

Silence

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ABSTRACT

25-year-old Michael Healey has been sober for several years. He tries to stay away from drugs and alcohol, despite bouncing in a St. John's nightclub. He struggles to stay afloat financially despite the lack of work, resorting to anything that pays. He's living a life he thinks he's supposed to live— in public, anyway. And still, it's a precarious juggling act. One day, Michael stumbles onto an old family secret: back in 1949, his great-grandfather, Harlan Hynes, was arrested for killing his great-grandmother, Allison. What he discovers about the past sends him on a path towards either self-discovery or potential self-destruction. An emotional, disturbing journey takes him from the clubs on George Street to the memories he left back home in Grand Falls-Windsor, as he seeks to understand the forces that shaped his life. In the process, Michael digs up other secrets he's hidden even from himself. Now he just has to survive them. Here is a study of the ramifications of child sexual abuse, toxic masculinity, particularly as it touches down in outport Newfoundland, and ultimately how harrowing recovery might be.

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Chapter 1

1949

Snow fell in the middle of June, the previous winter clinging to the land's bones. A cold spell came in off the Northern Atlantic. People all across Comfort Cove were hoping it wouldn't terrorise the crops on the farms. Couples of all ages scurried outside in the morning when they saw frost in the corners of their windows, desperately shaking off trees and vegetables so the few inches of snow didn't do any more damage than it had already.

Harlan watched Allison out at their vegetable garden. She was pulling burlap over the crab apple tree and the berry brushes so they wouldn't be ravaged in the short term chill. He saw her struggling and knew she didn't expect him to help. He would only stay there on the porch sulking, watching her work and believing he was no longer of any use. She stopped asking for any help months ago. She knew he resented her for still having both eyes, she also knew how much he hated himself for feeling that way. She heard him in the night, out in the shed crying to himself, weeping with nobody but her and the horse to hear.

Harlan thought about when he used to come home from the saw mill— hair brittle, skin caked with sweat and sawdust— and Allison would undress him, washing his face, his neck. One of her hands would wet his skin and rinse it off while the other soaped him. He remembers coming in the door to the smell of fresh baked bread. He watched the slabs of butter melting over top of each loaf, slowly settling into the dough and giving off a greasy glisten. Allison always put the kettle on, first thing— the sound of a spoon

rattling around the rim of a mug made him feel at home, like his wife was playing a piece of music only for him.

Harlan watched Allison stand up from crouching in the garden. Her back and knees straightened in rigid movements. He watched the toll he took on her, what his injury had done to her over the past year. It was as if she had aged a decade in the span of twelve months. He couldn't recall the last time she baked any bread herself, always getting a fresh loaf from the neighbours or somebody around town. There were no more baths, at least not like the ones he took after work, not like the ones back then that used to end with the two of them in bed or on the couch making love. He made the tea for Allison once she got home from work most days.

And the kids— he barely remembered their names on the best of days, let alone look after them. Allison had a girl, Sandra Hann, come down from town during the weekdays to look after the younger ones while the older few were at school. Harlan knew she was there to look after him, too. She never said so, and neither did his wife. But he knew. It was clear in the way Sandra watched him, in the way she rushed to make his food or tea or the bed when she noticed him about to try and do it on his own.

He knew Sandra was there mostly for him. The kids could have easily gone up to their aunt and uncle's place during the day instead of Allison paying somebody. It was because of the months following the accident. Harlan couldn't adjust to life with a single eye. He spent the first days moaning from the pains— sharp ones, sometimes phantoms that ached even as it felt like the eye was still in his skull— and then he started dreaming.

Allison used to watch Harlan sleeping next to her, on the nights he actually got any rest, and she saw his hands move how they used to when he would work at the mill, pushing pieces of wood through the machinery, one after another after another, or pulling

on imaginary twine like when he would go down to the wharf to work on his boat.

Occasionally Harlan woke screaming and Allison came to a scattered morning with her husband's hands on her shoulders, at her neck, and she could barely be able to loosen the mad grip his fingers had on her.

She started sleeping on the chesterfield after that, only months following the accident, incapable of falling asleep with him next to her anymore. She woke one night to see he was standing over her. She saw the sad eye shine in the moon from the front window. His eyes sagged with fat, wet drops.

Allison said, Jesus, you frightened the life out of me.

It's my fault.

She didn't respond. She didn't know what to say, or if he even wanted her to say anything. Then she heard him mumbling, words spilling out of him.

My fault, he said. I know. They all know.

Please, my love— go back to bed. Get some sleep.

Harlan sat at the floor near her feet, leaning back against the chesterfield's frame and its tan cushions. He leaned over his knees so tightly Allison thought he might fold into a flat flap of skin and disappear into thin air.

Allison said, You want me to make a cup of tea? Slice of toast? She was worried, and with Harlan's back now to the living room window and his left side facing her, she couldn't see that lonely eye, she couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Not hungry. Not happy, either.

Tell me what's going on, Harlan.

You're out here because of me. Got nothing to do with the heat. I know you waits until I'm asleep before you sneak out here.

I'm sorry. But I've been scared. Last time you woke up in a fit I thought you was going to kill me.

A long, aching sob escaped Harlan. Allison saw it in the dark and she choked up. All she could do was move down onto the floor and hold her husband, squeezing him tight against her as they both shook from his weeping.

The morning came and Allison was startled to find Harland standing stone still by the living room window again, leaned over the chesterfield at an odd angle. She imagined his body could split in two and his torso would crash to the floor at any moment, shattering in a million pieces like fragile glass. His eye was squinted. The empty socket seemed to do the same, desperately trying to see anything. Allison wondered if he was watching a boat head into the harbour, maybe a flock of gulls on the inlet trying to swoop in on a few dead crabs left behind by trappers.

Allison said, How are you feeling, my love?

Where do the sun go when it sets?

She was caught off guard and laughed. Sure it rises in the East, you know that.

I think it just disappears.

Don't be so foolish. She got up from the couch stretching the kinks out of her gnarled back. I'll put on the kettle. Walt brought down some of that raisin bread that Mary makes — go nice with a hot mug of tea.

Harlan kept staring out the window at the sun rising up over the dark Atlantic. His eye was sad and wet. I wish I had someplace to disappear, he said. His wife didn't hear him over the sounds of the kitchen. She tried to keep talking to him while she made them

tea and toast. She walked past him back towards the bedroom while the kettle boiled and the bread was in the toaster. She changed out of her nightgown.

You want butter on yours, Harlan? Or jam? I got that nice bakeapple jam there, that's still good.

No response. Allison heard the kettle's water coming to a boil. She heard nothing else until the screen door banged off the door frame, closing shut with the breeze. She went out to the living room— no Harlan. She didn't find him in the kitchen, either. She went outside and stood on the porch looking around to see if her husband was taking a walk down the pasture or heading over the hill to the beach. He was nowhere in sight.

Harlan? Allison said. She tried not to yell, but her voice started to strain and soon she was screaming. Something scared her. She wasn't sure. If she was forced to guess it was the worry that Harlan hadn't been acting right since the accident, and worse as of late, to the point she thought he might do something unimaginable to himself. She remembered how her own grandfather struggled because of an injury. He came over from Wales in the late 1800s, and, after working his entire life, barely taking care of himself because he had seven children to feed, only months later had to have a foot amputated. The man was never the same after that and fell into a depression that lasted until the day he died of pneumonia, screaming from the fetid deathroom where he spent his final weeks about how he could still feel the ache in his foot.

Allison ran down to the hill that sat perched over the beach. She looked down over the rocks, straining to see the farthest reaches of the cove on either side— no signs of Harlan. She called his name a few times until both syllables died on the strong gusts of wind starting to come in off the water.

By nightfall the Hynes house was full of women milling around, chatting, picking at food, and generally trying to keep Allison's mind occupied while the men were out searching for Harlan. The place smelled of tea, pastry, and moose meat. Voices raised up, down, each of them carrying on about everything under the sun, so long as it didn't involve any potential negative thoughts about the husband out there alone, God knows where doing God knows what in the pitch dark. Allison was already sick of the sweetness. She didn't like how people were pretending she shouldn't be worried. She felt them condescend even without words, just by the look in their eyes.

The only one who treated Allison like she wasn't a piece of china ready to shatter was Mercy Bennett. The two women had known each other nearly their whole lives, ever since Allison's family moved to Comfort Cove when she was a young girl. They met at school. Mercy was a year older. Allison joined the other kids from the area at their tiny schoolhouse, where the small group were all taught under the one roof. Mercy was always the realistic one. Allison was imaginative as a child, but Mercy seemed like an old lady from the time she was barely above waist high. There, in the living room surrounded by all the other women, Mercy wasn't willing to play pretend, not with Allison. The others were only concerning themselves with who was fed, who wanted a hot cup of tea, how much food was left. This was one of Newfoundland's customs of grief— eat and drink until it's easier to forget about whatever is happening.

Mercy said, What happened today? Something must have happened.

I woke up to him at the window, Allison said. I've been sleeping in the living room. That upset him.

How come you haven't been going to bed with him?

He was scaring me. Having nightmares, waking up in the middle of the night. One of the last times I thought he was going to hurt me.

Jesus, Allison.

No, he wasn't trying to, it was like he didn't even know where he was to, like the devil was right there, using him for a puppet.

And then, what — he took off? Just like that?

Basically, maid. Never saw him go. He never said a word.

I'm so sorry, my love. All we can do is hope he's not after tumbling over the rocks with his head split open somewhere.

Allison said, It's all I can picture now. Even with my eyes closed I sees him broken apart, that same look he had on his face when I woke up to him staring out the window.

What was he looking at?

Don't know. He was just staring.

Mercy went to the living room window and opened the curtains. The moon shone bright over the ocean lighting the night sky in shades of blue. Mercy looked out across the water to the small inlet where most of the Comfort Cove men usually set their lobster traps. She squints to look for any sign of movement. She can't quite make out anything other than the rocky terrain and discarded bits of old traps that look like skeletal arms in the moonlight.

Have any of the men gone over there? Mercy said.

Not that I know of, I only saw a few of them go around the cove's shoreline.

Mercy was out of the house and down towards the hill to the beach before Allison could say anything more. She called to the men on the beach by the bonfire they built,

urging them to take a loop around the inlet and have a look on the other side. Nobody asked any questions. The whole town knew one another. Everybody knew the next person's name, and their father's name. When there were any troubles, even minor incidences, they felt as if they were happening to everyone. A few of the men— George Head, Rollie Mills, and Gord Whelan— put the boat back in the water and without words began to paddle around to the opposite side of the inlet. Allison made it down onto the beach and stood by Mercy's side while they watched the boat disappear around the rocks, its engine like a scream in the night.

Harlan, a voice said. Neither of the women could see the men anymore, though they knew it was Rollie's voice shouting. And they could tell he was shouting right at Harlan.

Rollie was cradling Harlan in his jacket, trying to warm the wet, freezing man when the boat came back around the side of the inlet. George steered the boat while he and Gord shouted to everyone on shore. They yelled out for blankets and hot water. Mercy was off again, rushing up the hill to the house and ordering the other women around, but Allison only stood at the water's edge, waiting to see her husband's face. Allison expected him to be dead. She knew that, by the sounds of it, he wasn't, yet the image of his cold, dead face was all she saw— his mouth caught open in a perpetual moan, a throat full of icy salt water. When the men got ashore, Allison saw Harlan, alive and whimpering. His face was that of a man who'd seen things nobody ought to see, the remaining eye rolling around in every direction searching for whatever ghosts were chasing him. She couldn't be sure he wasn't dead inside.

Around midnight most everyone cleared out of the Hynes place. The children were already sent off with the neighbours earlier when their father first went missing, before the search party gathered. Their Aunt Alvina and Uncle Derek took them for the rest of the night once Harlan was found. Mercy stayed at the house, along with Rollie and his wife Charlene. The three of them cleaned up the dishes, put away the leftovers, and mopped the floors. They tried to make small talk to fill the awkward spaces of silence. Nobody wanted to sleep, except for Harlan, and Allison was determined to get answers out of him before she let him doze off. He was wrapped tight in the bed, covered in blankets and quilts, clutching a hot water bottle to his chest.

Allison said, I could smack your face.

Harlan said nothing, shivering from the sweat now running down his back.

I'm serious. What in the Lord's name were you out there for?

I got confused.

Jesus, Harlan. Scared me half to death.

I'm sorry, my love.

Allison couldn't say anything else. She didn't know what would make it all better. She couldn't put the eye back in his face. She couldn't piece together whatever was broken inside him, not like it was to plant another beet in the garden and watch it grow after foxes tore it up the first time. There are things that, once broken, once gone, can never come back, and Allison knew it, she just didn't want to admit that the man she knew, the man she loved, that she married was gone.

