave, never return. Willey nods dumbly, turns silently and places both bowls of chili on his tray before hurrying back to Hicks.

Hicks rattles his newspaper the way you might rattle your newspaper when you get interrupted. When you're thinking business. When you don't have time to pay any politeness to the man who's nice enough to bring you your meal. Willey, Hicks says. He says, In the time you were away, I can't remember if I ordered lunch or dinner.

They went and hired some red-headed girl over there, Willey says. And now the system's all messed up. He looks back over his shoulder, sees the pretty man at his table. He turns to Hicks, says, All the time it's order your chili, wait by the register, order your chili, wait by the register. Now she went and put it up on the high counter.

They hired a white girl?

Can you believe it?

Now, why the hell would they do that? They had a perfectly functioning, well-engineered, Filipino-driven, customer-service engine over there, and now they've hired a white girl?

Willey explains to Hicks about the chili on the high counter, and Hicks, he too has never, in his life, picked up chili from the Soup Depot high counter. They both settle in over their bowls but Willey gives in to a slump, slides his bowl away. Hicks may understand Willey's pain in regards to the high counter, but he remains ignorant of the undulating horror the light throws upon them both.

Sure, Hicks knows this string of downtown malls like the palm of his hand. Scotia Centre, TD Square, the Core. Stephen Avenue. Hicks can show you the best places to eat, the best places to shit, and where all the exits are, but is he even aware that the lighting in here has been given such a first-class upgrade? Subtle colours, maybe, but enough to make the darkest chili look disagreeable. What's wrong with your chili? Hicks says.

This light, Willey says. This light makes my chili all bruisy. Bruisy, then dark, then all out black, then bruisy again. And on this of all days. Thursday, the meat day of Willey's diet.

It's just your imagination.

I guess I didn't have an imagination before those lights were put in.

Eat your chili, Hicks says. Feed that uterus you're growing, diet boy.

A man can diet, Hicks.

Whatever you say, miss.

And I am going to eat it, Willey says. I'd just like to enjoy eating it every once and again, not having to guess if everything is the right colour it should be.

Hicks dips his biscuit into his chili, flips the newspaper to a new page. For a big man, he says. You're sure a picky eater.

Willey looks back at the pretty man again. Behind him, behind the pretty man, there's a new Sushi restaurant, Oh, Sushi Q. Now there is the exact type of shit Willey has to put up with these days. Clever restaurant names. Oh, Sushi Q used to be a donair place named the Brown Goddess. Not as artistic a name, maybe, and the hand-painted sign was a slight against the type of clientele the food court was trying to secure, but damn if the Brown Goddess couldn't squeeze a lot of flavour from a slab of factory-formed meat. That leaves the Soup Depot as the last of the Nanay at Pa restaurants. Nanay often gives Willey a bit of extra meat when she's working. There's something about the Soup Depot chili that's worth waiting for, that's worth dedicating a meat day to. Fresh onions, a touch of cilantro? See that guy over my right shoulder? Willey says to Hicks. Black shoulder bag? Dark grey suit?

That guy? Hicks says, not looking away from his chili.

Yeah, that guy, Willey says. I was right beside that guy waiting for the chili and I saw his PIN number.

Hicks casually folds his newspaper, leans back in his chair, looks Willey in the eye. You saw his Personal Identification Number number? Hicks says. Willey ignores the half-smile, the half-sneer, waits for the mood lighting to cycle, times his bite to his chili hitting its most appealing hue. Hicks waits through the entire process. Not

often Willey gets a chance to hang Hicks out on his words. After swallowing, Willey says, Yeah, when he punched it in.

You saw his Personal Identification Number number, and you came back here and started talking to me about the Soup Depot service and the goddamn light?

Look, I'm hungry is all. I didn't want you to get all excited right away. Willey takes a bite of his biscuit and, when the light is right, follows with a spoonful of chili.

Hicks runs his fingers along the line of his jaw, puts on his mock business face, narrow eyes, bit of a pucker to his mouth. Well, what's the number? he says. Willey points his wait-a-minute finger at the ceiling, loads another spoonful.

They use real shredded cheese, the Soup Depot. Nanay at Pa. And sour cream that hasn't expired yet. Willey chews, swallows, dabs at the corner of his mouth with a napkin.

Nanay, she once told Willey she used to be a school principal in the Philippines. Pa, a dentist. A fucking dentist and principal selling off everything to come to a foreign country, to work a one-off restaurant, to hire white girls who put orders on the high counter.

Hello, Hicks says.

Maybe the flavour comes down to something as simple as extra MSG.

Hicks rolls his eyes and shakes his head. He takes a spoonful of chili, eyes not willing to meet Willey's. You can suffer a minute, Willey thinks. You green-tinged bastard. You blue-tinged bastard.

You know I asked for vegetable, right? Hicks says, the red-tinged bastard.

Willey remains silent, holds the stare.

Then I realised I wanted chili, Hicks says.

Willey shrugs. Blinks.

Amazing, Hicks says. How the universe works shit out sometimes.

Willey blinks again.

Seriously, what's the guy's number?

Willey leans forward. I'm thinking of a movie, he says. Clint. Tuco. Yeah?

Hicks smiles his broad smile, shows more teeth than a jackal during Nat Geo's Africa Week. Of course I remember that movie, he says. *Good, Bad and Ugly* is my movie. I was the one that opened your eyes to that movie, if you'll recall.

Willey nods. Hicks wouldn't let an hour pass without mentioning that damn movie. Willey had to see that movie. Hicks insisted. Not now, but now. Right now. But for the life of himself, Willey can't remember the name of the character Clint played, or the name of the actor that played Tuco. One of them had part of a secret, the other the other part. Well, we're okay then, Willey says. I have the number, you get the bank card. We'll split what we get, right down to the middle.

Hicks spreads his arms and reignites his smile. I'm very happy you are working with me! he says, dipping into a Mexican accent.

Eli Wallach! Wallach played Tuco, and Willey must admit, Hicks might be pretty shitty voicing Clint, but Hicks, he has Eli Wallach nailed.

## 1.2

Now, Hicks would probably tell you that getting that card will be easy. He'll start by telling you that he was once a professional pickpocket. Not in the sense of picking pockets to steal money, though he was that, too. Willey, he's heard the story

over and over again, how Hicks once slaved for this magician, Ronaldo Magnifico, who'd work the Stampede and Klondike Days or the X or the Exhibition, or whatever they call that show up in Edmonton these days. In truth, picking pockets was only part of the job. Hicks's job was to clean sequined clothes, polish shiny shoes, set up and take down props.

Feed the fucking rabbit.

Between shows, Ronaldo would walk the concourse performing magic, and one of the tricks was a card trick. He'd have a standard deck: 4 suits, 13 cards each. Cards you can play crib with. But he'd also have other decks. One deck all threes of clubs, one all fours of hearts. One all aces. 52 aces of spades. You could play crib with that deck, too, though that would be one lousy game of crib.

When Ronaldo walked the concourse, Hicks carried extra cards and had to get them into people's purses or pockets, even their boots sometimes, or, as often as possible, their wallets. Of course, when he snagged a wallet, he had to get the wallet back into the purse or the pocket from where he picked it. After lacing a person with a card, Hicks would nod to Kat, Ronaldo's more visible assistant. Kat was 25 years old, and, according to Hicks, a 115 pound, 36C, punch-to-the-gut looker. Oh, if only Hicks were a bit older back then.

Kat would be wearing shorts made for a ten-year-old and she'd have on a top that was made for the chest of the same ten-year-old. Hicks would make sure the marks were the easiest to deceive—hit the middle-aged heteros, Magnifico would tell him—the type of guy that can't say no when Kat takes them by the hand.

Hicks would scratch his nose, because Ronaldo knew nose meant the man was packing an ace. Ronaldo, he'd show this real deck, flash the cards to the crowd, start to shuffle, always making sure that he stayed at least two feet back from the mark. Through gift of gab, gleam of teeth, and sleight of hand—this is a magic show, remember—the real deck would get swapped out for the dummy deck.

The mark pulls a card under strict conditions not to show Ronaldo, but to show the gathered lot. Surprise, it's the ace of spades. He, the mark, puts the card back into the pile, and after some shuffling and gleaming, Ronaldo swaps the ace deck with the real deck. Ronaldo has the mark pull out a card, it's the ten of clubs? Of course the guy smiles, laughs, shakes his head.

Not your card?

Not my card.

Maybe it's because your card is—Hicks, in the background, scratching his forehead with the edge of his wallet—in your wallet.

The mark, he pulls out his wallet and holy shit! Ace of spades between the wife and the wife and kids. Everyone claps politely. O-kay, they're thinking. Right, like that guy's not part of the show, like he's not in on it. Let's get to the beer tent line-up or the deep-fried chocolate bar vendor. Who has time for concourse magicians?

But what if you were that guy standing there with the ace of spades in your hand? What if you were that guy and you were damned sure that neither Magnifico, nor the sweet little thing in her shorts got anywhere near enough to you to slip a card in your wallet?

This one guy they laid the trick on, Hicks says the guy wrote letters to Magnifico for months, telling him how he'd lie awake at night boring holes in the ceiling with his eyes. That guy had been talking to God, saying, God, give me a reason so I can stop drinking. He was saying, For the love of God, God, so I can stop abusing my dog, my wife, my car, my kids, give me a sign! Then an ace of spades pops up in his wallet?

The man wrote about Magnifico as inspiration, about Magnifico's role in this spiritual miracle, about the strip-mall church the man opened in Ogden. Our Lord of the Holy Revelation. Current congregation: 12. Magnifico showed Hicks and Kat the letters and did they all have a good laugh.

Hicks insists he once got a card into a guy's hat. He says this one guy had his jeans tucked into his cowboy boots, so Hicks, he kneels down as if to tie his shoes, was about to drop a three of clubs in the boot when the guy takes his hat off to wipe sweat from his forehead, holds the hat at his side a moment. Hicks slides the card into the hat band inside. Always says he couldn't have done it smoother if he had three takes to film it.

Ronaldo holds out the cards for the guy, the guy pulls out the three of clubs? (There's a 1 in 52 chance. It happens.) The guy's amazed, but Ronaldo starts shuffling again, accuses him of lying, because the card is actually in—Hicks at the back of the crowd motioning taking a hat off, then scratching his head—in—more emphasis on taking a hat off.

In your hat? Ronaldo, not sounding at all convinced.

Guy takes his hat off, mind effectively blown.

Hicks always says that's his favourite, getting a card inside that guy's hat.

About that bank card, Hicks says. He says, Sure, getting the card is easy. But, listen. We might be telling this story someday, we might be telling people how we snaked a guy's wallet to snake a guy's bank card, so we should put a bit of style to it. Can't just take it and go.

Why not? Willey says. We just take it, take it to the bank machine, and we're done. We can lie later.

You're in oil money country, Hicks says, his arms spread wide. He says, That guy's probably got thousands of dollars in dozens of bank accounts. What with withdrawal limits, we might not be able to get all his money in one go. We've gotta get that wallet, get that card, get that wallet back in that guy's pocket. If we're lucky, he won't know for a while. We can take out money today, more tomorrow.

Willey nods a reluctant agreement. He tries focusing on his biscuit, dipping into the chili every 34 seconds. When the pretty man gets up, Willey has half a bowl uneaten. Hicks, the paper still folded in front of him, his eyes intent on the man's back, hasn't taken a bite since Willey told him about the bank card number. Let him get a bit of a start on us before following, Hicks says.

Hicks has to keep Willey from making too much commotion as they start to follow. Commotion such as, trying to take his chili with him. It's a meat day of the man's diet after all, and the other meat day, that's the chicken day. Just leave it and c'mon, Hicks says. And add some patience to your movements, dammit.

The pretty man boards the escalator, headed to the Scotia Centre second floor. Willey and Hicks step on behind a man in a steel-grey suit. In front of that suit, yet another suit. A few steps further up from that suit, a woman with a blouse and a skirt that might as well be a suit, but a suit cut to show a butterfly tattoo on her ankle. Willey always notices tattoos on women's ankles. Butterflies and Celtic scripts, dolphins. He can understand butterflies on ankles, what with the chrysalis standing for change, but what does a dolphin stand for? A script circling the ankle makes sense, but a dolphin? Willey nudges Hicks and points out the butterfly.

Hicks leans back as if he's stretching. Scratches the back of his head. No body, Hicks says. Butterfly wings without the body sounds a messed-up tattoo to me.

Maybe she's just waiting for the right person, Willey says. Then she'll tattoo the butterfly body with her right person's body.

I hope she's into girls, Hicks says. Guys with butterfly wings are an affront to ankles. Don't look like you're trying to catch up to him, but c'mon, let's catch up to him.

The escalator dumps them at either the foot or the head of a Starbucks, whichever way your inner therapist wants you to look at it, and butterfly girl walks over to get in line with the rest of the suits and skirts. Straight ahead, the pretty man walks toward the +15 walkway into TD Square, his face buried in his phone. Willey gives the butterfly girl one last shoulder check.

They follow at a distance, intense concentration on Hicks's face; Hicks trying to figure the man out, gathering all the details that make picking a pocket a touch

easier. His eyes narrow as they question the man's wealth. He bites his bottom lip as he ponders the man's employment, his sense of style.

Sure is pretty, Willey says. That man.

I wonder if Pretty's gay, Hicks says.

You think he's gay?

Sure, Hicks says. Why not? He looks uncomfortably dressed.

Willey has to think on this a minute, trying to predict the Hicksian logic at work, but he comes up empty. Scratching the back of his head, he says, What does dressing uncomfortably have to do about being gay?

I dunno, Hicks says, shrugging. Annie-O's always telling me how women have to dress uncomfortably, with high heels all the time to be sexy, and short skirts and panty-hose in winter. Seems logical to assume gay guys would be just as uncomfortable, if they're trying to get other guys to notice them. Pretty's tie looks like it's going in for the kill.

Willey concedes a certain logic in Hicks's philosophy, one that might make absolute perfect sense to Hicks, but pushing the matter further would only result in the elaboration of that logic, so Willey keeps his mouth shut. They exchange the thrift store light of Scotia Centre for the halogen retail of TD Square. Pretty walks past the Lancaster, where a man can buy a dozen coffees from a dozen different places. He stops in front of a display for hundred dollar pocket squares. Willey and Hicks pass him and stop at a directory map a little way along the mall.

He's gay for sure, Hicks says.

And rich, Willey adds. If he's thinking of dropping a C on a decorative rag. He must be loaded.

Pretty takes the escalator by the Alligator Shirt Store and almost bumps into the rail on account of his phone. Willey and Hicks board the same escalator, come to ground near another Starbucks and Willey scratches his head all aflutter over this. Why'd this guy go to Soup Depot for a cup of coffee? Especially when there's a hundred places to get coffee in the Core food court, all of them closer and surely holding more appeal for a guy in a suit?

Man's gotta slum every once in a while, Hicks says. Remind himself of the dangers of bad business. Of shitty parentage.

A dozen feet behind their mark, Hicks asks again, What pocket? Willey says again, Back, passenger side.

Pretty looks up from his phone and cuts an emergency right into the lobby of the Dome Tower. Dirty luck on Hicks's part. Amateurish. Had he been ten feet closer he could have nabbed the wallet in Pretty's pause to open the door. They catch up as the elevator doors open.

Hey, Hicks says. Hey, can you help me find—but Pretty holds up his hand and steps into the elevator. They watch the floor indicator. 12, 13, 18, 30. I shouldn't have talked to him, Hicks says. Now you're gonna have to distract him if we want that wallet.

How are we going to get his wallet? Willey says. He's gone.

Chances are he gets off at five. Let's get here at fourish, we'll wait.

### 1.3

Waiting until fourish means they have fourish hours to kill, and Hicks, even though he's in a tizzy about that wallet, starts to answer to his work. Once upon a time Hicks made a decent dollar, working through the Diverse Agency for Temporary Employment. A DATE with heavy lifting more often than not. The occasional day spent flagging for a construction crew. Some variant of landscaping. Mixing with this largely uneducated, young, often homeless, depressed or otherwise socially undersupplied group, Hicks soon discovered that a certain percentage of these folk don't mind a joint every once and again. Best part of having a father with a garage-scale grow-op, you can steal a decent amount and sell it for 100 percent profit. Why partake of heavy work, or any work, when you can make money selling to people who do? Most days Hicks hangs about the placement agency starting around 4:30, selling to those coming in from the fields. During the earlier parts of the day, he keeps his bench in sight, picking up early bird sales to anyone travelling from the agency to the homeless shelter, or any others in the know.

Willey and Hicks fill the pauses in small-time sales with conversations between themselves regarding their pending, hopefully larger deal. Pretty's lack of hospitality at the elevator provides some dividends in planning. Hicks's fingers aren't fourteen anymore, and attempting a no-crowd pick would have been outright foolishness. Hicks talks and talks and Willey, he thinks of an afternoon, the two of them on the train headed downtown. A man on the train with black, spikey hair dyed red at the tips. Tattoos up his arms and neck, the style of short pants that

stalky guys like to wear topped with an Afflicted t-shirt. One of those shirts that make it hard to tell where shirt ends and tattoos begin. Facial piercings.

The man has a chain from his belt into the back pocket of his wide-bottomed capris, and the train is packed, so the man has to stand. As the train comes into the 3rd Street station, people milling around getting on and getting off, Hicks takes the chain and pulls the guy's wallet out of his pocket. The simplicity, the artistry of such an act, made magnificent only when Hicks, after taking fifteen dollars and a bus pass, puts the wallet into the purse of the woman standing next to the guy. Willey can only imagine how the scene played when the woman or the tattooed man decided to leave, both were still on the train when Willey and Hicks stepped off.

You look distracted, Hicks says.

I'm thinking about this time, when I was fishing with my dad, Willey says. The fish weren't biting, so my dad took a long piece of fishing line, and put a hook on both ends, a minnow on both hooks. He tossed the whole mess at a group of gulls hanging out nearby. Long story, one tried to take off while another was happy to float, both hooked to each other in the gut.

Hicks stares a moment. We've gotta figure this shit out, he says. Picking this man. You're gonna distract him.

How, exactly, am I to do that? Willey says.

Willey, Hicks says. Plans are like women. The simple ones are the best laid. You're gonna bump into him.

As Hicks begins to outline his plan, Willey thinks of poor Dianne, poor Annie-O, Hicks's on again, mad again girlfriend. Dianne skating through Willey's memory of

a black night, one of those winter nights with the air full of snow crystals. Black hair streaming behind her, eyes far too blue to exist under hair that black. The three of them, Willey, Hicks, Dianne, out playing hockey in Pinebrook, Dianne in her white fluffy jacket, black yoga pants. Minus a hundred out and Dianne wears yoga pants and white figure skates.

Willey turns to look down the avenue as Hicks keeps on about their plan. You're gonna wait by the mall doors, Hicks says.

Dianne skating, Hicks coming up behind her with the puck. Dianne can't skate backward, she's waiting for Hicks to skate past her. Hicks fakes one way, goes the other, while sliding the puck through her feet. A cocky move, a show-off move. Dianne chokes up on the stick and as Hicks strides past, she swings golf-club style at his feet, hits the blade of his right skate and sends him sprawling. Take that you prick, she yells, laughing.

Hicks gets up to skate after her, but when she skates forward you're never going to catch her. You might be faster, but no one can turn on skates like Dianne.

'Course, he might go toward the train, Hicks says. Willey puts his hands in his pockets, imagining Dianne's feet coming out of her skates. Dianne has no ankle tattoos, but she paints her toe-nails in colours you'd find in the candy aisle. Hicks lowers his mouth onto a toe and Willey cringes. Best laid plans, Willey thinks. Asshole.

Are you even listening? Hicks says.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Mall doors. Train.

Willey's fighting away the toe-sucking image when a stressed-out lawyer-looking guy who knows Hicks for pot hits the bench, says he might have cost his company a few hundred thousand that morning and plans to eradicate the memory at 5 o'clock high. Do you have anything with a bit more punch?

I have ecstasy tablets or meth, Hicks says. Be back in five minutes with whichever.

Neither option thrills the man. Too many deaths in Calgary from tainted ecstasy, he says. And meth? The man insists he is not yet that far down the hole, and so he opts for the standard eighth. Hicks suggests the man might wanna buy extra, seeing as he still has to navigate the afternoon without causing any further damage.

The man pays for his pot and leaves.

You got meth? Willey asks.

What can I say, Willey? Demand and supply.

So you're selling meth?

Look, dealers everywhere are forced to sell worse drugs if they wanna keep up with what their customers want. I'm a slave to my pullers.

And Dianne?

As far as I know, Dianne doesn't sell anything.

Does Dianne know? Willey says.

As long as Dianne thinks I'm working that placement agency, she won't have reason to get upset. And I know you don't like her upset. Right, Willey?

Right, Hicks.

In regards to the pot users, Hicks is on more than a few speed-dials. Special clients who have earned the right, but, he insists, no texting! Calls only. With each buzz of his phone the two are off somewhere, meeting buyers. Central United or Olympic Plaza or one of a dozen places along Stephen Avenue. First, Hicks has to tap his stash, which, since he works downtown, he has to hide downtown. You must consider that Hicks has no formal training in the business of dealing, whose only advice from his father regarding drugs, or any other aspect of life, for that matter, essentially amounts to Never cut green with catnip. Pretty shitty advice, Hicks once told Willey, considering most of the bourgeois naïve will buy a near fifty-fifty mix without complaining.

Hicks has been making shit up as he goes and always lands on the paranoid side of fearing the law. That being said, every once in a while, when you're in a public lavatory in an area notorious for drug abuse, or not, take the time to take the tank lid off the back of a toilet, or feel around under certain sinks. You might be surprised. If you're in a single-shot restroom with a locking door, what kind of ceiling are you dealing with? T-bar, where you can push the ceiling tiles out of the way? If Hicks's going to get caught, he'll be carrying personal use quantities and that is all.

As if following some bizarre tide flooding their dopaminergic pathways, the methamphetamine enthusiasts start to come out mid-afternoon. Not an army by any means—this isn't the Beltline—and sure, it's mid-afternoon, but cravings can't tell time. Male, female, black, white, up, down, zig, zag, whatever; most of them still in the opening stage of ghoulish. Some occasionally throw out the possibility of payment

via blowjob before finally forking over twenty bucks for a chunk of brown tinged crystal that looks like it might have been scraped from the corners of an over-neglected litter-box. To some of the nastier looking heads, Hicks pleads empty. He sends the scabbier addicts to other dealers, often suggesting Lance Templeton who works a few blocks west in Century Park. Lance is always good for meth and isn't picky about his customers. You can never be too paranoid, Hicks says. Or too careful.

The phone buzzes and they head to 8th Avenue and Centre Street, near the iron horse. Hicks mock wrestles a guy before breaking out a hacky sack. They kick that around for thirty seconds, maybe a minute before back-slapping goodbyes, the other guy leaving with the sack.

You might have to flirt with Pretty, Hicks says. He says, If Pretty is indeed gay, you might be a possible distraction.

I'm going to need better attire, Willey says. If I have to attract a man as fashionable as Pretty.

Skinny jeans that show off your ankle, Hicks says. No socks. We should consider your muffin top. Hicks pulls out another hacky sack. This one, presumably, free of cargo.

Busy time starts at 3:30, when the high schools let out. Kids with pretty backpacks and colorful shoes. Unanimously white, triple or quadruple-parented. Raised by immigrant nannies who changed diapers and wiped noses and had to move on at the first sign of teenage self-sufficiency. Kids offering up their bus-passes for just a bit more weed, man, c'mon! One kid with 200 dollar shoes and a sneer to match shows up with a pair of pale yellow pills molded in the shape of Autobot

logos. After being told to put those away kid, fuck! and after being directed to the appropriate restroom of business, the kid asks Hicks if Hicks has seen anything like them, and what they might be. Hicks says they're either ecstasy or a meth bomb and there's only one way to find out, kid. Grind one up and smoke it through a chicken bone. If you start hearing a noise like shoom shoom shoom, meth bomb.

Chicken bone?

Or you can drink a bunch of whiskey and if you stay sober, meth bomb. And if it is a meth bomb, have a couple days' worth of plans, because you won't be sleeping for a while.

What if I do that and it is ecstasy?

Go dancing, Hicks says. Or do some homework.

Ten dollars here, twenty dollars there, it adds up, slowly. Maybe 200 one day, maybe thirty the next. To answer Willey's incredulousness, no, Hicks would never do phone business with any of the meth crowd, especially the younger ones. Having some fifteen-year-old show up fucked up on the news with Hicks's number the last contact on her phone? No, thank you. Sure, he's had the occasional stink-eye from the local constabulary, but Hicks has remained relatively charmed. He tells Willey he's only been selling harsher material for a couple months.

Months? Willey says.

Transit cops, on the other hand, the Peace Officers, they're a real handful. You'll never in your life get a warrant for your arrest from a single Deerfoot Trail speeding ticket, but don't pay your transit fine and see what happens. Light a cigarette in the mall and prepare to be asked politely to extinguish it or leave. Light

that same cigarette on the train platform? Better have your ID handy. Hicks, he says he prefers to stick inside the mall where he can see the bench as opposed to sitting outside and answering to the same accusations day after day. The security guards inside are a bit more forgiving, possibly due to the reduced prices Hicks gives them.

Hicks gets a warning call from a friend of his about his friend's girlfriend, Danielle, who is having a bad afternoon and who, if history has any say, might end up in Hicks's vicinity. Danielle stacks her crayons a little different from everyone else and when they fall over she often ends up at Hicks's bench, trying to sell her medication. Sure Marko, Hicks says to Danielle's boyfriend. I'll keep an eye out for her.

...

No Marko, I will not give her money for her meds.

...

I definitely will not give her any money.

...

Sure Marko. If I see her, I'll call you back right away.

Back at the bench, Danielle's sitting and waiting and talking to everyone around her, which is no one. Upon seeing Hicks, she bursts into tears. She says, You're the only one that understands me, Dwayne. You're the only one that I can talk to.

Hicks sits next to her, his hands in his lap. Bumps his shoulder against hers, says, What's going on, Danielle? Anything I can do?

Willey steps back a few paces, far enough to leave the impression of being out of ear-shot. Turns out Danielle had a rough morning. Marko had a look on his face like his eyes were burning and she didn't feel right and she hadn't been taking her medication because she felt so good and Marko wants her on her medication, just like her mother wants her on her medication. That fire in Marko's eyes, though. Like her step-father's.

Hicks tells Danielle that no one, not nobody, has been able to tell him where the line between sick and healthy is drawn and if she's sick, maybe everyone is sick. And what about your rabbit? Hicks says. You have an amazing rabbit. Where is he?

Danielle rubs at her eyes and stifles a chuckle. She says she does have an amazing rabbit, even the vet agrees. Hicks says to her, If you follow your instincts about caring for your rabbit, use your instincts to care for yourself, and if your instincts tell you to include a few moments in your life where you can be yourself, and not some medicated version, then why not follow those instincts too?

The two of them continue to talk, Hicks's saying something about Danielle's medication making everyone else's life more comfortable, not Danielle's life, and it's a shame, a real shame when you can't be yourself. Mostly Willey thinks about Danielle's rabbit. Danielle occasionally walks that rabbit on a leash and the damn thing will hop up to you and flop over so you can rub its belly.

Before Danielle leaves, Hicks gives her thirty dollars for a handful of olanzapine tablets. These he will offer as a sedative or as a coke come-down for those who need such a pill.

Hicks watches Danielle cascade down the street, invigorated, and Willey, he knows Hicks genuinely believes he's done the girl some good. Hicks turns to Willey, says, You know, I don't even know the name of that girl's rabbit.

Juan, Willey says. Thinks it's a cat.

And what about Willey? What would make a man want to witness if not participate in this cluster-fuck on a regular basis? Thursday, that's why. Thursday is Willey's Sunday, and if Thursday being a man's Sunday isn't enough of an answer, work a bowling alley for a time. Willey works Friday to Tuesday at the lanes portion of Las Gary's Casino and Lanes, where he wipes tables, sweeps gutters, serves the sourest looking beer in the city, and sprays a liquid that might or might not be Barbicide into rentable shoes. When you bowl and the pins get twisted and the pinsetter machine gives up trying to sort them out, Willey's the man that leaps, or rather, lumbers to your rescue.

In truth, half the time Willey would have fucked off from Hicks long before now to get to his own set of day-off adventures. Lying in bed with some Asimov or Lovecraft; helping mom with dinner or her corns; maybe bashing some sense into video-game prostitutes.

Willey, he might have a dopey look when you stand in front of him. Hell, he might put that dopey look on every morning, but there is a real possibility that one of these days one of those kids *is* going to show up fucked up and two of those other kids are going to lead the authorities straight to Mr. Dwayne B. Hicks, pusher, and Willey M. Hase, innocent bystander, would rather not be there when that happens.

Still. That wallet.

Just after 4, Hicks says, Time we set up shop. You remember that number?

Of course I do, Willey says.

Seriously, Hicks says. You might forget.

I'm good with numbers, I won't forget.

You should write it down and put it in your wallet.

Staring down the C-Train line, Willey shakes his head, already knowing that when he puts his hand in his back pocket, he's going to come out empty. Hicks gives Willey his wallet back, both of them laughing. I had to practice, man, Hicks says.

They start west up the avenue, heading for the Dome Tower and Hicks, he says, Hey man, whatever happened to those gulls, and for a moment Willey wonders what the hell Hicks's on about. Willey says, Nothing, really. They just sat there. All the other gulls left, those two just floated, not looking at each other or nothing. I like to think they knew, they knew they just had to wait until their stomach acids did their work.

If Pretty's wallet pans out for us, Hicks says. I'm gonna flash a wad in front of my father. I'm gonna go to Las Gary's, open up your casino to some serious bets. No small-time shit. Definitely gonna buy something extra nice for Dianne. Pre-emptive smoothing things out. If she ever finds out I'm dealing down here instead of working an honest day, she'll murder me and break up with my corpse. What about you?

I'd definitely murder you.

Ha, Hicks says. I meant about the money. What if we get a lot of money from this wallet?

Put it in the bank, Willey thinks. He tilts his head a moment. He says, I'm going to see if there's any wrestling shows coming on pay-per-view. Maybe have a steak. IF this pans out.

Wrastlin and steak? What about your diet?

I'll celebrate the steak on a meat day, Willey says.

I admire your simplicity, Willey. You're gonna make a woman scratch her head in happiness one day.

My Ma's happy with me now, Willey says.

The pair, they walk up the ramp to the 3rd Street transit station, open the gold doors of the Dome Tower, enter the honey-coloured lobby. All right, mama's boy, Hicks says. Let's take our places.

#### **1.4**

Now, the plan depends entirely on Pretty's means of exiting the tower. If he exits the elevators to the north, he's out on the C-Train platform, and Willey and Hicks will have to regroup. Chances are Pretty would be making for the train and if so, he's an easy pick on board. But if Pretty goes south, the double doors between the elevator bank and the mall is the best place to play. This is where Willey's currently stationed, standing between both sets of glass doors looking and feeling like most of an idiot.

Hicks sees Pretty come out of the elevator with a mob at 4:36. He runs his hand through his hair, pointing at Pretty in the process, ensuring Willey's on to the mark. Hicks heads left and curls around to come up behind. Willey pauses a moment, then another moment, giving Hicks time to get in position. Willey aims

straight for the door that Pretty heads for. He locks his eyes on Pretty's chest, pauses, eyes on Pretty's chest, pauses, lets a woman through, looks down at his phone, and wham-o! Willey plows into him, Hicks in tight behind.

Aw, Jeez, Willey says. I'm sorry.

Pretty, down on one knee, stares Willey in the mouth. Idiot, he says, standing. He steps to the left and heads into the mall. Hicks keeps an eye on him.

So much for you dating him, Hicks says.

You get it?

Of course I got it, Hicks says.

Christ that was fast, Willey says. The whole collision lasted less than a second. Takes Willey three seconds to get his hand into his own pocket and it always feels like he's molesting himself. The blue and gold card, Willey says. Hicks pulls the card from the wallet, slides it into his front pocket.

Let's just hit the machine and call it today, Willey says. Trash the wallet and be happy.

We still gotta get this back in his pants, Hicks says. Don't lose sight of him.

They pull back, making sure Pretty doesn't get too far out of range. In fact, Pretty takes about a dozen steps and stops, inducing in W and H a kind of stutter step. They pretend to use the bank machine next to the Dome Tower door. Pretty's in his phone again, taking slow steps under the escalator that comes down from the second floor. Willey can see Pretty's reflection in the glass of an ad for a high interest investment account. One that gives you the freedom to hang out on a beach in a red bikini.

We're right here, man, do it, Willey says, nodding to the ATM.

Sure, Willey. Just look into that little black window there and smile.

Well, we can find another machine, Willey says. One without a camera. Let's not be greedy.

You need to start thinking bigger, Willey. What if—Hicks finds Pretty's driver's licence—Kyle Pearce here is loaded?

Any cash?

Forty bucks, Hicks says. People just don't carry cash anymore.

A phenomenon that forces young pickpockets into dealing drugs, Willey says.

A horrible world we live in, Hicks says. And I am a simple victim.

Pretty—Pearce—hangs tight to his place under the escalator, his only movements the right to left sweep of his finger on his phone. Willey reaches into the wallet, comes out with a photo. This his girlfriend?

I'm gonna assume it's not his sister.

Might be his sister.

You're right, Willey, Hicks says. Kyle Pearce might carry a picture of his sister in his wallet with heart-Angie written on the back.

Heart-Angie's got a pretty face.

That she does, Hicks says. How about we reunite her pretty face with Pretty's pocket? Willey looks at heart-Angie again, runs his thumb along the edge of the photo.

She's beautiful.

Boy keeps fingering his phone like that, Hicks says. Thing's gonna orgasm right there. Hicks suggests that they leave the forty bucks in the wallet, under the belief that if Pearce goes to buy a coffee the next morning, he'll use cash.

Sure, Willey says. But I watched this man use his bank card for a five dollar coffee and soup combo. I say we ditch the wallet and get to an ATM machine.

Consider the benefits of returning the wallet, Hicks says. If Pretty pays cash for coffee, lunch, eats dinner at home tomorrow, we just might have this card for a few days, maybe more. What if he has daily withdrawal limits? What if he's got 20 thousand in there? Or 40?

Pearce's reflection looks left before walking towards the Metropolitan Restaurant, and the beautiful girl at her wait-station outside. Willey stares at the girl, who in turn stares at Pearce. That is one high end eatery, if they meet you outside. They're not even going to let your nose into the place until you pass inspection. Willey undergoes a momentary panic, thinking Kyle's going to go in, and they'll be hooped for getting him his wallet back.

Seriously, Hicks, Willey says. Let's just hit an ATM machine for real.

Pearce, still in slow-motion, drifts past the wait-station girl, ignorant of her look and smile toward him. He adjusts his shoulder bag, pokes at his phone, sweeps his finger.

Find a crowd already, Hicks mutters to himself. A store, a line. A dead body to stare at, anything.

Pearce hits the escalator that borders the suit store where Willey and Hicks once laughed over a pair of socks that were selling for more than Willey's rent.

Pearce starts taking the steps by twos. He makes the top, turns to head toward the opposite end of the mall. Willey and Hicks look down at their feet to ensure Pearce walks far enough past, then they hurry to get him back in sight. Willey finds him looking in the window of a high-end soap store.

Ugh, the soap store. Of all the stores in the mall, this is Willey's least favourite. Not due to an aversion of soap, Willey only looks dirty, but the place smells a lot like Hicks's father, perhaps the only person in history who needs to spark a joint inside the shower. Store smells like a really clean person who's just walked through a hemp-fire, Willey says.

Willey looks around, looking at the shine that comes off the glass and chrome and the polished stone floor. You can only be so small in a place of 360 degree mirror. Standing 6-4 with ragged jeans and an old hoodie doesn't help when trying to disappear in a thin crowd. Everyone ironed and smooth, put together as if for a display. And if Pearce goes into the Core, where the ceiling is glass and all four levels are open to the sun? This is killing me, Willey says. ATM machine, man, come on.

A T M for God's sake, Hicks says. The M stands for Machine.

Sure enough, there goes Pearce into the Core. Into the Core and past the bra stores and shoe stores and stores packed with so much make-up a single fire could spike the price of crude-oil to boom levels. Hicks intent on Pearce, Hicks ignorant of the light, the glare, the gloss, the smoothness, but Hicks fits right in with all that gleam.

They pass stores that want to know you on a first name basis. Names like Ricki and Melanie and Eveline and Jacob and Suzy and these stores would love

Hicks's proportions, his smile, his hair, his girlfriend. Jack and Judith and Laura. All your brothers and sisters here to clothe and primp you. Willey sees a sign for Bcbgmaxaria, your weird Italian uncle, looking to dress your girl.

Pearce moves along, sometimes faster, sometimes slower, occasionally pausing in front of clothing stores to look at the displays. Some stores have smooth-faced mannequins and some have faceless mannequins and at least one has mannequins that have no heads, but do have nipples. Willey give these a double take, and for a moment he follows behind Hicks, focusing on the blur of Hicks's heels. We've somehow evolved to nipples on our mannequins.

Pearce moves again, never looking anywhere beyond a foot or two beyond his phone. Between Jacob and Suzy, Willey sees a woman coming down the mall who looks to have stepped out of an advertising poster. Her hair the colour of a sun idealized in the same poster. Deep red dress, knee-length and flowing, as if the wind itself helped dress her. Walking in a high-heel staccato, and with Pearce close to the rail that looks over the lower level, she'll have to pass on his right. Hicks displays the type of forethought known only to the criminally adept. He shoves Willey into the nearest store, Suzy, and as the woman drifts by, an aura of jasmine and celebrity trailing her, Pearce turns slightly to look back over his shoulder.

And so the woman passes, head high, body slim and unlikely. Willey risks a look, memorizing the correct order of consonants used to create the particular takah takah of her shoes on the stone floor, but even that is not right, other than the ah of that sound. Only Hicks appears immune, staring at a pink hoodie on the rack.

Hicks and the mannequins, who here have neither faces nor heads. Nor nipples for that matter.

Guess he's not gay, Willey says.

Jury's still sequestered, Hicks says. Maybe he likes her shoes.

Willey feels his face warm.

Pearce continues west until he hits the end of the mall. He looks up from his phone, sees the sign for Holt Renfrew, turns and heads back down the opposite side of the mall. He doesn't stop to look, doesn't stop to shop. Sometimes striding, sometimes in a slow meander, he passes the lone elevator, passes clothing stores that smell like church in the spring, passes shoe stores that smell like the bottom of Willey's mother's closet from when he was six.

What the hell is this guy doing? Hicks says. Willey, his fists shoved into his pockets, shrugs. At the next available escalator, Pearce heads back to the second floor. Finally, finally, to everyone's delight, Pearce exits the mall for the +15 west toward the Watermark Tower. Hicks's hand finds his forehead, but rather than run his fingers through the spikes, he flattens the whole mess with his palm. Willey, Hicks says, but Willey already knows what Hicks is going to say. Pearce might be heading for the C-Train platform along Courthouse Park.

They dig out the wallet and, yes, Pearce packs a book of transit tickets. Shit, Hicks says. If Pretty goes for a ticket, sees his wallet is gone and remembers getting bumped in the crowd? Shit. Shit!

There's a chance he might be able to call in the card missing right away, Willey says. Let's go. Bank machine. Right now. There's one in the Watermark.

Hicks's fist now pulls at the spikes in his hair. We're gonna play the odds that if he finds his wallet on the lam, he'll head back to his office looking for it. If we see him go for that pocket, then go again for the phone, right away we're humping the nearest bank machine, camera or no camera. Coolio?

Willey sighs, nods.

When they see Pearce again, he's already past the 4th Street C-Train exit, making for the Watermark. All that worry for nothing, Pearce keeps walking along the +15.

## 1.5

Calgary's +15 system of elevated walkways lets typical office anthropoids make their way around the city centre without so much as getting their opposable toes cold. What they have to put up with is stretch upon stretch of medical establishments, hairstylists and Delis of a punishable wit: Submission. Missive Subs. Atomic subs. Subway, of course.

The Watermark, then Plains Midstream. Pearce strides along, the phone and his right hand in his pocket now, his left arm swinging.

In good weather people neglect the +15s for the comforts of light and air, a phenomenon that creates a severe problem for your average pickpocket: no pockets.

Mane Street. Hair Today. The Best Little Hair House in the West. Coiffe You.

For, if you were in the need to un-pickpocket a guy, you'd feel a lot better if that guy hadn't already looked you once in the eye. We need a crowd, a line-up, Hicks says. We need someone to distract him.

Western Canadian Place. First Alberta Place. The Fina Building. Nexen.

Gentle Oral Health. Painless Dentistry. Effective Acupuncture. Other lies.

And then it happens. Right there, in the Nexen building, right across from Pita Pita—so good, they have to tell you twice—miracle miracle, Pearce cuts a sudden right and makes for the washroom. Here we go, Hicks says.

When they enter, Pearce busies the nearest cubicle, the one bordering urinal row. Willey and Hicks stand next to each other a moment, gazing at the stall door. Hicks walks to the sink and turns on a tap. He waves Willey over. Distract him, he whispers.

Distract him? Distract him? How the hell am I supposed to do that?

Here's your chance to find out once and for all. Test if he's girly. Flirt with him.

What about heart-Angie?

You can flirt with her later.

Hicks ignores Willey's scowl, heads for the neighbouring box, leaving Willey to deal with that age-old question, How do you distract a guy in the can? Willey steps up to Kyle's cubicle. Might as well open with the basics. Basics such as rattling the door.

Nothing. Maybe rattling the door harder will work.

Occupied! Pearce says.

A third rattle of the door.

I said, Occupied!

Hey, I know that voice, Willey says. He steps around to the urinals. They're the style that hang on the wall, that direct backsplash away from your shoes,

focusing it at your thighs instead. Turns out they can also take 240+ pounds standing on them.

Oh, hi there, Willey says, smiling. Not a bad opener, under the circumstances.

Pearce is, of course, confused and a bit terrified. Willey's one big mother.

That gap-toothed shaggy head smiling over the cubicle wall? I thought it was you, Willey says. I wanted to apologise to you, you know, for that earlier bump. He tucks his hair behind his right ear.

Now, if you're Pearce, what exactly are you supposed to do in this situation? Squeezing your knees together should be part of your plan because after that, what?

You sure are a pretty man, Willey says. For good measure, he winks.

Willey can see the plaid of Pearce's boxer shorts. He can see a mix of what-the-fuck and fear in Pearce's eyes. He can see Hicks's hand, all of his arm and even a bit of his face as Hicks reaches out from the next cubicle. Pearce yells again, mostly high-pitched and indecipherable, the words fucking and asshole showing up somewhere near the end.

Half a minute later they, Willey and Hicks, exit the Nexen building into Century Gardens, Hicks laughing most of the way. Kyle Pearce's bank card warming in his hand, with Pearce none the wiser. You really need to work on your pick up lines, Hicks says.

That was terrifying, Willey says. And I don't think Pretty likes me.

C'mon, man. So what if you got turned down. I had to put my face in piss-splash to give that guy his wallet back.

They start into the park, heading for the corner of 8th and 8th, and Maam's Groceteria.

I love that word, Hicks says. Groceteria.

Makes it like we're shopping on another planet, Willey says.

They veer right of the Century Garden pond. Skyscraper reflections dance with the water's surface, as if the park too celebrates their score. Weathered bronzes of elated parents engaged in synchronised child-spinning centre the pond. I keep thinking those two are about to throw their kids in the water, Willey says.

A new take on helicopter parenting, Hicks says, and they both laugh.

Hicks cuts his laugh short, and his smile drops. Damn it, he says. Here comes Templeton.

Templeton. If there's any rain about to fall on this parade, Lance Templeton's the black cloud. He's a seller, probably a lifer. He strides over, blond hair free and blowing in the wind, face twisted into a snarl, right hand a fist. What the fuck you twos doin in my park? he says.

What? Hicks says, chuckling. Are you trying to be hard all of a sudden?

Make a reason a good one, Dwayne Bartholomew.

Jesus, Silky. You might need to lay off the gangsta rap, yo.

We're just headed to Maam's is all, Willey says.

What the fuck yous goin for Maam's for? Templeton spits back.

C'mon Silky, Hicks says. Don't be that way. You know I'd never wrong you.

The two a you in my park means wrong, no doubt a that. And lay off the Silky, else I cut you a new ass.

Bank machine without a camera, Hicks says. And for Christ's sake, you pasty lunatic, you sound ridiculous.

Willey pulls back from Templeton a bit. He, Templeton, advertises his product heavily, and the scent's a bit thick for Willey's tastes. Templeton stares Willey down, Willey nods towards Hicks, kicks at a pebble with his shoe. Hicks offers no further clarification, only a smile.

That ain't much a reason, Dwayne.

But it is *a* reason, Hicks says.

Templeton lets out a sigh, and his face and fist relax.

Wouldn't expect you down here for another couple of hours, Silky, Hicks says. And why in the park all of a sudden? Everyone knows the Mac's.

If I'm ever looking to get arrested, Templeton says. I'll sell at the Mac's. Besides, I thought I'd come in and maybe sell to a few cold-callers. And I told you, fuck off with the Silky shit.

Hicks nods along when Templeton mentions cold-calling.

If you were to sit in Century Park, with your five hundred dollar socks and your hundred dollar pocket square, your sushi lunch and hard-cover novel, a guy like Lance Templeton wouldn't pay you much attention. You'd get a split-second look from him, because that is all you'd be worth to him. But the park, situated smack in the middle of two hotels, gets plenty of travellers struggling with having to leave their paraphernalia at home. You carry a look of desperation along with your maps and cameras, you'd get a quick syllable to go along with Templeton's gaze, something just above the level of audible, something that you'd only hear if you

were waiting to hear it, something along the lines of shh or eth or ack, and if indeed you were of the right look, and if indeed you were attuned to that sound (if not Templeton's stink), you'd know that what Templeton meant was hash or meth or crack and Lance Silky Templeton would tell you to hang tight, he'd be able to set you right up.

Which reminds me, Templeton says, have I come to be aware of you offering meth of late?

Naw, Hicks says. Pot's working for me.

I know as a fact there's no such thing as a successful seller of pot.

A couple of my buyers have upped the ante, so—

So where exactly are you getting your ante from, then?

As the two start to talk shop, Willey drifts off into staring at the landscape. He has to admit a certain weakness for this park. There's a texture to Century that he's never been able to pin his finger to. The impression that the park has always sat here, always sunned here, has shifted her weight to be comfortable.

Willey carries this idea around that the city grew up around Century—brutalist, they call her—and looking at the buildings near her now, that may not be far removed from the truth. Refacing, renovating, rebuilding – Century saw the Nexen rise out of the remains of. . . who knows what. Century Park witnessed the laying out of the tracks for the transit trains. There's a patina of familiarity on all her surfaces, the knowledge, the wariness or perhaps the distrust a city holds for its own concrete coming of age.

That's some heavy shit, Willey thinks. He comes to with Hicks demanding they get moving. They walk silently for a moment, Hicks coming out of the park with a new supplier.

They wait for the 8th Avenue light to change. Silky? Willey says.

Caught a glimpse of a peach thong when we were kicking at a hacky sack this one time, Hicks says. Lance has a liking for wearing women's underwear.

Maybe he's on to something, Willey says. Some support we're missing.

Let me know how that works out, Hicks says. I'm thinking a bag of plums hanging over an elastic band, myself. The light changes and they make for Maam's.

## 1.6

Finding your coordinates in Maam's takes a bit of attention. Every inch of horizontal surface is taken up with stock, and stock is stacked on the floor, stacked in front of the windows, and hangs from the ceiling. Gunny sacks of rice, beans. Chocolate bars, candies, gum in boxes decorated with curled and slashing scripts. Spices in the air so thick you'll carry Maam's home with you, and have cravings for food you never knew existed.

In a cooler made for a now defunct buffet restaurant, fresh-made treats are assorted and labelled. Abrak, Bureek Muwaraq, Bureek Tajin. Willey has no idea what these things are, but damn if he doesn't want to take some home to taste at his leisure.

Past these treats and next to a shelf loaded with movies of unpronounceable title, a NovaBank ATM manages to add a bit of gleam to the meat-tinged light. Look at her, Willey, Hicks says. She might be the last NovaBank machine in the city. Edged

in a golden chrome, but with no place to go. She takes the card nice like true love, I bet.

Willey nods. Swallows.

We'll pull out all we can, Hicks says. We'll keep the card, try another machine tomorrow. With any luck, Mr. Pearce will not have noticed his surprising fiscal activity.

The machine blinks. PLEASE ENTER YOUR PIN.

Oh, you betcha, baby, Hicks says.

Willey clears his throat, ready to spit out his part of the deal.

Hicks's fingers hover over the key pad, skin and bitten nail reflected in a hint of disco.

Willey sucks in his breath, licks his lips.

Hicks, his eyes narrow. Ready Tuco? he says.

In a bend of the honeyed trim, Willey can see a warped Hicks thumb stroking the neighbouring index finger. Hicks's poker tell. In a second, he'll crack a knuckle.

Hicks cracks a knuckle.

PLEASE ENTER YOUR PIN.

She's begging for it, Willey.

All right, Willey says.

What's her number?

Asterisk asterisk asterisk asterisk.

Now, Hicks is pretty quick about coming to a conclusion, but this moment takes a moment to sink in. What are you telling me? he says.

I read the screen with my own eyes when he punched it in. Asterisk asterisk asterisk asterisk. Come on!

Hicks is also not a fighter, but now he's throwing fists and a flurry of stupid fat fucks. Willey turtles to absorb blows and words both. One punch and Willey can lay Hicks out, but Willey, he keeps his hands around his head, his elbows tucked into his sides.

Hicks pulls his hand back for another hit, lowers his arm. With a final shove he storms off, leaving a trail of stupids and fat asses echoing behind him. The store clerk, eyes wide, watches Hicks shove the Maam's door open. It catches a blaze of sun, flashes, closes.

Sorry Hicks, Willey says. He cancels the transaction and also exits under the confused gaze of the clerk. Hicks, a long stride, shoulders fierce, hands shoved in his pockets, already half way to 7th Street.

Willey sits on one of the blue steel benches planted around the downtown core. He surveys the street for the length of a long, drawn out exhalation. Across the street, a bunch of twenty-somethings, the look of the shiftless about them, horse around on a statue of a chess player. The twenty-somethings, planning who knows what, and where. Willey watches them for a minute, trying to see if any transaction takes place. He pulls the picture of heart-Angie out of his pocket, fingers along the edge of the photo. It's been cut out of a larger picture, carefully, but the edge on one side has the slightest of turns. The scissors took two swipes to cut that edge.

What was Kyle looking to get you, heart-Angie? Maybe it's your birthday soon, or maybe Kyle messed something up and is trying to make for amends.

Eyes closed, Willey listens as people walk past, listens to the occasional chatter of foreign voices from the building behind him. The sound calm and calming, like there's an edge of optimism in the air. He hears a rustle of clothing, and the soft steps of a woman in shoes that scuff of practicality. She sits at the bench and her smell of curry reminds Willey of his apartment in Dover. Home. Home, and his mother. He's thinking of his mother when he pulls Pearce's card out of his pocket, runs his finger along the edge of that, too. He heads back into Maam's. He doesn't clean out Kyle Pearce's bank accounts, but he could have.

## Chapter 2: A Night of Magic at Las Gary's Casino and Lanes

### 2.1

Think of those nights when your tail sits straight up in the air. When you decide to put on your best boots, your finest leather. When the lights of the local bowling alley slash casino are lit just for you. Hicks, in his best Elvis, sings, Viva Las Gary's with your one sign flashin and your no-arm bandits splashin all those quarters down the drain.

Willey's finishing up for the night, wiping down the last table, one rag to wash, one to dry. Willey's a man that can't stand seeing streaks left behind on the wood when he's wiping.

Viva Las Gary's with your 10-pin bowlin and your hopes a rollin, if you see it once. . . If you see it once, Willey, Hicks says, Why the hell would you ever come back?

Now, even Hicks knows that there might be a few casinos in Calgary and a few bowling alleys, but Las Gary's Casino and Lanes is the only place where you can you spare a 7-10 split and split a pair of sevens all within the space of ten minutes and all without having the rain take the gloss off your shoes. The whole strip of 10-pin lanes and the few for the small-ballers is known locally as The Lanes and who works the 2 to 10 shift every Friday to Tuesday? Willey can tell you which lane breaks which way, which tap is due to foam, which toilet is due to plug, and which patron will be the first to exit through the economy glitter of the casino, dropping a twenty or two or five along the way. Willey can also tell you the shoe size of every regular lady-bowler who has visited the Lanes, and sure, he might have a small

sampling of those very shoes stuck in the back of a closet, but who's to judge a man's kink—especially without first laying their own on the table—so we'll ignore that and get to the mission at hand.

Hicks in his snake-skin cowboy boots. Size 10s, complete with gold tone boot-chains linked with Conquistador-head medallions. No orange leather tonight, the November air too chilly, but his black leather jacket is an upgrade on warmth if not flash. Premium quilted sheepskin leather, so Hicks brags. Conventional cuff, front snap-welt pockets, adjustable snap tabs at hips—how does this guy memorize this shit?—Merino wool lining, he says, spinning. And, he adds, detachable genuine silver fox mandarin collar. He runs his hands down the length of the fur, the collar wide at the lapel, tapering down to the waist. \$1,345 at any retailer of fine leathers, or yours free if you don't mind carrying around an ink packet remover tool.

Detachable collar, Willey says. Yet there it is.

Oh, it's all aboard tonight, Hicks says. Tonight is Thousand Dollar Night.

Oh, Christ, Willey says. Thousand Dollar Night? Tonight? Not tonight?

Yes, tonight. Earlier this evening, walking to the store, I caught a glimpse of the downtown glitter reflected in the river. She whispered to me, Tonight's the night.

Downtown told you?

Downtown reflected in the river told me.

Willey walks to the mop-closet to put his rags away. Thousand Dollar Night. Tonight? Willey's not prepared for Thousand Dollar Night tonight. It's one thing

when a city speaks to you, but by looking at Hicks's face, it's a whole other animal if the river's involved. I don't have any money, Willey says.

That's the problem, Hicks says. Neither do I.

It's Thousand Dollar Night at the casino, and you have a problem. You need a thousand dollars. You need a thousand dollars before midnight, well, 11:30 really, and you have—Hicks counts up his cash—4 dollars and 85 cents.

Damn.

With a talent for picking, you might figure Hicks would be eager to get working on a few pockets, a few wallets. But, Hicks says to Willey, in a bowling alley?

According to Hicks, the casino proper also shoulders its detractors. Never pick pockets in a casino, Hicks says, his finger up, eyes narrow. A bit of advice Willey's sure to follow. Willey's fingers, they're too big for picking pockets. You get crowds at tables, Hicks says, but those camera guys have eyes like scalpels. You even think of picking a pocket in a casino, a light goes off somewhere.

So, what do you do when it's Thousand Dollar Night, only you don't have a thousand dollars? And Hicks has been planning Thousand Dollar Night for months. You need to understand, Hicks rarely plans anything for longer than a day, two tops. And the best part about this scam? It's not even a scam.

For the past bit, Hicks has been playing blackjack on five dollar bets. Three times a week, for three months straight. The maximum loss being fifteen dollars. That takes savant-style dedication. But the man has a plan: play blackjack, count how many times you win the first three hands in a row. Happens more often than

you think, apparently. Then, when you get the special feeling that you're due, like tonight when the city reflected in a river tells you, you drop a grand a bet, and bet your winnings each time. One thousand to two thousand, two thousand to four thousand, and four thousand to voila! Like that you've got eight thousand dollars. See, not a scam at all. Absolutely stupid, Willey thinks, but not a scam.

When Willey first listened to this plan, he said he'd be in for five hundred, under the belief that such absurdity would evaporate after a few days. Still, he set aside five hundred of what he inwardly called the Kyle Pearce money. Unlike Hicks's plan, however, that money actually did disappear. Deposited. For a month Willey kept the 500 dollars under his mattress before taking it to the bank. Once money lands in the House Account it's there for good. You can't break your principles on certain deals, especially those you cut with yourself. Rent, food, transit fines. If Willey's not taking money out of the House Account for those things, he'll be damned before he takes it out for a bet, even one as safe as Thousand Dollar Night. Willey's House Account is a one-way street.

This is what I'm gonna do, Hicks says. He leans forward, motions for the big potato to come closer. He looks left, looks right, Willey sliding to the edge of his seat waiting for this plan of plans, this idea that requires close conversation. God forbid any wayward bowler should catch on to the solution to what ails Thousand Dollar Night.

I had a vision, Hicks says. I've never told anyone about it. A vision I gathered in a dream.

Willey rubs the bridge of his nose.

A vision of the inside of a castle, Hicks says. You follow?

Sure, Willey says.

Hicks's eyes shift around again. He leans in a touch closer, tells Willey about the man he saw in this vision of a castle. An older man, kind of how God might look, only with a shorter beard, and an old-fashioned suit and hat. And God carries a briefcase, Hicks says. Old fashioned, to go with the suit and hat. God says, You'll find, if you sit back, an answer will present itself. That was God, Willey. And that's what God told me. Hicks leans back in his seat.

That was Sean Connery, Willey says.

Sean Connery? Hicks says. Sean Connery?

It hurts Willey, having to break this news to Hicks. He gets the feeling Hicks actually thought he had a vision, a visit from God. *Indiana Jones and The One with His Father*, Willey says. We watched it on TV the night you went with Dianne to that hot yoga class and you fell asleep on the couch after.

Jesus Christ, Hicks whispers. Sean Connery.

Hicks sits silent for a moment. Willey stares back, also silent. He looks toward the concession. This is not a meat night, and his stomach's giving him the gears about it. A man can only eat so many carrot sticks. He looks at Hicks again and sighs. Hicks nods in agreement to the sigh. I really thought that was a vision, Hicks says. He shrugs. I feel like the night's barely reached the second verse, and I've already lost the pace of the song.

Don't think I ever had a pace, Willey says, but I did have a thought tonight.

Go ahead, Hicks says. What's your thought?

In the years I've worked at Gary's Lanes, Willey says. In all four of those years, here, at this bowling alley, I've made sure to spray disinfectant into every pair of shoes that gets worn (well, not *every* pair) but in all that time, not once have we cleaned the balls. We don't spray anything into the holes of the balls, Willey says.

Hicks scratches the side of his nose. Looks under his fingernail. Taps the same nail on the table. Not once? he says.

Not once.

They listen to a long note of urethane rolling on wood, followed by a chorus of pin on pins, crashing. Willey can tell by the richness of the sound, a strike.

Hicks nods toward the lanes. That's like life, he says, and for Hicks, this is some high-end philosophizing. You take that shot, knock everything down, and while you're celebrating, everything gets right back up again.

Until one day you don't want to lift the ball anymore, Willey says.

Even better, Hicks says, is during your celebration, you wipe a tear of joy from your eye and get an infection because of the damn dirty ball you had your finger inside of.

Willey tries to talk Hicks out of Thousand Dollar Night, tells Hicks that Thousand Dollar Night can come again on another night, but Hicks will have none of it. He says it has to be tonight, because that's what the city told him.

The city in a river, you mean.

Don't mock me, Hicks says. He bites at his lip for a second. Your mom got any money?

No. What about your dad?

My dad hasn't had a thousand dollars at any moment in his life, ever.

What about dope? Anyone owe you anything for dope?

I haven't exactly been selling lately.

Willey holds Hicks's gaze a moment, looking for his I'm-a-liar twitch, which doesn't come. Supplier's in jail, isn't he?

There or Edmonton.

Not selling pot either?

Hicks drums the table with his fingers. He tells Willey his father's had a bit of trouble with the neighbours since they found his extension cords plugged into their outside outlets. Turns out he's given them most of his latest crop in exchange for not contacting the police.

What's he going to do for money now?

Already looking for a new place, Hicks says. One with better disguised exterior outlets.

The two have no reason to remain in the alley, other than to bowl, but Hicks says he's too amped to bowl. He has the look of a man pondering how to turn nothing into a thousand dollars. When Hicks gets that look, when he gets his hand at his face, thumb on one cheekbone, finger tapping the other, that means the problem he's working out is far from worked out. It's the thumb-and forefinger along the chin that indicates a workable plan.

Willey scopes the lanes a minute, watches a lady-bowler toss another strike. Her size 7s, Willey already has a pair in his collection. He runs his gaze along the hall that leads to the casino. Dammit, he forgot to wipe down the glass to the poster that

advertises the casino. This poster, right in the hallway, acts as a magnet for anyone with a finger. Some leave marks with their fucking noses. The poster reads, You've been bowling, now try some high-rolling. Experience A NIGHT OF MAGIC AT LAS GARY'S CASINO where you can—damn, the poster's been changed! Gone are the three women, caught in mid-step on a dance floor, arms in the air, all living devil may care. That picture having about as much to do with gambling as with bowling. The new poster advertises the restaurant. Has a picture of a juicy steak, nice and pink in the center.

Willey looks at Hicks.

Hicks looks at Willey.

We're gonna die in this place, Hicks says.

Can't say I disagree, Willey says through a sigh.

Right about then, one of the security guards comes thumping down the hall. A fellow brother battling the gut. Leon's bigger than Willey, at least in the weight department. Willey might have an inch in height. Hicks calls him Lilloo, because his name is Leon Lewinski and, according to Hicks, he'd make a pretty convincing Samoan woman.

Hear about Joey Chan? Leon asks.

No, what about Joey Chan? Hicks says.

Won last night, about six thousand.

Take it in cash?

Insisted on all twenties, Leon says, and there goes Hicks's hand, his thumb and forefinger jump to his chin. Leon tells Willey that he had to escort Chan to his

car, and he earned a twenty dollar tip in the process. Leon has to say, and he does, That was a big stack of twenties.

Is he in the casino tonight? Hicks says, and Willey straightens his back at the sudden edge to Hicks's voice.

Yeah, he's out there playing somewhere.

Probably playing that game the Chinese love, Hicks says, still rubbing his chin. What's that game called? Moo Goo Gai Pan?

Pai gow poker, you idiot, Leon says. Willey, he gets mixed up wanting to laugh at Hicks and wanting to shake his head at Leon. Of course Hicks knows Pai gow. Hicks could tell you every detail about every game on the gambling floor. Willey's stomach rumbles, the sudden desire for take-out demanding attention. Leon thumps off to continue his rounds.

I did some work for that guy a year ago, remember, Hicks says. I painted the inside of his house?

Leon is Pinkwalls? Willey says.

No, dammit! Chan. Chan is Pinkwalls. Look, there's no way he's dragging around that much money if he's here. And I know for a fact that Chan is not a bank guy. When he went to pay me for painting, he snuck off into his bedroom. I'm telling you, we get into that house while he's here. . .

I don't want to steal from Chan, Willey says. He's a nice guy.

He's not that nice when you paint his kitchen Dusty Rose instead of his spare bedroom.

I have conversations with him, he's a good guy.

You have conversations with him? Hicks says. How? Trying to talk to that guy is like trying to talk to a chicken coop.

You think Chan having an accent in English is confusing, try speaking to the man in German. Besides, Willey says. Him having an accent still doesn't make me want to steal from him.

I don't wanna steal from him, either, Hicks says. So we won't steal from him. We'll borrow it. When I win the eight thousand, I'll give him his thousand dollars back, and fifty dollars more. Be worth his while.

Willey sits shocked at the flawlessness of such a plan. The purity, the generosity. Simple plans, right Hicks? You'll have to break into his house, Willey says.

Okay, I'll give him a thousand and fifty dollars, and I'll fix any lock we break. Doesn't he live in Castleridge?

## 2.2

In the Gary's parking lot, Willey and Hicks walk toward Hicks's Oldsmobile. Shhh, Hicks says. We don't wanna spook her. The Olds sits in a stall made black by a burnt out streetlamp, a streetlamp working perfectly when Hicks arrived. Light of any kind shuns this vehicle. Hicks's 1987 Delta 88. In fact, the car is a mix of three Delta 88's, two of them '87s, one an '89. All of them some degree of boot-fucked ugly.

Hicks pulls the Not Abandoned sign off the windshield, gets in, reaches over to open the passenger door. As Willey sits, Hicks puts the key in the ignition, cranks the wheel hard left, pats the dashboard a couple times. When he turns the key he cranks the wheel back to the right and slams his foot on the gas. The engine coughs

like a de-barked dog and Hicks lets go of the key and hovers his hands above the wheel. Stay calm, he says.

Hicks tries the ignition two or three more times before popping the hood latch. On the hood the paint has peeled into a cartographic Africa in rust. A faded sapphire sea with white, blistering clear-coat coasts. Under unavoidably sunny conditions the car is mostly two-tone blue. Medium sapphire glamour blue metallic and midnite sapphire blue metallic, though the brochure is quick to warn that exterior car colors shown above are only for reference and are as accurate as print processes allow. Ask your dealer for true Color Chip information.

Hicks curses under the hood, the car rocking with his frustration. How many times has the brochure been the only reading material available while Willey guards the car from well-intentioned tow-truck drivers, or bottle-pickers looking for a place to sleep, Hicks off to get gas, or some mystical wrench. Willey puts the brochure back in the glove box. When he first opened it, the damn thing refused to open. Now that he wants to close it, the glove box refuses to close. Hicks slams the hood down and steps back in the car.

Use reverse psychiatry, Willey says.

Hicks rubs his palms together, turns the wheel again hard left, gets his hand ready on the wheel, palm up. Right hand on the key, he turns to Willey and says, You know what? Let's just stay here at the casino, but then he cranks the wheel hard again, turns the key and slams the gas.

Hrr-hrr-hrrr, from the engine.

Oh you mangy. . . Hicks yells and he slams his fist down on the dashboard, the console lighting up for the first time in half a decade. Don't make me beat you, bitch, Hicks says, and he turns the key again and again, stomping down on the gas pedal each time.

Imagine a father, proud of his practical son who at fifteen—not buying videogames or shitty movies—scrimped and saved every penny of the 400 dollars necessary to buy a car.

Hicks purchased the car nearly a decade ago with money he made delivering flyers. He tells Willey the story every so often. How he delivered flyers, how he saved up cans and bottles for a year. A little theft on the side, sure, but Hicks saved every penny he could for that car. Every chocolate bar, every bag of chips he bought coming with soy lecithin and guilt; there goes one more dollar that could have gone toward the car. Hicks bought the Olds from a man out in Shepherd whose back yard contained a litter of them, Hicks picking the runt.

Now imagine Hicks's actual father saying, You'll never save enough to buy a shitty bike let alone a car, and later, That shitty car ain't gonna last you a month, you should've bought a bike.

Outside the car, Hicks stares under the hood trying to telepath the car's affliction, while Willey stares at the recent addition Hicks has added to the vehicle's décor. A series of stick-figure stickers have been stuck along the driver's side fender and door.

One night, maybe a month before, Dianne, Hicks and Willey, the three of them come out of a theatre, the latest superhero show, so they come out of the theatre

pissed for having wasted all their money. There's a mini-van parked in the lot, and the back window has all those family stickers that middle-aged van-types slap on their vans in place of having any sort of self-respect. This van, from left to right, is decorated with a husband holding a brief case—even as a stick figure you can tell a suit guy—and next to him, a woman holding a shopping bag. A son, a son (both with skateboards) a daughter, a daughter, a daughter (all with cellphones and ponytails) and a well-heeled dog punctuating this family-life sentence. Dianne digs a white marker, a Tamiya paint pen for painting plastic models, she pulls this paint marker out of her purse and using the side of a Metro newspaper for a straight-edge, she draws a diagonal line through one of the daughters. The middle one.

Misogynist, Hicks says.

Turns out Missy's a slut, Dianne says as they keep walking to the car. If she's going to go out whoring herself, well, we'll see if one of her stick-figure boyfriends will feed and roof her.

Now Hicks's car has four suit guys along the front fender with a line drawn diagonally through the lot to mark a fifth, and a fifth sticker next to them to make an even six. Half a dozen shopping women, three boys, two girls. Four baby carriages, the car decorated like a junked World War II fighter plane.

No dogs? Willey says, nodding to the stickers.

I like dogs.

The streetlamp flickers in the wind, lighting up the mess Hicks calls an automobile. They're both thinking it, but Willey's the one who opens his mouth. We

can walk to Dianne's father's girlfriend's, he says. Maybe we can borrow Dianne's father's girlfriend's car.

Hicks's hand goes to his forehead. Dianne's father's girlfriend hates me, he says. Dianne's father hates me. Dianne is rounding third on her way to sliding into hating me. I dunno. If I fuck that car up, it might be the straw that breaks the camel's back, and I do love those humps, Willey.

Willey looks at Hicks. Thousand Dollar Night, he says, nodding a couple times with one eyebrow raised. Yeah? Yeah?

Dianne won't just give us that car, Hicks says. I'll have to lie to her, and I don't like lying to Dianne.

Willey chokes out a guffaw. What? When did that happen?

I don't lie to Dianne anymore, Hicks says. You can take that to the bank.

Any cash in that bank?

Hicks ponders a moment. He taps his fingers on the hood and rubs his knuckle with his index finger. Then he rubs his chin.

Debra and Mr. Dianne's father won't be back from L.A. for another week, Willey says.

### **2.3**

A few minutes along Highfield Boulevard, the road curves down the aptly named Highfield hill. Willey and Hicks, they walk through the orange street light, and the ever-present quasi-yeasty smell of the nearby distillery. Slouching against the February wind—even though this is early November—they shove their hands

deep in the pockets of their jackets. Willey with his hood pulled low over his eyes, Hicks with the fur collar around his ears.

Hicks sticks to the pavement, the metallic shink of his boot chains layered over the sound of jagged bits of road debris grinding into the asphalt. The type of sound that sets in at your teeth. Willey's size 13 Nikes crunch through the coyote-coloured scruff at the side of the road. He toes the occasional greasy, flattened box or crushed plastic bottle. The hum of cars on Deerfoot Trail, normally relegated to the subconscious, presses on Willey's ears. Cars, a lot of cars, each with a set destination.

What made you stop lying to Dianne? Willey says.

Hicks pauses to pick up a rusty clutch plate. With his one-step approach he bowls it down the road. For a moment Willey savors the potential for excitement should a vehicle come out from under the train bridge ahead. As if reading his mind, the plate wobbles right and clatters against the far curb.

That whole Walmart fiasco, Hicks says.

Willey nods at the recollection of the Walmart fiasco, and can't help but to chuckle. Due to some galactic freak alignment of planets, Hicks managed to both apply for and land a job at the Royal Oak Walmart, the furthest possible Walmart from Dianne's doorstep. Making it through the training process and blue vest fitting was task enough for Hicks, but on his first shift, the early morning team-building song and dance number proved too much. Didn't even punch out, just walked, leaving the vest hanging on the arm of the store greeter's wheel-chair. Only Hicks didn't tell Dianne, or anyone else for that matter, that he quit. About a week later

and still thinking he worked there, Dianne took a bus—well, a bus, a train and another bus—to surprise him for lunch.

You're snorting at her punching me, aren't you, Hicks says, and Willey lets his laughter loose. They're at the corner of Highfield and Ogden and traffic is non-existent. Still, they wait for the light. Every direction holds a variation of cinderblock and corrugated steel, with rust and gravel enough to absorb light and laughter both. Willey wipes a tear from his eye.

The night at the bottom of Highfield hill is the colour of stale coffee brewed from a machine thick with the grit of industry. Willey wipes dust from his mouth and looks around. Yards of debris, fences with dried weeds that look a cross between a dandelion and a Triffid. He sighs for the hundredth time. Pick up his 8 unit apartment building—the Octoplex, Hicks calls it—and drop it anywhere around here and it would blend right in.

You figure out what we're going to tell Dianne, yet?

I dunno, Hicks says. I don't wanna lie to her.

You know, you can call her.

If I'm gonna lie to her, I'm gonna lie to her face, Hicks spits.

We can always tell her the truth, Willey says.

Right, Hicks says. He pinches his nostrils and adds, Honey, Willey and I are gonna break into a house tonight, I need the car. Wanna come with us? Hicks shakes his head and laughs. He says, You know, this might be the stupidest idea we've ever had.

Yeah, but we're still young, Willey says.

They walk straight up 38th, edge left through a gravel lot, aiming toward a line of train cars. They pause a moment at a black tanker to figure out a bit of graffiti. Aldebaran, Willey says. Ladder, from Hicks.

Why the hell would they paint Ladder?

Why the hell would they paint Aldebaran?

They keep walking, the graffiti forever a mystery.

South Inglewood borders the CP rail yards at Alyth. Cutting across this surprising layout of track is a time-saving shortcut, for sure, but CP cops are like transit cops. There must be something about the taste of diesel exhaust and old iron that makes a man want to slap handcuffs on a twelve-year-old for the crime of watching a few pennies get squished. Willey remembers a man saying, Train'll take your arm, kid. Train is hungry for arms. Maybe trains are hungry for arms, but even at twelve Willey was able to tell the difference between a moving and a non-moving train.

This is, however, a mystical place. Inglewood is one of Calgary's better areas, any real estate guide will tell you that. Close to the river pathway system, close to downtown. Restaurants that allow for a myriad of ethnic adventures. Creole blues, Persian romance. Chain motorcycle. The army surplus store and the paint-it-yourself façade of Recordland provide the faux-danger of inner-city living. There are pyjama stores that actually sell pyjamas and not just lingerie. Modern furniture stores so hip and cool, modern has an extra e at the end. Trendy tea houses and spice merchants.

But more than a few residents have found themselves surprised at the sudden realization that their beautiful houses in their beautiful neighborhood sit in close proximity to a 200 acre train factory that's been lying low for more than a century. How can such a travesty be allowed to exist in such a lucrative area? There's a live theatre, for Christ's sake. Antique stores.

Willey and Hicks start dodging under parked trains, some with idling engines, some without, always looking for flashlight beams and always listening for the sound of footsteps, the sound of voices, or the sound of a diesel engine starting to work harder.

If we did invite Dianne, you think she'd come along? Willey asks.

Naw, Hicks says. She's agreed to watch her half-brother while her dad and Debra are in Los Angeles.

Oh yeah, Willey says, nodding. What if she did, though?

She'd take over the whole operation, Hicks says. She'd insist we change into black, she'd make sure we had our gloves on. We'd have to go back for our masks. By the time we got there it'd be tomorrow and Thousand Dollar Night would be done.

Hicks stops, says, You know, telling Annie-O the truth might not be that bad an idea. He takes Willey by the shoulder and turns him so they stand face to face. Willey, he says, emphasizing his voice. I promise to give you a ride home tonight.

They walk on, Willey realizing that Hicks's plan is not so much a plan to get the car, as to get it without lying. You know, Willey says. You've got a nickname for everyone. Everyone but me. I've always wondered why.

You do have a nickname, Willey. Your nickname is Willey.

But my name is Willey.

It's a lucky man whose name and nickname are the same.

Being nicknamed your own name beats being nicknamed Retard or Fat-Ass, although being nicknamed Wile E struck a decent chord. Willey's father's name for him, Wile E. Coyote. A name not heard in near two decades.

They make their way to the east edge of the train yard relatively unscathed, other than Willey banging his head on the underside of a grain car when he heard a diesel rev in combination with the distant clank of a train coming together.

We're on the other side of the tracks now, Hicks says. Mind your drooling.

Now, despite the ire, justifiable or not, that some Inglewood residents direct at the symphony of the rail yard, other residents see the value of such a facility when it comes to the establishment of rent. One could have a relatively marginal income but still go to one-off restaurants, buy a satellite dish, land a common-law husband, bring in a common-law step-daughter and her cat, have a kid, travel to California on a yearly basis, all while setting enough money aside to buy a spanking new car every few years. All one has to do is put up with the noise of a nightly apocalypse forming right around the corner.

Another train clanks in the distance.

Dianne's father's girlfriend's block consists of single story rectangles with peaked roofs and small windows. Built for early trainmen and their families, imagining a couple with more than one child living comfortably within holds a certain difficulty, train noise or not. Dianne's father's girlfriend's early 80s infill,

with pale-blue paint and the audacity of a second story, stands architecturally unsympathetic to the boxy nests lined up on either side; those houses having a stucco made of crushed rock and recycled pop-bottle glass, or, if tended to more recently, vinyl siding in various shades of Builder's Grey. Halloween decorations, either a week late or near a year early, desecrate a few lawns.

Ahead and under a halo of streetlight, a vintage Camaro seems to float above the grit of the street. Look at that, Hicks whispers. Now there is a car for me.

Hicks walks a circle around the car, whistling, while Willey stands off at the back passenger side quarter panel. Bits of metallic in the blue paint flirt at him. Somebody loves this car, Hicks says. Somebody whispers to this car every time he runs his chamois down the line of her body, telling her to hold tight, telling her to keep calm. Every time he turns her key, he and the car both start to throb.

Hicks places his face close to the car's windshield, reading the vehicle identification number. 1971, Hicks says, looking back over his shoulder. He looks back into the windshield. 350 cubic inch V8. Willey nods as Hicks continues to register the details of the car's birth. Made in Ohio, Hicks says. In August.

You wonder why your car hates you.

Willey, Hicks says. 1971 may not be the best vintage for this model of automobile, but you need to understand the significant sway Camaros continue to hold over today's lesser vehicles. From the more aggressive road stance, to the reduction of the Camaro's overall power, the very idea of being male is summed up in this single unibody structure. Hicks pats the car on the hood.

You need to understand the significance of Thousand Dollar Night, Willey says.

Hicks trails his finger along the car's hood as they head towards Dianne's father's girlfriend's. Approaching the house, Willey's mind fills with images of Dianne answering the door. How will she have her hair? What will she be wearing? What will she say? Dull questions, sure, but sharp in Willey's blood.