Before the accident, Allison used to make Jiggs dinner every Sunday, when Harlan was off work for the week. She would mill around the kitchen, occasionally taking a break from the sweltering heat off the stove to step onto the porch. Her husband

would take the day to go out in the pasture with the kids. He would bring them, one by one, along on horseback through the trail over the cove's hillside. He spent from morning to afternoon trekking all five children across the same route. The littlest ones came back with wide smiles, having spent precious time pressed tightly against their happy, laughing father, and the older of them were glad he provided them with new stories and jokes to take back with them to their friends at school. Once the riding was done for the day and the horse shut up in the barn, the family sat for dinner in a house thick with a smell of gravy and every window steamed like they were covered in frost. Harlan talked some more through mouthfuls of food. His children all looked at him, chewing and listening intently. Allison watched them all as she ate, happy just to see them all happy.

It was so strange to Allison then, to see her husband sitting there after being dragged from the ocean, silent and cold and deeply unhappy. Harlan's voice used to fill the house, even if he was right in the back lying in bed. Allison remembered that it seemed like even his whispers were as loud as anyone else would have spoken regularly. He would whisper naughty things to her in bed and she'd laugh, telling him to keep it down because the kids would hear, and he only laughed at her, his strong chest bellowing, reminding her every last thing he did was loud—the way he spoke, the way he worked, even how he loved.

Not anymore. Not after what happened. Allison watched him there under the blankets and felt that the memories she was just then recalling were already slipping away. She could hear all those laughs and all those whispers they shared withering, the slow suck of water being pulled down the drain. She looked at Harlan's dead eye, staring ahead, and she couldn't help picturing her husband, wrapped all over in fabric, like a

cocoon from which something had crawled, leaving behind only its hollow outer skeleton.

Allison said, It's got to get better, Harlan. It just got to.

It will.

But when? How long do we go on like this?

The way Harlan turned his eye upward, finally looking at his wife in the face startled Allison. He was more pitiful than she'd ever seen.

I don't know, Harlan said.

That's not an answer.

It's all I got, Ally. If I knew, I wouldn't be in this state. I got one eye and a hole in me head, I can't see into the future.

Don't be saucy. You think it's easy for me?

Jesus, don't get on like that.

Well, sometimes you wouldn't know but you thinks that I'm having a good time.

Harlan turned away from his wife, staring into the wall. He shifted, opening the blankets and flopping the hot water bottle onto the floor. He wiped himself free of sweat. He bundled up again, cozy and warm. His face didn't look content. It was the scowl of a gargoyle, something horrible and angry, not the sad thing he was moments earlier to his wife.

That's it, Allison said. Go on and be quiet. You're some good at that.

Anything I says you're not going to like. I haven't got anything to say anyway.

Anything's better than nothing.

At the edge of the bed, Allison waited, and for nothing. It was like they had used up all the words they had to say to one another. There was nothing left. She got up and

went to the kitchen, where she started to make another cup of tea for herself. Harlan didn't look back over his shoulder to watch her go. He fell asleep as the kettle started whistling.

The early morning sky was deep blue and split open with purple light when Harlan woke. It was still dark outside. The lights inside the house were off. Everything lit up by the occasional flash of lightning cracking through the landscape. Harlan saw that Allison wasn't in bed next to him. He got out of the blankets, leaving the sheets beneath him damp, and the cool air washed over him running into his bones. He rubbed his naked arms and bare chest, pulling on a shirt. He got a pair of pants over his shaky legs and went out into the living room. Allison was lying on the couch, sound asleep even with the shutters banging around outside in the wind. Harlan went back into the bedroom to fetch a quilt. He took it out and stretched it over the one already covering his wife, tucking the sides around her into the chesterfield, swaddling her like he did with the children when they were tiny. He watched as she squirmed under the blankets. Her face became an unconscious smile when she found another comfortable position. He stood over her watching, remembering what it was like to see her smile more often.

Allison was twenty years old when she married Harlan, who turned twenty four only a week before the ceremony. On their wedding day, everything went wrong. It started off with someone— who it was, they never found out— accidentally knocking a slice of toast covered in jam onto Harlan's suit. They couldn't get the stain out, so he wound up at the altar with an off-colour blotch on his pants. During the actual wedding ceremony, Father Hearn was wearing rubber boots because he said he stepped in horse shit not far out the door of the diocese. Far as Harlan could tell the rubber boots didn't

smell much better. And later, once everybody on both sides of the aisle were full of grub and drinking, the little reception hall was like a madhouse with no orderlies to watch over it.

And through it all, Allison kept smiling.

Harlan remembered watching her from across the room, when he went to calm his father John down after he'd drunk a few too many. Allison was watching everybody else dancing and carrying on, that smile too wide for her sweet face. She was the type of person who found happiness in the enjoyment of others. It was at the core of who she was, and Harlan admired that.

After they married, Harlan and Allison became a big part of the community. People in Comfort Cove were always giving Harlan a pat on the back for the big haul of fish he took in every year that he divided up among the families around town. Some man, they said. Nobody ever thanked Allison. No matter if Harlan told them, My wife cured all that, out on the flake, all by herself. The thanks were all to him.

Harlan said, That rots me. You're after doing a lot of work for everybody.

Yes and I'd do it again without any thanks, and I will do it again without the thanks.

I'd be pissed right off if it were me.

You're not me, are you?

No, my love. Certainly not.

Allison smiled. I don't do it for people to thank me. I does it because I know what it's like not having enough to eat when people down the road got plenty.

That was her. And still was — Allison would give someone the last copper she had if they needed it. Harlan looked down at her on the couch, cherishing the smile, too

far and few between since he lost his eye. She was still the same person, but it was only when she slept that she smiled like she used to, once upon a time.

Shutters beat against the side of the house startling Harlan. He had to get them closed, or the hard wind would have them whipped off by morning. He figured it was smart to check the barn while he was out, putting on his oilskin jacket and sou'wester before gently opening the front door so it wouldn't get smashed off the siding. He inched out in the wind, then pushed the door shut. Around the front of the house, he dodged one of the shutters swinging at him. He grabbed them both and shut them up, making sure the latch was closed.

Harlan stood on the grass by the edge of the hill overlooking the beach. The bit of snow that fell the night before was long dissolved from the pouring rain. The waves crashed on the ocean with sprays of mist. A sheet of fog rolled in swirls as the wind blew through it in sharp cuts. In the middle of it all, there was a rainbow, only visible for seconds at a time while sunlight trickled through the thinnest patches in the fog's blanket. Harlan saw the rainbow's colours out there, distant and murky, but there in the night's final few shadows as day was breaking. He was captivated, until he heard the horse. The barn doors flapped in the wind, the sound of wood beating off wood echoed everywhere and if Harlan hadn't already known which direction the barn was in he would've been lost. He moved around the house towards the barn. He could see all the way inside before he was right in front of it. He saw no horse. Its neighing carried in the storm.

Wind whipped in Harlan's ears. His vision blurred. The storm's sights and sounds were burrowing at his brain. He glimpsed the rainbow on the water. The neighing weaved in and out of earshot. Harlan wasn't sure that he hadn't been caught up in a nightmare.

He thought he might wake, sweaty in bed, and the sky would be clear, the water calm. He closed his eye, just a second. When he opened it, nothing changed.

But there, over the fence behind the shed, a sleek white body passed through the tall grass in the pasture on the other side. Harlan's eye widened. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. A unicorn was running where the horse should've been. The horn spiralled out of its head nearly a foot, and its hooves made no noise, like they floated above the earth rather than stomp into it. Rain and fog parted around the animal as it ran.

Harlan burst in through the front door and woke Allison on the couch. He barged into the living room with his boots on, tracking mud and water everywhere. His wife sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. He kneeled in front of her. His hands shook with excitement and he was breathing so hard he wheezed.

You'll never guess what's outside, Harlan said.

What is going on? Why were you out there? Sounds horrible outside.

My mother used to tell me fairy tales when I was a boy. I always heard about them. Never thought I'd see one. Never thought they was actually real.

Harlan, you've got to slow down. You sounds mad.

A unicorn. Out in the pasture.

Allison was speechless. Harlan scared her. He didn't look angry or upset. He looked like someone staring directly into the sun and seeing things no one else had ever seen. She couldn't look at him, turning away to peek through the curtains. She saw the sideways rain and a crackle of lightning twisting down from the clouds over the Atlantic.

Come out, Harlan said. Come with me.

He was pulling her by the hand to the door and Allison didn't know how to stop him. She took a raincoat off the hook in the porch, put on her boots, and went along. By

the barn, Harlan was pointing, talking to her before she was next to him. She barely heard a word.

Allison said, What are you saying?

Look at its horn. Look.

Harlan kept pointing. Allison surely didn't expect a unicorn. This didn't change her disappointment, looking out into the field and seeing nothing but their white horse with its patchy globes of brown. To her horror, the horse's face was mangled. Its eyes and mouth were scratched. Long red gouges were sunk into its face. Allison knew it was from the stretch of thorny brush next to the pasture. Harlan used to clear it out, before the accident at the mill. Since then it grew untamed. Now, the horse had run through it and all but blinded itself. Its neighs were shrill and tortured. Allison couldn't take it anymore, so she went to try and corral the horse back to the barn.

Where you going? Harlan said.

We got to get him back inside for the night. Look at his face, for God's sake.

Allison saw that her husband was lost, living out the storm in a place she wasn't able to reach. She left him there to cross over the fence. Harlan seemed to forget why they were out there. He came back to the world, watching his wife pet the horse. She soothed the animal with her quiet voice lulling in the aggressive weather. Harlan smiled at the sight, but he was scared, too. He couldn't remember the past few minutes. Like someone reached into his skull and pulled them from his brain. When Allison looked away from the horse, she saw that Harlan was gone.

After Allison put the horse in the barn and secured the door, she went back inside. She saw the oilskins and boots trailing from the porch into the living room. She followed wet streaks on the floor to the bedroom. She walked in, and there was Harlan, face in his

pillow screaming as loud as his lungs managed. She laid down on the chesterfield and cried. She heard a few muffled howls from the bedroom before sleep took her away from that life.

Chapter 2

The way Michael Healey crosses the stage— swift, deliberate movements, the hot lights catching every expression, all the emotion pouring from him— it's as if he came into the world performing. He steps out from the other actors around him to speak his next line. It is very painful for me to be forced to speak the truth. It is the first time in my life that I have ever been reduced to such a painful position, and I am really quite inexperienced in doing anything of the kind. When Michael's done this line, the crowd laughs. He gives them a second or two before launching into the rest.

Michael sweats off his stage makeup the longer he's under the lights. It doesn't matter too much when Oscar Wilde's words are bellowing out of him, easily reaching to the back of the Barbara Barrett Theatre and filling the room. Closing night of the show has every last seat sold. Everyone performing is tired, but they're giving it all they have, making sure the final performance has people talking.

It's important for Michael because this might be the last performance he gives for a long time. He's barely been able to manage the free time to rehearse for this one. Taking time off from working at the club, rehearsing for a play he isn't being paid for, makes it easier to keep up years of sobriety. And it means less food in the cupboard, or less to put on the power bill, the phone bill, any bill.

Worse is, Michael loses himself when he doesn't get to perform. He left it for a time when the drink and the drugs took over. After he got sober he found the stage again and it was like coming home to a warm bed. Onstage, the real him is allowed to come out, no longer shrouded in the masculine art of keeping secrets, an age old tradition in the Healey family for decades. He's able to explore the person he feels he is beneath the person he has to be out in the world, and under the macho mask he wears while working the club. Without the stage, something is missing in Michael, like a chunk of flesh ripped from his body. He's afraid if he has to go too long without getting a part in another production there'll be nothing left of him. It's already hard enough having to work at the club bouncing every other evening. He has to switch parts of himself on and off depending if he's onstage or watching over the dance floor down at the club. He's sure that, sooner or later, he'll lose both parts, and then he'll be somebody else entirely.

Michael feels the fist before it connects, before it was ever coming. He feels it in the angry smell of testosterone hanging on the air, and in the leaning, crooked stance of men around the club like apes about to beat each other into the earth. The fist is the same he's felt hundreds of times before. Every fist is the same— they might have different excuses and reasonings, their function remains to hurt, to punish.

These types of situations are Michael's job. He loves it, too. No matter if he tries to deny it. No matter if it goes against the gentler person he is beyond the theatre doors. Before a fight breaks out, the foreplay to violence is a chaos he can taste. He could stick his tongue out and taste it right off the air. He craves the ballet of fists and rhythmic scuffling of feet, the primitive groans and grunts of men against men.

The young drunk kid throws a haymaker and connects with Michael's cheekbone. The flesh flattens the way beef does under a mallet, immediately sprouting a red lump. Then the kid's nose explodes in a pop before he realizes it's broken, the blood runs over his chin and into his mouth. He starts to scream. A young girl next to him pulls tissues from her purse, drunkenly trying to put them to his nose. He wails through a mouth stained in a hideous red lipstick, the tissue sticking to him in puffy snowflakes across his mangled face. Michael goes through the routine of letting people know they'll be better off taking the fight's loser home before the cops are called and hear of his throwing the first punch. The young man goes wailing out the front of the club dragged by his drunk friends. The rest of the place goes back to their drinks.

Every few nights some man gets too drunk and things come to blows. Tonight, the kid was trying to snort cocaine off one of the toilets. Drugs don't fly when Michael's working— part of the reason he was hired is due to the fact he's clean and sober, in the perfect position to manage the situation. The kid was in the women's washroom with two young ladies in the same stall. If he had left when he was asked, the situation would've been averted. He forced Michael into it.

Michael cradles the hand he used to block a bottle that was headed for his face. A tiny shard of glass sticks from his skin, poking up from the fleshy divot like a diamond. Tonight's one of the nights he'll go home with his manager Cass, after she does shots with the staff before shutting down. They've been casual fucking for the past three years, and friends since Michael was in high school and Cass was a college student at CONA back home in Grand Falls-Windsor. She manages Club T and got him the job as their doorman, knowing how hard things are for him financially. It worked out they were good friends with benefits and worked in the same place, so at the end of the night, if they both

wanted, they went back to one of their apartments and had sex. Cass was laid back and from day one insisted they weren't going to take things any further than the casual screw, to which Michael happily agreed.

Nights like this, when Michael's left nursing his wounds, and Cass watches him work another man over with angry hands, they rush to bed where he grips her big, soft body in his sore fingers mauling her— two animals, half fighting, half fucking. In their private ritual, she pours whiskey over his gouged out knuckles for disinfectant, then as he takes her from behind she sucks his wet fingers before the alcohol soaks in. She savours the vague taste of blood and whiskey until it's only fog on her breath. She kisses him, pushing her tongue deep in his mouth so he can taste the faint sting of liquor. This is the other way Michael gets off. He's found ways of indulging that don't technically count as falling off the wagon. Cass indulges every one of his urges, mothering him in the excess necessary to keep him from the darkest of excesses.

After they finish, Cass rolls over on her side and Michael goes to the bathroom right off her living room. They always had sex there rather than her room— the walls of her bedroom were pink, and Michael hated it, the colour felt like it burned into his eyes every time he looked inside. She lights a cigarette, pulling the ashtray off the end table. Michael washes out his knuckles, feeling the last of the whiskey's bite leave and the hot pain begin. He looks out to see Cass on the couch lying on her back, the outline of her wide body the same as the curve of a rolling wave. He likes being with her because of her size, the feel of her fat stomach slapping against his own while they rock back and forth. He likes grabbing onto the heft of her body, holding tight as he thrusts into her. She likes being with him for much the same reason.

Michael stands a bit over six feet tall. He's thick, like a wrestler without the definition. She loves how his gut pokes out over the top of his jeans, no matter how he tries wearing them. She enjoys the feeling of his beefy chest and arms on top of her instead of chicken wings like the skinny men who usually hit on her at the club. She gets off by the force of his body, his raw strength controlling her.

She sees him staring at her from the bathroom. She says, What are you looking at?

You. I could go again.

Usually you wouldn't hear me argue, you knows that. But honestly, you might need a couple stitches.

Give it up, I'm fine, he tells her.

She shoots him the universal look women share, a look signifying he ought to get real, an evolutionary mechanism developed over thousands of years of dealing with male stubbornness. Cass gives him the look, also pointing at the arm of the couch where Michael now notices a streak of red and bloody fingerprints on the upholstery.

Christ. You're probably right.

In the emergency room at St. Clare's, Michael sits in one of the few seats free on its own, away from the usual madness. Like always there's a single doctor working overnight, the waiting room is full. Michael looks around at all the people, as if they're the cast of an obscure television show that only airs late in the night. There's a man in a wheelchair wearing a tracksuit and each time he shifts his body weight his clothes make a whooshing noise, like he's a sentient garbage bag. An old woman sits with two people in their twenties or thirties. She can barely get a whole breath in, and the people with her rub her

back, telling her things will be fine once she sees the doctor. Another old person— Michael's not sure if they're a man or a woman, just a body of sagging wrinkles reminding him of Droopy the dog— hacks into a handkerchief, inspecting what made it out of their lungs. Michael knows it'll take hours before he gets in to see a doctor. It's already near four in the morning. Instead of waiting he slips back out to the parking lot and starts the walk home.

Michael walks the lonely streets, sucking at the trickles of blood coming from his knuckles. The iron taste is bitter, familiar. These are the nights he feels alive, when the worries of life lie far off in another place, another time, the rush of sex and violence surges in his veins. He walks in the road for a block, knowing only the cabbies are out at this hour yet almost hoping a car passes, imagining himself so powerful he lets the car run into him and shatters the metal into a flaming wreck. He's invincible, nothing can hurt him. Full of anger and serotonin all at once— virile and dangerous, a weapon already unloaded, ready to be loaded and fired again.

At home, Michael showers, scrubbing the sweet smell of Cass off his body and letting hot water pour over his wounded hand. He should probably tell his girlfriend Mandy he's been cheating on her. She wants to get serious, she says so all the time and wants him to make a gesture to show he feels the same, like moving in together. He cares about her. He wants to get serious— he wants to be able to get serious.

He turns the water on as hot as it will go, standing under the showerhead with his hand out. The water steams and the whole room disappears. Michael holds his hand under the burning water, some splashing his chest, and he leaves it there until his skin goes red

and white in patches. He turns the water off and stands there dripping, breathing heavily into the quiet bathroom.

Once Michael dries off, letting his shaggy, shoulder length hair dry on its own after a quick towelling, he lays back on his bed and picks up his phone. He looks out the window noticing the sun peek over the horizon, its giant cyclops eye opening little by little. The fleeting image of himself and his childhood friend Matthew passes through his mind: barely ten years old, camping in Matthew's backyard and staying up over a muggy summer's night to watch the sunrise.

He checks his phone and finds no new messages. His balls ache, he wants to stroke another one out. He'd rather have the real thing. While he waits in hope of a message, he opens a browser on his phone and types Mature Fuck in Google Videos. Clips pile up in a mess of older women's body parts, the thumbnail to each video nothing but flesh. He finds one that gets the excitement tickling in his loins, then he starts in on himself. He's sore, which never mattered, and it takes longer than usual. Once it's done he zips up. The snarling beast in his guts still wants more.

Michael flicks open his email, scrolling through the contacts until he comes to one labelled sukudri45. He starts a new message to this contact, typing only: You up? He lays his head down on the pillow and stares at the ceiling. He isn't sure why he messaged, his cock felt like ground beef from being with Cass earlier. He doesn't even know if he can manage another erection, let alone another load. He's compelled, the urge calls out from right down in the marrow of his bones where the lust rattles and shakes his skeleton, hoping to be freed from its bony cage.

Another half hour and he's waiting outside an apartment in a part of town he barely knows. This time of the night, as morning slowly wakes, is the darkest, concealing beneath it people doing secret things. Michael stands on the apartment's porch waiting for the door to buzz. When it does he scurries up through a dim lit stairwell and onto the third floor. The hallway is silent. There's a strange odour of cat piss. Something sickly sweet is underneath. A thick aroma, like caramel— it reminds him of being a boy and having an upset stomach. The beat of his heart speeds up the closer he gets to the apartment with 237 on the door. The e-mail catered to his specific requirements for these encounters: a dark room, an ashtray for his joint, and no kissing. He knows there's someone waiting behind the door, just inside. He knocks light with a couple fingers.

Door's unlocked, a voice says. Michael heads across the threshold, into the unknown as he's done so many times before. It's all hands, and a sucking mouth, the moans of satisfaction in his lap. He can make out the shape of another man, the voice, his eyes. But that's it. And once it's over, he's gone.

Michael doesn't care who it is when there's a handful of cash involved. Not that he's repulsed by another man all over his body, either. Something about it excites him—the thought of being found out by the other men in his life, the ones who would never understand. He's never actually looked at another man and been drawn to him physically the way he feels when he sees a woman that turns him on. Once the pants are off it's another story. The thought of any warm mouth on his body puts a round in the chamber. Sometimes he stays hard all the way through, then there are others when it's like flogging a dead horse, the torture of the damned trying to raise his cock from the grave. When it's over an unknowable shame sets in, the feel of an upset stomach. Michael can't pinpoint its beginnings. He experimented in high school once. One of his cousins is gay, and that

same cousin's sister recently married a woman. He grew up in the world of theatre surrounded by people of all orientations. Despite believing himself liberated, Michael can't shake the clawing shame consuming him. It's with him all the time. He watches a faceless row of people pass in front of him on their knees in a communion line ready to be fed. The body, the blood, and the resurrection all in one mouth.

He tells himself it's about the money. To an extent it is, once all the electrical work dried up a while ago. Like others on hard times around the province he says, The economy, and shrugs, left to figure out a way of survival for himself. Bouncing can't pay rent and utilities. Life would be easy if those were the only two expenses. Michael's sobriety cut out a significant waste of cash, just not enough. His thoughts of going back to school are only accompanied by the heaviness of his empty bank account, the deadweight of a corpse— his life. He tells himself it's about the money, then he pushes down the other feelings. This justifies whatever he needs it to— those things he can't admit to himself, let alone anybody else. He pretends the bulge in his pants and the heat around his collar is all part of the act, the performance necessary to score the next payday as he scrolls up and down looking through online ads. He convinces himself it's only transaction. They creep up at times when he's in bed with a woman, they refuse to let him live in two worlds of pleasure at once. He's scared that he doesn't know himself half as well he thinks.

Everyone assumed Michael was full of shit when he said he was quitting drinking, and at such a young age, only recently nineteen at the time. Then they were amazed when it stuck. One year became another, and he abstained. People find out he's a sober bouncer and act like they've discovered intelligent life on another planet. Each time he has to refuse a drink, he has to explain why, because nobody can say no to a drink— not if

you're a Newfoundlander, and a man, at that. His story impresses the people he tells, they're astounded by his dedication. Michael doesn't tell people he gave up on his own because Alcoholics Anonymous was making him face the horrible person he was when he drinks. Neither does he tell them he's not much better of a person sober. Maybe he was never a good person to begin with, and the booze made it obvious. He's not willing to tell the person at a party asking him about his method of staying sober that when he first quit drinking he got so desperate one night he drank Aqua Velva before trying to suffocate himself with a Sobey's bag and duct tape on the dirty floor of his bathroom.

The obsessions of Michael's life—the addictions—have always owned him. Sobriety became the same thing. He wakes up each day, still almost six years on, and his initial thought is: You made it another day. Every day is one more day, until the days are weeks and the weeks are years. They become a blur, days melting together. His life is about keeping busy. Michael used the drinking and the drugs to cover up years of scars and scabs, to grow a new skin over those ugly patches. He kept busy with nights at the club or home alone pacing the floor until his feet were sore. When he got clean, the monotony kept him busy. After a lifetime of partying in a barely twenty years he welcomed the drone of a day by day, blow by blow lifestyle. Staying busy so long keeps him from understanding what made him a body always at motion in the first place, a living carcass never at ease in one place and seeking the next journey, the next obsession—the next method of pretending it's all okay.

A sharp, hot sun burns its way across the pavement on Duckworth, rising in the sky while its light chases the waning shadow off the street. Michael gets to his apartment building, his thick frame against the door as he fumbles for keys in his pocket. He feels a pain

around his crotch, not quite in the balls and not altogether in the pelvis. When it goes away quick he forgets the sensation immediately. Not the first time he's come home in the morning with a sore crotch. For a minute, he watches the rest of the world beginning their day, though his previous one hasn't ended. He imagines himself Frankenstein's monster, the wobble of his tired, sex weakened legs the shuffle of the hulking creature, and wonders how ghastly he looks to the normal people in his neighbourhood.