Willey has a sudden memory, a flash of a moment from a few weeks before, when the three of them, Willey, Hicks, Dianne, along with Dianne's step-brother, little Michael, all went to a fast food restaurant for lunch, and decided to eat in the Play McArea. The idea, Dianne suggested, was for little Michael to burn off some energy and maybe delay his murder.

The play area empty of children, but the tables full of elderly people. The trio, with little Michael, they get comfortable at a table and little Michael is having an unusual moment of passivity, all blond and charming. An older lady, near her 70s if not older, says to Dianne, What a lovely boy, he looks so much like you.

Dianne, without a pause, says, Oh no, he's not mine, he's theirs, and she nods over to Hicks and Willey. She says, I'm being interviewed for a nanny position. Willey and Hicks, they take a second to stare at each other wondering what the fuck just happened, and that's a second too long, as Dianne is already in on how hard the adoption process was. The old lady is so taken with the love story, that she nudges her husband to tell him, not once, but twice, the second time a bit louder. This man, who's most intimate contact with another male might have involved a bayonet, only grumbles into his newspaper.

This, Willey thinks, is the woman they are to convince should let them use her step-mother's car at near 11:00, on a Friday night.

The living room window flickers with a television, while an upstairs light honeys the gold-tone fabric of Dianne's bedroom curtains. Dianne opens the door and Willey can see in her eyes, if anything, a touch of desperate hope along with her surprise at Hicks's appearance at her door. Willey can also see little flecks of black in the blue of her eyes And what blue eyes. Willey's always been amazed at such blue under hair so determinedly black. Dianne's hair falling past her shoulders, onto her pink hoodie. Her white pajama bottoms with red hearts, and—God almighty—no socks. No socks and Gozer, Dianne's cat, purring circles around her ankles, back arched, tail up. All systems go and why not, purring around those ankles.

I thought you weren't coming over until tomorrow, Dianne says. Hi, Willey, she adds with heart-palpitating enthusiasm, and she gives the big man a big smile.

I need a favor from you, Hicks says, and he offers her a smile back. Dianne's nostrils flare, as if she can already smell a lie. In a moment Dianne's hand will land on her hip.

I need to borrow Debra's car.

There goes her hand to her hip and Dianne assumes the pose that you've seen a thousand times on television. Commercials where the put-upon woman has to deal with her knuckle-drag husband who has either eaten dog biscuits or can't dress himself or is in the process of endangering the children.

What for?

Willey and I, we are going to go break into a house and steal some money.

Ha, Hicks.

Willey and I, we are going to ransack a man's bedroom. Come with us, you can stab the dog, and help us tie up the kids.

Why can't I tie up the dog and stab the kids?

Hicks laughs, and says, You having trouble with your half-brother?

I swear to God that child will not make 3, Dianne says.

Willey and I, we *were* going to abduct a woman, take her back to Willey's apartment and insist she vacuum the floor, but we can have her clean up after little Michael instead, if you want.

Come on, Dwayne, Dianne says. Anyone would be comfortable eating off Willey's floor.

My car died, and I promised Willey I'd drive him home.

When are you going to give up on that car, Dwayne?

Hicks looks down to kick a pebble off the stoop.

I don't know, Dianne says. You do anything to Debra's car. . .

Hey, now. I've been pretty good lately.

That's what worries me. You mess things up fifty percent of the time. You're due.

That is a good point, Hicks says. I crashed a forklift today, does that count?

Hurt anybody?

Only my pride, darling. I thought, What if Dianne saw that? and I got all blushy.

You really work that warehouse again today?

Of course I worked that warehouse today. Where else am I going to smash a forklift?

You know, if you play your cards right, and keep the forklift smashing to a minimum, they might look at hiring you permanently.

Aww, there you go again, Hicks says. Ever since you got that job at the diner, you've been nagging all the time for permanent jobs and responsibility. What happened to you? You used to be cool, Annie-O.

I used to not have to get up at 4 in the morning to get to work at 6, Dianne says. I used to not have to take holiday time to look after my half-brother who I'm convinced is full-on autistic.

There's a 4 in the morning? Hicks says, offering that half-smile that he thinks makes him look charming and for the most part, accomplishes just that.

But not this time. Dianne's held Hicks's gaze for a moment too long and her eyes start to narrow, and when her chin starts to come out like that, it's usually followed soon after by a No fucking way. She turns to Willey, says, What is your take on all this?

I want to know what the problem is with your brother being artistic, Willey says, scratching at his mouth to disguise a smile, should one try to escape.

Dianne shakes her head, laughing. Make sure he brings that car back in one piece, big boy.

## 2.4

Turning from Blackfoot Trail onto the Deerfoot. Hicks says, When I win that money I'm getting my car fixed and I'm taking Dianne to a fancy dinner or to Banff or somewhere, his voice too silent for such a statement.

That'll fix everything, Willey thinks. He (and likely Hicks as well) sit silent wondering what happened at that door, what magic crept into the night to land Dianne's father's girlfriend's car under their asses so easily.

They drive in silence, leaving the Deerfoot for McKnight Boulevard, leaving McKnight for 47th Street, zeroing in on Joey Chan's Castleridge residence. What kind of car is this? Willey says.

Kia, Hicks says. My father found out I was enjoying a Japanese car, he'd laugh at me.

Pretty sure Kias are Korean.

Explain that to my father, Hicks says. They're all trying to take over.

They stop a couple blocks from Joey Chan's in order to take the plate off the car. The three Betty Boob stickers despoiling the trunk, however, have to remain. They drive slow along Castlegrove Road, slide into the alley behind Chan's house, letting the car coast most of the way.

At Chan's, Willey takes the wheel but leaves the passenger door loose enough to push it open without the handle, yet tight enough not to trigger the interior light. I have to get this money, you understand? Hicks says. He points his finger at Willey's face. Don't you fuck this up.

As far as Willey knows, Hicks has never broken into a house before, let alone on a Friday night in a relatively busy area. You either rob a house at 2 in the morning or 2 in the afternoon, never at 11. Hicks slips out of the car and creeps into Chan's back yard, propping the fence-gate open.

Now, in the coming days, Willey will have ample time to put together the series of events that are about to occur at the Chan residence. He will have Hicks's versions of the story, his own account, his own imagination, Hicks's imagination, and additional material that he will gather from his almost daily conversations with Chan. But at that moment, sitting in the car, a silver trickle of ice suddenly runs the length of his spine: Last week Chan told Willey, his grand-daughter is moving back from Toronto, and will likely live with him until she gets herself established.

Willey looks over at Hicks in sudden horror, but Hicks is already easing inside the house. Should he hammer the horn? The question answers itself within a second, Hicks already on his way back out of the house. What they eventually put together, is more or less, what follows. On the deck and at the door Hicks notices that not only is the door not locked, it's open a crack, and not believing his luck he pushes it open further, slowly, quietly, and he looks inside. He sees a light but that's not a concern, Chan likely left a light or two on, or maybe, as in this case, the television.

Perhaps Lian, Chan's grand-daughter, had to kick the door shut with her foot on account of her dog, Feng. Maybe they came back from the store, or a late night walk or even just a trip to the backyard and she had to hold Feng back, the dog already trying to tear off into the living room. Maybe all this happened, and she

forgot to go back and check the door. Hicks, taking that first cautious step into the Chan kitchen, hears a low rumble from the flickering darkness within.

As Hicks leaps over the rail of the back deck, Willey's already leaning over to push the car door open. Hicks, hearing the sound of dog on wood behind him starts to hoof it across the lawn. He looks over his right shoulder expecting to see mouth and spit-dripping teeth but instead sees nothing. Feng, passing Hicks on the left side, beats him to the car by a full second. When Hicks lands in the passenger seat he momentarily wonders why, exactly, is Dolly Parton blasting through the radio at near full volume. The dog, meanwhile, has already begun the process of getting herself comfortable on Willey's lap. Floor it floor it floor it, Hicks yells over the chorus of Jolene, and the car sprays gravel on its way out of Dodge's alley.

At the strip mall on 52nd Street between McKnight and Falconridge, Dianne's father's girlfriend's Kia idles while Willey and Hicks come down from the debacle at Chan's back door. They've already dubbed the dog Jolene. Her bashing the radio with her face changed the station to Dolly. Jolene has her front feet on the centre console, mouth adrool. Both eyes looking in different directions, neither one seeming to register anything of interest. She goes through the elaborate motions of swallowing, then resumes her pant. Maybe we can sell her, Willey says.

Who's gonna pay a thousand dollars for a pit bull from a parking lot at 11:20 at night? Hicks says. Even in the northeast. Hell, we wouldn't be able to sell her at noon in downtown Idiotville for more than a hundred.

Well, Willey says, I hear that incidences of attempted break and enter are going up in this area, and a dog like her might be helpful protection.

Hicks shakes his head and eventually gives in to a bit of laughter. He says, How much money you got, Willey?

With a cool five bucks between them—Willey found fifteen cents in the ashtray—they head to the casino, Jolene sniffing around the back seat.

## 2.5

The casino portion of Las Gary's Casino and Lanes would appear to be a straight-up square building with a relatively unchallenging interior layout, and for the most part this would be a correct assumption. However, there are certain conventions that you need to follow when building your own casino. You need to disorient your clientele so that they develop a panic and the subsequent preternatural response, which is to shove money into the nearest slot machine. Therefore, your casino must consist of a number of large rooms, some laid out at a 45 degree angle to the rest, while others must project randomly from the sprawling gambling area. As well, no matter how large your casino, it needs to be larger. Double the size of your establishment by installing mirrors on as many interior elevations as possible, and don't even think about windows. The one primal connection between casinos and bowling alleys? No windows. On that thought, the bowling alley addition to your casino is purely optional.

Since their recent renovation, Las Gary's has increased the size of the gambling area by removing unnecessary walls and re-aligning rooms to a 90 degree layout. They've given the carpet, walls and ceiling a nice, tasteful finish in deep red contrasted with pale cream and a subtle insertion of royal blue. In other words, they fucked it up. Still, it's Friday, and Las Gary's is packed.

Willey and Hicks approach the first blackjack table as a couple fresh losers stand and make way. A good sign, Willey says. Hopefully the first of many. Hicks sits at the table. The dealer, a man named Ariel, finishing a shuffle. Perfect timing. Hicks won't get the feel of messing up someone's run like when you enter mid-shoe.

Willey looks down the line of betters. Next to Hicks sits a Las Gary's regular, an older man with a string tie and plenty of borderline far-fetched stories. Bolero Derek, so Hicks calls him, tells stories like, When I was your age on the set of *Apocalypse Now* smoking weed with Coppola, or, Every summer, Trudeau and I with a couple others would fly into that lake.

The next gambler, a man about Willey's age, holds a bottle of Budweiser in front of his University of Calgary hoodie, his baseball cap on backward. Willey dubs him Dude, and next to Dude sits an elderly lady with a blue tint to both her hair and her O2 tank. The Golden Girl, running out her days with a bit of fun while the kids fret over their diminishing inheritance. Hell, the only stereotype missing at this table is the ubiquitous Asian gambler—and sure enough there he is sitting down in the anchor spot. Chan. Joey Chan with the whiskey-tinted lenses of his gold-rimmed glasses reflecting Ariel's shuffle. He nods to Willey and smiles. Chan with the black rims of his nicotine-tinted teeth. Willey nods in return before looking down and concentrating on the shuffle.

Most casinos these days, they use auto-shufflers in order to keep certain gamblers from trying to shuffle-track themselves to a slighter advantage. You notice, for example, a group of aces in the previous round of hands, you try to keep your eye on their place in the deck as the hands progress. Try to follow their location through

the next shuffle, bet higher when the dealer reaches that point in the deck. Ariel's table, with a 2 dollar minimum bet, doesn't use the auto-shuffler. Ariel separates the four-deck pack into a dozen or so piles, shuffles the piles together in pairs, and blends all these new piles together.

Chan, still packing his smile, nods at Willey, and in a German that can only be described as twanged, says, Herr Willey, Letzte Nacht ist mein glücklich Nacht.

Willey has to synthesize Chan's words a moment, struggling through the accent. He says, Sehr gut, Herr Chan. Aber, man sagt, Es war meine glückliche Nacht.

Ach so! Chan says. Heh, heh.

Willey looks down to see Hicks looking up over his shoulder, his face a furrow of confusion. Aber war ack ack, what the hell, Willey?

Chan's use of German probably requires some elaboration. Not only is Lian back from Toronto for the first time in a decade, but in a few months she's going to marry her long-standing boyfriend, Martin Baumann. Joe Chan, after over-emphasizing a thick Mandarin accent through the entire reception, plans to get up to the podium and wish the newlyweds all the best in the groom's family's native language. He's been taking Deutsch lessons the past few months and has been mit Willey gesprochen whenever he can.

The shuffle finished, no one takes Ariel's offer to cut the deck. Ariel stacks the mixed cards into the shoe. Hicks lays his money out. Ariel looks at the change, looks at Hicks, looks at the change again. You want fifty-cent chips with that? he says.

Just a fiver, mer-man, if you please.

Cashing five, Ariel yells. The pit-boss comes over, sees Hicks's pile of silver and adds yet another chuckle to the ludicrousness of the evening.

Hicks places his five dollar chip in his betting circle. Ariel runs his index finger around the Insurance arc, checking that all bets are correctly placed. No more bets, he calls to the table.

Ariel delivers the opening cards with a polished flip, Hicks receiving a bright red Queen. The Slut of Diamonds, he whispers. Derek and Dude both receive face cards, while the Golden Girl and Chan have to deal with a seven and four respectively. Ariel shows himself a Jack before marrying Hicks's Queen to her regal opposite. The deal continues through the other betters, the rhythm of Ariel's deal like the heartbeat of a steely nerved player. Flip. Flip. Flip. Ariel's second card dealt face down. Willey notices Chan's holding his bets to the two dollar table minimum. The mark of a man in a gambler's twilight. Small bets to kill time, perhaps rounding his money to an even amount. Rounding up or down, that depends on the whim of the cards.

Sitting with twenty, Hicks waves his hand to refuse another card. Ariel proceeds with the other players. Derek, hitting on thirteen, pulls a five and stays at eighteen. Dude and the Golden Girl both sit with hands in the high teens. Chan takes a card to turn his pair of fours into seventeen. Stays. Ariel flips over his hidden card, a 6 to mess up his Jack. Exactly what a better wants to see whenever a dealer shows a ten. In a 4 deck shoe, only 80 cards help Ariel in this circumstance, while 128 cards yield a bust. Ariel flips himself another face card. He busts, the corner of his mouth

turning up slightly. Good girl, Hicks whispers to the queen. I apologise for the slut remark. He winks at her.

Hick's revised plan is to bet his winnings. He wins the first three hands without having to make any key decisions. On the third hand he hit a soft 17 when Ariel was showing ten, ended up pulling a four. Ariel could have beat him with a blackjack but drew a nine that beat everyone else while paying Hicks. A whopping forty dollars in place of the planned eight thousand. What a punch to the face, Hicks says. The forty becomes eighty, becomes 160, then 320. Hicks turns to look at Willey, says he's just gonna double-down on each hand.

Now, not everyone knows that when you double-down your bet, you don't have to actually double your bet. For example, the bet limit at Ariel's table is 200 dollars, so on the seventh hand Hicks bets his 200, and after he gets his first two cards, he lays out his remaining 120. And tonight? Well, pardon the street-level crassness, but Lady Luck's in the mood to fuck because Hicks's holding a five and a six, and with Ariel showing a six, there is no better scenario for a double-down.

One card, Hicks says.

Hicks gets 21 while Ariel busts.

Hicks has been at it all of seven hands totalling ten minutes, and he's already fingering 640 dollars' worth of chips. The table is in a magic aura, Hicks on first hasn't done anything to disrupt the logic of the cards. The Golden Girl has pulled in her winnings efficiently and silently, her only noise the steady pff pff of her oxygen. Dude has won the majority of his narrow-eyed 25 dollar bets, while Derek,

like Chan, has been laying out two dollar bets, winning more than his share. As for Chan, he's done the anchor's job of eating a few face cards to keep them off the dealer, but can still count himself ahead. Everyone's winning.

On the eighth hand, Hicks lays out his standard bet of 200, his 200 ready to double-down. He's dealt a jack and a king, Ariel showing a ten. Now, this messes with Hicks's planned double-down, but there's always the split. Again, not everyone knows, but you can split face cards. They don't even have to be the same gender. However, the type of idiot required to split face cards surely exists only in science-fiction stories where robots designed to act like people go awry, split their face cards, and that's what gets them caught and dismembered. Sure, maybe splitting your face cards is something you do when you're playing by yourself, when you've got your winnings in hand, and you're only horsing around. But only an idiot crossed with a dedicated asshole would split face cards at a table with other players.

What did you say? Ariel says.

I said split 'em, Hicks says.

Now, Ariel doesn't have to, but he gives Hicks the benefit of the drunk and asks him again, and again Hicks says, Split 'em. Split 'em. Derek and Dude both sit with 10, so imagine their chagrin when Hicks sucks up not one, but two aces to 21 each hand.

Dude, Dude says.

Damn, from Bolero Derek.

Well shit, Hicks says and he holds his palms up in surprise. The Golden Girl, perhaps the only sane member of this group, gathers her chips and tubing and exits

the table. Chan nods and says, Heh, heh, Hicks. Konnen Sie mir mit meiner Glück geholpen? Before Willey can offer a correction, Chan slides his five dollar chip to the betting circle.

Hicks, 200 on the table, 200 in hand for the double-down, steels his nerves for the ninth hand. Ariel's hand sweeps across the table, no more bets.

Hicks opens with seventeen, Ariel showing six. Now, any blackjack book will tell you that hitting on this in any way, shape or form is downright slap-worthy. Hicks's odds to bust are so high, NASA's computers would lag trying to figure out the decimals of not busting. Hicks sets another 200 down and asks for one card. By now the table's aware that the kid must be trying to lose and can only shake their heads at the appearance of the four of clubs and yet another 21.

The table is a ruckus of disbelief, Derek saying he's never seen a run like this in his life, even when running cocaine out of Columbia with George Jung. Dude drinks his beer, shakes his head and drinks again. Chan leans back and laughs toward the eye in the sky, surely paying close attention as well. There are in fact, more than the typical number of pit-bosses roaming the area.

Hicks lays out his next 200 and buries his face in his hands. When he looks up he's got two queens flirting with him. It's 11:59, Ariel sports an ace, Thousand Dollar Night ends in less than a minute. Ariel says, You going to split those too, jackass?

Hicks looks around. Dude isn't betting anymore, but he's watching. Derek also sits this hand, but Chan's in with two dollars, showing nineteen. A small crowd has gathered, word's gotten around about the kid that can't lose, but wants to.

Hicks looks at Ariel. Ariel looks back. Hicks slides another 200 up. One card, he says, and like that Ariel flips over the ace of spades, giving Hicks another 21.

Now, before we go goose-stepping into the cliché of such a card, please consider that Ariel does have that big ace of his own sticking out at crotch level, and any ten jumping on that ace will screw Hicks out of his win. Those gathered at the table, reacting to an already improbable event, themselves come back to the reality of that ace. Right then, like a slap, Willey gets hit with a memory of he and Hicks in the bowling alley, those pins getting right back up again, and his heart sinks. He knows for sure, there's a ten all ripe and ready to love Ariel's ace. Hicks has his head in his hands again, not looking, only listening as Chan laughs his heh heh laugh. To the shock and dismay of everyone, Chan taps the table for another card.

You have nineteen, Ariel says.

Chan taps more vigorously, and Ariel is forced to show Chan the ten of diamonds. Chan busts. Ariel, instead of hitting a blackjack, flips himself a nine. Hicks, with his head still buried in his hands, has won ten hands in a row, and above all the clapping and claims of disbelief, rises the heh heh of Chan's laughter. Heh heh, Hicks. Heh heh.

Hicks gathers up his chips and locks eyes with Chan. It's not outside the realm of good form to offer a chip to anyone who would take such an obvious loss, but the subtle slice of Chan's hand along the table indicates his refusal. Chan's smile remains as he turns and places his bet for the next hand.

## 2.6

Walking toward the cashier, Hicks shakes like a kid stepping off a bolt-spewing amusement park ride. I've got that guy's dog in the back of my car, Hicks says. I was gonna rob that guy tonight.

We can get the dog back to Chan, no problem, Willey says.

Hicks shakes his head. And the ace of spades? Spades? That card's too loaded for meaning to be of any good, Hicks says. Death? I'm too young for death. Had it been the ace of diamonds I'd of kept playing. Diamonds means money. Even post-midnight, I'd of kept playing. Ace of clubs? War? Pfft. Hearts, and I'd be on the phone all teary-eyed to Dianne, but spades? Spades? What shitty symbolism. Really? Death?

Ha, it was the ace of work, Willey says and Hicks shudders. Hicks looks pretty shitty for a man who just won \$1840. You look all uptied, Willey says. Take a breath, man.

One thousand, eight hundred and forty dollars, Hicks says. Nine hundred and twenty bucks each, he adds in a sigh. He tells Willey, he says he felt the luck slip out of him, he felt the magic leaving. I'll never win three hands in a row again, he says, let alone ten.

Still, Willey says, You can go back to Dianne and say you've been working extra hard. Surprise her with this money, she'll cook you spaghetti for a week.

Don't you get it? Hicks says. What if each bet was a thousand dollars? What if we started in the big-money room with a thousand dollars? Hicks runs his hands through his hair, starts to calculate out loud (one thousand to two thousand, two

thousand to four, then eight, sixteen, thirty) before fumbling through his phone looking for the calculator app.

Four hundred and twenty eight thousand dollars, Willey say, turning the screen of his phone to Hicks. Willey keeps his calculator app handy for cashing out the bowling alley register. He says, You'd have four hundred and twenty eight thousand dollars, if you maxed your double each time.

Hicks looks about to throw up. That would have been in the big money, room, he says.

Uh-huh.

It wouldn't have turned out the same.

Probably not, Willey says. Well, maybe.

Hicks shakes his head. One thousand, eight hundred and forty dollars, he whispers. You know, that ain't bad for twenty minutes of work. He looks at his pile of chips. 2 purple chips, 8 black chips and 8 red chips, he says. How many twenty-dollar bills is that, Willey?

92 twenty-dollar bills, Willey says.

One can describe \$1840 as 368 five-dollar bills. Yet another way to describe \$1840 is  $\frac{4}{5}$ ths the total cost of repairing the damage Jolene is currently inflicting on the interior of Dianne's father's girlfriend's car.

Hicks cashes in the chips, they split the money and head out the north exit. Let's get some food to go, Hicks says, and go back to Dianne's father's girlfriend's house.

With midnight behind them, the meat day of Willey's diet has officially started, so he's all aboard for this idea. Bright light city gonna set my soul, gonna set my soul on fire, Hicks sings. He nods toward the near distance, where the downtown skyline sits stacked like casino chips on purple-black velvet. Look at her, Willey, Hicks says. Look at the city.

### Chapter 3: The Coquette's Fetish

#### 3.1

Happy Birthday, Willey. Down Stephen Avenue. West of the iron horse, on the north side. Between the Tribune and the James Joyce you'll find a red door. That's all the text message says.

Earlier today, Willey won a thousand dollars on a scratch and win lottery ticket. A Blackjack scratch and win; Hicks would surely have enjoyed the irony. Willey reads Hicks's text again. Happy Birthday, Willey. Down Stephen Avenue.

The aluminum paste and methyl ethyl ketone mixture was scratched off the ticket to reveal four 18s and a 20, with the dealer holding 19. This afternoon, Willey and Hicks drove out to Aspen Woods, Hicks had to visit a man in Aspen Woods, and as they drove and talked, Willey carried, in his wallet, in his fat man's pants, a scratch and win ticket that had 1,000 1,000 1,000 printed next to the 20.

West of the iron horse, on the north side. Willey's on the south side of the mall, staring at the Calgary Art Gallery. On the north side, there's the red door, like a touch of lipstick on the sandstone face of the Molson's Bank Building. The bonus square, the one on the lottery ticket? It said Try Again, but how disappointed could Willey be?

The door to the Coquette's Fetish is red, with paint applied in layers so thick, beads of paint have run, dried and wrinkled, covering what Willey believes to be the heavy oak doors of some imaginary castle constructed during Calgary's Dark Ages. A red too bright for blood. This is a red you'd imagine on the walls of Hell's waiting room. Or Heaven's door.

Willey made the mistake of weighing himself prior to leaving his apartment. Today is not a meat day, and this might have been a day to bend that rule, had he not stepped on his scale. After 4 months, he's lost a grand total of 11 pounds. It's not about the pounds, he reminds himself. Besides, if he throws out the contents of his wallet, he'll be a thousand dollars lighter.

Hewn, Willey thinks. Hewn is the word to describe the stone of Calgary's twelfth century castles. He has a lottery ticket in the pocket of his men's plus size pants, a thousand dollar winner, and he, with Dianne and Hicks are dining, yes *dining*, at the Coquette's Fetish, the heavy oak door thick with so much not-blood-red paint, really you can't be sure if it's oak or not. The door, Willey concludes, looks coated, like someone's continued to pour wax long after the door has said, Look, I forgot the safe word. Can you untie me, please?

There's no sign around the door, just the door, the exclusivity denoted by this lack of sign a sign enough for Willey. You shouldn't be here. Stay outside, imagine artificial histories. Hicks must be up to something, he's luring you here.

Hicks said, and Willey reads the text again, Happy Birthday, Willey. Down Stephen Avenue. West of the iron horse, on the north side. It opens easy enough, that red door to heaven. Willey, with his thousand dollar winning scratch and win ticket, eleven pounds lighter than he was 4 months ago and therefore still fat steps inside.

Happy Birthday, Willey.

Now, Willey has come to believe, that when you describe the interior of an unadvertised and fashionably hidden restaurant, it's best to begin at any and all

phallic imagery. What better place to put on your black jeans and hoodie, and celebrate the end of your 25th year—all 25 spent within 25 kilometers of this restaurant—what better place to celebrate with your two best friends, at least one of whom is probably already planning the dash that follows the dine, than at a restaurant full of phallic imagery.

The Coquette's Fetish, lettered in a simple font on the hostess's little pillar, her little curved pillar of a desk, is the first and only indication of the restaurant's name. Surely, Willey thinks, in a restaurant such as this, a better word should be used in place of hostess. Hostesses are what greet you at Earls. At Chainsie's.

Down the centre of the dining area stand five fake-marble columns, all nice and classic looking, but stretching out from the top of each column are women's faces, four to every column, every face wearing a crown of leaves that merges into and supports the ceiling's elaborate bulkheads. Faces with mouths partially open, eyes partially closed. As the hostess escorts Willey to Hicks's table—really, there *has* to be a better word than hostess. Something French, maybe—as they walk under these columns, to Willey's right stand a series of squared-off engaged columns that reach up and join arches spaced every ten feet or so down the entire length of the restaurant. Looking at these archways, there's no way they don't look like sandstone-shafted, purple-headed phalluses. Maybe you've been reading too much sci-fi erotica, Willey's inner Willey says.

If he weren't standing here, Willey would swear this place was a fictional invention.

Four hours ago, Willey was sitting in front of Castle Keep waiting for Hicks, a thousand dollar lottery ticket in his pocket, and now the *concierge*—no not quite—fans her hand above Hicks's table like she's introducing a magic trick, like she's introducing Hicks as some sort of magnanimous celebrity. Hicks has his right elbow on the table, right arm straight up hand out, palm down, a hacky sack resting on the backs of his fingers. Their server, the hostess warns them, will be there in a moment.

Hicks moves his hand in a slash, up and over the hacky sack. He catches it, presses it with his fingers to his palm. He lets go, and like a hand gesture normally partnered with some wizard incantation, Hicks circles the sack with his hand, and catches it again.

Willey sits, Hicks catches the hacky sack on the top of his hand. Whips his hand around and now the sack sits on the palm. The trick is to move your hand as fast as possible, making the hacky sack appear motionless, the only stationary point in the universe. In a blur, Hicks catches the sack between his thumb and forefinger. A flash, and Hicks's thumb is up hitchhiker fashion, the sack resting on top.

Hicks, Willey notes, is wearing Willey's father's orange leather jacket. Where the hell are we? Willey says. First Aspen Woods, Castle Keep, and now this? And I at my most Sasquatch, fat in my black jeans and hoodie.

Hicks puts the hacky sack in his pocket.

C'mon, Hicks says. Where else can you can watch people pay 35 dollars a plate to sit under what I'm sure are sculpted faces of women singing in the key of O. He nods to the column above.

The key of O?

Willey, Hicks says. As today's sophisticated dining enthusiasts devour every morsel of their investment-themed conversations and their—Hicks picks up a menu—and their Poisson selection of smoked Norwegian Mackerel with cabbage, potato and leek oeuf en cocotte with crème fleurette and pickled golden cauliflower, 24 dollars, there are, a mere twelve feet above, faces that have been intentionally modelled to have that presently-getting-laid look.

24 dollars? Willey says, picking up his menu. For fish?

Even from down here, with the collaboration of light and shadow, any eater can make out the sculpted contentment. When Dianne gets here, she'll tell you. Big O. She knows all about them.

And 24 dollars for fish?

It's mackerel, Andy.

What about the mercury?

Mercury in a place like this? Where do you think you are? Calgary?

You could have tipped a guy off, Willey says. This is a suit restaurant, and here I am in my hoodie and jeans.

Tip you off and ruin the surprise? C'mon, Willey. Happy Birthday. Tonight—Dianne will be late by the way—but tonight, I will take care of dinner.

Willey can only imagine what that entails. Last year's birthday dinner was also on Hicks. They, Hicks, Willey and Dianne, were at a Chainsie's, Hicks excused himself to use the washroom and five minutes later texted Willey from the car. His gift, he reminded Willey later, was a moment of utter exhilaration, of feeling alive while running down an alley in Mission. What does Hicks have in mind this year?

As Hicks starts to ponder the restaurant's existence, Willey feels as if he might as well start putting his plan into place. Hicks says, this is a restaurant for Christ's sake, it's gonna get remodelled every two years, and Willey fidgets in his seat, thinking about the lottery ticket in his wallet. Willey, Willey Hase, is going to try to pull one over on Dwayne Bartholomew Hicks. He's going to convince Hicks that he, Willey, is capable of psychic premonitions.

Not like pulling one over on Hicks at the ATM last year, with Kyle Pearce's bank card. That was a spurt of the moment stroke of genius. This lottery ticket hustle? This is a planned event.

Hicks says the greeter-girl (Hicks's words, greeter-girl) told him that the columns were taken from some failed movie set, that the sandstone for the walls was taken from another building, been in storage since the 70s.

You ever get that feeling, Willey says to Hicks, you ever get that feeling like you have to do something?

You're not listening, Hicks says. He says, This city, your city, with its internationally renowned environmental track record, stored reclaimed building materials for nearly half a century.

Ignoring him, Willey says, Hicks, do you ever get that twitch, that feeling that you have to do some specific action? I have this strong urge, this feeling like I have to buy a lottery ticket.

You mean like when you get a message from a city reflected in a river, Hicks says.

Less a message, Willey says, and more a feeling.

Hicks has never had that feeling. Hicks says he's never had a feeling like that but he once saw a Bugs Bunny cartoon where Bugs went into an epileptic fit whenever he walked over gold. Is it anything like that?

Yeah, Hicks. Without the epilepsy, it is kind of like that.

Hicks continues his exploration of the restaurant, Look, Willey, he says. Look at the shape on the top of that half-wall over there, the one that stretches between the third and fourth columns. That's the line you get when a woman lies down on her side and your eyes trace the shape of her body. There's some intent to that line, man. There's some love there.

Willey orders a beer from their server. She introduces herself as Carol, and she's hoping they're both doing well. Willey orders a Grolsch from Carol, Hicks has a Molson, the troglodyte. Willey imagines running his hand along the top edge of the pony wall, over the wall's outer thigh, along the wall's hip.

That, Hicks says, forms the perfect profile for a half-wall in a restaurant where wives of conservative oil tycoons shove 50 dollar Sanglier down their throats, the pan roasted wild boar tenderloin prepared medium-rare to medium, the boar belly stuffed duck neck and confit head served with roasted chestnut, celery root, apple, parsnip and a bunch of other shit that doesn't make you stop wondering what exactly is a confit head.

Willey reaches over and pulls the menu out of Hicks's hand, still staring down the length of the pony wall. Hicks has a point about the wall. Run your hand down the top of that wall, over the thigh, the hip, along the not ticklish waist, and just before you'd hit what Willey imagines to be the wall's fluffy bunny c-cups, you'll run

smack into the fourth of the five columns, this one broken near the base and leaning against the Coquette's wall of phalluses. The four faces on this column are skulls.

Wall of Phalluses? Hicks says. When did you get all dictionary?

Maybe I have a word of the day app on my phone, Willey whispers, and that's what popped up today. Hicks leans back and laughs, loudly. Willey leans forward, puts his head in his hands.

Would you even say phalluses? Or would you say phalli?

I'm pretty sure it's phalluses.

Maybe we should ask somebody.

I'll look it up, Willey says.

Where's the fun in that? I was thinking more, we ask another diner.

Christ, Hicks. I already feel like a zit on the face of this restaurant.

In an unadvertised restaurant in Calgary's downtown core, where sex and death are the major design motifs; in a Canadian city on the verge of the prairies, Hicks and Willey sit and ponder the plural of phallus, and not whether they are going to ask a fellow diner to solves this question, or not, but what specific diner will get the honour. The young man with the full beard and shaved head, tweed jacket and doe-eyed dining partner? The older woman with the snow-white hair and chunky white-gold rings, eating with her friend.

Phallus? Willey hears from behind.

The hostess has brought Dianne, and when Willey sees her, he thinks of the scratch and win ticket in his pocket and how impressed she will be when he pulls off pulling one over on Hicks. And how fat he is.

Oh God, Dianne. First thing Willey notices about Dianne, is the bright red hat standing out like a dab of paint on some artist's dull canvas. Or standing out like a red door to some exclusive restaurant. Dianne, her black hair, her blue eyes. Dianne, wearing a white blouse that you could probably see through if you tried hard enough. Thin, 80s kind of tie. Black wool jacket over her arm. A red and black checkered skirt, black stockings and bright black Mary Janes.

Happy Birthday, Willey, she says, and as she hands Willey a gift, she kisses him on the cheek. Open it, she says.

Willey start to open the present, and out the corner of his eye he can see Dianne looking at him. Hat is somehow the wrong word for her hat. The French word for hat would be better. This is a French restaurant after all. Her hair falls to her shoulders and disappears behind the blazing white shoulder of her blouse. As Dianne smiles, her upper lip doesn't move much, her lower lip does all the work. Her eyes.

Holy shit, Willey says. *Legends*. New Novels by Stephen King. Robert Jordan, Terry Goodkind. *Pern* by Anne McCaffrey, and *The Riftwar Saga* by Ray Feist. All under one cover.

Holy shit.

Open it, Dianne says again.

On the title page, the book is signed by the editor, Robert Silverberg.

Thanks Dianne, a stunned Willey says. Dianne, she's going to love the trick Willey pulls over on Hicks. She leans over and gives him another kiss on the cheek.

Look at that, Hicks says. A book someone wrote in, a free dinner, and not one but two kisses from your crush. Happy Birthday, buddy.

Ha ha, Willey says. They all laugh, Willey burning red at the crush remark.

I really hope you like the book, Dianne says.

Willey's read all the novels in the compilation, but Robert Silverberg actually touched this particular book. Dianne's tie, Willey notices, is a length of film folded to look like a tie. Dianne's tie is an actual movie film, something that once ran through a projector. Her purse is. . . Christ. Her purse is a splattering of different leathers. Chunks, dregs, leftover snippings dyed green, dyed blue, dyed to look undyed, stitched together in a random fashion. In the time it takes Willey to synthesize Dianne's smile, her tie, and her purse, Hicks has stood, pulled out her chair, probably quite dramatically, and Dianne has sat. She's sat, she's placed that god-awful purse on the table next to an honest-to God flip phone and she's adjusted her jacket, the black wool jacket, one with the decidedly nicotine odour. Not odour, stench. Dianne's jacket stinks of cigarettes.

Dianne leans over and kisses Hicks on the mouth.

How did you find this place? Dianne says.

I worked here last week. I am responsible for every one of these chairs being inside this restaurant, and some of the tables.

And phallus? she says. I interrupted your conversation. Exactly how did you two get on the topic of phalluses?

Yes, Hicks says, mock academically. Master Hase and I were debating the proper plural for phallus. Your take is phalluses, I see. Willey believes phalli to be the correct form.

The question you should ask yourself, Dianne says, is how would the answer improve your life?

Well, Hicks says. Your birthday is next on the list, and I'm considering baking a cake. Hicks leans over, tugs the upper sleeve of the woman with the white hair and chunky white-gold rings. Bright lipstick on a baby-powder complexion. Excuse me, Hicks says. My friends and I were noticing the obvious design concept of this restaurant's east wall, and we were pondering the correct plural of phallus. Would the correct plural be phalluses, or phalli?

The woman chews for a second, swallows, touches the corners of her mouth with a napkin, and says, I think either plural is acceptable, though I'd lean toward using phalli, myself.

I'm sure you would indeed, Hicks says, smiling. Could you lean toward using that in a sentence?

The woman coughs a short ahem. She says, Based on earlier loud conversations, I'm sure this young lady has sat at a table populated with phalli.

The woman turns back to her dining partner. Hicks turns to his friends, his genuine amusement hidden by mock amusement. Wow, he says. Nothing can faze her.

And so Hicks gives Dianne the virtual, seated tour of the better elements of the Coquette's Fetish design. The columns, the skulls, the pony wall, and finally, to

answer Dianne's question (Exactly how did you two get on the topic of phallus?) the sandstone wall on the restaurant's east side. Willey looks through the menu. This is not a meat day, and perhaps if he had not weighed himself this afternoon he'd alter his schedule. But the foods he does recognize have little appeal. Filet de Rouget. Confit de Canard. Coup de Canard. He could order Cheval. Or, if Willey's the type of man that doesn't want to commit to a large order of horse, he could order the Quack 'n' Track, consisting of a 4 oz. horse tenderloin with leg of duck confit.

What's up, Hicks says. What looks good?

I guess. Willey says, if you're going to sit somewhere and ask random strangers the plural of phallus, then the Salad Verte (Boston lettuce, wild arugula, baby spinach and Belgian endive with treviso, orange, cucumber, and dried nicoise olive drizzled in citrus infused olive oil and lemon, 14 dollars) is the way to go.

Still with that diet?

Yes, Hicks. Still with the diet, for what it's worth. In four months I've lost exactly 11 pounds.

Hicks spreads his arms. He tells Willey not to be so hard on himself. He's probably lost more weight in fat, but some of the weight's being replaced with the giant ovaries he's growing.

Hicks shies away from Dianne's hand, which still manages to catch him in the shoulder. She chastises Hicks, warns him to leave Willey alone, to support his friend. Dianne tells Hicks that he should be proud of his friend. It's not easy, Dianne says. Losing weight, trying to be healthy. What did you do today to be healthy, to improve

yourself? And so the chastising turns into questions of the day, and what each did so far on this particular Thursday.

It's not about the pounds, Willey thinks to himself.

Dianne talks about customers at the Blackfoot, Hicks about the short job he worked this morning, two hours moving furniture for a guy in Aspen Woods, a job he picked up through the placement agency. He tells Dianne about the area, he tells her about Castle Keep, a place so unbelievable, he says, that they drove out there again later, he and Willey. I just had to look at it again, Hicks says.

They're interrupted by Carol, come to take their order. Willey orders the Salad Verte, Hicks the Steak/Frites with a side of escargot, and Dianne her surprising Comme des Lapins, the Bacon-wrapped rabbit saddle prepared with spinach and tomato, the thigh stuffed with buckwheat and pine nuts, a fried foreleg and herb roasted loin chop enchanted with a creamy rabbit velouté (50 dollars!). Hicks tells Carol she should make sure the chef cooks Dianne's sinner before Dianne's dinner eats Willey's dinner.

Castle Keep? Dianne says.

Hicks tells Dianne, he says, Willey and me are in Aspen woods, we come around this corner and. . .

And at the corner of 14th and Ascot they stop to stare at a larger than life-sized statue of a knight with a shield and sword. The sword raised, the shield ready, the knight stepping forward, defending a heavy rock wall, an arch, a door.

The door to Castle Keep.

You should have seen it, Dianne. Magnificent.

Hicks with Willey in the passenger seat, Hicks's car, the Delta 88 in the mood to purr, but a hesitant purr. They drive past the knight and over a bridge with trusses intentionally finished in a coat of rust. It doesn't draw, this bridge, but the thick steel reflects the dark, rough rock and gloomy, heavy, black-painted timbers of the townhouses and condominium complexes inside. Beautiful and ridiculous, this homage to Calgary's medieval history.

The entire neighbourhood has this theme, Hicks says to Dianne. He says, In Aspen Woods, there's this lake, not like the lake in Auburn Bay. The lake in Auburn Bay is a swimming lake. That lake has sandy beaches, sand, I think I heard, shipped from California. But the lake in Aspen Woods, that lake is black.

Neither Hicks nor Willey can deny the beauty of the houses in Aspen Woods, houses that brood in the shadow of Castle Keep. The occasional turret, the occasional façade of brutal stone and thick cut wood.

Hewn wood, Willey thinks. The gaping garages.

The Delta 88 on Aspen Stone Way, or maybe on Aspen Hills Way, or Aspenshire Drive, or Aspen Acres Manor, one of those streets, Willey turns to Hicks and says, The garage is the mouth of your house. What are these houses saying?

They are saying, Hicks says. My owner is able to feed me.

They have to name the neighbourhoods after what had to be destroyed in order to build them, Dianne says. Aspen Woods. Hawkwood. Cougar Ridge.

Tuxedo Park, Willey says. Hicks laughs.

Then there's Ranche Heights, Hicks says. Ranch with an e at the end, just a bit west of Aspen. You have to have some serious dick swinging on the end of your development plan, if you're gonna put an e at the end of Ranch.

Sure, Dianne says. That's been the problem with all my development plans.

Hicks tells Dianne about the gate to Ranche Heights. He tells her about the large sandstone boulders next to the gate, used to keep people (people like us, Hicks says) from circumnavigating the gate to get in. He tells her about the two of them, Willey and Hicks, driving along the track that's formed next to the rocks.

Imagine the horrors the Ranche Heights citizens would face without those gates. Waves of poor people shortcutting through the neighbourhood, staring at the god-awful, uninteresting, over-garaged houses while offending the locals with denim jackets and Oldsmobiles dripping oil on the roads.

Your car doesn't drip oil, Willey says.

Poor men with nicotine stained fingers and un-coiffed facial hair; poor women wearing shorts, revealing their thigh-bruises.

And my thighs are not bruised, Dianne says. Well, not the left one. They all laugh.

Why the hell don't they have a knight in armor? Hicks says.

Dianne tells the boys that at the diner there was a man one day, he was hauling a single rock, something, she said, he called a gurgler, can they believe that, a gurgler, a gurgler that was going to be set up in a yard out, umm, somewhere. She says the man told her the boulder, the rock, was worth 5 thousand dollars. The man

said, Dianne tells Willey and Hicks, that someone paid five thousand dollars, plus hundreds more in costs to move the damn thing, for a rock to put up in their yard.

Not a rock, Hicks says, his finger up. A gurgler. Do try to employ the correct vocabulary, dear.

That must have been one heavy gurgler, Dianne says.

It's not about the pounds, the internet has told Willey, and he remembers that he's supposed to be playing off this scratch and win ticket in his pocket. That he's going to blow Hicks's mind, making Hicks think that he, Willey, is a psychic.

Hicks says the houses are so large in Ranche Heights, they have 6 car garages, a hundred windows. You need service stations around back so you can finish the grounds on your ride-on mower. He says the ride on mowers have in-flight service. Zing.

They have stucco, the houses in Ranche Heights. Cheap materials, only more of it.

He says, Hicks, that the houses are so large, they have six car garages, some with garages at either end, because how else are you gonna get from one end of your house to the other? Walk? He looks at Willey, who nods in assent. Ranche House is proof, Hicks says, that all the money in the world can't compensate for crappy taste and lack of imagination.

You're jealous, Dianne says.

Absolutely.

Willey's stomach growls. He could have switched this day with tomorrow, so that today is the meat day and tomorrow a no-meat day. He could have switched

days and had horse. Or rabbit. Dianne says that when her father was a man, he went out rabbit hunting, and his rabbit stew was one of the best foods she'd ever eaten. She couldn't pass on rabbit, seeing it on the menu. Willey, he could have had rabbit. Or duck. Or horse. Instead, he's having treviso and orange, and he's not sure what treviso is.

Dianne and Hicks lean in to talk about their weekend plans, Willey thumbs through his phone, searching treviso. Dianne has the place to herself, not this weekend, but the weekend after, and she's excited at having Hicks over. Debra and her father, they're taking little Michael to the Enchanted Forest in British Columbia, and they've already reserved a hotel in Revelstoke.

According to the internet, Treviso is a place in Italy.

Dianne's father asked her if she wanted to come, but Dianne said she had to work.

Then I booked that weekend off, Dianne says.

According to the internet, treviso is either related to radicchio, or is radicchio, the article does not make this clear, but the tender, ever so slightly bitter leaves and heart are delicious when used in salads, or when braised or sautéed with other vegetables.

Hicks leans in for a kiss and he and Dianne start to whisper the specific details of the weekend after next.

The internet tells Willey, that you should eat and exercise to be healthy no matter what your body type. However, the internet has also told Willey that he shouldn't eat anything that he wouldn't eat raw. That he has incisors for a reason,

that meat gives him protein and valuable nutrients, like iron, zinc, selenium, and that he should cook his meat thoroughly. That he shouldn't eat anything white.

The internet once told Willey that he can lose weight and detoxify if he eats nothing but cotton balls soaked in orange juice.

Now the internet tells Willey he should eat fruits and vegetables; that some fruits contain acids and sugars that will erode the enamel from his teeth, that the vegetables he's eating, that we're all eating, are loaded with pesticides, preservatives, our meat is full of hormones, and everything is full of toxins, and we should eat the way we ate two hundred years ago; that two hundred years ago our life expectancy was 20 years shorter than it is now, and what would those people think of our toxic vegetables, our steroid-addled cows; that there is a justifiable reason for a red bell pepper to cost more than a green one; that if you want to read the rest of this article, you should get a subscription (It's free, all you need is an email address); that these other articles might interest you; that the injuries suffered by Roy Horn at the paws and teeth of one of his trained tigers was a tragedy (which it was not, as evidenced by the oxymoron *trained tiger*) and yes, that article did interest Willey.

Hey, Hicks says. Willey looks up from his phone. Any online reviews of this restaurant?

Willey holds Hicks's stare for a minute, having lost track of the conversation. I really think I need to go buy a lottery ticket, Willey says. The urge is giving me a headache.

Hicks raises an eyebrow. Sighing, Willey searches for reviews of the Coquette's Fetish.

Look at that, Willey says, looking from Hicks to Dianne. UrbanSpoon. Willey says, reading, that UrbanSpoon allows today's amateur eater to stay up to date on all their favorite food news. Look, it says here that you can connect with other eaters, and if you're a food blogger, you can link to UrbanSpoon and share photos of what you are eating, or, judging by some of these pictures, what's left of what you've been eating. UrbanSpoon wants you to have a great meal and then tell the world all about it.

What an era we live in, Hicks says. With taste-buds and a smartphone, you can be given the same web space as an established food-critic.

You probably don't need taste-buds, Dianne says.

There are five critic reviews of the Coquette's Fetish, three blog posts and thirteen diner reviews with a 92 percent approval rate. SearchforYummy found the ambience great - even with very high ceilings. The restaurants [sic] small, table-clothed tables make it seem like an intimate space.

Willey, he might have to agree with SearchForYummy, the ceilings do reach, and, yes, the restaurant's decision makers have decided to clothe their tables. You figure, Willey says, SearchForYummy might have mentioned the faces on the columns, if he or she's so fixated on ceilings.

We're not here to kink shame, Hicks says. What's the next review?

BrianYYC says he went to the Coquette's Fetish for dinner two weeks ago with his wife and another couple. He's not the type to write reviews very often but he's still thinking about his dinner, so he figured it was time to write a review.

Thank you BrianYYC. Thank you for figuring it was time to write a review.

Keep reading, Dianne says. What does BrianYYC say?

The last time BrianYYC ate at The Coquette's Fetish it was not a great experience for him. The food seemed to have a strange sort of sweetness to it, just not his type of food. He was not that excited to go back, until he heard that they hired a Chef, new to the Calgary food scene.

Oooh, Dianne says. Calgary has a food scene.

Brian YYC, unfortunately has to tell us that there is much better value elsewhere for a lot less money and attitude. The Coquette's Fetish is for old people who drive big flashy cars and run over small, furry animals on the way to the Estate, or on the way to hop flights to the chateau in Europe.

Now we know where the lapin comes from, Hicks says.

Willey continues. BrianYYC really hated the vibe and the fact The Coquette's Fetish caters to fat expense accounts. How the Coquette's Fetish got named one of the top restaurants in the world is absolutely beyond BrianYYC. He knows French cuisine. He's eaten in real restaurants in France with French food prepared by French people.

In France, Dianne says.

BrianYYC feels that the owners are jerks too, especially if you don't buy their overpriced whine.

Look, Willey says, he actually wrote whine. With an h.

BrianYYC you slick punster.

BrianYYC . . . Willey scrolls down. Down. Down. This guy wrote a novel, Willey says, and we're not even at the part where he eats yet.

Let's cut to the money shot, Hicks says. What did he eventually eat?

Willey scrolls down a bit further. A bit further . . . Ah! Here it is. BrianYYC started with escargots, steak for main and sorbet/ice cream combo for dessert. BrianYYC's escargot entree was nice, but nothing special. His steak was average, again, nothing special. His Salad Verte was boring.

This is what we're using the internet for, Dianne says.

I can't believe it, Willey says. Shit.

What?

I ordered the Salad Verte.

Oh no, Hicks says. He puts his hand to his mouth, his eyes wide in horror. Like that his hand shoots up in the air, fingers snapping. He looks left, right. Waitress! He shouts. Carol! Dianne too, looks shocked.

Judging by Carol's expression, you'd expect her to expect seeing a fire at the table, or at the very least, the remains of a dead rabbit. My friend here, Hicks says, ordered the Salad Verte.

Yes, Carol says. Boston lettuce. Treviso.

Yes, yes, but BrianYYC on this review, Hicks points at Willey's phone, BrianYYC wrote that his Salad Verte was boring.

Carol looks at Hicks, at Willey, a moment at Dianne, then she kneels down. BrianYYC is an asshole, she whispers. Would you like to change your order?

As Willey's about to say No, Hicks jumps in, says, No, no, no. Of course not. But, could you suggest to the chef that Willey be delivered a salad that's a good conversationalist?

No, Dianne says. Give him a salad that's been flirting with something that might have been out too long.

Yes, Hicks agrees. A real whore of a salad.

Carol winks at Willey. Sure, she says.

As Carol walks away, Willey figures it's time to put his plan into action, his thousand-dollar-scratch-and-win-ticket-in-his-pocket plan. He says to Dianne, Dianne, you ever get that feeling like you absolutely have to do something? Like, right now, right here, right now, I feel I have to get up and go buy a lottery ticket.

Dianne's never had that feeling, though she once scratched a lottery ticket that had three pyramids, so she knew it was a winner, but she held on to it for a few days before scratching the prize amount. Savouring, Dianne says, the idea of being rich, and not only 2 dollars richer, as the truth turned out to be.

But I have to go buy a lottery ticket, Willey says, or the idea is going to drive me nuts. And that's exactly what he stands up to do, and when he stands up, when he's reached his full 6-4, Dianne says, Jesus Willey, look at you.

You look great Willey, Dianne says, and Dianne doesn't even know that Willey has a thousand dollar lottery ticket in his pocket. Dianne says Willey looks

great, and though he may not have lost pounds, he's lost inches, he's looking slimmer.

Don't sugar-coat his weight loss issue, Hicks says. Otherwise, he'll eat it.

That's a fucking home run, really. Willey has to give credit where credit is due, that's one for the ages, but Dianne, she smacks Hicks on the back of the head. She says, Listen Willey, quit weighing yourself, and measure instead. You're slimmer.

Slimmer, Willey heads off to buy a lottery ticket. A Blackjack scratch and win.

Heading to the door, however, offers its own set of distractions. The doe-eyed girl that was sitting with the tweed-jacketed bald guy? She has decided at that moment, to hit the ladies, and though Willey's never been much of a leerer (above the ankle that is) there's no escaping the eye-gravity of her pants. She's wearing yoga pants tucked into a pair of Timberland Savin Hill mid-boots, with a grey and yellow zippered track-jacket. And Willey in his hoodie and jeans? This place, Willey thinks, needs to instill a dress code. His inner-Willey, his dirty inner-Willey, wants him to consider these pants for a minute. These pants push the envelope in regard to tightness. Fill the envelope, in fact. The envelope, and Track-Jacket's ass-crack.

Willey can feel his face burn at such a thought, but Track-Jacket's pants are tight, and Willey with his double Y-chromosomes? What can a man do? Turn away, his inner-Willey says. The polite one. Track-Jacket turns left to the washrooms, and Willey, slimmer, not a leerer, heads right and out the door. This is a man on a mission, after all. Oh, you just wait, Hicks.

Now, this plan to get one over on Hicks isn't anything serious. Willey wants to *plan* something to catch Hicks off his guard, and wants Hicks to *experience* it. Unlike that moment at the Maam's ATM. Besides, to rub that in Hicks's face, Willey would have to put up with Hicks's constant self-pity references in regards to Willey cheating him. Not to mention the demands for monetary compensation.

As Willey crosses Stephen Avenue, slimmer, as he makes for the ARP Pharmacy, he savors the fact that he's finally found a way to surprise Hicks. You happen on a thousand dollar winner, you don't just cash it in. You have to have some fun with it.

At the ARP, Willey buys a single 2 dollar Blackjack scratch and win, then scuttles, very much satisfied with his plan, back to the restaurant. Through the red wax door, past the hostess's dick desk, the columns, the wall of phalli—Track-Jacket still hasn't returned to her chair—and back to his table where, breathlessly, he sits down.

He sets the scratch and win ticket on the table, rubs his hands together, momentarily places his hands in his lap. (Pulls the winning ticket out of his hoodie pocket, sets it on his leg). He use the edge of a butter knife to scratch, holding the ticket in such a way that blocks most of it from Hicks's view, but makes it look like he needs to hold it there to keep it from flying off the table. He moves his hand slightly enough that the scratching knife catches the ticket and sends it sailing into his lap. He brings up the winner, pretends to keep scratching. Finally, he looks closer at the ticket.

Huh, he says.

What? Hicks says.

I think. . . Holy fuck. He hands the ticket to Hicks, who looks at it, but says nothing. As Hicks busies himself saying nothing, Willey hides the other ticket.

What? Dianne says. What is it? Hicks hands her the ticket. She stares, her eyes narrowing. Is this? she says. Is this? Jesus, Willey, Dianne says. That's the second Jesus, Willey of the night.

A thousand dollars, Dianne says. A thousand dollars, Willey. Christ. She looks suitably impressed. Amazed. Astounded.

Where's the other ticket? Hicks says.

What?

The other ticket, the one you bought, the one you actually scratched, where is it?

What do you mean? It's right here. Willey holds up the winning ticket.

Sure it is, Hicks says. Is it under your shoe? Under your leg? Hicks asks Willey if he shoved it in the little crack where the leg of the table is screwed into the top, and as Hicks looks under the table, Willey slumps, pulls the ticket out, and lays it on the table. Hicks doesn't even look smug with his discovery, the bastard.

Asshole, Willey says.

Watch your language boy, you're in a fancy French restaurant.

Le anus.

How long have you been carrying that around? Dianne says.

I bought it this morning.

A thousand dollar winner, Hicks says. That's amazing.

Willey has 49 percent of a mind to say, Hey, remember that guy we stole that bank card from?

Congratulations, buddy, Hicks says. A thousand dollars. We might have to get a bottle of wine.

Willey looks at Dianne, who stares back. Dianne's been drinking her rye and cokes, Willey and Hicks various beers. The tab is rocketing, and, as if reading their minds, Hicks says, Don't worry you two, I've got this covered, no matter the expense. Drink. Eat. Enjoy.

They talk about what can be done with losing scratch and win tickets. Willey asks Hicks if he knows anyone who knows anyone who can figure out how to reapply the aluminum paste and methyl ethyl ketone mixture to scratched tickets, so they can return losing tickets to vendors, saying they had a change in heart, that they're fighting gambling addictions.

Hicks says that's not a good plan. He says, Sure, you can mix dish soap and aluminum coloured acrylic paint to make your own scratch film, but to do it convincingly, the expense probably wouldn't be worth what you'd get back, even if you could find a place that's willing to take lottery ticket returns.

Hicks assumes his lecturing pose. Hand out, palm up. He says some guys will buy a Lotto 649 with the previous week's numbers, and with a little bit of ink and a whole lot of talent, they alter the date of the ticket. He says some guys will, to this day, cut pieces of one ticket and past them into another to make a winner, and some guys are pretty damn good at it.

I know this one guy, Hicks says, who took one of those novelty tickets that are always winners, you know, the kind that say on the back, Not a real ticket, Idiot, or some variation of that. This guy, Hicks tells Willey and Dianne, buys those tickets and separates the front and back, and glues the back of a genuine Western Canada Lottery Corp ticket to the front of the dummy ticket.

Of course, the WCLC isn't going to fall for any of these tickets. But the WCLC isn't the target. Hicks says these guys will try to sell their fake tickets to people they meet on the street. They'll say they're ex-convicts, or illegal aliens that can't legally cash in a winning lotto ticket. There are guys, Hicks says, who say they're homeless, have no I.D., and can't cash it in, which is exactly what the homeless guy who sold Willey his ticket said. And no, Hicks says, they don't make million dollar winning tickets. They'll make tickets that look like they're one or five or ten-thousand dollar winners and these guys will try to sell them for a thousand dollars or so, or a few hundred.

Or, Willey thinks, they'll make them look like thousand dollar winners and ask five hundred for them. If you're smart, you can talk them down to two hundred. Shit.

### **3.2**

And so they drink and they eat and they chew and swallow and Dianne asks Willey, hesitatingly, where he got his lottery ticket. Hicks stops chewing and looks almost disappointed when Willey lies and tells her, he bought it from the lottery terminal in Marlborough Mall.

They decide to get another bottle of wine and with their meals not half finished Hicks starts suggesting dessert, the tab getting higher and higher. Willey tries to keep his suddenly fat feeling head under control. He's thinking over three hundred now, the tab. With tax, with his habit of underestimation, with Carol's well-deserved tip, maybe five hundred. Willey smiles. He leans back and laughs at jokes.

Despite this horrid chain of events, Willey thoroughly enjoys his salad. The Coquette Salad Verte is pretty fucking delicious, he says. Whore or not. He didn't have an out of body experience at the leafy hands of this salad, nor did he enter a deep depression because his salad wasn't the endive equivalent of a geisha. The treviso, Willey says, with its red leaf and its slight bitterness, acts as anchor for both the eye and the palate, (even if you've just lost a thousand dollars that technically you didn't really have to begin with).

Hicks says his steak was a perfect medium-rare, nicely marbled, but what really surprised him were the escargots. That garlic/butter mix? Delicious, Hicks says. And quite tender. As far as garden pests go. As for Dianne's garden pest, it too followed through on its promise of fifty dollar pleasure. When Dianne offered Willey a taste, he broke his no-meat-day rule and took a fork full, the meat not as stringy as he would have assumed, but having a wild, woody flavour. The Thumper special, Hicks called it.

Willey thumbs through his phone, BrianYYC's review still on the display. You might have decades of eating experience, BrianYYC, but the fact you jumped on a trend of using the Calgary airport designation in your name is reason enough for your readers to enjoy watching you choke on your Escargots La Coquette, the last of

the marinated escargots lodging firmly in your larynx until a quick thinking though somewhat ill-advised busgirl and her perfectly applied Heimlich sends the offending slug arcing gracefully across the table, phlegm and white butter trailing behind, until it plops against the forehead of your dining partner.

Fuck, Willey thinks. What am I going to do with a fake thousand dollar lottery ticket?

And which dining partner, BrianYYC? Who was the person you were looking at when you thought you were going to die? Who did you think was going to come to your rescue? Who did you want to tell one last time, I love you? Your wife? Your friend's wife? Your friend? Now, there is a review to write, Brian: The Coquette staff knows the Heimlich maneuver, and I am no longer in doubt about my sexuality.

What are you smirking at? Hicks says.

Willey turns to Hicks, says, I can start my food blogging career right here, right now. I'll say I ordered the Pénis d'un Cheval. Stuffed with roasted vegetables, red pepper, eggplant, tomato, cat ligament, cheddar cheese. Pan seared and served on a warm potato- and olive salad (36 dollars).

More penises, Dianne says. If you don't mind, I'll think I'll skip this part of the conversation to visit ladies' room. Both Willey and Hicks watch her walk away, the sway of her skirt, the flash of hair and shoe.

Review what really matters, Hicks says. Take pictures of the washroom. Include pictures of fellow diners. These are the people that eat here. Note the lack of baseball caps and sandals. This picture represents the quality of ass on the serving staff.

Willey and Hicks, they've been drinking, and now Dianne's left them alone. Willey looks around, trying to gauge the quality of ass on the wait-staff, to see if Hicks's on to something. All the girls, Carol, they're wearing black slacks. They have white blouses, buttoned one button short of the throat. The male servers also have white shirts, but the material looks different from Carol's blouse. All wear red neckties, all wear black slacks that are tight around the bottom, but not *tight*, around the bottom, not like Track-Jacket in the Timberland Savin Hills (Size 7, Willey's sure of it). The slacks on the wait staff are relatively loose down the leg, and flare out over gloss black oxfords. Speaking of asses, Willey says. Don't look, but there's this girl behind you. Grey zip-up jacket with yellow trim—

Hicks interrupts him. He says, Pants like that and you describe her via her top?

Why would I expect you not to have seen her?

I've got to tell you man, Hicks says. I've objectified a lot of women in my day, but those pants are spectacular.

Willey says—and his only excuse is his drunkenness, his drunkenness and the fact that he's just discovered his thousand dollar winning lottery ticket is fake—he says, Man, I wouldn't mind objectifying the hell out of her right now. Although Hicks seems shocked at this statement (out of character, he says) there's truth to it. It's been a while, Willey says.

Hicks laughs. He says, I'd sit through an Oprah marathon just to objectify her at the end of it.

Objectify Oprah? Willey says.

They laugh, these two men having dinner, making crude comments.

Dianne takes her seat and sighs. I leave for five minutes and you two start grunting right away. She asks what they're laughing over.

Objectification, Hicks says. This restaurant contains a woman with tight pants.

Yeah, I saw her, Dianne says.

Do you think, Willey says, she knows that guys—

She knows exactly what she's doing, Dianne says. Don't assume people are stupid based on their choice of clothing.

Hicks says, We're planning to write a review of the restaurant, only we want to write about the specifics that matter. Specifics like, what the washrooms look like, what your fellow diners look like. What the wait staff's asses look like.

The server outfits here are quite nice, Dianne says. She takes a sip of her wine, leans forward, and when Dianne leans forward, Willey knows she's got something important to say.

Let me tell you about my friend who worked at a Chainsie's, Dianne says. You know, one of those chain restaurants that's pretty much a medium-food restaurant. The place where the serving staff all have a lot of moxie, wink wink.

I know the place, Hicks says.

There, Dianne says, the girls have to wear tight, short skirts, and high-heeled shoes. *Have to wear*, she repeats. The customer is always right, and, apparently, the customer who goes to Chainsie's wants the waitresses to dress in short skirts and high-heeled shoes. And you might want to wear thong underwear, the manager of

this one Chainsie's said, because you don't want to be embarrassed by panty lines. This is what Dianne's friend told Dianne.

Natalie, Dianne's friend, said that one day the manager asked her to get a keg of beer from the storage room near the washrooms because the Fickenbräu was getting all foamy, and Natalie had to lean over to drag the keg down the hall, because she couldn't lift it.

Dianne takes another sip of her wine, she looks at Hicks. Natalie's leaning over to drag the keg down the hall, Dianne says, and some jerk walking past on his way back from the men's room takes a picture under her skirt. This guy, Dianne tells Willey and Hicks, he shows his friends at the table the picture, and this isn't some lumberjack-shirt wearing, east lowland silverback either. This guy has tan pants, this guy's wearing a cornflower tie.

Natalie goes to the acting manager, but the acting manager doesn't know what to do. He shrugs and says, What can I do?

You can kick him out. You can smash his phone, you can do plenty but if there's one thing worse than an upset employee, it's an upset customer.

Natalie says she can't work, she's upset and she's definitely not working there with that guy there, and the manager, he's too afraid to do anything. He says he didn't actually see anything happen so he can't do anything and, he says to Natalie, you should probably get back to work.

So, it's up to the girls to do something about it. One of the other servers challenges the guy and the guy says he's not leaving, says he already deleted the

picture because it wasn't that interesting and maybe you shouldn't wear mini-skirts if you don't want people taking your picture.

So, Dianne says, the guy eventually says he'll leave, no problem. The guy says it wasn't a good picture anyway and he'll leave, he's going to finish his beer not have dessert, and he'll leave, but the girls want him gone now and this scene is starting to attract attention, so the manager comes over to smooth things out. He offers to comp the man's meal if he'll leave quietly.

Dianne says, So this guy tells the manager that he'll leave right away, he won't even finish his meal, he says, but only if the manager makes the bitch drag the keg the rest of the way. Ha ha.

Willey and Hicks sit silent as Dianne finishes her story. Hicks sips his beer and Dianne says, This other girl, one of Natalie's co-workers, opened the door for this guy as he was leaving, but then stopped short with it so he'd run into the edge. She said it was worth losing her job over.

Carol brings the bill. Willey and Hicks have decided telepathically that it's not a good idea to ask Carol if they can take a picture of her ass for their hilarious restaurant review. In fact, they've decided the whole review is off. The bill totals 480 dollars.

Willey says, You need help paying this, Hicks?

Nope.

Are you sure? Dianne says. I've got some money.

Nope, Hicks says.

You're paying this whole tab? Dianne asks.

Oh, hell no, Hicks says. I'm not paying for any of it.

And there it is. Christ. Willey can only shake his head.

Son of a fucking bitch, what? Dianne says to Hicks. Seething, she says, Dwayne, I like this place and I might want to come back here one day. With or without you. I'm not running out of here.

I told you, Hicks says. I will take care of this. He starts to put his jacket on, which is a great sign, a vote of confidence to those dining with a person who's pulled a half dozen dine and dashes in his career, often without telling the people dining with him. Hicks puts his jacket on, turns to Willey, says, As I take care of our bill, I will teach you how to pull one over on someone. He reaches into his back pocket, pulls out his wallet, pulls a card out of his wallet. This, Hicks says, will pay for tonight's meal.

The card is a bank card. Amar Deshwar's CIBC bank card to be precise. Did you lift another bank card? Willey says.

Do you have the PIN to this one, Dianne says, and Hicks glares at Willey a moment.

Look closer at the card, Hicks says, and Dianne and Willey both stare. The gold chip that most of today's bank cards have, that security chip on bank cards and credit cards? On this card, the chip's missing.

Dine and dash is beneath me, Hicks says. One of our fine fellow diners in this restaurant will pay for our meal, and give Carol a healthy tip.

Dianne rubs at her temples. Willey can see her teeth grit. As for Willey, he's curious how Amar's going to make this happen, and says as much.

Hicks says that at the bank machine, he'll stand there and wait for the right person to come along. He'll explain to this person, this older male, father-type, that Hicks is in this restaurant, trying to impress his possible new girlfriend. Poor Hicks—poor Amar—taking his potential girlfriend and her handicapped brother out for a nice meal, and the bank machine went and ripped the gold chip off his card, and now it won't work. Must Amar make a fool of himself in front of the love of his life?

Some Good Samaritan will come to my rescue, Hicks says.

Sure, Amar. Dianne says, rolling her eyes. Whatever.

Watch and learn, Hicks says. He grabs the bill, the whole leather wallet it comes in, and walks toward the bank machine. Willey fingers the lottery ticket, his scratch and win, and matches eyes with Dianne. They both look over to Hicks, watching him as he makes for the hallway. If he turns right, he's out the door. Left and he's heading toward the washrooms, the ATM. He dummies right, then heads left, giving his friends a quick smirky glance as he does so. But what catches Willey's eye is Hicks putting his right hand in the pocket of his jacket, and pulling out the hacky sack.

Dianne and Willey sit silent for a minute. A minute more. Dianne stares toward the hallway, her finger running the rim of her wine glass, still half full. She sips it, drains it. There's not a person on the planet let alone in this restaurant who's naïve enough to step into that trap, she says.

You'd be surprised how naïve some people can be, Dianne. And stupid.

What do you think he's doing? she says. What do you think Amar's doing?

Talking his way through the kitchen, Willey says. He'll text us from the alley.

I had no idea you won a thousand dollars, Dianne says, and I don't expect you to pay for dinner. I can pitch in sixty dollars right now, she says. And make up the rest later. Or . . .

Willey looks at her.

Listen, Willey, Dianne says. I stopped and bought this stuff on my way here. Bought it at a thrift store. This purse, this smelly jacket. Five dollars for the whole mess. The phone they gave me for free. After last year when Hicks pulled this stunt, I wanted to be prepared. We leave this here, looks like we're coming back to the table. By the time Carol, God help her, has figured out what's going on, we're halfway home.

Dianne insists she'd be horribly upset at cheating Carol this way. Dianne works in a diner, after all, and people have run out on her. But, Dianne says, I'm not expecting you to pay just because you have that winning lottery ticket.

Great, Willey thinks.

Truthfully, honestly, Willey can pay for dinner. He has three bank accounts. One for the house he wants to buy, one for bills he has to pay, and one for a car. Each one of those accounts, Willey can pay for this dinner and leave a killer tip, but then what? You make a promise to yourself, you make a deal, and you follow that deal and if you eat fat when you're not supposed to, then why not eat fat all the time? You break a deal you've made with yourself, you can't trust yourself anymore. Still, Willey thinks, it would be nice for Dianne to watch him nonchalantly cover a 480 dollar plus tip tab. You pay for this meal, his inner Willey says, are you willing to put

up with Hicks sniffing around wondering where so much money came from and if there's any more?

There he is, Dianne says.

I don't believe it, Willey says.

Hicks steps up to the table, says, We're good, let's go. He sets the leather wallet down, Willey can see the ends of a thick spread of bills inside. Red. What looks like a dozen fifties peer out the end of the wallet.

You are not serious, Dianne says. You've only been gone ten minutes.

Yeah, we're covered, Hicks says. Carol's getting a 120 dollar gratuity. Let's go.

Dwayne, Dianne says.

Willey looks toward the column that's knocked over, the skull column, to a man who came from the washroom hallway a few seconds before Hicks. The man glances back at him, he and Willey lock eyes.

Hicks puts his finger to Dianne's lips. Shhh, he says. Amar, remember?

The man at the dead column, he's an older guy, middle-aged, well-dressed in a dark suit with the faintest of white pinstripes. Black hair, shiny and combed back. A face that always has a five o'clock sneer. Facial hair to match. Some guys go to the theatre to watch a movie; this guy looks the type to grow a beard sitting there. Willey realizes that in this scenario, he's Dianne's handicapped brother, but he's equally sure the gape-mouthed look he's giving this man matches any expectations.

As Hicks insists for the third time that they get moving, Carol stops at the table to thank them for dining at the Coquette's Fetish, and she hopes they'll come back again.

Willey pictures the black-haired man as an extra in a movie about people lobbing mortars into Yugoslavian playgrounds.

Remember, Hicks says. I'm Amar, and I'm embarrassed. He doesn't look embarrassed. He looks pretty fucking smug. Outside the restaurant he says, That, my friends, is how you pull one over.

They walk off arm in arm in arm down the avenue, east toward the iron horse. Hicks looking pretty satisfied with himself. Dianne, she's silent, switching from looking at Hicks, to looking at her feet, not sure whether to smile or not. Willey, he's slimmer in the waist, fatter in the head. He wants to ask Hicks about the hacky sack, about Hicks carrying his meth in hacky sacks. He wants to say, Yo Hicks, let's kick the hacky sack a bit, but Hicks examined that scratch ticket pretty close, and he had the decency not to out the ticket as fake in front of Dianne.

Happy Birthday, Willey, Hicks says.

## Chapter 4: The Boot

### 4.1

Handing back a personal hygiene product might not be the best idea when trying to strike up a conversation. Thankfully, Mr. Dwayne B. Hicks has worked to perfect this particular ice-breaker. You might not tell by looking at me, Hicks says, but I'm fairly clever.

Hicks casts his line out to a pair of girls that have let themselves become separated from the pack. At the outer fringes of the party, over by the stereo, distracted by their conversation. Somebody's father moving in with a stranger.

Willey's on a nearby couch picking up the odd word here and there. Mistake, marriage. Step-mother.

One of the girls snorts a laugh at Hicks, the other gives him a quick once over, likely figuring the boy not dangerously drunk, though there may be a certain risk behind the personality necessary to wear that shirt. Black on turquoise paisley-swirl with a disco collar? God Damn.

Hicks angles himself toward the taller of the two women. Less curvy than her counterpart, her dark blue skirt pleated all the way down to sandaled toes. A short blouse buttoned opposite to the party's standard of cleavage offers an occasional belly-button peek as a trade-off.

I noticed you from across the room, Hicks says. I said to myself, look at how she's dressed, look at her sense of style. She's a sophisticated woman, smart, and if I can get a card trick past her, I can get a card trick past anyone. Hicks fans out his deck. Pick a card, he says.

Willey watches this unfold with a mix of concentration and eye-roll. This girl, she has hair of such black, he thinks it might actually be blue, and in the intense blue of her eyes, he can barely notice the black of her pupils. Still, her attraction to Hicks might boil down to the ease of getting a playing card into her handbag, no matter about her hair, her belly-button, or even her toes. She holds up the three of clubs for her friend to see, and the moment her attention diverts, Hicks, as you've already figured, swaps his deck of threes with a real deck.

Christ. All that bastard has to do is stare girls in the eye, and throw out a smile. If there has ever been a smile stolen from the big cat section of the zoo, Hicks has it. A circle gathers, a cluster of girls surrounds Hicks as he has the black-haired girl manipulate the cards. Not once does he touch them. The cards, that is.

Boys on the fringe of the group, they sip their beers and squint at Hicks, taking notes over what to do next. Give him a sly smile and a fist-bump to the shoulder? Or try to take the fucker out back. After a time, Hicks directs the girl to turn over the top card. The queen of diamonds, she says.

A wealthy future for you, Hicks says. The cards never lie.

The girl shakes her head while others laugh outright. That wasn't my card, she says.

Well, I messed that up, didn't I? Hicks says. He holds his hand out. This your lipstick? The girl finds the three of clubs in her purse when she returns the lipstick. In some civilizations such an invasion may incline the purse-holder to apprehension, if not outright fear. In the world of this party? The girl tucks her hair behind her ear, laughing.

Dwayne, Hicks says.

Dianne.

Six years ago, that party. Willey's hair now long enough to be intentionally long, and not the shag of a man too lazy to get a haircut. Hair he can feather back over his shoulders. If he wants, he can force a stray bang to hang in front of his eyes. Tonight is an occasion for going dressy. Willey's exchanged the blue jeans for black cords, and the black tee for a deep red button up shirt with a collar.

If he feels so declined, Willey can get his hair in a ponytail.

Outside the window of the Las Gary's staff-washroom, a parking lot of dirty snowbanks and accumulated grit evidences the coming spring. March comes to Calgary with two guarantees. There will occur sometime between the 17th and the 24th a fall of snow you can measure in feet, and Dianne Olsen will begin an early spring clean, tossing old clothes, receipts, magazines, notes, and Hicks. Both dumps usually forgotten in time for April's snowstorm, but this year, Dianne has yet to thaw.

Willey's face burns at the heat of that fight. That breakup moment. Pot is one thing, Dianne yelling. But meth? And to children. Dwayne, you were selling drugs to children.

On the sidewalk in front of Dianne's father's girlfriend's house, Willey backing toward the sidewalk trying to find the sweet spot between looking like he's not listening, and listening. Hicks, he usually smiles and talks his way out of Dianne being mad at him, but this time, he's got his hands in his pockets looking down at the

ground. Of course, when she's mad at him, it's usually because he said he was working at a place when he wasn't. Or he spent money he never really had, or, say, he fucked up her step-mother's car. Or the time he bought her a cat.

I should have known, Dianne says. I should have known, you with steady money.

I don't sell anymore, Hicks says and that's all he says, and in a whisper. Hicks standing on the stoop, kicking at pebbles with his feet. I got caught up in the money, he says. Whispers.

Theme song of the caught, Dianne says. Chorus, I don't do it anymore.

Normally Hicks has his arms spread wide and his mouth the same, but this time? This time there's some serious heat coming off Dianne.

Willey, he's looking down, too. Well, looking up to get glances, then looking down again. Dianne's voice lowers to a seethe. She says, All this time you told me you were working temp jobs for that agency. All this time you were lying to me, and selling drugs to children.

Children? Hicks says, raising his face. Children? Really? I seem to remember my high school years spent working, helping my father with rent. I seem to remember my high school years spent failing, spent doing all sorts of things, none of which saw me taking drugs.

For the longest time Willey couldn't figure Hicks out on his selling. Willey's seen the man look at a kid wanting to buy ecstasy and Hicks telling that kid to fuck off. He's seen real hard-up looking kids, poor kids, northeast kids asking for meth and Hicks saying, Kid, smoke pot. But the wealthy looking kids, the richer kids. Hicks

would sell those kids Anthrax if he had it. Hicks says to Dianne, The *kids* I sell to get exactly what they want.

Dianne steps toward him with her hand in a fist. You're not stupid, Dwayne, she says. And neither am I. She steps back into the house, closes the door and turns the lock.

A slamming door? You can handle a slamming door, but a slowly closing door and a lock turning? There's no cure for that door.

With the sound of that door lingering in his head, Willey stands in front of a mirror, an electric razor buzzing, trying to determine a shadow between having just shaved and not having shaved since yesterday morning. Willey Hase, now a preener, preening in the Las Gary's Lanes staff rest-room while he thinks about the birth and what might very well be the death of his best friends' relationship. And who killed that relationship, Willey?

Here's the plan for tonight. Tonight, Hicks and Willey are headed to Kevin Parker's, and not the marquee event at Jenny Tewilliger's. Willey knows that Dianne plans on Jenny's party, and with Hicks still embedded in his post-dump mope, why throw those two into the same neighborhood? We're going to head to Kevin Parker's, Willey says to the mirror, preening. He says, We're going to Kevin Parker's, and we're going to cut loose, relax, and smile for an evening.

A horn sounds from the staff parking lot out back. Willey looks out the window, sees Hicks standing by his car, pretending to swig from a bottle of some green liqueur. Hicks puts the bottle on the roof of the car and with both hands at his mouth whistles for Willey to come out. Willey grabs his motorcycle jacket and his

motorcycle boots, thinking, If only I had a motorcycle. He exits the alley, stage north. 10:34 on his phone, Hicks only late by half an hour.

Willey exits the Lanes, and there's Hicks leaning against the car spinning his keys on a finger. Hicks with his snake-skin boots. The Pythons, he calls them. Black dress pants and a glimmery blue shirt beneath his leather jacket, the jacket adorned once again with the detachable fox fur collar. Even the car freshly showered. Dirt and salt residue washed away, the car in her rusty two-tone glory, orange under what little light the sodium arc streetlamp offers. Willey pauses. A tie. A fucking tie on Hicks. Identical colour to the shirt, but a tie nonetheless. What could this signify? Willey might want to head back into the bowling alley, throw a few balls. A tie. A tie on Hicks. You had to one up my dressy shirt, Willey says. Didn't you?

Well, don't we look a pair, Hicks says. He points at Willey, says, You know the score of the hockey game?

What game? Willey says.

Flames-Oilers, Hicks says. What other game is there?

I don't know the score, Hicks.

Good, don't say if you find out. Hicks slides into the car, reaches over to open the door. I've spent the entire evening helping my father move our shit belongings from our shit old house to our shit new apartment, Hicks says. I plan to get shit-faced at Parker's and watch the 1 AM replay. Don't mess it up for me.

No problem, Willey says. 9-1.

Willey!

Christ, Hicks. When was the last time those two teams conspired for that many goals?

Hicks informs Willey that they need to stop at a liquor store, which is fine, Willey needs a bottle. The Marlborough store, Hicks says. I need to meet Sarah Guitar in about fifteen minutes ago.

You mean Sarah Gutierrez?

Why complicate things, Willey? Hicks says. She's buying the last of my pop's latest crop. Hicks slips the key into the ignition, but before he starts the car he turns and asks Willey if he wants to drive. Willey says he's a few months from buying a car, and Hicks has been teaching him the finer arts of annoying other drivers. Only makes sense to have a license when you buy a car.

Hicks, he's been teaching Willey what he calls the true necessities of driving. How to guide the decision-making process for other drivers. He says that when you're going to change lanes, you signal, obviously, but then, the other driver might not know what to do. They might slow down, or they might speed up. Or typically, they'll do nothing. So if you start to edge over immediately, you make that decision for them.

Hicks has been teaching Willey how to drive with his knee. Practical experience for those occasions when you have a Slurpee in one hand, and a bean-burrito in the other. Willey reminds Hicks that there'll be no more Slurpees and bean burritos, and he pats his shrinking belly.

Your diet's working, Hicks says. And I will admit to that. He says, Driving with your knee then, is practical experience for when you have a latte in one hand, and your tube of lipstick in the other.

Oh, you.

Hicks, he's been teaching Willey about what to do when someone tailgates you, which is neither to speed up nor slow down. What you do, Hicks says, is you maintain your speed, and if an occasion arises that would allow you to merge to the right in a safe manner, you do that and let the other driver pass you. Then, when they pass you, and when they glare over at you, and they will, you don't look at them, but scratch your ear with your fuck-off finger.

This is what you should do. According to Hicks, this will help your driving.

Oh, it won't help your driving, Hicks says. The novelty of driving becomes a chore relatively quickly. And every bit of in-road entertainment, anything that keeps you awake at the wheel, helps. Nothing, Hicks insists, infuriates a man more than when he is given the finger, and he can't give the finger back, because the other driver won't make eye contact with him.

To continue these lessons, Hicks offers Willey the chance to drive, and so Hicks opens the door to get out.

The key is in the ignition, the car says.

Hicks and Willey lock eyes, freeze.

Now, Willey's witnessed some pretty sporadic shit from this car in the time he's known it. From the radio coming on for no other reason than a slight bump, and

lights going off for no other reason than they were needed, but this might be too much.

It's just a voice chip, Hicks says, laughing. Calm down.

What do you mean, voice chip? Willey says.

Hicks tells Willey the voice is part of a warning system they put in the car. Late 80s cutting-edge technology. GM's spinning lure for the tech-savvy fish, circa 1980—whatever. Look it up while we drive, Hicks says.

If your car says anything derogatory, I'm done, Willey says. Last thing I need at this crucial stage of my diet is a car telling me to have another Baconator.

The car, in an accommodating mood, starts first try, Hicks still laughing when they pull out of the Las Gary's parking lot. In the back seat, along with the spare tire, a case of beer rattles, Hicks not wanting to make the effort to undo the series of bungee cords keeping the trunk closed.

They take 36th Avenue out of Dover and start the crawl north to Marlborough. Willey looks over at Hicks, Hicks chewing a toothpick. He flicks his eyes at his friend, then back at the road.

Your car's a boy, Willey says.

Yeah, I noticed that.

They pass 17th Avenue, unscathed by any stoplight. They drive to 12th Avenue, inside Hicks's suddenly male yet strangely effeminate car. Hicks takes the toothpick out of his mouth and sets it in the ashtray.

Willey turns to continue the conversation, but Hicks's interrupts him. He says, I've had this car for ten years, Willey. Ten years and despite the appearance,

this car has given me the undeniable impression of femininity. At that, I wasn't able to come up with a name. Gretel? Nope. Betty? Didn't work. Nothing ever felt right, and now I know why.

Is your car gay, Hicks? Willey says.

Hicks thinks for a minute. Really, that's none of our business, he says.

What are you going to do?

What I've been trying to do for the last ten years. Come up with a name. This might be the piece of the puzzle that cracks the code.

Hansel? Willey says.

Hicks squints. I don't think so.

Barney!

Jesus, Willey, Hicks says. You heard of any cars named Barney?

Well, there's a Herbie, Willey says. Can't think of anything else. Christine, maybe?

Car's a boy, Willey.

Willey and Hicks, two young men having ridiculous, meaningless conversations, making degrading comments about women on the street, often laughing in secret at the owners of small, impractical dogs. Questioning each other's sexuality on every turn, and now debating names for inanimate objects. Are there any other gay cars, I wonder, Willey says.

Your neighbour owns that yellow Sunfire, Hicks says. Surely that car's gay?

They come to a red light at Radcliffe, the engine purring abnormally well.

Willey snaps his fingers, suggests the name Lou, but Hicks, he says they're not going

to come up with a name just like that. The car will tell us what his name is, Hicks says. We just have to wait.

I'm starting to think you're serious, Willey says. About naming your car.

They turn into a strip mall parking lot just before Memorial Drive, and come to ground in front of what can be best described as the depressed traveller's strip-mall trifecta. Gas-station, convenience store, liquor store. If there were a cheap, one-off hotel behind, it would be the grand slam of single traveler retail.

Willey stares at a waterfall of red hair and blue jean over by the door to the liquor store. Sarah and another girl, Sarah's friend, with hair like copper flowing to mid back. Not the copper installed on buildings that browns in the air, the copper of this girl's hair is orange-gold.

Hicks shuts the car off, turns toward Willey, says, Willey, a man's car is part accessory, part horse, all personality. Some see a man's car as an opening statement regarding his pack-status, an indicator of his economic virility weighed against maturity, practicality and, should he drive a pick-up, his willingness to do grunt work.

When people say red hair they often mean something close to brown or auburn, but this girl's hair is deep orange with honey-glaze on the highlights. That's right, Willey thinks. Honey-glaze.

A man, Hicks says, seemingly unaware of this girl with her deep orange and honey-glaze hair, will look at your ride and immediately weigh himself against your bank account, your line of work, your tendency to hunt, the type of woman you're likely to keep, and how far you tuck your cock in.

Words to live by, Hicks.

For me, this car sends a message to all but that special woman. Run. Run far, run fast. This car allows me to undercut all the machismo bullshit, and keeps me from having to deal with both the over-testosteroned competitive types asking about my car, and the pretentious queers who—oh, sorry car, Hicks adds, patting the dashboard.

Also says you might be prone to delivering pizza.

That is true, Hicks says, seeming pleased with Willey's understanding. He says, Any car requiring an upkeep to its appearance will only lead to disappointment when people finally recognize my true laziness. Also, my insurance remains low. Now, if you don't mind, my client approaches.

Sarah holds her arms out. Thanks for showing up, Hicks.

Sarah attends Mount Royal University, a strange background for anyone with an affiliation to Hicks, but she knows Hicks through a brother who bought used CDs and DVDs from Hicks, back when people wanted such things.

You know the score of the hockey game? Hicks says. Don't say it.

The girl with Sarah turns around, a cigarette smoking in her hand. Willey, never a fan of the nicotic arts, opens the door to the car, staring wide-eyed as the girl opens her mouth, smoke hanging. She breathes the smoke back and Willey, he's seen her face before, he's sure of it. She has blue jeans tucked into a pair of tan riding boots—ankle buckle, D-toe and a futurity heel, *giddy up*—with a green sweater-coat that only serves to make that hair look more of a torrent. Hi, she says, holding out her hand. I'm Rhonda.

That's all she says. Hi, I'm Rhonda, and Willey's opinion of smokers is rocked to the core.

Hicks is already digging Sarah's baggie out of his pocket. Sarah's boot-wearing, cigarette-smoking, opinion-altering friend shakes Willey's hand and has this look on her face like she knows something that Willey doesn't, like there's a secret he's not in on. Best not to worry about it, Willey thinks, lest he hold her hand for too long. Dammit, she likes to hold eye contact, which has its own set of fresh terrors. Those freckles across the bridge of her nose, they're a man-killer, for sure. Willey shakes Rhonda's hand as he steps past and says something in return, something like, Hey. A Hey drawn out and nonchalant, not due to some inner motorcycle boot cool, but a result of saying Hey while trying to place exactly where he's seen this Rhonda.

Not just one place, Willey thinks. Two places. He enters the liquor store, recognizing Rhonda from two places. A memory where she's smiling at him, and a memory of a John Waterhouse painting. Willey has an art book at home, one that might be titled *John Waterhouse's Big Book of Dreamy Yet Fierce Looking Women*, and in that book somewhere is a picture of a painting of a woman that looks very much like cigarette smoking, green sweater wearing, red hair flowing, looks you in the eye Rhonda.

You, Willey's inner-Willey says, never told cigarette-smoking, green-sweater-wearing, red-hair-flowing, looks-you-in-the-eye Rhonda your name, you corduroy-wearing, mouth-agape idiot. His other inner Willey jumps immediately to the rescue,

says, Relax, man. Makes you look all aloof. Yeah, that's right Rhonda. I'm aloof. You can't pin me down. Fuck, Willey whispers to himself.

Willey found that Waterhouse book in a box of sci-fi picked up at a garage sale, and Rhonda definitely has that wide-eyed Waterhouse look.

Inside the liquor store—the lighting in east side liquor stores is terrible—inside a liquor store too bright for buying booze, Willey learns that a light too bright is also no help in trying to remember women you've just seen in parking lots outside.

Liquor stores too bright leave you the sensation that whatever you purchase there needs to be drunk quickly. This is the kind of light they'd have in a pornography store. While wondering where he's seen Rhonda before, while waiting for the search icon on his phone to quit spinning, Willey grabs his bottle of whiskey.

The purchase of alcohol should be a moment of mystery, a moment spent in the shadows. Adventure, not necessity. Same with using the expensive and allegedly best cell coverage in the province to search images of John Waterhouse paintings.

There's that painting, *Hylas and the Pond full of Fourteen-Year-Old Girls*, that one, that's the painting Willey might remember, but no. Rhonda has the large eyes, but those girls in that pond look like they're high on lily petals, while Rhonda looks very much aware of who is around her. There's that painting of Proserpine by Rossetti, maybe that slipped into the Waterhouse book the same way it slipped into Willey's search results, but, again, no. Had Rossetti painted Proserpine with straight orange hair (and a honey-glaze) and backed off on Proserpine's nose a bit, perhaps, but, no, not Proserpine.

Willey does realize the foolishness of this adventure. Here he is in a liquor store, a bright liquor store, at that, looking for images of paintings that might match the appearance of a woman out in the parking lot, and he's about to come to his senses and give up, then there she is. *The Mermaid*. 1901. Before Willey fingers the postage stamp image, he knows it's the one.

Willey clicks on *The Mermaid* (1901) to get a bigger view and that, more or less, is Rhonda. More tail, less freckle, but here comes the next question. When did he see her before? In life, that is, not in John Waterhouse, and why didn't Willey think of John Waterhouse when he did see her, whenever that was? Willey has a distinct memory of Rhonda looking up at him, those big eyes, her smile, and he definitely didn't think of John Waterhouse at the time. In fact, he remembers being somewhat upset at her.

That doe-eyed girl, Track Jacket, the girl in the restaurant from a few months ago? No. Why would he have been upset at her? Drop it, Willey's inner Willey says. Forget this Rhonda, who swam out of a John Waterhouse painting to sit and brush her hair on the stony shore of the liquor store parking lot of your heart. Forget her, because in two minutes you will be in Hicks's car heading to Kevin Parker's while Rhonda will be off painting herself into someone else's memory.

Willey pays and exits to the comforting orange light of a Calgary parking lot and the smell of a great Canadian city in late March. Wet concrete, dirty snow, last fall's dead leaves coming to the surface. Cigarette smoke. Cigarette smoke and a flooded Oldsmobile.

Christ, Hicks. Really?

He gets spark, Hicks says. Doesn't turn over.

Have you tried giving him a name?

You give it a shot, Hicks says.

You don't like any of the names—

Dammit, Willey. Come on!

It's flooded, Willey says.

Just give it a try.

He can be an asshole, Willey says to the car. But he loves you, he really does.

He pats the dashboard, turns the wheel hard left. He turns the key as he cranks the wheel back to centre, hammering the gas. No luck. Willey tries the same manoeuvre, this time without slamming the gas. Why'd you even shut it off? he yells.

I'm environmentally friendly, Hicks says. He says, We should just walk back to your place, watch the game there, maybe. Trade this thing in for a horse and put two bullets into the head of the fucking horse. Hicks starts playing around under the hood, still complaining. I don't even want to go to Parker's, he says. Parker lives in the southwest. Southwest is full of assholes, he shouts.

Sarah pulls up in her Cavalier and asks about the trouble with Hicks's car.

My car is going through a strange time in his life, Hicks says. Fuel injection or something with the throttle or gender confusion, I'm not sure.

Sarah says that she and Rhonda are going to a party over in Capital Hill and why don't they leave the car to figure itself out, and go with them?

Willey leans down to look into the car. Rhonda in the passenger seat flicks her head toward the back seat. Come on, Willey, she says. She must have asked Sarah his name, seeing as how Willey's so aloof.

There a TV there? Hicks asks.

Is that all you want to know? Sarah says. If there's a television?

What my life's boiled down to, Hicks says. TV or no TV.

#### 4.2

Willey and Hicks push the Olds to the opposite end of the lot, fearing the manager of the liquor store might grow squirrely and call a tow if the car stays up front. Hicks pulls his Not Abandoned sign out of the glove box, sets it on the dash. He rescues his beer and bottle from the back seat. They get into Sarah's Cavalier and eventually head west on Memorial Drive, Sarah having to U-turn at Marlborough Way in order to point herself in the right direction. Willey in the back seat behind Rhonda, who he still hasn't placed, Hicks behind Sarah.

Willey elbows Hicks and shows him the picture on his phone. *The Mermaid*. Remind you of anyone? he whispers.

Hicks shrugs.

Come on, man, Willey says, nodding toward Rhonda. A split second later, Willey's hand is empty.

Turn around, Rhonda, Hicks says.

Christ. Shit. Willey scrambles for the phone but Hicks, he's far too fast for the meaty-armed, even with the considerable loss of late.

Rhonda turns around and Hicks hems and haws, the phone up near Rhonda's face, Willey fretting and moaning, Rhonda and Sarah both saying, What? What?

Take off your shirt and brush your hair, Hicks says.

Fuck, Hicks! Willey swipes for the phone, again without luck.

What? Rhonda says.

Rhonda, Hicks says. Can you put your tail up on the dashboard? Willey here thinks this picture looks like you. He turns the camera toward her.

Oh, I love Art Nouveau, Rhonda says. Of course she'd say that. She *is* Art Nouveau.

They continue west on Memorial, Rhonda talking about Art Nouveau paintings. Rhonda likes Alfons Mucha. Sure, Willey says. He says he likes Mucha too, and maybe he does. All he knows about Art Nouveau at the moment is *The Mermaid* was painted by John Waterhouse in 1901. All the times Willey flipped through that book, you'd think he would have read a word. He can't even remember the damned title.

There comes a pause in the conversation, and Willey gets the feeling that it's his turn to say something material, something relevant, something other than, Yeah, he painted it in 1901. Something, anything to move the conversation further, but there's nothing there, only this image of a mermaid on a rocky shore brushing her hair while she smokes. This's a nice, practical car, Hicks says.

God bless you, Hicks.

Like the Bic lighter of cars, Hicks adds. Disposable.

Right, Sarah says. Unlike your car. You should put that car of yours to sleep.

That reminds me, Hicks says to Willey. He turns to Willey and says, You have to keep the dog an extra few days.

Now, if anything could white-out that image of Rhonda on her rock, smoking her cigarette, brushing her hair, her tail tucked under herself—topless, Willey might add—it's Jolene. Jolene, likely barking as they speak, likely annoying Willey's mother and the neighbours, adding to her kennel smell. Jolene, able to vomit on command, but only her own internal command. No way, Willey says. I had her all this week, it's your week next starting tomorrow.

Am I to believe you two have joint custody of a dog? Rhonda asks.

Willey leans forward to Rhonda. This is some dog, he says, as Hicks starts in with the C'mon, mans and the You-have-tos. Hicks says his father's going do some drywall work in their apartment, and he doesn't want Jolene sticking her nose around where it might get her hurt. Willey knows the truth of this detail. Hicks told him the other day, his father plans to open up their side of the wall with the neighbor's, see if he can tap into their electricity.

It's always roughest on the children, Sarah says, when a marriage breaks apart, and if anyone picked up the pun, they all ignore it.

Put her in the kennel, Willey says.

You know what she's like in the kennel.

We both have to be on board with kennel training, Willey says, a touch of anger to his voice. How can you let a dog make the decisions in your life? Put her in the kennel when she has to be in the kennel. It's the only way she'll learn.

How do you get joint custody of a dog? Rhonda asks, and really, that's a fair question. There's no problem asking that question. The problem comes in answering that question, without making yourself look like a common house-breaking criminal.

It's a bit of a story, Willey says.

I like a good story, Rhonda says.

I tell you what, Willey says. When we get to the party, I'll tell you the story.

Willey nods a cool, flirty nod at Rhonda, or at least his version of one. He looks out the windshield, starting an underarm sweat. How do you tell a relative stranger, someone you might want to impress, about acquiring a dog via trying to rob a guy, when you might not want to admit trying to rob a guy?

Sarah sticks to Memorial instead of taking Barlow Trail as a short-cut through Mayland Heights, Hicks pointing out what he considers a poor choice of manoeuver. Kensington and 10th Street is a Friday nightmare, Hicks says. If you take 8th Avenue to Edmonton Trail, go up to 20th, you might save ten minutes.

How much time are you saving over taking the bus? Sarah asks.

Hicks leans back in his seat. A suggestion for future reference, is all, he says.

Where are we going, anyway? Willey asks. Whose party?

My friend Jennifer is throwing this party.

Willey rubs at his temples. Surely, when he asks Sarah, Jennifer who? she won't say, Jennifer Tewilliger, *the* Jennifer Tewilliger, who is holding the very party that Dianne Olsen, Annie-O, Hicks's former girlfriend, is said to be in attendance. So the rumour goes. Jennifer who? Willey asks.

Tewilliger.

### 4.3

Based on the amount of traffic turning from Memorial into Kensington, Sarah decides to avoid 10th Street. She heads north on 19th instead. Hicks starts drinking from his liqueur.

Ten minutes later they stop in front of a mint green bungalow that looks turned 90 degrees to fit a narrow lot. Willey can see a couple girls on the front stoop being directed around back. Even at street level, the air thrums with bass from the Tewilliger stereo.

Dianne's supposed to appear at this party, and she'll likely come with her new boyfriend, Paul. Willey scans up and down the sidewalk for Paul's blue Camaro, but sees nothing of the sort. Maybe he's not driving the Camaro, the roads being clear of snow but full of gravel. Christ, if Hicks ends up in Dianne's vicinity, anything could happen. Anything outside of anything good, that is.

With the door open, the heavy bass reveals itself as late 1900s rock. Guns and Roses, Hicks says. You could be mi-eeee-ine, he sings. He takes a swig from his bottle as they walk along the side of the house. This a vintage party, he says, or maybe a Radiohead party gone all irony?

They add their boots and shoes to the smorgasbord of footwear at the back. Willey's memorized most of Dianne's favored shoe, compiling a mental list that he never would have thought to put in place during a moment such as this. His scan of the pile yields no information, other than Uggs carrying their popularity deep into the 2010s. Willey makes his way through a short, Nicorette-coloured hallway, up

three steps into the kitchen. He stares down at the part in Rhonda's hair, honey-orange from root to tip.

The kitchen consists of a yellow-speckled laminate counter, L-shaped to front and right, marked at one end by a stove, the other a fridge, both finished in what Rhonda will later refer to as the misunderstood 60s Harvest Gold. The counter arrayed with a tray of vegetables, a tray of crackers, more crackers, a sink, more vegetables and near the fridge a selection of various cheeses. At least a dozen people stand in groups of two and three. Everyone in their early 20s, holding glasses with various liquids in gold-tinged brown. Willey gazes over this mosaic of different hair colors. All the black-rimmed glasses. Male, female, all unique individuals. He congratulates himself on making the right decision regarding his level of shave, but probably should have re-thought his clothing and his height.

Look at all the beardists, Hicks whispers. Like a casting call for the part of Pedophile in here.

University party for sure, Willey says. He scans the crowd, looking for Dianne.

Mind your political correctness, Hicks says. These people can smell your isms.

The trim of the kitchen's wood cabinets, gummed in a mix of cooking grease, cigarette smoke, and lint, offers orange highlights to the once golden oak. The Tewilliger residence echoes Willey's in both style and content. Mismatched bowls. Small appliances, the newer in chrome, the older, like the coffee urn—a giant urn in brown with an orange v-pattern—appearing rescued from a library that once held self-help meetings in the basement. On the walls, crooked portraits of smiling, short-

cropped men and abundantly-bouffanted women, their clothes if not their hair hinting at Canada's then recent centennial celebration. A couple of guys with skin and haircuts like boys, but both shaped like large, large men. They stand in a corner under ball caps twisted backwards. Jocks given bad instruction on where to party.

To Willey's left, a kitchen table in a laminate of gold-speckled blue holds a cityscape of tall bottles in blue, green or clear, the occasional black wine bottle offering architectural contrast while beer bottles form the 'hood.

Sarah and Rhonda hug out greetings, shake hands here and there while Willey finds a pair of glasses and fills them both with whiskey. He looks for a place to stand, planning his route to wherever that place will be, already imagining the walk through this crowd, a Sasquatch stepping past the edge of the Patterson film. Past all those pretty girls with their minimal make-up and tasteful clothing. Sweaters, blouses. Skirts with nylons. The boys in coloured denim, coloured khakis, or slacks. Expensive blue jeans rolled up at the hem. Ties under sweater vests, and renditions of argyle everywhere. Argyle sweaters. That man has an argyle tie, that man, he has argyle socks. How the fuck did Hicks know to dress up the nines? Hicks already rearranging the fridge's interior, looking for a place to liven his beer.

Is the collar of that jacket made from real fur?

Hicks takes three bottle from his case, stands and turns to the voice.

This is Dwayne Hicks, Sarah says. She introduces both Hicks and Willey to Jennifer Tewilliger, party thrower.

Hicks cautions Jennifer against her knowledge of the game, before offering his hello.

Is that real fur? she says again.

Hicks straightens up, looks her in the eye. Lord, no, Hicks says. I don't understand the type of individual who would wear parts of an animal.

Jennifer narrows her eyes.

All synthetic, Hicks says. 'Cept for the animal beneath. He smiles. Tch-Tch, wink wink. Where's the TV?

Jennifer carries their jackets into a distant bedroom. Beyond the table, an iron railing with a centred opening shows the way into the main living area. Rust coloured carpet, rust coloured sofa and chair. The layer of vintage too thick, too accurate to be a retro-savvy student residence. Someone's parents aren't home tonight. Willey scans the living area. No Dianne.

Groups converse on and around the sofa. A couple share the matching chair, he on the arm, she on the seat, he animated in conversation, his hand jumping up and down, she nodding along, her fingers dancing the screen of her phone.

Rhonda, drink in hand, nods for Willey to follow her through the group, leading him to a place where they can set up and talk. Willey, he takes his eyes of the orange-honey sheet of Rhonda's hair to look for the black sheet of Dianne's hair. Hicks following along behind, Rhonda with hellos and hugs here and there, making introductions for her new friends, Willey nodding, Hicks shaking every hand.

The living room gives way to a dining area, also crowded, and from there one can walk again into the kitchen. They find a spot behind a wingback chair that marks the unofficial divide between living and dining rooms. The chair, a brown and rust

floral print on a beige background, sits occupied. Hicks stares at the wingback, at the TV, at the wingback's occupant. He frowns.

Behind this chair, chaperoned by a sparse areca palm, Rhonda reminds Willey of his promise.

Promise?

Your joint-custody dog story, she says.

Oh, that promise. Willey clears his throat with all the melodrama he can muster. Pauses for effect, and horror. He looks down to see what pair of socks he went with that day. No holes in the socks, hopefully no holes in the story, but black pants and white socks? God dammit man, get a hold of yourself. One foot on top of the other, Willey begins his joint-custody-of-a-dog tale, this being the abridged version:

We know this guy, Joey Chan, Willey says. Good guy, won all this money at a casino, bought a television. A big television because his daughter had moved in, only he couldn't get this television to his house, so he hired us to deliver it.

Willey takes a sip of his whiskey. So far, so good.

Well, Willey says. We pick this thing up at the store and it's a real mother. We have to slide the front seats forward, shove this thing into the back seat of the car. We get it to Chan's place up in Castleridge, and Chan's there waiting for us. He props the door open, and we slide the TV out of Hicks's car, and I guess we didn't close the door to the car. Anyway, I remember lifting one end of that TV up while we walked into Chan's place, and that TV was awkward. I'm trying not to drop it and at the same time I'm using my foot to try to slide this dog out of the way.

Hicks stares at Willey, as intent on the story as Rhonda, and why not? This chapter of Hicks's life is fiction to him as well. Flat screen, Hicks says. Grabs the wind.

Right, Willey says. Long story, et cetera, forty-five minutes later we're pulling into Las Gary's Casino when we realize that there's a dog in the car with us, lying down in the back seat.

Oh my God, Rhonda says, laughing. You. . . here the laughter trails off. But you still have the dog, she says. Did you steal the guy's dog? She asks this in a way that strikes Willey as coming from a person who might not see the hilarity in watching your friend try to rob a house.

No, Willey says. He tells her that no, they didn't steal the dog, but . . .

And from this point the story begins to take on a semblance of truth. The next morning, the two of them, they're still in Dianne's father's girlfriend's Kia, the one with the chewed up interior, the one they paid over two-thousand dollars to fix (details Rhonda doesn't need to know), they're in the car heading back to Castleridge with the dog. The plan is to park at the end of the alley, and Willey, since he lost by picking rock to Hicks's paper, is to take the dog to Chan's back gate, and deposit her in the yard.

Jolene's eyes in a squint of happiness, her tongue out and panting as Willey carries her down the alley. He holds the dog under one arm, reaches through the hole in the fence to unlatch the gate, pushes the gate open. There's Joe Chan looking up, caught mid rake.

Willey, Chan says, this edge of query to his voice.

Uh, Joe, Willey says.

So, Willey says to Rhonda. This guy, Chan? He looks at the dog, then back at me. Then he nods for me to step back out into the alley. Follows out after me and closes the gate.

Here's your dog? Willey says to Chan. I found her at the end of the alley.

That's not my dog, Chan says, and here, Rhonda starts to laugh again.

In the story, Jolene swallows. Willey too, for that matter. What? he says. What? He thinks out the problem for a second, can't really think of anything to add, so he says again, What?

That's not my dog, Chan says.

On the spot, under duress, relying on quick thinking, Willey says, I was talking to your neighbor, he's sure this is your dog.

Not my dog. You take, you take. Heh-heh. Lovely dog.

At this point—at this point in the story, that is—Willey looks at Jolene's tag. She's wearing a bone shaped bauble that says Dog on it, with Chinese script on the other side.

Chan?

Vely rovery.

Joe?

Now, in the alley, Willey's not oblivious to Chan's rapidly degenerating English and suddenly over-accented accent. So he appeals to the man in German, perhaps reminding Chan of how Willey's helped him out, how Willey's taken time out of his day to help him learn another language, and he can at least be polite

enough to take his own fucking dog back. But to no avail. Nicht meine Hound, Chan says. Nicht meine, nicht meine. He backs up and closes the gate.

Walking back down the alley, Jolene's saliva glands working overtime, Willey looks back over his shoulder. Mein Hund, you shifty bastard.

So that, Willey concludes, is how I ended up having a joint custody dog with Mr. Hicks, here. Willey receives Rhonda's laughter in exchange for the story, and he's rewarded with a look from Hicks, a confirmation of his ability to adapt, bend, and outright break the truth.

Dwayne Hicks?

All three turn to see a girl sitting at the end of the dining table, feet up on her seat, long bangs down in front of her eyes. She runs her hand through her hair, tucking her bangs above her ear and behind her shoulder.

Dwayne Hicks, Hicks says. He offers his hand, but the girl only leans forward, hair hanging again to the chair. She begins clicking out a message on her phone, fingernails of such length, she uses the sides of her pinkies to type.

No, really, Hicks says. My pleasure.

By now Willey's glass is empty, as is Rhonda's, and Willey offers to make fresh drinks. Rhonda insists that she'll get them. She heads off and Willey follows the orange-red of her hair meandering through the crowd. There's nothing more romantic than meeting a woman, and lying through your teeth before knowing her last name, Willey says.

Start off lying, Hicks says. She'll come to expect the lying. When you start telling the truth, she'll think she fixed you. There isn't a woman alive who'll drop a

project she's fixed. Hicks takes a long draw of his beer, kills it off, looks down at the chair they're tucked in behind.

Willey thinks a moment of introducing the subject of Dianne into the conversation, but if there's one thing worse than a drunk, arrogant Hicks, it's a drunk, weepy Hicks. He looks off toward the kitchen, waiting for that moment when he first sees her coming back.

Where the hell does he know her from? And what the hell is he supposed to say? To Rhonda, that is. While Rhonda smokes, while she slowly, seductively fans her tail, is Willey supposed to look deep into her eyes and say, I once helped steal this guy's wallet, so we could steal his bank card?

Will he say, Put down that hair-brush, darling. I want to tell you all about how I like to hang around my friend while he sells pot and ecstasy and methamphetamines to high school students downtown. Pleased to meet you too.

Hicks takes a step toward the front of this chair, snaps his finger and points at the guy sitting there. Hicks says, You're . . . ?

Sebastien, the guy says. He holds his hand out, polite. Confused, but polite.

Hicks shifts his assortment of bottles, tucks them between his left arm and body. He shakes the offered hand, says, Nice to meet you, Seb. You know, Seb. Jennifer was looking for a Sebastien a minute ago. Can't imagine there are that many here.

Sebastien frowns, stands and heads toward to the kitchen. Hicks settles into the chair, leans forward to set his bottles of beer and his liqueur onto the long, heavy coffee table. Stained dark enough to disguise the species of wood, the edges of the

table faded like the seams of an old pair of black jeans. Hicks pulls the table closer, fumbles with a pair of remotes, finds CBC and the Hockey Night in Canada replay, the first game about to begin. Toronto and Montreal.

Hicks turns the volume to 0, and Willey notices the music has shifted from GnR to something involving a ukulele. On the television, a replay of Don Cherry wears a suit like an old television test pattern. The Flames-Oilers game doesn't start for another hour.

Another guy, not Sebastien, this other guy wearing red denim pants and a blue Polo shirt—the brand not the style—turns from the television to Hicks. If you know the score of the late game, Hicks says, don't say it.

I don't follow sportsball, Red Pants says.

Sportsball? Hicks says. You don't follow Sportsball?

No, Red Pants says. I don't see the point.

Oh, Hicks says. Will you be hurt if I do?

Red Pants raises his glass to Hicks.

Willey takes one last glance for Dianne, one last look at the jocks making their escape for the door, one last attempt at remembering where the hell he's seen Rhonda. She comes back with their drinks and they stand in their spot in the corner, there by the areca palm. Rhonda tells Willey stories about University parties and nights along 17th Avenue. He tries to connect himself to her stories via people who know people who might have participated in the events she recollects, but it is by and large a fruitless task. Hicks sets his second and third empties on the table. He

gulps from the liqueur. Soon, he's going to have to get up from his chair to get more beer. What then, Willey wonders. Seb's been eyeing him, eying that chair.

Rhonda talks about her first year at University, just coming to an end. She's studying Interior Design, she loves furniture design, and the program, she tells Willey, is intense (super-intense, in fact) but worth it, she guesses. Would Willey like to step outside with her, so she can have a cigarette?

Willey would step outside with Rhonda so she could smoke cornflakes if she asked.

He trees his way through the crowd. Rhonda slides between everyone easy enough, but Willey has to excuse himself here and everywhere, having people step back, having people turn to look him square in the throat, then up.

Out back on the deck, a few other people stand to enjoy their smoke, and Willey has this fear that Rhonda will find some friend she hasn't seen in a while, some interesting guy with university tuition and a suntan, and they'll start talking and Willey will have to stand rooted for an hour.

No such bad luck, Willey has her full attention and she his.

Rhonda is a fan of the Art Nouveau movement, as already established, and when she's not brushing her hair or scaling her tail, or talking about the Jugendstil with smoke lingering around her mouth, she also enjoys collecting furniture designed by 60s Mod plasticists. You know, Joe Columbo, Vico Magistretti, Anna Castelli-Ferrieri.

Willey, he has a book shelf at home he found in the alley behind the Octoplex, while Rhonda has not one, not two, but five original Verner Panton S-Chairs. These

are early Herman Millers in the lacquer over polyurethane foam, she assures him, and not the modern polypropylene versions. Willey's taste in furniture rests somewhere between what the Brick offers, and what was in his place when he and his mother moved in, but he has to admit, he loves that word: plasticists.

He takes a long, long drink of his whiskey. He tells her about the bowling alley. He comes clean about the bowling alley, because he's not picking the bowling alley's pockets. He's making for manager of Las Gary's Lanes, whereas Rhonda hasn't touched a bowling ball since she was eleven. A large portion of Willey's work day involves sweeping, mopping, flushing and wiping. Rhonda? Rhonda studies the elements and principles of design, with hands-on projects that explore surface and spatial manipulation, structural concepts, and theories of behaviour, light, and colour. Rhonda's learning communication skills that involve freehand drawing, manual drafting, rendering—on their way outside, Willey excused himself and detoured to the washroom. He looked up the first year of her program—so while Willey sprays disinfectant into shoes, Rhonda's learning how to use AutoCAD, she's being taught model making, Photoshop, and Illustrator. Rhonda is studying the historical, social, and political influences of art, architecture, and interior design, and last night, some guy at the bowling alley, where Willey works? That guy took a shit in the urinal.

Out on the deck, Rhonda smoking, Willey says to her, You know, I've always been interested in the historical, social, and political influences of art, architecture, and interior design.

Rhonda agrees, these are interesting topics. The way interiors, the way spaces are used to manipulate us. How we link place and space to our lives, how we feel nostalgia, she says, for places we've never seen, for a time we've never lived.

For chairs that just aren't made the way they used to be made. Hey, Willey says. Have you been to the Coquette's Fetish?

No, she has not.

#### 4.4

Back inside—this is Calgary in March, after all—they stand and watch as people form groups and fly apart again, so many nuclei coming together and separating, changing topics, changing elements of conversation. That's Rhonda's line. Willey, he's pushing a tidal image, eddies and flows of people, flotsam and jetsam here and there, Hicks like a rock in the middle of the room's invisible delta. Hicks has managed to reload his beer supply without losing the chair. As for Dianne, Willey keeps half an eye out for her, but every minute that goes by is a minute more likely she's not going to arrive.

The time approaches 12:30, Willey has white socks on, Rhonda says that those two over there are Mike and Rebecca, both in her class, both trying to hide their relationship, though not very well. That guy over there, on the opposite side of the room, he's Quentin, or is it Quinten, Rhonda can never remember, though Quentin, or maybe Quinten, reminds her about his name all the time. Whoever he is, he probably knows where he's seen Rhonda before.

And that girl over there, beside the guy beside Hicks's chair? The one with the hair in her eyes? That's Jennifer's younger sister Aishling, or Ash as she likes to

be called, and Rhonda doesn't know who that guy with Ash is, she's never seen that guy before, that guy with the loose blond hair, that guy leaning over into Hicks's face.

Fuck, Willey whispers. Lance Templeton. Lance and the girl Ash are getting into Hicks's face and by the time Willey gets over there, he only catches the last of Lance's words, a suggestion for Hicks to suck a cock.

Just one? Hicks says.

Willey ask Hicks to fill him in, Hicks and Lance both look up at Willey. Hicks says, Watch out Lance, Willey is here to look out for me.

What's going on Hicks?

Silky ripped me off on a bunch of ecstasy tablets a couple of weeks ago, says—

I gave you more than what you paid for, Lance says. Some of the surrounding conversations momentarily skip.

Hicks licks his lips, glares at Lance. Quantity's not the issue you dumb idiot, he whispers. Quality is your problem.

Lance, foregoing the whisper, says, I make quality and you know it.

You always say quality, Hicks says. No matter if it's dope made with lithium batteries or some *Breaking Bad* pure dope, you always say you got quality. And your ecstasy? I tell people I'm selling ecstasy, and when they get shit laced with meth, people get upset, Lance, and some people I sell to aren't very pleasant when they get upset. As a matter of fact, some of them get downright punchy.

More and more of the surrounding conversations come to an end. The only disguise is the music thumping out of the stereo, but if another ukulele song comes on. . .

I want my shit back, Lance hisses. We will settle this.

Silky, Hicks says. He puts his hands up, palms forward. I don't even fucking care anymore. I'm here with friends, at this fine house. Jenny Tewilliger's house.

My house, Ash says. This is my house you're in.

All I want to do, Hicks says, is watch the replay of the hockey game. Sit tight, I'll get you a beer, help yourself to some of your girlfriend's vegetables. Come two o'clock, when the game is over, we'll head over to my car, and you can have your stuff back.

Lance stares out Hicks a minute. You serious? he says.

I'm always serious. Trouble is, my car's not here right now.

Lance and Ash walk off, stand in the corner of the living room close to the iron rail, Ash turning around to give Hicks a glare. Hicks turns to Willey, says, Look at you Willey, you got here pretty quick watching out for me.

Why'd you not tell me? Willey says. How long have you had that shit in your car? By this time Sarah has re-appeared, her eyes rimmed in red. She and Rhonda, they watch Hicks and Willey, silent, but Rhonda's got this look on her face, the look you get when you're waiting for two cars to collide, and you're excited about it.

Didn't want to bother you with my business, Hicks says, still staring at Lance.

How long have we been driving in that car with drugs in the back?

Forever, Hicks snaps. There's been pot in that car forever.

You know what I mean, Hicks.

Hicks reaches out with his foot, pushes against the back of Sebastien's knee. Sebastien turns around, and Hicks introduces Willey and Sebastien to each other, tells Willey that Sebastien is going to be an interior designer one day. He says to Sebastien, Sebastien, tell Willey what the difference is between interior design and interior decorating.

About 50 bucks an hour, Sebastien says.

Sebastien and Rhonda, they know each other and they nod the little hellos of people who know each other but don't really talk. And Sarah? She keeps asking Hicks about this car full of pot she's just heard of.

Sebastien, Hicks says. Seb. I'm going to the gents. At one o'clock, I'm sitting in this chair, with you in it or not.

Fair warning, Sebastien says, and he takes over Hicks's spot, Hicks heading off to the washroom. Lance's eyes follow the whole way.

Rhonda and Sarah start in on the questions for Willey, but Willey has questions of his own. His life, like any life, is full of mysteries, but Hicks has never been one of them. The Hicks that Willey's used to, he'd tell Willey about a trunk full of ecstasy. Rhonda posits the idea that Lance's friends might be coming to make trouble.

I don't think he has friends, Willey says, and Sarah wants to know why he's so sure. The only reason Willey has, is if Lance had friends, they'd be there already.

They talk back and forth for a time. Small talk. Sarah and Yvonne offering uninspired gossip regarding some of the party-goers. Sarah says again, Lance might

have friends coming, he might have friends waiting. Maybe they should go. Rhonda says, Why go, this party might get interesting.

Willey sees Hicks coming back from the washroom. Hicks, staggering, enters the kitchen from the opposite side, and after a minute he walks—staggers—into the dining room, a bottle of beer in each hand. He hands a bottle each to Lance and Ash—not even his beer—and he stands between them, his arms around both their shoulders. He talks to them a minute, pats them each on the back, shakes Lance’s hand, then he walks toward Willey, his hand going into his pocket. Coming out again with a deck of cards.

Oh, for fuck’s sake. Willey rubs the bridge of his nose. Just what this party needs is a goddamn Dwayne Hicks card trick. Where’s that mermaid at, Hicks shouts.

You like magic, Rhonda? He says. R-R-R-R-Rhonda. Hicks wavers in front of her, in front of Rhonda and Willey, holding out the cards. Rhonda looks at the cards, looks at Hicks. Are you serious? she laughs. Performing magic? You might want to concentrate on performing standing straight.

Hicks hands the cards to Rhonda for examination. She looks through them slowly, apprehensive but thorough. What’s the catch, she says?

No catch, Hicks says. Only magic. He takes the cards and starts to shuffle. He holds his hand up a minute, eases out a belch. Says, Okay.

Okay, Rhonda says.

Hicks places the cards on the dining room table. Pick a card, he says. He makes a point of having Rhonda show the card to as many people as possible, having

her hold it up in the air, having everyone's attention focused on the three of clubs held high in the air. But not Willey. Willey keeps his eyes drilled on Hicks's hands, looking for the exchange of decks, but no exchange is made.

Hicks holds his hands up. I will not touch those cards, he says. He slides his hands into his pockets, starts to give Rhonda instructions, but still hasn't made the swap yet.

Cut the cards, put that pile over there, put that pile over here, take a card out of that pile, put a card in that other pile. The crowd around Hicks and Rhonda gets larger and larger as Rhonda's pile gets smaller and smaller, until only one card remains. Willey, he's all agog over this. Not only did Hicks not swap decks, his hands barely scratched at his sack and what else could they do stuffed in those pockets?

That your card? Hicks says.

Rhonda turns over the eight of hearts. No, she shrugs. It's not.

Wait just a minute, Hicks says. He raises the card to his ear. What's that, card? he says. You wouldn't lie, would you, card?

Hicks moves back and forth, partly from being drunk, partly from looking for someone in the crowd. He gets Lance's attention. Says, You're a scammer and a thief, Silky. Where'd you hide the card?

Fuck you, Hicks, Lance says. Leave me out of your little card games.

In his pocket, I bet, Hicks says. What's in your pocket, Lance?

Lance shakes his head. Nothing.

What do you have in your pocket, Lance?

With most of the crowd now staring, Lance reaches into his pocket.

Now, the three of clubs coming out of Lance's pocket is a stunner to all gathered, not the least of whom is Willey, having seen a dozen variations of this trick. Yet never has Hicks not switched decks half way through. But if the card is not enough to woo even the most jaded of sceptics, or entertain them, the appearance of a pair of women's underwear with that card is the true clincher.

Lance pauses, the underwear in his hand. There's some laughter in the crowd, some ooh's and aah's. These aren't anything you'd call panties, either. These are as practical a pair of underwear as you'll find. All business, no pleasure. Cotton. Lance, more stymied than anyone, holds them for a full three count before letting them drop to the floor.

Ash, she slams her hand into Lance's chest. Those my sister's? she yells. She swipes Lance across the face, and three red stripes of a musical staff appear, with a treble clef of blood quickly forming. Ash runs off to the back of the house, a slamming door coming a few seconds later.

Lance has a bit of a collection, Hicks says. Lance takes two strides and slams his fist into Hicks's face. He gets the one punch in before Willey grabs him. Sebastien and Willey, they lock up Lance's arms and take him to the ground. Sebastien, like Willey, maybe he thought to let Lance get in that one punch before wrapping him up. Other guys swirl around, the general motions of a party whose goers rarely see violence above the animated discussions of what movie is better. Some try to get out of the way, others try to get closer and establish their presence in this historical event. Hicks on the ground, laughing. A result of the alcohol shifting in his head as

much as the punch itself, though a swell already starts to form around his left eye. Willey, Hicks says. Willey always looking out for his buddy.

Despite Willey's knees in his back, Lance keeps thrashing around until Sebastien gets a single finger in behind Lance's ear and, as if Sebastien's pressed a pause button, Lance freezes, says, All right all right all right.

Jennifer erupts into the room, What's going on? she yells, and when she sees Lance she yells again. Aishling! I told you not to bring that asshole here. Then she see the underwear on the floor. Her underwear, and not the cleanest pair. Jennifer looks at her dirty underwear on the floor, who can blame her for kicking Lance in the ribs?

#### 4.5

Lance's shouts of revenge carry all the way through Sarah's car. A number of partiers spill onto the street, shoving Lance down the sidewalk toward his truck. Jennifer and Ash yell at each other on the front stoop.

Fucking interior designers, Hicks says. Why so rowdy?

Sarah pulls away before Lance regains his senses enough to try smashing her car. She accelerates, zigs through Capitol Hill, zags south into Briar Hill, Hicks and Willey in the back, Hicks lolling, Rhonda repeating again and again, Holy fuck, Holy fuck, all the while laughing.

Sarah stops the car on Juniper Road, only now joining in with Rhonda's laugh. What now? Rhonda says. Hicks squints at the dashboard clock. 12:50. The night's still in its delinquency, he says. Let's go to Kevin Parker's, weren't we supposed to go there anyway?

Sarah and Rhonda look at each other.

Damn, Hicks, really? Willey says.

Why not?

What about your eye, Hicks?

We'll take my eye with us.

Where? Sarah asks. Willey sighs, Hicks gives out a direction and Sarah turns the car for 19th Street, headed for Glamorgan and Kevin Parker's.

You sure like looking after me, don't you, Willey? Hicks says. Willey, looking after his buddy.

Right, Hicks.

The side of Hicks's head pressed against the chill of the car's window, he slurs through the story of catching a peek of Lance's thong when he knelt for a stray hacky sack. Turns out the boy has a collection, Hicks says. Some pilfered, some purchased, and he takes to wearing a pair every once and again.

Sarah shakes her head. But you have no ecstasy? she says.

The trunk of my car is loaded with ecstasy, Hicks says.

But it's bad ecstasy.

Actually, everyone who's had it says it's pretty good.

Willey looks at Hicks, tries to stare a burn through him. How long? he asks.

How long what? The high? How the hell would I know? I wouldn't feed that shit to my dog.

How long have you been not selling? Willey says.

I sold today, you were there.

C'mon, Hicks.

About a day longer than I've been broken up, Hicks says. Lance wanted me to carry some of his gear to a place for him. I took all that, and all the ecstasy I bought from him and trunked it in my car. He won't buy the ecstasy back, he won't get his ingredients back.

What I don't understand, Rhonda says, is that card trick.

When I was fourteen, Hicks says, his eyes closed, I was sent to this camp near Edmonton. A camp for marginal youth. Confidence building, hard work making you feel part of a community.

Willey turns his head for this story. Willey's all over this story. Hicks's fourteenth summer, that was supposed to be the Ronaldo Magnifico era. Willey's never heard Hicks's camp-for-marginal-youth story.

This camp, Hicks says, is where he learned how to chop wood and play cards. Where he learned the responsibility of cooking and doing dishes. Learned that a piece of sparkplug no bigger than a pea could smash a car window. Learned the art of distraction. Quick fingers. How to take a punch. Rhonda, Sarah, Hicks says, if I was a little more coherent, I'd be able to get out of this car with the contents of both your purses. I'd pick your pockets like nobody could, and you'd have no idea.

I understand, Rhonda says, that you put that underwear in his pocket, but the three of clubs, I don't get that.

Magic trick, Hicks says.

Trick deck, Willey adds without conviction. Hicks never swapped decks. All of Rhonda's cards should have been threes of clubs.

We're close to Glamorgan now, Sarah says. Willey examines the street-scape, trying to place his location in relation to the core. He knows they've taken one hard right off Crowchild Trail, but he's unfamiliar with this side of the map. Last time he was over here, Hicks and Willey were mocking the knight in front of Castle Keep. Weeks ago.

You ever been up in Aspen Woods, Willey says to Rhonda. Where that knight is? Rhonda smiles. She passes through Aspen Woods every time she visits her parents. Never seen a knight, though.

Glamorgan, Hicks shouts from the back. Eyes closed, forehead on the cool window glass, head rolling with each bump of the car. He looks up, leans to stare forward through the windshield. Turn left here, Hicks says. Sarah follows his instructions. Turn right there, another left.

Right here, Hicks says, his words dragging out, his mouth hanging open. Willey looks up in time to watch as Sarah pulls in behind a blue Camaro. Paul Thompson's blue Camaro. Dianne's new boyfriend's blue Camaro.

Hicks's eyes find their focus. Both girls can probably feel Hicks's glare as much as see it. Sarah, Rhonda, even Willey follows Hicks's look out the windshield to the Camaro.

My car came out of the closet tonight, Hicks says.

Sarah and Rhonda turn to look at him. What?

I love my car, Hicks says. I remember, do you remember Willey, that summer when he'd only start with that one particular screwdriver? That one summer when I spent those two days in Pick a Part, going over those wrecks for fenders and

radiators and exhausts and a new back seat and a new ignition, and had to key that fucking ignition. Hicks turns to Sarah. An ignition key that won't turn will cause you stress and consume a lot of your time, he says.

I'm sure it would, Sarah says. She looks over at Rhonda, Rhonda looks at Hicks.

I spent the next two weeks putting all that shit into my car, Hicks says. You remember that Willey?

I remember, Willey says. The man was insufferable. He wouldn't let anyone help him. Not me, not his father, nobody. And when he put all that shit into the car and the damned thing started first try? After that, he was more insufferable.

And Willey, he so desperately wants to help me. Don't you, big guy?

Hicks licks his lips and looks out the windshield. That's Dianne's new boyfriend's car. Hicks squints at the Camaro, leers at the Camaro. See if that guy can keep that car on the road based on pure will, he says. He says, See if that guy can convince an ignition cylinder to take a new key. See what that guy would do if his car says to him, I'm gay.

Let's get into the party, Sarah says. Maybe they have some coffee, maybe they have something you can put on your eye. In there, we can further discuss your car's sexual orientation.

Willey's not sure if that's a good idea, and looking at that Camaro, he tries to convince Hicks that they should just leave, that Hicks can watch the game at Willey's place. Hicks says he's had only one plan for the whole night. To watch that game. Two plans, he corrects. Get drunk, and watch that game.

Well, you're drunk, Sarah says.

I have been avoiding all references to this game, via television, radio, updates on my phone, and inadvertent comments by Willey—

I don't know the score, Willey says.

—Inadvertent comments by Willey, and I have attempted to make sure that I am near a television when that game starts. There's a television in there, Hicks says. Right there. I'll be on my best behaviour.

That's what worries me, Willey says.

#### 4.6

From the door, Willey peers through the mob. There must be thirty people in the living room alone. A little more colour to this mosaic of face and hair, a little more texture and tattoo than at the Tewilliger party. Willey finds Dianne off in the distance, her hair a bright sheet of black silk half way down her back. Willey, he never thought he'd never want to see Dianne's hair.

Paul sits next to her, a drink in his hand, a smile on his face, his eyes a wrinkled squint as he nods along to one of Dianne's friends. Paul, a regular at the diner where Dianne works, bits of grey about his temples. Four or five other girls fill out the group, all probably interested in the personality that dragged and or lured Dianne out of a six year relationship with Hicks. Paul the Camaro driver, yawning. One of the girls nods towards the door and Dianne turns around, sees Hicks and turns around again. Hicks acts as if he doesn't notice her.

Kevin Parker spots the new group at the door, comes over with fist-bump hellos, one armed back-pat hugs, and introductions. He laughs at Hicks. I'm not sure

who to guess the punch thrower would be, Parker says. Seeing as how Dianne's been here all night.

Don't say the score of the game, Hicks says. I want to watch the late replay.

Game is PVRed, Kevin says to Hicks. If you want to watch the whole thing.

Sarah disappears into the mob. She knows a weed party when she smells one.

Willey introduces Rhonda to Kevin, who's a bit too Lando Calrissian for Willey's tastes. Kevin says hello to Rhonda, and winks at Willey, and Willey makes a mental note to remind Billy Dee Williams to ease off the hand-kissing when he's meeting girls for the first time. Rhonda and Willey, with Kevin, they see Hicks into the spare bedroom, get him tucked in front of the television. Parker brings him a beer and a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel.

Why'd you move out here, anyway? Hicks says. This side of the city?

Parker opens Hicks's beer, hands him the peas. My parents have been saving, have been looking at this area for years, Parker says. He says, They paid almost half a million for this place.

Willey runs both hands through his hair. Half a million?

I get the basement suite rent free, Parker says.

Rent free?

As long as I go to school.

Jesus, Hicks says. School?

Hey, man, Parker says. I worked four years out of high school. Have to start thinking on a career.

Fuck, Hicks says. Get drunk one night and the world falls on its ass. His phone buzzes, and he mechanically thumbs his finger across the screen. He slumps back, raises his eyes to the ceiling. Willey can see the screen. A text from Lance. 4-1 Edmonton.

Hicks decides that he will watch this game regardless, says he'll try to figure out where exactly the game went wrong. Other than when the car didn't start, he says. He says he's just going to sit back and relax and enjoy this fine beer that his good friend brought him.

Back in the crowd, Rhonda and Willey look for a place to set up shop. Willey walks through the crowd, comfortable in the surrounding attire. Blue jeans and black band t-shirts. People with black pants and white socks, the idiots. The music drowns under waves of crowd noise.

They sneak into a corner, Rhonda asking Willey if he thinks Hicks will be fine.

He's not much of a drinker, Willey says. If Willey were a clumsy machinist, he could still count on one hand how many times he's witnessed Hicks this drunk. I expect him to stay in there, Willey says, and he tells Rhonda that Hicks just broke up with a girl, that girl over there, that girl staring at us right now, in fact. If he was sober, Willey says, then I'd worry. He pinkies an eyelash from Rhonda's cheek, realizes what he's done, and for the umpteenth time that night, his face reddens.

Can he really pick pockets? Rhonda asks.

Hicks? Willey says. Pick pockets? He thinks for a second (he edits, is what he does) and he says to Rhonda, This one time I saw a man had left his wallet on a

counter, and rather than give it straight back, Hicks thought it fun to put a note inside and reverse pick-pocket the man. Willey tells the story of following this guy to the men's room, and Rhonda laughs, and she says, You did not do that, and, No, you guys did not do that. Willey tells the story, he says, So I looked up over the cubicle wall, flirted to get his distraction. Hicks, lying on the floor, reaches out and slides the wallet into the man's pocket.

Rhonda wipes a tear from her eye. Hicks didn't really do that, did he?

Some version of that.

Rhonda looks at Willey, a smile on her face, and that's when it hits. The image of Rhonda's face in Willey's memory, her looking up, smiling, Willey being upset. The rocky shore, the waves, the cliffs and the hairbrush, all the details you'd want to drop into your mermaid aquarium, all that rinses away and is replaced by the real memory. Rhonda in her hair net, Rhonda in her tan shirt and brown slacks. The Soup Depot.

Ha! Willey says. You work at the Soup Depot downtown. That's where I know you from.

Worked, she said. Not there anymore.

They fired you for putting chili on the high counter, didn't they?

Rhonda stares at Willey, her tongue held between her teeth, her eyes large and wet. Gorgeous, he thinks. He'd love to match that gorgeous look right back at her, a squinty-eyed, cool, yeah, you're the one I'm focused on look, but internally, he's on full damage control. What has he said, what has he done in front of the Soup Depot counter, in front of Rhonda?

Rhonda, she's giving Willey a sultry, mouth partially open, come-hither look and Willey's wondering, what slack-jawed moments did he have while standing in line at Soup Depot. Did he criticize her for slow work? To her face, that is. Did he make a face, frown at all, anything that could be constructed as an insult? They fired you, Willey says, laughing. Didn't they? For putting people's orders on the high counter.

Willey, she says, had I known you were so passionate about the high counter, I would have always put your order there. And no, I wasn't fired.

Rhonda's parents know Al and Ramona, the Soup Depot owners—Nanay at Pa—and an employee wanted to go back to the Philippines for a month. My father thought it would be in my best interest to work a domestic job over the summer, Rhonda says.

Willey thinks, Was Rhonda working that day he dropped that whole tray of food?

Rhonda bites her lower lip, holds Willey's stare for a second. She says, I'll be right back, and she touches Willey's arm as she turns away. She turns away from Willey, she pounds his heart, feeds his blood as she turns, and he watches her walk away, gorgeous. Gorgeous and smart.

Dianne appears before Willey drains off the length of his sigh. What is he doing here? Dianne hisses.

What?

Dwayne. Where is he?

He's in the bedroom at the end of the hall.

Why'd you bring him here?

Here? Why are you here? You were supposed to be at the Tewilliger party.

Why would I go to a university party?

Willey scratches at the back of his head. That was my thought, he says.

What happened to his eye? Dianne asks.

He got into a bit with Lance Templeton.

Dianne frowns. He still has Lance's drugs?

Looks like it.

Willey, those are horrible drugs he has. Chemical drugs, not just marijuana.

You have to talk some sense into him.

Willey holds out his hands and shrugs. That won't happen tonight.

Dianne starts telling Willey why she can't be with Hicks. She starts telling Willey why she can't ride around with him, what with all that material in the back of his car. He gets pulled over and searched, Dianne says. She doesn't want to be there when that happens. Dianne's lip trembles and she asks why can't Dwayne just get a job like a normal human being, and why can't Dwayne do this and do that and Rhonda's standing behind waiting to get introduced.

Dianne turns to see Rhonda, Rhonda half invested in a smile.

Oh, shit. Sorry, Dianne says. The two make quick introductions and Dianne excuses herself, but not before giving Willey a smile and a secret thumbs-up, not at all secret.

Rhonda takes Willey's hand, leads him into the kitchen. Is there any place where we can be alone, she says. They step through a doorway which, depending

upon your sense of adventure, can lead you to the back door and out, or down the stairs and into the basement. Rhonda, holding Willey's hand, turns right and leads him down down down the stairs.

Parker's house has a large den at the bottom of the stairs, recently occupied, judging by the empty bottles and chip bags, but now it's empty. This television provides the only light, but offers no sound. Rhonda sits on the couch and Willey sits next to her, trying to calculate the balance between too close and polite close. Willey edges toward polite, Rhonda slides closer, edging toward down-right intimate.

Willey gives the room a quick survey. All the debris, the beer bottles, the empty chip bags, all this debris could have been left here five minutes ago, or two hours. Someone might be on their way back. Rhonda slides closer still, her thigh rubbing against Willey. Her eyes, the colour of a deer, narrow as she leans in closer again and Willey kisses her. Willey kisses her once, then again, and the third time he touches her lip with his tongue. They kiss again and this time Rhonda's tongue slides into Willey's mouth, and he pulls her in tight. She twists her body to straddle him, he can feel the heat from her, and he flexes against her. Rhonda holds Willey's face in her hands, she turns his head slightly, and kisses him deep, a slight movement of her hips pushing against him. Her hair falls along Willey's cheek, down his neck to mingle with his hair. He slides his hands up Rhonda's sides, outside her shirt, from her waist all the way up and back to her shoulder-blades and back down again. Outside her shirt again and the third time, Willey slips his hands under Rhonda's shirt. She presses firm and hot against him. His hands find her breasts, his fingers slide up under her bra, her nipples small, hard under his palms. She kisses him on

the mouth again again again and moves her face into the nest of hair where Willey can feel her breath hot and damp on his neck.

I'm sorry, she whispers. I thought I could. Thought I wanted to, but I won't.

Willey slides his hands along her sides again, along the outside of her thighs, then up her back above her shirt and again he pull her toward him. He says nothing, he relaxes his hands so Rhonda can back away if she wants to. She kisses him on the neck.

I was hoping we wouldn't, Willey says. Not yet, anyway.

Willey's two inner Willeys, they're at each other's throats. He inhales deeply, breathes in and tries to separate the scent of shampoo from the scent of Rhonda from the scent of cigarette smoke and his closed eyes flood with reds and oranges. The red and orange smell of woman and the apple smell of a shampoo he'd never use but might want to swim in. The smell from a cigarette he would light and smoke a thousand times over. On the television, a dancer, with the sound off, looks like she's engaged in a seizure. Sarah shouts for Rhonda from above, while on television, a dancer looks as if she needs medical attention. Time for Rhonda to go.

Willey's had bouts of romance before, sure. Half hour here, evening there. Usually larger girls, tagging up with him near the end of a party. Girls looking to get laid, seeing an easy score. Willey fell all the way for some of those girls. What are you thinking, Rhonda? Who the hell are you, and what are you doing?

Rhonda leans over and gives Willey a kiss on the cheek. Then on the mouth. Text me, she says, and when Sarah yells again, she's off and up the stairs, her socks flashing on each step.

Rhonda, Willey thinks. There she goes. He says her name again. Rhonda. Rhonda likes him because he was telling stories. Lies, his inner Willey says. Maybe tomorrow, Rhonda comes to her senses. Rhonda likes him despite anything dopey he may have done while waiting in front of Soup Depot. Rhonda the university student. She appreciates Art Nouveau, and she has not one not two but five chairs designed by. . . Willey's forgotten the man's name. You have some serious reading to do, Willey says to himself. Rhonda collects furniture and accessories designed by 60s plasticists, you know nothing about 60s plasticists, other than one of them is named Vico. Rhonda is your ride home, his inner Willey says. You big dummy.

Willey stares at the TV. At a commercial for dog treats, promoting dental hygiene of such quality people should eat them; a commercial for a car, the camera always held at the level of the door handle; and an interview with what might be the singer of the next video, his gold chains, his sunglasses, his head bobbing in rhythm to the interviewer's silent questions, that microphone too, bobbing. With no sound people look ridiculous no matter what they're trying to sell you.

Willey allows enough time for Rhonda to leave. Not that he doesn't want to see her. Her exit, it had a certain quality to it. Magic? Not quite. Romance? Better than that. Not awkward, Willey thinks to himself. When she left this romance-nest of empty bottles and chip bags, her parting was not awkward.

When Willey eventually hits the top of the stairs, Dianne finds him, looks like she's been waiting for him. She comes over, wide-eyed and chewing a fingernail, whiskey thick on her breath. I want to talk to you, Dianne says. Willey's never seen her this kind of drunk before.

Dwayne giving you a hard time? Willey says.

He was nothing but polite, she says. Polite to me and Paul.

You saw him? Willey looks around the room, terrified. Tonight wouldn't be the first night Hicks was all polite and hand-shakey, before grabbing the evening's steering wheel and cranking it a 180. He talked to you? Willey says.

Willey, Dianne says. Me and Paul. I just wanted to say to you Willey, I know that there was a certain . . . overlap between Dwayne and Paul, and I don't want you to think anything bad of me. I want you to know that I've never done anything with Paul, not even yet.

I would never think anything bad of you, Dianne, Willey says, looking straight at her mouth.

Paul is polite. Polite and persistent. Dianne laughs. A short, quiet air-out-of-your-nose laugh. But who's anyone to decide for me, who I see and don't see, who my friends are, right Willey?

That's right, Dianne.

I met Dwayne when I was fifteen, Willey. Fifteen. I've never known any other boy. I just. . .

No, it's cool, Willey says.

You've been a good friend, Dianne says, holding her arms out.

Willey hugs her close and, yes, he thinks of Rhonda, but still, he can't help but to breathe in a bit of Dianne's hair. He closes his eyes and breathes in again. Dianne says she's heading out soon, that she and Paul are going to go play some pool and maybe Willey would like to come with them?

**4.7**

Willey knocks on the bedroom door. No answer. A light flicks from under the door, Willey pushes the door open. The TV on, but no volume, no Hicks.

At the door, Willey notices that Hicks's boots are gone. Jacket, too. He calls Hicks's phone and waits on an answer.

A group of people out on the deck, smoking, Willey says to them, Has anyone seen a guy go out here? A guy wearing a black leather jacket with a fur collar?

Yeah, a guy says. Willey peers as best he can up and down the alley.

Snakeskin cowboy boots?

You weren't sold on fur collar?

Which way? Willey says.

The guy nods to the right and so Willey heads in that direction.

Willey's boots crunch the gravel as he walks to the end of the alley. He looks up and down the street, and looks down the alley across the street. Whether Hicks is heading to his new place in Pineridge or back to Marlborough and the car, he'd likely make for downtown first, but which way to downtown? Still no answer to any of Willey's texts. He crosses the pavement, follows the alley.

Hicks has always held the philosophy that you can judge a neighbourhood by the couch content of its alleys. Hicks would likely take the alley. He once told Willey, you can judge a neighbourhood by how indiscriminately the satellite dishes have been screwed into the walls. Half way down, a sensor light on a garage comes on and Willey jerks. In the new light he can see a two foot wide space between the garage and the fence, neatly filled with old sheets of plywood and a single mattress. About

fifteen feet away, something protrudes from the side of the same fence. A boot? A boot stuck in the fence.

Hicks's boot, the right one, stuck in the fence, the chains, the conquistador heads shining in the motion-sensor light. Willey starts to work at the boot, twisting and pulling. The boot holds tight, the bastard, and a dog starts barking. As a back porch light comes on, a man yells to the fucking kids to get away from the God damn fence. Willey rips at the piece of wood under the sole of the boot, and the man, the owner of an old mattress and a damaged fence, a man with a head like a paint can, shouts against the desecration of his property. Right when the dog arrives—dog has a head like a tennis ball—the boot comes free, the conquistador heads shinging their thanks.

At the pavement, Willey looks up and down the street, trying to place himself on his internal city map. He walks left, to the end of the block. Gordon and Glacier drives. Well, that's no help at all, so he keeps walking, noticing that the house numbers get smaller. He's likely heading toward downtown, walking north or east. At 46th Avenue, Willey's inner compass aligns, and he turns right, finds his way to 37th Street. Would Hicks carry on pure north, or would he angle his way over to Crowchild Trail? Willey crosses 37th and jogs to the next set of lights. Sarcee Road. He's not sure of the distance to Crowchild.

Waiting for the cross light to change—2:30 in the morning and he's waiting for the damn light to change—Willey hears a rumble coming up behind. Paul's Camaro. Paul and Dianne. They drive past, turning left from Richardson onto Sarcee. They drive past but then the brake lights burn, and Willey jogs to the car.

Willey, Dianne yells, leaning out the window. What are you doing?

Willey holds up the boot as answer. What did he do? Dianne says.

He's drunk, Willey says. Not sure which way he went.

He's walking?

Limping, I bet.

Paul agrees to a brief search and so the Camaro heads north on Sarcee Road.

Willey offers a number of thank-yous and you-don't-have-tos. Paul and Dianne both assure him there's no problem. He calls again, no answer. Texts, no answer. Dianne adds a call of her own. They turn left onto Richmond Road. Surely he couldn't have gone much further than this, Paul says. If he didn't come up this way, maybe he went up 37th. Or maybe he kept walking east.

Paul takes Richmond back west as far as 37th Street, turns south and ends up back near the party. Willey can see Paul looking at him in the rear-view. Willey pretty much fills the entire back seat of the car, and neither he, Paul nor Dianne are sure what else they can do.

What do you think, Willey? Dianne says. You want to come play pool with us?

#### **4.8**

Now, when you work any job until 10:00, there are certain limitations on how to burn off your post-work energy, but a pool-hall is always an option. In fact, Hicks and Dianne would often pick Willey up after his shift and the three of them would head to Pocket Mike's up in Vista Heights to play a little 8-ball or snooker.

Paul heads north on 37th as far as Bow Trail, and Willey can't help but scan the road for his friend. Only when Paul turns downtown does he lean back in the seat.

Check out my cue, Paul says. He reaches for a case leaning on Dianne's seat near her leg, passes it back to Willey.

Dianne says to Paul, As a rookie, you shouldn't use that stick. It's not a rookie stick. I think I should use it.

Paul laughs, says, Dianne thinks people might get the wrong idea if I start playing with this cue, but can't play well. As Paul speaks, Willey can't shake this feeling that there's something missing from the conversation, some detail unspoken, then it hits. What's missing is Hicks saying, Dianne, you can handle my stick any time.

Paul navigates the obstacle course that gets you from Bow onto Memorial via 10th Avenue and Crowchild Trail. You play pool 4 or 5 nights a week for 4 years, you learn a trick or two along the way. The three of them, Hicks, Dianne, Willey, they've all managed a certain talent. Nothing tour worthy, of course, but none of the Pocket Mike regulars would ever play any of the three for money.

The car prowls along Memorial, Dianne and Paul talking, not in a whisper, but Willey has to strain to hear them. Paul says he's worried that Hicks might try to get to her house if he's that drunk that he'd walk around with only one boot on. Maybe it's best if she spends the night at his place. But Willey, he knows Dianne's weekends when she wants to go out, and if Paul thinks he's seeing a bed before the sun, he hasn't been seeing Dianne for that long. Willey stares out the side window,

the streetlights of Memorial, the bridges. The river alongside, dreaming the swell of future floods.

Paul opts to take Barlow to 32nd Avenue instead of the Deerfoot, and the only reason Willey can give to Paul's choice, is that he doesn't want to subject his car to higher speeds and rocks that might chip the paint.

Often one or another of the three would run the table. They'd play and Dianne or Hicks usually would win a game without the opponent getting so much as a sniff at the felt. As a result, they started to put certain restrictions on the game. Not only would you have to call your shot, but your shot had to contain either a kiss, a bank or some form of combination. Made the games a bit more durable.

Paul, Willey says. Is there a colour to this car? A name, I mean.

Mulsanne, Paul says. Mulsanne blue.

Now I know what colour to call your eyes, Dianne, Willey says.

You're sweet, Willey. You been drinking?

I've had a bit, Willey says. Paul looks at him through the rear-view.

They pull into the Pocket Mike's parking lot, and make their way inside, Dianne's hands shoved firm into her pockets. The pool-hall itself occupies a space large enough to be mistaken for an aircraft hangar. Walls for the storage rooms and offices stop short of the ceiling. Incandescent lighting overcasts the hall, while fluorescents suspend a few feet above each table, giving the clarity needed to line shots, and bleach enough to wash the colour out of any skin. There are prettier places to play, but with dozens of tables—pool up front, snooker in the back—rare is the night when any trio has to wait.

They set up to play, Willey versus Dianne, with Paul applying some sort of mathematical arrangement to the balls. Just make sure the black one's in the middle, Dianne says, and Paul tells her, No, they have to be set up properly to ensure the spread is nice and even.

There's Hicks's voice again, something about a nice even spread.

Your research is showing, Dianne says.

Dianne breaks with a hard clack, and the balls fly apart (like so many nuclei, Willey thinks) and the five ball drops. Dianne walks around to line up the three, says, Bank shot into this pocket, and she taps the corner pocket on her right with her cue, which happens to be Paul's cue. Back in the car, Paul told Willey the cue is a McDermott GS something-or-other with Michigan maple forearm and sleeve, stained in Pacific Blue European organic. Not quite mulanne but close enough. Dianne takes her shot, the ball following her orders precisely.

Now the four. Cue ball to kiss the six, four in the corner, and Dianne again taps the designated pocket with her cue. Paul runs his hand through his hair and chuckles to himself.

The four isn't as trustworthy as the three, and it hits the cushion an inch off the pocket. Dianne leans over to the ball. Jerk-off, she says.

Willey taps the corner pocket and calls out a cue ball bank with the twelve ball dropping. In order to complete this maneuver he must swerve the cue ball around the eight, and so he cues the ball left of center, and low. The cue ball swerves as Willey and nature both intend, but the ball strikes the twelve too solidly and ends up jawed on the pocket. Dianne's turn again.

And so they continue, the winner playing whoever stood out the previous game, Paul allowed to make straight, uncalled shots, Dianne letting him use his own cue as long as she's not playing.

At one point Dianne grabs Paul's cue as he's about to shoot. For the love of God, stop, she says. She takes Paul's hand and has him adjust his grip on the cue. Thumb and forefinger only, she says. Like a swivel, see that? Her hand on Paul's wrist, she swings his arm back and forth. Keep your forearm straight, let it hang.

What about my other fingers, Paul says. What do I do with my other fingers?

Put them wherever you want, Dianne says. As long as they don't put pressure on the cue.

Put your fingers wherever you want, Willey thinks.

Game after game and one pitcher of beer, then another. Paul taking sips, Willey and Dianne gulping. In his head, Willey tries to sort Paul out. What kind of man is this guy? How old he is? At the least, mid-thirties. Maybe older. That bit of grey in his hair, those lines around his eyes. Forty? Forty-five?

Paul and Dianne play and for some reason Willey starts taking the balls out of the pocket as they are sunk, dropping them into Hicks's boot. At the start of the next game, he dumps them out. During one of Dianne's typical four ball runs, the boot in hand, he turns to Paul, says, So, what do you do? Where do you work?

I'm a hydro-geologist, Paul says.

Oh, great, Willey thinks.

Most of the time I assist farmers in locating likely places to drill for fresh water. Lately, Paul says, I've been working with a team from the Tyrell museum, trying to find a way to de-water one of their dig sites. What do you do?

I work in a bowling alley. Occasionally I have to de-water a washroom.

Paul laughs. Are you happy working there?

Yes, I am, Willey says.

Then you have one up on me. Your turn, Willey.

The beer mixed with the self-imposed encumbrances makes for a laughing stock of billiards. A skillset not unnoticed by some of the surrounding players. A man walks up to Willey and says, How about we play for a bit of cash? Say, five bucks a game? The man is short, but solid. Cut. A stocky guy, tattooed around his neck. His friend, a thin man with wavy black hair, stands behind him, a pool cue held in his hands like a hockey stick. Dianne steps in front of Willey, she says, How about 20 a game? Willey can see that her make-up, her mascara, has left a trail of dots under her eyes. Her eyes, mulsanne blue, and heavy looking. Normally, Dianne's picky about her appearance. Rhonda, she didn't wear any make-up at all.

The man laughs and says, Sure, Honey. Whatever you like.

I'd like if you break, Dianne says.

Willey must admit that he too, is feeling the sway from the beer, but is nowhere near twenty-a-game drunk. Jesus, Dianne.

The man breaks and although the balls spread well, nothing falls. Dianne steps up. Six in the corner, she says, and the ball drops solidly. The cue ball draws

back and lines up with the four for an easy side pocket shot. After that, the three ball, the one. The two ball. The five.

That leaves the seven, but as it sits just shy of table center, with the cue ball back and to the right, the force needed to propel the ball into the side pocket will send the cue ball into the far corner. Dianne recognizes this and decides to try to bank the seven into the opposite corner, but misses.

The thin man with the wavy hair shoots for the twelve and also misses.

Willey's effortless stroke, the cue ball smooth and controlled, pockets the seven into the corner, before bouncing off the end cushion to rest six inches from the eight. An easy tap in, and game. 20 dollars, Dianne says. Si vous plait.

The man stands a moment, steps in front of Willey, says, I don't fucking think so.

This man, there's no way he going to pay, he says, and his partner edges over to where Paul has just stood up. You fucking hustled us, the man says to Willey. He shoves Willey in the chest. You a fucking dummy, ain't you? You a fucking dumb hustler.

Willey takes a step back, which takes a bit of concentration. Maybe he is twenty-a-game drunk. How can we hustle you? Willey says. You asked us to play?

Yeah, well you were playing like shit until there was money involved. That sounds like a hustle to me.

I thought as much, Dianne says. You can tell a man by looking at him what kind of man he is. Just pay up, little man, and get away from my table.