He lies in bed, the memories of Cass and his early morning transaction swirling together in his head. They're no longer distinguishable. Only sweaty parts intertwined. Bisexuality doesn't scare him. Despite the shame, he enjoys what he enjoys— if only he ever really enjoyed anything. It's not making up his mind that's terrifying, the idea he'll never settle down, that he'll be out there in the bars and streets and hotels and all the other sordid meeting places forever in an endless factory line of lovers. Every fuck feels like it takes him further from himself. Each encounter, paid or not, is another step from being human into a blissful oblivion, a place made of only carnal delights and the tabula rasa of an intoxicated state that drifts into perpetual nothingness— one giant unsatisfied pleasure floating in the ether.

Michael can see the day he won't feel a thing anymore on the horizon. He has orgasms, though the relief is more akin to the one that comes from throwing up rather than sexual release. There's no connection to the hunk of flesh under him, on top of him, in him—it's a body. At night he dreams of faceless mannequins standing on the stage of a strip club, all fitted with male and female parts jumbled together. He lies in the middle of the stage and the mannequins walk all over him, their hard plastic feet in his face, on his chest, crushing his balls and rolling sickly over his kneecaps. Then they're all on the

floor. He's swimming in plastic corpses, hands stroking and slapping him with dead fingers. He's plastic, too. His face is gone. He's nothing but muscles, fake flesh, and a long plastic cock. He watches his genitals fall to the floor, their plastic cracking on the hard stage. He wakes with his jockeys tight across his crotch, sighing in annoyed relief.

Someone told Michael the eyes are the window to the soul. It's a popular adage—an adage for pretentious assholes, he thinks—but someone specific repeated it to him. He's sure it was someone during his time at Alcoholics Anonymous, where these kinds of phrases take on a life of their own and alcoholics cling to them so they won't drown in their own helplessness. The eyes are no more the windows to the soul than the nose or the mouth. To get at the soul you've got to eviscerate yourself.

The one good part of AA is it forces people to take inventory of their lives and how they've contributed to their own destruction. Michael never cared for getting up in front of everyone and baring his worst qualities for them to hear, feeling that telling strangers was useless when there were people in his life to whom he wasn't able to admit the truth. Sometimes he couldn't even admit it to himself. He always saw the benefit for those without anybody to speak those truths. They got up to the podium, their nervous voices shaky, and they aired a lifetime of dirty laundry that's been growing mold in their hampers. So much of Michael was as unattainable to himself as it was to those who wanted to help him.

When he was drinking the thoughts of death were quiet. Now, they rage in his head. There's nothing to keep them silent anymore, only the routine of staying sober, the monotonous journey of a rickety wagon he's somehow managed not to fall off for years.

Real men don't kill themselves, an uncle told him when he was sixteen. Michael was diagnosed with major depression as a young man. When the whole family found out it made for awkward family suppers.

One Sunday, when he was watching *Jeopardy* alone with his Uncle George, Michael told him about his suicidal thoughts—the only one in the family in whom he confided. His uncle looked him right in the eyes and explained the tenets of manhood according to Geoff—a twice divorced, unemployed alcoholic—which revolved around not trusting women and lying to them, along with burying your feelings in a place where nobody can find them. He said, Nobody wants to hear a man being sad.

Michael imagines the manliest way to die. If he was unable to meet the bar of masculinity in life, he's determined to be so in death. He envisions a grisly demise. He sees himself home, back at the old Abitibi Price mill. He walks himself to the edge of the mulcher, peering into its hungry teeth, then tips himself over. His body sprays into the mulch in a crimson pulp as he watches from above in dreamland, at once in a hazy state of life and a hideous state of death, disembodied and disemboweled. It feels so glorious he's ashamed. The thought of giving himself over to death is being on the precipice of climax, the moment preceding that of sweet relief.

It's why he chose to go to Alberta and work in the oilfield. Somehow he saw a way out—an accident, a trip over wiring, heavy equipment could lose control and run him into the dirt where his blood would meet the oil and he'd become a part of something rather than slipping away into the abyss that was opening wider all the time.

Pussy, they called him when he refused to go up two-hundred feet and work on a junction box with only a safety line to his harness, no railing or enclosure whatsoever. He was always a good speller—his true calling had been something in the arts, yet he wound

up becoming an electrician's apprentice. He knew the word pussy came from pusillanimous. He knew just as well the foremen in the oilfield meant something else when they used the word to describe him, or anyone else they thought fit the bill. They were trying to liken him to a woman—the softest part of a woman—as if being a woman were something shameful. His mother was tougher than any man he'd ever known. She squeezed him out of her vagina, and Michael saw nothing weak about that. It was harder than anything he'd done in his life.

The word never upset Michael, neither did he change his attitude. He couldn't change it if he tried: heights terrified him. It was fly up, fly home every three weeks or go on welfare. He knew the high steel stood out there in the dust of stolen land, awaiting his arrival, and there was no way, on a massive construction site, to avoid going up. He tried to get as much work on the ground as there was to do. Inevitably he had to go up to do a job or two. It never got any easier, though he pretended.

Heights, bravado, and alcoholism with a side of addiction didn't mix well. It got so Michael was getting high and taking nips of booze in the job shack just to climb the scaffolding. He started taking risks. He jumped across gaps rather than take the long way, no matter if it scared him. He did it so the rest of them saw, so they knew what he could do and how far he was willing to go. It was the same as beer and liquor, how the alcoholism took hold of him when he was young. Michael was a specimen of an alcoholic, the rare sort who hated the taste and drank solely to get himself drunk. He started drinking out of peer pressure, out in the woods during Grade 8, and continued because of it, only drinking to prove a point. This became the tale of his whole existence—proving himself, proving something, ultimately proving nothing.

Such is being a man. A man has to prove himself to fit in and survive amongst other gorillas. A man's got to be able to conjure an old version of homosapien too brutish and ugly for the modern world. A man has to be able to bring out the worst in himself in an effort to be the best man he can, swallowed whole in the primordial chaos of manliness.

Michael isn't an outdoorsman, neither was he one as a child. He spent time out in the woods at the camp with his pop, Henry, and his uncles, mostly out of love for his grandfather, who was the only father figure he had, and wanting to be around him no matter where they went. This led Henry to believe young Michael was a real man, like the rest of them. Michael was taught to set snares and bear traps, shoot moose, and gut fish, rabbits, any of the other animals they killed on their hunt. They ate everything, too. Even down around the bay when there was a catch of lobsters, Henry made the boy eat the whole thing, down to the red and green wax deep in the shell. You wants to be big and strong you'll eat that, he used to say. And Michael lapped it all up, grimacing through the yucky bits.

When Michael became a teenager he drifted from his pop and uncles, not spending near as much time up at the camp, even in the summer when he had months to himself. He withdrew from everyone. Suddenly his manly status amongst the men of his family changed. He was into music, writing poetry, and he told his parents about wanting to go to film school after graduating high school. None of this felt right to his grandfather, who supported him fully, secretly harbouring a sadness about the way his grandson was turning out. No longer did they spend time hunting and playing cribbage at the old camp across the river. Michael was only interested in pining after girls, spending hours locked in his room scribbling terrible poetry, and staying out too late in the

evenings taking drugs and drinking. Henry mostly gave up asking Michael to go with him on their usual trips, to the point they stopped going altogether. The young man saw a light in his pop's eyes go out as the old man felt his little boy, the hopeful manly man, slipping away.

Around the time Michael turned fifteen, he asked his pop to go on another trip to the woods. They hadn't been in almost two years, so Michael thought it would do them good to be together, alone and at the camp like when he was a young boy. Henry was thrilled. The fishing season was underway, and he anticipated lots of trout in Secret Pond—a quiet body of water perpetually full of fish, accessed by canoeing across to one side of Mill Pond, where the camp was built, and transporting the boat across to the pond on the other side. The two of them set off on a sunny afternoon, leaving Grand Falls-Windsor behind. After they got off the paved road and hit dirt, Henry called for Michael to open his half case of Dominion Ale. The boy passed his pop a bottle, watching Henry's huge fingers twist the cap off and his mouth suckle for the rim of the bottle's neck, sipping back a long gulp of cool beer. By the time they were at the turn off to the camp—a muddy path surrounded by a claustrophobic tunnel of alder branches—Henry was three beers into the case.

It was nearly five when they reached the camp. They took out the Coleman's stove and Henry grilled a couple steaks. They ate only steak, both gnawing into the medium rare beef, holding the cuts with their bare hands like two neanderthals in a cave. They unpacked the truck when they were finished, and Henry got the generator running while Michael took several logs out to the chopping stump. The boy wanted to make his grandfather proud. He set up a log, grabbed the axe from the shed, and started making splits. It took him a few whacks with the axe, and after minutes he chopped a few logs,

the splits lying around the stump in a messy ring. He put the axe back and took the splits inside, piling them in the makeshift bin near the wood stove.

Go on from that, pop said.

Why?

Young feller like you shouldn't be at that stove.

I've done it before.

I said get out of it. Henry's voice raised enough to make the kid move away from the stove. She's old, see, and you never knows what she'll do. This was an excuse. Henry didn't want the boy around the stove because he didn't trust him. He loved his grandson. He wasn't sure how well Michael could handle being there in the woods anymore, at the camp—the realm of men. There was a time Henry felt the boy was meant to be there. After so long he saw him as weak, and not part of that world.

Michael scuffled off outside, pretending not to be on the verge of tears. He went around to the outhouse out back, preferring to be in the company of the decaying shit and toilet paper in its hole than his pop. He kicked a rock at the side of the shitter, denting the wood and scuffing a black mark across it. His toes surged with a pain at the tips so bad he was sure they'd fall off in his boots. Without checking he knew at least one toe was bloody. He winced off the pain then headed back to the front of the camp. Inside, his pop was drinking another Dominion, and had the cribbage board out. Michael walked in to sit at the table with Henry. They silently began a game.

Summer didn't matter—the woods were always cold at night. Michael bundled himself in two sleeping bags in the bunk next to his pop, who was already passed out and snoring loudly. He curled into a foetal position, gathering warmth in a ball at his torso with his knees drawn to his chest and his arms wrapped around them. The silent dark of

the woods was both beautiful and unsettling to Michael. He liked it compared to the constant traffic outside his house at home, where he lived in a busy part of town. The quiet gave him the time to think. He let his mind clear out and let the nothingness of the forest enter him.

Michael had trouble sleeping his entire life, he remembered it started when he was only small and, so says his mother, wailed at a banshee pitch for the first three months of his life. Legitimate insomnia ensnared him as a boy later. At five, he would charge into his grandparents' room, always choosing to wake them instead of his mother in her room, announcing his presence. This gave way to his bedwetting coming back, which he thought he had stopped a year before, lasting years beyond what most consider normal. He would be lying in bed, sleepless, begging for his body to shut down and allow him rest, then a flash flood of urine soaked around him into the mattress, that hot, ugly feeling of shame all over. It was always harder to sleep after that, when his nan would tear herself from a good night's sleep to bathe him, wash his clothes and everything on the bed, and get a fresh set of pyjamas on him before tucking him back in a bed of fresh sheets. Nan loved him deeply. He knew it by the way she yawned, scrubbing him with a facecloth in the tub, and sang to him softly the words to the only hymn he ever enjoyed: "Lord of the Dance." This never took away the guilt. He laid in bed, the new sheets and comforter over him, and each time he cried himself to sleep.

Michael felt other memories lurking in the tall grass, hidden from sight but only barely. He saw the obscured face of a woman. She was there, like she walked out of the woods surrounding the camp. She called to him. She called him Monkey in the Middle. Everything else was murky. Jagged, ruined pieces of a puzzle left knocking around in its box.

Michael got up from the bunk and went to the kitchen, which doubled as a living room for the camp, a front porch, and a bathroom sink area. On the table there was a half full beer bottle left from when Henry stumbled drunk to bed in the early morning. Michael felt drawn to it. He decided first to light a fire in the stove, a miniature act of defiance while his pop was unconscious between the sheets. He put a few splits in, along with some usnea— old man's beard, they called it— for kindling, and lit it with a match. He let the fire start crackling hot before shutting the stove's door and latching it. He went over to the table after that and took the half drunk Dominion, putting it to his lips. The taste was bitter. The beer was on its way to pissy warm. He chugged until his eyes watered. When he finished he urged once, managing to keep the vomit down. The beer flowed through him and in an instant he saw the world shift on its axis. Those numb memories were history— at the back of his mind was nothing. He drank the bottle's last sips, putting the empty in its proper place with the others in a case. When Michael got back in bed he felt warm inside and out. Sleep came easy.

Michael and his pop went out early in the morning to make it across Mill Pond over to Secret Pond. They pulled the canoe from out of a snarl of trees by the trail's mouth at the edge of the water. Henry was irritable and hungover. He barked orders at the boy, which made Michael more nervous than he was on the water already. They made it across in only minutes.

On the other side was a hump of land. They pulled the canoe from the water and up over the small hill, letting it slide gently down to the water on the other side at Secret Pond. They got back in the canoe and started out towards the middle of the water.

Usually there were tons of bites while fishing out of Secret Pond. That day, there were barely any, and neither Michael nor his pop hooked a single trout. Henry was already several beers into the cooler, less angry as they took the edges off the effects of his hangover.

Let's go over to the dam, he said to the boy.

I hates it over there.

What's wrong with you?

You got to go out with the hip rubbers on, walking across those raggedy beams. I hates it.

Go on, his pop said. You'll never be a proper man if you gets on like that.

Michael said, What do being a man have to do with walking over slippery old wooden beams?

You've got to do stuff you don't want to do sometimes.

What's the world going to end if we don't go down to the dam, is it? Right as the words spit from of Michael's mouth he wanted them back. He didn't hurt his pop's feelings, and he didn't make him mad. It was a look of profound disappointment, like what he said negated everything Henry wanted him to be in one fell swoop. He couldn't take it back. He reeled in his fishing rod, laying it at the side of the boat. He picked up his paddle on the opposite side and pushed towards the direction of the dam. Without acknowledgement, Henry started paddling with his grandson.

The dam wasn't functional since the 1970s, when it was used by Newfoundland Power as part of the hydroelectric system in the area. After there were upgrades the dam was left sitting there, no longer actually damming anything. The river spilled over the rotting structure in a waterfall where it kept on heading west across the forest landscape,

shrouded by a canopy for well over a kilometre. Henry and the other hunters in the family would setup a ways past the dam, which is where the fish always bottle-necked before heading further downstream. He and Michael got to where the river thinned, pulling the canoe ashore and tying it to a sturdy birch. They took their time climbing down around the side of the dam, slipping and sliding along soggy wood until their feet were on solid ground at the riverbank.

Henry and Michael set down their things and started getting the rods ready again. Henry pulled out the tackle box, flicking through the flies and hooks inside. Michael put the rods together, waiting for his grandfather to ready the flies. Henry got the lines ready and pulled the styrofoam container of worms from their cooler— inside, they squirmed, blind bodies writhing against one another in the dirt. Something about the worms unsettled Michael. It was the same as snaring rabbits and trapping bears. He didn't mind shooting a moose, or grouse, it was always quick and the death was over. Trapping things, hooking, or snaring them, it was, for him, a barbaric act. He watched his pop take one of the naked worms in his fingers, gradually working the thing's body over the barb and up the rest of the hook, its flesh fitting around the tiny piece of metal like skin over bone. Henry finished, wiping off his hands, and snapped his fingers unconsciously— something he always did when he was getting thirsty for another beer.

Michael was never good at fly fishing. He couldn't get the hang of casting the line out. On that trip, Henry tried to show him how to do it right. He cast his rod several times, going through the steps. The boy thought he could do it, he knew how. His brain wouldn't let him, reaching out to stall his limbs so the line went wiggling off only a couple feet in front of him, plunging clumsily into the watery grass by the riverside.

And every unsuccessful attempt was another huffing, puffing performance from Henry, whose temper flared worse every time. The old man was done his half case and looking for another bottle when Michael tried another cast, failing again.

For Christ's sake, Michael, it's not that hard.

Pop, I'm trying. You think I'm doing this for a laugh?

I never seen the like of you. Thank God nobody else is out here to see this. Your Uncle George would have some laugh.

Michael bit back the sob he wanted to let go, holding the tears right at the corners of his eyes somehow. He put the rod down against the cooler and sat a few feet away on a rock resting his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands.

So you're going to sit there now until we leave, hey?

I can't do it. You're just getting mad at me.

Henry laid his beer on the tackle box and walked over to his grandson, glaring down at him. One of these days you'll be a grown man, maybe. Grown men got to be able to do things, without quitting. Get your arse up off that rock. He grabbed at the boy, who slipped his arm away from his grandfather's reach.

I want to go back to the camp, Michael said.

We'll go back when I says it's time. Now get up, take that rod, and cast the fucking thing out proper.

Michael jumped from the rock. He rushed to his rod, angry hands shaking. He picked it up, and with a wide swing he tossed it into the river. He and Henry stood watching the rod go with the current, each in as much disbelief as the other. Michael gulped so loud the echo bounced off the rocks around the dam, coming back at him in stereo.

His grandfather didn't say another word the rest of the afternoon. They packed up their gear, headed over the pond, then the lake, and back up through the trail to the camp. He said nothing when they got back, and went about making supper, frying one of the couple fish he managed to catch before the incident. Michael didn't try talking to him. He spent the night out at the chopping stump, the spotlight from the front door guiding him while he cut log after log, the splints falling at his feet like long wooden snowflakes. Each log was another cord of anger he felt drip off him with the sweat from his brow. He wasn't as angry when he went to sleep that night. He didn't feel any anger from his pop, though they still hadn't said more than a word or two between them before bed. It was only the disappointment again. Michael's pop slept with his eyes closed, and yet he felt those disappointed eyes burning through the dark, tunneling through him.

That was the last time they ever went fishing together. Michael went to the camp less and less in the years after that trip. He loved his pop, but the forest was his world, somewhere he could go to conceal the drinking, someplace it was normal to be drunk by lunchtime, and he could be that angry, primitive man nobody wanted to see or hear back in town—the man nobody tolerated. Out there was a playground of brutal masculinity. It wasn't a place Michael felt at home. It also wasn't a place he felt would do him any good. He already felt the rage in his own bones trying to get out. When he was splitting wood, he often imagined it wasn't wood on the chopping block at all, it was a face. The face changed— sometimes it was his hockey bullies, or the young psychopaths at school who jumped on his head and stuffed him in a locker the year prior, sometimes it was a faceless man he thought he recognized but never could make out. After Michael's last fishing trip, when he was cutting those splits he saw his grandfather's face, and beneath that was

another man's face, an older face that looked similar to Henry's, and the axe came down, shattering the face, and those underneath, in a splinter of wood and blood and brain. He never dreamed he could be so angry, and the feeling made him sick.

When Michael recently gave up being an electrician he saw the same look of disappointment on his grandfather's face he saw over fifteen years ago. Everyone expected him to tough it out somehow with no work. He wanted to go back to school. He spent his whole life following the rules others set out for him. He did as he was told, all the things he thought he was supposed to do. He went by all they prescribed— first his family and the church, then school from his first try at university to trade school and the masculine world of working with his hands, he even tried the military, but psychiatry held him back.

None of it did him any good. He was left with few options after tumbling down path after path, getting lost. It was a life structured early on by money, time, work. It was existence solely as survival. He never saw his own family relax, they were constantly in motion, their bodies getting leaner every year until they wilted to nothing. When his pop wasn't at work he was in the shed building furniture for friends and family, or he was in the woods, drinking, playing cards at night and up before the sun even cut through the sky to hunt for food, a way to cut down on the need to buy meat at the grocery stores. From an early age, Michael felt that, as a man, if he wasn't able to provide and do all those things he saw his grandfather and the other men in his family do, then he would remain a child all his life.

This sticks in the back of his mind as he applies to go to MUN as a mature student. Each line he fills out he feels the sting of disappointment on the back of his

neck, imagining his pop stood over his shoulder shaking his head, tutting his tongue and recalling their good times together at the camp. Michael signs his name at the bottom of the application. Instead of feeling excited he's filled with a poison crawling in his guts, spreading its roots out into his veins. He feels like a part of him is dying, rather than coming to life. He wants to nothing more than to get an English degree, then, fingers crossed, do his Master's in film somewhere on the mainland. It's a dream he's had for years. He put it off because it wasn't practical, and it wasn't what was expected of a good young man from small town Newfoundland— nothing Michael did was what anybody expected of him, or of a man. His dream is within reach, but the thought of what it's doing to his grandfather, and most of his family, is like having his brain caught in a towing sock and pulled from the moorings of his skull.

Michael needs to go back to school. He'll perish slowly on the inside if he doesn't at least try. He put it off for the longest time, until his friend Julianne— about to finish a degree in social work— picked up an application form at the registrar's office for him. She slapped it down in front of him and waited until he finished filling it out, making sure he went through with it. She should've followed him all the way to the university and watched him drop it off. The form sat, filled out, on his counter for weeks.

Michael looks at the completed forms and stares hard in hopes he'll unleash previously unknown kinetic energy, burning the paper to ashes. Then he wouldn't have to take it to MUN, he could put it off another day. The paper remains, its stark white against the black ink beams into Michael's eyes like the headlights of a freight train. He can't escape this decision. Putting it off will only last another week at most. Julianne's been asking him whether he brought it over to campus. He keeps lying, telling her the registrar has it and he's now in the process of waiting for an answer. It's now or never.

After dropping the form at the registrar's office, Michael decides to look up a few books he'll need if and when he's accepted to the program. He heads to the library, where everyone is face down in their work. A couple computers near the far wall are free, so he heads for one of them. He signs in with the temporary ID they gave him during the application process.

Once he writes down a few titles of books required for first year English courses, Michael's about to get ready to leave. He notices a woman several computers down from him with a newspaper article on her screen. He sees part of a headline: Brother and sister from Comfort Cove overcome the odds.

He says, Excuse me.

The woman turns to him, acknowledging without words.

Don't mean to be creepy, I just happened to see Comfort Cove in the headline there you're reading. My family's from there, my pop.

Oh, she says, I've never been, I'm researching info on some of the fish plants around the island for a Newfoundland and Labrador history paper.

Where are you searching for that stuff? I wouldn't mind having a look. Love to learn more about the place.

It's a collection of articles from the Western Star— a newspaper in Corner Brook. She shows him how to get to the database through the library's website, and he thanks her before she goes back to her work.

Michael searches the newspaper database for his grandfather Henry's name, finding nothing at all. He searches his grandmother, Allison, and he gives a shot at searching his mother, Kathleen, neither of whom produce any results. He thinks a while

before arriving at the decision to type his great-grandfather's name in the search engine—Harlan Hynes.

Three results pop up on screen: one dated 1949, and the other two from 1950. He clicks the first one. The headline reads like electroshock therapy, sending fireworks of volts and amperage surging through the neurons in his brain: Harlan Hynes remanded for murder of wife, Allison.

Chapter 3

Partial memories are broken glass— the pieces difficult to put back together, tiny shards scattered everywhere. Sometimes, if you get hold of a shard, it only slips away, and pierces the skin, cutting deep through flesh to the tendons and ligaments. Memories dripping in blood. Michael's whole family is wet with crimson, long scabbed over and dried, a sanguine mountain on top of all they buried years ago. He's not sure if anyone tried collecting all those memories before, or if he's the first to open the wound since it closed.

His lips cracked and he wanted to wet them while he read that newspaper article. He would've drunk Drano right then and there if it got him drunk. There, on a computer screen, was the family history his own family hid from him for a quarter century. Michael barely made it to a bathroom at the university library then collapsed in the corner of a smelly stall. He couldn't smell the faint bleach or the lingering, acrid piss. It took all of him not to vomit from those words in the newspaper, all lined up in a row as if a firing squad ready to put him down: Harlan Hynes Remanded For Murder Of Wife, Allison.

Church basements all had the same scent. This church basement smells of stale communion wafers, dust, and the aroma of mothball tins stashed in forgotten corners until they became part of the potpourri of scents wafting around the rooms downstairs. A thread of coffee runs through it— black, cheap, and strong. It was only coffee like that could take away the longing whiff of booze in Michael's nostrils. He welcomes it now more than ever. He pours himself a styrofoam cup full, holding it in his hands the way a fortune teller might cradle their crystal ball. He sits among a growing group of lonely people like himself.

He listens as others get up to the podium, speaking their troubles to uncomfortable extents. He takes their stories as reminders. Although they're all different, and different from his own, they serve as a series of vignettes reminding him of all his worst qualities. One woman lost both her kids to an abusive husband, all for the fact she lives at the arse end of a bottle. A man with a tragic moustache and a horseshoe of hair left clinging to the back of his skull told the room of love's ruin and the destruction of his marriage due to an unshakeable faith in Jim Beam combined with an inability to remain true to his wedding vows after tying one on. The youngest of them— a twenty-two-year-old alcoholic and crack addict— recounts his short, sad life stuck between a pipe and a hard place, kicked out of every home he'd ever known for being unable to control his drinking and drugging, until he landed in jail and found a worse drug habit in heroin while at Her Majesty's Penitentiary, only to be homeless once they set him free. Michael sips his steaming coffee taking in everyone else's misery to counteract his own. He doesn't bother getting up to introduce himself, knowing he only needs a meeting to quiet the thirst briefly. He won't be back, so it doesn't matter if he stands up there and bares himself to the room. That's what he tells himself— he tells himself a lot of things.