Fuck you, the man says.

Or, we can double-or-nothing. Up to you.

Paul's into the mix now telling the man to leave, to take his friend and leave and don't worry about the money. That's bullshit, Dianne says. He owes us 20 dollars. He was fine with that bet, thinking he was going to take advantage of some drunks.

I came here to play pool with you, Paul says. That's it, just you. You and Willey. Paul looks at the man and says, Just go. Just go, and don't worry about any money.

The man stands silent a moment. His friend urges him away. Not worth it, he says. The tattooed man shakes his head and turns toward his friend. The two start to walk off.

Little man, Dianne says.

Come on, Dianne, Paul says. He puts his hand at her back and guides her over to their table.

Bullshit, Dianne says. She raises her voice, this is fucking bullshit.

They continue to play, the silence punctured only by the sharp clack of Dianne's shots. They order another pitcher. Why not, what could go wrong? Willey keeps one eye on the tattooed man, now playing two tables over. Dianne sinks another ball, Willey drops it into the boot. The man sets his cue down and strides in Willey's direction. Willey takes a breath, shit, damn, but the man veers off for the washroom. Still, Willey watches him walk the full distance. Another ball drops, this one running the length of the table, banking off the far cushion and running back again, still with enough energy to thunk the backside of the pocket.

How old are you, Paul? Willey says. He drops Dianne's latest shot into the boot.

Paul laughs. Willey, I'm closer to 40 than 50.

You handled that guy well, that's all I'm saying. Almost 3:30 in the morning, Willey rubs at his eyes, blinks. Dianne misses her latest shot and Willey's up. He sets Hicks's boot on the side-table, next to their beer glasses. He lines up his shot, a relatively easy corner pocket shot but he still hasn't quite recovered from the fiasco of the tattooed man, which, as it turns out, isn't quite over. Willey watches as the server lands the new pitcher, and no sooner does it touch the table, when it is picked up again and poured into Hicks's boot.

Dianne turns, her decision to do so based purely on Willey's sudden look of shock.

Who drags a fucking boot around with them, the man says. Dianne still and silent. Paul now standing. Willey frozen.

Dianne picks up the boot and the man takes a step back, his body language that of a man ready to spring, but which way? The opposite way the boot will fly, of course, but which way will that be? Dianne lifts the boot, the man shifts his weight, but Dianne lifts the boot to her mouth and takes a large drink. She sets the boot down, turns her back to the tattooed man and starts to chalk her cue.

You can tell a lot about a woman by how she looks, the tattooed man says. I pegged you for a swallower.

Willey takes three strides beginning at the man's last syllable, already launching his first and only punch. Willey in a supernatural state of awareness,

knows this neck-tattooed fucker is going to duck down and to Willey's right. With a hard right launched almost straight down he hits the man square in the back of the head, driving his face into the laminate of the Pocket Mike's floor. A table crashes, beer flies and a boot cartwheels through this cacophony, a rainbow of billiard balls trailing behind.

The thin man, a man with a face perennially in the background, a face you see on thousands of people you wouldn't remember, slides into Willey's view as Willey raises his foot above a man tattooed and unable to stand.

No, the thin man shouts, this unmemorable man. No. He's done. You've done him.

Foot still up, Willey's lost in consideration, a subconscious, primal thought; this one act to punctuate an entire night, week, month, lifetime. Punctuate, enter, begin a new sentence.

That stomp does not land. Paul brings Willey back to Earth and pulls him closer to the table. Dianne, then, is afforded the only other blow of the fight, she leans over and delivers a hard punch to the side of tattooed man's head.

By then the good knights of the evening, employed by Pocket Mike's, or not, help guide Dianne out the front door, Willey and Paul following, and the tattooed man, now on his feet, with his friend out through the back. Dianne's mockeries provide the soundtrack to the exit scene.

Usually such victories are heralded again and again, recalled and retold, every participant allowed their own spin, while outside the night takes on a new duration. Not this night. With interior silence, the Camaro rumbles south on Barlow.

Willey's head filled with thoughts of that tattooed man's friend. The black wave of his hair, the black O of his mouth. No, that man shouting. Willey's head so recently full of Rhonda, and now this guy? Willey feels as if he's desecrated Rhonda's memory somehow, the black O of the man's mouth, the man drowning in the waves behind mermaid Rhonda. Dianne broods out the window.

So, Paul says, and really, is there anything else to say after that? No one answers.

So, Paul says again. Do events like this happen often to you two?

Twice tonight for me, Willey says. Not even close to a record.

Dianne lifts her hand off the arm rest, sighs and thumps her arm down on her thigh. Hate when I act like that, Dianne says. Like a stupid man. I shouldn't have punched him. She turns to Paul, says, I guess we could always try bowling. Willey, you able to cut us a deal on bowling some time?

Sure, Willey says.

I can only imagine you two with bowling balls, Paul says and he tries a chuckle, the last noise before the car pulls into the parking lot of the Octoplex in Dover.

Let me know about Dwayne, Dianne says, as Paul smiles and waves.

Inside his apartment, Willey eases his boots off, lies down on his Viggo couch (As-is section, Ikea, 250 dollars and even that hurt) and stands Hicks's boot on his chest. The stain on the couch is liveable, the one that resulted in Ikea orphaning it off like that. Willey can't wait for Rhonda to see it. Rhonda, Willey can only imagine her couch. Sofa. Maybe she calls it a chesterfield. The chains on Hicks's boot, the

conquistador faces, stare toward the parking lot light. Willey pulls out his phone, still nothing from Hicks. He thinks of trying him with yet another call or text. Maybe the seventh will be the charm. He types a simple Hi to Rhonda instead.

4:05, early by typical Friday night standards. Willey stares at the grey of the ceiling, memories of Rhonda's eyes fighting with the black O of the man's mouth. The tattooed man's friend. What colour were Rhonda's eyes, again? Deer. Dianne's are mulsanne. The ceiling remains grey, the man's mouth remains black, Willey replays the evening again and again, Hicks's boot like an antennae to the memories.

Outside a car comes into the lot, and Willey opens his eyes at the impossibility of that gravelly purr. The ceiling different, paler. Willey's phone now reads 6:30. He looks out the living room window and recognizes immediately the staccato of the 88's right headlight. Hicks. Hicks in his car, only. . . Willey digs through his pockets and pulls out Hicks's keys.

When Willey gets to the entrance of the building, Hicks is already sitting on the step by the door. Where were you tonight? Willey says, dropping the boot next to Hicks's leg.

Went for a walk, Hicks says. His right foot has about eight extra inches of soaked and blackened sock. Ended up at the reservoir. Willey nods, trying to place the reservoir on his inner map, trying to display it in relation to his current coordinates.

Coyotes howling, Willey, Hicks says. Some in front of me, some behind. What a sound that is in the middle of the night. This one coyote, he was trotting down the path about twenty feet in front of me. Guess he thought that was easier than trotting

through the woods. Only he had to look over his shoulder every once in a while.

Trust issues.

Must be the fur collar, Willey says. How's your foot?

Wet.

You walked around the reservoir, Willey says.

Around the reservoir, past a hospital, and along the river to Stanley Park.

Walked past Las Gary's. Here I am. Only took—Hicks checks his phone—five and a half hours.

You could probably beat that time with the appropriate footwear.

Do you know, when you're walking in a black leather jacket with a fur collar, and one boot, people give you space. Hicks slides his boot over, pulls his sock up, eases his foot into the boot. He pulls it out again, looks at Willey.

Your boot had a bit of a night, Willey says.

Hicks turns the boot over and shakes it, then holds the opening toward the streetlight, trying to peer in. With an exhausted merger of ideas, Hicks raises the boot to the light, but then turns it over to get a look inside. The 6 ball rolls out and hits him in the mouth.

Hicks, silent, watches the ball clack three times on the concrete, roll towards the edge of the sidewalk, drop off the curb and come to rest against a yellow parking block, also chipped.

Hicks pulls his lips back for Willey. Yep. A quarter of his upper right central incisor gone. Shit. He passes the boot to Willey. Says, I don't want this anymore.

You don't want your boot anymore?

Not anymore.

Won't your other boot get upset?

I know you look out for me, Willey, Hicks says. I know you love to look out for me, and in some, freak fucking way that is beyond me, I know that you telling Dianne about my selling meth will be for the best. If not for me, then her, although I wonder at your timing.

Willey swallows. Tries to think of something to say.

Especially after I lock all that shit in my trunk, Hicks says. I fucking mean it, man. I fucking stopped. I haven't been able to look at myself for a while now, and since everything I do seems to be tied up in you, I definitely cannot look at you now.

She's not an idiot, Willey says.

I know she's not an idiot, Hicks says. He shakes his head. She knew. She knew what I was doing. It was right there, sitting in the dark, and you went and shined a light on it. You forced her to react.

Why'd you come over here? Willey says.

I need my keys.

Willey tosses the keys into Hicks's open hand. You sure you need your keys? he says. Your car seems nice enough to you without them.

Turns out he starts without his key, Hicks says. Making my life that much easier. However, my new apartment isn't as sympathetic. Hicks gets up and half walks, half flaps over to his car. Keep the boot, he says. I'll see you around.

Willey's phone buzzes. A smiley-face icon from Rhonda.

## Chapter 5: The Date

### 5.1

Seriously, Hicks says. Take your date to a strip club.

Willey, Hicks, Dianne, they're at Las Gary's Lanes tossing a few small balls before heading out to the movies. Women, Hicks says, love strip clubs. That's why so many of them work there.

Now, this piece of romantic advice came a year before the whole boot fiasco. A year before the night Willey met Rhonda. Hicks and Dianne still together, all the movie stars in their proper constellations, no one dealing drugs, and Willey thinking of ditching the pyjama bottoms and Xbox controller for an evening, and maybe asking out a girl.

Lining up with the centre arrow, Willey makes his reservations known to Hicks. He says, shouldn't a strip-club be a fourth or fifth date location? Willey's always wondered, five pins, seven arrows. Half step to the right, thumb on top of the ball pointing straight at the three pin. Left right left, slide, roll the ball off the index finger, make sure you follow through and. . .

Sure, five-pin doesn't have the same sex-appeal as the big ball game. More ball plus more pin-action equals—ladies, drop your drawers— more chaos, but five-pin requires a degree of accuracy above and beyond what the ten-pinner can muster.

Willey's natural curve kicks in two thirds down the lane, the ball gliding left. Head pin. That was the frame he messed up his first potential 300 score. Shot that

head pin while waiting on Dianne's response to Hicks's dating philosophy. Take your first date to a strip-club, Hicks says again.

I assure you, Dianne says, women do not like strip-clubs as first date locations, or as a fourth date location. The poor girl probably has body image issues already. Do you really want to take her to a place full of naked twenty-year-old gymnasts?

Willey sets up again, this time lining with the head pin marker. There's a real temptation after you hit a head pin, to hurl a screamer down the lane, try to hit a gonzo spare, but the good bowlers, the money bowlers, they bowl conservative, take the easy points.

Why not take her to a strip-joint? Hicks says to Dianne. A strip-joint is the best possible first date location, because it's also the worst possible first date location. You either hit a home run, or you strike-out terribly.

Willey's ball glides left, takes out the 2 and 3 on that side. He turns for his third ball and Hicks says to Willey, Your challenge, should you choose to accept it, is to spend three hours in a place full of naked women, without once looking at any naked women. If your girl agrees to a second date, you know she's genuinely impressed and you'll have a great story to embarrass her with on your wedding day.

I'm after marriage now? Willey says. How about I find out her last name first?

Willey, if you take this man's advice on dating I will date you myself, just so I can break up with you. Willey's third ball gutters halfway down the lane.

Take her to dinner, Dianne says. A nice, classy restaurant. She turns to face Hicks. At least get to know her before reminding her of how our society constantly objectifies her.

Objectified? Hicks says. If there's any objectification going on, it's the poor wallets who spends their rent money on a pole-cat leading them on.

You're going to tell me that a stripping woman isn't seen as a sexual object?

Of course she is, Hicks says. That's the honesty of the strip-club. Where objectification comes full circle. Sexual objects being paid by monetary objects. The perfect economic relationship. No lies, no surprises. Hicks holds out his lecturing hand, his ball, one of the house balls, resting in his palm. One will leave the joint richer, the other drunk. Both likely fighting depression.

Dianne rolls her eyes as Hicks delivers. Hicks has a vicious, one-step approach, the velocity of the ball delivered via arm only. Hard, straight, but straight to the left side three-pin. He freezes in his post-delivery pose—right leg back and to the left, right arm high, his hand in a fist. Had he made a strike he would have pumped twice, like a truck driver pulling the horn. Instead, Hicks's arm falls limp.

You either go to a movie, Hicks says, where you can't talk, or you go to dinner, where you have to talk. Tell me, Willey. How good are your conversational skills? You need a place with a distraction, but a distraction that you can ignore if you can manage to string a few syllables together. I say again. Strip-joint.

Hicks lines up his second ball, delivers, holds the pose. The ball slips past the five pin, again the arm falls limp.

I don't have it today, Hicks says. Ball's just not working for me.

I can't believe this. Dianne says, holding her hands out. I date you.

I'll bowl better next frame, Hicks says. I promise. He picks up his third ball, runs a cloth over it. Like pornography, Hicks says. Strip-clubs and porno is where objectification in its refined form turns to the male, and he becomes the object to be manipulated.

But these are women, Dwayne. They have lives outside of pornography. Children.

Your problem, is you're confusing the woman off the stage with the woman on the stage. You see her after the show with her sweatpants on, waiting outside for her boyfriend to pull up in the Corolla, she's a woman. When she's on a stage, when she's doing porn? She's an object paid to be on display.

People die, Dwayne. Drug overdoses. AIDS. Depression. Willey looks over at Dianne. Surely Dianne can tell Hick's bullshit voice from his serious voice.

Hicks hurls his third ball, catches the five pin which in turn cleans up the pins on the right side, but the ball, hitting the five-pin a little too thin, can't catch the left side two. I don't care about oil workers, Hicks says, sitting down. Guys overdose working oilrigs, working coal mines guys die all the time. Do we stop working oil? Oh no, there was a refinery accident, everyone stop driving your cars. Just entertain your audience, porn-star. Go have your disease on CBC Special Reports.

Dianne, picks up her ball, turns to Willey, points to Hicks and says, This is the man I date.

Where was your first date? Willey asks.

That's a good question, Willey, Dianne says, lining up. She looks over her shoulder, an accusatory stare at Hicks. Dwayne, where was our first date?

We spent the day in Banff, Hicks says. It was about 5 degrees when we got there, -30 and a blizzard when we left. We had lunch at the Grizzly, where you lied and told me you were seventeen and not fifteen, thereby making me feel less a criminal in the eyes of the law, while at the same time ensuring that I wouldn't pressure you into ordering a drink. You had a Caesar salad and a glass of coke, I had a burger and a Corona. We went to Cave and Basin, saw the snails, we went to the Banff Springs. You were wearing those blue jeans you had with the black marker signatures of all your Grade 10 friends on them. Your black hoodie with the cat ears. We decided to go to a movie, and with the luck of the mountains on our sides, Casino Royale was still playing, but no. You said you weren't a fan of James Bond, and so with Daniel Craig pounding the theatre next door, you got all weepy-eyed over the Smith family showcase: *The Pursuit of Fresh Prince Jr.* As if to punish our cinematic choices, that blizzard hit and it took three hours to get back to Calgary, you talking about the movie the whole way.

*The Pursuit of Happyness* is a good movie, Dianne says. Don't tell me you didn't enjoy it. She turns and delivers her ball, a three step approach that ends, or is supposed to end, with a left foot slide, her toes usually turning in, but this time her foot catches on some smear on the lane, and her balance goes askew. Gutter ball.

Damn it to hell, she yells, picking up her second ball. She grabs the rag to clean the ball, turns to Hicks and says, You forgot to mention you wanting that homeless guy to break a toonie for you. Dianne balls up the ball-rag and lobs it in a

high arc toward Hicks. As he reaches above his head to catch it, Dianne tosses her ball toward his crotch.

Willey lets them taunt each other while he heads to the desk for some floor cleaner. By the time he gets back to the lane the two of them are all over each other again, Hicks trying to shove a bowling ball down Dianne's top while she squeals with laughter.

## 5.2

A year later and Willey can't remember the name of the girl he was thinking about asking out. But this girl, Rhonda? They have a date. Willey texts Hicks and tells him that he's going to take his first date advice. But what he really needs from Hicks is advice on getting a car. In this age of environmentalism and high gas prices, in a city with an excellent mass transit system, it's still abhorrent to the male-mind to tell your date, on your first date, that you'll meet her at the bus stop.

They're meeting, Rhonda and Willey, in two days. To date, he's lost 24 pounds, earned one driver's licence, and saved three thousand dollars for a car. Sure, he can take his boots off and get a more accurate result from the scale, he can get money out of the house account, but if you tap a keg once, what's to stop you from tapping it in the future? There's also that fucking lottery ticket that he's been dragging around, but what idiot's going to give up any cash for a fake lottery ticket. Still brings a burn to his face, thinking about that wasted money.

If anyone can help Willey save money on a car, if anyone can give advice on a car, it's Hicks, but for the past week, since the Tewilliger party, Hicks has been a

ghost. A ghost that rarely answers texts, a ghost whose own father says, I don't know where he is. But if you find him, tell him I need his share of the rent money.

Along 7th Avenue, a lot of Hicks's regular customers, his former regular customers, ask Willey what's come of Hicks before Willey can ask them the same question. They tell Willey they haven't seen Hicks in a month (a month in meth time is one week in real time, or maybe that's the other way around, Willey can't keep the details straight) and they're getting their junk from Lance these days. Taking that cue, Willey heads to Century Park to find Lance.

Willey expects Lance to get up in his face, but Lance is all about advertising. Pot, going by the smell, and so he greets Willey with a wet and red-eyed, Hey, fat man, where's your lover?

I was going to ask you the same thing, Willey says. Lance, he's all smiley that Hicks and Willey have, in his words, broken up. He tells Willey he still wants his shit back from Hicks, and Willey's to tell this to Hicks.

Hicks, Willey says, is nowhere to be told anything.

Aww, Lance says. He wants to know what Willey's going to do without his buddy.

Sitting down, Willey says, more under his breath than anything, I have to buy a car without my buddy.

My sister's selling a car, Lance says.

Lance's sister is selling a car. She's desperate to sell this car, Lance says, and after a quick phone call, he tells Willey he can check out the car after 5:00. Can you find your way to Thorncliffe without your chaperon? Lance asks.

That gives Willey four hours to murder, leaving an hour to bus it to Thorncliffe. There's that fucking e again, he says, looking at the map on his phone. He shoves his phone, his hands in his pocket and makes his way through the late March Calgary air. Some people wear shorts, trying to incite the coming spring, others in long pants and jackets, sure that winter can come back again any minute.

In the short time Willey handled Kyle Pearce's driver's license—more than a year ago, now—he took in Pearce's address, memorized it, played a bet against the possibility of experiencing live the smile portrayed in heart-Angie's photo. Surely the woman visited if not lived there.

Maybe, with no place worthy of wringing time's neck, you would just as soon read in a park as opposed to home, and if you're going to read in a park, why not the park in behind Pearce's building?

Heart-Angie's photo holds a special place in Willey's wallet, between the Game Spot card and a punch card for a second hand book store—you buy eight paperbacks, your ninth is free. Twice in the past year Willey saw Pearce, hair short, jacket long as he entered his building. Twice he waited for either heart-Angie to arrive or Pearce to leave, not once did he see her.

In the park behind Pearce's condo, Union Square, Willey sits and reads, but mostly he looks out over the top of the book, watching people walk past. It's not like he was here every day, Willey tells himself. He sat here maybe once every couple of weeks, maybe twice a week every couple of months. No matches to the portrait he carries in his wallet came flitting by. The portrait that he sometimes looks at during the night, reminding himself that he is the world's shittiest stalker.

He reads another paragraph, feeling as if he's read it before. He watches a woman push a stroller through the park. He thinks of Rhonda, tries to convince himself that his presence in this park is not an insult to the image of her he carries in his memory. He checks his phone. Willey has a lot of friends on Facebook, but no one whose funeral he'd go to. He's asked Dianne to be Facebook friends, but she's always rejected the requests. Part of the reason is none of Willey's Facebook accounts are real. Stephanie, she likes to repost feminist blogs to Facebook, and the angrier the better. And Mike, Mike likes Men's Rights Groups.

Willey makes blind friend requests to anyone. For example, Stephanie joined a Gender Equality group, and made friend requests through the group. Then, she, or rather Willey, made requests through friends of those friends. Stephanie has short black hair, what she describes as a pixie-cut. She has black frame glasses and a black cat. And if the person who posts photos of herself and her cat through her Tumblr account gets wind of Willey gleaning her pictures to use for Facebook updates, well, Stephanie's life might get complicated.

Mike did the same with various Men's Rights Associations. The real man behind Mike, whoever the hell he is, likes to work out. That guy, he posted a couple dozen pictures of himself in a weight-lifting forum back in 2009. He hasn't posted since, but he left enough pictures for Mike to drop the occasional cheeky snap on his page. Here are Mike's huge biceps in Los Angeles. Here he is flexing in front of the mirror, in, well, wherever Willey wants him to be.

Together, Mike and Stephanie have over 500 friends, about 35 mutual, and neither Mike nor Stephanie have laid eyes on any of these people. Nor has Willey for

that matter. Mind you, to get those five hundred or so friends, Mike and Stephanie had to make about a thousand friend requests. As for Willey's third account, Roger, Roger's a bit of a dishrag. Roger likes all the sci-fi movie fan clubs and does have haughty opinions on the *Alien* movies. Roger, he is fucking upset at the majority of the *Star Wars* movies. Willey's not sure what he was thinking with Roger, but the best thing about Roger, he hasn't said anything outright stupid, unlike the other two.

Willey's also not sure what to do with Mike and Stephanie. Other than a future marriage announcement. Maybe they'll link their wedding to an online donation site. Help us start our lives together. A virtual wedding with real monetary gifts.

There's always the possibility of a Willey Hase Facebook account, but then that would entail trying to post interesting content. Anyway, Kyle Pearce, who has a Facebook account, has never accepted friend requests from Mike, Stephanie, or Roger. Some people and their privacy concerns, Jesus. What's with people who have no sense of adventure?

### 5.3

Leather interior, power windows, power mirrors, air conditioning could use a re-charge. Power sunroof, five-speed manual transmission and an extra pair of front seats if Willey wants them. All that and he's not sure if a 1984 Volkswagen Scirocco is worth three thousand dollars. The car's pretty. Red, no rust, clean, and if he takes his shoes off, he can fit inside the fucking thing. Still, 1984? Willey wasn't even alive then, likely wasn't planned then. Or ever, for that matter.

Lance's sister, Laura, she says she has records of all the mechanical work done on the car, in a folder in the glove box. 30 year old receipts for oil changes, brake jobs. The glass is good. New battery. She says the starter is starting to go. She says she'll be up front, that the starter is starting to go, and that there's a bit of rust on the undercarriage. She says, All you have to do, when the car won't start, is hit the starter with a hammer. She's loved the hell out of this car, and has gotten slack in the upkeep regarding the rust. It was her dad's car, then her car, but with the baby coming, she could sure use the money. Where do you know Lance from?

While Laura tells Willey about the baby coming, while she tells him about her immaculate records on the car, Willey runs a quick search for Sciroccos online. Some guy on kijiji, he's selling his Mk II for over eight thousand dollars. Another one, a car not running, a parts car offered for a thousand. Willey could sure use Hicks's advice. For some reason, a reason he can't put a finger next to, the car is calling Willey's name.

He finally gets a return text from Hicks. You did not tell her to meet you at a strip-joint, he writes.

Place with a distraction you could avoid, Willey texts back. He fires off another message. 1984 VW Scirocco, 190 thousand K, \$3000. Y? N? Despite another half hour of discussion with Laura, no return text comes.

Willey tells Laura he'll buy the car for \$2500, but he wants Laura's assurance, in writing, that if the car fails inspection, she'll buy it back. They agree on \$2750, and Willey has two days to sort out how to master a standard transmission.

After panic-buying the car, he messages Rhonda. He types, Friday night, I'll pick you up. 6:15, wherever your place is.

Sounds good, she types back. Smiley-face smiley-face. She doesn't leave an address.

#### 5.4

You want to insure a thirty-year-old car, you need a certified inspection, but the earliest Willey can book one is the Monday following the date. The best thing a boy can do in this situation, is tell his girl, Hey, my car is out of sorts, let's meet at the Saddledome. What he actually does is pay Lance fifty bucks to steal his sister's old licence plate. At least Lance was nice enough to paint a fake registration sticker on it.

All that, and what does Rhonda say when Willey texts her saying, What's your address? She says, West side of the 'Dome, bottom of the south handrail. Meet me at 7.

Willey checks the message from her again. Meet me there at 7. His phone says 7:20. No Rhonda. No messages. 7:21. Should he text her? What's the policy on texting on the first date, asking your girl, Where the hell are you?

Willey's boss, the manager of the whole Las Gary's shebang, he works directly for the casino, bowling alley owners. Ali has season tickets for the Flames, and he doesn't mind handing out a few of the non-marquee events to his staff. Ali goes to the Edmonton games. Vancouver. Toronto, Montreal when they're here. Tonight, Rhonda and Willey, they get Columbus.

Ali, he says he's done with the team. This is the third or fourth time Ali's been done with the team. One day, Rhonda says she's never been to a hockey game, the

next day the team trades off its franchise player, and Ali, he offers the tickets for free because he's done with the team. Lower bowl tickets for free? You can't complain about timing like that.

Rhonda arrives at 7:30, overflowing with apologies. I couldn't put the pencil down, she says. They rush to their section, through the cool concrete air of the Saddledome concourse, through shadows contained since the mid-80s. They have to wait for a stoppage in play before they can enter the arena proper and plant their asses in their seats.

In the lower bowl you can smell the ice, you can feel a touch of chill coming from the rink and if you breathe deep enough you can take that chill into your lungs. That and the popcorn smell lingering from the concourse. They get in their seats two minutes into the game, a face-off in the Calgary end. The referee drops the puck and the scrambled face-off is marked by the clattering of sticks, the crisp winter sound of skates cutting into the ice. Willey closes his eyes and he tries to see Dianne skating, but the rink in his imagination is dark, empty.

The puck careens behind the net. In the lower bowl, you can hear the players shout at each other, demands, suggestions on what to do, where to go, where to send the puck. The trick on player nicknames is to take the first syllable of their last name, and add y at the end. Iggy. Cammy.

The puck eventually gets to a defender in the far corner who pounds it up the boards toward a streaking forward. The forward gathers the puck but is cut-off immediately by a Columbus player. The puck is chipped behind the Columbus net, but too early. Another icing.

If the y-ending results in a name too uncomfortable—Tangy—swap out the y with an s or an er combo. Tangs. Yeller. Other names, you can simply stick with the first syllable of the player's surname, if it sounds edgy enough. Gio.

Other players earn their names through their style of play, or accomplishments on the ice—Sandbox, The Eliminator—but trying to remember all the nicknames from the past decade still can't get Willey's mind off Rhonda, sitting next to him. Here. Now. Rhonda's out of breath, thinks her hair is a mess so she pulls out her pony-tail, gathers her hair again and re-applies the elastic, her chest out, her back mermaid straight. Melt the ice, take off your sweater, let's go swimming.

Within a minute Willey can tell the game is going to be spent mostly in the neutral zone. Rhonda can feel it, too. She says if they're lucky this will be a night of fighting, since both teams have decided to pursue the dump and chase style of play, and both teams are, as she puts it, heavy on the dump, light on the chase. Willey came to the game prepared to explain offside, icing, Rhonda leans forward, eyes wide on the game. No playoffs again, Rhonda says. And the heart and soul of the team pumping in another city. They can reward our sorrow, buy our patience with dirty play and violence.

High sticking, Willey says. Thunderous body-checks. Boarding.

It's been a while since I've seen a good spearing, Rhonda says, and Willey's inner Willey wonders if there's a double meaning there. The other inner Willey, he says don't be stupid.

Get in the slot, Rhonda yells. Watch for the backdoor play.

Haven't seen a game before, huh? Willey says, the puck smothered and the play dead again.

I'll buy the beer, Rhonda says, standing. With a wink she makes for the concourse.

Mrs. Kathopolous, the lady who owns the seats next to Ali's, she leans over and says, She's lovely, Willey.

Willey's been to a few games, and Mrs. K and her cowbell are a Saddledome fixture. They talk a minute about the depression in the building. A team facing a new reality. No playoffs this year, likely not next year, or the year after for that matter. Rational expectation is a four year rebuild. Sure, we'll get some good prospects, some good draft choices, Mrs. K says.

But a Canadian city without hockey playoffs? Willey says. You might as well live in Saskatchewan.

Mike, Facebook Mike, he takes a picture of the crowd. At the 'Dome watching hockey, he posts. Later, Stephanie is going to reply, noting the violence of sport and how it plays out across society. One of her favourite words, society, and she'll quote statistics about domestic violence reports spiking during high-profile televised sporting events. So stay in the kitchen, Mike will write back. What an asshole.

Rhonda comes back with beer and a new smile and Mrs. K is right, she is lovely. That's a word you don't hear often. Lovely. The lack of make-up and the swath of freckles? Ouch. She's got a bit of lipstick on, that's about it and she touched that up when she went to get the beer. That's a good sign, both Willey's inner-Willeys say. Your date trying to draw attention to her mouth. Rhonda hands Willey a

beer, crosses her legs, and Willey gets a good look at her left boot. She's wearing the tan riding boots again. An image of heart-Angie pops into Willey's head and he wonders for a moment who he's cheating on.

Something's happens on the ice and the crowd is all oohs and ohs. Rhonda leans back, hand going to her forehead. Some player pulls himself off the ice, Bambis his way to the bench. Rhonda looks over at Willey, says, Are you watching this game or what?

Well, Willey says. I'm trying to impress a woman, and I don't want to start screaming obscenities until at least the third period.

Trying to impress a woman, huh? Rhonda says, smiling.

Yeah, would you like to meet her? Willey says, and he lean back to introduce Rhonda to Mrs. K. That's right, Rhonda. That's how charming and witty Willey is, you better watch out for Willey.

They go through the first period talking violence in sport. Rhonda comments on watching fights in soccer; how ridiculous they look. Slap and kick fights in basketball, the big mobs of dry-humping in baseball. Why does fighting look so natural in hockey? She asks Willey if he's ever fought on skates.

I'm a good Canadian boy. Of course.

Tell me about a time when you lost a fight.

When I *lost* a fight? Willey says. Willey's a big guy. You go out for a drink when you're a big guy, wherever there's a likes-to-fight guy, Willey's the guy he usually starts picking on.

I remember this one night, Willey says. Hicks and I and a bunch of others playing shinny out in Temple. They've got a good rink in Temple and this one night we're drinking some beer and playing hockey. Our friend Dianne too, but it's cold out. Not many people are there, and those that are there leave pretty early.

So it's just the three of us, Willey says to Rhonda. Me, Hicks and Hicks's girlfriend Dianne. I start pounding pucks into the net. I've got a good slapshot and I start hammering these pucks at the net, and Hicks stands in front trying to deflect them. He slides them back to me. I shoot, he tries tipping them.

On the ice a 2 on 1 has developed and the raised muttering of the crowd catches Willey's and Rhonda's attention. The pass across is chipped away by the defender. Keep going, Rhonda says.

So, Hicks is trying to deflect these pucks out of the air, and that's when Dianne comes over and she starts trying to deflect the puck too. Only Dianne, she's got pretty good hand-eye coordinates, and usually she can tip them and still get them into the net. She gets her stick on a couple, but they miss the net, deflect over toward Hicks. Hicks, he's been skating around with a beer in the back pocket of his jeans and he pauses to finish it off.

A beer in his back pocket?

Yeah, a standard beer bottle fits in a back pocket. You want to drink half of it first, though. Before you go skating anyway.

Naturally, Rhonda says.

Anyway, Willey says, I can see what Dianne is trying to do, so I take a bit off the shots, and the first one, Dianne slides forward to get her stick on it, and it

whizzes past Hicks's knee. Cut it out, you two, Hicks says, and he starts to raise the beer to his mouth again. Believe it or not, she tips the second shot, and it takes the bottle right out of Hicks's hand. For a split second he looked like a man only pretending to drink, then his hand shook, then he lost it, and I don't mean he lost the bottle. The man snapped.

Hicks, Willey says, he skates toward me, and I think we're going to mock fight, but I'm too busy laughing to do anything about it. Still, I start trying to jersey him, to get his Blackhawk jersey over his head, only he starts swinging, giving me body blows, and he's really throwing them. I didn't realize how mad he was. He'd never been that attached to a beer before.

Is this the drunk guy from the party? Rhonda asks.

Yeah, Willey says. We fell to the ice and wrestled around a bit, until Dianne started using her stick to shovel snow into our faces. I acted like it was no big deal, but man can that guy throw a punch when he wants to. Hurt breathing for a few days after.

Willey takes a drink of his beer. Your turn, he says. Tell me about a fight you lost.

Never lost a fight, Rhonda says. I've lived a fairly uneventful life.

Ever win a fight?

A few against my brother.

They sit and watch the game, the back and forth, almost oceanic rhythm of evenly matched teams. The player that left the ice is not on the bench anymore.

Rhonda says the guy's got a concussion, no doubt. You give the players all that armour on their shoulders and elbows, what do you expect?

They need to protect their elbows, Willey says, smirking. He asks Rhonda what she thinks about all the talk of concussions in hockey and she shrugs. Willey agrees. To hell with concussions in hockey, he says.

Dump, chase. A pass is deflected to the Columbus blue line. A forward pass to the red line, dump, chase. From behind the net a long break-out pass connects to a streaking Flame, but it's time for a line change. 1 on 3, the Flame forward shoots high and the puck hits the glass and deflects out of play. I hate people talking about hockey players outside of hockey, Rhonda says. I don't want to know what their lives are like outside the arena, what their problems are.

Taken advantage of by an industry that sees them as objects to be traded and sold, Willey says. Concussions, drug problems.

I am capital A Audience, Rhonda says. Just take those hits, you rich bastards. Throw those punches.

Willey laughs. He says, Yeah. Have your concussions on CBC Special Reports, and as Rhonda joins in Willey's hunched-over, stifled laughter (you don't want to be shushed in the 'Dome) she sets her hand on top of Willey's, only for a moment, but what a moment.

It's like actors, Willey says. Actors don't get 50 million dollars to make movies because they can act. They get 50 million dollars because capital A Audience is willing to shell out 500 million dollars to watch them on screen. In exchange, capital A Audience demands total access to their lives.

Rhonda nods, smiles. She taps Willey's plastic beer cup. That sounds like a fair deal to me, she says. She hold her cup in a toast. To the great actresses and actors of the world, she says, and you having to put up with capital A Audience and our tabloid representatives camped out on your lawns.

Consider it part of your job description, Rhonda says. Between trips to the Botox clinics, between visits to foreign countries to add to your collection of international children, you get an obscene amount of money to put up with our obscene obsessions.

We understand each other, Rhonda says. The period's been over for a minute, she adds.

Willey, he doesn't know the score, and he doesn't care. 1-0 for the baddies. 4 shots on net according to the shot clock. He'd rather the team lose 6-1 because the other team went 5 for 15 on the power play then lose while only generating 4 shots. As they wait for the aisle to clear so they can head to the concourse, Mrs. K pulls Willey back, whispers that he should pay attention to the scoreboard screen during the second period, around the time the kiss-cam usually comes on.

Oh, for God's sake, Willey whispers.

Second period. Players dashing, skates a-flashing. Willey and Rhonda, back in their seats with fresh beer in hand and a plate of nachos to share. No diet tonight. There might not be another night like tonight so the diet is off the books. The teams are scoring now, but mostly Columbus. When they make it 3-1, Rhonda and Willey both lean back, start talking again.

It turns out that Rhonda is from a purebred, multi-generational family. She has two parents who are presently married—get this—*to each other*. They love their daughter to the point of paying for her entire education at Mount Royal. They go on vacations. They have family dinners. Her life is so foreign to Willey's she might as well be Martian.

The trade-off is that mom and dad want Rhonda and her degree, once she gets it, to go immediately to another university and get a Master's Degree and a Doctorate in Environmental Design or Architecture or What Have You.

But I might want to work for a while, Rhonda says. Be on my own, you know, be Rhonda. She says, My father's already pissed that I didn't go into IT or some petroleum industry business course.

The red light by the penalty box is on. Time for the ice girls to clear the ice. It's important to have the proper equipment when you clear the ice. Sharp skates. A wide shovel. Leggings.

Mrs. K elbows Willey. On the scoreboard it's kiss-cam time. Willey, he leans back a little, gets nice and comfortable. Yeah, he's so relaxed. He takes beautiful women to hockey games all the time. They show a couple in Calgary jerseys, the man elbow deep in his phone. Next, two pretty girls. Half-hearted claps and cheers of drunken encouragement come from the crowd. When the girls notice what's happening one blushes, the other looks up in shock and starts laughing. This is a male space, ladies. You're supposed to kiss, dammit. There they are, Willey and Rhonda on the Jumbotron. Willey gives Rhonda a tap and nods up at the screen. Rhonda and her hair and Willey all laid back and cool. Their first kiss occurs in front

of 17,000 bored hockey fans, half of whom are still probably reminiscing over the failed lesbian romance. Rhonda is delicate with the tongue, but it's there none-the-less. Neil Young's *Cinnamon Girl* starts up before the puck drops and this is turning out to be a not bad date.

It's rude to leave a game early, Willey thinks. Midway through the second period, getting up to walk out, it's disrespectful to the players, who put themselves on the line as they do, all for the sake of entertaining the masses. Horrible, Willey thinks, to leave. However, as this season was reduced to 41 games due to arguments over who gets the longer, harder, thicker dollar sign, Willey turns to Rhonda, says, I made reservations at The Coquette's Fetish. 9:30. We can hop the train and get there in time. Rhonda kills her beer and they say bye to Mrs. K.

## 5.5

On the way to the restaurant, Rhonda tells Willey that she's been wanting to go to The Coquette's Fetish for weeks. She says it was designed by the Palushkas, a husband and wife Interior Design team that has been creating some interesting spaces in Calgary. The Wills residence. Skye Lofts. The Trocadero.

Rhonda's impressed by the Coquette's red door. Willey explains his theory, the idea of the door covered not in paint, but in wax. The Coquette's Fetish is candle-wax, Willey says, and the Coquette's lover poured on the wax long after the Coquette had had enough. Rhonda takes one final drag of her cigarette, butts it out on the wall and tosses the remains in the garbage. Sounds like an interesting couple, Rhonda says. Let's go in.

Inside the restaurant, they're seated beyond the fallen column, next to one of the smaller columns engaged to the sandstone wall. Rhonda says the fallen column, leaning against the opposite wall—they had to pass under the skulls to get to their seat—acts to break up the length of the space.

Here you are, Mr. Olsen, the concierge says. Your server will be here shortly.

They sit, Willey picks up his menu.

I thought your last name was Hase, Rhonda says.

I made reservations under different names for every half hour, Willey tells her. He doesn't tell her that he also made reservations at 3 other restaurants for the same times. Maybe Rhonda wanted Tibetan or Italian. Or Chain Motorcycle. What's your first impression of the restaurant, Willey says.

Rhonda looks around the restaurant, her eyes travelling from the skull column to the wall of engaged columns, to the pony wall and back to Willey. A lot of phallic imagery, she says.

Would those be phalluses, or phalli?

Shit, Rhonda says, and she folds up the menu.

Don't worry, Willey says. Dinner is on me. I chose the place, I pay the bill.

They have horse on the menu, she says.

So much for ordering the horse, Willey thinks.

Rhonda tells Willey that her Aunt Irene and Uncle Bill own land near Drumheller. Her favourite place in the world is riding her Aunt and Uncle's horses. They're close to the river. The badlands.

The waitress comes to take their drink order. You're back, Carol says. Smiling at Willey.

When ordering wine, maybe you want a woody selection, or maybe fruity. Willey chooses a mid-range price. A Cabernet Sauvignon. Chateau Gromel Bel-Air, 2008, from Bordeaux. Not the most expensive, not the cheapest on the menu, but at 70 bucks a bottle, it better kick.

We can go, Willey says. We can protest the inclusion of horse on the way out.

No. no, Rhonda says, opening her menu. I'm no vegetarian. Maybe I'll have the frog. I think our server likes you, she says.

As they decide what to order, they continue to subject the restaurant to a forensic examination. Willey points out the pony wall, the curve of hip and thigh.

I can imagine Sonya modelling for that, Rhonda says. Sonya Palushka, lying on her side, cigarette smoke coiling up as Alexzander P captures the line of her body on a page. Willey nods.

Carol returns with the wine, offering it to Willey like it's his newborn son. Willey can't remember the make or model of the wine he ordered, isn't sure how to acknowledge the cork as Carol presents it to him, but he's sure he's supposed to taste the sample in the glass to make sure it's not anti-freeze. Carol, he says. I'm used to wine where you have to find the perforations in the cardboard. Carol laughs, fills both glasses.

Rhonda's eyes follow Carol as she hurries off. She looks Willey in the eye, nods to her left. Notice anything about the photograph? she asks.

Each of the engaged columns has a framed print, abstract swaths of pink, subtle purples, hints of flesh tone. If they're actual photographs and not mere digital creations, any chance at recognizing the subject matter is lost to the high exposure levels.

Rhonda leans forward, The genius of it, she whispers. People dining underneath high resolution, extreme close-up photographs of someone's pussy. Staring at Willey, she takes a sip of her wine. Then a gulp.

Willey looks again. Sure, he thinks. If you use your imagination, maybe you can make out some labia minora, but if you use another, far less interesting part of your imagination, the whole thing could be a tropical orchid, the type you'd buy at Home Depot.

You're drunk, he says.

Yes, Rhonda says. But that doesn't change the subject matter of that picture. That might be Sonya P in person.

They forego the art criticism when Carol returns. Rhonda orders the day's poisson, the Ontario pickerel pan seared with lime, roasted red pepper, corn gnocchi with baby zucchini and pistou (38 dollars) while Willey orders the pan roasted chicken breast suprême, a thigh served with sweet potato bread pudding, strawberry-sage brown butter and haricots vert. Price? Who fucking cares, Willey's sitting in the most pornographic restaurant in the nation, possibly the world.

Oh, she likes you, Rhonda says, nodding toward Carol walking away.

## 5.6

Rhonda orders a rye and coke, hard liquor a better accompaniment to fish as opposed to red wine. Willey doesn't think red wine is supposed to accompany chicken, either. What was he thinking, ordering wine before he knew what they were eating? What was he thinking ordering wine? The owners of this restaurant, they need to exchange the red door for the Ranche Heights security gate. Keep the hillbillies out.

Rhonda's drink arrives with their meal. Carols sets their respective dishes in front of them, asks if there's anything else anyone needs. No, thank you, Willey says. Carol nods and walks off as Willey arranges his napkin in his lap. He looks up to see Rhonda staring at his meal. She looks at Willey, looks at his plate again. Frowns.

For a split second Willey thinks Rhonda's aunt and uncle might own a chicken ranch too, but then he sees it. There it is in all its kinked, golden glory: A hair. Better than that, a pubic hair. Sitting on his haricorts vert all smug and blonde.

Well, Rhonda says. If this isn't a true character building moment. What are you going to do?

It's nice that Rhonda can keep her sense of humour under such circumstances. The wine must have hit her pretty hard. At least she's not totally grossed out. Unlike Willey.

This is one of those situations where you learn exactly what kind of person you are, what your hang-ups are. Your flaws. Your deep psychological issues. Rhonda takes another pull from her drink, the ice-cubes in her glass clinking together.

All this time Willey's been thinking that he's the worst man possible for this delicate creature, and like that, she takes on the qualities of a mermaid that can swim against the current.

Maybe it's just keeping with the theme of the restaurant, Rhonda says.

Hmmm, Willey says.

The question I have for you, Rhonda says. Is would you go down on that waitress? There's that smile again. Willey's inner Willeys, they're suddenly at each other's throats. It must be the Saddledome beer, that's what got Rhonda drunk. They locals call it heroin beer for a reason. The horses it comes out of, they're under medication for equine schizophrenia.

There's no proof it came from her, Willey says.

Rhonda agrees. You raise a good point, she says, a factual point, but this is no time for fact. This is all about primal instinct. Maybe the waitress sacrificed one and set it there, maybe she's flirting with you.

That's a shitty way to flirt, Willey says.

Listen, Rhonda says. Let's say you agree to meet her after work, you take her on a date, you hit it off.

Because I'm charming, Willey says.

You get an opportunity to go down on her. Are you going to insist that she excuse herself to shave, or are you just going go with the moment?

Willey's shoulders slump. Look, he says. I'm not a psychopath. Of course I'd go down on her.

Eat your beans, Rhonda says.

As they dine, the kinky little strand of burnt gold on the floor beneath the table, they discuss the issue further. They come to a glassy-eyed agreement regarding rules for matters such as this if the event should ever happen in the future. They agree that if you can determine within your own judgement that the source of the offending matter (pubic or not) is from a person with whom you would engage in intercourse (oral or otherwise) then you are within your right to remove the hair and eat your meal, or simply eat the meal, hair and all, without having to resort to complaining to the server, the maître-d (that's the word!) or any other innocent person who happens to be seated across from you. In exchange, there can be no negative judgements passed against you.

Addendum: If the source of the hair cannot be determined, you have the choice to either A) remove the hair and continue to eat your meal; B) remove the hair and eat everything save for a one inch diameter around where said hair rested; C) return the fouled dish to the waitress, all the while remaining polite, non-accusatory, and downright apologetic lest your replacement meal come back laced with phlegm, saliva, urine, or any other material that makes a simple pubic hair come across as a piece of parsley.

Good Lord, what would BrianYYC have done?

Their meal completed, Rhonda's gone off to the washroom, while Willey sits unsure if he passed or failed some surreal test. He stares at the picture on the column. Sonya P's photograph. His birthday night, the night he was here with Hicks

and Dianne, the print closest to them looked like a sea-anemone. What the hell could that have been? A man sits at the table with Willey, smiling.

Willey leans back. Hello? he says.

You were here, only two months ago, yes? Here with Mr. Hicks and his woman friend?

This is the man that allegedly paid for—what was Hicks’s alias that night—Mr. Deshwar’s tab when the ATM ripped the security chip off Deshwar’s card. Allegedly.

Willey pauses, not sure how to answer, and the man raises his hand. Sorry, I don’t mean to intrude. Tell Mr. Hicks that he should contact me. Bratukhin. Can you remember that, or should I give you a card? Willey takes the man’s card.

## 5.7

In the car on the way to Rhonda’s place, Rhonda politely fails to notice Willey’s struggles with the manual transmission. When he parked the damned thing, he left it in gear and starting it without the clutch in? He thought the transmission might have fallen out. Twice he tried starting through an intersection in third gear.

Getting to the car, they had to walk down Stephen Avenue to Macleod Trail, then a dozen blocks south to the lot where a man in a lawn chair charged the hockey game rate of 15 dollars per stall. During the walk Rhonda locked her arm in Willey’s, kept her shoulder close to his arm the whole way and that walk, all twelve blocks? That walk took 15 seconds. Or it felt like fifteen seconds, twelve of which Willey spent formulating in his head a text to Hicks. Something along the lines of, Tell your

fucking drug deal partners not to harass me when I'm trying to have a simple meal in a restaurant.

This is a cute car, Rhonda says. She fiddles with the knobs of the radio until she finds a station with club music. Boom-tiss music. She opens up the glove box. Pulls the sun-visor down. Thumbs the window down, then back up again.

1984, Willey tells her. Scirocco. The car hums west along 5th Avenue.

This is like having a fresh start, Willey says. I was born too late to buy this car brand new, but if 1984 Willey was able to buy this car brand new, what would that Willey do with his life?

Nostalgia, Rhonda says. She gives the volume knob another twist. Blondie's *Atomic* or a recent re-mix booms through the speakers. Rhonda's entire body moves with the beat. Nostalgia for a time we never lived, she says. For a time that never existed. She turns to Willey. That's one of the fundamental problems, she says. With the world. We cling tenaciously to our childhoods, we hate the changes we see. When people are old enough to complain, the childhoods they remember have become mythologized.

How old are you? Willey says. Rhonda laughs. He's about to add, You sound like my mother, but decides at the last minute, that might not be a phrase you want to drop on the first date. Or any date, for that matter.

5th Avenue becomes Bow Trail, and from there Rhonda directs Willey to 45th Street. A couple more turns and they pull up in front of a Glendale duplex. Rhonda tells Willey to park behind the black Jetta. I'm the left side, Rhonda says.

Before heading into the house, Rhonda unlocks the Jetta, pulls out a sweater and her backpack.

Nice car, Willey says. What year?

Willey helps Rhonda take her boots off. With the left one still in his hand Rhonda tiptoes and kisses him full on the mouth. My place she, says, stepping back, spreading her arms and giving a pirouette.

She shows Willey the Panton s-chairs, all five of them. A sixth she says, she could have had off eBay for a good price but the seller still held a grudge against Canada for failing to support the second Iraq War. Refused to ship north of the border.

Fucking Bush, Willey says.

Next on the tour, her sofa. Nine-feet long, orange on orange, knobby-fabriced upholstery. Danish modern with a solid teak base, matching chair in the corner. An estate sale steal at 800 dollars. Mismatched teak side-tables (came with the sofa) and a mid-century sideboard topped with a flat screen TV complete the living room decor. I'll be right back, Rhonda says. Willey watches as she heads down the hall, opens a door. He catches a glimpse of a black dresser.

The Danish, they can make a decent couch. On his phone, Willey fires off that long awaited text to Hicks (Tell your fucking drug deal partners not to harass me when I'm trying to have a meal in a restaurant). He speeds through a Kijiji search for 2012 Jettas. It's fairly comfortable, the couch. It's not a sleeping couch by any means, not with that fabric, but the couch has a solid feel.

Seventeen thousand dollars for a Jetta, a white one. Christ.

Willey's surprised at Hick's instant reply to his text. Who? Name?

Willey texts back, That what I have to do to get a response out of you.

Mention drugs?

Willey's \$250 dollar as-is special is one of those all-foam sofas, and as a result, a permanent bend in space and time shaped like Willey's ass has formed on one end. His mother prefers the La-Z-Boy, while Willey likes to sit on the end of the sofa next to the lamp. Willey's television is bigger than Rhonda's.

Willey's phone buzzes again. Name? Willey pulls out the card. Bratukhin, he texts back.

Rhonda's laptop is on the coffee table (kidney-shaped, rosewood, she said). Rhonda's laptop, after Willey taps the finger pad, comes to life on her Facebook page. The newsfeed refreshes and Willey leans forward, his finger on the pad's scroll-bar.

Steve Babych has posted a link to an article on the bike of the future. Amber Janiten complains about school, her latest project is, quote, a spectacular failure, unquote, but the responses, they're all helpful reminders of Amber's talent. Willey leans back. It would be easy for Mike or Stephanie to submit a friend request through Willey's phone, and Willey to accept on Rhonda's behalf. Now that's how you stalk someone in an era of technology.

A guy named Tim Mailer, upset, has opened his heart and offered his friends a post. As proof of the sad state of world affairs, he tells his friends, the trending list to the right of his feed, the order of the new stories is Harrison Ford hurting himself, the Dutch beating the Spanish in soccer, and a news item about Israel and Palestine.

We're more concerned about movie-stars and sports than we are with actual life and death current-events, Tim says.

I'm reading your Facebook newsfeed, Willey shouts to Rhonda.

Anything interesting?

Tim Mailer might be upset that people enjoy soccer, Willey says. I hate it when people like things that I hate too, but am I to expect more out of Tim?

Don't expect anything out of Tim, Rhonda says.

According to Tim's profile, he likes *Buffy*, *Batman*. The man is becoming less interesting by the consonant. But then, Willey discovers that Tim studies comics at the University. Is that possible? Is it possible to study comics at a university? Willey reads on. Tim watches *Angel*. He listens to Jenn Ryan. Willey's never heard of either. He teaches, this Tim, this friend of Rhonda. The man's life is God-damned fantasy camp. Who is this guy?

Willey hides his Asimov books. He doesn't read his Heinlein and Lovecraft novels in public. He would never consider reading a Silverberg pulp in a coffee shop, because Willey's far too worried about looking like an overgrown child, and Tim Mailer studies comic books at the university. Willey sold all his comics when he turned 20.

One of Tim's events is a Tim turns 30 party. He's 30, or about to be 30.

Rhonda should tell Tim that people like soccer and movie stars for the same reason people like comic books. We're all desperate for heroes. Willey can type that on Rhonda's behalf right now.

Speaking of Rhonda, what the hell is she doing in there?

Tim's upset, Willey says, because sports gets more commercial time than drawings of imaginary people in their battle-tights.

Tim's desperate, Rhonda shouts back, to say something.

The lone comment says, Oh My God is he okay? and it's from Rhonda.

Let's step back a minute here. That's not bad. That comment's okay. It can be read as a witty support of Tim's politics, but read sarcastically, its non-committal tone could also suggest that Tim might want to loosen the belt a little, that maybe movies and sports offer temporary and justifiable distractions to ceaseless wars.

No, this is fine, this is okay. If your posts on Facebook have to be anything, it's non-committal. Willey knows this because he has near five hundred friends on Facebook, none of whom know him.

Hey, Willey says. You alive in there?

Sorry, Rhonda says. Come on in.

Rhonda has amassed quite a colourful collection of Kartell Componibili storage units. These, she says, can be used as side tables, or they can be stacked together into wall units that border on being practical. She calls them Round-ups. Hers are all red, she uses them to hold her socks. Socks and books. Underwear. Rhonda sits on the bed. The bed spread a bright red to match the—Willey can't remember Rhonda's first descriptions, so he goes with Round-ups. Has a more Calgary nostalgic ring to it.

Rhonda's bed is tucked into one corner of her bedroom, a rough and black painted antique dresser at the foot, no headboard at the wall, only an oil painting of

a gunmetal cross on a deep purple-blue background. The cross consists of Celtic snakes in a repeating writhe, all interlocked and hissing.

Kitty-corner from the bed, a drafting table large enough to design mid-40s battleships commands the room. Next to the drafting table a wide desk with a white plastic top, a computer on the end next to the drafting table. Rhonda's taped an abstract drawing of triangles and pentagrams to the drafting table. Spirals like the horns of a goat. On the desk, next to the computer stands a three-dimensional model of the drawing.

The Golden Mean, Rhonda says as Willey peers at the drawing, comparing it to the model. An element of proportion. The drawing is a two dimensional representation of Golden Mean proportion, the sculpture a constant reminder of how hard it is to model spirals in mat board. Both are due Monday.

Golden Mean, Willey says. On a notebook next to the model, Rhonda has written Re: Nostalgia – childhood mythologized.

Think of a square, Rhonda says. She gets up and stands next to Willey.

Okay.

Find the exact centre of that square, imagine a line drawn from the centre straight down until it touches the bottom of the square.

I'm still with you, Willey says. Rhonda's easy to follow, she's pointing to parts of the drawing.

Place a compass at that point, she says, and have the lead end at the top corner of the square. Draw an arc down past the bottom of the square. Now, extend the line that forms the bottom of the square until it touches the arc. Where they

touch, draw a straight line up past the top of the square. Extend the top of the square over, and you've made a Golden Rectangle.

I still follow, Willey says.

Rhonda gives further lessons on Golden Proportion, talks about Greek vases and temples. How one golden rectangle can be used to create another, larger rectangle, or another smaller rectangle, and she shows instances of this occurring in both the drawing and the model. The short side of a golden rectangle, Rhonda says, is about 0.618 the size of the larger. That number, phi, is one of those numbers that stretches to infinity. Rhonda tucks her hair back behind her ear. Picks up a pencil.

Like pi, Willey says.

Golden proportions appear in everything from pentagrams, cat's claws and spiral galaxies, Rhonda says, to flowers, trees. Have you ever drawn a five-pointed star, one where you don't have to take your pencil off the page? If you draw that mathematically, the lines cross each other at the Golden Proportion.

This is fascinating, Willey says. Rhonda's look of interest, her eyes narrowing in concentration as she looks at her drawing. Without looking at Willey, she says, When you get further involved, the Golden Mean begins to terrify.

She turns to face Willey, snaps straight like a soldier at attention. Take an average human being, she says. And measure from the bottom of their feet to the middle of their belly button. She taps, presumably, at her belly-button. Measure from the middle of their belly button to the top of their head. Do this to fifty people, or a hundred, or a thousand, and on average, you'll end up close to the Golden Proportion.

That is scary, Willey says. When you consider pentagrams.

Well, math is the devil, Rhonda says. In the dark, in the night, in Rhonda's bedroom, she asks Willey if he's heard of the Fibonacci sequence.

Here's the Fibonacci sequence, Rhonda says. 0,1,1,2,3,5,8,13 and it goes on indefinitely. She sits at the desk, says, You add two numbers in the sequence to get to the next. Zero and one is one, one and one is two, one and two is three. The higher you go, when you divide one number into the next, the closer your answer gets to phi.

Fuck, Willey says. What else can he say? He might not know anything about the Golden Mean, he might not know anything about the Fibonacci sequence, but he knows what he'll be Googling for the next little while.

I have to create these two compositions of the Golden Proportion, Rhonda says. Area, height, balance, all in Golden Proportion. She starts to shade in a portion of the drawing.

I had a thought tonight, at the game, a thought that I should try to find a shade of grey that looks 61.8 percent lighter than its counterpart. I think I can do this through Photoshop. As my rectangles in the model spirals in, and gets smaller, those parts will get taller.

61.8 percent taller, Willey says.

Rhonda laughs. Inspiration come easy when you're drunk, she says.

Your mind is free to explore.

Your self-sensor's the first to go, Rhonda says. But it comes back too quick.

Half way home, it hits. Willey's inner Willey, the dirty one, he says, Idiot. He says, you know, you could have offered to measure her belly-button height in relation to her overall height. Or, failing that, when she was sitting on her bed. Sit the fuck down next to her. Almost right away, his other inner Willey says, Just because a woman invites you back to her apartment, back to her bedroom, onto her bed, that doesn't mean she wants to have sex with you. Willey's dirty inner Willey hasn't mounted the strength yet to murder his counterpart.

Willey can only laugh, shake his head. What else can you do? Punish yourself? He deserves some sort of punishment, sure, he probably hurt the poor girl's feelings. She probably thinks you're a gentleman, Willey's PC inner Willey says.

She might think you're handicapped. Willey ponders eliminating a meat day. That's punishment for not recognizing a woman leading you back to her bed. Starve your uterus, man.

Pulling away from a stop sign, Willey shifts the car into first, presses the gas while taking his foot off the clutch. The car accelerates smooth through first second, and third gear, the shift into third occurring without any shudder what-so-ever. I'm getting to love this car, Willey says out loud.

When he first bought the car, first thing he thought, in terms of a name, was Siri. Siri the Scirocco. But he can't name the car Siri. That mechanical telephone voice is Siri, and as a result, people are naming their children Siri. Sure, change the subject, his inner Willey says. You're still an idiot. Rhonda, poor Rhonda, home alone, staring at the ceiling. Poring over her drawing more like it.

Rocco as a name for a Scirocco is another obvious choice, but Willey's trying to avoid the obvious here, and because of the iPhone voice he can't name his car Siri. Some guys, they're posting pictures of their new kitten online, and they're saying, Meet Siri like it's witty, like they're being original. These guys with their black framed glasses, their brown corduroys. Willey's inner Willey says, How's changing the topic working for you? How's that not thinking of Rhonda grinding her teeth and staring at the ceiling working out for you?

You need to be original in naming your car. In naming anything. This is how we get five Emmas in the same classroom at one time. This is why every third wiener you meet is named Jackson. Hi, I'd like you to meet—Is it Sophia?—Yeah, Sophia, how'd you know?

Just a hunch.

What the hell am I going to name this car? Willey thinks.

Shut up, his inner Willey says. Both of them.

## Chapter 6: *A. Sarcophagus*

### 6.1

Of all the moments in life when Willey thought to be terrified, this runs a distant first. Hell, even Hicks looks white and that boy's spent the last few days lazing in the sun. The sheet in the back of Hicks's truck has more colour than the pair put together.

The man who introduced himself as Edward Sikorsky, he pulls back the sheet in Hicks's truck. Sikorsky looks like an actor you might see on TV. The type of guy that plays the role of man who works in a university. Wire rim glasses that stress economy over style. Haircut to match. Brown suit jacket with patches on the elbows. Loose tie with alternating stripes of brown. Uniform of the unintimidating, sure, but Sikorsky is Russian, isn't it? Russians are terrifying, aren't they?

Sikorsky runs his palms over the plaster held in the bed of the truck, tries to shift the weight. Feels heavy, he says. The other man—Bell, he said his name was—hasn't moved from his position by the table, stands married to his briefcase.

You don't mind if we cut that open, Sikorsky says, indicating the load in the truck. Where's the saw? Willey fumbles through the toolbox, pulls out the Dremel rotary tool and screws on a cutting wheel. The task should take about fifteen seconds to complete, but Willey drops the blade twice and Hicks, he looks like he's spent the night in bed with a bottle of bad whiskey and the night is only now coming to a hurling end. Willey steps back to Hicks as the Dremel whines. Plaster dust fills the air around Sikorsky.

Bell and Sikorsky are helicopters, Hicks says, his mouth near Willey's ear.

I think they're scientists, Willey says.

If Bell and Sikorsky are their names, Hicks says. I'm an Irish faery.

Irish or not, faery or not, Hicks has the hands of a man suffering the later, least entertaining stages of the delirium tremens. The man appears to be one sharp turn from throwing up. You going to be all right? Willey says.

Bell steps over to Sikorsky, his hand clutched firm to the Samsonite case. He steps up into the bed of the truck, he and Sikorsky hunch over the truck's cargo. Judging by the speed of their muttering, Willey bets they're A+ excited. Bell occasionally points, Sikorsky occasionally runs his hands through his hair. Willey catches the occasional snatch of what they're saying. Something something laterosphenoid. Something something mandibular fenestra. Look at the detail on the premaxilla, Sikorsky says. My God.

After about a month Bell and Sikorsky look toward Willey. Mr. G, Sikorsky says. Do you think you and your partner can help us get this into our truck?

Willey looks at Hicks, who looks back at Willey. They both stare at Sikorsky, wordless. Oh, Sikorsky says. Right. The money.

Bell lifts up the case he's been carrying and sets it on the table, opens it. He says, I'm not really sure . . . do you need us to stay here while you count? He steps away from the case, raises a hand to indicate the money, takes another step back and shoves his hands into his pockets.

Willey looks into a case packed with so much money, it has its own gravity. To his right, Hicks falls in a heap to the floor.

## 6.2

Maybe we should back this up a bit. This story of Calgary begins 90 million years ago when an inland sea covered much of Alberta. Sometime after, Willey, driving through the city's southern reaches, comes to the conclusion that there will be no end.

Auburn Bay, Copperfield, Mahogany.

Willey's not sure if humans were around when the last bay of that inland sea, auburn or not, dried up. As far as he knows, the nearest copper mine is a thousand miles distant, and mahogany? Has there ever been a mahogany tree successfully released into the Alberta wild? There is a field, however, and working somewhere in this field of black shingle, Dwayne Hicks: general labourer.

Of course, auburn, copper and mahogany can describe the colours of the fields these communities sit upon. If you're nostalgic, that is. The new colours, going by the palette of houses, are grey, grey and taupe. We name the neighbourhoods in memory of what had to be destroyed to build them. Willey turns off Stoney Trail. Heads south on 52nd Street.

Willey's been looking for Hicks two days, now. Rumour control has it that Hicks's working somewhere in Calgary's Deep South. He might live somewhere in the Deep South, too. Willey turns right onto Seton Boulevard.

Hicks the elder shied at naming his son's employer, not knowing himself, but someone who knows someone who knows Dianne told her Hicks was spotted at the Auburn Bay Shoppers Drug Mart, and according to this source, Hicks is dry-walling a basement in Auburn Bay.

Willey turns right onto Auburn Bay Gate. Hicks's employer, Willey says to Jolene, Jolene sitting in the passenger seat, tongue out, eyes nearly closed. Now there is a phrase Willey never thought he'd hear. Hicks's employer. Willey starts circling the neighbourhood.

Half an hour later Willey spots a truck that matches the description of Hicks's truck as given by Hicks's father. Black Ford, he had said. Sticker on the back window of a gun, pointed up, the barrel like a Christian cross. Half an hour after that, Willey, feeling like an FBI agent, sees Hicks walking out of a gape-mouthed garage, a Sawzall in one hand, toolbox in the other.

Willey starts the car, pulls alongside Hicks as Hicks walks the sidewalk toward his truck. Hicks looks first at the car, his expression noncommittal. Just another car in the neighbourhood. When he looks in at the driver, his eyes roll. Willey thumbs down the window, says, Think there'll be a lot of reno work, what with the mighty Once a Century flood?

Hicks says, Is that twice in a decade we've been hit by a once a century flood?

Having two once a century floods hitting in one decade only occurs once every hundred thousand years.

What do you want? Hicks says, and what the hell are you driving? He waves at the car.

1984 Scirocco, Willey says. Wolfsburg edition. Mars Red.

Does it do buttonholes? Hicks says.

And to think, Willey was tossing around the name Marla Singer for the car. Not anymore.

I have a business propositional for you, Willey says. Meet me tonight at Atlas Pizza. 7:00. My treat.

Make it 8:30, Hicks says. I work long days.

### 6.3

At 7:30, Willey leaves the car at home and hops a bus, the 26, to Memorial Drive, transfers to the 45 and gets off by Atlas. Time to get to work, time to get his business face on, though he's confident Hicks won't require much cajoling to follow along with Willey's venture.

When Willey gets to Atlas, Hicks is already at the table nearest the door, still in his work clothes. Look at you, he says to Willey. You're all showered, shaved, and I presume, shitted.

Two for three, Willey says. And look at you in clothes that look like they've been engaged in manual labour all day. How can that be?

I have found the perfect hustle, Hicks says. The perfect scam. But Hicks isn't wearing his hustle face, the jackal's smile, the mountain lion's stalking eye.

Turns out that for Hicks, the once a century flood hit during a once a century early-life crisis, and so Hicks found himself—that's the only way you could describe it, found himself—found himself volunteering to help swamp out flooded houses in Bowness. There, he says to Willey, he met a guy who, like him, felt a need to give back to the community.

After the flood of 2013 hit, Willey was out taking pictures of kids wading through Chinatown. Hicks was digging mud out of a stranger's basement. Rhonda

with her family in Europe, Willey took to the streets, walking around neighbourhoods, measuring the misery of other people.

Only this guy, Hicks says, owns a renovation business. We'll do your fence, we'll do your roofing. Interiors, exteriors, tiling, floors, concrete. Dry-walling. You get the idea. On the side, he buys and renovates houses, then sells them again for a profit.

The guy's a flipper? Willey says.

The best part about this scam, Hicks says. It's not even a scam.

The waitress comes by and she drops another beer for Hicks. He tells Willey he took the liberty of ordering himself a beer, then another, seeing as this is Willey's treat.

Willey's treat, buying beer for a house flipper.

Willey orders a beer, and with Hicks's approval, their typical pizza, the Atlas Greek God special. Sure, this messes up Willey's diet, but Willey's decided to merge his two weekly meat days into one, tactical nuclear meat day. Meat and beer. This is, after all, a special occasion. Hicks, a flipper. The maggot of the home renovation industry.

Flippers. These assholes, they'll buy a house and prettify it themselves by dropping in ten thousand dollars of paper-thin improvements. Rhonda once told Willey, flippers will put in ten thousand dollars of paint and Ikea, or ten thousand dollars of Home Depot final sale items and Kijiji finds, then turn and ask fifty thousand more than what they paid for it two months previous.

Capitalism. Supply and demand, and yes, the finished project looks surface good, but how's it going to look six months down the road when the ceiling in your downstairs bathroom is starting to sag and your black mould problem is larger than the mould colony in the neighbourhood grow-op? Not like you've got a builder to harass when your ceiling starts dripping like a chlamydia patient. Flippers, it's about quick profit, and for a quick profit, costs need to be reduced, shit has to be shat fast.

Flipping houses, Willey says, shaking head. That sounds like a legit job. What happened to you, man?

Hicks shrugs.

Rhonda says there are guys that will buy a house and raze it, take it to the dirt and rebuild. This, Rhonda says, is fine. You buy that house, you've got a builder behind any problem you might have. But flippers who buy and renovate? Maggots, she says.

Willey's always had the sense that Hicks scams in the killing-time-until-I-grow-up kind of way. But nothing drives a scammer crazier than siding with a scam that sides with the law. Could be worse, Willey says. I half expected you to tell me you were working a gig where you take down-payments on flood renovation work, then you high-tail it to British Columbia for a year.

Maybe five years ago, Hicks says. Not now. He takes a healthy guzzle of his beer. Look at Mr. Hase, he says. Splurging on a pizza.

Well, Mr. Hicks, Willey says. Should you follow through on this opportunity of mine, the price of a pizza will be negligée.

Negligible, I think is the word you're tripping over.

No, I mean negligée. This might pretty you up nicely. Willey offers his phone to Hicks so he can peruse the photographs Willey has cued up. Hicks picks up the phone, holds it landscape style, but the photo rotates on him, so he spins the phone to portrait, only to have the photo circle back. Oh, for fuck's sake, Hicks says, and he lays the phone flat on the table.

Anyone catching a casual glance at the image on the phone might see nothing more than a swath of black and rust, might have a hard time finding a pattern to that abstract swirl. Even Hicks with time and attention enough can't place what he's looking at. I have no idea what this's supposed to be, he says, and he pushes the phone away. Just tell me what you want.

Willey slides the phone back, says, Listen, since the floods, all sorts of interesting items have been found around Alberta's rivers. Ancient bison bones on the Bow. Unexploded bombs at Weaselhead. Willey calls up the picture again, tilts the phone towards Hicks so the image will align itself properly. He sets the phone flat again. Hell, the floods, they even exposed you to a job, did they not? Willey points, his finger hovering over the phone.

I engaged a professional to offer his opinion based on these photographs, Willey says. Look at this one. Willey swipes to the next photo.

A professional? Hicks says. A professional what? He studies the image, turns his head this time. That a mouth? he says.

Willey nods. Hicks, picking up the phone, keeping it straight, fingers through the pictures until he ends at a shot of Jolene and Rhonda.

This that red-headed mermaid? Hicks says.

Willey takes the phone back, fingers back to the earlier photo. Based on a rough geographic location, he says, and this little ridge of bone here—Willey turns the phone toward Hicks—my man's convinced she's an *A. Sarcophagus*.

You have a man, Hicks says, laughing.

Willey looks Hicks square in the eye, says, I insist you listen. That thing is worth her weight in twenty dollar bills. And she's heavy, Hicks. She's heavy.

Hicks looks at the picture. She's a what, Willey?

*Albertosaurus*, Hicks. Jurassic Park and all your childhood delusions come true. I've been there. I've seen her. I've touched her. And I know someone who wants to buy her.

I don't know, man, Hicks says, leaning back into this seat and laughing harder. I was more a Space Ranger as a child.

Willey raises an eyebrow.

You're serious? Hicks says.

Willey nods and Hicks takes his beer in a gulp. I have a job, he says. I have a job and a new place and a new truck that depends on me.

Have you named your truck?

No, I have not named my truck, God dammit. I work now. I'm comfortable.

Willey shrugs. Words, they'd only get in Hicks's way.

You're serious, Hicks says again, less of a question this time, more of a statement.

Another shrug, this one with a flick of the eyebrows.

Hicks looks out the window, slumps his shoulders. How much?

We get her out of the ground, just the head, mind you, and we get eighty thousand.

Jesus, Hicks says, his DNA all afire. Willey can see the electricity of the idea snap into Hicks's eyes, the lust, but then Hicks pauses, the eyes narrow, and he rubs his chin while giving Willey a crooked look. Eighty? Why eighty? Why not a hundred, why not fifty? Eighty is a suspicious number.

Eighty *is* a suspicious number, you can't disagree with that, and Hicks, he's a suspicious man, but he's also a man who lights the fires of negotiation pretty early.

They offered fifty and I said a hundred, Willey says. They were pretty quick to agree on eighty, come to think of it.

Continuing with suspicions, Hicks says, how exactly did you come across this thing? You're not exactly the treasure-hunting type.

Willey takes a swig of his beer and together he and Hicks pour over the photos and the details of the discovery. Willey remains necessarily non-committal on anything that would leverage Hicks. Exact location, buyer, and Rhonda's connection to the land? These are details Hicks need not know. One beer becomes another, becomes their pizza and a third beer, and Hicks slowly succumbs to the lubrications of the hops if not the loaded 14 incher. They talk about the futures that could be rented with eighty thousand dollars split between them. Of course, Hicks has yet to hear about the third partner, but Willey will worry about that later.

Hicks's eyes hold the excitement of the score while his mouth goes on about the ease and security of working a nine to five job, which lately, he says, is seven to seven. Trouble is, in this city, at this time in history, making any portion of eighty

thousand dollars does not take many months, even for a man of Hicks's pedigree. They eat, they drink, they talk. On occasion, they laugh.

Hicks works the Atlas wifi, trying to determine any comparison to Willey's find, which is fine by Willey. The more Hicks looks up fossils and their price, the less control he'll have over his sense of adventure.

Hicks stares at an image on his phone, a single Tyrannosaur vertebrae, black, larger than a fist, the website asking 1200 dollars. There are images of other vertebrae, other bones. He shows Willey a listing for an Excellent T-Rex Toe Bone, Cretaceous, Hell Creek Formation, PFV312 – Sold. Next, an Exquisite Edmontosaurus Duckbill Dinosaur Maxilla, Cretaceous, Hell Creek Formation, Code: PFV133 – \$3100.

They named a dinosaur after Edmonton? Hicks says.

Yeah, Willey says. The one that had the sweatpants. Ha ha.

Hicks keeps looking through the site he's on. T-Rex Vertebrae, Cretaceous, Hell Creek Formation, Code PFC399 – Sold.

Hicks sits back a minute. Cracks a knuckle. All right, Willey thinks. Here it comes.

I assume there's a catch, Hicks says.

There's about a thousand catches, but three big ones.

Go ahead.

Willey tells him the obvious catch first. They have to get her out of the ground. Not all of her, just the head. We sell the head and directions to get to the rest for eighty thousand dollars, Willey says, but no one can see or hear you do it.

Second, and this will admittedly be a hard sell, Willey tells him the people wanting to buy her might just go get her themselves if they find where she's sleeping, so Willey can't go out there. They might try to follow me, he says.

Oh, fuck you, Willey, Hicks says. You're worried about being followed, yet here you are meeting me. You don't think the paleological mob can crack that code?

I may be paranoid, Willey says, but I learned the art of careful paranoia from you, so that's just the way it is. I took steps to get here without being followed.

What steps? Hicks says. Willey tells him, steps, but that's not enough. Hicks asks again, What steps?

I took the bus.

Hicks runs his hands through his hair, For Christ's sake, Willey. How the fuck does taking the bus form any version of taking steps?

Try to follow a city bus one day, and make it look like you're not trying to follow a city bus. I sat in the back and watched the whole time.

Willey, Hicks says. I lied when I said I didn't miss you.

When did you say that?

I've said it a thousand times.

Well, answer your phone every once in a while, and you wouldn't miss me.

You said there were three big catches, Hicks says. You owe me one more.

This might be that proverbial straw. This might be the deal-breaker. It might also be the deal-cincher. The guy I first showed this picture to, Willey says, the guy who pointed me to the guys who want to buy her? That guy is Dianne's old boyfriend with the Camaro, Paul. Hydro-geologist Paul. He was helping these

paleontologist guys with some water issue on a dig site. Paul himself is not the issue, but you might have to lock eyes with Dianne every once and again.

That it?

Well, you have to understand, this isn't exactly legal, Willey says. You think Alberta clenches her thighs over oil? He leans forward, gives Hicks the abridged version of Alberta's fossil laws.

Now, let's say you're walking through the Paleolithic outcroppings between your house and the nearest liquor store, and you step on, trip on, or otherwise discover the bones of some long dead killer sitting on the ground. You are legally within your right to pick up those bones, take them home, and terrify your children with them. If those bones are on someone's land, you need permission from the landowner before walking off with your find. Regardless of where you picked them up, the bones still belong to the province. You can't sell them without the province's a-ok, you can't cross any border with them, not even a provincial border.

Alternatively, if those bones are set in the ground, as opposed to resting on the ground, you need a permit to dig them out, and just try getting a permit to remove a tricycloplotz if you don't have a paleontology degree, a job at the Royal Tyrell, and a well-written proposal.

Which brings me to my final question, Willey-boy.

Money, Willey says.

Money.

Well, Dianne kind of knows, so—

Wait. Dianne *kind of* knows?

Dianne knows, so she gets some of the money. Shut up money. She goes to the museum or the province—

Dianne wouldn't do that, Hicks says.

You know her better than that, Willey says.

Yeah, Hicks sighs. Well good, she can help me dig then. 'Cause if I'm doing this myself, I imagine it will take about as long to get that beast out as it did to get itself trapped in the first place, and I need to compensate for losing time at my job. I want fifty thousand, and even that depends on my opinion once I actually see where it's buried.

No way in hell, Willey says. We'll split down to the middle. Thirty-five each, ten for Dianne to sit home and not phone the authorities.

Forty-five, Hicks says. Otherwise you can grab a shovel.

Willey comes back with forty. That's half just for you, he says. (In truth, the price is actually a hundred thousand, but a man needs to reserve a bit of wiggle room in his negotiating.)