The meeting does nothing except steep him in the hurt of others, making his all the more difficult to take, too. Michael feels the blood of his great grandfather run through his veins— hot and muddy, stuck to his insides. He leaves the meeting having gained nothing. He was never huge on AA simply for the fact a higher power isn't something he believes in, and he's not about to pretend to believe for the sake of others. He feels nothing beyond himself, only his pain, and the pain he's caused others because of his drinking and all the drugging.

He can't remember his last drink, it feels like another life. There's no longer a mouth watering quality to the liquor. He can't remember how it tasted, no memory of what it is to be drunk. This is part of what takes him back to that place, what drew him to a bar where he goes after the meeting. The article about his hidden family history runs behind his eyes like the old paper's being printed all over again, stacks upon stacks running through the machine in his head. He feels like if he keeps thinking about it much longer then he'll bring the past to life and resurrect the family's bones. He already hears their knocking, the dry marrow in them sifting like desert sand, expecting any minute to feel his great grandfather's cold grip on his shoulder.

He's in a bar. He didn't want to go to the club, he doesn't want anybody from work seeing him. Just one, Michael thinks. Isn't he strong enough to sip on a glass then go home? The bartender pours a tumbler of Jim Beam for him by request. All the words from that news story are a bag of Scrabble tiles, a state of jumbled letters. Michael knows what they spell out. He has to put them together across the board for any of it to make sense, if it can ever make any sense. There are other pieces of the past in the way, those

jagged slivers of glass among the Scrabble tiles he can't pick up without butchering himself.

At the age of ten, Michael thought it was loneliness, being an only child, and a sensitive one who didn't fit in with other children his age. His parents made him play hockey. He loved the sport, though he was bad at it, in the beginning. Boys his age were more aggressive, they weren't afraid to knock him around or throw a punch in the back of his helmet when the coaches weren't looking. None of them took him serious. They saw him as no threat to their violent egos. He didn't retaliate. He let them use him as a punching bag, a pylon to slap around the ice with the rest of the orange cones. When Michael was thirteen he was being bullied by another boy his age, another Michael—Michael Lane. This boy made it his mission to hurt Michael, going so far as to slash him at the neck during a home league practice. A weeping Michael— this was a habit of his, crying— went to the dressing room, where his coach sat him down.

Coach Randy said, Mike, you've got to stick up for yourself.

The boy sat there, wiping snot and tears from his face.

You can't let the other boys beat up on you. They'll do it forever.

So, how am I supposed to stop it?

Coach looked at him with an inexplicable face. You got to fight.

But mom told me you don't hit anybody else.

Well, your mom's right, bud. It's just that, some people aren't like me and you.

They can't sit down like this, talk sensible about stuff.

Michael said, Like Mike Lane.

Yeah, people like him. And guys like that, they don't listen to nobody— not me, not their parents. You got to make them listen. Sometimes, not all the time.

Michael wasn't sure what he was hearing. His mother taught him well. His pop also taught him things, like that you shouldn't let someone hit you. Michael felt knotted inside. He also felt the throb of his neck, a puffy lump of skin swelling at the knob of his spine. He was tired of lumps and bruises and welts.

When ten-year-old Michael went back on the ice, he dropped the gloves then beat the boy bloody until a teammate pulled him off. He went back to the dressing room early, full of power. That night he refused to wash his jersey, wanting the white to shine with a permanent blood stain. He used it later as warpaint, reminding the rest of his fellow hockey players and the bullies he wasn't putting up with abuse. Nobody touched or teased him again. All it took was a little blood. The other Michael apologized weeks later, once the shame of being thrashed in front of a stadium of parents and kids from school wore off. The bloody splash stayed in Michael's jersey. He actually wore it to school a few times to show off his newfound male wrath.

Long before Michael found drugs in the eighth grade, he took to stealing glasses of beer laid down on any table at his height when he was barely able to walk, living with his grandparents as an infant along with his single mother. He was like a party trick—everybody found it funny to watch him sip a beer. It was a big tent carnival act, and Michael played the role of tiny illusionist making glasses of beer disappear, seeing how much he could consume before an adult nabbed it from him. Nobody said it was wrong. They didn't tell little Mikey to stay away from alcohol. They only laughed. Making people laugh made him feel happy, clapping his two fat baby hands together, clenching them in tight, hard fists, and squealing loud. Look at the little fella, they said, He's after getting a buzz. They laughed, and everybody moved on. Next time, it was only funnier because he was developing a taste for it. Everyone tried guessing what his favourite

brand of beer was and if he might like a shot of whiskey. Made it easier when he was in junior high and the beer would get passed around while everyone was hanging out in the woods behind the school. Booze tossed back easy, like the familiar taste of candy. Putting anything in his mouth became easy from an early age.

Not long and Michael was fifteen, spending evenings doing anything to find an escape from a reality that was awful to him for some unknown reason. One night Michael was siphoning gas to help fill his buddy's Buick and decided, while they were already into a gas tank, he'd soak a rag to huff. That same night he broke into a car at a used car lot and took a shit in the front seat. Most summers he and a few friends were found in the woods camping, with only hot dogs, sleeping bags, a chunk of hash, and a few bottles of 7-Up to mix with tall bottles of Benadryl— dextromethorphan, or DXM as their buddy Adam called it, was a cheap, favourite buzz of their group, offering a nice sleep after an evening of enjoyable hallucinations.

By the end of high school Michael wasn't living in reality any longer than necessary to pull the wool over his family's eyes, and, against all odds, manage to make the Honour Roll. The days were long, the nights longer. Michael forgot mostly about the depressed thoughts, his world was from one sedated state to the next, little downtime between.

Michael stares down watching liquor roll over the couple cubes in his glass. It makes him hungry, like watching delicious, thick maple syrup drip over pancakes. His stomach rumbles, so he picks up the glass and tosses the rich brown liquid past his teeth and tongue right down the throat. He doesn't taste it. The warmth settles in his gut and he feels a buzz he barely remembers. He needs another one, to savour.

Six whole years, gone in a mouthful.

Somewhere around the time Michael stumbles outside to bum a smoke is when consciousness goes loose and time oozes away. It's a feeling he left behind when he got sober. After a couple years, then a couple more, the feeling's foreign. He imagines returning to the embrace of a former lover— bitter yet beautiful. Same as being pulled into their arms against the heat of their bare skin. He sucks at the rim of a glass the way he once sucked on his lover's toes and nipples, rolling the ice cubes over his tongue like it were her tongue. His caress of the glass's shape reminds him of tracing the lines of a body, fingers running around the curves leaving behind their fiery touch. Before Michael knows it he's on his back. When he looks up it isn't the heaving body of the woman he makes love to which meets his vision. He meets the eyes of a bouncer leaning over him. He can't hear the man, only noticing the stern look on his face.

Then Michael looks around to see he's still in a bar— a different one than he remembers walking into earlier— and then finds his pants undone, boxers down, and the whole of his cock hanging from the open zipper. He's at half mast and wet. He can't remember, in the midst of his drunken fantasy, trying to take a leak on the stools. Neither does he recall having a full erection, which sent a spray of piss up over the bartop at the bartender, spritzing a few patrons. Exposed, soaked, and half conscious, Michael's tossed to the sidewalk outdoors. He lies there in the smell of his own piss as it washes off in the warm summer rain.

Michael forgot rock bottom along the way towards recovery. He forgets how it looked, how it smelled, how it tasted. He forgets the guilt. Thoughts of his great grandfather and the newspaper article disappear. All he thought of was being at church for his First Communion. The priest loomed over him in his musty robes, leaning in with

his wafer, and one of the clergy pushed a goblet of wine at him, urging a sip. He was only twelve years old. The smell of the ancient grapes was tantalising, despite a gulp tasting like motor oil with raisins in it. The Latin verse made the whole act of drinking and eating feel sacred. All those priests with whiskey and homebrew on their lips, breathing it at him while his grandparents talked to them after mass.

Some time later— Michael isn't sure, lost in the drink and all the old memories bubbling up with the booze in his guts— he makes it home. His apartment doesn't look like his apartment to him. He's lived there three years and every day was a sober one. He's never come home to this place intoxicated, stepping into a world that feels at once familiar but entirely unfamiliar. Each step is strange, every touch of his fingers lands on objects he can't recognize. All he does is aim for a bedroom.

He walks into the one he assumes is his, finding himself in a place he doesn't recognize, neither the place or time. The wallpaper looks thirty years old— new, but like it would if it were the '80s. He crosses the fluffy carpet. The bed in front of him reaches up to what looks like the ceiling from where Michael's standing. He feels small. His gut is sick, the sickly smell of flowers and caramel are together on the air. Michael's head hurts. He can see a shadow opening wide on the bed until there's nothing left. He looks behind him and there's only shadow, too.

Michael crashes into his actual bed. He half expects to fall through into some dark void, but he hits the mattress, bouncing a couple times on his face. He wraps himself in the blanket and sheets. In the makeshift fort, he's a kid again, buried in blankets and sheets barricading himself from an unknown force about to tear him to bits. When sleep is about to come, Michael pictures all four of his limbs each tied to a horse. Before

edging off into liquor soaked oblivion he sees the horses run in different directions, quartering him. He comes apart like a soft piñata, candy showering everywhere in bright bursts of neon colour, except the candy isn't candy, it's rancid sewage, and it never stops.

Michael feels like a child, even at twenty-five. His whole life people told him to grow up. He either shows too much emotion or feels things differently than others, and instead of trying to understand him they always tell him to grow up. He's grown now, and it doesn't change him. Fundamentally, he's the same person he always was, and growing up only meant another disappointing birthday party. Others think their two magic words will sprout him like a beanstalk, suddenly he'll shoot up emotionally into another person entirely.

Mainly it's his crying. He cried all the time as a boy, often the same as a grown man. When he was a boy it was tears of a child unsure of himself and the others around him, never knowing who and what was safe. His tears as a man are tears of disappointment and anger, of all the pent up rage he stuffed down over the years each time someone treated him like a child for trying to express what he felt inside.

He finds himself sitting in a bar again, crying. In between sips he wipes his eyes smearing salty streaks over his cheeks. When the bartender returns Michael uses the cuffs of his shirt to get the rest off his face, pretending everything's fine, always pretending everything's fine. He orders another drink, if only to protect his secret weeping from the tall, muscular man with the perfect hair and granite jaw behind the bar. It's always worse when a man sees him cry. Women, even the hardest of them, seem to understand. They know pain and suffering, unlike men. When a man sees Michael's tears it's all they can do to look away fast, in case they make eye contact and an infinitesimal moment of

bonding is unwillingly initiated. It's like men think tears will leave a forever stain on them, so they don't want to cry, nor do they want to get too close to another man crying for fear of being tainted.

There are things buried in Michael he doesn't even remember, burnt out by the painkillers. He feels them come up when he's drinking, it was always that way. After going so long without a drink this time the feeling is stronger. He taps the bar with two fingers again, and, even though this is the first time he's been in this place, after a couple hours the bartender already knows this means two fingers of whiskey.

He feels the vibration of his pocket, a buzzing dread runs through him. He's out of practice telling lies. Once upon a time he was the king of deception, no matter if it was a small or massive lie required. It was his experience as an actor growing up that ultimately prepared him for the shitshow that would be his adult life. He acted in all the typical things as a kid, then as a teenager he was part of the drama club and got big parts in plays like *The Diary of Anne Frank*, and the high school later did a production of *Little Shop of Horrors*— he got to do the voice of Audrey II, the human-eating Venus flytrap, opposite a skinny ginger boy who looked nothing like Rick Moranis and a cheerleader turned drama kid with fresh new braces. People always said, Michael, you'll go far with the acting. Once high school ended he got more interested in alcohol and cocaine. He used his abilities as a thespian to lie to his parents about stealing from their wallets, or to convince his friends he was someplace when he was actually another and wanted to keep them from finding out. He lied to his girlfriends a lot growing up, never wanting to get too close to any of them, or anybody else for that matter. He rarely told the truth, even to himself. It wasn't until after he got clean and sober that he returned to acting, using it more to express himself than he used it to deceive everybody.

Michael is searching for the lies again. This time he comes up empty. He stares at the name on his phone, knowing when he answers Mandy's going to want to know where he is, where he's been, if she'll see him any time soon. He doesn't remember the last time they were together. He assumes recently. He isn't sure how long this bender's been underway, neither does he know for sure when it'll end. He lets the phone vibrate once more and before he can answer it goes dead. Better use the bar's phone before Mandy goes mad, he thinks.

Michael calls and when she picks up he says, How are you, my love?

Fuck sakes, Michael.

Full name means she's angry. His family are the only ones who call him Michael, so he knows she's either being sweet or holding back rage, and he feels her seething through the phone, about to melt the tips of his fingers and curl the lips back to his teeth.

She says, Where are you at?

Downtown. Only for a few minutes.

I hear someone on the VLTs in the background.

I'm only in for a chat with one of the boys from work.

There's a silence that goes on into eternity, so far Michael's near lost by the time he hears her voice crawl back up out of the quiet.

Mandy says, I can hear it on your voice, you're drunk.

I fucked up, okay. I haven't fell off the wagon once since I first give it up. I found out some really shitty stuff about my family.

Why can't you just be a real man and have a drink, she says. All the other guys around here got no problems, and here you are, can't even go out for a glass of beer without looking like an asshole.

He says, What are you talking about? I never did anything.

Georgina was down at O'Reilly's earlier tonight. She saw you bawling, sitting alone in a booth with beer and mixed drinks going down hand over fist. Said you was like some fag, tears in your eyes out in public in front of the whole bar.

Michael doesn't hear another word. He bangs the cordless phone off the top of the bar until the plastic casing shatters and electronic guts spill from the receiver. Little numbers tumble onto the floor in a surreal math equation. Everybody turns to watch him while a fuzzy country singer's voice keeps singing from the speakers above the bar. The bouncer, who probably looked like Patrick Swayze fifteen years ago, waits patiently to see if Michael's about to extend his violent outburst to the other patrons.

Michael looks to the bartender and says, Racket with the misses. He finishes his drink and slides a handful of twenties on the bar. He has to go elsewhere to do the rest of his forgetting.

A call comes through on Michael's phone, the sound cutting through his hazy drunkenness. He wakes up in a bus shelter to the ringing. He can't remember charging it, but feels the lump of the charger in his pocket. He looks at the phone, confused. He assumes it's Mandy calling and ignores it. Across the road from the shelter, a haggard Labrador Retriever sits on the sidewalk with its hind quarters on the concrete and its back leaning against a brick planter. The dog looks at Michael with drooping eyes while licking a patch of dirt from its fur. The wind's direction changes and Michael smells himself: beer, piss, and the raw onion smell of unwashed armpits. His phone rings again, so this time he checks— it wasn't actually a ring, it was an alarm reminding him of an early shift this evening.

Michael tries sobering up at home in the shower. Years ago he functioned well enough as an alcoholic with a job and various responsibilities. He lets hot water steam fill the bathroom. In the scalding fog, he remembers a trip to the camp again, when he stood around a bonfire. Michael, his Uncle George and Uncle Brian, George's son Trevor, and Henry were burning alder branches, rotting wood, and stray bits of garbage and old junk.

Brian said, Henry, you going to get rid of that chesterfield or what?

Jesus, yes, let's be done with that now.

Henry and George went into the camp, coming back out with the raggedy couch that they brought up there a decade before. They maneuvered it through the door as dusty tendrils puffed out of the cushions in the midday sunlight after years of being trapped in the upholstery. They dragged the couch near the fire.

That'll never burn if you puts it in whole, Trevor said. You got to cut that in two. Henry cursed a few times wiping the sweat from his brow. He went over to the shed to find the chainsaw, which he brought back out along with a red can of gasoline. Young Michael watched his pop check the gas. Henry primed the chainsaw, then he hauled on the pull-start. The cord was old, and it took muscle to turn the engine over. Michael saw the veins in his pop's arms bulge as the old man pulled the cord once, twice, three times, and every pull it didn't start Henry screamed a new swear word into the bonfire. He knew not to laugh, so did the rest of them. They all watched quietly. George cracked another beer solely to break the tension, the only other sound being Henry's grunts and curses. Trevor said, I can give her a try. His father nudged him hard in the ribs, enough to make him cough. Henry shot a hard glance back at him, dropped the chainsaw by the bonfire, then went off without a word back inside the camp.

What's he doing? Michael said, looking up at George, who shrugged, struggled out part of a smile, and went on sipping his beer.

Henry emerged from the door carrying his hunting rifle. It was an old Winchester from the late '80s, its walnut stock smoothed down and faded from years of use. He walked towards the bonfire loading a round in the chamber. His eyes never left the chainsaw. His hands manipulated the gun blindly, fingers moving across the dark steel like a musician's appendages over their instrument. He cocked back the hammer, aimed the rifle, and shot a hole through the chainsaw. Fuel poured from the saw's engine. Henry chambered another bullet. This time, he shot and the engine burst into flames—the sound of the shot was loud enough, the saw's metal exploding ripped through the air exciting wildlife in the surrounding woods. Henry's anger broke as the small fire burned next to the bigger one and he chuckled, turning to the others. Everybody else laughed. Michael was scared. He pretended to laugh each time his pop looked.

After his shower Michael checks his charging phone. There's a text message, sent a while ago, from Mandy. He opens it to see only one word: Goodbye.

Cass is getting ready for work when she hears Michael knocking at the door. This was the sound she's come to associate with him: knuckles across wood like a human doorbell. Their physical relationship was a series of knocks at the door followed by things Cass knew Michael wasn't willing to let be known past a closed one. In the last few months she's gotten less thrilled each time the knocks come, no matter how cute he tried to be with the rhythm, whether it was the "Shave and a Haircut" call and response or a melody he made up. Michael's fine with spending all their time together in the dark, in a bedroom, in a car parked someplace desolate, behind the locked door of her office at the

bar after everyone else has gone home— anywhere that won't require him to acknowledge they're physical together. Cass knows it isn't only the fact he's been dating another woman. They've been physical for years, during times when he was attached and times when he wasn't attached. She knows why he won't take it any further, and each time that knock comes a piece of her soul is chiseled away.

She opens the door and says, I wasn't expecting to see you before work.

Michael doesn't say a word, he leans in and sticks his whiskey tongue in her mouth, grabbing a handful of her hair trying to be passionate. She pushes him away, wiping his slobber off her lips.

Jesus, you stink like booze.

I've had a rough day, he says. He goes over to her couch and lies down, kicking off his boots.

Make yourself at home.

So, I found out some crazy shit about my family.

Cass moves his boots out to the porch, then goes back to her pre-work routine.

Michael says, And then I fell off the wagon. So— get this— Mandy just says later on, left me.

That's shitty, Cass says. She stays in the bathroom getting ready.

Yeah, well, I'm not exactly marriage material over here or anything. Barely got any money, and now I'm trying to go back to school, which is only more money I won't have.

Don't be so hard on yourself. You'll be fine.

Michael takes off his jacket and pulls off his shirt as he goes into the bedroom, falling onto the bed. He lies there looking up at the ceiling. He finds a loose smoke on the

bedside table and lights it, laying back on the pillows, puffing from the cigarette occasionally.

When Cass comes in she has a look of disgust on her face she tries to hide. He sees it. She flashes a fake smile to deflect.

He says, How about we fuck before work?

I just got out of the shower a little while ago. I'm in the middle of doing my makeup.

Put on your makeup, I'll mess it up. Bit of smeared lipstick— some sexy.

He reaches out to touch her face but she turns and heads to the bathroom again without a word. His eyes burn a hole through her and his face goes tight with anger. He follows her to the bathroom. He says, What's your problem?

Listen, I don't want to get into this. Just go home and I'll see you at work.

This is fucking ridiculous. All of a sudden you don't want to be at this?

At this— what's this, anyway? This is nothing. You and I fuck from time to time. You know, when you're bored of your girlfriends, or when you're lonely, or sad, or angry, or whatever.

Where's this coming from?

Cass says, From the bottom of my angry goddamn heart is where. You know how I feel about you. I drop everything for you, whether it's at work or here. I was the only one that was around when you and Annie broke up ten years ago, not even your friends gave a shit because you were such an asshole when you were drinking.

That's it, bring up the past.

It's not even past. You can't see that. You're the same person you were when you were drinking, it just takes longer to come out. When you were a fucking drunk at least

you just said what was on your mind. These days it takes a year for you to talk about a problem.

Then let's talk, now. Let's have a conversation.

Okay, how about this one? Let's be together. Maybe I'm crazy, but I still want that. I've wanted it since we first started hooking up. Give it a shot, see where it goes instead of this fooling around that goes nowhere.

Michael hesitates. He says, I don't think we'd work together. We're such good friends, I wouldn't want to spoil that.

Cass swallows back her tears with a hard gulp, refusing to let him see the destruction he's caused. But fucking me works for you plenty. You're so typical it's rotten. Not worried about all the things you worry about with Mandy, though. No worry you don't have a good job with me, hey?

It's not like that, Cass.

The only thing you're worried about is people knowing. Wouldn't be the big sexy man then if people knew we were together, just some guy who can't do better than a fatty.

Not true, he says. I'm not that fella.

What stings most about you is you actually believe you're different. You walk around a head above the rest of the men on the evolutionary scale. You're a knuckle dragger, same as the other cavemen.

Where did this come from? You never said anything like this before.

Not these exact words, no. I've said the same things, in a lot of different ways. And you have too— with your mouth, those hands, your cock. Your body said things to mine.

You and I talked about this before we ever got in bed together. We said it was just for fun, just a bit of sex between two friends.

But you came back to me, every single time, Michael.

He feels like a child each time a woman says his full name, the words of his mother spilling out of their mouth. He loves his mother, and he only ever wanted to give his love to a woman. Everything he does makes the women in his life say his name in that same disappointed tone.

Each time you weren't happy with your girlfriends, who did you run to? Who licked your wounds and everything else you asked?

My life is falling apart here, Michael says. I found out my pop's father was a murderer, and nobody in my family cared to tell me. Then I fall off the wagon one single time in over a handful of years staying sober and Mandy fucks off on me. I don't need this conversation right now.

Cass only rolls her eyes into the back of her head. Michael makes her wish she could roll them back so far she'd go blind, just to not look at his face. He looks disgusting to her. If it weren't her apartment she would run from the place. There was a time Cass barely let him through the door before unzipping him and kneeling on the kitchen floor, unable, unwilling to wait a second longer to have him in her. She stands next to him and just the smell of his skin is sickening. Her stomach heaves. Briefly she's sure she'll vomit. She feels Michael wash off her, like the end of a sickness.

You've got to go.

Unbelievable, Michael says. You can be a real bitch.

Cass laughs straight from the gut. The deep sound echoes in Michael's ears even after he feels his lip split. His feet give way and he crashes back against the railing, the

ass of his jeans scuffing on the top of the concrete steps. He tries to yell at her but coughs on one of the teeth rattling down his throat.

By the time Michael's head clears of the stars enough for him to drive, he has no time to go home before work. He doesn't care, he's too busy worrying about seeing Cass at work tonight. It wasn't going to be the usual sexual tension across the bar while they worked. His lips are swollen in a bulb at the front of his mouth and a thin red crust forms over where the skin broke open like the wide divot of a peach. Everyone notices when he walks into the bar. They say nothing, assuming business as usual. In the world of bouncing, a busted lip is another reason for people not mess around with the doorman, a badge of muscle and blood to wear with pride like any other part of the uniform.

He can't stop thinking of earlier, before the punch, before all the mess. He wanted to take Cass right there on the floor of her apartment. The lust grabs hold of him. His pants feel tighter, uncomfortable, and he rushes for the bathroom upstairs. Only a few minutes before his shift officially starts. Through the smell of bleach barely covering the undercoat of piss staining the bathroom stalls, Michael manages to finish himself off, pounding away into his groin like he's trying to strike oil. He has no other choice. He bathes in the relief, despite knowing it won't be too long before the urge returns, like Sisyphus trying to roll his boulder uphill.

Michael feels the vibration of his phone. He pulls up a text from Julianne: Work tonight? He replies: Yeah. Maybe the worst day of my life too. Her reply is near immediate: What? You ok? He wants to tell her everything. Knowing it will take too long he types back: Call you after work.

Michael plays the memory of Henry and the chainsaw over in his mind. He remembers only ever seeing his pop use the gun prior to that for target practice, or shooting a moose. The saw was an object, not living like an animal, as inanimate as any target. The violence Michael witnessed in Henry's eyes as he shot the engine, along with the harsh explosion, ignited a terror in him as a boy. His uncles tell the story nearly every Christmas while everybody's drunk in his grandparents' basement after dinner. Even Henry looked less amused with it every year before he passed.