Half the money, for all the work, Hicks says.

Right, Willey says. But try selling this on a street corner downtown. Try hiding this in a hacky sack or a fucking toilet tank. Without my buyer, it's just a heap of rock.

Hicks says he'll agree to forty, pending his review of the site. He says he wants to see the thing in the ground before he agrees. He leans forward. Fossils are worth a mint, he says. Based on the reading Willey's done, Hicks is very much correct. According to the internet, a gristle-headed entrepreneur in the States tried

to auction a complete Tyrannosaur that he somehow managed to smuggle out of Mongolia. Opening bid, one million US. Closer to home, a farmer not too far down the road sat on a million dollars watching a local museum take a Tyrannosaur out of his field, slowly, professionally, legally. And that is only the tip of the bone. *Albertosaurs* may be the pigeon of the tyrannosaur family flock, they might be a Porsche in a field of T-Rex Ferraris, but go out and buy a Porsche tomorrow.

All I'm saying, Hicks says, is eighty might be too low.

I understand your concern, Willey says. But we do not have the means to put her together, nor the legal position to work on the straightened arrow. We are to provide a head and a map to the rest. I think it's a fair sum.

How much did you say Dianne gets?

She's happy with ten.

She's happy right now with ten. That leaves thirty for you? You happy with that?

Yes I am, Willey says, and not just because he knows about the other twenty thousand under the table. He, Willey, pulls a folded map out of his pocket. His map, hand drawn. You need to go right away, Willey says. The sooner we can do this, the better.

I'll go out there on Sunday, Hicks says. A nice drive in the country.

#### 6.4

Sunday. Sunday, and although Willey has to work at 2, he and Rhonda head for an early lunch at the Soup Depot. Rhonda has agreed to work an afternoon, covering for a sick employee.

Al and Ramona, who have owned and operated the Depot for almost five years, will be attending the Garbutt family's Last Annual BBQ (rain or shine), scheduled for two weeks from Wednesday. Willey knows this because he's invited to the same BBQ. He'll walk in to the Garbutt residence, somewhere out past Aspen Woods, where he'll likely smash his head on a low-hanging light fixture. He'll meet Rhonda's parents, Lawrence and Katherine. Rain or shine, but Calgary in September, you might want to add snow to that qualifier.

They park on 6th Avenue. Willey unfolds himself from the car, pushes his seat-back forward to make space for Jolene's exit. He pauses a moment next to the front fender. Susie, he says. Sherry?

What are you doing? Rhonda asks.

Trying to come up with a name for my car.

Your car's name is Angie, Rhonda says.

Angie? Angie? How do you know the car's name is Angie?

There's a picture of a woman named Angie in the glove box, stuffed in with the previous owner's oil-change receipts.

Oh, yeah, Willey says, sweating. I think that was the last owner, maybe.

A pretty name, Rhonda says. For a car.

With Jolene leading the way, they walk to and through Eau Claire. If there was a more ironic name in this city in 2013, Rhonda says, shout it out.

High River, Willey shouts.

I said ironic, Rhonda says, with a chuckle.

In two weeks Willey's going to meet Rhonda's parents. Al and Ramona will attend the BBQ. Some of Rhonda's relatives will be there, such as her Aunt Irene and her Uncle Bill. Bill and Irene are driving to British Columbia to visit Irene's family, and on the way through, they'll stop in Red Deer to visit their son, then on Wednesday, Rhonda's parents' place for the BBQ. Today, Willey's friend slash partner is scoping out a dinosaur-find on land belonging to the same aunt and uncle, and Willey's never been fully confident that he knows what ironic actually means.

They tour the muddy remains of Prince's Island, staring silent over displaced benches, shaking their heads over the river's edit of the park, the uprooted trees. They step across and around yellow caution tape. Willey stands straight, estimates the level of water, where it would have been in relation to their heads had they been here mid-June. The debris on nearby trees and bushes, weeds and other organic flotsam caught by the branches, has dried in the sun, and denotes the river's high-water mark. The high water mark at the level of Willey's eye. Jolene sniffs out locations to sprinkle notice of her whereabouts.

At one point, Willey says to Rhonda, The name feels right, Angie. In fact, it feels horrible. A Volkswagen Scirocco, Scirocco II if we want to be picky. A 1984, Wolfsburg Edition, Scirocco II, named Angie.

Your problem, Rhonda says, is that you're thinking the car's name should start with the same sound as the car, and that's not the case.

You make a great point, Willey says, but first initials are far from his problem. He thought he had rid himself of that picture of heart-Angie. Willey and Rhonda walk over the short bridge that leads back to Eau Claire, and Willey's car, should this

name stick, and how can it not stick now, will be a constant reminder of that desperate phase of his life, when he once attempted to stalk a woman.

Your Jetta have a name? Willey says.

Of course not, Rhonda says, lighting a cigarette. My car gets me from A to C, hopefully without breaking down in the shittier parts of B. For a woman, that's pretty much what a car comes down to.

Coming back through Eau Claire they pause for coffee, Rhonda's treat, so Willey sits outside giving Jolene a well-deserved scratch behind the ear, her leg thumping. A man approaches and asks if Jolene is a pit bull. Yeah, Willey says, and he starts describing Jolene's personality, but the man simply nods and walks away. Jolene squints at the sun's reflection off the Canterra tower.

They walk deeper into downtown with their small coffees, and eventually they walk with their coffee cups, one empty, one with two cigarette butts in it. The morning sun bouncing back and forth between buildings. The light matches Willey's memories of this space, Willey and Hicks off to sell pot, but the present emptiness gives Willey an odd nausea.

Rhonda looks at him, holds his hand.

Back at the car, they lure Jolene into the back seat and thumb the windows down a bit. Willey has to muzzle her, even though she hates the muzzle. Jolene hates the muzzle, Rhonda hates the muzzle, Willey hates the muzzle, but if there's one thing Willey hates more than a dog in a muzzle, it's a dog without a muzzle eating the interior of his car.

Rhonda and Willey make their way to Scotia Centre and the Soup Depot. You're not yourself today, Willey, she says.

Maybe I'm coming down with something, he says. Or maybe his friend slash partner in crime is on his way to Drumheller. Willey's just received a text. Hicks is on the highway.

They say hi to Nanay at Pa. Al and Mona. Al might be 5-6 and 120 pounds, but he looks carved out of teak. His head, perfectly round, his hair short and black, a little grey about the ears. Al, who used to be a dentist.

Al shakes Willey's hand, says, There's the big man.

Ramona steps out of the kitchen, if that little prep area back there can be called a kitchen. She waves a Hi, asks if anyone's hungry. Ramona always raises her shoulders to her ears when she waves Hi. Ramona, her smile, and her shoulders coming up, to Willey it's like she's waving Hi on the sly, like she lives in some kitten world where greetings have to be done behind someone else's back, and if you get caught, well, the punishment is a severe tickling. That, and she always asks if Willey's hungry, if he wants more soup. Hard to imagine Ramona as a principal of a school.

And Willey? Of course Willey wants soup. The Vegetable Gold is a good choice, due in part to the darker colour. The Baked Potato Alejandro looks good, but a white soup under the shifting food court lights? To hell with that. There's always the chili. The Soup Depot chili is advertised as Chili. In terms of advertisement, you don't mess with what works. Willey decides to follow Rhonda's lead on the

Vegetable Gold. Besides, after Thursday's pizza debauchery, he needs to scale back the carbs a bit.

Al says, Do you know why we call this soup the Vegetable Gold?

Willey doesn't know, and Rhonda, she shakes her head. Willey's always wondered about the name, especially when he considers that the Vegetable Gold used to be called the Gold Vegetable. Why do you call it the Vegetable Gold? Willey asks.

Al smiles, laughs. We make it with 24 carrots.

God damn it, Willey says, turning to Rhonda.

There's one less mystery in life, Rhonda says. What's in the Baked Potato Alejandro? she asks.

Baked Potatoes, Al says, and his laughter pulls everyone into laughing with him. Al, he loves talking about his soup. His and Mona's soup. He says they put care into every bowl. Quality, Al says, is the key ingredient. Quality and humour. Al says, Willey, we're going to make a new soup, and we're going to call it the Twitter Alphabet soup.

Okay Willey says. I'll bite. Why is it the Twitter Alphabet Soup?

Because each bowl has 140 letters, Mona yells from the back.

These two are addictive, Al and Mona. Willey can easily spend the rest of the day here, subject to the light, of course. And Twitter soup? That would probably sell out. Willey and Rhonda take their soups to a nearby table. Thankfully, in front of the Soup Depot, the effects of the lighting are minimal.

Willey reminds Al that two years ago, they called the Vegetable Gold Gold Vegetable. Why the name change? he asks.

Mona, joining them at the table with a cup of coffee, says, Gold Vegetable soup wasn't selling because people thought the sign said Cold Vegetable.

Ahhhhh, Willey says. The type of Ahhhhh you give when you think you should have been able to deduce the answer.

And when we did sell a bowl, Al says, people complained that it was too hot. He laughs up at the ceiling, the laugh of a genuinely happy man.

Rhonda and Willey, with their bowls of complimentary soup, they sit a moment under the same shifting light from when Hicks and Willey lifted Kyle Pearce's wallet. Al heads back to the prep area to answer the phone. Ramona sips from her coffee, asking if the Vegetable Gold needs more salt, more pepper. Rhonda and Willey both assure her, it's delicious.

You're not eating yours like you usually do, Willey.

I'm trying to eat slower, Willey says, smiling.

You make sure you eat enough, she says. You've lost so much weight. She tells Willey and Rhonda she has to check on her soups. She puts her finger to her lips. Don't tell Al, she says, but after he thinks the soups are perfect, I put in a pinch more pepper.

Willey takes a spoonful, pauses for the light to shift red, and slurps it into his mouth.

You look distracted today, Rhonda says. She doesn't know that Willey's spending half his time in the Badlands, working out a paleontological robbery, the other half in the Beltline, trying to figure out how you can un-stalk somebody.

It's the light in here, Willey says.

You look like you've got something on your mind.

My car's name is Angie, he thinks of saying. The Vegetable Gold soup is more at home under shifting coloured light than the chili, that's for sure. Willey's not sure why that is. It's hard trying to understand the physics of how light and soup interact.

Two weeks from Wednesday, dinner at the Garbutt residence. The Garbutt Annual Last BBQ. There's an interaction. Snow or shine. Willey turns to Rhonda, says, Listen, I have a problem. I need to talk to you about this, maybe you can help.

Rhonda leans in, What is it? she asks. She puts her spoon down.

This dinner we're going to, this dinner at your parents' house the week after next, the BBQ? Willey pauses, he narrows his eyes, looks left, looks right, leans in closer. I need to come up with a soup joke for Al. I'm having trouble.

Don't give me that shit, Rhonda says, Something's up with you today, and if you don't want to tell me, that's fine. She takes a spoonful of her soup, her face turning red. Then blue, Green.

A week from Wednesday night, because Wednesday is Willey's Saturday, that's when the BBQ will occur, and it's sure to be an occurrence of some type. They've made special arrangements for Willey, Rhonda's parents. The least Willey can do is bring a soup joke for Al.

Al and Mona are looking forward to returning to Karen and Lawrence's beautiful home. Willey wonders, should he call them Mr. And Mrs. Garbutt? Kay and Larry? Perhaps he should stride in wearing low hanging jeans, a wallet chain. K-Ren and L-Gee, s'up, bitches. More fitting for a hood-rat, maybe.

Angie. That really fits. That's perfect. Exactly what Willey deserves his car to be named. I guess, Rhonda says. I should get back there and earn our soup.

And when I get off work, you get off, Willey says, sneaking a quick lick between two of Rhonda's spread fingers.

Big man, big talk, Rhonda says, and she takes Willey's finger, his right index finger, and holds the end between her teeth. Rhonda says Willey's to cheer up so he can back up his big talk. I mean it, Rhonda says. You have nothing to worry about at that dinner. My parents will love you.

Willey nods. They kiss their goodbye and Willey walks through the changing light of the Scotia Centre food court. Past Oh, Sushi Q, past the Tim's line-up, and out the door to the vacant light of 7th Avenue. Not the best of urban Canyons, 7th Avenue. Not like the canyons Hicks might be looking at right now.

## 6.5

Save for a brief visit as a child to his father's residence—Hicks the elder lived a two year stint in the Drumheller Penitentiary—Hicks has never been to Drumheller. Instead of following Willey's map north toward Trochu, Hicks drives the Trans Canada toward Strathmore, only leaving the wide comfort of those south-curving lanes to follow the 561 straight east. The 561 highway flirts with Hussar, curves around Deadhorse Lake and becomes the 56. Hicks zigzags north and east

through a checkerboard of tamed and untamed moraine—hummocky here, recessional there—until he reaches the hamlet of Dorothy, and the cretaceous and tertiary bedrock of the Red Deer River valley. The Badlands.

Dorothy, Western Monarch. Towns whose futures lay behind them, arranged between the river and the clastic cliffs like so much abandoned mine equipment. Here, ancient rivers drained the Bearpaw Cordillera and debouched their load into the warm, shallow waters of a great Maastrichtian Sea.

Hicks drives past East Coulee. Lehigh. Towns founded on a need for coal, shrinking as the mines have shrunk. Seams of tourists come to be picked over now, but still the ancient swamps are visible in a few of the cliff faces. Bands of black coal among the layers of blue or grey; grey or tan; yellow or orange; flesh or purple or blue depending upon the extravagances of the sun. Cliff faces and bluffs: a land storm-shaped and sun-cooked, belying its wintry half. Would anyone mock those who believe hoodoos are grown rather than sculpted? Their red, iron-rich caps, their horning bodies. As if the breathing apparatuses of alien behemoths lying just beneath the surface of the planet have been thrust into the present. If such a creature were to emerge from the bentonite clay and roar its displeasure, only here would the act seem natural.

Canbria, Rosedale. The outer skirts of Drumheller. After the glaciers scraped the land into prairie, the Red Deer carved through the encyclopedia of rock to read what lies below. The easterly prograding deltaic intermingling of land and water. An ancient shoreline. Even a river must understand where it has been before it can decide where it must go.

Hicks whispers again, the Badlands. He enters Drumheller from the east, passing signs for Saloons and ice-cream vendors. Medium sized agricultural-themed outfits wrap around the surrounding buttes, and the fingers of industry penetrate, but do not obliterate the folds of the valley. Even the Walmart appears positioned in available space, the cliffs left to their own slippery, erosional whims. But this mix of land and business is quick to give way to the city proper, where retail bases itself on the temporary visitor. Hotels and fast food. Gas stations. Across the tracks, the Saan store, that small town dinosaur, has succumbed to the steam-roller that is Dollarama, sitting west of a downtown core that is itself a mere block long and devoid of all traffic.

Hicks parks in front of one or another of the dozen sculpted, cast, painted, welded or otherwise guessed-at renditions of dinosaurs appearing both dangerous and silly. He pulls out Willey's map. Executed with a ball point pen on ripped pages of lined foolscap, the map comes complete with directional arrows and small annotated drawings. This is what the bridge looks like.

The dinosaur stalking Hicks—red body, yellow belly—glances pure north with its right eye, slightly northwest with the left. Hicks pictures Willey with his tongue sticking out in intense concentration drawing that bridge. Good thing for the note, as bridge is far down the list of material nouns this drawing might allude to. What species are you? Hicks whispers to the dinosaur.

Now that he has seen the Badlands, Hicks is eager to get to the X on Willey's map. He drives under a four story mock-up of a Tyrannosaurus, mouth able to hold a dozen tight packed children, merging imagination and terror. Respect, perhaps, for

the power, the size, the success of the genus, but a degree of mockery presents itself in those cartoon proportions. You are gone, and this is what we think of you.

Hicks heads north on 9 and aligns with Willey's map, zigzagging again, now west and north, nearing the Red Deer River. Passing a farm house decently described on the map, Hicks knows the next township road is the one he wants. After three kilometers straight west on loose gravel, Hicks slows and looks for a gas well in the field to the south. Once he finds the white pipes, a few more twists is all that's needed before he'll turn into Willey's designated parking spot. The road curves 90 degrees north before a well of any kind makes an appearance.

With a flare of curses, Hicks turns around and resets at the farmhouse. He drives again to the township road, as indicated on the map, but instead of turning he continues straight, takes the second road instead. A few hundred meters after the three kilometer mark, Hicks finds the well.

As he walks through a worked field, Hicks scatters a few grasshoppers and attracts the attention of what might be every local fly. A few hundred yards to his left an eldritch farm house sits surrounded by outbuildings of mixed decrepitude. A barn with the mid-back sag of an old mule. Faded red sheds, inclining to the east. A weather-streaked Quonset hut previews the rusts and browns that Hicks will come to find in the coulee below. A scan of the horizon reveals no other dwellings. Ahead, the remains of another well, defunct in terms of natural gas, but useful now as a marker on Willey's map. Hicks has to flip to page 4, the details becoming tighter. Keep your back to the well and walk straight into the coulee, the author insists with two exclamation marks. If you stray too far left, you'll end up on the wrong trail.

The harvested field sits tight to the rough valley edge, where various species of scrub grass and sagebrush take over. Aspen leaves flicker like a mass migration of dry moths; weather-cracked spruce rue their decision to grow this far up the valley wall. Without a moment spared to marvel at the spectacle of the river valley, Hicks steps down into the coulee.

## 6.6

As much as Willey would love to sit and watch Rhonda work, making jokes with Al and Ramona, there's a certain creepiness to the idea. Sitting there like some possessive gorilla. That might have been romantic back in the 50s. The 1850s.

That's a woman's word, creepy. A young woman's word.

Willey turns off 6th and heads south on 8th Street. A woman, she can call you a mindless, knuckle-dragging, under-dicked, no-good bastard and you'll say, So, dinner then? And you might even have half a chance. But if she says you're creepy? Get your hat and coat, mister. You're done.

Jolene moves up to sit in the passenger seat, stands a moment panting at the window. Willey took the muzzle off, explaining to Jolene that she wouldn't have to wear it, if she'd stop chewing everything that wasn't a chew toy. Jolene yawns as if saying, sure, whatever. She circles the seat once and lies down.

First thing Willey did when he got back to the car was take that damned heart-Angie photo out of the glove box. Just looking at that picture made him all shrivelly, gave him a set of cold sweats. You know that feeling you get when you remember something embarrassing. Might even be a year later, you remember something stupid you did and all you can do is stare at the ceiling or sit in

amazement over how your sack, if you carry such anatomy, can suddenly shrink up on you. Willey takes the photo and shoves it back into his wallet.

When Willey took heart Angie's photo out of the glove box, he also took out his latest bit of reading material, and now Jolene's on top of it. Willey pulls it out from under her. *Facies Relationships and Paleoenvironments of a Late Cretaceous Tide-Dominated Delta*. Not much of a plot, he must admit.

As they wait for the lights on 8th Avenue, at 8th and 8<sup>th</sup> with Maam's Groceteria over there, Century gardens right here, Willey pats Jolene on the head. Want to go for a walk, girl?

This is an idea worthy of a tail wag.

Willey drives under 9th Avenue, and the Canadian Pacific tracks, the railroad tracks that split the downtown core from the beltline area. Maybe not cartographically, or legally, but psychologically. Willey's out of downtown and into the beltline. Willey's also in the left lane and here the road narrows, the bridge pylons looking inches away. This is a tricky stretch with a standard transmission, Willey tries to guess the light at 10th so he doesn't have to stop. Coming up the other side of the dip, even after a few months of driving this car, a standard transmission on a hill like this is another of life's sack-shrinkers.

The idea of keeping heart-Angie's photo carries a bitterness with it, but the idea of just tossing the photo puckers Willey's mouth even worse. Behind Pearce's building, there's a small park with a few sapling trees. Is burying heart Angie's photo under a bush melodramatic enough?

Screw that, his inner Willey says. Take it to Pearce's building if you have to, but if you bury it I'll try my damndest to inflict erectile dysfunction on you.

Jolene's eagerness for her walk shakes her entire body before giving in to a persistent wag of the tail. Tongue out, eyes wide, staring. Willey makes eye contact and her tail kicks up a notch. This go for a walk idea? This is a wag your whole ass idea. They turn left onto 12th and drive the 5 or 6 blocks east toward Central Memorial Park. Jolene looking at Willey, looking at the door, looking at Willey, wondering, why doesn't Willey open the door already? He said the w-word, let's go.

At the west end of Central Memorial, close to where Willey parks the car, there stands what looks like a pedestal for a statue, yet no statue. Further in there's a similar pedestal with a bronze sculpture of a mounted soldier, looking east, looking, maybe, for whoever got down off that other pedestal. Jolene and Willey, they walk along the park at 12th and wait for the cross light. Jolene sits, the sun warm on her face.

As far as dogs go, the area is predominantly Boston Terrier, Yorkie, dogs of that capacity. A breed of Jolene's notoriety garners attention. A man at the light asks if she's a pit bull. Men are always asking if Jolene's a pit bull.

Jolene's a stray, Willey says, turning to look straight into Kyle Pearce's face. Willey glances immediately to the woman Kyle's standing next to, heart-Angie not comfortable with Jolene's presence. Kyle Pearce, his bank card stuffed in a sock in a dresser back in Willey's home. Willey's surprised at the evenness of his heartbeat. Abandoned, Willey says. The dog. He says, I never thought I'd be owner to such a dog, but. . . Jolene has a way about her.

Jolene, Kyle says, and he reaches down to scratch her head.

Jolene squats to pee.

See, absolutely charming.

I recognize you from somewhere, Pearce says, and suddenly that heartbeat isn't so even anymore. Heart-Angie, her photograph crushed in Willey's hand, reaches over and allows Jolene a sniff of her palm, the arm held out and the sniff given in exchange both stiff, apprehensive.

You're a stalker, Willey's inner Willey says. You're a stalker and shave before you stalk someone, you retard. His other inner Willey, he wants to burst out laughing.

Do you work for Hudson and Company? Pearce says. Downtown, I think I've seen you downtown. The light changes and they all start walking, heart-Angie in the lead, her heels typing out a code, Morse for Get me away from that dog.

No, Willey says. He says he works out in Highfield, and is set to quick-think an elaboration, but Pearce has little patience between questions.

You must live around here, then? he says. Maybe I've seen you around here.

No again, Willey says. But I love the area, love the beltline, you know, the proximity to everything, and I'm looking to move here one day. Willey swallows. Jolene's nails click on the pavement.

They walk toward 1st Street, past what might still be Soda, what might still be the Gravity Room, and the Drum and Monkey, if that's still there. They make small talk.

September in Calgary, somebody says.

The flood.

At 1st Street, they'd have to turn right to get to Union Square, Pearce's building, and though that was Willey's original intent in terms of destination, fuck that noise, now. Heart-Angie's already half way down the sidewalk. Well, Pearce says, if you're looking to move into the neighbourhood, now's the time. There's a number of empty units. Until then, I'll try to remember where I know you from. He says goodbye and they shake hands. Willey with Jolene in the lead, they continue down 12th Avenue.

Off down the sidewalk and along 12th Avenue, east toward the Saddledome, away from Union Square. The river, at this very location, knee deep a mere three months before. Knee deep, maybe deeper and following the past recession of water, Jolene and Willey walk east toward the Elbow, and her big sister, the Bow.

The condominiums in the area—the older looking a little vintage in the shadows of the taller, younger buildings—a number of the newer buildings take their colour from the palette of the new 20 dollar bill. Willey finds it hard to imagine a day when someone would look at these buildings and think they look run down. One thing the old and new condominiums have in common, they're shitty at taking your mind off of things.

Jolene and Willey walk through Victoria Park, past the casino, past the Stampede Grounds. They stride past a set of manicured ruins, the ruins of an old hospital. Jolene taking advantage of Willey keeping to her pace, instead of trying to heel her back. Beyond the ruins, Willey finds the bridge that crosses the Elbow just east of 7th street and there, without much ceremony, he gives heart-Angie's

photograph to the river. He tells Jolene it's time to head home, time for her to rest in her kennel. If they hurry, Willey might have an hour or two to ponder Hicks before he has to work. Surely the man's about to report on the impossibility of such a venture as removing a dinosaur head on the sly, and the back and forth over dollars can continue.

## 6.7

Hicks clammers and occasionally slides his way down toward the Red Deer. Ground-water seepage keeps a path to the river well marked and treacherous. The path shows no direct evidence of the layers of stratigraphy that mark the epochs, but both right and left the cliffs stack like books of alternating authorship. Hicks steps through the Scollard Formation, the Whitemud, he slides into the Horseshoe Canyon Formation, descends through millions of years, through layers of interbedded sand and shale, grey silty shale, brown carbonaceous shale, silty sand, with thin seams of coal and thin seams of bentonite offering occasional contrasts. Massive layers of sandstone form the base pigment of the cliff faces, pale yellow flirting with fawn below and blushing pink above. Bands of red fired by the mid-day sun hint at cataclysms past. Crevices from present day slumping wait patiently for hooves and ankles.

Part way down the hill and firmly bedded in the late Maastrichtian, Hicks finds the boulder he's looking for. An immense iron concretion from a hoodoo now worn away, about 6 feet in irregular diameter, rendered by God or nature or both in an artist's palette ranging from burnt sienna to raw umber. Big rock, Willey states

on the map, though his rendering, in a solid line of Bic blue, holds true to the rock's profile.

Turn with your back to the river, the map says and Hicks immediately notices the small tabletop or shelf indicated on Willey's map. Like a miniature butte, formed where the dry creek that rules this coulee splits to come around either side of what might be called a sugarloaf. About three feet in height, eight feet wide, thicker at the cliff and pinched nearer the slope. Hicks walked along the top of this table, maybe about 20 feet in total, in order to avoid the shifting nature of the path to the river. He climbs back onto the table. Four ironstone rocks have been placed not so suspiciously that a man clambering along would devise their artificial setting. Willey indicates these rocks on the map, and four circles mark the terminals of his X. The rocks conspire to hold down a section of black polyvinyl sheeting, itself covered with dirt and debris. Rolling two of the rocks away, breathing heavy, Hicks finds the edge of the poly and pulls the sheet back, shaking the dirt, pebbles and sticks off.

Willey's photos managed to capture every feature of this ancient, terrible, beautiful, efficient mouth. The smoothness of the fossil, the dark brown to outright black of mineralized bone against the grey and buff of the sandstone matrix. Willey captured everything but the scale. With a foot and a half of mandible and skull exposed, and basing on images cribbed from the Tyrell website, Hicks surmises that another one or two feet of cranial bone lies under the sandstone. Mother of Christ, Hicks whispers, but the only listener, a coal-glossy crow on a nearby aspen, offers no rebuttal.

Hicks in a series of quick movements, looks further along the table trying to predict where the rest of the reptile situates. Along the side of the table, carefully observing, Hicks finds small rocks the same colour and smoothness of the fossil. Finger bones, perhaps. Carpals, phalanges. On the opposite side of the table he finds nothing, but through the slant of the head, he's sure that the dinosaur here sets deeper into the landscape. If the entire carcass remains pressed into the rock—Hicks looks at the head again—and if the neck pulled back into the death pose—Hicks cues an image on his phone, an *Albertosaur* with its head flexed back against its spine—the skeleton should extrude from the rock where he stands. Based on that head alone. . . Hicks looks at the crow. Thirty, thirty-five feet, he says. The crow can only watch.

His phone out, Hicks snaps a dozen photos. He compiles a mental bullet list of reasons why this venture is an impossibility, of why he should note his GPS coordinates, take his photographs, and make straight for the Tyrell. Maybe this isn't even a *Sarcophagus* at all. Maybe this is a new subspecies. *Albertosaurus Hicksii*. He blows some of the finer debris away from the mandible and is momentarily shocked at the layering of teeth, the number of teeth, before realizing that both sides of the skull and mandible have been pressured together.

Where the sandstone overlays the mineralized bone, Hicks pries with the edge of his jack-knife. The sandstone crumbles away far easier than expected and for a brief moment Hicks feels the tingle that this might be possible.

That feeling fades as he stands up to look around. Short of a helicopter, how the hell would a man be expected to drag this head out of here? That question itself

depending upon Hicks's ability to chisel the head and matrix down to a manageable size. Particularly chiselling away from underneath. You would have to consider the weight, he whispers to himself. You have to consider working around the spine, to remove the head. You have to consider creating a plaster jacket. You have to consider a hundred considerations you can't even imagine. He stands and stares at the sky. Wipes sweat from his brow, finds focus on the crow.

What do you think? Hicks says. The crow lowers its head. Hicks scans along the cliff faces around him. He sends a one word text to Willey. Impossible.

All right, crow, Hicks says. I'll leave it up to you and God, or you and the devil, whoever's listening.

He starts back up the coulee, at times having to hold on to bushes to keep from slipping in the bentonite path. The spring that carved this coulee barely trickles in September, but enough seepage occurs to keep a man on his toes. And his heels. Hicks digs in to make his way up and out of the valley.

## **6.8**

The city can be a real charmer, that's for sure. Certain mornings when you're driving down Memorial Drive, heading west, the mountains look like they've crept in for a one-nighter and got caught half-way home. All the promotional material for the city is shot facing west. In the afternoon, with the heavy industry on full-blast, the easterly view shows a brown fuzz sweatering the city. Willey spends most of his life under that mushroom-colour.

You wake up some mornings, you look out your windows, there's heavy snow on the trees, and you swear you slipped into some fairy tale locked into the most

magical of winters. That same day, you leave your house at 1:30 in the afternoon and it's 21 degrees outside. One afternoon, Willey tells Hicks to meet him at Atlas Pizza, and Willey, in the parking lot getting drenched under a hail-storm, receives a call from Hicks. Hicks, across the street, about a hundred feet away and bone dry suggesting Willey come over there.

The day looks as fresh as a Clearasil commercial, but Willey is more than aware of the cloud above. Call him a sell-out but he'd love to buy a house over in the west, someplace close to Parker, but damn if they haven't completely lost their minds about house prices over there. Fucking flippers.

The seasons in Calgary are pushing back. Summer goes deep into September, winter doesn't start full-time shifts until January, but winter, sometimes she likes to stick around into June.

Willey pulls into the Las Gary's lot a half hour before he's set to start, Mid-September and 20 degrees outside. He's decided to simply park and sit with his head resting against the steering wheel. He should stay like this for the rest of the afternoon, Willey in his car, the windows all the way down. Of course, with his phone, Willey can play video games, or watch movies, or he can tell his friends on Facebook all about him sitting in his car. Stephanie's or Mike's friends, that is.

What he should do is get into work. The Lanes might have received an order for the concession that has to be put away. Someone may have clicked the Bowling Enquiries button online and sent an inquiring email to which Willey should formulate an answer. Someone might have clicked the Event Planning button. Book your next private or corporate event at Las Gary's. Children's birthday parties, adult

stag parties. Team building exercises. Snack on your favorite foods while you celebrate your eleventh birthday, your impending wedding, your miserable corporate life. We're licensed to serve beer, highballs and draft, and we also sell non-alcoholic beverages. To book your next group event, email TODAY, and we don't use all caps lightly.

Sunday, glow-bowl day, when the alley looks like a cross between a laser tag arena and a Special Olympics awards ceremony. The day starts busy with kid's parties, post-Church gatherings in a safe space, but late afternoon on a Sunday? That's the time for drunk casino winners and pairs of young couples looking desperately for some new experience.

There might be someone in there right now, someone who just won four hundred dollars playing blackjack who thinks it'll be cool or funny to join a bowling league for a year.

Or worse, Willey thinks. There might be someone who's seen *The Big Lebowski*, who wants to join a bowling league for a year and bowl like Goodman, Bridges and Buscemi bowled. Some guys watch *Kingpin* on Netflix or on a late night rerun, five guys all drunk at the end of the night, and *Kingpin* comes on, and they kill themselves laughing. Bill Murray's hair, or that moment when the audience finds out Amish Quaid scores high because he bowls 12 frames instead of 10. The next day two of those five guys want to join a bowling league and it's Willey who has to put up with them. Willey can tell the serious bowlers from the half-assers. Sorry guys, he'll say. Leagues are full.

Full?

Full. Every night.

Every night, the adult leagues are tits to elbow, and if you want to join a league here, you pretty much have to wait until one of the Flintstones has a stroke. Check back next month.

In four years of working for Las Gary's, Willey's had to shoo off maybe a dozen *Lebowski* fans, ensuring they don't get into the leagues. In four years of working for Las Gary's, Willey hasn't taken a single sick day, nor has he booked off a holiday, but there's no way he can work today, not with Hicks out there and that promise of a hundred thousand dollars burning a hole in his conscience.

He phones and talks to Marcy, who's working the day shift. Marcy, I'm in my car outside, but I think I might throw up. I'm sick Marcy.

Marcy's happy to work late, she says she's happy to cover Willey's shift, and it hasn't really been that busy anyway, so no, Willey shouldn't worry about it. She, however, is worried about Willey. Marcy, she says that in four years, Willey's never taken a day off, but he's lost a lot of weight lately. Take the day off, but be careful. Go to the hospital if you have to

In the four years that Willey's worked at Las Gary's (paying rent, paying electricity, his phone bill, the cable bill) in that four years he's still only managed to put away a third of what will be his cut if Hicks does what Willey's sure Hicks is going to do. Which is to cut a dinosaur head out of the ground, and nothing more.

Thanks Marcy, Willey says. And maybe, if you want, you can take my shift tomorrow, too.

## 6.9

The weathered wood of the nearby farm house indicates a rain and wind-lashed existence, but rock solidity and squareness of side key a maker willing to fight the elements tooth and extra nail. One could describe the house as gingerbread gothic, added emphasis on gothic. Bates Motel, Hicks says to himself, laughing.

The plan is simple. Be truthful and get chased off the land. Head to the Tyrell. Sorry Willey, wasn't meant to be. Hicks passes his truck, the house looms. A house of this type, of this texture denotes gray skies and lightning, but the day is steel blue and hot. Hicks foots down the driveway, Timberland Boondocks kicking up dust. Waterproof leather, anti-fatigue insole the perfect work boot for any paleontological thievery.

Hicks takes the three step onto the porch, opens the screen door and hammers the inside door. This should only take a few seconds, unless the owner answers with a shotgun, in which case it will take less. He hammers the door again.

A sound from behind him, a sound like a jacket flapping in the wind, and Hicks turns to see a man in an oiled duster, an oiled duster dark with age and use but not near as dark or aged as the man beneath. Hicks stands speechless to the face of a man seemingly made from the area's darker geology. Skin the color of the valley coal seams, highlighted in the rust of iron rich sediments. The degree of wrinkle and fold on the man's face suggest a lifetime or two of hard work under freeze-thaw conditions. A delta of creases lead to each eye, sagging eyelids hold a perennial squint. Dark concretions of papulosis nigra in the cliff face of the man's cheeks. The kinked white of a week's beard growth and a ragged blue cap that might have been

set on that concretion of a head eighty years ago. If this man is eighty, Hicks thinks, he's a hundred. Hicks rubs his fingers together, but his knuckle won't crack.

You own this place? Hicks says. This land?

Ya think if I didn't own it I'd be living here? the man says, his voice a rock polisher working a fresh tray of gravel. What do you want, boy?

You live all by yourself, old man?

Why, you gonna rob me?

Probably not, Hicks says. Not your home, anyway. How'd you like to make five thousand dollars?

What would I do with five thousand dollars?

Spend it?

On what?

Then save it.

For what?

I don't know. The future.

The future? Kid, I don't plan anything past the next trip to the shitter. Get to it, what are you selling?

Hicks swallows. There's a dinosaur on your land back by the river, he says. A big one. You can contact the museum and let them have it. Ten years from now they'll be here for six months, and two years after that you can read Found near Trochu in the newspaper. Or, you can let me pull it out, and I'll give you five thousand dollars.

Kid, I ain't reading nothing in no newspaper.

Hicks looks the man square in the eye, and only now notices that his gaze is focused on the blackness above and beyond Hicks's right shoulder.

Shit. You blind, old man?

Only since birth.

Hicks stands still for a moment. He scratches his head, waves his hand in front of the old man's eyes.

I can hear, though, kid. Now get to it. How much you selling this dinosaur for, if you prove able to get it from under my ground.

Fifty thousand dollars.

You cocky or stupid? Which one?

Both.

The old man nods his head. You were going to show me something on my land? Let's get going, I have to get back here to feed my horses.

The man turns and starts walking, veering towards the outbuildings that situate alongside the house.

You want to know where it is? Hicks shouts.

The man stops. All right, he says. Where is it, this dinosaur?

Hicks points. There's a coulee straight out from where that gas well is. Half way down there's a large rock—

I know the spot.

It's maybe a hundred feet up from that rock.

Hicks steps off the porch to follow, to guide.

I'll meet you down there, the old man says.

You need me to show you—

I'll meet you down there, I said.

Halfway across the field, his boots kicking up more devils, Hicks continues his inward mutterings about the stupidity of this venture. You ask God and a crow for help, even throw a few thousand dollars into the mix, and this is what you get back? An old blind man? And blacker than the ace of spades, his father would say. A thought itches to get out the back of Hicks's skull; saying this man is black is like saying a man the colour of snow is white.

Hicks turns to the sound of a horse running up behind. Running right toward him in fact, and Hicks freezes, not sure if he should dodge out of the way, stand still or drop his pants. The horse adjusts its trajectory, and streams past, head out, tail back. The old man turns on the saddle, Good thing my horse can see, he shouts. Hicks watches as the horse slows at the gas well, watches as it takes the left coulee, Willey's forbidden coulee, and starts down.

Approaching the boulder, Hicks hears a nicker before he sees either horse or rider. I know, the old man says.

Back up this way, Hicks yells.

The horse plods carefully up the bentonite path and with a drawn out neigh, halts where the path momentarily levels out. An array of rocks ranging from fist to head-size make for unsure hoofing.

All right, Chester, the old man says. He dismounts and stands a moment, Hicks unsure what to do. He offers help but the old man raises a hand and waves a no before stooping slightly. He takes cautious steps toward Hicks's voice. Finding

the table edge he stoops and puts his hands on the top, steps up and crawls. His hands spread out like the feelers of some Cambrian organism, his fingers find the fossil almost immediately. They probe the maxilla, the nasal and feel along to where the lacrimal is overlaid by the matrix. Now back along the mandibular ramus, the old man's fingers caress each dental. Each tooth.

Such beauty, the old man says. He rolls from his knees and unto his buttocks, turns to face the sun. He raises his head to the warmth. Such creation.

I figure it's about thirty feet in creation, Hicks says. But I only need to get the head. Someone else will come for the rest.

What's your name, kid?

Hicks. Dwayne Hicks.

Okay, kid. Name's Argo. Say, kid, how are you going to this this beast out from under my ground?

## **6.10**

Hicks, based on what he observed at the specimen site, has a plan. So he says. A plan to get the beast out of the land. Willey watches Hicks's truck bounce into the Atlas parking lot, and they watch him the whole way into the restaurant, his long stride, a toothpick shoved in his mouth, his Tyler Durden hairstyle. Dianne stares into her coke.

Hicks walks in, sees Willey, looks over at Dianne, his face that of a man who wants to ask Willey why why why would you do this? Dianne must have noticed Hicks's look. Why not? she says.

Dianne is your extra hands, Willey says to Hicks. He says, Before you flip a lid, I'll remind you that this is your idea. Quote: Good, she can dig then, end quote. By the way, Willey says. I insisted to our buyers that the specimen was in a location impossible to remove without extra care, equipment and attention to detail. There is an extra 20,000 on the table.

That's convenient, Hicks says.

You can keep your original forty, but with less work. Dianne, your assistant, will get thirty, under the condition that she does no more than 75 percent of the work you do, or something like that, you two can sort that out when you're out there. Me, I'll supply your supplies, I'll contact our buyers, and I'll take nice hot showers every day you're in that coulee. In exchange, I will also get thirty.

Assistant? Dianne says.

Less work? Hicks says. With her there I should get danger pay.

Dianne lifts her chin. I work for free, she says. Thirty keeps my mouth shut.

We'll see how shut your mouth is when we're digging that thing out under the sun with the only cloud a cloud of bugs.

I'm more than willing to walk out of here right now, Dianne says. Hand over my thirty thousand, and I'll see to it that my next stop does not involve a television station or a museum.

Willey calms the two down to a low seethe, and he asks Hicks the general details of his plan for extraction. That's Hicks's term, extraction. Like he's pulling a tooth out there.

Hicks relates his extraction plan. First, they'll chip away the sandstone, the loose sandstone, Hicks says, to reveal the extent of the skull. They will then incise a line around the head and chip down and out, removing the sandstone to reveal a block of matrix, sufficient in size to protect the fossil, yet small enough to be lifted by one of Argo's engine hoists. This hoist will be rolled into place after the sandstone around the head is removed. As they undermine the block, they'll apply a plaster jacket in stages, while sliding straps underneath to support the weight. Hoist up, Argo's horse cart underneath, Chester pulls it down toward the river, where it'll be lifted into Hicks's truck. A short, albeit bumpy drive to the river access road. Wipe, throw, flush, Hicks says. Ta-Da!

Argo?

Chester?

Argo is the landowner, Hicks says. He's big, he's black, he's blind, and he looks to be about 90-years-old if not a hundred. He is also under the impression that we are being paid fifty thousand for this specimen, of which he gets ten percent. Hicks turns to Dianne. Chester is the horse, he says. Paid in carrots.

Willey, he finds it rather interesting that Argo is the landowner, what with his belief that Rhonda's Aunt Irene and Uncle Bill own the land. What a twist, and at the moment, Willey's not sure how to handle that twist. If Argo's a fiction, and Argo's ten percent is money that Hicks wants to sponge up, five thousand seems pretty low, especially considering Dianne will be standing next to him the whole time. If Hicks is trying to pull something, he'll have to share. Still, it's not like Willey can out and out

call Hicks on this bit of Argo news. The man has enough bargaining power without knowing the connection between the land and Rhonda.

What follows is an easy alteration to the monetary arrangements, all three agreeing to split Argo's portion evenly, not to the penny, but close enough. Other elements of math, however, warrant discussion. Due to the creature's grin, those two (three if you include Argo's help) will have to remove a sandstone block sized 3.5 feet long by 3 feet wide by 1.5 feet deep. Plus or minus, Hicks says. A block of sandstone that size grand totals to just over fifteen cubic feet. 2700 pounds according to the internet. More or less. Hicks assures Willey that Argo assured him that this is a figure handled by hoist and horse both.

Do we trust Argo? Dianne asks.

We don't have a choice, Hicks says. He's already cutting up one of his engine hoists, reconfiguring it to so we can use it without the legs getting in the way. Our problem is noise and attention, we need to do this fast.

What's Argo's last name? Willey says.

Hick shrugs. Argo To Hell and Gone for all I know.

This is going to take weeks, Dianne say. She has Hicks's phone, the images of the *Albertosaur* bright in her hand.

The sandstone is fairly loose, Hicks tells her. You can gouge it with a car key. At the front of the table—Hicks circles his hand over his phone—it's less like sandstone, more like a tight, fine gravel. You're not making a wall of phalli with this sandstone. Hicks leans back in his chair. Four days at the most, he says. During the week preferably.

Four days? Dianne says. That's impossible.

That long? Willey asks.

Hicks reminds Dianne that they're not digging out some bone that needs sketches and measurements. Speed is the fashion of the day, not detail. Rough work, and fast work, but having said that, Hicks turns to Willey and adds that they can't saw the bitch out of the rock. He insists that the head is far enough from the river that anyone floating by won't notice, sheltered enough that anyone looking from above won't see them, but they can't crank up a saw in there. Noise like that? Argo, Hicks tells them, says the land there is both parent and child to the people who live upon it. Anyone hears a noise like a saw, they'll come looking.

Well, isn't that poetic.

My only question, Dianne says, is when do we do this?

The 23rd, Hicks, says. A week from tomorrow. Argo suggests that the number of hikers and canoers will be limited, says there isn't much around, population wise, but any foreign truck attracts attention. Argo, Hicks says, suggests we arrive prior to dark.

Willey nods. It would seem that Argo is privy to Bill and Irene's itinerary. Willey can imagine some connection, Bill and Irene charging Argo with protecting their horses and dinosaurs while they're away. Maybe, in the country, 90 isn't that old.

Dianne taps her fingers on the table. Why is Argo agreeing to this so easily?

That is an excellent question, Hicks says. And as soon as I sift out an answer, I'll let you know.

**6.11**

Monday, September 23rd, 3 in the AM. Hicks shrugs himself comfortable at the wheel of his Ford, Dianne shifts herself in the passenger seat, tilting the seat back, thumbing on the ass-warmer. Willey rolls over in bed, fluffs a pillow, another 6 hours of sleep ahead of him.

Dianne wears an old pair of jeans, ragged cuffs fringing a brown pair of hiking boots still gleaming on the soles. A red hoodie under a denim jacket, pony tail pulled through the back of a black baseball cap, a white diamond logo on the brim. A small backpack on the seat between them contains her extra clothes.

Cold out, Dianne says.

They thunder through the orange-black of a late Calgary night, heading north on the Deerfoot. The first half hour of the trip unrolling in relative silence, Hicks chewing a toothpick, sipping his coffee, Dianne looking at him every few minutes. Words on the edge of her lips. Questions.

Last time I was up at three in the morning, Hicks says, I was on my way to bed. Dianne stares. Nods.

All right, fire away, Hicks says.

Dianne shifts in her seat, twists toward Hicks. Where'd you go? she says.

Just left is all.

People don't just leave like that, I think you hurt Willey's feelings.

Willey's feelings are a big boy's feelings.

Where'd you go?

I have a place in Bridlewood.

I'm not sure where that is, Dianne says. Are you working? Even your father doesn't know where you went.

He asked about me?

No, we asked about you, and he could only shrug.

Yes, I'm working, Hicks says. I started serious with the temp staffing place, and eventually got hired to flag for a construction crew, just like you said would happen.

Dianne waits for more detail, but none comes. Hicks opens his mouth for the coffee and toothpick only. She watches the ditch fly past, tall grass lit by the headlights. You ever going to get that tooth fixed? Dianne says.

At Crossfield, Hicks thumbs the window down an inch, Dianne turning to the sudden roar. He flicks the toothpick out the window.

Are you still flagging? Dianne asks.

Nope, Hicks says. Construction. Lot of grunting. Hence the truck.

I've slipped into the Twilight Zone, Dianne says, her voice with a touch of smile. Hicks merely nods.

This is crazy, Dianne says. This scheme.

Hicks takes the last sip of his coffee. I don't disagree, he says.

But I'm glad to be along, Dianne whispers, looking out the back windshield of the truck.

The moon waning, gibbous, and directly behind them. The moon lighting a wisp of cloud. The constellation of dashboard lights mirrored on the glass obscures

any stars, and as Hicks changes lanes to pass a semi-trailer, the reflected signal-light points flashing to the moon. Dianne offers a yawn to the morning, and seeing her, Hicks stifles his own.

At Olds they turn East on Highway 27. 3:50, an hour out from Argo's ranch— whoever's ranch—the sun not due for another three and a half hours. Prairie under the sun seems to lack human habitation, but the night lights of farms and ranches give away what the day hides. Hicks glances now and again at these lights, wondering about the lives they entail. Those people waking up at this God-awful hour.

This is a nice truck, Dianne says. The seat warmer is one of civilization's greatest inventions.

Hicks turns to Dianne, shifts himself in his seat. He tells her that he's never touched the seat warmer button in the truck. But, he says, we'll see if that holds out in December.

And your car? Dianne says.

Haven't touched the seat-warmer in the car either.

Dianne stares at Hicks for a moment. He's quiet, she thinks, but not angry quiet. He's close, but he's not quite typical Hicks today. You still have the car? she asks.

At home, Hicks says, in the garage, under a cover.

Dianne nods, but can't think of anything to say about the car. Hicks clears his throat, turns to her and says, When I moved in to my new place, I was putting the cover on the car, and a man offered me fifty dollars.

Fifty dollars?

Yep. Fifty dollars for the cover. Forty for the cover and the car together.

He's not typical Hicks, Dianne thinks, but he's telling typical Hicks jokes.

Whatever he is, he's not angry at her for being here.

Argo and Chester meet them at the end of the gravel driveway, and lead them to a dirt track where Hicks can access the river in his truck. They truck their supplies in a single load to the river. Buckets, shovels, a flat of water, their tools, enough trail mix to keep a pair of lost Boy Scouts in misery for a week. A tent, sleeping bags, camping stove, cans of stew, cans of soup, bread. Lawn chairs, hot dogs and a single bag of marshmallows. A cooler with two bags of ice. Coffee. Beer.

Argo has a small trailer, built for hauling behind an ATV, since converted to, quite literally, horse power. Chester takes two trips to get their material from the river side to the site proper. As Hicks leaves with Argo to park the truck at the boat launch, about a half hour's walk away, Dianne sets up the tent.

Dianne's idea, the tent. Not just a tent to sleep in, a large tent as a means to disguise a portion of their work, should they be interrupted. A great plan, Willey said. Hicks nodded approval, unwilling to give voice to the quality of idea.

The false front for this operation, should anyone come curious, is the pair as a couple of young, bumbling, geology students enjoying a few September days along the river, while photographing the local stratigraphy. A thrift-store tripod and Willey's digital camera carried along with the supplies serves to support this fiction.

Dianne pitches the brand new Insta-dome directly over the fossil. Willey bought the largest available, 140 square feet of camping luxury, enough to sleep 8

comfortably, or 2 comfortably with enough room left over for black-market paleontology. She drags the tent so the left side covers their specimen, the wall of the tent right on the table edge. They have to step up three feet to enter, but their work, at least their initial work, will be disguised. She cuts the floor out around the *Albertosaur*.

Her first look at the creature came in the beam of Hicks's thin flashlight, the contrast between light and shadow as sharp as the contrast between rock and woman. And now, there in the tent, alone, her second look contains twice the terror of the first. Here is a face that, if anything, should never be allowed to surface. If we are all intentions of God, Dianne whispers. What was, what is, God's intention with this creature?

What do you think? Hicks says when he returns to the camp, Dianne outside the tent, organizing equipment.

I don't like it, Dianne says, looking at the tent. I don't even like being in there.

Hicks brings up a photo on his phone, a diagram of a reconstructed *Albertosaur* skull. Under the light of their lone flashlight—Hicks not wanting to use the Coleman lantern to lighthouse their location across the valley—the two try to align the spaces and bumps of the image with the details of the distorted skull beneath them. Hicks suggests they remove all the matrix, chipping carefully from the present exposure all the way up the skull and mandible until the length of the head is revealed.

Or, Dianne says, we can estimate where the head and spine meet, and chip down until we find fossil.

My fear, Hicks says, is if we come in from above, we chip too far down and damage our money.

So? So what if we damage the money? We can damage it a little as long as we don't destroy it.

Hicks runs his finger from stone to fossil, sliding over the *Albertosaur's* lacrimal bulge. I don't want to butcher the thing, he whispers.

We're cutting its head off, Dwayne.

Hicks runs both hands through his hair. We haven't even touched a chisel yet, and here we go.

Dianne's shoulders slump. She says, Look at it this way, any rock we leave on top only serves to protect our money.

All right, Hicks says, I concede that we have some leeway in what we can get away with, damage wise, but we should strive to make as few pieces as possible.

Agreed, Dianne says.

Hicks opens his toolbox, frees the chisels, the mallets. He checks the time on his phone. 6:45. He's surprised to discover that there is coverage here in the valley, in the coulee. Hicks sends a two word text to Willey. Here. Working. Might as well get at it, he says to Dianne.

Hicks finds a point about 15 inches back from where the *Albertosaur* emerges from beneath the sandstone blanket. He strikes one of the smaller chisels with the mallet, a piece of sandstone flits like a moth in the flashlight beam.

With no further ceremony, they work in a silence punctuated only by the sound of illicit chiselling. Hunched over, pressing their knees into the foam pads

they brought for bedding, pressing their wrists into the sandstone as they hold the chisels. The sandstone as soft as it is, the grooves come easy, but dust flies. Eyes filling with grit, Dianne digs through the supplies for the safety glasses.

The occasional small talk consists of how best to hold the mallet, how best to hit the chisel. Chips of rock, some the size of quarters, some larger flake off from under their work. They slide this debris out of their way, forming a pile close to the tent's door. Side by side they inch toward their money, but both feel as if miles lie ahead.

The sides of the tent lighten with the coming morning, a slow shift in light from a yellowed lime to a pale sage. Dianne sits up to take a mouthful of water, pushes back the flap of the tent to spit.

A caw axes the silence.

Dianne and Hicks both jerk to the sharpness of the sound, Hicks hearing the flap of wings as the crow leaves its perch atop the tent. It lands on a nearby aspen, left eye black, glassy, keen. Watching. Hicks picks up a disc of sandstone and flings it at the crow, sidearm, like a child trying to skip rocks. The crow steps off the branch and flies toward the edge of the coulee.

By mid-morning, Hicks figures they've exposed the—he squints at his phone—the laterosphenoid, he says. We should only have to chip back another few inches. Careful work now, Dianne using the small chisel to carve a line perpendicular to the alignment of the exposed portion of head, Hicks with the edge of his pocket knife, working the details of Dianne's line, flicking stone back and away from the mouth.

Dianne wipes at her brow, arches her back to pull her jacket from her hoodie. Even through her hoodie, Hicks can make out her shape, and memories of those curves flood his side of the tent. The light of the tent now a garden green, and the smell of the tent, too; a sweaty, dark, paradise. Dianne raises her arms to readjust her hair. Her shirt and hoodie pull up, her jeans ride low on her hips. Hicks presses his forehead into the sandstone, opening his eye not two inches from the curves of the *Albertosaur's* teeth.

They chip and cut, and hammer and incise and the work progresses as smooth as the sun rises, but half as slow. Hicks in the tent, hot, sweaty, gritty, down to shirt and jeans now, Dianne still in the hoodie. His stomach protesting, but Hicks will not be the first to quit working, and he will be damned if he allows himself to appear uncomfortable in front of Dianne.

The morning passes in flying chunks. The temperature outside the tent rises through the morning hours, hits an even 16 degrees at 11:00. The sun able to find its way through short aspens to sear the tent. The two sit back and survey their mess. They've revealed the posterior portion of the skull. Hicks again checking his phone. His diagram describes a bone called the occipital, attached to the end of the squamosal. He shows Dianne. Squamosal, she says, and she runs her finger along the freshly uncovered portion of fossil. This piece right here.

They are now able to place their skull in relation to the diagram, the inward curve from squamosal to squamosal on their specimen flattened and twisted. The disfigurement telling stories of fossilisation and pressure. Stories that, should they

complete their mission, will be lost to anyone concerned with the physics of such ancient death.

We chip through here, Hicks says, indicating an imagined line anterior to the occipital condyle. This is where we relieve the beast of its head. We'll probably destroy at least one of the vertebrae. I'm sure Willey's friends will be able to fashion another. We should chip back here a little more.

Dianne's chisel and mallet clatter to the ground. I have to use the ladies bush, she says. She opens the flap and again she jerks, startled.

Hicks turns. That crow back?

Argo, Dianne says.

Chester stands fifteen feet from the tent, Argo seated on the horse, staring toward the sun.

I brought the hoist, Argo says, indicating the trailer behind the horse. What now?

## **6.12**

Prior to Willey's walking regimen, he wouldn't get up before 11:00. Scheduled most nights to 10:00, picked up after work by Hicks and Dianne, he often didn't get home until 4:00. Even on days when he came home straight after work, he'd stay up to read or mash his Xbox controller.

This morning, he's up and out of his room at 8. In truth he was rolling over at 4, then near 7 when his phone buzzed announcing Hicks's presence in the Red Deer River valley. Willey arranges the money, Willey buys the equipment, Hicks and Dianne do the work, but no one sleeps well. Hard to imagine exactly what the two of

them have to do to get that money out of the ground. Also pressing on Willey's mind, the Garbutt family's Annual Last BBQ. Snow or shine. T-minus 58 hours.

Outside, Willey waits for Jolene to get on with her morning business. Whether she's standing still or walking, it takes ten minutes before she'll squat and drop. Willey's been walking her down the back alley to a sidewalk that exits Dover on the east side, and crosses the train tracks that run between Dover and Erin Woods. They stand and stare at each other. Willey checks his watch. Two more minutes.

Rhonda's at school all day today and she has a project pending, says she's struggling with it. They've exchanged a couple of messages already this morning (I hope you have a good day. XOXO) but Willey feels at his most supportive when he's silent. Call me later, Heart heart heart.

As an added distraction, rather, as a distraction to all the other distractions, Willey's decided to do something about the lottery ticket, the fake Blackjack scratch and win ticket. Perhaps he can find a way to sell the ticket to somebody, and he can recover his money.

His mother's not impressed with Willey calling in sick last week, nor will she be impressed when he tells her that he's already made arrangements for the entire week off. How can a man be expected to focus on his lane-broom with his two friends out there, chipping away the stone in that coulee? He won't be able to program names into the autoscorer. Everyone will either be Dianne or Dwayne. Some four-year-old kid named Albertosaur, that kid'll play two games versus his little sister, Hundred Grand.

Jolene sniffs a circle on the sidewalk, lowers herself and manages to land half her load between the rail and the pavement.

When Willey arrives back at the apartment, Jolene, ever the optimist, runs wagging to Willey's mother. Sitting at the kitchen table, last week's *Der Spiegel* spread-paged in front of her, Willey's mother sips from a cup of coffee, her first or maybe her fourth of about eighty she'll drink that day. Willey's already decided not to tell her that he took the week off. He'll take some money from the future house account and put it into the present bill account in case she has any questions. What's an extra few months of saving money for a house he's probably never going to buy anyway? In the time it takes you to increase your account by 5 percent, the average house in Calgary goes up 7 percent. Half a million in Calgary will get Willey a three bedroom bungalow in a decent neighbourhood. That same house in Phoenix goes for a hundred and twenty thousand, and you don't have to buy a snow-shovel. Difference enough to push a man to robbery. Like that's the only reason, Willey says to himself. But it's a good excuse.

Behind his mother, on the sideboard, Willey notices a photo of his ten-year-old self. The photo's probably been sitting there for fifteen years and Willey's noticed it maybe five times, today one of those times. He looks at that little moron and tries to remember why he was so happy that day. That little idiot wanted to be a scientist. He wanted to be an archaeologist or a wild animal photographer and did Willey ever let that kid down.

Mother's going off about an article on chemical attacks in Syria. She's always going off on Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq. Israel and Palestine are a hot topic these days.

Willey leans over and kisses his mother on the head. As he kisses her, he turns the photo around. Willey doesn't know what to say to that kid. Hey kid, sorry. Sorry I took every chance you had and put it to sleep on the couch. Bowling balls are composed of a polyurethane-based reactive resin, kid, that's as close to an archaeologist as you're going to get. Enjoy.

Look at this, Willey's mother says. Gaza.

Willey rolls his eyes. Violence in Gaza? he says. Really? Willey's mother reports the news to warn Willey, she raises her voice, takes on a squeak. The dire circumstances of this world are revealed through the news.

The German news, Willey says.

Violence blows from the Middle East and will blow here soon enough. Willey must watch out. Drives his mother nuts when Willey's out, drives Willey nuts when he's home. On that note, Willey reminds himself that while's he's not working this week, he'll have to stay out of the apartment during his usual work hours.

I'm not taking the dog with me this morning, Willey says. I'll be back to take her out before I go to work. Don't lock her in the kennel. Let her sniff around.

But she follows me around, Willey's mother says. If I go into the bedroom and close the door, there's so much whining.

The red balcony curtains are open, the ends of the room darker with the morning light coming through the fabric on either side of the balcony doors. Open doors usually push mother to the centre of the room. Behind her, next to the now reversed photo on the sideboard and waiting their turns, sit seven issues of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. After leaving Munich in 1989, she's never missed an issue. The

only trouble is Willey having to pick them all up at Billy's News downtown, drag them back to the apartment. With the car it's not too bad of a problem, but Willey's mother won't let the papers go when she's finished reading them. One wall of the apartment is hidden behind past issues of South Germany's leading newspaper. She has stacks of *Spiegel* in her bedroom. Willey has made, to date, two attempts to get her to read the news online, but she told Willey—and Willey was ready to argue back against any opposition to the idea—she told him that reading online doesn't smell the same. She wants the smell of her coffee, and the smell of the German newspaper. In Papierform. There's no argument against that, so Willey's taken to sneaking old issues out as he brings new ones in. His mother hasn't acknowledged the pile, the wall not growing, so until Willey points it out, which he won't, there should be no problem.

Willey, his own cup of coffee in one hand, a plate with toast and peanut-butter in the other, kisses his mother on the head again, tells her he's going out to see Rhonda, a boldfaced lie. He doesn't tell her to try and sit out on the balcony today. He wouldn't want to start an argument, what with the sky so blue.

Wann treffe ich dieses junge Mädchen? Willey, she says.

In English, mother.

When do I meet this young friend of yours?

Then there's that problem. And, Willey remembers, the lottery ticket problem.

This is what Willey's going to do. About the lottery ticket, that is. No one's going to buy the damned thing from him, he's tried that, so he's had to come up with

a plan. What he plans to do first is find a convenience store. One that speaks to him. One that gives Willey a feeling, like when the city reflected in the river spoke to Hicks. So, to find a convenience store that has that magic, Thousand Dollar Night quality, he might as well start with the old walking ground.

When Willey started his diet, when he started walking, he'd head straight west and make for the river valley, or he'd follow the train tracks that separate Dover from the neighbouring community, Erin Woods. Erin Woods is on the other side of the tracks, but no one's sure which community is on the other side of the proverbial tracks from the other. Maybe the fences and lawns in Erin Woods are another decade out from looking like the fences and lawns of Dover. All Willey can tell you, is the back yards on Doverville look out on the tracks, while in Erin Woods, their front yards look out on the tracks. In Dover, you have to like the sound of trains, in Erin Woods, you better like the whole song and dance.

Willey met Hicks on those tracks. Eleven years old, walking up the tracks by Penbrooke, up by the trailer court, looking for whatever falls off a train, a selection of dimes and pennies in his pocket. Put the penny down first put the dime on top, let the train do its work. Willey was walking up the tracks looking for anything rusty that might have fallen off a train, or lumps of sulfur to break apart, or glossy bits of coal to stare at, and feel with his thumb. Hicks, he was walking the other direction down the tracks doing the same thing. He said to Willey, You go to Valleyview, meaning the elementary school in Dover. Hicks was a grade ahead.

That was August, 1999. The 9th. An easy date to remember. As Hicks and Willey stood on the train tracks, talking about assholes at Valleyview, and the lack of

gold dropping from trains, the city exploded. Not the whole city, just Hub Oil. The refinery off International Avenue exploded, killed two people, and took down the city's last drive-in with them.

Hicks and Willey, after throwing themselves to the ground, after What the Fucking this, and Holy Shitting that, they sit up to watch a blossoming ball of orange fire eclipse the sun. With all due respect to the two dead men, to the long-gone Corral 4 Drive-In, for an 11 year old kid, there is no greater moment in life then when something explodes. They get up and run toward the explosion, run toward the pedestrian overpass that spans the tracks between Penedo Way, where Hicks lived at the time, and Penbrooke Heritage Estates, a trailer park, despite that name, where Hicks would live in the future. There, at the pedestrian overpass, they hoped to be lucky enough to have flaming debris fly over their heads.

Within ten minutes the overpass is jammed with people, and ten minutes after that, the police clear everyone off. Hicks's father, in a rare moment of true fatherhood, comes out to find his son, to make sure his son is safe and he, Hicks's father, tells the two boys that they'd better leave the area. They get in Hicks's father's old panel truck and he tries to find a place closer for better viewing.

They end up behind the Loyal Order of Moose building, where the Apostolic Ark Pentecostal Church hold their—Willey doesn't know—rituals? Celebrations, dances, sacrifices? That church had the best name imaginable to stand behind while you watch the local refinery enter the sky in a large plume of black burnt offering, and come back down again as greasy flakes of black manna. My name's Dwayne,

Hicks says. With that black reverse tornado behind him, he says, You can call me Hicks.

That day, in the era before children carried cell phones, Willey neglected to inform his mother that he would be outside for nine hours watching the refinery burn to the ground, and when he got home, she grabbed him with both arms, almost suffocating Willey between her breasts. Siehst du, Willey. Kannst du sehen? The nine hours watching that inferno felt like five and the fifteen minutes with those hot tears flooding the top of his head, that felt like 9 hours. Ich habe dir gesagt, es wird Feuer geben. She told him. She always tells Willey, There will be fire.

### 6.13

With the camper's gourmet of wieners and beans on the boil, a smell that delights Hicks's inner child, he sits stirring the pot.

What is the condition of your find? Argo says.

It looks like it was set there, Hicks says. It looks set on a chopping block like a chicken waiting for the axe.

Convenient, Argo says.

Dianne scoops her meal onto a paper plate. The plate precarious on one hand, she uses the other to shake out a lawn chair, kicks at the legs to spread them open.

Hicks climbs onto the table, crawls into the tent with a tape measure and a cold chisel. With the edge of a chisel he scratches four quick lines into the sandstone, outlining the block they must remove. A block three and half feet long, three feet wide, and, say, about 2 feet thick. If they remove a foot-wide trench of sandstone

from either side of the block, this will allow enough space to dig underneath the block, and position the hoist properly. Hicks mutters to himself. That's one foot by three and a half feet, by three feet deep. Hicks pulls his phone from his pocket, the phone too gritty with dirt. Hicks punches numbers into his phone. 20 cubic feet of material. Add another 40 at least that must be removed from the front of the block in order to slide the trailer in . . . Hicks looks at his chisel. You also have to undermine the block, he whispers. There's another 10 or so cubic feet. But the real problem, he reminds himself, isn't the material they have to chip away, but the material they have to carry out of here.

Hicks re-calculates the size of the block they must take with them. Twenty cubic feet, say, with sandstone weighing about 145 pounds per. The phone insists on 2900 pounds.

Argo, too, is insistent, says his modified engine hoist can take that weight.

And Chester?

Of course, Chester. And if not, Chester has fifteen cousins loafing the plain above.

And the little trailer?

Now that there's an interesting question, Argo says.

Hicks spoons himself a plateful of weinered beans, unfolds the other lawn chair, slumps next to Dianne. Goddamn, that looks good, he says. You hungry, Argo?

I am full, Argo says.

The sun warm, but warmer when the breeze sits still. Hicks takes in the surrounding valley. The bands of strata in the cliffs now muted by the noon hour

light. Various degrees of ochre, with layers of chalky white, layers of sienna, some burnt, some raw.

Swallows flit about the canyon walls, or maybe they're sparrows, Hicks not sure if he's even seen a swallow. He looks for a familiar species of bird, finds magpies, two of them, flying a straight line over the river. If there is ever an ill-omen, it's a pair of magpies flying in a straight line anywhere out in the open. Hicks looks for a crow, any crow, but none avail themselves of his attention. On the opposite valley wall Hicks can see a thin seam of coal, bulging in a black knot here and there. He can almost feel, under his thumb, the smooth, glassy sides of coal he'd occasionally find as a child, walking the train tracks behind one or another of his many houses. Beneath the band of coal, large rills carved by the careful attention of countless rainfalls and snowmelts direct water to the dry creeks and from there to the river. Rainwater, spring water, snowmelt, endlessly working at the cliffs, endlessly carrying the cliffs into the river. The Red Deer slow and olive green, reflecting the balsam poplar, the plain cottonwood, trees with a touch of early autumn's orange and yellow about their leaves. The spruce here stick within the coulees, like harried spears in the constant shimmer of aspen leaves. As for them, the undersides of the aspen leaves hint at the color of frosts to come. Patches of prairie fescue in bright green top the taller of the round, striated hills, drawing out the reds of the valley geology. Hicks inhales the sage, the juniper scent. The smell of beans.

He shovels his most formal meal of the day into his mouth. Summer two days gone, the mosquitoes coming off their high season, yet still incessant in their whine

for more blood. He watches Dianne finish her beans, a line of sauce drips from the corner of her mouth. The most romantic of dishes in this, or any setting. Hicks wipes at his own mouth to hide his smile. Dianne raises her head to drink from her water bottle, and Hicks does not disguise his stare. Her throat matches the valley's paler colour, but her face is filthy with bean sauce and sandstone. A smear of dirt on her right cheek, the black of her baseball cap dusty with fingerprints. Over her shoulder, behind her, behind Hicks and all around, the last of summer's flowers still bloom. Tiny stars of the fairy candelabra like white supernovas in the green of the coulee; the white and lavender of prairie aster; the mauve fluff of prairie clover. Dianne stands and drinks, the centre of all these flowering constellations. Gumweed, rabbitbrush, sage, and the tall stalks of owl's clover; their yellows offer a contrast to the whites and September purples of the mauvaise terre. The Badlands.

Hicks and Dianne both think it wise to mix some plaster and cover what they've uncovered. Dianne volunteers to ferry a bucket of water from the river, but adds that she is keeping track of the hours Hicks works. She will ensure, she tells him, that by the end of her venture, he will have earned his extra twenty five percent.

As she sets out, Hicks describes the next portion of their plan. Argo sits in one of the lawn-chairs, Chester helps himself to some of the flora Hicks mooned over. We'll chisel down between the skull and shoulder, separating head from neck, Hicks says. Chisel all around the head, create enough space to slide the hoist in. Might take a few minutes.

Hicks rubs his hands. He stares at his palms, the creases full of the dirt and grit that managed to get into the gloves. A palm reader's dream, Hicks says. If Dianne's ever wanted to be a hand model, that dream will end this week.

What about a saw? Argo says. I have three concrete saws at your disposal. Make a nice clean line, limit the damage during your beheading. Argo ignorant, it would seem, of the mosquito horde.

You don't think that will be a bit loud, a concrete saw?

Don't know. Never heard a concrete saw cutting sandstone in a coulee before.

You suggested no noise.

I've suggested a lot of things to a lot of people in my life, Argo says, looking to the southwest, motionless. Like a lizard, basking.

Now you're suggesting a saw.

Now I'm suggesting a saw that can cut you a line 10 inches deep.

Hicks stares deep into white of the man's eye. Looks at the black of the man's skin, the blacker marks on his cheeks. Hicks looks for an answer in the blue of the man's cap. You not bothered by this? he says.

Why would I be bothered?

Desecration of your land, Hicks says.

The removal of this beast is no desecration in my eyes. Are you bothered?

Not really, Hicks says. What are the practical aspects of such a specimen, anyway? So a paleontologist loses a small piece of evidence, relatively speaking, to prove what? Pre-historical mating habits? Cretaceous biting force? Maybe another

piece of evidence for evolution? Who cares? Anyone who believes already believes, while those young-earth lunatics will always invent a reason to deny the truth.

Lunatics? Argo says. Deny the truth?

Hicks tilts his head back, looks straight up at the sky. Let me guess, he says. Ten thousand years old, this earth? Twelve?

The earth is six thousand and seventeen years old, Argo says, Argo lifting his chin. According to the Book.

You don't know the months?

Eleven, but you go ahead and mock. You go right on ahead.

Hicks licks his lips, stares a minute at Argo. Says, I'm not mocking, Argo. I meant no offence. Just been working hard, is all. I honestly don't care how old the earth is. Only how stubborn.

All right, but watch your tongue, young man. I do not wish to be caught in the collateral should the LORD decide He's heard enough, and brings the hill down upon you.

Hicks takes a mouthful of water, rinses and spits. This does make perfect sense, he says. Here you are assisting the removal of a devil's trick from the Lord's ground. Removing science that would otherwise mess with your time frame.

Why is it so hard to believe that this here all is a creation of the Lord God? Argo says. I don't understand people. People waylaying the Bible and science into the same stall. Foolishness.

Chester nickers on the path, his ears up and aimed toward the river. I know, Argo says, and a moment later Dianne appears on the path.

Argo turns from the sun, turns his face directly to Hicks. Science is no trick of the devil, he says, tapping his saddle horn. Science is a tool of God given freely to the devout, here to reveal all of God's hiding places.

What are you two talking about? Dianne asks.

Argo's giving me mixed messages, Hicks says.

Faith, young lady. Do you have faith in God?

I have faith in Dianne, Dianne says. She sets the bucket down, Hicks notices the constant flexing and un-flexing of her fingers.

Faith is the latch to Heaven's door, Argo says.

The door to heaven is red, Dianne says, and Argo turns to face her.

The door to heaven is ragged and black, he says. Science was created by God to work His flock worthy of His gaze. The greater the science, the more difficult the faith. The more difficult the faith, the purer the believer.

The harder the rock, the longer the work, Hicks says. He grabs the bucket of water, a box of plaster and a roll of tinfoil under his arm.

Dianne pulls the tinfoil from Hicks, rips off a length, and enters the tent. She fills any space or void in the ancient mouth with tight balls of foil, working it between the *Albertosaur's* teeth, filling any gap between fossil and sandstone. Hicks sits and begins mixing plaster in their second bucket. Argo and Chester ride off to get the ring-saw.

Ring-saw? Dianne asks from inside the tent. Her face appears dirty in the flap.  
Ring-saw?

Hicks dumps the raw plaster into their alternate bucket, adds water by the pot-full. Stirs. A concrete saw, Hicks says.

Dianne presses a long sheet of foil against the skull. She takes the burlap roll and cuts strips of a length sufficient to cover the entire head.

Did you not insist, no saw? Dianne says as Hicks lifts the bucket into the tent and crawls up after. Dianne pushes the burlap into the bucket, pulls it out and lets it hang for a moment, allowing any excess plaster to drip back into the muck. She spreads the saturated burlap out above the foil, pressing it tight to the contours of the now silvered rock, running her fingers down the entire length, Hicks following suit with another strip.

My insistence was based on Argo's insistence, Hicks says. Argo has changed insinences. I'm following suit. He looks at Dianne's plastering. Don't cover too much beyond the actual fossil, he says. We have to remove as small a block possible.

#### **6.14**

About that lottery ticket. The forged Blackjack scratch and win. With time off work and time to kill while waiting on Hicks to dig up that money—Hicks and Dianne—while waiting for them to come up with that money, Willey decides to get back in touch with his neighborhood. Dover. Dover Glen. Forest Lawn, Forest Heights, Southview and the length of 17th Avenue.

International Avenue.

This time, he'll take Angie along. The car, that is. Maybe branch out a bit, explore the city. Drive to interesting new places, look for areas suitable for walks, maybe scout out neighbourhoods where he might want to buy a house one day.

While doing all that, Willey will see if there's a convenience store that speaks to him. A store that speaks to his scamming, bastard, lying inner Willey. A store with a voice, and a lottery terminal, and he will solve the problem of his forged Blackjack scratch and win.

He has to give Angie credit, she starts every morning. Sometimes he has to open the hood and hit her with a hammer, but not like Hicks has to hit his car. Starters on older Volkswagens, occasionally they get a bit of rust inside the solenoid on something called the plunger sticks. Lance's sister told Willey you have to hit the starter with a hammer then start the car. You don't have to pound it, just tap it with a hammer.

Not this morning, though. Angie starts right up, her dashboard lights all nice and pretty. Maybe not the galaxy of lights and switches that we like to see in modern automobiles, but everything works. Yes, Willey will have to buy a starter someday, but not today.

Willey drives from the octoplex in Doverville, heading first to 26th Avenue. Doverville, Doverwood Place. Dovercliff, Dověrtree. Doverwood is an open door community. Whenever the temperature hits 25 degrees, doors are left wide open, and kids sit on 2nd story windowsills. Here, the satellite dishes are proudly presented on the fronts of the houses. On Doverwood Place, each house has a chain link fence in the back yard, low enough to talk over, high enough to keep the dogs in. In Doverwood, people keep their doors open and nobody hides behind anything. You can judge a neighborhood, maybe a neighbourhood's personality, some might

say a neighbourhood's quality, others might say the honesty of a neighbourhood, by the couch content of its alleys. Hicks's theory, couches in alleys.

On 17th Avenue, International Avenue, you can find three 7-11s, a couple of Mac's stores and at least one Winks. You can find a hundred other one-off convenience stores with or without lottery terminals. Like Willey would subject one of these stores to the scam he has planned, the scam to cash in at least a portion of his money that he paid for a fake thousand dollar lottery ticket. The forged Blackjack scratch and win ticket currently riding around in Angie's glove box. Those are too close to home, those convenience stores along International Avenue, but he has to start somewhere, and who knows, maybe one of those stores will sing out.

The Mini Supermart on 26th Avenue is definitely out. That's Willey's go-to store and his first stop of the morning. That whole brown brick and anodized aluminum strip mall is an ingenious invention. Supermarket slash convenience store on one end, liquor store in the middle and next to that, Golden River, the Chinese take-out place. All under one shared roof. If that strip mall had a drycleaners, Willey would use 75 percent of that strip mall.

Truth is, Willey doesn't eat much take-out anymore, what with the diet and all, and he's never been much of a drinker, so there's two-thirds of a reason never to come to this strip mall again. Still, Willey wouldn't subject Gil and Yuna Park, the owners of Mini Supermart to the scam he's got planned. Gil, he looks tougher than a tree root. Gil once told Willey that he learned martial arts in the Korean Army, but he wouldn't elaborate on whether it was the North or South Korean Army. Gil, he

once said to Willey, You know how they say martial arts teaches you how to avoid conflict, how to subdue your opponent? Not in the Korean Army.

Right, Gil. But North or South Korean?

When Willey asked Yuna for an elaboration on North or South Korean, she just shook her head, frowned, and acted like Gil was touchy on the subject.

Korean Army martial arts, Gil always said to Willey—and here he'd do some martial art move or another—he always said, Korean Army martial arts teaches you how to kill without fuss or worry.

Willey stops at the Mini Supermart, not to scam Gil and Yuna with his ticket, but to buy a half-dozen others. The first part of Willey's plan, even before finding a suitable store that sings to him, is to get another Blackjack ticket, one that's a winner in any amount.

Willey tried being an ex-con while attempting to scam off this lotto ticket. He said, Look, I'm just out of the penitentiary, 4 years for, whatever. He tried fitting his fraud, his four year stint in the pen, to what he thought his mark would appreciate. This one guy in a suit, Willey told him he was in prison for tax evasion, and now Willey can't cash in this ticket. Not even sure why he bought it. This other guy, a street level banger? Willey said to this guy, Four years for drug possession, yo. Can't cash this grand winner. Shit, bro, I'd take five hundred to get this gone.

At the Mini Supermart, neither Gil nor Yuna are working. Instead, their daughter Sierra works the till. Willey buys half a dozen Blackjack tickets. Sierra, she has a hard time making eye contact, what with Willey always looking down at her stomach, but today, Willey looks Sierra in the face, and her eyes stare at the counter.

Willey says, Hey Sierra, where's your dad from? I mean, before Calgary, where'd he live, and Sierra rolls her eyes. (She's what, seventeen?) She rolls her eyes and says, My parents were both born in Vancouver.

Once, Willey thought he should try being a tourist. Hallo. Ich come aus Germany, ja? Und ich kann nicht dieser Lotterie Ticket cash. Ein-tousand dollar winner, ja? Für Sie, for you, Say, five-hundert?

So now this is the plan. Willey's going to buy Blackjack scratch and win tickets until he finds a winner, any winner, even a two dollar winner. Then, with his thousand dollar ticket and his two dollar winner, he'll go into a 7-11 late at night. Or any convenience store. Late at night, though. Two, maybe three in the morning. Some place where only one guy's working, where Willey can easily scam this ticket off. Then he'll really put the plan into place.

First, he has to find the right store. So, instead of hanging around and trying to pull the scam on Sierra, daughter of Gil, who can open walnuts with a thumb and forefinger, and Yuna, the only person Gil's terrified of, Willey takes his half a dozen Blackjack tickets, and heads to 17th Avenue in beautiful southeast Calgary. International Avenue on many maps.

On International Avenue, you can get a taste of your home country, no matter your home country. A sold-out bus will take you and other hungry visitors on a food tour; 6 continents of food spread over 35 blocks. Caribbean, Portuguese, Middle Eastern restaurants. South East Asian, African and Latin American food stores. A savvy foodie will know, there are no French restaurants on the International Avenue

Food Tour. These are restaurants from third world countries and if they aren't technically third world, well, we're going to believe that they are.

Willey's heard all the monikers for Forest Lawn (Forest 'Nam, Viet Lawn) but the beauty of Forest Lawn, of International Avenue, is that Willey's been met with smiles from a hundred nations, only 89 of them South Asian. Whether the people are happy to be there, happy to be alive, or just happy, who cares? On International Avenue, a short walk can fetch the taste of a hundred foreign and exotic locations that you wouldn't even dream of visiting. Ethiopia. Jamaica. Newfoundland.

At the intersection of International Avenue and 52nd Street, Willey scratches one of the tickets, trying to be careful not to get the scratchings all over the car. He looks briefly to his right, to a relatively new condo complex called Bella Casa.

That first ticket, that ticket wins zip.

Bella Casa. Nothing says high end luxury like saying it in Italian. Christ, Hicks and Willey laughed at that, Bella Casa. Based on other constructions in the area, the hole they dug for Bella Casa was like something you'd see on the Discovery Channel. The beautiful home, Bella Casa. On the fringe of International Avenue, across from the 17th Avenue Dental Clinic, close enough to Brake Check, they could share a wifi signal. Bella Casa.

The light turns green before Willey gets a chance to go at the second ticket. He swings the car left, shifting smooth as he turns, and he heads west on International proper. To his left, the T and C hugs the morning light tight to its 70s logo. Maybe that's a 50s logo. The economy architecture of the Town and Country Inn looks timeless. The T and C has a red and tan paint scheme that makes it look

cloisonné into the September blue sky. Every room has a balcony and every balcony has green patio furniture chained in place so that it won't accidentally blow—let's face it—so it won't be thrown over someone's ducking head before landing in the parking lot below, which itself happens to double as a truck stop. Willey's seen groups of motorcycles pull in, and pull right out again. Doctors and lawyers acting tough and leathery on Harleys stand no chance in the pale face of the T and C.

Further up International there's the Bake and Shake convenience store. The sign out front assures you, repeatedly, that they have the lowest price on beverages, ice cream, ATM, ice, water, welcome, milkshake, pizza, pasta, donairs & rolls, chicken wings, and on top of all, they have an honest to God Slush Puppie machine. Despite that menu, the B and S refuses to sing for Willey.

Willey keeps driving, scratching his other tickets at every red-lit opportunity. He passes the commanding sign of the Dragon Gate restaurant, stops at another red light. He scratches one ticket then another and finally, there it is! A two dollar winner on the fourth of his six tickets.

If you want authentic Chinese food, you might have to go to Chinatown, but as for the Dragon Gate, you will be hard pressed to find an establishment that has better mastered the chicken ball.

The light turns green and Willey, a two dollar winner riding shotgun, a thousand dollar 'winner' in the glove box, accelerates west.

There's Mayfair Foods at 40th Street, but Willey can't remember if they've got a lotto terminal. They're in the same strip mall as Forest Lawndry. The whole area, Forest Lawn, Southview. Dover, all those areas sing, but not the right song.

How can you not love an area that has a retail exterminator store? You can find it on 34th, just south of the bridal fashions and formal wear store. Willey likes to imagine the people in the duplex next door having to arrange a quick wedding, with an on-the-cheap reception to be held in the basement suite. But Cindy, the bride, she needs a dress, and she's afraid of spiders. Man, they'd have their shopping day set and they wouldn't even have to boost the car.

Just past 36th Street, the blue and red neon for the 4 Seas Restaurant stands as a headstone to the memory of a failed yet perfect smashing of cultures. Chinese cuisine and North American roadside diner.

How can you not love an area rife with computer repair specialists? What might be the last holdout of advertised Television and VCR repair shops is in this area. Possibly the last standing Blockbuster sign in North America if not the world, is in Forest Lawn. Discount appliance stores. At least one appliance rental shop. Second hand stores and Dollar stores. And a thousand convenience stores fathered by a hundred different ethnicities, but none that sing to Willey. Not the right song.

There's always Adam's food store at 33rd Street. Sometimes Willey shops at Adam's just to get that trigger of going into Adam's when he was a kid. His mother, when she went out, she'd swear by Safeway and so they'd take the long walk to the Safeway to shop for groceries, and they'd take a taxi back. Willey's mother always let him stop at Adam's to buy some candy or buy a hotdog. What smell straps us to our pasts better than the smell of hotdogs? Willey enters Adam's, nods to Tran, the clerk, as he looks through a spinning display of sunglasses. No hotdogs are cooking, but that's okay. Willey's not after hotdogs.

**6.15**

As they wait for the plaster jacket to set, Dianne and Hicks organize their camp to look less suspicious should anyone come to answer what is sure to be the saw's loud call to attention. Hicks drags the engine hoist to the edge of the sugarloaf, inspecting Argo's modifications along the way. Argo removed the legs from the hoist, widened the base frame with sections of square metal tubing, and welded thirty inch post extensions onto the new frame. He then reattached the original square tubing that receives the legs. The revised hoist can now straddle their block of money, as opposed to resting on top.

Probably did all that without turning the light on, Hicks says.

Will his welds hold? Dianne asks.

I'll let you know sometime next month when we set it up.

While Dianne pulls from above, Hicks pushes from below. They tilt the hoist along the table edge, and together they drag, slide, and otherwise force it behind the tent, where it lies in the sun like a dead cockroach. Hicks grabs Willey's black poly sheet and as he starts to cover the hoist, he pauses. He looks at the hoist, at the tent, and back at the hoist again. As if reading his mind Dianne nods and says, I'll go get the scissors.

Hicks undoes the stakes from around the tent, as Dianne cuts away the rest of the floor. They drag the tent part of the way off the table, where it hangs like the green and tan carcass of some oceanic behemoth washed up on the rocks. All the while they remain careful of their specimen. With the boom in its shortest position, the legs removed and the hoist folded, it will fit easily inside the tent. Hicks drags the

hoist closer to the *Albertosaur*, and the two, again careful of their fresh plaster work, lift the tent up and lower it over hoist and beast both.

Hicks carries the hoist's legs inside. We even have six feet of space to sleep in, he says. He smacks at his arm. To lie in and feed the local fauna. Where's the bug spray?

This place could use an exterminator, Dianne says.

Rather than pound more stakes, Dianne suggests they pull the tent back so that the *Albertosaur* is open to the sky when they cut with the saw. Otherwise, they have to work with a gas powered saw shooting exhaust and rock and God knows what else inside the tent. If Argo whistles, we can slide it back within seconds, she says.

The rock saw, the K970, once gleamed orange and black. Now it sits on Argo's trailer, orange and black, chipped, cracked and dirty. Another stain looks suspiciously like blood. As with the mouth beneath them, the intent behind the teeth on the blade is obvious. A fourteen inch diameter, diamond studded ring with a bite depth of ten inches.

As Argo gives Hicks the once over on the saw—squeeze the throttle lockout before you squeeze the trigger, don't push it forward, pull it backwards—Dianne lifts the remaining water onto the sandstone table, two empty water bottles floating inside.

Argo and Chester will watch—yes, *watch*—down by the river. Chester will let me know if anyone approaches from the river, Argo says. Or the prairie edge above. Cut in increments of thirty seconds or so. Listen for my whistle. Argo puts his fingers

to his mouth, his pitched shriek makes Dianne cower and cover her ears. Argo turns his milky eye toward her. You hear a long drawn out whistle, someone's coming from the river; you hear a series of quick whistles, someone's coming from above. You hear any whistle, cover up.

Hicks nods. I know what to do if I hear your whistle, Hicks says.

Argo and Chester again make for the path to the river, Chester in a slow trot past the giant concretion that figured prominent in Willey's original map. Hicks turns to Dianne. Horses even see that far? he says. He thinks of Willey's map. Felt like a month ago, that map.

Dianne waves her hand in front of her face. The mosquitoes are back in what appears to be an organized assault. She pulls the elastic off her pony-tail, thrashes her hair in a fury around her face. We need bee-keeper masks, Hicks says. Or wedding veils, even.

So there *is* a time when I'd consider wearing a veil, Dianne says.

They set enough rocks on the remains of the tent floor to keep the tent in place if the wind attempts to steal it, but not enough rocks to intrude upon having to move the tent quickly, should that emergency arise. They fill their ears with Argo's plugs, each using a set of industrial muffs, both pairs orange and black, matching the saw in colour and degree of scratch. Dust masks. Safety goggles. Hicks examines the saw, checks the weight, the balance. Unlocks the drive wheel button. He looks at Dianne and shrugs. He sets the saw down, puts his foot in the rear handle, grabs the start cord. Dianne steps in behind.

Whoa whoa whoa, Hicks says. He pulls the muff off one ear. Where are you going?

Where else am I supposed to stand?

In front.

In front?

Yeah, this will spray everything back between my legs, you want to be in front, pour the water on both sides of the blade.

What if the blade comes off?

Why the hell would the blade come off, Dianne?

Dianne pulls her mask down. Because I'm in front of it, that's why.

Well, don't sit down, stand with your legs open. If it comes off it'll be halfway across the valley before you know.

I don't like this, Dianne says.

I love it, myself. Hicks says. They readjust their muffs. Hick slides his boot back into the handle of the saw, pulls the start cord. The 970 catches immediately, and idles to a low, anticipatory purr.

That's not bad, Dianne says.

Hicks squeezes the lockout and the trigger and the saw screams hungry, Dianne jerking her shoulders up, giving Hicks an angry look.

Hicks rests the saw's support on the sandstone directly on the line he scratched earlier, that line that when cut, might serve to sever the *Albertosaurus's* head. Hicks pulls the rear handle upward while pushing the forward handle down. Here we go, he says. He squeezes the throttle lock, squeezes the trigger and the saw

shrieks an insatiable anger. A fury, a blizzard, a cacophony of spitting sandstone, wet and stinging flies back between Hicks's legs. Dianne pours the water, Hicks runs the saw for ten maybe fifteen seconds, in that time cutting a five foot line to a depth of an inch. He lets go of the trigger, and as the engine cycles down he steps back to the beginning of the line.

All right, Hicks says. He lines the blade up with his fresh-cut guide line.

Again? Dianne yells.

That was just a guide, this one's the real work.

Dianne's shoulders push to her ears, her teeth clatter, her hands shake in awe of the ferocity the machine displays, its absolute hatred for stone. Hicks grits his teeth in determination, forcing the saw to cut faster, faster, stepping backwards, mindful of their earlier plastering. He ignores the puffs of his own breath which jet from between his mask and cheek straight into his eyes. Dianne steps in time with him, reaching down to pour the water. The two step a slow, surreal and shrieking dance.

Dianne pours river from both bottles, one on either side of the blade, but can't keep up with the blade's demand. Hicks relaxes the saw back to idle, but keeps the blade in the groove, as Dianne refills her bottles from the bucket. After two minutes, they've cut their line, and they take a moment to catch their breath.

I don't like this, Dianne says. That cuts too easy.

Easy? Hicks says. He picks up a bottle of water. I'm not even sure if the blade managed to behead our beast there.

It's too mean, she says. And too hot. Hicks holds his water bottle, staring, as Dianne pulls off her hoodie. She pulls the thin strap of her camisole back on to her right shoulder, the thinner straps of her bra imprinting themselves as red lines on her collarbone. Her face is dark with engine exhaust, splattered with mud, plaster, sweat. The only clean area has the shape of her safety goggles. Dianne filthy and beautiful in sunlight filtered green through the trees. Hicks stands for a moment and stares, simply stares at her.

A roar not heard here for thousands of years, Argo says.

Fuck, old man, Hicks says. You scared the Christ out of me.

Can't be that much left, Argo says. How'd that ring-saw work out?

Quicker than expected, Hicks says. I want to keep cutting.

That roar is a horror, Argo says. Keep that up and we'll have plenty of visitors come checking your work, and you won't have to spend any time here.

Now you're telling me not to cut.

I told you I'd never heard the sound of a concrete saw cutting sandstone in a coulee before. Now that I have, I'm telling you not to cut.

I'm cutting, Hicks says.

Argo spurs Chester, the horse turns toward the path. If you don't mind, Argo says. I'm going up to feed my horses.

Dianne stands, pours. Hicks pulls the saw along, cutting the guide lines on either side of the money, the mix of water and burnt rock spitting behind Hicks to splatter the tent. The air reeks with the smell of wet and burnt stone, gasoline, gasoline exhaust, plaster and sweat both old and new. Again they have to pause, the

saw hot, the blade burning. Dianne, refilling her bottles, sees for the first time, the horror they have inflicted upon the tent, but there is nothing to be done about that now.

I can't get enough water on the blade, Dianne says.

Hicks sees movement out of his peripheral, a flash of black. The crow, back again, left eye staring, beak open to emit a throaty, gurgling caw.

Caw, Hicks says back.

The crow caws again, beak still open.

Hicks picks up the saw, steps toward the crow and revs the blade. The crow leaps, flies toward the iron concretion just down the path. Hicks shuts the saw off and the crow makes one last caw before flying off toward the river.

We can't use that saw any more, Hicks.

You know how many minutes this saw would cut off?

Thousands, but you heard Argo.

There can't be that many people around here. We might chance it.

Dianne puts her hand on her hips. Dwayne. . .

I know, I know, he says. He sets the saw down and picks up the mattock.

Together Hicks and Dianne push away the rocks that weigh the tent in place. They slide the tent back over their work, keeping the fossil tight to the end, the hoist in the other end, what will become their bedroom in the middle. Without so much as another sip of water, or an adjustment of his crotch, or a curse delivered to the day, the heat, the sun, or the top of the tent, Hicks, on his knees now, raises the mattock

over his head, drives it into the ground next to the creature. A large chunk of loose sandstone, about the size of a twenty dollar bill flies off.

Dianne, with the mallet and a bolster chisel, sets up shop at the opposite end. Next to Hicks's guide line, she starts hammering.

We'll see what gives out first, Hicks says. The day, or the body.

We'll see who gives out first, you mean, Dianne says. Hicks kneeling at one side of the head, Dianne at the other, they begin their true dig.

## 6.16

Willey has a winning two dollar Blackjack ticket on the seat of his car, a fake thousand dollar Blackjack ticket in the glove box, and an A&W Chicken Caesar salad in his hand. While at Adam's, the original convenience store, he bought a pair of sunglasses, and he's decided to wear those too. You still need to find the right store, his inner Willey reminds him. You have to be patient, he whispers in return. This might take days. You might have to drive past every convenience store in this city.

His phone buzzes and his heart leaps, hoping, wishing it's a text from Rhonda. An image flashes in his head, Rhonda tilting her head back, a wall of green behind her, her hair fanning out.

That hair, her voice, her laugh, her freckles. The way she looks at Willey and lets smoke ease out of her mouth. Willey's phone buzzes and what he wouldn't give to read a text from Rhonda telling him to get over to the college, to meet her in her atrium. The buzz denotes an email from Willey's phone company informing him his bill is ready. He can view it online by clicking the following link.

Rhonda, her red hair flowing down her back like the waterfall of a cinnamon river.

Willey should text Rhonda, tell *her* to meet *him* in her atrium.

The day after their first date, after Willey was invited to Rhonda's place, to her bedroom, to her bed; after he stood up from the bed, said, Uh, good night, and after he drove away, aloof and idiotic in the night, Rhonda invited him to her studio at Mount Royal. She sent a message, told him to come visit her during her studio time. She gave him a room number, 316, told him just come in.

When Willey entered Mount Royal, the University, he had a hard time finding the Interior Design department let alone room 316, which is not, as it turns out, part of the Interior Design department. Rhonda said in her message, Come in at the west gate, but, nope, Willey had to go in at the east gate and from that end of the school, Willey couldn't even find the entire third floor.

He eventually finds security, (sixty feet from the west gate) and rather than say, Hey, where's the third floor? Willey asks where the Interior Design department is located.

Third floor, the guard says.

Willey with the right directions, gets to the third floor, walks past a number of studio doors and, following the rising door numbers, enters and leaves the Interior Design Department. He walks down an ever-shrinking hallway and passes door 315, a narrow staircase that would take him down to the east gate, dammit. A few steps and he finds door 316.

He opens this door, and the first thing he sees is row upon row of plants. Rows of plants inside, philodendrons from ceiling to floor, all on tall, wheeled carts in front of east-facing floor to ceiling windows. Rhonda might have watched him walk into the building.

Somebody from the Botany department has turned this office into a bit of an atrium and Rhonda, she says she talked her way into a key in exchange for watering the plants every second day. Willey walks into this room and in the middle of the atrium, in the middle of this wall of green, Rhonda sits on the end of a bench, a cigarette in one hand, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the other. One foot on the floor, one foot on the bench, legs parted, short skirt. Pink underwear. . .

Standing there, Willey thinks to himself, Rhonda doesn't realize that she's flashing her underwear at me. Thought the word underwear, too, the shithead.

He thinks, Should I tell her? Should I just be quiet? He sits next to her, nods to the book and asks about Shakespeare. Rhonda says she's been dragging the fucking thing around for days, and Willey says, Well, Shakespeare is the core of Interior Design as I understand it.

Underwear. That still gives Willey the embarrassment tingles. Maybe he should return his penis to the penis supply, and pick up something more useful to him, like an extra appendix.

Rhonda lets smoke out of her nostrils, leans her head back to stare at the ceiling and says that every student needs to suffer through an English course. Rhonda decided to take hers this year instead of last year. Her professor says you are not to read Shakespeare, you are to experience Shakespeare.

Willey asks how experiencing Shakespeare is going, and Rhonda says, truthfully, it's going pretty good. She takes another drag of her cigarette, chuckles to herself, shakes her head, tells Willey that there's about 125 pages of academic experience before the play even begins.

One of the elements of the play that's interesting, she says, holding the book higher, is that Hippolyta, Queen of the Amazons, newly conquered by Theseus, is pretty much a prop in the story, whereas the younger female characters are strong-willed and independent.

Sitting in his car, eating his Wendy's salad, Willey remembers this conversation distinctly, because he felt like a moron. Not the type of moron that doesn't recognize a get-laid-now offer, that realization wouldn't come for about another minute, but the type of moron who needs to sprinkle some classics in with the robots and aliens.

Hippolyta, Rhonda says, represents the death of the old world, and that the new generation of women in the play are set to live by new rules, rules where women do not get so easily conquered.

So Willey asks Rhonda if she got all that from reading the play, and she says, Why read the play? The introduction is 125 pages. Fuck the play.

Rhonda stretches, reaches behind her, the book shaking like a butterfly. She opens her legs further. Slides her tongue out with her cigarette still stuck to it, then spits the cigarette onto the floor.

Click.

Willey's sitting there, on the edge of the bench, all that red hair and green foliage. He manages not to blurt out, Oh, Oh! And instead says, So, are you coming over here or what?

Their first time, in that room with all those plants. He takes Rhonda's hand and pulls her over, and she starts kissing his fingers one at a time, giving them little bites. He feels along the edge of her lower teeth, whispers his lack of condoms. Rhonda says Willey doesn't need any condoms. She tells him, as she works at his belt, his zipper, that he should shut up about condoms.

Rhonda straddles him, one knee on the bench, one foot on the floor. She arches her back, pulls her shirt up over her head. The whole garden seems to roll in on Willey, the light goes green then Red as Rhonda leans over to kiss him, her kisses like a new mint. A new mint pulled fresh out of an old ashtray. She stares at him, her eyes narrow as she positions herself comfortable, reaches between them, eases herself down.

Willey has to find something quick to grab his attention or he's going to make a lousy first impression. He starts counting Philodendron leaves.

Great, Willey thinks. Now he's sitting in his car at the west end of International Avenue, in the Far East take-out parking lot, wearing sunglasses, eating a Caesar salad and sporting a big ol' rager in his pants.

He starts the car, exits the Far East lot and zips through the yellow light at the intersection of International and 28th Street. I've only just started, he reminds himself, again. Have patience, dumbass. None of the stores along here make the right impression. The only impression being made here is Rhonda on his memory and the

resulting zipper bend. He drives past Adam's again. Drives past Paradise Lanes, a bowling alley too good for Willey's resume.

That's when he sees it. Right there, on the south side of the avenue, right where the Vagabond trailer court used to be. (You know your straits are dire when your community, the poster child for wrong side of the tracks communities, you know you're in trouble when the leaders of a community with the most unfortunate reputation in the city want you out because you look too poor.) The collection of ragged motorhomes and chain link that used to be called the Vagabond Motor Court has been replaced by what the community leaders describe as the type of revitalization Forest Lawn and International Avenue have long hoped for. A discount grocery store.

Willey's been aware of the discount grocery store for some time now. He and Hicks watched on the television news the announcement by the Forest Lawn powers that be of this grand, new development that would propel Forest Lawn into the future. When it turned out to be a discount grocery store (built across the street from the other discount grocery store) they had tears in their eyes, laughing so hard. But the store's not the problem. In the same parking lot, there it is, the feathery cultured stone, the polished glass, the tasteful proportions and trendy colours. A Joseph's Urban restaurant, urban right in the fucking name.

A Joseph's Urban—Willey's tempted to describe it as a low-budget 3 dressing itself as a sea-food specialist 9, but he won't. Damned if they can't make a piece of haddock shine to the tongue.

The anchor of the development, the No Frills store, fits the undeniably low-cost neighbourhood with a low-cost design selling low-cost food to people on low-incomes. But this store, this Urban Joseph's? Despite having the back of the store face the parking lot, there's still a real danger lurking behind that refined colour palette, those aesthetic proportions. Of course, who's to blame Joseph's Urban? They're only leasing the space, but that upper middle class, inner-city lettering. The clear, professionally installed, bright white lettering. Stylish. Trendy.

They're still finishing the exterior. They've got an asphalt cutter working on the sidewalk, an old asphalt cutter that you have to stand behind and push. The Willey that's pushing that saw, leading with his gut, that would have been Willey in ten years had he not started his diet. Now Willey can take off his boots and fit inside a Volkswagen Scirocco. As for the saw pusher, he might live in Forest Lawn and he has no idea what he's party to.

Gentrification. What's next? A pyjama store? A Chainsie's?

Parked in that parking lot, watching that poor son of a bitch push the asphalt cutter, Willey recognizes the hustle that the Forest Lawn community leaders are trying to pass over on its citizenry. He recognizes the truth behind the dream of community renewal: high-end cubist glass and stone duplexes with million dollar views. They're thinking, Let's shed that Viet Lawn moniker by appealing to a first-world clientele. Let's raise our property values.

Oh God, it's already happening. Willey's seen them. Men in suits, men who drive BMWs. Willey's seen them on their way from shorefront properties on Lake Chestermere, getting annoyed at the commute downtown, having to pass through

this slum. Willey's seen them at the more exotic take-out places, stopping on the way home, picking up a thrilling, spicy dinner.

Or worse. The young professionals. In pairs or groups of four, most often but not always openly heterosexual. Willey's seen them in the thrift stores, the junk shops. The girls with non-threatening tattoos, reminders of younger days wild by name only. The men with carefully coiffed facial hair. Men with five-o'clock shadow, small handle-bar moustaches and stylish hats. Men that know comic books. Men that couldn't change a tire with a gun pushed into the back of their heads, or fix a broken pin-setter with a party of ten 12-year-olds, all of whom itch to fire a ball down the lane while you're standing there.

They're here already, the young professionals. If you make the neighbourhood too pretty, they'll want to stay. They'll sell their inner-city condos and buy your cheap houses, Forest Lawn. The successful businessmen, they'll start in on you, Southview. They'll start with your houses, the ones that face the river valley. They'll tear those houses down, put up three level all-glass beauties with views of the river back-dropped by the downtown core and Bonnybrook's heavy industry. Then others will come to the new hot neighbourhood. Infills will spread like a stylish fungus growing through the rest of Dover and into Forest Lawn.

This is an emergency. Why didn't Willey recognize this before?

Forest Lawn, Dover, Southview, you are all too close to the downtown core.

Willey watches the man lean over the asphalt cutter, cutting away a piece of his neighbourhood, wiping sweat of his brow.

Hold tight to your split personalities, Dover, Southview, Forest Lawn. Keep your muscle shirts on, your baseball caps with Cat logos, your Brazilian soccer jerseys, your Oakland Raider jerseys. Your dashikis and hijabs and saris. Wear your denim shirts and safety vests, your work aprons. Wear them on the bus. In fact, never stop wearing your work. No one trusts a city too pretty. You are the city's anchor, Forest Lawn, Dover, Southview. You secure the city to the truth of who we are.

Besides, Willey says, starting his car. Where the fuck else am I going to buy a house if I want to stay in this city?

### 6.17

With the sun low on the horizon, the western valley silhouettes against the dusk. The eastern valley walls bathe in the crimson end of the spectrum. The greys of the slopes glow orange, the oranges blush pink, and the pinks and purples burn to vermillion. A backdrop for a meal of water and beef jerky, eaten between swings of their mallets. Nacho chips flavored in part by the valley dust, and a beer each. Hicks and Dianne have managed to chip, hammer, gouge and claw out what Hicks calculates to be between fifteen and sixteen cubic feet of sandstone. Starting from their cut lines on either side of the plaster they've chipped down and out away from their money. About a foot and a half down on either side, about a foot out on either side. Three and a half feet along each side of the head. 7.875 cubic feet per side, so Hicks's phone says.

The stone initially of such softness it could have been gouged out with an ice-cream scoop, but hardened and hardened the deeper they worked. Still, it came out

faster than either thought possible. Dianne occasionally whispering to herself, As hard as this is, this is too easy.

I feel like we've lost control of the situation, Dianne says. We're at somebody's whim.

Don't get all God-feary on me now, girl, Hicks says.

They chisel and chip as the sun finally sets, they chip and gouge and scrape and Dianne, as she rubs her hands, believes that she might have unknowingly clawed at the sandstone at some points. But Hicks continues to work, and so Dianne continues. They work first in near darkness, then by the light of their battery-powered lantern, an extra shirt of Dianne's, dark blue, thrown over to subdue the brightness.

Not once did Dianne not work while Hicks worked. When he went out to use bushes lit only by the moon she did same on the opposite side of the camp. At one point she held herself to the point of tears waiting for him to have to go.

In the end it's Hicks who gives in to his agony and Dianne's stubbornness. It's Hicks who simply drops his tools, says, That's enough for today. It's too dark and if my hands get any crampier my sex life will be permanently impaired.

If Dianne felt a victory in Hicks quitting first, and surely she did, she did not let on. She too drops her tools and immediately begins rubbing at the joints of her knuckles, the palms of her hands.

Hicks steps over Dianne, steps out of the tent. Under the waning though nearly full moon, their camp is lit better than their work inside the tent. Hicks looks

at the bean-encrusted pot, at the empty water bottles and the empty chip-bags which have come loose from their garbage. Likely that crow, Hicks says. Picking through our trash, making us look like ragged vagabonds out here.

Hicks grabs a rag, says he's going to the river to clean the pot before going to bed. He says he wants to see the river at night, under the moon. Dianne nods and starts to straighten up the camp, putting the empty bottles back in their flats, next to the full bottles. She starts repacking the garbage, lazily, casually, but when Hicks steps out of sight she hurries, she tosses one stray bottle in with the trash rather than take the ten steps to put it in the flat with the others. She reaches inside the tent for her hoodie, jogs down the path to catch up to Hicks.

They reach the river together, the white of the moon somehow painting the water black. Kneeling at the river's edge, the water at Hicks's feet looks like clear silver, but the water in the distance is the same gloss black of Dianne's hair.

Hicks looks at Dianne. She pulls the elastic from her pony-tail, uses her hands to fan her hair out and back, the moon decorating her in silver highlights. Hicks feels a moment of vertigo, he knows the river is at his feet, black and silver, but there it is pouring from Dianne. She gathers her river of hair and pony-tails it again with the elastic.

Dianne freezes, hands still at her hair. What's that? she says, looking across the river. An animal pads the opposite shore. A wolf? A coyote? It pauses a moment to raise its head, to look at them, before slouching and stepping off into the tree line behind.

Hicks looks up at Dianne. From her feet all the way up past her heavy, sagging jeans, up past her formless hoodie. Hicks looks up at the Dianne-shaped silhouette cut from the moonlit clouds and the galaxy's stronger stars. Long legs, Hicks says. Was probably a lynx.

You're never going to get that clean, Dianne says, nodding to the pot. Fill it and we'll let it soak overnight. Whatever you spill on the way back, we'll top off with our drinking water.

Hicks stares up at her. He knows that she can probably make out his face in the light of the moon, but her expression is unavailable to him.

Sure, he says. That's a good idea.

Outside the tent, Hicks shakes sandstone particles out of his foam bedding. I think about seventeen cubic feet, Hicks shouts. That's how much we did since noon. Dianne gives the all clear from inside the tent. She refuses to sleep next to the *Albertosaur*, but she will not put voice to this refusal. When Hicks enters the tent she's already in her sleeping bag, next to the hoist.

Hicks adjusts his foamy, rolls out his sleeping bag. He takes off his boots, his jacket. He notices Dianne's jeans tucked between the legs of the hoist. He slides into his sleeping bag, reaches down into the bag, pulls off his pants and tosses them to the foot of his foamy.

Since I started at the diner, Dianne says, I go to bed at 8:00 just about every night. I will sleep like the dead tonight. Like that terror in the ground over there.

How much time did you take off the diner? Hicks asks.

I quit outright.

You're pretty confident about this?

Aren't you? Where does your boss think you are?

Down east, attending to an inheritance.

Dianne nods. Hicks shuts off the flashlight and they lie in silence for a while.

Looking through the unzipped window-flap of the tent Hicks can see the top of an aspen silhouetted by the moon. He feels the pull of gravity, the ground sloping toward the *Albertosaur*. If, he thinks, they continue at the same rate, they might be able to shave a day off their schedule. They must be close now, to the bottom-side of the head, maybe beneath it already. They only have to chisel down close enough to ground level, to get the cart in. Cutting down to that level and taking off the front of the table, which pretty much crumbles every time they touch it. That's one day. Hicks figures that undermining the block and jacketing the whole thing, that can't take a whole day. Come 48 hours, they might be in the truck driving home.

What are you going to do with your bit of the money? Dianne asks.

Going to pool money with my boss, Hicks says. Thirty thousand each, we become partners, buy some new equipment. He has connections with the city, we could get large, expensive projects. The other ten thousand . . . That's for when that first thirty fails.

Dianne remains silent to Hicks's plan. Hicks has a history of responsible planning.

Hicks stares at the darkness, slides deeper into his sleeping bag, listens to the leaves in the night's breeze. He can hear them fall, hear them hit the tent. How about you?

How about me what?

The money. What do you plan to do with your money?

Haven't really thought about it, Dianne says, her voice a whisper. Take time finding a new job, I guess. Or get my high school. Her voice a dreamy whisper and Hicks imagines how warm he would be inside her sleeping bag. He tries not to think about being beside her, being inside her, but he hardens nonetheless. He rolls onto his stomach and presses himself into the ground. He imagines looking down into Dianne's face as he presses himself against her, pushes himself inside her, her eyes closed, tilting her head back as they fuck together. All those times they've fucked. In her old house, in her father's girlfriend's house. In one of his hundreds of rented houses, apartments, and the one trailer-house. In the car, the car in Calgary, under a cover, unnamed. He feels the pull toward the *Albertosaur*, the slope of the ground, and he has a momentary vision of waking up in the middle of the night, pressing himself against the *Albertosaur's* mouth. He pulls himself deeper into the sleeping bag, turns to his side and pulls his knees up to his chest.

During the night Hicks wakes up in turn from the howl of coyotes, the slap of a beaver tail, and an argument among the local geese. His sleeping bag cold and damp from his own breath, Dianne either sleeping through all these cacophonies or not sleeping and not caring. The tent smells of ground and sandstone. The air damp

with the clay smell of plaster. From outside the tent a footstep, small and soft in their camp.

Dianne sits up.

Just a deer, Dianne, Hicks says.

At his voice the animal hurries off into the woods.

Can't sleep? Hicks asks.

I can't relax, can't shake the feeling that something's not right.

What can possibly not be right here in this coulee, us taking this head out of the ground?

Don't you think Argo is a bit too compliant?

You think he's setting us up to get us caught? He'd have done that by now.

No, not that. Even the sandstone is compliant. The head the way it is. This table top being the way it is. I can't for the life of me imagine any way that a hoodoo or anything eroded to reveal a dinosaur like that. The silence of this place during the day, Argo always having the necessary tool. The hoist, that saw. His trailer. His horse, even. Any one of those things missing and we'd be damned. I can't shake the feeling that we are being led, Hicks. That everything is following along nice and orderly as prescribed.

Hicks turns over to face Dianne. Let me tell you this story I heard once, he says.

Dianne lies back, turns on her side toward Hicks. What story?

I may have read this story, or saw it on TV, Hicks says. He says, This is a story about a chunk of rock, a chunk of rock in space, like an asteroid or a meteorite, this

chunk floating around for a hundred million years, or hundred million years and ten, maybe more, maybe even God forgetting how long.

This rock, Hicks says. Who knows how big originally, floating through space, travelling. The ultimate traveller, this rock. Thinking it's the parent of its own fate, but in fact, this rock is slave to every whim but its own. Bumped once or twice along the way, told by one star, go this way, by another star, no, that way. Attracted to our little sun by forces we only think we understand.

For a million years, Hicks says, and Dianne turns to stare out the tent window, to the stars. For a billion years this rock coming, always coming to us, past Saturn now, past Jupiter, curved by Mars. Bent, focused on us, on our little planet. Earth getting bigger day by day, year by year until one day, one year, the rock takes the final plunge, heating, shrinking, burning through the atmosphere, travelling since the beginning of time only to scream through the roof of a trailer house in Bughump, Arkansas to hit the ass of a woman who decided at that very moment she had to get up and take a piss.

I remember reading about that story when I was a little girl, Dianne says. I'm pretty sure that woman was asleep on the couch when the meteorite hit her. On the outer thigh, I think.

Let's go with take a piss, hit in the ass. Makes for a more interesting story that way.

Okay, good point, Dianne says. Speaking of points, what's your point?

That dinosaur was set in the ground for us to get it back out again, Hicks says. Everything has led to this point. You're right, Dianne. Whatever happened to this

beast, however it died, it died for us to come get it. Both the dinosaur and us making decisions, travelling to meet at this point. Fate on an unimaginable scale.

### 6.18

That's a lucky dog that gets to stay up late, that gets to go out for a moon-lit walk. Back behind the octoplex, Jolene and Willey walk down the alley, heading for the train tracks, heading for the path to Erin Woods. Don't expect to find any woods in Erin Woods. For that matter, don't expect to find any forest in Forest Lawn.

Southview, just west of Forest Lawn, has a great view to the west, and Dover? Maybe there's a town in England named Dover or a dead guy or both, but one thing for sure, just west of Dover, there's a community named West Dover. Truth in advertising.

Jolene's out for her last walk of the night, Willey's mother is at home in her room watching television. She likes to watch the Top Singer, Top Model, Top Dancer, Top Restaurant Make-over and today, Willey's mother went outside.

Coming back home after 'work' Willey hung his car keys on the centre hook of the Haussegen plaque. (1. She is always right. 2. If there is ever a case where she is not right, rule 1 automatically comes into effect.) Willey's mother, shaking, smiling, standing before Willey. I was out on the balcony, Willey, she said.

Willey paused taking his shoe off. It almost sounded as if his mother said she was out on the balcony. What? Willey said.

Her, Willey's mother said, pointing to Jolene, Jolene looking up at Willey, tail wagging. She got her head stuck in the balcony bars. I had to help her get free.

Holy shit, Willey said as he hugged his mother.

She cries, Willey's mother said. I did not know dogs could cry.

For as long as Willey can remember, he's walked this alley and made for the pedestrian crossing so he can walk up the tracks looking for treasure. Each time he's passed a sign which he's always assumed warned you about staying off the tracks, but a couple weeks ago, Jolene and Willey walked past the sign and Willey took a second to read it.

Any person found committing damage to City of Calgary property is liable to prosecution under the criminal code of Canada.

Willey's not sure what to make of the sign. His first reaction was laughter, but then he thought, perhaps he should be offended. Are the train tracks City of Calgary property, or is the alley? Maybe just the fence is City of Calgary property. If it's the alley, do other alleys have similar signs, or is this another Dover moment?

In Dover, down the street, there's a fence with a sign that says, Stay off the Grass, but the grass, if it still is grass, is a foot high, and the weeds are threatening to obscure the sign. In Dover, the stay off the grass signs aren't necessarily there to keep you from ruining a lawn. You obey this particular sign, it might save you a broken ankle or a snake bite. In Dover, there's a family a little further down the street from Willey's, they've set up their swing-set and slide in the front yard, because the front yard has a decent slope. In the summer, they set up the sprinkler to get the slide wet, and the kids whip down the slide, down the sloping lawn, and into an old mattress they've leaned up against the chain link fence. Those kids, there might be four of them that live there but it's hard to tell with all the neighbourhood

kids playing on the slide. Those kids are the happiest kids you'll find in any neighbourhood, Dover moment or not.

Willey opens his Facebook account. Stephanie's Facebook account rather, and is about to detail his offended status—Stephanie's offended status—about this sign in a poor neighbourhood, but he realizes, there are already too many people in this world who have offended statuses. Willey decides not to take his gripe to Facebook, as himself or as Stephanie. His mother was outside today.

Willey would often wait at these tracks for Hicks, Hicks either trying to balance on the rail, or riding his bike alongside, and together they'd make their way to Valleyview Elementary. At Valleyview, well, at every school, Willey had a harder time than other kids picking up simple instructions, particularly words, but he was smart enough to recognize the trouble that could come from such a trait. So he'd stay after school for a bit of studying, to have the teacher help. Mrs. Koniwalsky, there's a name, a shoe that Willey will never forget. She would always smile for him as he showed up after school and she'd help him work through grammar books and spelling lists. Her bright red lipstick, her blonde hair. Mrs. Koniwalsky, she always wore heels.

When Hicks found out about this, he didn't say anything other than telling Willey he'd wait too, but Hicks, he wouldn't sit in on the class, and he wouldn't always wait in the playground either. Often, he'd sit on the school's front steps looking mopey and alone, and if his teacher or the principal asked what was going on Hicks would say his dad forgot him again. Then when Willey was ready, Willey would offer to walk with Hicks home, and the principal was okay with that. That

principal, he could never get a hold of Hicks father, what with their phone number changing almost three times a year. Hicks told me, his teacher always took it easier on him on a day after his dad forgot to come pick him up. Soon Hicks's father forgot to pick Hicks up every day before a test was scheduled.

But the key factor, Hicks didn't bother Willey about slow learning, and that was what nailed their friendship together. So Willey was completely in on Hicks's plan when Hicks showed up one morning with a handful of white pills, an E stamped on every one. Hicks wanted to sell these pills as ecstasy to the Junior High kids in the school next door. All Willey had to do was buy one with money Hicks gave him, eat it, and trip out on the school field. Willey wasn't sure how to trip out and Hicks said, Just roll on the ground, laughing.

They sold every pill for ten dollars each and some of those kids, not all but some of them said they totally tripped too. Christ, Hicks and Willey told that story for years after and laughed each time like it happened yesterday, but the best part, according to Hicks, was watching his then common-law step-mother search the house for her pills, while you could swear her mustache was getting thicker right in front of your eyes.

Jolene's done her business in a record 9 minutes and 35 seconds, Willey's picked up her business, they've walked home, Jolene's in her kennel and in case a refinery explodes somewhere in the neighbourhood and Willey's mother has to bust in to his bedroom, hysterical, Willey's left a note on his pillow telling her he's gone out. She was out on the balcony today, Willey's mother.

Willey's hasn't found a place yet. A convenience store to take the fake lottery ticket. He figures, since he'll be putting his plan in place at night, he should try finding a place at night. Drive the length of 36th Street. Go through Marlborough, Rundle, Whitehorn. Maybe go as far as Falconridge, Saddleridge.

These areas, they don't have the same texture as Forest Lawn. Tell that to someone in the southwest, though. Guys from the southwest, they think Forest Lawn starts somewhere near the east side industrial area, and keeps going until the airport.

Willey drives 36th through Marlborough, past the liquor store slash gas-station slash convenience store where he first saw Rhonda. The depressed traveller's trifecta. The liquor store reminds Willey of Rhonda, and so it reminds Willey of not hearing Rhonda's voice today, and the pending Garbutt's Last BBQ at her parents' place. Lawrence and Karen.

Willey hasn't talked to Rhonda today, other than the exchanged texts. Her project that's due, the one she's struggling with, is relatively major. No drafting, she says, just a few concept sketches and a sample board, something you might show a client before the real work begins. Heart heart heart.

Willey continues north, past Marlborough Mall, past Pacific Place, or what his mother used to call Franklin Mall, and Willey remains unable to get Rhonda out of his head. The way her face looks when she's reading, the way her eyes narrow when she's concentrating.

The streetlights are orange, giving the city a perennial Halloween glow. Calgary at night, no matter the time of year, there's something about the space, the light that reminds you winter is always just around the corner.

These areas in the northeast, Marlborough, Sunridge, Rundle, Whitehorn, Willey loves these areas but they're shitty for convenience stores that speak to you, that invite you in to scam their employees. Just east of Rundle is Pineridge and Pineridge is where Willey used to play hockey in the winter, and sitting in the car, at the intersection of 36th Street and one of about a hundred cross streets with a light, Willey remembers that night with Dianne skating and her hair flying black behind her, and this time in the memory, she keeps skating away from Willey and doesn't turn back before the arrow starts flashing and the guy behind lays on his horn.

Willey asked Dianne about talking to Rhonda and wanting to watch her as she works but Dianne was quite explicit in making sure he gives Rhonda enough space to work and feel comfortable and if there are days where he doesn't see her—like today—then so be it. Just send her a message, say Hello, tell her you miss her, tell her you can't wait to see her again, tell her you hope she has a good day and leave it at that. No pressure, no guilt-trips.

Willey drives up 36th all the way to McKnight, heads east to 52nd and comes back south again, all the way to Memorial. Then back on 36th. Really, he should be zigzagging through these neighbourhoods, but he's not feeling it tonight. He doesn't have it in him to be detail-oriented. He drives past Marlborough Mall again, Pacific Place again, and he drives past Sunridge Mall again and can't find any place that might feel right for this scam.

What he'll do, when he finds the right store, is go inside, late at night. He'll put on the pair of sunglasses that he bought from Tran at Adam's for just this occasion. He'll make a point of putting these sunglasses on, he'll really emphasize having them. He'll ask the clerk, he'll say, Can you spread out the lottery tickets, man, maybe just those ones there? The clerk will bring them out a few at a time, and Willey, he'll put the sunglasses on, and he'll pretend to look through all the tickets. He'll say in passing, Yeah, if I test these during the day, people get upset. He'll have that guy's attention then, that's for sure. Unless that guy's elbow deep in cleaning the nacho cheese dispenser or something, Willey will have him totally piqued.

36th Street isn't good for convenience stores because 36th Street is as inconvenient as Hell would be if it didn't have convenience stores but did have train tracks running down the middle with full-scale malls on either side. Willey's mother used to go to bingo at a place behind Franklin Mall. The bingo might still be there, but the convenience stores in this area seem relatively well hidden. This one night, Willey's mother won a couple thousand dollars at bingo, and you'd think she'd splurge on a cab for herself. She won this money and while standing at a 36th Street bus stop she got clubbed on the back of the head and ended up in in the hospital for three days. 15 years ago.

Willey's not even sure if a Middle Eastern clerk or a clerk from India or Pakistan will fall for his scam. Those guys, they're in a grey area of being scam victims. They don't trust white guys, especially at three in the morning in a convenience store, trying to sell them scratched lottery tickets. This lottery ticket problem, it's a white man's problem.

It dawns on Willey at this point, why he's not finding a convenience store that sings the right song. He's dealing with trying to recoup losses from buying a fake thousand dollar lottery ticket. Therefore, he's dealing with greed. His problem, his lottery ticket problem, is a first-world problem, and relies on a first-world solution. He needs a white clerk. Male. Entitled. Depressed and greedy.

He nods to himself. Yeah, that's what he needs. He needs to get out of the north east. Yeah, he says, nodding. Yeah.

## 6.19

Hicks wakes up in the morning at the sound of a leaf hitting the tent. The leaf like a boom in the tent at—Hicks turns on his phone to check the time. He reminds himself not to use the phone if he has to calculate any simple math. He's used the phone too often to look at *Albertosaur* fossils to try and get a feel for what they're working with and the battery is under 50 percent. They have Dianne's phone, which hasn't been turned on yet. A shower would be nice. The leaf that landed on the tent shifts its weight. Caws.

Hicks sends Willey a quick update, hoping that at this time in the morning, Willey has his phone set on shriek. Everything fine. On Schedule. There?

Hicks begins to stretch, realizes he's right next to the pit they've chiseled. Dianne right against him, rolls over.

That fucking crow, she says.

Would make an excellent stuffed specimen, Hicks finishes. He takes one of his boots, these alone might have prevented him from sliding all the way into the shallow pit they've dug, and he tosses it at the tent ceiling.

To his surprise, and Dianne's gasp, Hicks's phone buzzes with Willey's response. Everything fine. In the market for a soup joke, though.

Breakfast comes in the form of cereal bars and coffee, Dianne boiling the water while Hicks prepares the day's butchery. He pulls the tent back, pulls the black poly back and exposes their earlier work to the judgement of the coming sun. The plan is to chip away the face of the table, back close to their plaster work, and down to a point where they can get the horse-drawn cart in and out.

You know, Hicks says. I never in my life thought I'd have opportunity to make use of a horse-drawn cart.

You forgot about that time in Banff, Dianne says. When we took the tour of the town in that carriage, and you asked to drive. Does that not qualify?

Ah, Hicks says. But that was winter. That was a sleigh, and not a cart.

The two look into each other's eyes for almost a full second, perhaps both remembering the romance of that night in Banff, and the full second is a full second too long to be comfortable for either. Hicks turns and looks for the mattock. He drags it across the face of the ledge, and the sandstone, if it even qualifies for that designation, crumbles to the ground.

And so, as has been the soundtrack of their recent days, they chip, and their tools clatter and Hicks cracks his neck while Dianne whistles with her breath, songs that require moisture on your tongue to sing. Hicks scrapes away all the loose bits of rock, Dianne chisels inside the trenches they've created. The sun warms, then heats and though the day is not hot by valley standards, it draws out sweat.

Hicks is able to use the sledgehammer to pound at the more solid yet still quite loose sandstone in front of their trenches, and by noon he declares that he might soon have to start working underneath the *Albertosaur*. Everything is a thief's dream.

A dream split by a whistle from the river below. Argo's shriek. Long and drawn. A visitor. A visitor from the river, coming. Dianne and Hicks lock eyes for the second time that day. For a split second they hold their gaze then both toss their tools amongst their clippings. Dianne starts tugging at the black poly sheet, pulling it out from under the tent, Hicks sliding the tent along roughly pulling and pushing from inside. Dianne drapes the poly over their work, their crime, and Hicks aligns the tent with what would have been the edge of the table, had they not hammered it away. Inside, he covers the poly sheet with their bedding.

Dianne sets up the tripod, the camera, aims it at the cliff faces. I'm not sure what to do with this, Dianne says.

Hicks says the setup is fine. He says he hasn't taken any photos of their work with that camera, but the camera is loaded with photos from his earlier tour of the coulee. He suggests they walk toward the river. Meet their visitor half way, they might be able to bluff him away there and then.

Okay, Dianne says. She swallows. Let's go.

The man is older, short blond hair frayed and graying around the ears. Dark green khaki-style shorts and a hiker's vest. The ubiquitous look that comes with his age: boots and black socks pulled near the knees. The arms of a canoer, life vest to match.

Oh, Hicks says, surprised at seeing the man on the path.

Hi, Dianne says, her voice hitting high notes that Hicks hasn't heard since, he thinks, that night in Banff.

Hello, the man says. I was wondering if there was a camp over here. Saw a light last night, Thought I'd come see if I knew anybody.

Yeah, Hicks says, we've got a camp just up the trail. I have to say, didn't expect a traffic jam on the path.

I canoe here every September, the visitor says. From Content Bridge down to Dinosaur Provincial Park. Camp for a couple days here and there. The man looks at Dianne. I only bring what can fit in the canoe, he adds. No stopping for supplies allowed. Have to catch most of what I eat.

Oh yeah?

Uh-huh.

Mm-hmm.

I was wondering, this visitor says, if you heard any sawing yesterday. I thought I heard a saw in the valley yesterday.

Yeah, Hicks says. We heard that too. Hicks points back over his shoulder. Old farmer up there on the prairie was cutting up a rock on his land or something.

Hmm, the visitor says. It didn't sound like it was on the plateau. Sure sounded like it was in the valley.

Well, we were headed out for a walk, Hicks says, but, a visitor is rare. Why don't you come back to our camp, I've got some, warm, flat beer if you want one.

Sounds good.

As they turn to head back up the path, the visitor steps between Hicks and Dianne and takes the lead. Dianne gives Hicks a glare. Hicks shrugs, and turns to follow the man.

On the way to the camp, Dianne says to the man, What's your name, sir?

Richard, Richard says.

I'm Veronica, Dianne says. This is Edgar. She nods back at Hicks.

Nice to meet you both, Richard says. He shakes Edgar's hand. Then Veronica's.

They're only a minute walk out of Edgar and Veronica's camp. As they walk in, Richard gives the camp a quick once over. His eyes pause on the black poly sheet. Hicks slides a chair to him, then grabs two beers, dripping, from the cooler.

Where you from, Richard? Hicks asks, handing him one of the opened beers. He hands the other to Dianne.

Oil country, he says. Edmonton.

You work in Oil and Gas.

Yep. I run a medium sized business, I guess you can say. We do slickline service. Wireline. Well testing, cased-hole logging & perforating.

Oh yeah?

Mm-hmm.

Yep.

Data Management.

And you canoe.

Yeah, I try to get out here every year. Love the valley in the autumn.

Yep.

Richard takes a sip of his beer. You weren't joking about this beer, he says.

Well, Hicks says. I tried to get some ice from the man who lives up on the plateau. Not a very companionable man though. He's trying to get a rock out of his field. I don't know.

What about you, Richard says. Where are you two from?

Calgary, Dianne says.

Ahh, Richard says.

Yep, Hicks says. Oil *money* country. He holds Richard's gaze for a moment, not smiling at his joke. Richard nodding, silently.

Richards takes another sip. What do you do? he asks. When you're not doing, whatever it is you're doing here?

What I'm doing here, is what I do. Hicks says. University of Calgary. I'm a student. He looks at Dianne. Trying to finish my Master's degree in Geology.

Geology, eh?

Mm-hmm. I'm writing about the barrier island complex present in this area.

The barrier island?

Barrier Island complex, yes, Hicks says. You see, sandstone is the predominant lithology in the unit I'm studying right now. Hicks waves his right hand from one edge of the coulee to a point consistent with how far he's able to move his shoulder without pain.

The unit I'm concerned with reaches from about where we're sitting up to a coal unit you can see behind me, on the opposite valley wall. What we're dealing

with here, typically, is a tidal flat, heavily channeled with trough and cross bedding, flaser, wavy and lenticular bedding. About a hundred meters east of here, we've noted an oyster bed, 4 meters thick in spots, which pinches out about another kilometer downriver. At its eastern edge, a sandy channel scours through the bed and the underlying shale of the unit below. I've got all my samples, we're just here for a few days, taking some visuals for my thesis. Measurements.

Hicks and Richard continue talking while Dianne leans back and sips her beer. She stares off into the valley, eyes wide, but she sees nothing, focused on Hicks's words. Richard listens, Hicks does the talking, spreading bullshit thicker than the layers in the surrounding valley. He drops words such as *carbonaceous*, words like *palynomorphs*. When Hicks talks about well-preserved burrows of *Ophiomorpha*, Dianne looks him square in the eye.

But I digress, Hicks says. I'm interested in the glauconite from the east end of the oyster bed, when compared to, say, glauconite from where we are right now.

Ah, the glauconite, Richard says.

Oh, Christ, don't get him started on glauconite, Dianne says.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. Hicks says, taking a playful swing at Dianne. Glauconite here is glauconite everywhere, but I'm trying to determine if there's a glauconite distinct to this area, and if so, why? So far, the samples we've taken from the other end of that oyster bed have no local comparison.

Well, Richard says. I do data gathering for two companies that have Glauconitic fields in the upper Mannville. We've examined core samples and looked

at the stratigraphic differences among various reservoirs, and our data shows that samples thought to be Glauconitic are, in fact, from a Basal Quartz member.

Yeah, Hicks says. My research, as I see it now, won't add anything to glauconite as a predictor for oil or gas-rich environments. But, Hicks adds, rubbing at his hair, smiling, it means I get to graduate, and maybe, one day, we make a better fertilizer.

As Richard takes another second to stare at the tent, at the black poly sheet, Hicks turns to Dianne and shrugs a quick, jerky shrug. He mouths one word to Dianne. Fuck!

Dianne takes a long swig of her beer, stands, and with her back to Richard, takes off her sweatshirt, rubs at the back of her head, shakes her hair out and adjusts her undershirt. Convinced she has Richard's attention, she climbs up onto the table, crawls into the tent making sure she adds a bit of extra sway to her movements.

Richard stares at the tent. Sips his beer. Stares at the tent a bit more. What's the black sheet of poly for? he asks.

What's that? Hicks says.

That black sheet of polyvinyl, Richard says, What's that for?

That's mine, Dianne shouts from inside the tent. That's my idea.

What's it for? Richards asks.

The sheet, Dianne yells, gets direct sun from about noon to sunset. It gets pretty hot, and we, Edgar and I, we like to go to bed early. That sheet keeps me warm all the way through the night.

Richards looks at Hicks.

I laughed the first time, too, Hicks said. But I'll never go camping again without one.

Dianne comes out of the tent, Hicks sure she will have traded her jeans for her pair of brown denim shorts, sure she will have traded her shirt for a tighter, whiter version, and she is about to put on a show for Richard. Seduce him into leaving.

Instead a pot, their cooking pot, lands in Hicks's lap. Dianne slaps him across the back of the head. I told you to clean this you lazy asshole, she shouts.

Hicks stands, the pot, not all that dirty by Hicks's standards, clatters to the ground. What the fuck? he yells.

I'm not your fucking slave, Edgar. I don't mind coming out here but I'm not your fucking dish-maid.

I should probably get going, Richard says.

## 6.20

Willey has to find a first-world solution to his first-world problem, he has to find a 7-11 in a first-world neighbourhood with a first-world clerk. Maybe he should go back to Auburn Bay, maybe he should go to Castle Keep. The Hamptons.

Tuscany.

He takes Jolene out for her morning call. Since Willey tends to stay up late, that means Jolene's more of a night dog, and last night, she didn't get in her kennel until after midnight, as is typical, so she's good in there until about 10 in the morning. Still, it was her whining that got Willey moving. Her whining and Willey's mother worrying about why the dog's whining, and Hicks's update. Hicks writes in

answer to Willey's soup joke request, If the soup is Italian Wedding, you can say it has extra thigh fat and oil.

Willey rubs at his temples. He's on his own for finding a soup joke. He shoves his phone in his pocket. If he ever gets wealthy, he plans to take Hicks on a trip around the world. Hicks and Dianne and Rhonda, and Willey will keep track of all the countries where Hicks gets punched.

Half way to the tracks, he pulls his phone back out of his pocket. A text from Rhonda. She says she misses him, asks if he wants to head out for lunch with her before he has to work. Smiley face heart heart heart.

It's Tuesday, which means it would normally be Willey's Friday, but Willey forgot that he didn't tell Rhonda he took the week off.

Sure, he types back. Should I meet you out front, or . . . ?

Not the atrium, Rhonda texts back. Heart.

Driving west along Memorial Drive, the mountains large behind the towers of downtown, Willey remembers a place in Capitol Hill, a donair place named Jimmie's that he and Hicks once visited for lunch. At the red light at 10th Street, Willey texts his suggestion of lunch at Jimmie's

Rhonda, she's eager to go to any place that Willey raves about, and she says she's already waiting outside, she can't stand the studio any more.

When Willey sees Rhonda, she's carrying her backpack, a black plastic tube that carries some of her work, and a leather case large enough to carry unfolded maps. This is for her larger projects, ones that can't be folded. Sample boards. Willey

gets out to open the back hatch, Rhonda asks if it's all right for him to drop her off at home when they're finished lunch.

As if reading Willey's forming thought—her house, her bed—she says, rubbing her temple, that she has what might be the worst headache she's ever had in her life.

You even want to go for lunch? I can take you straight home.

Yes, she says. She does want to go for lunch. Eating might help and besides, she has the ultimate faith in restaurants Willey picks. She leans over and kisses him, says Hi to Jolene in the back, who gives a tail wag in return.

Jimmie's makes a meatless shawarma so good, God himself would buy it if he didn't have such a hate on for vegetables. Willey orders the meatless with extra peppers and sauce, and Rhonda follows suit but without the peppers. They take their shawarmas outside to sit in the sun with Jolene.

They eat in silence, Rhonda's thoughts barely on her meal, her eyes narrow with other thoughts as much as the sun's glare. Willey's rational inner Willey, he says she's worried about school, but Willey's paranoid inner Willey is convinced that Rhonda's worried about Willey meeting her parents, and maybe she's rethinking the whole plan. The whole plan, the whole relationship. The Garbutt BBQ is tomorrow.

Willey's mind left to worry or wander, he decides to let it wander. The day he and Hicks went to Jimmie's, that was the day Hicks bought a cat for Dianne and Willey almost chokes having to stop himself from laughing.

You all right? Rhonda asks.

Willey chuckles. I came here with Hicks this one day, a couple years ago. Jimmie's is packed, even outside, where we are now, and we decide to take a walk around the neighbourhood. If you're not careful with a Jimmie's you might end up wearing most of it, and there's no way, according to Hicks, we're taking these things into his car.

Anyway, Willey says, we're walking toward 19th street when I see in the distance, this stand on the side of the road, you know, where little kids sell lemonade or juice. I'm thinking that it's everybody's lucky day because Hicks and I neglected to buy something to drink at Jimmie's and this kid's going to make a couple dollars.

Rhonda, as she listens to this story, must have missed the part where Willey warned her about wearing your Jimmie's if you're not careful. Already there's sauce pooling on the table in front of her, and a drop hanging from her chin. If Jimmies' was smart, they'd sell shirts that had a post-lunch-mess patterns with Jimmie's written on them.

Willey tells Rhonda, he says, When we get to this table there's this little girl sitting there playing with this kitten. Kid's about eight or ten years old, or however old you are when you start losing your front teeth, and though her table's got a sheet draped over it, all pleated and professional looking, there's no lemonade. We look at the sign on the front of the table. Says, \$5.00 cats.

Hicks and I, Willey says, look at the little girl, look at the sign, look at the girl again. She looks at Hicks. He says, Are you serious? The little girl holds the kitten out and drops it in Hicks's hands. The cat makes a noise like a squeak-toy, and, having

some semblance of good taste, it wants down. So Hicks sets it on the table and says, Sorry little girl, I wanted a black one.

Well, if this kid doesn't reach under the table and bring up this box with about three other kittens in it. She half sets, half throws this skinny little black thing in Hicks's hands. It looks at Hicks and pulls its head back a bit as if to say, Well, who the hell are you, then?

Hicks rifles through the change in his pocket, I pitch in a dollar, and Hicks says he's going to buy this cat for Dianne. His girlfriend, Willey tells Rhonda.

Rhonda wipes her chin, she says, He did not actually buy his girlfriend a cat, and give it to her as a present, did he?

To make matters worse, Willey says, when responding to Dianne's irritation at such a gift, Hicks says to her, It's kind of a test, if you take care of the cat well enough, I might give you a baby.

Did she kill him? Rhonda says. She's not laughing at the story, though. Maybe it's not a story you laugh at, or maybe she's sympathetic to Dianne. Something's definitely pressing on her mind.

My turn to ask you, Willey says, why do you look distracted?

School, she says. She says she's almost got that project finished, but when she does finish it, there's no reprieve. She says she has a CADD project due in two days—wall sections, sections that they'll use as macros for the next three years—and she has some Photoshop exercises to do. As well as her theory plate which is due Friday, which she hasn't started. Willey gets from the look on Rhonda's face that she

shortened the list for his benefit. She lights a cigarette. One smoke before we get back in your car, she says.

He'd love to see her smile, maybe even laugh a little, so Willey takes a chance. He rolls the dice, and he rolls out a fake laugh. Rhonda looks at him. She exhales smoke out her nostrils. What? She says.

It's September, Willey says.

Yeah?

Your school year just started.

Rhonda holds his look for a minute and then a smile forms. She laughs. Oh, Willey, she says. I'm sorry. She runs her hand through her hair. I enrolled in this course to avoid actual school work. Little did I know.

You know, Willey says to Rhonda, I'd really love to see what you're working on.

They stand over Rhonda's desk like they're in a doctor show looking at a new-born baby. A beautiful baby, but one with heart complications. Rhonda's in a better mood, her head-ache might be disappearing, and Willey? Well, on the way to her place from Jimmie's, they stopped at a 7-11, the one by Westbrook mall, on 37th Street in the southwest. They pull up to this 7-11 and it's just like any other 7-11. Kind of close to Parker's place, this 7-11, close to where Hicks lost his boot, and they stop so Rhonda can buy some Advil. Willey told her to wait in the car, he'd get it, and while waiting for the clerk, Brad, Willey heard Brad tell someone on the phone that he wouldn't be able to join his friends that night. Brad's going to work a double shift,

and a few extra hours after that, probably. He might be there all night, because he can sure use the money, and he has to go now because he has a customer.

That 7-11, that white Brad, who could sure use money? Willey started to get all fuzzy. Not exactly like downtown reflected in a river telling you that it's thousand dollar night, but close enough. That store sung the song Willey's been waiting to hear. Willey's found his convenience store.

In Rhonda's house, Willey's giddy because he's found the site of his future Blackjack ticket scam. Rhonda shows Willey her project, she tells him that for this project, which is a tea shop, or probably a tea shoppe, all she has to do is come up with concept drawings and a sample board. She's largely finished the board and the drawings, which have to imagine different views of the shoppe, Willey can see in her drawings the different colours of the samples she's selected.

Rhonda thinks she can do better work, she says. She says she rushed certain parts of the drawings, but Willey, looking at the pages, at Rhonda's talent, skill, creativity? All the concentration coming from her mind, moving through her body and out her hands, her fingers. How can anyone not want to be part of that? How can Willey get himself in there, to be part of the process, to be on her mind when she's thinking of her work, but as an inspiration, not as a distraction?

Willey imagines Hicks on the land, her Aunt and Uncle's land, maybe willed to her one day. He imagines what Hicks and Dianne are doing out there.

Rhonda picks a marker from the holder on her desk. She has coffee mugs in different colours along the back of her desk, with markers in each one. She takes a dark blue marker from the dark blue mug and as Willey watches, she dabs at a part

of one drawing, a man sitting at a table. A dark blue marker, the fine end, her hand so quick, the touch of ink barely registers, and suddenly, the man she touched with the marker? Before she touched him he was turned to face his friend, both of them with their backs to Rhonda and Willey—the creator of their world, and a voyeur looking in—and now the man's turned a little more, his eye looking back at Willey, as if to say, Whatcha looking at, buddy?

Willey can see in the drawing, the texture of everything on the sample board. Not just the colour, the *texture*. The wood floor, the wood of the table tops, he can tell where each belongs. On the sample board, there's an empty white space labelled Art, and in the drawing, behind the server, the shoppe's only employee, brewing the order of the man so rudely interrupted, behind her, a matching empty space on the wall.

Art, Willey says.

Art, Rhonda says. Art is the last detail I need, and I want something dramatic, that one canvas that can nail the whole room together. But nothing's clicking.

Willey, when he's working, he says, Size ten? And an hour later, he takes the same shoes back and sprays chemicals inside.

Rhonda has old art magazines jammed in her backpack, more spread out on her desk. *Architectural Digest*, *Art Quarterly*, old issues of *Journal of Canadian Art*.

She says, I need to source something, anything, but I need to have some sort of visual representation on my board, something that I can easily reproduce in my drawing.

Maybe I can help, Willey says. Give me some tips. What am I looking for?

Rhonda tells Willey, the theme she's working with is *Alice in Wonderland*, but she wants it to be subtle, she doesn't want somebody looking at the drawings and screaming, Oh, hey! Alice!

Okay, Willey says.

Traditionally, Rhonda says, tea shoppes have a lot of texture, and earth tones, right? Greens and browns, neutrals? Modern tea shoppes are very glossy.

Okay, Willey says. Rhonda looks at her drawing. She tells Willey that she wants texture, but something a little off-kilter. Not lace and flowers, no antique-looking Asian tea-pots. She wants texture more like tree bark and jars of buttons that have been spilt with parts of bird skeletons mixed in. Does that make sense?

Of course it doesn't, not to Willey, but based on *Alice in Wonderland*, his first impression is the art should be a Mad Hatter. His inner Willey says, How subtle is that, jackass?

His next impression is the Queen of Hearts, more a lateral move than an improvement, but still, he says, How about a Queen of Hearts, only the back of a Queen of Hearts?

Rhonda looks at Willey. Like a playing card?

He shrugs.

Rhonda gets on her laptop and right away she finds a nice image of a Cheetah themed deck, heavily textured, black and white, the cheetah with a subtle smile, a heart-shaped nose.

Fucking amazing, Rhonda says. She saves the image, reduces it to the size she'd need for the sample board, and sends it to her printer. She takes the image

again, the one on her computer, and opens it in her Photoshop program. She skews the image to match the perspective on the drawing. She does this without measuring, she does this by eye, and again she sends the image to her printer.

Willey sits back and watches, amazed at her working, the way her body moves, the way she does her work as if she's been doing this all her life. She tapes the image to her desk, tapes her drawing on top, and flicking a switch, her desk lights up. She traces the skewed image onto her drawing using a black ink pen, a pen that has 000 written across the cap. She does this fast, telling Willey that she has to match the level of detail of the art with the level of detail in that distance of her drawing. It can't be too technical, it has to match the sketchy quality of the rest of her drawing.

Speaking of sketchy qualities, Willey's found his convenience store, and the Brad that he's going to rip off later.

Rhonda has a song in her thoughts, and her body, her hips sway a bit as she stands and works and Willey can watch this all day. He sits back on the bed and tries to stay out of her way. Even though Willey's sitting back and watching her, Rhonda's talking to him as if he's looking over her shoulder. I'm going to emphasise the smile of the cat's mouth, she says. I'm going to make the heart-shaped nose a little bigger. She takes the first print out, roughly playing card-size, and she cuts it out, but not with scissors. She uses a ruler and an X-Acto knife. She uses scissors to curve the corners of the picture, and uses rubber glue spread with a piece of matt-board, to glue the picture onto a thicker piece of card-stock. She cuts that to match the shape

of the original print, and all the time she's giving Willey instructions, as if he might have to do this himself one day.

When Willey looks at her finished project, he wants to have a cup of tea. He wants to join Alice down the rabbit hole. He stares at her drawing, at that man looking back over his shoulder. The man doesn't notice Rhonda, stepping in front of Willey, pushing Willey back on the bed. There's my big Willey, she says. She says, Everything else can wait, big Willey.

## 6.21

With Richard safely ensconced in his canoe and paddling downriver, Dianne turns to Hicks and shakes her head. What the fuck was all that? she says.

Shouldn't that be my line?

I had to do something to get him out of there, Dianne says, and you, she lets her sentence trail off. Hicks isn't sure if she's angry or mock angry.

What? he says, arms out in his pose of innocence.

Ophiopha—did anything of what you said to that man make sense?

I don't know, Hicks says, his laugh dying. I can picture the words but I don't know what half the words mean. What I do know, is the area I described, Richard won't float past that area for two days, probably.

But how did you know all that?

I've been reading all week. Didn't you do any preparation?

Yeah, Dianne says. I bought boots.

Dianne stares down the river, but Richard has long since made the bend and gone out of sight. She scans the shore, and high up on the prairie edge hoping for a sight of Argo. Nothing.

Heats up from the sun, Hicks says, laughing. Jesus.

I guess we should get back to work, Dianne says.

Using an inch wide cold chisel, Dianne teases excess weight from the block. She chips closer and closer to the *Albertosaur*, smoothing away all the right angles, Hicks insistent that they must trim the fat from this cube.

Hicks starts undermining the block, gouging, carving digging inward and up, holding the mattock horizontally, his left hand held near the tool's head. The sandstone comes away in flakes but still the work is slow, tedious. After an hour he's notched a foot in and works within a foot of the top. Tentatively, carefully, on his knees in the grit, exchanging the mattock for a hand chisel, he gouges further and further up, working closer and closer to the underside of the fossil. He stands to inspect Dianne's trimming.

I don't doubt that the hoist and horse can carry our planned weight of block, Hicks says. But Argo's trailer is another matter. Dianne shrugs and indicates a few places where she's shaving off sandstone dangerously close to their set plaster, and therefore, too close to the fossil.

I'm two inches from the plaster at the front, Dianne says, which means I'm three inches from our monster in there. Other places I'm even closer.

Hicks measures across the top of the block. Three feet at the widest, but Dianne has been shaping the block to reflect the shape of the encased skull. Most of the width is closer to two feet.

Let's pretend, Hicks says, the average width is two and a half feet. The length remains three and a half. Depending on how much our queen has been compressed, maybe I can narrow the depth of our block to twenty inches. Hicks resorts to the calculator app once again. That's about 1900 pounds, he says. Perhaps the softness of this particular sandstone weighs less per cubic foot than what the internet tells me. Hicks frowns, scratches at the filth in his hair. He hopes that the trailer can hold more weight than it looks. He wonders where the hell Argo got to.

Together, Hicks and Dianne decide to hold off on removing any more rock from the top and sides of the block, Hicks giving in to Dianne's cautions. She starts cutting burlap for the jacket. She rubs her forehead with her upper arm, and gets a nostril full of her own stink. Hicks, too, has had few days in his life smellier than this. History will remember this day in the valley as hitting 16<sup>0</sup> C, maybe a decimal or two more, but with no cloud and no wind, the air feels outright equatorial. What part of her arms she hasn't inadvertently smeared with mud or dirt are free for the mosquitoes. Dianne would rather face Hicks's odour than her own, but her deodorant sits safe in the tent, somewhere close to the insect repellent.

She mixes more plaster, the dry gypsum mixing with dust, forming a thin layer of pasty mud in her mouth. No amount of water can rinse away the taste and she frowns, thinking this will be a flavour she carries with her for the rest of her life.

Dianne's shoulders have picked up an ever-deepening tan, her cheeks spot with freckles, and particles of sandstone adhere to her sweaty skin. Hicks also browning, she notes. The low sun picks out the blond in his dirty-blond dirty hair, gives it a touch of late day strawberry. It picks out the sheens of sweat on the curve of every one of Hicks's muscles. He stands and reaches up, stretches his arms over his head, curves his back as he twists his neck to crack it. Dianne stares at Hicks's naked torso. Sweat has carried dirt into every contour of his body. His oblique muscles stand out in relief, flex as the muscles of his stomach stretch.

Dianne's eyes trace the outside of Hicks's abdominals, the definition of his muscles leading her gaze down down down. His pants low on his waist, every muscle demanding attention. She wipes at yet another bead of sweat on her forehead, or perhaps it's just a wisp of hair, a mosquito. Whatever Hicks has been doing for the past two months, his body is all the harder for it. Hicks smiles at the unintentional dab of plaster across Dianne's forehead.

Both wonder about Argo, who hasn't been seen all day. Yet his earlier whistle saved them from potential disaster. Only the crow makes appearances now. Sporadic and largely ignored.

Dianne plasters the block about twelve inches down either side, leaving space for Hicks's work. Her feet sit in the trench to the creature's right, her bucket of plaster and piles of ripped burlap to her left. Without any fossil revealed here, Dianne foregoes using the foil. One layer of burlap perpendicular to the head's alignment, the next layer parallel. She slides along the block as she works, she balls large sections of burlap and shoves them deep into the bucket, straightens them out

on the block, covering sandstone and her earlier plaster work alike. She grabs handfuls of plaster, smears them onto the smoothed burlap like a child in the later stages of a finger-painting project gone awry.

The valley burns with dusk, Hicks carves at the notch, wanting to remove as much weight as possible, but needing to protect the expensive monster within. He reaches under with the digital camera to snap flashed pictures, making sure he isn't chiselling away fossil.

The stone comes off in chunks but never quick enough. The deeper Hicks works into the block the harder it is to swing the mattock properly. Soon he will have to switch to a crowbar. Lying flat on his stomach, his head under the block, he scoops debris with his hands, and slides it back behind him. He hopes that the softness of this particular sandstone weighs less per cubic foot than what his research indicates. He hopes that the trailer can hold more weight than it looks.

Dianne, working near Hicks, flicks plaster with her fingers, globs landing cold on his back and in his hair. You stink, she says. With a handful of plaster she runs a strip of white down his back, Now you're a skunk, she says.

Hicks straightens up. That feels nice and cool, he says. He smiles at the stripes of plaster decorating Dianne's face, two under each eye to match the unintentional stripe on her forehead. Smiling, he runs his tongue across his upper teeth. Even his smile grits with sandstone. He dips his finger into the plaster and matches the smear on Dianne's forehead with another to form the point of arrow aimed at the part in her hair. Hicks draws a line down the bridge of her nose. So decorated, Dianne

finishes the current plaster job, wrapping burlap down and under where Hicks has undermined the block of sandstone.

That's where we'll put an engine strap, Hicks says. Argo's hoist will support the weight and we can get out the rest of that rock that's holding this monster to the ground.

And after that, Dianne says. We'll snap its neck.

You should use two straps, Argo says from behind them, and both Hicks and Dianne jerk to the rough landslide of his voice.

Jesus Chester, Hicks says. Why do you have to sneak up on us like that?

Chester's always been light of hoof, Argo says. Not much of a dancer, though.

Where have you been all day? Dianne asks. We wanted to thank you for that whistle.

Oh, we've been here and there, Argo says. By the river, on the plateau, watching out for your visitor in case he decided to make a return engagement.

He's gone? Hicks says.

Past the ferry by now.

How do you know he's gone? Chester tell you?

We threatened to have a domestic dispute in front of him, Dianne says.

Ahh, Argo says. Judging by the smell around here, I wouldn't bother him for leaving.

We're close, Hicks says. We're close but I don't think we can work anymore today. We need to set up the hoist, but I don't want it exposed all night.

Probably a wise decision, Argo says.

**6.22**

It's almost time for Willey to put his plan in place. This Blackjack ticket plan. What he'll do, with his non-Asian, non-Indian Brad at full attention, is ask to see the lottery tickets. With his sunglasses on—Willey will make a huge deal of putting these sunglasses on—he'll point at a Blackjack scratch and win ticket and say, There, that one. No, not that one, the one next to it, and when the clerk, Brad, still three hours from finishing his shift, when he pulls out that ticket, Willey will buy that ticket.

Rhonda and Willey laze around in bed for a while, she smoking, he playing with her hair. Then they laze around a bit more, her reading, smoking. Rhonda lies back with the pillow up against the headboard, her legs open, and Willey rests his head on her lower stomach. She smokes. In this air, smelling of nicotine, his eyes follow the line of Rhonda's calf, all the way down to her painted toenails. He's starting to get an addiction to the smell of cigarettes.

After Willey buys the ticket, he'll make a point of scratching the ticket on the edge of the counter, over by the machine that checks your tickets for you. That clerk, Brad, he'll be three hours from finishing his shift, and this is the part of the night where all his young white male counterparts come driving up in BMWs and Corvettes, large-breasted blonde women waiting in the cars. The clerk, with his white brethren, his handsome, well-dressed, social-superiors looking down upon him; he sells three-packs of condoms to these guys at three in the morning. Oh, this guy's ripe for a scam all right.

Willey's spent a lot of time thinking this through.

Rhonda says, You sure put a serious crimp in my plans tonight.

I did? Willey say. He says, You put a crimp in my plans too.

What plans did you have for tonight?

I was going to go to Tuscany.

So, Willey, he'll scratch the ticket, then he'll nod all cool like and say, Hmm, and he'll rub his chin all thoughtful, still nodding. After having bought the ticket and scratched it in a place where the clerk can't really watch, he'll hold the two dollar winning ticket under the machine, you know, the ticket checker where you check your own ticket. He'll scan that ticket so the machine goes Woo-hoo, and the clerk, Brad, now he'll know, or he'll think that he knows, that Willey's just pulled a winning ticket using his sunglasses.

Rhonda and Willey, they decide to drive to Calgary's northwest community of Tuscany. He tells her he wants to see the houses there and she's fine with going for a drive. Willey offers to take Angie, he doesn't want Jolene messing up Rhonda's car.

Willey steps out of Rhonda's bedroom, Rhonda still getting dressed. Willey sees Jolene on the couch, on her back all four paws in the air, head lolled to the side, tongue out. Willey thinks for a moment that Jolene has devoured part of the couch, but no damage is visible as yet. Jolene twists back and forth, rubbing her back on the nubby fabric, squirming along from one end of the couch to the other. It might not be a sleeping couch, that couch, but it's heaven on a dog's back. Get down from there you mutt, Willey says.

Angie won't start, so Willey pops the hood, hits the starter with the heel of his hand, and they're good to go.

I love a man who knows machinery, Rhonda says. I don't know why, I just do.

Time wise, it's not too long a drive from Glenbrook to Tuscany. Tuscany, Calgary that is. High on Sarcee Trail, looking toward the downtown core, the glass of the skyscrapers reflects the setting sun. Willey's feels injected with optimism. All that human construction, all that evidence of human coordination reflecting the setting sun. Down the hill and onto 16th Avenue, AKA the Trans-Canada. Highway 1. Then north on Stoney Trail. They drive into Tuscany through Tuscany Boulevard.

There's no reason to short-cut through Tuscany, which makes it a secluded area. Which is why, when you explore the western reaches of Tuscany in your Mars Red Volkswagen Scirocco II, people stop their yard-work to straighten up and stare at you.

As they enter Tuscany from the east, Rhonda says, Prepare to be underwhelmed.

You've been here? Willey says.

My friend, Robert, and I. We drove around Calgary last year, looking at the different residential styles. How neighbourhood layout has changed over the years.

Willey's inner Willeys, turns out they're both the jealous type.

The first selection of Tuscany houses, the houses off Tuscany Springs, they designate the first phase of the community's development. These houses are older, have aged. These houses wouldn't look out of place on Willey's side of the city. Notice the window layout, Rhonda says.

Rhonda says, The windows appear to have no external rhyme or reason. They design mass-produced houses from the inside to the inside, only putting a

window where interior necessity calls for a window. From the outside, Rhonda says, it would appear that the designers employ a shotgun method of architecture, with randomly placed windows disproportionate to the large, irregular expanses of empty space.

They pass an arch at Tuscany Way, Tuscany, 1995, stamped or cut into the rock. The first houses went up nearly twenty years ago, but no one, Willey says to Rhonda, has broken out their personalities yet. No one has painted their house Heaven's Door Red.

There's probably a collection of tight-clenched thighs, Rhonda says, that ensures the community remains personality free. Paint your house red, face the mob of torch-wielders the next day.

Why not architecture? Willey says. Why not study architecture instead of interior design.

A, Rhonda says, you need a degree to get into any architecture program, and B, I'll likely stick to Interior Design in order to play the odds in my favour.

That requires an elaboration and Willey looks at her and squints with one eye. Rhonda says there a lot of successful women in the Interior Design industry, women who own their own companies. Not so many in Architecture, however.

Willey can't generate a response to that. What he does generate, is another damn memory, this one night, early one night when he went for a walk, a long walk trying to recreate Hicks's one-booted tour around the reservoir. (Only with two boots).

Late, but not dark, Willey comes to a part of the path where the path curves and goes up what looks like a pretty steep hill. He was new to walking then, was pretty big, and so he decided to sit on a nearby bench and recoup some energy, to get ready for the ascent. He's sitting there when a jogger comes along, sees him, and jogs past him. Fine, okay, a normal everyday occurrence. Only the woman looks terrified. Willey didn't stare her down or anything, but the woman struck Willey as terrified. He's noticed since then, that lot of women, not all of them but enough of them don't look too comfortable when walking or jogging past men.

It would be nice to see on a woman's face, the look of her feeling safe, the look of her thinking, For the next few steps, coyotes and bears don't scare me as much.

Mike might have to deal with this. Facebook Mike. He might have to bring this up with his Men's Rights friends. Mike, he's going to meet a woman, maybe Stephanie, and he's going to sell his truck for a van, or maybe a Prius. He's going to give up playing hockey twice a week, he's going to stop hunting and fishing on the weekends. He's going to do this very publicly on Facebook. Mike, he might get a vasectomy. And to be fair, Stephanie might meet a guy. She might meet Mike in person, and she might start posting tips on thigh reduction exercises. She might post salsa recipes. Stephanie's going to Like *Cake World* magazine on Facebook. And their friends, their comrades? They all can just fuck off.

Rhonda says, Hey! and Willey takes his foot off the gas, head snapping around. See on that house where a gable vent would be? Rhonda says. And that house there, and that one. And that one.

Willey's not sure what a gable vent is. Rhonda says, None of these houses have true gable vents, but they've moulded fake gable vents into the stucco.

Hmmm.

Simulacra, she says. Willey adds another word to the list he'll have to look up later.

Thick pillars with no weight to support, she says. Lots of natural stone, but ledger panels only. All for decoration, that's it, no practicality outside of aesthetics. Home design's trophy wife.

The further they drive into the community the more rock makes its way onto the houses' exterior walls. In Tuscany Springs, some lawns, they'd be at home in Dover, but in Tuscany Estates, every lawn is immaculate, even the lawns that aren't lawns, the lawns that are all gravel, they're gravelled with pretty, decorative gravel. Not one stone on a driveway, anywhere. What would the neighbours think? That you just moved in from Tuscany Springs?

They park in Tuscany Estates, near a paved path that heads down the hill toward the river. Some of the houses here, the stone exteriors run from ground to roofline. Even colour distribution, interesting texture, but at the same time, according to Rhonda, entirely unforgivable.

Willey carries Jolene out of the car, and sets her down in the grass next to the pavement. Rhonda takes the leash and they walk half way down the hill. If they keep going, they'll be rewarded with a Home Depot store.

We've been unfair to Tuscany, Willey says. It's a beautiful neighbourhood, well put together, well kept. Sure, Tuscany Springs and Tuscany Hills might want to be on high alert, but there are soccer fields, a bicycle path, a grocery store.

It's artificial, Rhonda says.

There's a creek, Willey says.

A creek that flows through a metal culvert.

There are people out and about, they look happy.

They got what they wanted, she says. And I mean that sincerely, she adds.

There is order here. Things make sense. She takes a drag off her cigarette. Why the interest, anyway? She hits Willey in the shoulder. Maybe you should be the architect?

Yeah, but then I'd need a degree, he says. And to get a degree, he'd probably need a high school diploma, but he doesn't say that.

But what can be done? Willey says.

Nothing, Rhonda says. Artifice is everywhere. Why should Calgary be any different?

So, is this the theme of Calgary architecture? Willey says. Artificiality? How depressing.

The Sandstone City hesitant to use sandstone, Rhonda says. It's bad enough that celebrities have to fly in on their chartered jets, their private jets and complain about our oil. If we start working over the sandstone outcrops to adhere to our one unique aspect of architecture, we might get more point and click protesters filling in their online protests before SUVing off to the mall.

Rhonda snuffs out her cigarette, shoves the butt back into its package. Down there, she says. The Home Depot. We ship in as much Chinese stone as we need, we bring in slabs of India, Africa, but what happens if we start cutting our own sandstone? The theme of Calgary, Rhonda says, is that if we don't have it, we'll build it. Or we'll invent it. The tone of her voice even, Willey's unsure if Rhonda's damning the city or if she's being complimentary.

I'm freaking out about tomorrow, Willey says. About meeting your parents.

You have nothing to worry about, she says. They're going to love you. But you, well, they are who they are. One thing I do know, she says. Is when you get to my parents' place tomorrow, prepare to have your socks blown off.

Willey takes Rhonda back home and stays for an hour, a quick meal of canned soup and grilled cheese sandwiches. Despite Jolene's sigh of protest, Willey prevents her from hopping onto the couch. It's rude, really.

After the soup and sandwiches, Willey one-foot hops down the hall, struggling to get that last sock off, as Rhonda kills a cigarette. Twenty minutes later Willey dresses as Rhonda lights another cigarette, and she tells him he's losing weight.

I'm exercising, he says. In fact, I'm thinking of throwing a few jogs in with my walks.

She pats her belly—Willey loves the jiggle of her belly—and Rhonda says she could use a jog or too. My ass, she says, is taking on the shape of my studio chair.

I'm thinking of boxing, too, Willey says, and Rhonda says she'd be up for that, too. She says the idea of Willey boxing gets her all wet and she pulls him back onto

the bed. The fake Blackjack ticket burning a hole in Willey's glove compartment, that'll have to wait a little while. Willey kisses between Rhonda's breasts while from the living room, the unmistakable sound of a dog on her back, squirming from one end of the couch to the other.

Willey can tell you that India and Pakistan are considered part of Asia, and technically they're Asian, but at two in the morning, in a convenience store in, say, Glendale, guys from India or Pakistan, they're Indians. No Indian clerk is going to buy this fake ticket, and don't even try this scam with a female clerk.

You use ticket checking machines to check your thousand dollar winning tickets so that clerks in convenience stores don't scan a dud ticket they keep with them, and turn to you and say, Sorry, losing ticket, want me to throw it out for you?

A woman clerk? Absolutely not. Women are too careful. Women are always suspicious. If a woman never questions what you're up to, that means she has a scam of her own going.

So, after sliding his two dollar winning ticket under the checker to make the checker sing Woo-hoo, Willey will palm that two dollar winner and bring the thousand dollar fake winner up to the register, and he'll show that to white as white Brad. That guy, when he sees that ticket, surely he'll have his mind sufficiently fucked with. So Willey will say to Brad, Can you cash a thousand dollar winner? Of course Brad will say, No. What 7-11 is going to have a thousand dollars lying around for lottery winners at two in the morning? Even says on the ticket, they should be able to cash up to 1000, but they have the right to turn you out to look elsewhere. Point is, Brad's not going to be able to cash this ticket. Willey will say to him, Look

man, you don't have any other winners here, but I need five hundred dollars right now.

He'll say, Look man, I'm in on a hot poker game—Willey will appeal to Brad's inner gambler, his rogue manliness, if he has any left—and Willey will say, Yo, I need four hundred bucks, bro.

Now, Willey knows Brad can simply take the ticket and scan it under the machine on his side of the counter, and Brad will know it's fake before Willey even gets to the door, so he'll put the ticket back in his pocket and say to Brad, I really need three hundred dollars, do you want to buy these sunglasses? Since I've got the formula down, I can make a new pair, easy.

Surely with the little money in his bank account, the money in the register, and any he can get from the safe, surely Brad will be able to scrape up two hundred dollars. By the way Brad, you have no other winning tickets here.

Yeah, that's what Willey's going to do. Right now. He's parked a block away.

He walks that block, He's ready. He has the tickets, he has the sunglasses. He walks into the store.

And he's out again about a minute later. What was it that Brad said? I'm a clerk not an idiot? Get the fuck out of here before I call the police? Willey thinks he might have mentioned something about the sunglasses and Willey's asshole, but by then, the door was closing.

## 6.23

Nature's alarm clock, the crow. Hicks double checks his phone. 6:30, the morning still black. In his dream, the coulee was full of people sitting in pairs and in

groups of three, conversing. Paul and Dianne sitting on top of the *Albertosaur*, Hicks, bare-chested and skinny, every bone showing through his skin, having to wait for Paul and Dianne to get off the fossil so he can get back to work. Instead, Dianne leans back, covers the fossil, and Paul leans over her. Dianne spreads her leg, I've always been yours, she says to Paul.

Dianne's sleeping bag is empty, she's already out of the tent. Hicks, still dressed from the night before, steps out from the green-dark of the tent and into the grey-dark of the coulee. He sees a dark silhouette of Dianne sipping fresh coffee.

Hicks's eyes narrow at the crimes and betrayals Dianne committed in the night. That's rough on the environment, Hicks says. Styrofoam cups.

Dianne waves toward the crow. Hicks can barely make it out, standing on top of the tent. He was up there all night, she says

Don't crows sleep?

I'm sure he was standing up there all night, making that throaty little growl of his.

Hicks pours himself a cup of coffee and sips. Rinsing the taste of the tent out of his mouth, and any questions of Paul.

We also got a gift, Dianne says.

Hicks spins around. What?

Dianne indicates a leather wallet, opened like a book on the other lawn chair, containing an assortment of mason's feathers.

More chisels, Dianne says. What good they are now.

Better than chisels, Hicks says. He picks up the wallet and sets it next to Dianne. Wedges and shims. For splitting rock.

Together they decide to forego any breakfast other than their caffeine. The next step is to set up the hoist. In the dark morning, not so dark now that Hicks's eyes have adjusted to the light, they push the rocks off the remains of the tent floor, and lift the tent up and off the hoist. Dianne stands, her arms straight up in the air, holding up the end of the bending and abused tent, while Hicks drags the hoist out.

Hicks drags the hoist to closer to where it will straddle their money, Dianne tugging and dragging the tent out of the way. He tilts the hoist back, inserts the legs so they point straight in the air, and inserts the pins to lock the legs in place. With the hoist still on its back, Hicks raises the boom so that it doesn't interfere with the block of sandstone—or tongue of sandstone as it is now referred—as he positions the hoist. He then pushes and drags the hoist nearer the trenches, and stands it up, the original portion resting on the table above, presumably where the rest of the dinosaur sleeps. Argo's modifications fit nicely in the trenches they've carved out over the last two days. Yeah, ha! Hicks says, slapping his hands. Measure twice, chisel chisel chisel and chisel once.

The hoist is not without its wiggle, however, so Hicks takes twenty minutes to tilt the hoist out of the way, and he and Dianne smooth out their trenches a touch. With the footing secure enough for fast and amoral work, Hicks adjusts the boom until the chain is centred on the block.

Now, Hicks says. I will celebrate the erection of the hoist by walking into the woods and answering nature's overdue demand.

With the boom in place, Hicks slides the first engine strap under the sandstone tongue, and secures it to the chain. He and Dianne, working from opposites sides, attack the tongue's stony frenulum. Hicks predicts about half an hour of work before they need the second strap, and so Dianne volunteers to fetch water for plaster. This section of sandstone proves stubborn, however. After an hour of this surgery, the bucket of water ready, more burlap cut into strips, Hicks still sweats over his work.

I just can't get at it, Hicks says, wiping sweat and grit from his face. The morning is cool and overcast, but the work is hot in any weather.

Rather than mix plaster, Dianne again chisels the side opposite Hicks. They work closer to the fossil, not worrying yet about the material close to the ground. This they can remove when the tongue is properly lifted by the hoist, when they need to get the cart under. They remove only enough material to allow space for their hands to pass burlap beneath the tongue.

After another hour, and another, and into early afternoon, Hicks declares the tongue ready for the second strap. The two turn to mixing plaster. Dianne pours the gypsum while Hicks stirs.

Are we going to have to wait for this to dry before we put on the second strap? Dianne asks.

I think we should plaster the strap right in with the burlap Hicks says.

With the plaster adequately agitated, Hicks shoves burlap into the bucket and slides it under the tongue, Dianne grabbing it from the other side and wrapping it up

and over. Hicks wonders how much extra weight all this plaster adds to their block. He takes the strap and slides it under the tongue, slides it through the mess of plaster and passes it to Dianne. Two minutes later and both straps are now fixed to the hoist's chain.

The straps thus arrayed, Hicks turns to Dianne. Let me show you how to work this hoist. Hicks excited now, vibrating, gibbering almost, the end of the work in sight.

The crow, now on the end of the hoist's boom, not six feet away, caws into the air.

Fuck off, Hicks says.

Leave the crow alone, Dianne says.

The crow caws again, flaps once and glides to the top of the tent.

All you have to do, Hicks says pointing to the hoist's bleeder valve, is twist this shut. Hicks takes the pump handle from a holder Argo had welded to the hoist's frame and slides it into the ram. You pump this, Hicks says, to raise your engine or your dinosaur head. To lower your engine or head, open the bleeder valve. As Willey would say, Ja?

Ja, Dianne says. Sehr gut.

Don't get carried away with that gibberish, Hicks says, smiling.

Ja ja ja ja ja, Dianne says as she makes her way to her place at the hoist's spine. Nein nein nein nein nein. She works the ram slow, careful, Hicks watching for strain on the sandstone cube. The strap closest to the hoist stretches taut and Dianne twists the valves to ease the tension. Hicks, his every motion quick, adjusts

the straps to even the weight distribution, and Dianne pumps the ram again. On the third try both straps tense evenly.

That, Hicks says, will hold our beast in the air while we pound out the rest of the sandstone beneath. He grabs the mattock.

There is only space enough for one to work beneath the slab, Hicks on his stomach, his foam bedding minimizing the roughness of the ground as he takes awkward swipes with the mattock.

He must work alone under there, Dianne whispers to herself. She tries not to think of the slab falling, and so she distracts herself by preparing for their next and hopefully last bit of plastering. She pours the remainder of their latest plaster into the bushes, takes the bucket to the river and cleans it out, fills it with water and starts the slow carry back to camp. Hicks continues to chisel, gouge, hammer, pound, claw, and scratch at the sandstone beneath the *Albertosaur*.

Coming from the river Dianne stares at the hoist. If anyone were to canoe up the coulee now, there is no disguising the abomination wreaked upon this small section of land.

She tears the tent down, looking over her shoulder at the slab of rock, refusing even to call it a tongue now, as tongues are hungry and not to be trusted. Hicks continues to work.

It takes her half an hour to fold the tent and another half hour after that to unfold it, and refold it down to a size that will fit into its carrying bag. Still Hicks works at the block, only coming up to slide waste material out of the way. This, Dianne gathers and tosses off into the bushes.

Dianne organizes their food, offers Hicks potato chips and beer, to which he refuses all but one sip of beer, the bottle alone and neglected atop the now butchered sandstone table. She folds the black polyvinyl sheet, places it with the rest of their equipment. She drags the cart nearby.

The crow returns and lands on top of the hoist, Dianne shoos it off, not wanting even the slightest weight, corvid or otherwise, on the hoist.

Hicks comes out from under the slab, asking about the sound.

Just chasing that crow off the hoist, Dianne says.

Hicks looks at the top of the hoist, turns to Dianne. That gives me an idea, he says. He rifles through their pile of equipment, asks Dianne where the shims got to. She digs through their supplies, pulls out the leather wallet. You work the hoist Hicks says, I'll keep scratching underneath.

Hicks uses a crowbar under the slab as Dianne gives the ram three pumps. Hicks, on his back now so he can get the tools in at the right angle, twisting his head back to see, awkwardly hammers the mason's feathers between the rock they need and the rock they'd rather leave off. Another pump, he shouts. Yes, he yells, this is working, pump it again.

Dianne, shaking, hesitant, her eyes squinting, a tear forming at the corner of her eye, her heart expecting the boom to break, the straps to snap, the slab to fall. I hate this, she yells, but in her mind only. The line they cut to sever the creature's head, the line cut what feels like weeks ago, has disappeared.

Finally, after a year, Hicks scrambles out and says that's it, he's worked back far enough. He goes back under to round up the shims, the hammer, the crowbar.

Dianne's phone says 6:30. Not long now, Hicks says. Not long, he shouts to the crow, who, without a tent to stand on, clings to its original perch in the aspen.

Allowing for fifteen minutes to reacquaint himself with his beer, as warm as it is, Hicks talks about their next plan. Dianne will work the hoist, Hicks the shims. Simple.

You don't have to go back under there, do you?

Hell no, Hicks says. There's only about a foot and a half of rock holding that thing to the valley. We're going wiggle this bitch up and down until she lets go. Like a tooth when you were a kid.

What kind of fucked up teeth did you have as a kid, Hicks? Dianne asks. She walks past him, ruffling his hair with her hand. Back in a minute, she says.

## **6.24**

Sitting around the house waiting for the right moment to pick up Rhonda would kill Willey. So this day's walk begins in Mission. From there, he crosses the Elbow River, heads up the 4th Street Hill, and with Jolene, he walks toward Princess Obolensky Park. How can one not be curious over such a park? Flipping through a map book, reading the little details, the tiny intimate lettering, Willey comes across that name and he's supposed to ignore it? How can one not reconsider Hicks's theory of places being named after what was destroyed to build them, when you come across that name? By that theory, Princess Obolensky, what did they do to you?

We name our parks, our streets, our communities after what had to be destroyed to build them, but really, what's the alternative? Sure, the silver spring at

Silver Springs still gushes, the cliff along Spruce Cliff still holds plenty of Spruce, but these neighbourhoods and a few others aside, a city wants to grow, needs to grow, and for that to occur, changes happen, and shit gets lost along the way. Honour the places you give up by giving their names to their replacements

The Tsuu T'ina mile of ring road.

You can name parks and streets after dead or soon to be dead men. Or you can name them after places you come from. Places you envy. Tuscany, The Hamptons? Christ, how did those developers get away with that?

Rhonda says in Calgary, if we don't have it, we'll build it. Hence the fake-lake communities in the south. The New England beach in the deeper South. An eighty foot tall 17th Century Irish Tower in the northeast, that, when lit, ensures no prairie schooner will come to ground against the rocky shores of Kincora.

Kincora, Killarney, we have pieces of Ireland here and there, we have pieces of Italy and Long Island. There is no denying the beauty of these places, only their truth. This city, it hustles like nobody's business. Or everybody's business. Glenmore Landing, an ocean port without an ocean.

Willey walks along 4th Street, passing houses large and beautiful or large and ill-conceived. Here we go again. Princess, Willey thinks, a stylist ahead of your time. Princess, what do you think of these houses that face your park? The real brick, the artificial sandstone. Or maybe that's genuine sandstone, pulled from Lindsay's Folly, Willey's true destination.

Before Willey picks up Rhonda, before he meets her parents at the Garbutt's Last Annual BBQ, snow or shine, he's going to look at a piece of Calgary history that

he has only this morning read about. He read Princess Obolensky Park on a map, searched the park online, and on another map, a little x in a circle with the words Lindsay's Folly.

In 1913, Neville Lindsay, doctor, Yukon oresman, he dumped two hundred grand into a home for himself and his wife. What would have been a brick and sandstone palace fit for any Russian Princess stalled after Lindsay ran out of money or patience or life or all three.

Ever the environmentalist, Lindsay recycled sandstone from a demolished church and began his magnificent house on the slopes of the Elbow River valley. One hundred years later Willey walks along 4th Street looking at other architectural follies. All the copper in the world can't help the proportions of that house over there. While over here, that house has enough superficial detail to be described as inspired by. . . Italian Renaissance? Inspired by something once seen on holiday in Spain? Or something once seen on television?

That house looks like it belongs in Tuscany, but if it was picked up and set down in Calgary's Tuscany, it would look out of place.

Willey looks down at Jolene. I've ragged on Tuscany quite a bit, he says, but God damn it. All apologies, Tuscany.

Today, Willey's meeting the Garbutt family, where, no doubt, he'll have his economic and genetic potential scrutinized, while having his socks blown off. According to the internet, Garbutt is of Norman origin, but that's not telling Willey anything.

Princess O, founder of *La Boutique*, clothier of the rich but never to be famous, what is your take on these houses? Of that glass and stucco cube that has foregone the typical taupe finish and gone instead with, sigh, a fifty-fifty blend of taupe and hunter green.

Willey walks past all those easily mocked and easily envied houses, he walks through Princess Obolensky Park, all fifty feet of her, and he looks for the bike path that leads to Rideau Park, or is it Stanley Park? He's not sure where Obolensky ends and one or the other or both parks begin. He looks for the path that would lead him to Deadman's Castle.

On 4th Street, on every street, a piece of trim that looks like an arch, but isn't. Balustrades for balconies that don't exist. Rhonda pointed out the gable vents, the fake ones, and now Willey's seeing fake shit everywhere.

Do it or don't, home designers.

Oh, the laments of a man unable to afford a house. The laments of a man unable to find the ruins he's looking for. Lindsay's Folly. It's not like they put up a sign or anything. So he turns back, walks out of Princess Obolensky Park, perhaps forever, and starts to make his way back along 4th Street.

But really, why should Willey apologize for his opinion of these houses? You sacrifice taste to maximize size, emphasise arrogance over style, you get what you deserve: the opinions of those whose opinions don't really matter much.

You get to meet the girlfriend's parents, her rich parents you drop-out slob.

Willey takes a few pictures for posterity. Rhonda, she told Willey that when it comes to designing first impressions, colour is your opening statement. What are we scared of in this city?

As for Lindsay's Folly, turns out there is a sign. Next to the Southern Alberta Pioneers building, by the pathway Willey missed when he was walking along the opposite side of the street mocking the local architecture. The sign says, Lindsay's Folly. Little arrow says, straight up. Following the path, and halfway down the hill, Willey comes to a stretch where the ground becomes suspiciously even. There's no sign down here, but if you swing your arms through the bushes you will find not so much the remains of a sandstone house, but the remains of the remains of a house.

Some folks, blessed with good memories and an internet connection, describe online their 70s era youths spent crawling over these remains. The red bricks, the concrete foundation, the last bits of sandstone and all of Lindsay's graffiti.

Willey's a little underwhelmed. Based on pictures he saw online, pictures from the Glenbow Museum's archives, he expected to see tall pillars with great sandstone arches. He Sasquatches his way through the bushes on the other side of the path, finds what looks like another concrete foundation, but this one newer. Again deferring to stories told online, Willey knows there are tunnels around here, where local children used to play, but they've since been sealed. The hill here has slumped and under the concrete block, a space has opened up, maybe two feet of space between the earth and the slab. Willey can see near the back, a jacket and some bottles.

Even Jolene won't go under there.

We need to get back home, Willey says. Jolene wags her tail. We need to get you put away, we need to change the tone of my day, my clothes. Need to change my socks, he says, scratching Jolene under the chin, so when they get blown off, nobody will spot the holes.

Willey's never seen Rhonda in a dress before. He picks her up at 2:30, they're supposed to be at her parent's place at 3:00, the Annual Garbutt Last BBQ, late September, snow or shine.

Willey's never seen her in a dress before, and as she sits in the car, he loses track of a few seconds. Drive, Rhonda says, I don't want you to be late.

They head straight west on 17th Avenue, past the exit that would take them to Aspen Woods and Castle Keep, past the entrance to Ranche Heights.

You look beautiful, Willey says.

Rhonda has half her hair pulled back in what Willey thinks he should call a French braid. She has tiny white stars of phlox woven or inserted into the centre of the braid, with others in the hair pouring down her back. Her dress is dark green with short sleeves and a conservative neckline. She's carrying a white knit button up sweater and a pair of white medium-heel platform sandals, three inch heel (size six, Willey's sure) with what looks like faux-phlox detail along the lower strapping.

Keep going west, Rhonda says. And thank you, though I feel like a pamphlet-model for a cheap beauty college.

Willey's wearing dark grey slacks with a pale-green shirt and matching tie, all selected for this occasion under Rhonda's supervision. Gloss black dress shoes.

You're wearing make-up, Willey says.

Don't get used to it.

Lawrence, Larry or Lare Garbutt is a self-motivated—these are Rhonda's words—is a self-motivated, all work, little play, early rising champion of industry. BBQ or no BBQ, Friday or Tuesday, winter or summer, snow or shine, Stampede or Valentine's Day—he's in bed at 8 in order to be up at 5:30 so, Rhonda says, our terror will last, at maximum, five hours.

She looks at Willey. What in God's name do you think you're doing? she says.

Huh?

Get rid of the pony-tail.

Okay, but I thought. . .

If he asks about your hair, say you're a part time extra on *Hell on Wheels*. He loves *Hell on Wheels*. It'll keep him busy looking for you whenever he watches it.

Will he find me?

It's *Hell on Wheels*, Willey. He'll find fifty of you. Drive, dammit. Turn right at Lower Springbank Road.

If I'm late, you're late, Willey says.

If I'm late, Rhonda says, that means you have no control over your woman, and you will have immediately failed. What's your explanation for this car?

I'm fascinated with German cars, Willey says.

Automobiles, Rhonda says.

I'm fascinated with vintage German automobiles, and I enjoy the responsive nature of a well-tuned and well put together Wolfsburg Scirocco. This will do until I can afford a Saab. Do I have mechanical aptitude?

Yes you do. My father does not, so it's good that you do.

Okay, Willey says.

They trade Lower Springbank Road for Springbank Road via Horizon View. Rhonda twists the rear-view mirror to check and double check her hair, her teeth, her eye-shadow.

They speed down Springbank Road, well over the limit. Angie whines her way past Partridge Place, Alandale Place, Banded Peak. Angie's little engine buttonholes its way past Range Road 32.

Rhonda reminds Willey, Al and Ramona are coming, as are her cousin Kyle and his latest girlfriend. Kyle is the son my father never had, Rhonda says.

Thought you told me you had a brother.

That's the son he did have, if anyone mentions him, please don't ask for an elaboration.

Okay.

All right, tell me about us.

We are not having sex yet, Willey says. I only see you once or twice a week, based on my decision, my schedule. I have never been over at your place.

Good, what else? One of the important ones.

You don't smoke,

Good, she says. Turn left at Range Road 33. Mountain River Estates. And I have one last question.

Yes,

What are your intentions with me?

## 6.25

Dianne twists the bleeder valve of the hoist slowly, carefully, and the cut line at the dinosaur's neck expands. What was once a thin line the width of the ring-saw's wheel gapes to a quarter inch. Hicks pounds the feathers in, shoves the crowbar in and pries. He works around the hoist, has to crawl in on his knees between the hoist's legs and spine. Dianne pumps the ram until the cut line disappears, then bleeds the valve again. More, Hicks says, a little more. Dianne twists the valve, Hicks, on his knees, works the crowbar, first here, then there, moving from side to side, banging his head twice on the hoist.

Dianne twists the bleeder valve and the rock, the slab of rock lowers. She pumps the ram and the rock slowly, tenderly, licks the air. Dianne pumps the ram, twists the bleeder valve, pumps the ram, twists the bleeder valve, the cut line opening and closing like a breathing gill on some stony fish.

I'm not sure how long this will take, Hicks says. We're working against the grain of the rock, and—before he can conclude the sentence there comes a thudding pop, a dull sound, a wet sound in the coulee. The sandstone has split away, the rock disengaged, the head of the *Albertosaur* severed from the spine.

Ha! Hicks yells. Ha! He looks up at the crow, still on its aspen. Take that, you scavenger. The crow hops in place, turning its body toward them, twisting its head as if curious about Hicks's words.

Dianne pumps the ram and the head slowly lifts from the ground. Another foot and it clears the top of the table, another foot and enough space is created to finish shaping and reducing the weight from the severed rock, their money. Enough space to begin the final bit of plastering.

We should lower it to the cart, right now, Hicks says. I don't want that thing swinging around up there. It doesn't have to be in the right spot, just enough to take the weight off the hoist until we're ready to plaster. To get this far and have it fall now.

Dianne pushes the cart into the space they've carved out, but a bit of clean up chiselling is needed to get it to sit right. This time Dianne joins Hicks under the slab of rock, and the two begin to make quick work of evening out the ground, when a series of sharp, short caws sever the air. The crow, on top of the hoist announcing to the forest this defilement. A chill runs down Dianne's back but Hicks twists to get into position enough to throw a chunk of rock at the crow

The crow caws once, before jumping from the hoist and flying off, heading east, up and over the coulee edge.

Hicks pushes the cart in place as Dianne steps up to the ram. She twists the bleeder valve to lower the block. The hoist groans, and the fossil begins to sink toward the cart. It lowers half a foot and freezes.

Dianne twists the valve one way, then the other. Keep lowering it, Hicks says. If we're not aligned right I'll tell you to stop.

Something's wrong, she says, her voice small in the valley.

Hicks joins her at the valve, twists the bleeder one way, then the other. Nothing. He closes the valve, pumps the ram, the slab rising at each pump. Hicks twists the valve open and the slab lowers, only to freeze again in the same position.

This is impossible, Hicks says. He stares a moment at the river, at the opposite plateau, at the coulee wall above them. In late dusk, the valley burns red, as if fuming, or perhaps blushing in embarrassment at this desecration of its land.

Willey! Hicks shouts. God damn you!

He fiddles again with the bleeder valve, biting his lip, smacking the ram. Hicks, Dianne says. Dwayne.

I knew this was a trap, Hicks says. Deep in my heart I knew this was doomed. Like you said, like you've been saying. Hicks steps back and kicks at the hoist. I always fall into the same fucking traps, he says.

Dianne stares, the *Albertosaur* hanging in the sky, a gentle swing from the slight breeze, perhaps from the rotation of the earth, perhaps the trick of a chuckling god or devil.

Hicks slumps, looks at Dianne. All I wanted to do, he says to her, was work a solid year. Work a solid job for a year, then come back into your life and say hello.

Hello, Dianne says. She puts her hand on Hicks's shoulder.

Hicks gets up, a reluctant frown on his face, the type of frown you give in place of a smile. An I-fucked-up-but-will-you-forgive-me-anyway kind of frown.

Hicks is master over these frowns, but not under this circumstance, not when he's the victim. He gets up, walks over to the hoist, examines the ram as best he can, examines the chain, the boom, the sky, anything that can be held responsible for this travesty of physics. Tears of frustration, anger, form streaks through the dirt on his face.

Again he twists the bleeder valve and again the block descends a few inches and holds.

God damn you, Willey, Hicks yells. I will fucking murder you.

Watch your language, boy. Argo's gravelled voice coming from the path.

Hicks spins around. You got bells for that fucking horse?

What's the problem you got?

Hoist won't lower, Hicks says. Head's four feet in the fucking air.

Twist the bleeder valve.

Thank you, Hicks says.

Calm down there, Dwayne, Argo says. Relax, God will deliver.

Your fucking Creator is what put that thing up there. I should have known, this was suspicious from the very start. I step into that trap every time. Hicks kicks at the hoist.

All you need is some faith, Dwayne.

Fuck your faith. Hicks says. He storms around the camp. Punts a lawn chair into the trees.

Tell God you love Him, and He will deliver.

Faith, Hicks spits. Now I know why you're blind, old man.

I can see, kid. Just not with the same light you see by.

Well, congratulations, you God-smacked lunatic. Hicks stands behind the hoist's ram again. Four inches up, four inches down.

Hicks, Dianne says. Dwayne.

## 6.26

Mr. Garbutt—Lawrence, Willey should call him—he isn't much interested in Willey's intentions regarding Rhonda. Her cousin Kyle, on the other hand, looks very much interested.

They, Rhonda and Willey, turn right off Range Road 33, what Rhonda calls Mountain River, and turn onto a driveway lined with tall aspens, their leaves burnt gold and sun yellow. The drive curves left and descends a hill, and after a minute, still no house in sight. Most of the other houses on Mountain River, built on clear-cut lots, these houses don't merge and blend with the surrounding landscape, but dominate it. Paradoxically, maybe schizophrenically, they stand large enough to demand individual attention, but huddle together as if for warmth and protection. Self-assurance. After another minute of driving and a few seconds of some architectural mass flicking beyond the trees, they emerge from the forest and come face to face with the Garbutt family residence, Alberta version. They have another home near Sedona.

Park on top, Rhonda says.

On top? Willey pulls in next to a Chevy Suburban, a spot to the right of a low profile and rather unassuming contemporary style house. Single story gable-roof with beams extruding above the main entryway, and evidence of a second story near

the back, a raised wall that might suggest a small auditorium if this place were a school and not a residence. Narrow, rectangular, bold lines, a garage at the house's north hip. The gable has a working vent.

This strikes Willey as California Ranch, maybe. Not necessarily a bungalow. Prairie style? Not with those windows, not with that lack of ornamentation. Damn labels. He decides to go with contemporary. Low-slung and asymmetrical. Wide eaves. Yes, contemporary. Nothing extravagant. Sorry Rhonda, but nothing anyone would call sock-blowing.

On top? Willey says again, and Rhonda tells him that the driveway continues down to more parking space in front of the lower entryway. Willey's inner Willey says Prairie Style is when both partners lie on their backs and stare at the sky.

Lower entryway, Willey says as they walk up to the front door. Or maybe this is the back door? Willey's not sure anymore. His lower entryway involves a glass door and a foyer with eight mailboxes. His upper entryway? That's the balcony. You want to use our upper entryway, you need a good vertical jump and excellent upper body strength.

The Garbutt upper entryway, double wide solid wood doors, opens to a six foot wide hallway complete with gold carpet, rosewood panelling and a thin red-headed woman. Smiling, pale, eyes shadowed in blue, the woman hugs Rhonda before she reaches out her hand and introduces herself. Karen—Mom—she's wearing a mustard-colored dress with burnt-orange and brown trim. Autumn in the country, complete with a white apron. The red of Karen's hair, made suspicious by the lines around her mouth and eyes, is styled almost identical to Rhonda's. Willey

shakes Mom's hand and waits for her eyes to give him the once over, but they meet Willey's and hold the look. Mom has Rhonda's smile, the lower lip doing all the work but that wet look in her eyes, the heavy lids? Mom's started the party early.

Karen turns to Rhonda, tells her Rhonda's father is out on the patio. Karen has small scratches on her hands, the type of scratches you'd get by horsing around with roses. And her hands, she has a faint smell on her hands, like turpentine. Willey's always worried on days he shaves, worried he missed some large area, and so after he shakes Karen's hand, he rubs at his upper lip for the twelfth time and catches a faint whiff of turpentine on his fingers.

Along the length of the hallway, built-in shelving contains photographs, books, various bits of pottery, and small plants. Two skylights add sun to the gold carpet. One photo, the Eiffel Tower in the background, the next photo, two kids standing in front of a giant Ukrainian egg. Rhonda when she was six. Rhonda at eleven. Occasionally alone, occasionally with her older brother Michael, the brother Willey's not supposed to ask about. In sections along the hallway the built-ins give way to spaces where oil-paintings have been hung, flat planes of heavily textured clothing worn by subjects whose faces contain a derogatory opinion of the viewer, or perhaps, the artist. On some of the paintings burlap has been pressed into the paint to create a texture, in others, the small gears of watches or clocks.

Mrs. Garbutt tells us that everyone else is here. That Bill and Irene were almost an hour early and Bill, Karen's brother, is still holding out on coming inside the house. In the distance Willey can see a totem pole. Not in the distance of a

photograph or a painting, but down the hall, in the living room, a totem pole. Bill, Karen says, sat in his chair on the patio and won't leave it.

Willey pauses for a moment in front of a large canvas hanging above a teak console table. Family photographs on the table guard a bowl of turned burl, a set of keys inside, while the canvas above holds a storm of burning grey on black smoke, red-tinged like a flaming tornado, but one less lethal than a column of burning refinery. This is a great painting to look at if you want to take your mind off a living room that contains a totem pole. Female bodies swirl around a column of smoke, all lifted skyward and all facing a skull painted in the centre of the twisting cloud.

They continue down the hall, toward the totem pole. Toward two totem poles, another appearing on the far side of the living room. They walk toward the living room and those totem poles. They can either veer left into the dining slash kitchen area, or veer slightly to the right, step down half a dozen steps, walk under the spread wings of a thunderbird, or maybe it's an eagle—Willey's short on the protocol of Native-Canadian imagery—and enter a perfect circle of living space that can probably accommodate Willey's entire apartment.

Jesus Christ, Willey whispers. Holy Coyote. Three totem poles support the ceiling. He should have known you'd need three, what with the load-bearing qualities of totem poles. The ceiling itself, Karen says, is a sixty foot diameter—this explains that third totem pole—a sixty foot diameter shallow dome with beams radiating from the centre like a prairie flower. Those are Karen's words, prairie flower. The clerestories, Willey's told, rise above the ceiling, sweep around probably 45 degrees of this circular room, and, these clerestories, they angle in order to catch

the different light of the moving sun and reflect it off the tall gold wall on the room's north west elevation. So Karen says, wet-eyed and smiling. This wall, this tall gold wall, curves with the clerestories around the space while sloping down and away from the living room.

Willey's inner-senses tingle. There's a raised platform near the rear of the sunken living area. Rear, because what you'd call the front is an all-glass wall that looks out over the river valley. At the rear, furnished with a single bookcase, a lounge chair and a circular table, is a raised platform, but to access this platform you have to step over built-in bench seating—poured concrete with Naugahyde cushions—or walk back up the hallway and make your way down a few steps. If this house is anything, it's designed for careful circulation, but this platform, Willey decides, is at odds with the rest of the space.

How tall is that wall? Willey asks.

Thirty feet, Karen says, but the clerestories rise 6 feet above the ceiling, so the living room ceiling is really only twenty four feet.

Only twenty four feet. How can anyone live in such a confined space?

Willey's inner Willey, he says the platform might have been an atrium. His other inner Willey opens his eyes at the mention of atrium. He's tuned to atriums, that inner Willey.

All original wood, Karen says, sweeping her arm to the beams of the ceiling. There must be thirty of them, the beams of that prairie flower. Karen says that she and Lawrence once discussed painting them. But, Rhonda says, stepping in, they were talked out of it by someone who had a shred of aesthetic decency.

Lawrence would like to meet you, Karen says, and she smiles, points toward the patio door. She suggests to Rhonda that she take Willey outside to introduce Willey to her father.

Willey has a moment of vertigo looking at that thirty foot wall and twenty four foot ceiling. From the opposite side of the room, looking back at that gold wall, he feels as if they're in some alien landscape modelled after an old Star Trek episode. A set with papier-mâché rocks and a painted sky.

Come on, Rhonda says. Time to meet the old man.

They walk past the fireplace, a walk that takes ten minutes. That's an exaggeration, of course. It doesn't take more than thirty seconds to walk past the fireplace. Willey might not be able to park his car in the fireplace, but his bed would fit, that's for sure. Large, jagged boulders form the surround. The floor is flagstone slate in ranges of dark grey, rust and gold.

Mr. Garbutt stands at the patio rail. He turns as Willey and Rhonda come out the patio door, a door that slides on a curved track. Willey's picked up a lot of architectural terminology lately, but he's coming up empty on what to call this space. Patio is the wrong word, but this is space too curvy to be a verandah or a veranda, too open to be a court, too Canadian to be a piazza.

Ah, here he is, Lawrence says. Lawrence has to be pushing past 6-2 and flying past sixty years old. Steel-coloured hair cropped short, tanned face, white teeth but no dentures. A perennial squint, like a man used to working in the sun, but Willey shakes the soft hand of a man who's rarely held a shovel.

Al and Ramona sit on patio chair, Al raises a glass and Ramona waves. Bill and Irene look up from their chairs, the aunt and uncle from Drumheller. Bill looks like he took the afternoon off from his job standing in the middle of a Far Side comic, a panel where the cows get one over on the farmer. Buzzed hair, permanent scowl. Suspenders. Irene, she looks like a woman who would marry a guy like Bill and put up with him for fifty years. Complete with cat's eye glasses and freshly curled hair. Both ignorant of any paleological atrocities that might, at the very moment of greeting, be occurring on their land.

As Rhonda kisses her father hello, and makes polite introductions (Father, this is Willey, not William, Will-EE) Kyle rises to his feet, legitimately stunned.

The afternoon wouldn't be complete without Rhonda's cousin, Kyle. Kyle Pearce and his fiancé heart-Angie. If coincidences have a governing body, they're all here today. Like that, Willey's year old question is answered. Why would a man like Kyle Pearce walk all the way through three malls to get to a one-off fast-food restaurant for a cup of coffee that, all apologies to Al and Ramona, tastes filtered through raw Sumatran soil? To visit his cousin, Rhonda, of course.

Terrace!

Rhonda's never met Angela, but as they are introduced, Willey can see on Rhonda's face the recognition of heart-Angie from the photo that until recently sat in the glove box of his car.

Willey can play the part of Terrified Man, he can play the part of Embarrassed Stalker, but he decides to go with Stunned as well. What a surprise, he says. I guess we know where we know each other from. The Soup Depot line-up.

You two know each other? Mr. Garbutt and Rhonda say at the same time.

I found Mr. Hase scoping out my neighbourhood, Kyle says. He holds his look a moment after his smile fades.

A lot of condominiums in his area, ha ha, Willey says.

Well, we have heard a lot about you, Mr. Garbutt says. It's a pleasure to meet you.

He's heard a lot about Willey, they've heard a lot about Willey, probably Kyle's heard a lot about Willey, but what have they heard? What's Rhonda's angle? Am I the rugged boyfriend sent to punish her parents? Is he the sensitive catch held up for approval? The liar on all fronts?

They make pleasantries, Willey and Mr. Garbutt. Willey's to call him Lawrence. Lawrence, he's heard plenty about Willey, who's heard only vague hints about him. Al and Willey shake hands and Ramona, she stays in her seat but gives Willey another patented Ramona shoulder-shrug smile. Bill waves a hello or he shoos a fly away, one or the other. Irene offers a smile but in his periphery, Willey can see Rhonda and Kyle, both looking like they're trying to twist Rubik's Cubes in their heads.

I'm sure your mother could use help in the kitchen, Lawrence says. Rhonda, so dismissed, flicks her eyebrows at Willey as she walks to the curved, sliding terrace door. Heart-Angie looks toward at Kyle, and with a quick nod of his head, she follows Rhonda into the house.

Rhonda tells me you're in management, Lawrence says. He sweeps his arm toward a table of liquor bottles, asks Willey if he, Lawrence, can make him a drink.

Assistant manager for now, Willey says. Honesty is the best policy, so people say. Willey tells Lawrence that he assists with the management of a staff of fourteen. A beer would be fine, he adds.

Lawrence takes a can of beer from a large bucket of ice beneath the table, turns it, dripping in his hand, to read the label. Bitburger? he asks, holding the can out.

Bitte, Willey says. Yes. He notices at least three other brands of German beer in the bucket. Weihenstephaner. Fürstenberg. Hacker-Pschorr. He's never heard of any of them.

And you're looking to buy a house, Lawrence says. He pours himself a scotch, drops two ice cubes from the beer bucket into his glass

Willey takes a sip of the beer. Mmm, he says. Am besten.

Rhonda tells me you and she have been all over the city looking at neighbourhoods, dissecting the local architecture. Lawrence smiles. She's at least told me that.

Yes, sir, Willey says. He looks back over his shoulder. But Rhonda neglected to mention this house. He takes another sip of the beer. Hoppy, that beer.

My father had this house built in 1966. Started construction in 1965 after his business went public. It took 16 months to build.

It's beautiful, Willey says. Well-proportioned.

The house is beautiful because the man who created it absolutely loved it.

Your father.

Hell, no. My father was wise enough to realize that money and power don't always equate with taste. Lawrence gulps down his scotch. You see that place over there? He says, pointing across the valley, where a pale brown mansion, at least three stories, plunks in the space between two lines of trees. Like a brown dash in a yellowing, foreign script of trees.

The Talon place, Kyle says. William and Leanne.

That house was designed on a computer, Lawrence says. Probably one of a dozen prefab choices, don't let the size fool you.

That house reeks of prefabrication, Kyle says.

Despite Talon talking incessantly about his input into its design. Talon, Lawrence says to Willey, wanted the house on the highest point of the property, so he took the trees down, had the house built and planted those God-awful tower poplars. Talon wanted a view of the river, and a view of the mountains, but Lawrence wouldn't be surprised if Talon has a telescope in his living room looking into the Garbutt residence. Alberta version.

Regardless, Lawrence says. Before Talon was born, the architect who built this house refused to build anything until he had a feel for the space. Lattner, the architect, came out here every week for a year, rain, winter, summer, autumn, came out here and sat in his car, walked around, took a thousand pictures before his pencil even touched a page.

Kyle's short on words but long on stares as Rhonda's father gives Willey the once over on the design and construction of his house, and the affront to aesthetics that William Talon has inflicted on the opposite side of the Elbow River valley.

Ramona talks with a nodding Irene while Al joins the group at the rail. Bill continues scowling. There is always money to be made in real estate, Al says.

And money to be wasted, Lawrence says.

It's all a waste, Bill says. Land that does nothing.

Everyone turns to Lawrence's brother-in-law. Land can value itself by being left alone, Lawrence says to Bill's scowl.

You can at least bring horses out here. I keep telling Karen to take some horses.

We don't need horses, Lawrence says. He gulps his whiskey, his second since Willey's arrival. We have no space for horses.

Keep 'em in the living room, Bill says.

What do you think? Kyle says to Willey. Do you find the house a bit too much?

Not really, Willey says. He turns to Lawrence, says, I hate to tell you, Mr. Garbutt, but in my apartment, I have four totem poles.

Lawrence laughs. What was it that Michael said about the totem poles? The subjugation of First-Nations imagery? Something along those lines. What's your take on totem poles, Willey? What's your take on abusing First-Nations imagery? He chuckles. Nations, he says, chuckling harder.

Michael, Willey says. The brother I'm not supposed to ask about.

Lawrence takes another long pull from his glass. Willey sips his beer. Kyle's not drinking, but has re-engaged his stare, twisting the puzzle in his head. Willey imagines Kyle picturing Willey's face, turning from background to background trying to place him. Sooner or later he's going to hit Dome Tower lobby and Willey

bumping into him. Surely, Willey thinks, it'll be a short trip down memory line to the moment Kyle discovered his bank card missing.

Michael is not a fan of where his eventual estate will originate, Lawrence says. He's off, I assume, paddling his First-Nations birch-bark canoe into the Pacific where he can tug plastic water-bottles from the blow-holes of whales. He's twenty-eight and the poor boy has my sins to atone for. I figure, five or seven years before he comes to his senses. As for the other one, she's only started her hatred.

Willey sips his beer, Lawrence drinks his whiskey, staring again at that bastard Talon's house. Kyle still intent on placing Willey, so Willey plays the where's-the-washroom card to excuse myself. It's been fifteen minutes and Willey's sure that one way or the other, his first impression has been made.

Down the hall, to the left, Lawrence says, without turning.

The Garbutt kitchen contains generous preparation space, cupboards finished in dark stained oak, and three women, two of whom seem engaged in a quiet, heated argument. All the appliances are black.

Rhonda and Karen stand facing each other, Karen with her back against the cupboards, her arms crossed. Willey, she says, looking over Rhonda's shoulder. Are you hungry? Angie turns to look at Willey, then turns back to mixing the potato salad.

You paint, Willey says, and both Rhonda and her mother jerk their heads to look at Willey. I noticed earlier, Willey says. You have the scent of turpentine on your hands.

Oh dear, Karen says, rushing to the sink. I cleaned my brushes and I thought I'd washed my hands well enough. I hope I didn't do anything to the salad.

I'm sure the salad's fine, Rhonda says.

Would you like to see my studio? Karen asks, smiling, locking her elbow into Willey's.

Sure, Willey says. Anything to keep him from going back outside. Let me see all of your studios.

Angela smiles, says she'll finish off the salads. Angela, Karen assures Willey, is a doll.

As they walk to the studio, Karen adds citations regarding the house's interior design. She says the kitchen cupboards were built to suit the specifications desired by the original owners, Lawrence's parents. She says, turning to Rhonda, they were designed around Rhonda's grandmother's height, and as for appliances, you can't buy harvest gold appliances anymore.

Karen tells Willey that a wall once separated the kitchen from the dining area, but it was removed in 1986 (or was it 1987) in order to create a feeling of more space.

This is exactly what this house needs. More space.

The dining area is trapezoid, one corner with a door that leads out to the side terrace. A teak dining table sits loaded with chips, cheeses, assorted dips and at least five different rolled meats. If Willey's hungry, he can help himself. Next to the door and sweeping around to the fireplace, the all-glass wall looks over the entire length of the terrace, ending only at the fireplace, which itself gives way to the thirty foot

gold wall. Outside, they can see Lawrence and Kyle talking, Kyle at one point nodding toward the house, Al back at his seat next to Ramona.

They make their way under the wing of the thunderbird, take the steps to the hallways and walk toward the Garbutt upper entrance. Willey asks, as they pass under the thunderbird, if the raised platform at the base of the gold wall used to be an atrium.

Oh, you are an observant one, aren't you, Karen says. Did Rhonda tell you? We had a tree there for a time, a lemon tree, and we'd often use the fruit to make pie. Oh, what delicious pies they made from the lemons of their lemon tree.

My grandmother designed this house, Rhonda says. Some architect's name is attached to it, but my grandmother designed it and, yes, there once was an atrium there. With a lemon tree that was almost twenty feet tall—

A lemon tree and at least three colonies of ants, Karen says.

We had a bird for a while, as well, Rhonda says. A sparrow we used to feed breadcrumbs.

A sparrow that once had an accident in your hair, if I remember. Oh, Willey, you should have seen her. Karen tells Willey, he should have seen Rhonda and her precious hair, running about the house. Complaining about the birds, complaining about the tree that attracts birds.

But not anymore, Rhonda says. No tree, no birds. Someone said no more atrium, so no more atrium.

The horror of no more atriums, Willey say to Rhonda, who offers no reaction.

The first door on the right side of the hallway leads to the master bedroom, which they don't enter. Instead, Karen takes Willey by the hand, leads him down a short hallway to the left. A door off this hallway leads to the garage and furnace room, the two doors to the left lead to a washroom, and a room full of exercise equipment, exercise equipment that Karen should use, she says, but just doesn't have the time or energy anymore. At least Lawrence is still quite religious about using the treadmill every morning, while Karen prefers the spin-bicycle, when she has time, of course.

Back in the main hallway, Karen tells Willey that there were originally two separate bedrooms here (along with the master suite, of course) but when Rhonda's brother left, the wall was removed and Rhonda took the entire space. One of the walk-in closets was converted into an ensuite, a huge issue involving plumbing. When Rhonda left two years ago, it became Karen's studio.

I get to sleep in this turpentine smell whenever I visit, Rhonda says. On a fold-out sofa in what used to be my bedroom.

But now you're a big girl with a place all of your own, Karen says, her voice pitching higher. She opens the door.

Rhonda's former bedroom explodes with abstract canvasses painted in golds and yellows, mirroring the opposite wall, itself all window looking out to a forest of mature aspens. Plants congregate in each corner, two mannequins—one male, one female, neither with nipples—stand in the centre of the room. Rhonda introduces them to Willey as Fred and Ethel, the last relics of Karen's once and, according to Rhonda, future clothing store.

It wouldn't surprise Willey if the canvasses on display, some still works at large, are swapped out four times a year with the change of seasons. Karen's green canvasses. Her white on white winter scenes. With three easels, countless brush stands, the plants, Fred, Ethel and books books books stacked and piled, the room looks part studio, part library, part Eden and all clutter, but a creative, comforting clutter.

Back in the hallway, where completed examples of Karen's art hang in the spaces between the built-in shelving, Willey stands again in front of the tornado painting. The floating women, the skull.

Philosophy, Willey says. This reminds me of Gustave Klimt's destroyed painting. There's Rhonda in his periphery again, staring.

Karen nods, smiling. A bit too much of the same subject matter, she says. I was influenced.

On Karen's suggestion they get back to the kitchen. The potato salad, the last hold-out of the meal preparation, is ready. Karen opens both doors of the double-wide, cavernous fridge and loads into Willey's arms, and Rhonda's, plates of raw hamburgers, chicken, and wrist-thick sausages.

Outside, Lawrence has the Barbecue lit and with his whiskey in one hand, uses the other to scrape at the grill. Willey stares at the valley as Lawrence talks about the merits of a proper barbecue. Which somehow leads into the merits of the latest Saab. Engineering, the economy. Oil. When Lawrence hits on oil the barbecue sizzles with the first meat offerings of the Garbutt's Annual Last Barbecue.

The weather warm, everyone decides to eat on the patio. Rhonda with Angela and Karen, bring the food from the dining room and set it on a foldable table that Kyle has wrestled into a standing position. The scent of Lawrence's cooking teases out Willey's appetite. Ramona, she talks about the Flames. The hockey team, that is, and the early season hope for playoffs. Ramona says they have nothing like hockey in the Philippines. Watching hockey is like watching soccer set on fast forward. Ramona likes the hitting.

What about the fighting, Willey says.

I love the fighting, Ramona says. She hold her hands up like a boxer. Pow pow she says, punching the air.

They're thinking about getting rid of fighting, Willey says.

Never, Ramona says. They can't.

Willey's always wanted to ask her, why leave the Philippines, why leave her job as a Principal to open a Soup-based restaurant. Perhaps it's the Bitburger— Willey's on his second—that finally asks the question.

If you have a bad batch of soup, Ramona says, laughing, you can always throw it out.

Many of you, Al says, Many of you don't realize what you have here. Feel this space, he says, holding his arms out. Bill starts a coughing fit, stands to, in his words, visit the inhouse.

Rhonda and Willey load their plates and again Willey is conscious of Kyle staring. Staring at Rhonda, then back at Willey.

Is there a path to the river? Willey says. I'd sure like to look at the land.

As they walk the path and still in full view of the patio, Rhonda, her plate in her right hand, rubs her left arm against Willey and touches the side of her head against his shoulder.

I'm sorry, Willey, she says. I get worked-up coming out here.

Your house is amazing, Willey says. I really struggled to keep my socks on.

I don't think this will ever be my house, she says. The path is wide, groomed with fine, crushed gravel. As they reach the end of the kept lawn, they step onto a more natural path, an animal trail descending to the river. This soon gives way to an even and open area of boulder, river rock and the grey, weathered wood of what might have been a dock or a boardwalk.

This is where the river used to be, Rhonda says. It'll take another minute to get to where the river is now.

At the end of what can only be described as a debris field, they sit on a fallen tree and stare out over the swift, shallow Elbow River. Willey sets his beer on a flat rock, his plate in his lap. I have to admit, he says. The burgers are pretty tasty. If Willey's going to use this BBQ as a meat day, he's going full bore. He has one of each, a burger, a length of smokie, and a breast of chicken on his plate. The handful of carrots, Rhonda must have dropped those in there for colour.

They sit in silence as they eat. Listening to the water, the buzz of insects, the chirp of sparrows. The occasional caw, and a loud discussion among magpies. The shattered remains of a shed litter the far bank. The water flowing but calm, a few high ripples, but no rapids. Hard to image the bender this river went on a mere three months ago.

Your father hates Mr. Talon, Willey says and Rhonda almost chokes, laughing, on a forkful of potato salad.

You should see him, she says. He'll stand there for hours, cursing, staring. I don't even think Talon lives there half the year. But to destroy my father's view like that.

Your mother's nice.

She's so happy to meet you, Rhonda says. I don't think any of my previous boyfriends have ever mentioned Gustave Klimt to her. Is my father giving you a hard time?

It's horrible, Willey says. Kyle holds me, your father punches.

My mother, Rhonda starts to say, but she stops to turn toward a noise behind her. An attempt at a coyote howl rolls over the spread of boulders, Kyle and heart-Angie coming across the Elbow's latest deposition.

Angela, Rhonda says as the two step up to Willey's and Rhonda's fallen tree. Have you ever owned a Volkswagen?

No, heart-Angie says. I don't have a licence. She reaches her hand out to Rhonda. Come with me down the river, she says. I want to go for a walk. Get away from the boys for a while.

Rhonda wipes her mouth with a napkin, stands, says, Sure, why not?

As the two head off, Kyle picks up a rock, tries to skip it in the water.

Great chicken, Willey says.

I remember you, Kyle says.

Willey takes another bite of his chicken, tries to form an escape plan in his head, tries to channel his inner Hicks. What the hell would Hicks do? Run? Swim for it? He'd probably open with a smile.

Yeah that's the smile I remember, Kyle says. I remember you now.

The Soup Depot, Willey says. The lineup. A busy place.

Not quite.

Shit. Here it comes. Kyle's put his puzzle-cube together and now Willey's fucked.

I wouldn't figure Rhonda for your type, Kyle says. Her being so womanly.

Willey takes a sip of his beer, stares out over the river. In truth, Kyle's last sentence took a corner he wasn't strapped in for. Her being so honest, might have fit. Womanly? Where exactly do you know me from? Willey says.

A washroom, Kyle says. I think it was the Nexen building. Ring a bell?

Oh for God's sake. Those words, they actually pop into Willey's head. Oh for God's sake. Kyle thinks Willey tried to pick him up in that washroom.

Oh for God's sake, Hicks would have a blast with this.

Look, Willey says. That was a strange time in my life. I don't know, I saw you in the Soup Depot line-up. You looked so put-together.

So you followed me to the washroom?

Of course not, Willey says. Willey tells Kyle, he says he was in Century Park, and went in to use the washroom. Look, Willey says. I was walking to the same restroom when you walked in. It seemed a good omen. Serendipity.

And now you'll say you're not gay anymore? Like you can just turn yourself on and off.

Look, Willey says again. This is the type of moment where you need to start every sentence with Look, so Willey says, Look, I've since relapsed into heterosexuality, and I think it will stick this time.

So Rhonda has nothing to worry about? You'll just turn your gay self off?

Oh, she's got lots to worry about, but Willey, he doesn't say that to Kyle. He says, I never really was gay. Gay men are all over television, all over pop-culture these days. There's a lot of pressure out there, and I needed a change. Fuck, Willey shrugs, feigning anger. For a moment I thought about it and I'm sorry you were the guy that triggered that. I assure you, I'm not gay.

Relax, Willey. She's my cousin.

And she's my girlfriend.

Kyle lets his breath out. Besides, Willey says. I decided to go on a diet. You know, a less drastic lifestyle change.

Kyle laughs, thumps Willey on the back. Like unbent heterosexual men thump each other on the back. Kyle smiles, says, All right, big guy, I believe you. But I will keep an eye on her, and you. You flick that switch, and you'll have to deal with me. Big guy or not.

Willey has to take a large bite of his chicken, a huge heterosexual mouthful of chicken, it's the only meat present that might prevent him from bursting out in relieved laughter. He's not a criminal. Well, not at the moment.

Back in the house and not a criminal, Willey listens as Lawrence tells him, nodding toward Al and Ramona, about their new plan to open a second location. Market Mall. A second Soup Depot. A six-foot log burns in the fireplace.

Or Chinook Centre, Ramona says.

Willey asks them how they met, Lawrence and the Riveras. Al talks about Mr. G being a client of his back in the Philippines. Those beautiful teeth of his, Al says. All my doing.

When I told Larry we wanted to come to Canada, where was a good place to live, he suggested to us Calgary. Here we are.

Lawrence raises his glass. With the best soup this side of the Philippines. Or any side.

Cheers to that, Kyle says, and he clinks his glass with Lawrence's.

Al's almost as good at soup as he is at dentistry, Lawrence says.

Almost? Al says laughing. You should try my new recipes. We will have you and Karen over, we'll have everyone over, and we'll put on all our soups for you.

This is it. Willey figures this is the perfect time to drop the soup joke he's been holding. He promised Al a soup joke, or maybe he promised himself a soup joke for Al, Willey can't remember, but seeing how he hasn't been outed as a thief and a liar, he feels confident in telling Al a soup joke. He says, Has anyone tried Al and Mona's new alphabet soup?

Lawrence looks at Willey, Kyle too. Al knits his face in confusion. Alphabet soup?

I had four bowls, Willey says. That night, I had the best vowel movement of my life.

There's a momentary pause and Willey thinks, maybe a thinly disguised crap joke wasn't the way to go, but Al throws his head back and laughs. Al laughs until his eyes are full of tears. Even Rhonda cracks a smile. She says, How long did it take you to look that one up?

They're smiling, now. They're all a happy family. Well, not Bill. Willey's relieved that he's a closeted homosexual and not a criminal. A closeted homosexual who can lay out a decent soup joke. As if reading his mind, as if noting his relaxation, his phone buzzes. A text message from Hicks that opens with a two word sentence: A snag. . . It doesn't get prettier from there. Hoist trouble. Head hanging in air. Can fall any moment.

Lawrence hands Willey a whiskey. Glenfarclas twenty-one year old single malt scotch, he says. Old enough to vote anywhere in the world. Strong enough to clean any paintbrush.

That was only once, Karen says, and she takes a playful swing at her husband's arm.

Hicks has a problem and as the potential cost of that problem fills Willey's knees with liquid, he has a whiskey in his hand and so he drinks. Thinking about the damage a broken hoist a hundred miles away can inflict on his plans, his dreams, his delusions, he drains the whole glass.

Willey, Rhonda says. What are you doing?

Lawrence's turn to thump Willey on the back. He says, Man wants a whiskey, man drinks a whisky. Want another?

I sure do.

Karen says wait a second and she disappears down the hall. The sun is near-set and the haze from the yearly series of British Columbia forest fires glows orange through the curve of glass. Karen comes out with an album of photos of the house as it appeared decades prior to Willey ripping off with Kyle Pearce's bank card, subsequently stalking Angela and funding the theft of an expensive paleological specimen in Bill and Irene's back yard. At least the whiskey acts to keep all these details even. Willey lets out a small laugh. The first Lawrence and Karen Garbutt Christmas in the house, 1979.

We probably should be going soon, Rhonda says. I have class early in the morning.

The photographs show tinsel, artificial mistletoe, platform shoes and lots of facial hair. Karen in a white pant suite with spaghetti straps and bell-bottoms. Gold coloured Formica and turquoise paint in the kitchen. A look on Karen's face that would be a perfect model for faces topping quasi-Corinthian columns in a far off restaurant. A tree in the background of one photo. Harvest Gold appliances in another.

That turquoise and gold mix, Kyle says, is what happens when late 50s optimism and mid-60s drug culture get together for a night out.

Lawrence puts his hand on Willey's shoulder, says, Let's step outside for a second. He says, You'll be on your way soon, have another whiskey a minute. So

they, with Kyle at Lawrence's heels, head back out on the terrace. Angela slides in closer to Karen as Rhonda again checks her watch. She gives Willey a shrug on the sly.

Outside, Lawrence toasts the Talon residence. With any luck, he says. It'll burn to the ground, or someone with more money and style will buy it out from under Talon, and do something about it.

This house, Lawrence says, thumping the steel patio railing, will be here long after Talon loses it during the next bust.

And it's coming, Kyle says. The bust is always on the horizon.

When this city busts, Lawrence says, the population of Saskatoon will triple. A Boom and Bust city, Lawrence says, when that Boom is on, you open all the valves. You need to be hard. Maybe a little compliant, but mostly hard. Ruthless, even.

And there's the stone in sandstone city, Willey says.

When the province busts, Kyle says, welfare claims in the Maritimes will spike.

Lawrence turns to Willey, he says, a Boom and Bust city, when the city booms, a city needs to be ruthless with its history and its landscape. You can re-manufacture one, repurpose the other.

The whiskey's caught up with him now, he talks about people always fucking complaining. Always fucking pointing at the oil, he says. One hand pointing, the other hand out, palm up. Ignore raw sewage dumped off Victoria's coast, ignore the Pulp and Paper acids. Do we get celebrities flying in their private jets to condemn the forestry industry? Do people picket the furnaces that burn the coal that provides

the power to charge their fucking electric cars? It's not the environment any of these so-called environmentalists are concerned about, Lawrence says. It's power, and they have no idea what the rest of this world, what China will do if we give up even a little bit of our power, how America will steam-roll us if we give in to environmentalist demands and they don't. He takes another drink.

Willey, he's glad Lawrence brought him out here for this.

There are whispers of a coming Bust, Kyle says.

There are always whispers of a coming Bust.

And if it busts? Kyle asks.

And if it busts, we'll pick up our grievances where we dropped them. A sheet of paper blowing in some ditch off a dirt road somewhere, caught in a barbed-wire fence. And we'll know that the Bust had something to do with the East. Near East or Far, and we'll remind Ottawa about our legislated generosity, knowing full well the answer. And those poor students in Montreal will riot after their transfer payment tuitions suddenly inflate.

Willey, he's not sure how oil-entrenched the bowling industry is, but if the Great Bust comes again, he might be able to afford a better house.

Lindsay's Folly, Willey says.

What the hell is Lindsay's Folly?

Willey gives Lawrence and Kyle the abridged lesson, A man wants to build a house, so he buys a church, repurposes the sandstone, runs out of money. Half a wall stands as a reminder, a few decades of posterity to remind everyone how fleeting wealth can be.

Lawrence takes a sip. Willey's pretty sure he can call his look a glare.

But better than that, Willey says. He says to Lawrence, We have a park named after the man, Lindsay, and we have a community recreation centre that was once named after the park, but has since been re-named after sponsorship from an Energy Corporation. And the city's mythological re-imagining continues its slow turn.

Lawrence coughs, he puts his hand on Willey's shoulder. Listen, he says. One thing I do know—Lawrence takes another slug from his glass—one thing he does know, Rhonda's been pissed at him for a while, and recently, lately, she's even more pissed. Lawrence turns to face Willey, says, She's mad at her father for not hiring a friend of hers to write for his company. Damned if her father can't explain to her why he didn't hire his daughter's friend. Maybe you can sort her out, Willey. He says Rhonda has to carve out a comfortable place in the world for herself, and if Lawrence tries to offer advice, holy shit. You sound sensible, he says to Willey. Maybe you can set her straight.

Kyle adds nothing other than full-body nods, the nods where you nod from the waist.

Here's a scenario for you, Lawrence says.

A scenario? Willey says. He looks back through the glass at Rhonda sitting on the couch next to her mother. Rhonda staring back at him.

Yes, a scenario. Lawrence finishes his whiskey, holds the glass out to blot out the Talon residence, lowers it to the railing. He says, In this scenario, you and Rhonda are driving, late at night, two, three in the morning, your car breaks down.

It's my fuel injectors, I bet.

Your fuel injectors fail and at two in the morning, you or Rhonda have to knock on a stranger's house. Possibly a house like Bill's who would answer the knock with a shotgun blast. Lawrence looks over at Bill, who hasn't moved from his chair on the terrace since his visit to the inhouse, but Bill's focused on the view from the patio. Either he doesn't hear his brother-in-law or he chooses to imagine that shotgun in his hand right now.

For some reason, Lawrence says, for some reason you don't have cell-phone service, and you have to knock on a farmer's door, rural Alberta, rural British Columbia, two in the morning. In this scenario, the lone occupant of that farmhouse is a woman, maybe her husband's up north, working a rig. Guy's too dumb to go to university, so he's working a rig, complaining about the guys that go to university, and his wife's alone at home. From an upper window, she sees you hammering at her door. Or she sees Rhonda hammering at the door. If we run this scenario a hundred times, one hundred different lone woman whose husbands are working rigs up north, fifty times for Rhonda, fifty times for you, do you think there will exist a disparity between how many times the door is opened for Rhonda, and how many times the door is opened for you?

Before Willey get a chance to complain once again about his damned fuel-injectors, Lawrence says, Of course there will be. Many of these woman will simply play the odds. If there is a chance of a rape occurring, she'll calculate the likelihood of being raped by you versus the likelihood of being raped by Rhonda.

If only Willey had taken that car in for service.

That's all I was doing with Rhonda's friend, Lawrence says. Playing the odds. Rhonda's friend, Janine Pankowitz, Lawrence says.

Pankowitz, Willey says.

Pankowitz, Lawrence says again. Pankowitz had a great resume, and we narrowed the position down to her and one other applicant. Lawrence turns to Willey, he says, Now, I'm leaning toward Ms Pankowitz, but we have to be thorough. We discover she has a blog and some of the topics, from where I was sitting, behind the President's desk, some of her topics triggered warning bells. One entry attacked an MLA who had the audacity to email the women on his staff on mother's day, with an emphasis on motherhood. Insensitive, sure, but Ms Pankowitz's blog states, and I quote near verbatim, Another white male politician denigrates women to mere motherhood. Other blog entries have similar material. Insanity pleas as another means to deny the link between white male privilege and violence. I was simply playing the odds, Willey. An applicant who writes about hiking and the issue of designated bicycling lanes, against an applicant with an agenda that can potentially disrupt my staff.

Lawrence, Mr. Garbutt, he takes another sip of his drink, only it's not his drink, it's Willey's that Willey had set on the rail. Don't get me wrong, Lawrence says. She was writing about important issues, I'm sure those articles have a wide audience, I'm sure to some, they're all necessary, but from a business standpoint, who do you think is more likely to create a distracting work environment? Still staring at the Talon residence, Mr. Garbutt finishes Willey's drink, and steps toward the glass patio door. I was playing the odds, he says.

Willey watched the door slide shut, watches Rhonda stare at her father as he passes through the house.

He's a great man, Kyle says. Successful. Powerful.

Hammered, Willey thinks.

After a minute, Kyle turns to Willey. Have you ever heard about the Scarborough house, he says. He says, you like stories like Lindsay's Folly, have you heard about the Scarborough House?

Do my fuel-injectors fail in this story? Willey says. He checks his phone, nothing new from Hicks. Okay, he says. Let's hear your Scarborough House story.

Kyle coughs, and he tells Willey about the Scarborough house.

Seems, back in the 30s, the 1930s that is, some wealthy doctor—Kyle says all the guys in these stories are doctors, just like Lindsay was a doctor. Kyle says that this wealthy doctor, he started to build a house in Scarborough, This guy, he builds a 3-story beauty in honour of his wife, but she's not so keen on having a house that big. Still, the wife says, that third floor, the one with the master bedroom? Well, it would be a shame to knock that off, it's so beautiful. So Scarborough, he gets this idea.

Kyle finishes his whiskey, set his glass next to Willey's on the table. What Scarborough does, Kyle says, is he has his contractors attach jacks to the third and first floors, and he cuts out and removes the middle floor.

Maybe, Kyle says, he gives it to Habitat for Humanity, but he cuts out the middle floor and lowers the third floor down onto the main floor.

But it turns out there's a problem. The jacks they used were not properly installed, and they stopped a foot short. The Scarborough house stood there with the third floor a foot from the main floor.

Now, Kyle says. The sane among us might think, Just use more jacks, Doc. Any normal person would simply frame the space in. What's one extra step on the staircase? Kyle says. But, for the sake of local lore, let's say that other jacks or other reasonable technologies or ideas weren't available or feasible.

What Doc does, Kyle says, is he gets blocks of ice, 12 inch thick blocks of ice and jams—slides I guess—slides these blocks of ice in between the floors. His workers remove the jacks and as the ice melts, there you go.

Willey might have to call hustle on this one. Willey might have to say to Kyle, C'mon, man. That's bullshit. But really, what a nice idea.

Rhonda and Willey walk to the car, Willey turning for one more look at the Garbutt family residence. Alberta version.

Your father plays the odds, Willey says.

Oh, he plays the odds, all right.

He mentioned some agitator named Pankowitz.

In front of the Scirocco, Rhonda tells Willey, she says her father told her he could sniff out trouble, and he knew the moment he met Janine, Ms. Pankowitz, that she was trouble. Did he tell you, Rhonda says, that he interviewed her four times, that he pretty much had his entire human resource department forensically search for her online persona. That he hasn't been involved in the hiring process for a decade and all because I brought her here to introduce her, and she had her nosed

pierced and made the mistake of saying that she'd never in her life worn a skirt, nor would she.

He didn't say anything about her nose.

What did he tell you?

Her feminist blog was the deal-breaker.

The man's a dinosaur, Rhonda says. He forced my mother to sell her business when I was born. She was designing her own clothing line, and now. I don't know who to despise more.

Now your mother paints.

Now she stays at home and paints. She's never had a gallery showing, she's never promoted her art anywhere. She just paints. She gardens, but not the atrium anymore. Whatever he says goes. And she drinks. They both drink. I hate coming here, and that Angela, Rhonda says. Did she even say four words all night? Rhonda opens the door to the car. Sitting, she opens the glove box.

Rhonda and Willey get to the car about 9:00 o'clock, the first thing Rhonda does is open the glove compartment. The envelope's gone, she says. The picture. I was sure Angela and Angie are the same person.

I tossed the envelope, Willey says to her. The picture must have been inside it. Darn.

Willey, Rhonda says. You have a thousand dollar lottery ticket in here.

Oh yeah, the lottery ticket. Willey tells Rhonda all about the lottery ticket, with certain edifications of course. He tells her about buying it from the ex-convict street guy who couldn't cash it without ID.

Since when do you need ID to cash a lottery ticket? It's a thousand dollars, not a million.

Where was she in February? It's fake, Willey says. He tells her he felt bad for the guy wanting to sell it, which is the truth. What he doesn't tell her, is the whole thinking-he-made-a-nine-hundred-dollar-profit part.

Rhonda, she doesn't think the ticket is fake. Is Willey sure it's fake? She asks him how he knows it's fake. As they drive through Mountain River estates, Willey tells her what Hicks told him, about how guys can fake these tickets by altering them with ink, or doing a cut and paste job. He says to her, I thought of this scam where I could sell it, and he explains to her the whole process, the sunglasses, the other winning ticket. When he finishes, Rhonda's face has the look of unbleached horror.

You wouldn't really do that?

Of course not, Willey says. But your face is hilarious right now. Her face also doesn't change expressions when he tells her he wouldn't scam anyone with the ticket. Of course I wouldn't do it, he says again. If I was going to do that, I would have done it already.

Rhonda turns on the overhead light, starts examining the Blackjack ticket up close.

I can get a ticket for driving with that light on, Willey says.

She bends the ticket, looking to see if she can spread open any cut mark. Exactly what Willey once did.

This sure looks real, she says.

Yeah, that's kind of the point. You know, there are guys who collect fake tickets. I can probably put this on line and get a few bucks for it.

Let's go the drugstore in Aspen Woods, Rhonda says, and anyone can already see where this is headed. When that fucking machine woo-hoos and Willey realizes that he's been dragging a thousand bucks around with him all summer, he could have punched himself in a mirror.

Ha, look at that, he says. A winner this whole time. (Son of a Bitch!)

Turns out, you don't need ID for a thousand dollar winner, at least not according to Jennifer who works the Aspen Woods Shoppers. You do have to sign the back, however. Willey Hase. Willey Hase, a man who used a thousand dollar lottery ticket as a book-mark for a month. Willey Hase, who would have used a thousand dollar lottery ticket, folded, to stuff into a dashboard squeak had a gas receipt not been closer. Willey Hase, Fuckhead, Willey's inner Willey says.

Since you thought this was a fake ticket all along, Rhonda says, a big smile on her face, you could donate this money to a homeless shelter.

Willey looks at her and smiles. I'm going to do just that, he says. Not only is Rhonda honest, she's honest to a fault. Donate it?

I was joking, Rhonda says, hitting Willey on the shoulder. If you're going to waste it, have fun wasting it.

## **6.27**

Hicks punches the ram again, his knuckles bloody. He raises the head a foot, twists the bleeder valve again. The head lowers a foot. Stops.

Hicks! Dianne yells.

What?

I have an idea.

Hicks looks at her. Yeah? he snaps. Go ahead.

We build a box, Dianne says. A box in the cart up to the level of the block. Fill the box with dirt and lower the head that little bit until it rests on the dirt. Then we dig away or rinse away the dirt until the block's in the cart. Voila, Dianne says.

Hicks turns to Argo. Her, I love.

Of course you do, Argo says. She's full of God, even I can see that.

Argo figures that the box might take two hours to build, so he leaves Hicks and Dianne to plaster the last of the exposed surfaces, including where the ring-saw sliced half way through the *Albertosaur's* second cervical vertebrae, and the feathers, chisels and crowbars did the rest. They forego any further trimming for weight, they're on borrowed luck already and hammering at that weight riding the sky might push luck further away.

They are near professionals at plastering now, and the work is quick and silent, both on the ear out for any groan of the hoist. Neither will step down into the pit, they pass strips of burlap one to the other, reaching under the stone as quickly as possible.

Dianne plasters the small portion of exposed fossil on the remains of the table, and covers this with dirt while the plaster is still wet. As she does this, Hicks walks back to the truck in order to move it to a closer, albeit far more conspicuous site closer to the camp. He keeps an ear out for the sound of Argo's saw in the barn or workshop or, he wonders to himself, is there a specific name for a warlock's lair?

After completing the plastering, Dianne empties the bucket, carries the tent and lawn chairs to the pre-arranged meeting area below, nearer the river. Despite the overcast sky, the gibbous moon's light still manages to give the valley an eerie glow. She arrives a minute before Hicks, listens for the sound of the truck, tries not to listen for the sound of claws or growls or anything else that might mark a creature out hunting a late night meal.

In the darkness, or through the darkness, or perhaps, from the darkness itself comes the growl Dianne has waited for and fears, but the orange eyes she sees reveal themselves as the parking lights of Hicks's truck. Headlights off Hicks bumps the truck along the river's bank of small boulders. He parks the truck close to a copse of aspens, and after they place the tent and chairs under the truck, the two make their way back to their camp, where Argo and the revised cart await.

I've made a few modifications to your idea, Argo says to Dianne. At the bottom there, I've put in those slats. That way, when the cart's full of dirt, we can hammer them open, and gravity can do some of your work.

Good, Hicks says, his voice full of exhaustion, but the night's rougher work still ahead.

I've also brought wood blocks, Argo says. To support the cart. Maybe it can hold all that dirt, maybe it can hold that block. It ain't holding both.

And so they begin. They push the cart in place, and reinforce it with dozens of wooden blocks stacked one on another. Where the table that contains the *Albertosaur* joins the coulee wall proper, they dig. They dig soil, they dig loose sandstone, and in the darkness they dig anything their shovels will lift. They fill their

buckets with this dirt and carry and drag it over to the cart where they lift and heave it into the box, trying not to hit their suspended block, trying not to give it any reason to crash through the cart below. For all they know in the blackness of the night, their shovels lift coal, or gold, or the remains of a rarer specimen but they are both too tired to care. At 1:30 in the morning they start digging, and they continue until the eastern horizon, the horizon they cannot see, begins to pink. They shovel and they shovel and slowly they fill the cart, they fill the sky beneath the *Albertosaur* with dirt and when they feel they can't dig anymore, they keep digging because they're only half way there.

It takes them five hours to fill this portion of sky. Five hours of back and forth, palm crushing, back breaking work. It takes them five minutes to lower the block and level it out and unhook the engine straps from the hoist and lean the hoist away. It takes Argo half an hour to ride off and fetch the other engine hoist, and literally drag it to Hicks's truck. It takes Hicks about ten seconds to pound away the slats on the front and sides of the cart and they start draining away the dirt from the sky they have so recently filled.

As with every solution in the coulee, it begets another problem. And so when they thought their digging was done, they must grab shovels and fling away the dirt that forms piles around the cart. Dianne scrapes with her shovel between the cart and the edge of the sandstone table, Hicks takes scoops of dirt and tosses them over his shoulder into the aspens. Each shovelful buries some or another of the coulee's flowers. Startles the coulee's birds. Awakens the mosquitoes.

Argo sits on Chester and though he can only listen, Hicks is sure that in some way he is watching. You getting close, there, Argo says. Chester's getting twitchy. He doesn't normally have the harness on this long waiting for loafers to finish their job.

Tell Chester to grab a shovel, Hicks says.

You pushed that cart in the right way, I hope.

Hicks pauses, panicky. Dianne, not pausing in her work, shakes her head. Not funny, old man, Hicks says.

They scrape and scoop and toss and have to shove their shovels into the cart to get the dirt flowing, and with the sky lighter, with their work about to be on full display, Hicks tosses his shovel and asks Argo, How do you hook your horse up to this thing?

You're up, Chester, Argo says, and Chester answers with a whinny and even Hicks, though not experienced around the sounds of horses, can detect the sarcasm in that whinny.

Argo backs Chester to the cart. He gets down and takes a minute to make sure Chester's collar is secure. He adjusts the harness's breeching, feels around under the cupper.

Now's not the time to molest your horse, Hicks says.

Knock away those blocks, Argo says, as he mounts Chester. Let's go, Chester, we're not paying you by the hour, come now. Chester takes two tries at moving, the first a false start punctuated by another whinny and a tail flick. The second go, he digs his hooves in and gets the cart rolling. Hicks and Dianne look at the cart's bulging tires, then at each other.

No blow comes however, as Chester earns another of his day's carrots by hauling the head with equine meticulousness down the Coulee path to the truck, the new walls of the cart securing the money over rough terrain.

## 6.28

There were moments, Hicks says. When I thought the thing was going to flop over. When I thought that second hoist was going to freeze in the air. Hicks, he's eating a Grandpa Burger, has a mouthful of burger and says, I might be ruined on using engine hoists for the rest of my life.

Willey, of course, already knows the rest. They knocked the new walls off the cart, loaded the slab in the back of the truck, loaded their equipment. They loaded first one hoist, then the other on the cart. They paid Argo the remainder of his five thousand dollars. A ridiculously low amount, considering.

I said to him, Hicks says, I said whoever comes looking for the rest of that dinosaur is rich, and not to be so accommodating. And Argo, he turns to me, and says, Remember Mr. Hicks—he called me Mr. Hicks—he said, remember, God's in no book, he's in people. Argo told me that God lives in the people we love, and if we don't believe in God, what does that say about the people we love? Hicks shrugs, takes another bite of his burger.

If I never touch a shovel in my life again, Dianne says, looking at her left palm, it'll be a good life.

Hicks takes another bite of his burger. Under the circumstances, Willey's decided to forego the no food in the car rule. Throwing thousand dollar stacks of twenties inside the local A&W represents the zenith of poor manners. You can,

however, do this in your Volkswagen. Hicks slaps a stack of twenties against the dashboard, Dianne has been making it rain from the back seat, flinging twenty after twenty after twenty at us, Hicks stripping his shirt off, licking in fingers and circling them around his nipples.

You feeling all right? Willey says to Hicks. He says, You fell pretty hard back there.

In front of Bell and Sikorsky, in the warehouse by the airport, Hicks fell and wacked his head good on the concrete floor. Bell and Sikorsky looked more freaked-out over Hicks falling than Hicks.

Hicks nods. Landed on my pride, he says. He smacks his stack of twenties on the dashboard again.

What a sound, Willey says. Those people who decry money, who bitch about capitalism. They've never heard the sound of a stack of twenties hitting a Volkswagen's dashboard.

Thick like a steak, Dianne says. Brand new.

Hicks, he takes out a twenty. Another. Another another another. Then he rests his head on the dashboard of the car and like that, the evening ices over. When Hicks goes pale, shit's coming out the business end of the fan.

What, Dianne says. Dammit Hicks, what?

He hold his stack up in the air. Perfect, he says. Perfect, un-creased, smooth, brand new looking but 2004 era bills that happen to be sequentially numbered. I wonder, he says, if there are any unsolved armoured car robberies, or bank robberies or any other affair that might result in a hundred thousand dollars of

twenties, all in sequential fucking order, and all ten fucking years old. He throws his stack hard to the floor of the car. God dammit, he yells.

It would seem someone has pulled a fast one on them.

## Chapter 7: Dirty Money

### 7.1

How do you account for a hundred thousand dollars? Be creative. Money like this, it doesn't just come out of the ground. You come across a hundred thousand dollars, you have to explain to certain people, like yourself maybe, you have to ask yourself, how did I get this money? You have to ask yourself, Am I comfortable with my answer?

Maybe you were paid out for five years of diner work all in one shot. Maybe you did a year's worth of triple shifts managing the local bowling alley. Maybe you spent a few days mixing chemicals in the basement of a rented house in Bridlewood, making enough synthetic drug to pay for one fifth a typical Calgary house, or maybe, just maybe, your hundred thousand dollars is the result of some cockamamie plan to sell an expensive rock you dug out of the ground. However you get that money, now that you have that money, how are going to get away with having that much money?

One hundred thousand dollars. When you write it out, there are so many zeroes, you don't even know where to put the comma. Sure, it's split between three of you, but even a third of a hundred thousand dollars is still a lot of money to account for.

Here's what you can do. You can put out a bunch of fake ads online and pretend to sell things you don't own. You put up fake ads for your iPhone Infinity, your Xbox with fifty games, your skateboard. You put out ads for expensive collector books, jewellery, maybe old collector coins. Whatever you can think of. You can put out an ad for a Robert Silverberg signed copy of *Legends* and when people call—if

people call, because who's going to pay your asking price of three hundred dollars for a book worth fifty dollars—if people call, you say, Sorry man, already sold.

You put ads out for two, five, six thousand dollars' worth of goods and, look at that, everything sells. Or, you tell your mother, your step-mother, your father, you tell them you won a couple thousand dollars on a Video Lottery Terminal. Or maybe playing blackjack.

You deposit thirty-three thousand dollars in the bank, the bank itself isn't going to care about that money. They're going to send a note to the government saying, Yo, this cat just deposit thirty thousand. He typically deposits less than two. Thought you should know.

Sorry man, the *Lord of the Rings* Special Edition DVD boxed set, signed by Peter Jackson, the set for five hundred dollars? That set sold yesterday.

You can tell your mother, you won four thousand dollars at the local bingo. Tell her you won the bonanza.

The *Alien* teaser poster? The teaser poster with the red silhouette crew, the four thousand, five hundred dollar poster? That poster? Damn, sorry man, a guy picked that poster up this morning. I guess I under-priced it.

But accounting for that money, that's not your problem. You deposit thirty thousand into the bank, the bank tells the government, the government raises an eyebrow, goes back to sleep. You make that deposit again, then again, that's when the government's going to come wide-eyed looking for their cut. So having to account for thirty-thousand dollars, that's not that big of a problem.

Your problem is the money you have, the actual physical bills, that money might be linked to someone else's dirty work. Somebody might have murdered for that money, you don't know. You can't prove it, but you can't disprove it, either. Maybe you're careful, maybe you're paranoid. Maybe your paranoid friend, who's sold drugs, stolen drugs, stolen cars, stolen money, picked pockets, shoplifted, scammed and otherwise hustled his way around the city for the last decade—and that's just the shit you are aware of—maybe you listen to his opinion because for all that, he's still managed to carry a clean record into his mid-twenties.

I assure you, Hicks says. I assure you that our money's hot, and if it ends up in our bank accounts, the police'll be greasing up their microscopes before we even get a chance to set our asses down.

Bottom line is, you have to clean your money in a way that won't lead back to you and your two mopey looking friends sharing your table. You have to take the money you have, the physical twenty dollar bills, and there's a lot of them, and swap them out for clean ones.

So what do you do?

The three sit at Atlas again, trying to come up with a plan for this money. Hicks, Dianne, and Willey. One thing we can't do, Hicks says, and he says this for the third time, is put this money in a bank.

There's these people, they work for banks, and when you make a deposit through an ATM, they're checking to make sure you actually did make a deposit. Hicks tells Willey and Dianne, he used to know this girl, Chantel, and when you make a deposit for, say, four hundred dollars, and in the same transaction you withdraw

four hundred dollars, it was Chantel's job to make sure that you didn't just slip an empty envelope into the machine. But Chantel, she also checks for serial numbers on suspicious groups of bills. People like Chantel would have easy access to a hot list of serial numbers from bills involved in bank robberies or ATM thefts or armoured car robberies. It's too bad, Hicks says, I don't know Chantel anymore. Or anyone like her.

According to local newspapers, archived editions, two ATMs have been stolen in this city in the past 6 months. The articles detail how stolen trucks smashed into closed stores and how guys wheeled off stand-alone ATMs, how these guys took about a minute to do the whole smash and grab. The articles talk about GPS trackers in ATM machines, and that the police will soon catch these criminals. What these newspapers lack, is follow-up articles talking about how the police caught these criminals.

I guess it's cheaper, Hicks says, to put a sticker on a machine warning of a GPS tracker, rather than an actual GPS tracker. Looks like somebody's called their bluff.

In the Maritimes, guys have been smashing into places and using blow-torches to cut into bank machines, just to get at some of the cash. Those guys got caught, and not because they were recognized beneath their ski masks.

The thing is, these two ATMs that have been carted off the past few months in Calgary, they'd be loaded with recently printed money. Willey's money, Hicks's and Dianne's money, they have the old style twenties. Their money's a decade old, it's in pristine condition, and in numerical order.

According to the internet, in 2005, in Nova Scotia, an armoured car jockey was killed when thieves robbed him and his partner while they were stacking a machine at a bank in Halifax. Police figure that it was an inside job, but the police, they might still be figuring.

Rhonda, she gets access to all the University's subscriptions to archived newspapers. Inside job or not, you can key-word search through these back issues of the Halifax Chronicle-Herald, and if you do key word searches for, say, armoured car, or cold case, or a whole wet slough of words, you'll know, they've never found that robber, or the money.

Hicks says, I'm not saying that's our money, but, we should act like that's our money.

What Willey says to Rhonda is, he's interested in Calgary's history. He says he's nostalgic for a time when he never lived, which is not a lie, and so it would be cool if he could look at back issues of newspapers to see how the city's changed, and so she gives him her student ID number and library password.

Hicks says he knows a guy that knows a guy in Vancouver who's heard of a construction company that might front for laundering money. There must be someplace like that here, Hicks says. We're more than a million in population. Surely there's a market here for a money launderer.

Technically, they don't have to launder the full hundred thousand. Bell and Sikorsky, they gave Willey a five thousand dollar retainer, which was used money. Wrinkled, with tens and fifties mixed in.

I guess they didn't want to tip you off, Dianne says.

They spent almost a thousand of that money buying supplies; the tent and the tools and all the food, and Hicks used the other part of the retainer to pay Argo. Half before they started digging, half after. Of the half after, Willey pinched in some money from his house buying account in order to top off what they owed Argo. So, of the ninety-five thousand they were paid on delivery, ninety is suspicious, the rest looks okay. Old, beaten up, non-sequential serial numbers, different dates. They only have to launder ninety thousand.

Only, Dianne says.

When you do a typical money laundering job, you're trying to disguise having a lot of money with no logical means of making that money. These three, they have to take money that might be traceable to some past event, and exchange it for money that they can spend, save, or give to strippers without having to worry about it.

Dianne says, How much do we lose if we use a launderer?

No one is sure of that answer, but Hicks, he figures that they'd likely end up with fifty-five thousand.

Dianne slumps in her seat, but before that, she says, What about a casino?

Don't even think of taking this money into a casino. Don't even think about sliding these twenties one at a time into a slot machine at this, that, or any other casino, then cashing out and taking your receipt up to the counter for clean money.

Don't think about going up to a black-jack table, Ariel's black-jack table, and laying a thousand dollars across the felt, making Ariel say, Changing a thousand.

Then you play, and if you win, well, keep playing, dummy, but as soon as you lose

fifty, take your chips and cash out. Yeah, casinos have never seen that move before. No one ever thinks of laundering money like that at a casino. Like banks, casinos have some guy in a backroom ready to check serial numbers.

You might think every table of a casino has a single camera on it, but in fact, every table of a casino has three cameras on it. Casinos, they have more cameras than Metro, Goldwyn and Mayer all put together. Casinos are always watching you. They know where you were playing, every bet you placed, how much you lost. They know what you had to drink.

Some guy with a cigarette and an ulcer, he sits in a room and watches you as you lay out that thousand dollars of old-generation twenty dollar bills for Ariel to give you chips, and he sees you ten minutes later cashing those chips in. That guy's calling the floor and within seconds they're emptying Ariel's table of the cash, taking it to the back to look at the bills you brought in.

Casinos, they record everything, and they throw nothing out, probably not even the bottles you drank from. It wouldn't be surprising if casinos are checking your propensity for gambling on a genetic level. Why you have the gambling gene and someone else doesn't, and what can be done to improve that situation in the casino's favour.

I'm sorry I asked, Dianne says. That's when she slumps in her seat.

What really hurts, Hicks says, is that we were duped all along.

He's right. They all know that Hicks's right. Those guys that paid for the *Albertosaur* head, they don't care about the *Albertosaur* head. Those guys weren't trying to buy a dinosaur, they were laundering money that Willey, Hicks and Dianne

now have to launder. They can sell that head for ninety, ninety-five thousand. Maybe more. That head could be on display in some rich guy's foyer right now, Willey says. Bell and Sikorsky, they don't give a fuck about the rest of the dinosaur stuck in that coulee.

What if they take some money to a currency converter, and buy American money, then take the American money to another converter, and buy Canadian?

Same issue as the casino. Cameras. Also, buying anything more than three thousand dollars requires identification. They take that money in, those people are trained to recognize a hustle. Those people are trained to recognize people in disguise.

How you can tell a guy in disguise in a casino? Hicks says. Answer, he's the guy being hauled out by his belt loop and collar.

They take your money in, those people at currency converters, they take the money you're trying to exchange, they notice right away; old style bills, that's clue number one. Similar serial numbers? That girl counting your money, she's already rolling her eyes, thinking, What an idiot. You're flagged already.

Or what about bars that have video lottery terminals and shitty security cameras?

That's not that bad an idea, actually. Drop in five hundred. Sit there and do nothing, cash out, take the receipt up and collect clean money. You don't have the same forensic voyeurism as at a casino, and if the bars do have security cameras, they're often so shitty they might as well not have them. Hicks says the bars will pay out thousands, and, yeah, that's a quick way to exchange dirty bills for clean ones,

but what ends up happening, is that money gets deposited by the VLT owner, gets checked by Chantel or someone like Chantel, who makes note of who deposited it, and when the RCMP catch wind that money missing from a murder scene ten years ago just surfaced, you think they're not going to turn over every rock and bum looking for you?

Sure, you can wear a disguise, you can park your car far away, or you can take transit to this bar, even. You launder your money through that bar, you get away with it, but do you want that hanging over your head the rest of your free life? Every knock at the door, for the rest of your life, the RCMP?

Yes officer, I did recognize suspicious looking people in the area. They got into a Volkswagen Scirocco. Mars red. Two males and one female, officer. They got into an older car, I think it was an Oldsmobile. It had stick-figure family stickers all down the driver side and bungee cords wrapped around the trunk.

Still, that's the best they've got so far. It means waking the police up to this money finally coming to light, but it's the best bet so far.

Hmmm.

Hmmm, indeed.

You could buy a \$2000 smart TV, pay cash, and the next day take the TV still in its original box back to the store for a refund.

Yeah, my wife, she thinks there are better ways to spend our money, other than \$2000 televisions.

But then the store makes a night deposit, Hicks says, and you get the idea by now.

So, what do you do? You and your two friends have ninety thousand dollars, and you can't spend it. That won't get you into school. You can't use that money to buy quality construction equipment. That's money that can't be used toward a down payment on a starter house.

So, what do you do?

I think I have this idea, Willey says, but neither Dianne nor Hicks move at this declaration.

Seriously, Willey says. This might work.

Let's hear it, Hicks says.

Shitty convenience stores.

What about 'em?

How about, we go to these stores one at a time, buy a pack of gum, or a fifty cent candy. One at a time, we buy something that costs fifty cents, and we pay with a dirty twenty dollar bill. They give us back money that hasn't possibly been linked to a murder.

Hicks and Dianne both sit up in their seats. That's one twenty dollar bill from that store that gets deposited in the bank, Hicks says. Even then only maybe.

If it's a ma and pa store, maybe it doesn't get deposited, maybe they take it to Costco or wherever. Maybe they give it to the guy who delivers the chips, the coke.

Maybe it gets handed back in change to some poor sucker trying to launder his dirty fifties, Hicks says. We figure this shit is going to get deposited sometime, what we need to do is increase the number of steps between us and the depositor.

Holy shit, Dianne says.

Hicks slaps the table, then he leans in, they all lean in.

Garage sales, Dianne says. Flea markets.

Holy fuck, flea markets. I didn't think of flea markets and garage sales. That's better than convenience stores.

That's right, Willey says. Places where people are going to collect our money, then take it home, pay for their pizza with it. Where the money is going to get spread around so that when it does end up in some night deposit envelope, it's too hard to track where it came from.

Now we're on to something.

## 7.2

They're on to something, but they're not going to put that plan into place until Saturday. On Saturday, Willey, Hicks and Dianne are going to try to hit a few estate sales and late season garage sales listed on the internet. That's Saturday, tomorrow, but tonight, Willey heads out the door, taking Jolene for her late night walk, Friday version. He takes her down the alley to the train tracks, and Jolene stands a minute, looking at him, wagging her tail. Willey scratches behind her ears, pats her ass until she sniffs around, finds that ideal spot, that magic spot and squats.

We're going on an adventure, Willey says. What do you think about that, Jolene? Me, you, Hicks and pretty Dianne. You like Dianne, don't you girl?

They've decided, since Hicks's Oldsmobile has worked perfectly of late (ever since it came out of the closet, Hicks says) that the Olds is the car they'll take. They're going to use secondary highways, and hit all the small stores in all the towns between Calgary and Edmonton. Towns like Carstairs, Didsbury, Olds. They're going

to drive through Bowden, Innisfail, Penhold, Blackfalds and Lacombe. Wetaskiwin, maybe Camrose, because Camrose looks big on a map. Hay Lakes and New Sarepta.

Hicks figures there might be yard sales in these towns. Lone, dusty convenience stores. South Cooking Lake, Cooking Lake, Bug Swallow.

Willey, standing there while Jolene finishes her business on the sidewalk, he's not convinced the Olds is the way to go. Being on a secondary highway between Red Deer and Bug Swallow in that car? But what are the alternatives? Do you want to take your sewing machine Scirocco? Hicks asked. How many of those are registered in Alberta these days? Five? Or should all three of them ride in the cab of Hicks's truck for twelve hours a day?

Willey, walking out of the alley and into the Octoplex parking lot, sees a small Asian woman running toward him. This Asian woman tears through the parking lot, running toward Willey, and Jolene starts whining and tugging at her chain, the woman yelling Feng! Feng!

This woman, Lian Baumann nee Chan, she's on her knees getting her face licked all over by Willey's dog and Joey Chan makes his way up the sidewalk from in front of Willey's building.

Ah, Willey, Chan says. Vielen Dank, Willey. You took care of our dog. You found her, and took care of her. Thank you, Willey.

But, Joe...

Lian has Jolene's papers, her registration papers and her vaccination records and photos and she's getting them out of her car to show Willey that Jolene is Feng, though she doesn't have to prove anything, it's obvious based on Jolene's reaction.

Willey says to Joe, You can't just come here and take my dog away. It's been six months, for fuck sakes.

You see tattoo, Chan says, You see tattoo on ear, heh heh?

Don't give me the fucking accent, Chan, Willey says. He says, Don't fucking act like a new immigrant all of a sudden.

Lian points out the tattoos and the photos and the colour and what? What's Willey supposed to do? They're going to take his dog either here and now, or they're going to come back tomorrow and hammer on his door with the police.

See the tattoo? Lian says.

I tried giving her back to you six months ago, Chan.

Das tut mir leid, Willey. Aber, . . . I didn't recognize her. I thought you were trying to give me a different dog.

It took you ten months to figure out how much she was worth? Willey turns to Lian, says, You didn't tell him the next morning, how much money this dog was worth? You waited ten months?

I want my dog, Lian says.

Das tut mir leid, Willey, Chan says from the passenger window, as he and Lian get ready to drive away. Willey, Chan says. When she has puppies, you can pick the first.

Christ, one minute you're picking dog shit off the train tracks, next thing you know you're standing there with a loose chain in your hand, scratching behind your own ear, thinking, what the hell just happened?

Willey's mother, she's still up when Willey comes in, and she says, Where's the dog, and Willey tells her the former owner came and picked her up.

Well, that's gut then, she says. She turns the page of her newspaper.

By the way, Willey says. I'm buying a house in the winter. When prices are low.

Willey's mother laughs. In dieser Stadt? she says.

English, mother.

Willey, how can you afford a house? Rent here is low. We'll stay here, she says, and she turns back to her newspaper.

I'm a criminal, mother. That's how I can afford a house here.

Willey, don't say such things.

Unless you want to convince the next tenant to keep you as a room-mate, you might want to get used to going outside.

Willey's mother folds her newspaper, crosses her arms. Why should I go outside, Willey. I'm old. Let the world spin without me.

Willey puts his hand on his mother's hair, pulls her toward him. I'm going to buy you a house, mother. And make you proud of us again.

You need to eat, Willey, his mother says. Let me cook you something.

### 7.3

On Saturday morning, Hicks, Dianne and Willey, they hit a series of late-year garage sales in Mayland Heights. It's late September, but the weather is still in the sunny high teens. They find a few garage sales here and there, including a whole street in Mayland Heights. In one place Willey buys a spatula. He starts buying small plastic toys, movie propaganda toys kids get when their parents order a Happy Meal.

Some women—always women—some women hosting garage sales say, Oh, you can just keep that. That's only 25 cents, I don't want to give change on a twenty for that. Willey buys a Mario in one place, a Luigi in another. He tries to look for decent books, some decent pulp sci-fi at some of the sales but Hicks, he's all, Speed it up, come on.

Willey buys a toy horse with a pink mane, a toy horse wearing eye-shadow, because it's twenty five cents and, Gosh, I'm sorry, all I have is this twenty and I need this one for the collection. Starsprinkle is the last pony I need, Willey says, and he insists on paying when the woman host says, No, you can just take that.

With most women, fifty cents is their line. They try to give you stuff for free if it's fifty cents and you're holding out a twenty. More if it's a kid's toy. If you're holding out a kid's toy, anything a buck or less they'll try to give you free before cashing a twenty. But the men, and seniors especially, they want that quarter, kid's toy or not.

Dianne, she's buying Twilight books when she finds them fast enough and she has five of them, and the most expensive one was a dollar.

You got ripped off, Hicks says.

Dianne buys fifty cent bangles, twenty-five cent earrings. Her ears aren't pierced, but that's okay, Willey doesn't have a pony collection. Hicks, he buys the first thing he sees that's fifty cents or less, and he gets pissed at the other two for taking the time to actually look for something they can use. Hicks buys a fork at one sale. Who sells a fork?

Every place gets a fresh twenty. They let garage sales have two fresh twenties. So, at one garage sale Dianne buys something, and, acting like he doesn't know Dianne, Willey buys something else. Or Hicks does, et cetera.

They buy cassette tapes when available because the radio in the car's been working for a while, and as they drive, they pound Michael Jackson out the window.

Willey still misses his fucking dog. One day, you say to your dog, Dammit, stop chewing on that, and a few months later you say, Jolene, what am I going to tell Rhonda?

This the one with Dirty Dianna on it? Hicks says, looking at the back of the cassette cover.

They park in Ramsay and get ready to walk to the Crossroads Market. Hicks figures that no matter how careful they are, a few of these bills are going to make their way to the RCMP. He says if a few of the bills get deposited from Crossroads vendors, they'll be looking at security camera footage. Dianne tells Hicks he's paranoid, but Hicks says being paranoid and being right aren't mutually exclusive.

They try to disguise their features, not so much from the vendors, but from anything with a record button. All day Willey's been wearing a cheap cowboy hat pulled low over his eyes. He keeps his eyes down, which isn't hard when the tops of

everyone else's heads are already at your chin. Hicks, he wears a black bomber jacket that makes him look bigger. His boots add an inch or two in height, and he's wearing a baseball cap. Dianne wears a baseball cap too, with the hood of her hoodie pulled up over it, all her hair hidden inside the hoodie. She looks like one of those women you see occasionally who wears pajama bottoms outside. She has pajama bottoms on today and with the hat and hoodie, she looks like she just got up, threw some stuff on.

We spend like a madman, Hicks says as they walk through the Crossroads parking lot. We go through this shit fast, every fucking vendor who's selling anything for fifty cents. After we're finished at the Crossroads Market, we'll head up to the Blackfoot Market, we'll hit a thousand convenience stores.

It just so happens, Willey knows where you can find a lot of sketchy looking convenience stores in this city.

Hell, we'll even hit the change machine at Forest Lawndry, Hicks says. Then tomorrow, bright and early, we'll hit the flea market in Hillhurst, any other garage sales we see, and then we'll blast off to Edmonton.

Inside Crossroads, they have to make slight alterations to their plan. Some of the vendors look outright professional. Parts of the market look full on capitalist retail. They can only hit places that look like they're in need of a social assistance program or another.

Don't buy anything at the candy store, Dianne says. The woman running the candy store actually makes money there. She might have to make nightly deposits.

But the book sellers, the junk dealers, the guy who sells toy cars from a collapsible table; guys who look like they'd rather keep the money in their clenched fists rather than pay a bank to keep it, these people get twenties. At different times, each one of the three buys a small pumpkin from the Hutterites, Hicks saying if that Hutterite money goes anywhere other than a thrift store or a Ford dealership, he'll let Dianne wax him a full Brazil.

First one grow back already? Dianne says.

They all have backpacks full of tens, fives and loose change. Hicks's full of broken china, one fork.

Willey stops at a table where a guy is selling comic books and he flip through a couple issues. Jesus, Willey, Hicks says. Put some gasoline in your movements, c'mon. Willey buys a fifty cent Archie comic.

We got the world in our oyster right now, Willey says. Have some fun, man. But the truth is, this whole day feels like a twilight zone. Willey has enough money to fill a bathtub, but can't spend it. His dog is gone, and Rhonda? What the hell is he going to do about Rhonda? Every relationship has its lies, but a thirty-thousand dollar, have-to-travel-the-province, this-might-end-up-with-me-in-jail-for-a-bit lie?

At one place, Willey buys a 1985 Calgary Stampede button. Fifty cents. At the coin lady, a 1959 two-shilling coin. Also fifty cents. The other coin vendor, Willey doesn't trust that vendor. His inner Willey says, that guy looks like he might know everything about every bit of money ever produced, that guy might have his own list of hot-money serial numbers, checking it every night, hoping one day he lands a notorious bill.

Of course, there's also the I-pretty-much-stalked-your-cousin's-fiancée-lie. Oh, and the Guess-how-I-got-that-photo-of-her-in-the-first-place lie. Yeah, I helped steal his wallet.

Willey's not even worried about the whole, You-know-that-coulee-in-your-Aunt-and-Uncle's-land lie. Oh well, at least he's not implicit in some drug manufacturing scheme.

Willey buys a Jackie Collins book, fifty cents, though if he buys four more he can get all five for a dollar. He buy a VHS copy of *Gung Ho* for two dollars and he's not sure who gives the weirder look, Dianne or the guy selling the movie. It's a classic fish out of water story, Willey says.

All you need is a two dollar VCR, Dianne says.

Every once in a while, Willey tries to survey ceilings in the distance, trying to spot any security cameras, but if the Crossroads has them, they're pretty sly about it.

At the vendor that sells dollar-store quality toys and Asian imports, Willey buys a G.I. Jay—that's right, *Jay*—Military truck with missile launch action. Two dollars. At the vendor where the guy sells superhero dolls to men, Willey almost buys a two dollar Hotwheels car, but that guy has too much stock, and all that stock looks expensive. Like the candy woman, the dolls-for-men guy looks like he's making money. Fuck that guy. That guy can keep his two dollar toy car. No illicit twenty dollar bill for you.

From the pin guy Dianne buys a cloisonné chuck wagon lapel pin, which she pins to Willey's hat. At the Guatemala table, Dianne buys a small package of South American trouble dolls. What you do, the vendor says, is at night, lay the dolls out on

your nightstand, and whisper your troubles to them. While you sleep, they carry your troubles away. Hicks throws out the theory that it's more of an exchange system. They carry your trouble away, bring back someone else's. You exchange having money you can't spend for someone's throat cancer. Be careful with those, Hicks says.

Dianne buys a cat salt shaker. Or maybe a pepper shaker but either way it's only one of them. As you hold it upside down it makes a meow sound. That vendor, she says if you can find the second one somewhere, you'd have a great set.

Dianne's got more mismatched drinking glasses than the *Viva Las Gary's* staff room.

You walk into a vendor's room, some guy or woman, they get out of their chair, a mix of hope and annoyance on their face. Hope sits in the eyes, annoyance forms a line across the mouth. When they say, Is there anything you're looking for, anything I can help you find? the last thing you want to say is something that they have, something that might be expensive. Willey walks into this one place, Snubby's—Snubby has a sign, neon-yellow poster board with black felt marker—and so Snubby, he says, Is there anything specific you're after? Willey says, I'm looking for old Betamax movies, *Logan's Run* in particular. Pull that one out of your loot pile, Snubby.

Snubby's shoulders droop, but that's okay. Willey adds, I also collect *Star Wars* fridge-magnets. Do you have anything in a Jake Lloyd Vader? What do you know, right at the front of the store, one dollar.

Does Willey have anything smaller than a twenty? Sorry, Snubby, No. It's this or nothing. Snubby wants that dollar.

The sticker vendor sells thousands of stickers for your car. He specializes in stick figure families in any theme you can dream of to humiliate your car. Zombie themed, Star Wars themed, Flames or Stampede's themed family stickers. Oilers, if you bend that way. The sticker guy, he has stickers for every car you can think of. Need to let everyone know you drive a Cavalier and the Cavalier itself isn't doing the job right? Sticker man, he's got a sticker to go across the top of your windshield that says Cavalier. And if he doesn't, he can make it with the latest in twenty-first century bumper sticker technology. You gotta sticker of a woman on a pole? Hicks says.

Give me five minutes the guy says. I can print one off.

Sorry, Hicks says. Sorry that he can't buy a woman on a pole sticker. Instead, he buys another guy with a briefcase sticker for his car, pretty expensive for three bucks. From another vendor, he buys a pair of RCA audio coupler jacks, two dollars. Hicks, he sees Willey's *Gung Ho* purchase. A classic of mid 80s white-guilt cinema, Hicks says.

Dianne rolls her eyes and Hicks, he keeps going, he says, Seriously. The worst fuck-ups of Japan's automotive industry prove superior to the best of their American counterparts. You can get your crazy-Asian joke fix, while at the same time, you can pretend to acknowledge foreign superiority.

Hicks barks for the attention of a woman behind the next table. She's cut in the shape of a grandmother but looks hard as bone.

It's like *Dances with Wolves*, Hicks says. Or better yet, *Avatar*. Colonization is bad, white people are bad, technology is bad. Western progress is bad. Hicks coughs, trying to get grandma's attention. Men are bad, Hicks says.

Do you know what's bad? Dianne says. Ultimately, the hero is a white guy. Who becomes the red man's hero? The white guy. Who organizes the blue people? A white guy. Who teaches the Japanese to tone it down? Dianne grabs the movie case from Willey's hand. Michael Keaton.

Jesús, Hicks says. I never thought of that. A white-guilt redemption curve-ball. Now I'm not sure if I hate those movies more, or like them better.

Grandma's talking to another vendor, a roomy woman rolling over both sides of her chair. She rants over the prices they have to pay to rent space. She goes on about the building owners raising vendor rent and screwing over the little man.

You have to remember who's buying the tickets, Willey says. *Avatar* was a fucking thrill ride. Dragons and spaceships? Come on.

Not near as good as *Aliens*, Dianne says.

Hicks, louder, says, Hey ladies.

The women both turn. Hicks, that jackal smile, he says, Ladies, I'd like to buy this cup and saucer, if either of you can throw down change on a twenty.

Sure Hon, Grandma says. She takes the cup and saucer and starts wrapping them in old sewing patterns.

I mean it, Dianne says. Ripley taking out dick-headed baddies to save a kid, while in the end, it all comes down to womano-a-womano.

Phallus-headed, Hicks says.

And who saves Ripley in the end? Ripley.

Grandma talks about what a great cup and saucer Hicks picked. Pretty, and if you display it the right way, you won't notice the chips.

Fifty cents, right? Hicks says. He looks at Dianne. Don't ruin another movie for me, he tells her. Besides, Hicks says, my father named me after that movie.

Grandma runs Hicks's twenty under a blue light, looks disappointed when the bill turns out real. She fists her fanny pack and pulls out some bills and change.

Did you know that, Willey? Dianne says. Dwayne here was conceived while his parents were watching *Aliens*. Had he been a girl, he would have been named Ellen. Or maybe Newt.

Haven't seen a twenty like this in a long time, grandma says.

I'm buying this for my wife, Hicks says, elbowing Dianne. All rosy and slightly cracked, just like her.

Irregular shaped and chipped, Dianne says, just like your teeth.

The woman, the grandmother-shaped woman, she hands Hicks three 5 dollar bills and four-fifty in change. Hicks takes one of the fives and reaching across the table, holds it under the woman's blue light. All right, he says, narrowing her eyes at her. This time.

That five dollar bill, it might have been fished out of a urinal once. That five, some guy with a bit of lunch in his teeth and desperate for a toothpick, he might have folded that five into a triangle shape and picked burrito beef out of his teeth with it.

Hicks kisses the five. Sweeter'n fresh panties, he says. He drops the change and the cup and saucer over his shoulder into his backpack.

They're in and out of the Crossroads in an hour, they're up Blackfoot Trail to the Blackfoot Market where they buy cheese and fudge, where Dianne buys pegs for playing cribbage—Dianne flirted the guy down to three dollars—and on their way out, she says, What's cribbage?

The Blackfoot Market is too upscale for their shit, so they think, but they each drop a twenty at a different food vendor to have lunch. They're silent walking back to the car, all thinking the same thing. This is taking longer than they figured it would take.

What about the scene, Hicks says, where Bishop grabs the little girl before she slides into outer space?

Maybe they're not all thinking the same thing, but as Hicks and Dianne go off about gender issues in cinema (You mean Bishop the *artificial* man? Dianne says), Willey gets his phone out to do a bit of quick calculating.

Let's say you want to clean thirty thousand dollars in two days.

$30,000 \div 20 = 1,500$ . That's the number of bills you need to swap out.

$1,500 \text{ twenties to be recycled} \div 2 \text{ (days)} = 750 \text{ transactions a day}$ .

$750 \div 12$  (let's say that's the number of hours a day you'll be peddling your money). What that equals, is fucking impossible. Worse, when you consider there are three of you doing this, and you need to be at a different location each transaction. Let's say you want to clean twenty thousand in three days. God damn. . .

This is going to take forever, Willey says. Hicks leans over to open the door as Dianne gets into the backseat. She's just not as quick at calling shotgun.

I think what we have to do, Dianne says, is wait until garage sale season. April, maybe May?

Hicks, through a bite of his burger, says, Yes, this is taking some time. But taking a break, he adds, might be a positive. He says they're still going to Edmonton. If Edmonton has anything going for it, it's sketchy flea markets. But he says that if they do take a break after Edmonton, it'll give them a chance to see if their work attracts any attention.

Great, Dianne says. The RCMP finds a few of our bills and issues a statement that money from a past crime involving a murder is being used. They release the serial numbers, those numbers get posted on Social Media sites. Like that we're the new D.B. Cooper.

Who the hell is D.B. Cooper? Hicks says.

Then we're looking at holding this shit for another decade, Dianne says.

Look, Willey says. I've been all over the internet looking for any evidence that banks actually track money, that there are hot-lists of serial numbers involved in crime. I've looked up dozens of these serial numbers on money-tracker websites, I've looked at bank policy, at the history of previous armoured car robberies. Nothing comes up regarding serial numbers. All this, all what we're doing, this might be bullshit. We might be worrying about nothing.

Hicks pauses, a French-fry hovering in front of his mouth. He sets the fry back in its package. I'm telling you, again, he says, his finger up and pointing back and

forth from Dianne to Willey. I'm telling you that *if* this money is linked to that heist a decade ago, or any other heist, the RCMP will not stop looking for it. I agree, it's a big *if*, it might even be the queen of *ifs*, but every *if* is a maybe, and a lot of maybes become definitelys. I don't want to take the chance. He backs the car out of their stall and heads for the lot exit.

But would they not have released those numbers back in the day? Willey says. The internet existed then. There'd still be some record of them online. I think we're wasting our time.

Maybe the police didn't issue them publicly so the thieves will spend them and get caught.

Dianne leans forward, thrusting her head into the conversation. I did a little looking too, she says. What I thought was interesting, is the thousand dollar bill. Criminals pay each other off in thousand dollar bills, because a million dollars in thousand dollar bills weighs less than a million dollars in twenties. They don't make those bills anymore, and as they trickle into banks, they get pulled from circulation. But there's something like a billion dollars in unaccounted for thousand dollar bills.

What's your point? Hicks says.

I think this money is like that. It goes from crime to crime, from scam to scam. It becomes the problem of the next group down the line. Only we're too amateur to line up another group.

Hicks turns to Willey. See, he says. That's two to one. So, what we'll do then, is we'll go on road trips when we can. Cranbrook, Creston, Nelson maybe. Okotoks, High River, Nanton. Dianne, you can come with me on Saturday and Sunday, you can

go with Willey on Wednesday, Thursday. We'll stick to the plan until we hear about the RCMP talking about this money. Do this fast, but carefully.

As Hicks talks and drives, as he turns to look at Willey or at Dianne and not out the front, they bounce out of the parking lot right in front of an oncoming police cruiser.

Shit, Dianne says, but really, that's an understatement. The cop turns his lights on, and blasts Hicks with the siren.

Hicks pulls the car over to the curb. Dianne's head snapping back and forth from Hicks to the police car. Shit, she says. Shit.

Relax, Hicks says. I ran a stop-sign. I'm registered, I'm insured, my licence is valid. I'm going to get a ticket, I'm going to thank him for it, and we're going to move on. Just stay calm.

Dwayne, Dianne says from the back seat, her voice small even from that short distance. She says, Please tell me you emptied the trunk sometime in the past little while. Tell me you don't have Lance's chemicals back there.

Hicks turns away from her, rests his head on the steering wheel.

No, Dianne says. No, Dwayne.

I can take off, Hicks says. I can slam the gas and take off and hope the cop doesn't follow.

What exactly do you have in the trunk, Willey says. Can we explain it away?

We can explain the case of brake fluid, the case of Draino, Hicks says. But that in combination with battery acid, the rubbing alcohol, the lighter fluid, the paint thinner, the Freon?

Jesus, Dianne says.

The ammonia, the hydrochloride, the iodine, the red phosphorus, the ether and the lye.

All right, stop.

There's also enough ephedrine packed in the trunk to decongest an entire zoo.

I'm going to be sick, Dianne says.

I can step on the gas right now, Hicks says, and—

And what, Hicks?

And we head to, what's the closet mall, Chinook Centre? We head to Chinook Centre and drive this thing right through the doors, get out, disappear in the crowd. Then I call the car in stolen, and we all hop the next blimp to Venus. Fuck, Hicks says.

The officer approaches the car. Fifteen steps that feel like a hundred. He approaches the car as Hicks rolls the window down. Hicks smiles politely as the cop asks if Hicks knows what he did, if he knows why he was pulled over. Hicks shrugs. The cop says, You ran a stop sign, son, and Dianne, God bless her, says, I told you so.

Officer Reddy (a nametag now burned into all of their memories) stares. Maybe he stares. With those Terminator style sunglasses, he can be looking anywhere inside the car. The three, fifty-pound backpack of coins and doilies on the floor behind Willey's seat. Or maybe he's looking at the brand new Samsonite case in the back next to Dianne. Reddy looks like he's tonguing some shit out of his mouth. He says. You're not paying attention to your driving, son.

I'm sorry, officer, Hicks says. He thumbs toward the back seat. We were just having an argument. Me and her.

And what were you arguing about? What was so important that you failed to stop at a traffic-control device, failed to check both directions for oncoming traffic, and almost struck an on-duty police cruiser?

Dianne back there insists that the movie *Aliens*, though it never makes a list of great feminist movies, is in fact, the greatest feminine movie, while I insist that a woman using masculine solutions, aka guns, is not necessarily a feminist victory.

I never said it was the greatest, Dianne says, just that its message is skillfully presented without having to beat people about the head, a la *Avatar*.

Enough about *Avatar* Hicks says, spinning around. They're different messages that need to be presented in different ways, that—

All right, Reddy says. He leans down further to peer in at Willey, his sunglasses curving a reflection of Hicks's face. In the passenger seat, Reddy says. What's your take on this conversation?

I have no take, Willey says. He leans forward, turns to look Officer Reddy square in the glasses. Other than being thankful for the temporary interruption. These two have been barking over this all day.

Reddy asks Hicks for his paperwork, and before walking back to his car, insists that the two try to have their differences settled before he comes back.

All that talk about care and attention to detail, Dianne says. Dwayne, you idiot.

I know, Hicks says. He rubs his temples, but to give him credit, he rubs his temples like a man about to get a ticket, not like a man about to get thrown to the ground and arrested. I know, he says again.

Hicks tells Dianne and Willey to keep their eyes open for other cop cars, and for the police helicopter. I can't imagine they're on to us already, he says, but who knows, maybe we gave a bill to the wrong person at a garage sale, some freak collector on the look-out for hot-list bills, hard all his life at the thought of making that phone call to the police.

Or maybe you're just getting a fine for being a dumbass, Dianne says.

Come on, Hicks says. We need to consider every possibility. We can't be too careful.

Too careful, such as taking your meth chemicals out of the car you plan on laundering money in?

Yeah, that kind of too careful, Hicks says.

They go back and forth, a conversation Willey doesn't need to be party to. He sends Rhonda a text message, tells her that he thinks he might be falling in love with her. Sure, a text message is a crappy way to say that, but he couldn't wait. An image of his mother pops into his head. Sitting at the table, her housecoat. Willey pushes in the cigarette lighter to see if that too has started working. He reaches into his backpack to start rolling coins.

Qu'est-ce fuck, Willey? Hicks says.

I'll be natural in my own way, thanks.

Reddy sits in his car for a solid five minutes. Or maybe two. Or twenty. Hicks tells Willey to put down the rollers, God dammit, and watch for other cops and think of a place where they can easily slip into a crowd. I know there's that Walmart down the hill, he says. And Ikea, but is there a better alternative?

I don't know, Dianne says. We might hurt some kids doing something like that.

Do you have any other ideas?

Maybe we should hide this case with all the money in it?

No, Officer Reddy's already seen the case, if we hide it now, he'll get interested in it.

The cigarette lighter pops out.

He's getting out of his car, Willey says.

No other cruisers have pulled up, boxed them in. No helicopter. He's not drawing a gun, or anything, Hicks says.

Reddy takes those long fifteen steps, a lean, slow stride to the car. Hicks's car, it might not stand out in Southview, it might not stand out right there by the Blackfoot Market, but that glossy Samsonite case in the back? Reddy leans close to the window.

So, Reddy says. What's the greatest feminist movie?

Feminist action-movie, Dianne says.

Hicks shrugs, he says. Apparently *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* is pretty good. He turns to face Dianne, says, Though you can only present issues from the position of victim for so long before the message gets stale.

So, stop victimizing then.

Reddy coughs loudly, says, You have an issue with your trunk, son?

Rattles like a marble in a paint-can, Hicks says. Drives me nuts.

Reddy shakes his head, stands quiet for what feels like twenty seconds. He nods toward the back seat. Nice case, he says. That new?

Gift from my father, Hicks says.

Yeah, Dianne says. A kind of, thanks-for-moving-out present. Now he gets to sleep at my place. On the couch.

You're the one dating it, Hicks says.

Pay attention to the road, Reddy says, and he hands Hicks a 287 dollar ticket, gives him the spiel about how to pay your ticket, where to pay your ticket, what will happen if you don't pay your ticket.

Thank you, sir. Sorry, sir. Have a nice day, sir.

After Reddy pulls away, Dianne lets out a sigh. Christ, she says. I can sure use a washroom.

I think the car's name is Red, Hicks says. He turns back into the parking lot. He too can use the can.

Willey reaches under the seat for the loonie rollers. His phone buzzes, Rhonda telling him that she might be falling in love too. Heart heart heart. If you want, Willey types, you can come over to my place, late, say 8:00, and after you meet my mother, we can tell each other how we're falling in love. X heart X heart.

Rhonda tells Willey, she'll see him at eight.

## Afterword

Calgary's running joke of the late 70s – early 80s boom period, repeated in 2008<sup>1</sup> declared the official bird of the city the construction crane, *cranus erectus*. In 2013 the skyline that one of my two central characters, Dwayne Hicks, observes while walking out the back entrance of a semi-imaginary casino is lit in part by the red flashing lights that warn of Calgary's insatiable, vertical growth.

The Calgary of *A Collection of Borrowed Exaggerations* is a location replete with opportunity. For Dwayne Hicks, each of the million jewelled lights represents another pocket to pick, another buyer in want of drugs, or another owner of a home in need of renovation. For Willey Hase, the city and its growth represent opportunity slipping away. Willey calculates that for every 5% he saves, the housing market rises 7%. In fact, between August 2013 and August 2014, the average house price in Calgary rose by 13.6%<sup>2</sup>. Calgary's rapid growth is indicative of its position as a global city, and Canada as an urbanized nation. As such, Calgary makes an excellent stage for a novel that looks at the effects that Canadian urbanization and growth have on individuals who are not entirely masters of their fates.

Looking at the state of Canadian literature at the end of the twentieth century, Stephen Henighan's *When Words Deny the World: The Reshaping of*

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<sup>1</sup> DustinRJay, "Calgary's Official Bird the Tower Crane Returns – Highly Cyclical Migration Pattern." *Calgary Real Estate Market Blog*. 10 Mar 2008. Web. 16 Oct 2014.  
<<https://calgaryrealestatemarketblog.wordpress.com/2008/03/10/calgarys-official-bird-the-tower-crane-returns-highly-cyclical-migration-pattern/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Marr, Garry. "Outside of Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary, Canada's housing market is 'mediocre at best.'" *The Financial Post*. 15 Sep 2014. Web. 16 Oct 2014.  
<<http://business.financialpost.com/2014/09/15/canada-housing-market/>>.

*Canadian Writing* (2002) suggests that Canadian writing faces a “crucial obstacle” in sustaining “a significant novelistic tradition in Canada” because of an “inability to pull our own society into focus.” The novels of the 90s, Henighan asserts, “are self-consciously partial and limited in scope” (207). Henighan blames the influence of globalization and Free Trade on Canadian writers who see their culture as “more remote” and “more difficult to evoke” than a dominant American counterpart (207-8). Additionally, a “debilitation of the urban novel” sponsored by “antiquated, highly romanticized” depictions of rural Canada has seen to it that Canadian literature has “lost touch with . . . *contemporary* Canadian experience” (208, italics Henighan’s). Combine this with Henighan’s third assertion, the “assimilation [of] prohibitions against . . . creating morally dubious characters from disadvantaged or minority backgrounds . . . into our literary unconscious” (209), and it would seem that capturing a distinct genre of urban literature in Canada is near impossible. Recent Canadian novels, including Timothy Taylor’s *Stanley Park* (published one year prior to Henighan’s criticism), Todd Babiak’s *The Garneau Block* (2006), and Rawi Hage’s *Cockroach*, (2008), have however taken these challenges to task.

*Stanley Park* chronicles the struggle of Chef Jeremy Papier as he attempts to operate a restaurant offering menus and ingredients local to urban Vancouver. The source of Papier’s struggle should make Henighan happy, as the chain of Inferno Cafes, described by Taylor as “brutally efficient, market-researched repudiation of the local” (255) represent globalization in restaurant form. Although Taylor’s novel might succumb to simplifying if not romanticising homelessness, he does not shy away from depicting Vancouver’s urbanity:

The beachhead of condo development to the southwest had stalled in its advance this direction. Buildings had been torn down and not replaced. The area stopped being part of any neighbourhood at all. A quilt of denuded lots collecting rainwater, a grid of vainly hopeful streets. A place stranded between other places. (419)

Taylor's portrayal in this passage may not be distinctly Canadian, may not immediately identify Vancouver as the area under scrutiny, but the military imagery in terms of growth—in this case, halted growth—is unquestionably urban contemporary. Citizens of large cities are familiar with the connection of local growth to global economics. Old buildings come down during times of financial excess, but before development can continue, the investments dry up and lots sit empty save for puddles.

Another contemporary urban novel, Babiak's *The Garneau Block*, looks closely at Edmonton, often focusing on the city's historical warts. Edmonton's urbanization is shown through reference to headline-inducing murders, crimes indicative of a large, globalized city. "[T]he thirteen-year-old girl found dead on the golf course, the Somali cab driver stabbed and stuffed into his own trunk, the pregnant wife beaten to death and abandoned in a ditch" (60-61). That these headlines were pulled from real-world Edmonton, that they are not mythologized as are the Babes in the Woods murders featured in *Stanley Park*, suggests that Babiak is writing with a local audience in mind. Humorously bitter comparisons between Edmonton and Calgary support this idea, as does the rally cry that "Edmonton is a real city as soon as we, as Edmontonians, believe it is real" (173). This is a reminder

that although the city has become large and urban, it is still in the hands of those who live there, and functions as a fundamentally local space.

Babiak acknowledges Henighan's third assertion, the mistreatment of minorities in Canadian literature as taboo, when he writes, "First Nations peoples were not on the list of approved subjects for mockery" (24). Rawi Hage's *Cockroach*, on the other hand, looks without much flattery to the vulnerable minorities of Montréal's immigrant community. A witness to war and violence in the Middle East, the titular character possesses the necessary moral balance to generate sympathy despite his thieving. He steals from the wealthy, he steals from a sham professor, and he breaks into the apartment of his therapist, her only crime a severe case of naiveté. Due to his background (and his victim's excess of wealth or lack of personality) we forgive him. His culturally produced sexism, however, presents challenges to the sensitive reader while allowing for a touch of realistic dirt.

In one of the novel's contingent moments, the Cockroach invites his boss's high-school-aged daughter to his apartment, where he limits his seduction to watching her out the corner of his eye as she masturbates. He "imagine[s] . . . her mind projecting on the wall images of boys and young hairless singers" (180). The blank wall becomes a site where the Cockroach escapes the realities of the Montréal in which he lives. His apartment, depicted at times as cold and empty, at other times filled with the residue of living—dirty dishes, dirty socks—echoes a Montréal that also varies in description, white, cold and desolate one moment, noisy, bustling, and chaotic the next. It is a city constantly reminding the Cockroach that he is yet another poor immigrant.

Although Hage's novel directly addresses Henighan's complaint regarding political correctness, it likely would not exist in published form if Hage were not of Middle Eastern descent. At its core, however, *Cockroach* presents Montréal as an urban space, not merely a location through which the Cockroach functions but a place essential to the Cockroach's evolution. So too does *Stanley Park* implicate Vancouver in the creation of the character of Papier, who draws inspiration not from his surroundings as much as the changes he witnesses to his surroundings. The potential destruction of the fictional street in *The Garneau Block* allows Babiak's characters to come together, to see each other, their city, and themselves differently. Like these three texts, *Borrowed Exaggerations* examines Calgary not as a setting, not as a subject, but as a force that acts upon its inhabitants. The novel looks at these characters as they are constructed by a sprawling, wealthy, globalized twenty-first century Canadian city.

The process of identity construction involving space occurs in what Edward Soja describes as "thirdspace" an esoteric area where "subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history" (56-7) merge together to influence viewers' inner perceptions of a given place, and by extension, themselves.

Soja's firstspace is compartmentalized space, and can be likened to a cartographic representation. The details of a map, the denotations of specific places, a school, or a shopping mall, are instances of firstspace. Secondspace is the mental

concept of firstspace created in conjunction with personal and cultural knowledge of the space's social and physical attributes. We see a shopping mall on a map, and we understand this space as a place where goods are bought and sold, where we can eat at a restaurant or a food court, and where we can watch people come and go. Our familiarity with the map and the location of the mall also influences our perception, as does the architectural style of the mall itself. What area of the city is the mall located? Does the map indicate surrounding industrial or residential land-use designations? A map may indicate two malls, but both trigger separate secondspace responses. Surrounding affluence leads us to imagine one mall containing expensive retail outlets; economical architecture indicates low-priced retailers and determines our decision to visit this mall instead.

In thirdspace we align ourselves with the expectations each mall delivers and make decisions on how we should look and behave if we were to step inside. We envision ourselves comfortable in our running shoes and hoodies in an older, well-worn mall. We see ourselves in high-heeled shoes and pantyhose in the newer, gleaming alternative. We populate each mall with the type of person we expect to meet, we imagine their attitudes toward us, we try to determine and evaluate our potential responses.

This phenomenon is alluded to early in the novel with my chief protagonist Willey's simple complaint about the lighting in Scotia Centre. He laments the loss of his favourite restaurant. He makes his way through the series of interconnected downtown malls, unable to align himself with how he feels he should appear and act. Is he dressed correctly? Does he look like he belongs in these spaces? The malls'

interiors serve to highlight his self-awareness. To Willey, TD Square represents upscale shopping for people who are put together as if for a display, while the Core, full of chrome and glass, provides too much opportunity for self-reflection, and the knowledge that those around him are aware of his appearance. Certain stores remind Willey of his financial limitations, others his youth. As we learn through his response to seeing himself in a photograph from his childhood, he is reminded of how far he has come without accomplishing any of his life's goals.

The nausea Willey feels is what Celeste Olalquiaga terms "psychasthenia . . . the disturbance in the relation between self and surrounding territory . . . a state in which the space defined by the coordinates of the organism's own body is confused with represented space" (1-2). In short, standing in the middle of the Core, Willey is unable to balance the attitude, behaviour and appearance he feels the space commands; his ability to satisfy those requirements incites his discomfort.

When the thrift store lighting in the Scotia Centre food court is replaced with undulating coloured lights, Willey fears the gentrification that would see him lose a comfortable place. As for Dwayne Hicks, the novel's narrator refers to him as a lion-fish alone in an aquarium, but Hicks is more chameleonic in the spaces he occupies. Like the late-night Calgary skyline, every place for Hicks is a place of opportunity. When dealing drugs, his position near the temporary work agency is based on a secondspace response to the location. Hicks assumes a certain type of clientele to be there, and expects them to be interested in what he sells. His alternate location at the bench near the mall entrance involves a decision based more in Soja's concept of thirdspace. Hicks feels that these particular clients assume a certain type of

transaction. Hicks is able to read his clients and tailor his locations of business to suit their expectations. A meeting on a bench with business in a nearby washroom for one type of client. A shifty transfer of money in exchange for a hacky sack loaded with narcotics (a trade that occurs in an open, public space) for another type of client.

Willey responds with psychasthenic anxiety to uncomfortable spaces, while Hicks responds to his thirdspace by establishing immediate ownership over the spaces he enters. He takes over the Tewilliger refrigerator, he tricks Sebastian out of the best seat in the Tewilliger house. His brash attitude toward the other diners in *The Coquette's Fetish* exemplifies his challenge to every space he occupies, as does his mockery of Lance Templeton in the middle of Templeton's territory, Century Park.

Interestingly, Hicks's attitude mirrors the attitude of Calgary itself when facing national or international pressures. Rather than tone down the western imagery in the face of political incorrectness, Calgary markets its history as a celebration. This celebration acts to define Calgary, to set it apart from everywhere else. Calgary, Will Ferguson tells us, "may pander to tourists by promoting a concocted image of itself as a Cowtown caricature, but Calgary does not live in the past" (Ferguson, np). Instead, Calgary's search for comfort in its global space involves mythologizing and marketing itself in terms of history. Hicks's response to his thirdspace is a similar concoction. He markets himself via his clothing. His refusal to obtain a more reliable automobile caricatures parenthood.

Regardless of his own comfort and ability to adapt to the spaces he uses, Hicks, like Calgary, becomes the 'other' through which a space is often defined. Timothy Cresswell notes that "the creation of place by necessity involves the definition of what lies outside [while] the 'outside' plays a crucial role in the definition of the 'inside'" (102). A high-end store is not explicitly designed to limit the number of potential clients, but certain cues—the physical appearance of the space, the clothing style of staff and clients—trigger psychasthenic responses. A store is high-end or exclusive not only because of its expensive design, its rich merchandises, or its stylish staff and clientele, but also because it is not designed with economical material finishes (unless done ironically). It does not offer inexpensive products and it does not cater to lower economic classes. In similar fashion, Calgary becomes the 'other' because it is seen to embrace a past that is presently uncomfortable to many outside the city.

When Willey enters The Coquette's Fetish he crosses a line and commits what Cresswell refers to as a transgression, an event that occurs "when something or someone has been judged to be 'out-of-place'" (103). Although Cresswell notes, "the action is seen as transgression by someone who is disturbed by it" (103), the psychasthenic effect on the transgressor is as important as the response of the transgressed-upon when determining transgression. Willey's unease in the restaurant exists within his own head. The queasiness he develops in the restaurant (as well as at the Core, and in the Tewilliger and Garbutt residences) pales in comparison to his fear of witnessing, or imagining, the beginning of gentrification in Dover, and the possibility of becoming an outsider in his own neighbourhood.

As Willey tours Calgary, he keys on specific details through which he compares the 'truth' of his neighbourhood with the 'falsity' of others. The beach in Auburn Bay is impossible without constant maintenance and truckloads of sand. The knight of Castle Keep is, to Willey, homage to a past that never existed. The Kincora watch tower, a clever disguise for cellular communications infrastructure, is a disguise none-the-less, and one borrowed from a foreign architectural style. These spaces, although tactile, visual, present and real, remain inauthentic. They are evidence of what Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) termed the precession of simulacra.

Baudrillard's precession describes the existence of cultural signs and symbols that refer to a perceived yet constructed reality from which we form unofficial guidelines to live our lives. The first stage of this precession describes faithful copies of originals, or the concept that a sign stands in for an identifiable reality: a solid roof signifies shelter. The second level of Baudrillard's precession enters play when the sign disguises and modifies the reality it alleges to represent: home as a signifier of happiness.

The third stage of the precession occurs when simulacra claim to have legitimate sources, but are in fact copies without originals. Through associations to its name, the area on a map of Calgary labeled Tuscany promises to emulate a certain reality, but the difference between the Tuscany of Italy (the real) and the Tuscany of northwest Calgary (the copy) is so great, the copy and referent have no connection.

In the fourth level of precession, signs refer only to other signs. The goods we own and the activities we pursue signify the fulfillment of voids in our lives that never existed in the first place. Those that recognize the lapse between fulfillment and the necessitation for fulfillment (or lack thereof), but cannot balance this realisation against the cultural pressure to 'fit in' begin to feel the full effects of psychasthenia.

Simulacra are present in all three aspects of Soja's triad of spatiality. Maps of firstspace reveal a human order imposed over an irregular landscape. Tuscany follows, more or less, the contour lines of the Bow River valley; a creek is allowed passage through the neighbourhood, yet the near-perfect circle drives and the straight line main intersections form a crosshair indifferent to the formations of the land, while the levelled lots necessary for development replace uneven prairie. More specifically, the name of the neighbourhood carries a steamer-trunk of signification. Old-world charm, old-world architecture, year-long sun, and wine poured from local grapes, are all features impossible to find in the area the map alludes to.

Willey begins to witness the simulacra of secondspace when he recognizes Tuscany as a place of habitation (as opposed to industry), and clues trigger his instincts regarding the type of community he expects to experience. Compare the curving, circular layout of Tuscany to the grid of Willey's beloved Dover. Tuscany's proximity to the city boundary, and its location in a quadrant of the city noted for wealth impinge on Willey's forming sense of secondspace. On an intimate level, the size of the residences, their material construction, and the degree of landscaping all assist in forming within Willey the behaviours that he feels would be expected of

him should he come to inhabit this space. In terms of simulacra, the presence of such details as artificial gable-vents, artificial beams, engaged columns, the use of cultured as opposed to real stone, and the prevalence of other architectural elements that function now as unnecessary aesthetic detail all create a space of hyperreality. Tuscany, as a whole, aligns with Baudrillard's fourth order of simulacra, where simulation appears prior to the reality it alleges to replace. The architecture of the neighbourhood—the exterior finishes, the neighbourhood's layout—allege to simulate an Italian Tuscany that does not now, and has never existed.

The simulacra of thirdspace then, are the manufactured attitudes and behaviours generated from one's internal response to a space. From Willey's perspective, residents of this neighbourhood must fall into a certain economic class, must own a vehicle from a certain range of options, present a certain style of clothing, walk the right breed of dog, and otherwise engage in activities that fit within the imagined rules and laws of that neighbourhood. These are not by any means hard and fast rules, nor do all residents change or disguise their behaviour in order to comply with the neighbourhood's aesthetic. Some do, however, and they become fourth level simulacrous people, trying to fill a lifestyle that was never empty, but needs fulfilling according to pressures brought about by advertising, media, or rules as innocuous as community-based landscaping standards. Hicks philosophizes that you can judge a neighbourhood by the couch content of its alleys, the area where the assumed order and propriety of a neighbourhood is allowed slippage. The newer parts of Tuscany, as with many new neighbourhoods, have no

alleys. If the gentrification Willey imagines were to occur in his neighbourhood, he fears he would have no place to be himself. Worse, because of the economic gap between Willey's earning potential and the housing market, if he wants to own a home in his own neighbourhood, he must act quickly.

Willey's quest in the novel is, on a material level, a fast-track to an income stream that would allow him to purchase a house of his own. The threats of his simulacra-inspired, thirdspace-generated psychasthenia are not the only dangers he faces. In Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard insists that "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (5) and the first home that shelters us becomes a model for the spaces we come to inhabit later in our lives. Bachelard provides a rather romanticised version of a house, complete with garret, basement, and a verticality that many homes today, particularly apartments and condominiums, do not share. "In the attic" Bachelard writes, "the day's experiences can always efface the fears of night. In the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night. . ." (19). The garret becomes a seat of rational intellect, the basement an irrational zone where fears hold greater weight.

Willey's shut-in mother and her stacks of newspaper highlight the broken connection Willey has with his current home. If we apply Bachelard's theory to Willey's building as a whole, the garret becomes Willey's apartment, and the basement the entire city. The seat of Willey's rationality is permanently haunted by his mother, while his irrational fears form in the labyrinths of Calgary's streets, shopping malls, and +15 system.

These irrational fears—the fear of having to alter or disguise his identity in a city that has moved past him—are what push Willey into becoming a criminal. But what kind of criminals does this process create within the novel? Are these characters simple criminals, or are they more rogue-like, responding to their place in the world as best they can, deserving a sympathetic audience similar to that of *Cockroach*? In “Discursive Parameters of the Picaresque,” Marina Brownlee begins to determine the “essential feature, configuration, or environment that determines the presence of a picaresque. . .” by introducing four traditional model texts or authors for the “protopicaresque” text *Lazarillo de Tormes*, often considered a precursor to the picaresque genre (27). Works by the authors Lucien and Apuleius make up the first two models, *Libro de buen amor* by Juan Ruiz is the fourth. It is Brownlee’s third model that is most interesting in regards to *Borrowed Exaggerations*. In discussing Christoffel von Grimmelshausen’s *Simplicius Simplicissimus*, Brownlee quotes Ulrich Wicks<sup>3</sup> who writes “[i]s not the essential pattern [of the picaresque] a quest for ‘home’ . . . ?” (28). As Willey’s quest for a comfortable home of his own develops through the novel, he and Hicks both take on, employ, or reveal picaresque characteristics.

In *A Handbook to Literature*, William Harmon lists seven specific features of picaresque fiction, of which Willey and Hicks as characters embody many. The connection between the narrator and Willey pushes the novel toward picaresque autobiography, despite the novel’s lack of first person perspective. Willey and Hicks can both be considered low characters, as Hicks’s ability to avoid paid labour edges

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<sup>3</sup> Brownlee sources the quote to Wicks’s “The Romance of the Picaresque.” *Genre* 11 (1978): 40.

him toward the traditional picaresque, while Willey's employment matches Harmon's modern description of "menial" labour (416). The novel matches Harmon's third condition, that picaresque novels offer a series of loosely interconnected episodes, told in a plain, realistic manner. Regarding Harmon's inclusion of social satire on the list of traits, *Borrowed Exaggerations* includes satiric elements in keeping with the characters' personalities and commentary about their surroundings. Still, satire is not the chief goal of this novel.

Willey and Hicks show character development as the novel progresses. Both recognize their state in the world and attempt to alter the trajectory of their lives, but fundamentally, both remain picaros. However, the final trait on Harmon's list—that picaresque heroes stop short of stepping into explicit criminality—is not met. Harmon insists that the line between "crime and petty rascality is often hazy, but . . . the picaro always manages to draw it" (417). Willey and Hicks cannot escape their criminal proclivities, but for picaro figures in the twenty-first century, allowances have to be made.

*Borrowed Exaggerations* roughly corresponds with Harmon's traits of the modern picaresque novel, but a deeper look into the picaresque genre by Ulrich Wicks solidifies the link. "The essential picaresque setting" Wicks writes, "is that of an unheroic protagonist, worse than we, caught up in a chaotic world, worse than ours, in which he is on an eternal journey of encounters that allow him to be alternately both victim of that world and its exploiter" (54). Willey and Hicks are, if anything, exploiters and victims, at the hands of each other as much as the world around them. They follow a pattern Wicks describes as the "Sisyphus rhythm" (55)

where they must plan further to make up for the unintended consequences of their successes. Although Hicks wins ten hands of blackjack in a row, his winnings fall far short of his original plan, and must be put toward repairing the car he's responsible for. They remove the *Albertosaur* from the ground, but exchange it for money that they feel is useless to them because it will take so long to launder it. Every win comes with a loss.

Willey and Hicks each fit the description Wicks gives of the picaro, a "pragmatic, unprincipled, resilient, solitary figure who just manages to survive in his chaotic landscape, but who, in the ups and downs, can also put that world very much on the defensive" (60). Though Willey and Hicks comprise a pair, they are solitary of mind. Willey particularly has no qualms about bending his principles of friendship in order to preserve his principles of finance. Of the two, Hicks appears the least sympathetic, yet the most principled. A seller of drugs, Hicks refuses to push them on people, choosing instead to sit and wait for customers to approach him. As Willey notes, Hicks will often refuse to sell to the poorer kids asking for harsh drugs. It is Hicks who, after winning his ten blackjack hands, splits the winnings evenly with Willey.

The Calgary of the novel does not reject Willey; it is Willey's fear and imagination that makes him see himself as an outsider deserving of rejection. He attempts to enter a more fulfilling life by taking better care of himself, by engaging in a relationship with a woman who has emerged from the world that allegedly desires his exclusion. Willey's self-exclusion in this sense comes with his acceptance of Rhonda into his life, his admission that he loves her, that he will take a chance and

bring her into his version of Calgary. In this brief, anticlimactic moment, Willey turns the tables on what he feels the world has brought to him, his psychasthenia. He becomes the ultimate trespasser, engaging in a relationship with a woman who exists outside his personal comfort zone, and does so in spite of his own internal misgivings.

Fiction relies on successfully envisioned characters with certain appeal, and transgressors, whether they be physical or social, form a good many of our literature's protagonists. Recent novels in Canada have looked at criminal transgressors—the outright thief, the hustler or scammer—in a similar light to *Borrowed Exaggerations*. Two such novels are Patrick deWitt's *Ablutions: Notes for a Novel* (which also uses space as a determining factor in the protagonist's development) and Billie Livingston's *One Good Hustle*. Not only do they explore crime and the nature of the scammer, both employ different tactics in order to 'pull one over' on the reader.

DeWitt's subtitle, *Notes for a Novel*, suggests a switch in authorship, that the unnamed narrator has taken a first person story of his own and transferred it, along with the crimes committed, to the reader. DeWitt gambles on the second person perspective to strengthen reader complicity in the theft of his boss's money, and refuses to abandon that perspective when the narrative 'you' engages in further and more abhorrent behaviour. The second person pulls us into the novel, the acts committed within push us away, and the emotional back and forth results in an interesting read.

In *Hustle*, the fixation Sammie feels about her father, her distrust of being touched, particularly by men, and her father's distance and reluctance to talk to her, suggest that the overall scam in this story, the one good hustle of the title, is played on the reader. We dig through the novel looking for the details that will reveal and predict the secret transgression that has occurred, but Sammie, the consummate hustler, never reveals the truth to us.

In similar fashion, the narrator of *Borrowed Exaggerations* also holds a secret. The change in narrative tone during the Hicks and Dianne segments of chapter 6, *A. Sarcophagus*, and the subtle insertion of matching details from scene to scene demand closer examination. While driving through Forest Lawn Willey sees an exterminator's retail store next to a bridal shop, and in the following scene Hicks mentions the need for an exterminator, Dianne a bridal veil to repel insects. Similar overlapping details appear throughout this chapter, hinting at a link between Willey's thoughts and the events in the Red Deer River valley. Willey, at the beginning of chapter 7, ponders how one would account for a large sum of money. The answer, the mixing of a few chemicals in the basement of a rented house in Bridlewood in order to manufacture drugs, follows immediately. The link between Hicks's habit of disguising his drugs within hacky sacks, the presence of a hacky sack at the restaurant where Hicks allegedly has a stranger pay for the trio's dinner, and the stranger Bratukhin's later interruption of Willey's date with Rhonda in order to find Hicks supports the presence of a secret that the novel, and that Willey, refuses to elaborate. The extraction of the *Albertosaurus* in chapter 6 might be read as a

fabrication, a dream that emerges from Willey's Baudrillardian basement in order to hide the reality of his crime.

Willey moves from a more-or-less picaresque figure to an outright criminal, Hicks moves from a criminal to a straight man, but can't deny his nature and gives in to Willey's plan. The change that truly affects Willey, that turns his plan into a nightmare, that results in his fantasy solution to account for their money, is Dianne's involvement with Hicks in crime. For that is Dianne's response to the space around her. Space is made up of people as much as walls or trees. Willey wants to fit into the locations of his life, Hicks seamlessly matches himself to the spaces he occupies, while Dianne wants simply to be with the people she loves. She no longer wants to be cast in the role of victim, the target of Hicks's tricks and lies. The tragedy of *Borrowed Exaggerations*, if there is one, is that when Hicks is ready to work, to save money, to impress Dianne with responsibility, she gives in to his former life instead and becomes his accomplice. Recognizing Dianne's change and unable to cope with his role in her transformation, Willey turns to daydreaming, to his imagination (and a copy of *Facies Relationships and Paleoenvironments of a Late Cretaceous Tide-Dominated Delta*) to create a version of history that more comfortably accounts for their probably criminally obtained money.

*Borrowed Exaggerations* is by no means an attempt to prove that Baudrillard's precession of simulacra infects Soja's thirdspace to result in Olalquiagan psychasthenia and subsequently a life of crime. Through small references to his father, Hicks is revealed to have an upbringing, if not a genetic predisposition, conducive to hustling. Willey is not far behind in terms of

criminality. The novel looks at the influence that a space such as Calgary has on certain individuals, much like the novels of Taylor, Hage, and Babiak look at the social-constructing aspects of Vancouver, Montréal and Edmonton respectively. It plays with traits of the picaresque genre in order to intersect with novels such as *Ablutions* and *One Good Hustle*, which present crime as a means of generating reader sympathy while simultaneously arousing revulsion in those same readers. Finally, *Borrowed Exaggerations* adds another novel to Stephen Henighan's call for a literature that responds to a globalized Canada, while examining a fundamentally Canadian space, a space that historian Harry Sanders described to Will Ferguson as a destination where "people come . . . to remake themselves [and where] they become someone else" (Ferguson, np). As the cranes of Calgary continue to re-create the city, so too does the city re-create the people that call it home.

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