There were always corners of Michael he never knew himself. Nobody understands themselves easily— there's no map to being a person. From the first moments of life, Michael remembers feeling outside himself, like him and his experiences were laid out on a table and he was at the same time another ethereal him, watching from above, detached from everything happening to the corporeal him. Those unknown spaces in him grew, and keep growing, since seeing that newspaper article. An unnamable anger sits twisted like a nest of angry snakes in his belly unable to get out since the day he was born. The more he thinks of what his great-grandfather did, the more he worries that nest slithered right up the family tree from its roots. He's afraid his blood is poisoned by rage and violence.

Most Thursday nights are busy at the club. All the students from Memorial and College of the North Atlantic take over George Street, many of the younger ones having landed a coveted Friday off to make every weekend an extended one. Tonight is busier because of the warm weather coming on earlier this year than normal. Pop and techno music pound through the place, and the dance floor throbs loud and sweaty. After the door slows down Michael heads in to the bar to watch over things a while. His job as head of security for

the club means a third of the night on the door, another third split between the upstairs and downstairs bars, and the other third floating around checking on the other few bouncers working.

Have a drink, he thinks. All those bottles behind the bar, just waiting to be drunk. He thinks of going downstairs and piping one of the lines right into his mouth, sucking on the hose until there's nothing left in the tank. He imagines pulling the next woman who winks at him into a stall.

Michael's looking straight at the front of the bar when Cass comes through the door. He watches her head on past him upstairs to her office. Before going in she glances back downstairs at him with eyes that make him feel tragic. She closes the door behind her, and he keeps looking, not noticing a small racket break out on the dance floor between a couple men. When Michael snaps to he calmly walks over to the fuss— two men in their thirties with their polo shirts messed up, one of them with a White Russian all over him— and asks the men to leave. After he's done he goes back by the bar standing near the stairs. His eyes wander up to the closed office door.

Around one thirty in the morning, Michael has to squeeze around people to get a couple fresh cases of beer for the girls at the bar with only inches between one person to the next. When he has the bar stocked again he takes a walk upstairs to check on things. He heads out onto the patio, the night so muggy it feels like the air hangs in place. He's hit with a bitter wash of cigarettes and weed smoke, stale beer and liquor occasionally wafting up. The music muffles as the doors close behind him. The people are just as loud as if the music were right in their ears. A young couple makes out between sharing puffs of a draw. Two rugged older men combine their powers to try and woo a pair of women around their age by ordering apple martinis.

A scrawny kid, no more than twenty, is standing by the side of the patio with one arm reaching around a bigger girl standing next to him. They're leaning into one another, talking, sipping on their drinks. Neither pay any attention to what's going on around them, in their own world. Michael watches the kid grab the girl's ass, his hand barely able to squeeze half a cheek. The kid pulls her mouth in his, they linger for seconds pressed together, a wet smack as they pull apart to nibble and kiss each other's lips, smiling and giggling between bouts.

Watching the couple makes Michael angry. He hates the kid, and hates himself for it. He could be somewhere doing the same with Cass. In his heart, he knows they'd work as a couple. There was no reason they wouldn't— they'd been friends for a decade, they were good in bed, they've taken road trips together and gone to concerts and worked in the same place. They barely ever fight about anything. If they do it's never serious, until today. And it isn't only sex. When they kiss it's passionate, not only the hungry, horny appetite of two people just trying to get each other off for fun. He's treated her like a woman on the side since the moment they originally had sex years before. He won't allow himself to fall for her, or give a serious relationship a chance.

It isn't only Cass. So much of what Michael enjoys doing are things others don't understand. His nights in dark rooms with men and women alike are the secrets he'll keep until he dies. Although he thought he wanted something serious with Mandy, it was only him kidding himself. She was never the type of woman for him. She's thin and toned, her abs like a washboard from four days a week at the gym and a serious diet. Michael's only exercise is sex and fighting. Sometimes the only thing he eats are microwavable pizza subs he buys at the gas station next to his house. She likes to go skiing, boating, and barely rests in the summer. He prefers lying on a beach with a cold can of Pepsi and a

weiner roast at arm's length. Mandy's a woman other men expect of him. She's the type of woman who only likes men like Michael because of how good he is in bed. And Michael's the type of man who's only good to a woman in bed. A woman like her can tolerate his halfway good looks and the gut hanging over his pants when he goes down on them for a half hour before getting to the main event, always making sure he lasts until they're satisfied. Once they figure out the repressed anger and insecurity lurking behind those gorgeous blue eyes, they fast discover his worst qualities.

One of the bartenders says, Mike, can you clear the Labatt's line?

Michael goes downstairs, the heavy steel door to the basement shutting and blocking out all the sound. He stands in silence and tries unclogging the line. Nothing budes. He tries the nozzle. A frothy squirt of beer hits him in the chest, splashing up over his chin and lips.

Goddamn new hires, Michael says. He tries the line again. Nothing's moving. He keeps trying to find a solution, not willing to go back upstairs and tell the bartender the Labatt's is toast for the night because it'll mean an argument about whether the line is actually broken. Nobody ever takes Michael's word, not when he was young or now, like his forehead has Don't Believe Me tattooed across it. His parents never trusted him to make his own decisions, thrusting him into a career he never wanted. His old friends couldn't trust him to stay sober, and, after they tiptoed around him a couple years, gradually faded out of his life. Michael's own family didn't trust him enough to tell him the truth about his great-grandfather, for whatever reason.

The line won't move an inch. Michael flicks the nozzle in frustration getting a hard blast of beer again. Next thing he knows his fist is cracking against the keg's stainless steel, knuckles beating the nozzle head. Blood flicks across the low ceiling of

the keg room, streaking in a bunny trail along the wall. Michael puts an elbow into the drywall behind him throwing punch after punch. If he had a gun he would shoot it, watch the beer pour from the side foaming on the floor. Shoot until it was dead.

He keeps punching. He can't see anything, like the blank black of a movie screen after the credits are done rolling and there's nothing left on the film, dead space behind his eyes. His hand is a lump by the time he's done, nothing but blood, purple bruises, torn skin, and two knuckles, divided by a nasty ditch of missing flesh, crunched flat. He feels weak. His vision returns to normal. He sees the beer spray and splashes of blood. Michael walks out to check the basement. When he sees he's alone, he sits on one of the kegs and cries into both hands. He screams into his palms until his body shakes. The salt from his tears sting the open wounds on his hand.

Back up at the bar Michael tells the bartender to forget the Labatt's. There's no argument like expected once he shows off his hand. He ignores everybody asking what happened. He pulls a bottle from the shelf and pours himself several fingers of vodka, choking them down in one gulp. He pours another bit in the tumbler. He sucks the vodka in his mouth, letting it rest, and puts his knuckles to his lips, letting the liquor touch them. He thinks of Cass's mouth on his hand.

Michael knocks on the office door.

Come in, Cass says. She's expressionless when she sees it's him.

I fucked myself up a bit downstairs. He raises the mangled right hand for her to see.

My god. You've got to go to the doctor.

I'm not going at that. I was already there the other day for my hand. They'll think I'm wild.

That's right. Better to let it stay like it is, then.

You can write it down now, I'm not going claiming Workers' Comp. My own fault.

What'd you do, anyway?

Moving kegs. Nipped my knuckles.

She's sick of trying to drag everything out of him. She's the manager, and she should care, but these bloody knuckles are one set in a never-ending series of mishaps that are his life. She won't keep cleaning his wounds.

Cass says, I'm leaving in a week.

What?

I didn't say anything before. I put my notice in, I only gave one week.

Where you going to?

She can barely look at him. See, if you really gave a shit about me, you'd know where I'm going. Not like I haven't talked about it a hundred times since we've known each other.

Montreal, Michael says.

A small comfort. I landed a job as one of their aviation meteorologists. I start a week from this coming Monday.

Shit. I'll miss you.

No, you won't. You'll miss fucking me.

Christ, Cass— really?

What else are you going to miss about me?

Hanging out. Chats. Smoking a draw. Late night drives.

Sometimes I wonder if you could actually say it to yourself, like alone, in the mirror. Probably not. It's not in you, is it?

Michael's speechless. He feels the swollen side of ham at the end of his arm throb, the pain no match for the one in his ego. He knows every breath is the truth. He wants to return to a dark nothing, where thoughts are few and far between.

Cass says, Until I'm gone I scheduled us on opposite shifts. Rather not see you again before then, if possible.

Michael's in the street when he realizes he didn't say another word before leaving. A sudden pain moves through his veins, lightning from the bottom of his testicles to his stomach. He lurches against one of the downtown shops as he comes up onto Duckworth. Hot fire blazes across his pelvis. Sweat beads on his forehead, his armpits are damp immediately. He sits on the cool bricks of the entrance to a small restaurant, the lights inside long gone dark. He stretches one leg out and the pain disappears. Only for a second, then it's worse. His bladder starts to hurt, after filling to the brim without him noticing through the ache in his balls. Michael doesn't know what to do. He gets up again, grunting against the swelling tenderness around his groin, and walks down towards the Ultramar across from the Delta Hotel.

He gets into the gas station bathroom and unzips himself before piss starts gushing involuntarily. He only gets a little out at a time, like the staccato squirts of a laboured lawn sprinkler. Each push is agony. Every splash is akin to a punch in the gut and rubbing alcohol on a wound. Michael cringes, trying not to yelp through the sore stream coming out of him. When he's finished, he returns the bathroom key to the attendant at the counter. He catches a glimpse of himself in the glass on the way out the

gas station door— hideously pale and moist all over— reminding him of when he finally got clean. After years of cocaine and Demerol he spent two days shaking, throwing up all over and between his legs while he sat on the toilet expelling what little was left in his bowels. The ghostly reflection only cut through Michael's swollen hand and crotch, making him wish he knew how to score drugs like he did years before.

Michael gets back to George Street, walking on toward his apartment on Gower. It's a few minutes before two in the morning. There's more trash in the street than people. Crowds migrate home, down to the Celtic Hearth or to the closest McDonald's, and cabs speed off in every direction with fares to all ends of the city.

A body— a man— comes tumbling out into the road, arms and legs frantically looking for a grip on something, anything to keep him from crashing into the pavement teeth first. Voices yell from inside the Sundance. A bouncer comes out the doors.

Don't let me see you back in here again, the bouncer says. He hawks a snotty spit at the man before slamming the doors behind him.

The man pulls a crumpled pack of menthol cigarettes out of his pocket, rubbing out the creases in a dress shirt that looked like it had never once seen an iron. He looks for a lighter, unable to find one. Michael approaches him from across the street.

Racket in there, was it?

The man turns on his heels with a smile beaming a solitary gold tooth at the side of his mouth. Buddy, you wouldn't believe what it's like tonight. State.

Bad in there on the best nights.

The man says, Why's that, anyway? What is it about this spot?

No idea. Only every week or so I've got to put fists up over our way. Michael pulls a lighter from his pocket, flicking a flame behind his cupped hand.

When the man's cigarette is lit he says, You bounce down here, do you?

Yeah, I'm down to Club T.

Best kind down there. The man hauls a large Ziploc bag from one of the ass pockets in his jeans, unrolling it to reveal a multicoloured wonder of pills. He pours a rainbow into his hands, searching for a specific shape. He looks like a boy at the corner store, sifting through a handful of delicious candies for the best combinations to taste.

Michael says, You're having a time tonight.

That's why they tossed me out tonight. Said I was selling pills in the club. I mean, I was, but I wasn't ripping nobody off or nothing.

Michael laughs. He can barely focus with the sight of those colours, each with their own special corresponding feeling.

The man says, You going at anything now? He holds his bag of treats out in silent offering.

Guess I'm going at whatever you are. Michael already has his hand deep in the bag trying to find the biggest, heaviest pill by touch.

I'm Rob, by the way. People calls me Steak, though.

My name's Mike. Mind if I ask where Steak come from?

I was sent up to Her Majesty's years ago for stabbing a lad in Whitbourne with a steak knife. Got a light sentence because it was self defence, right. Anyway, in the pen some fella found out what I done. Next morning everyone's calling me Steak. Like it sounds stupid, but people in there was kind of scared of me for it. Worked out, too. Nobody ever started nothing with me.

How long you been out?

Few years now. Still another year and a half on probation, then I'm free and clear again, boy. Not bad.

Michael's thoughts wander to the men in the jail. All those bodies crammed together in close quarters. He imagines being caught in a cell with another man where there's nobody looking, and the lights go out. He feels the thrill of those dark rooms he already knows so well— two half naked bodies obscured in sweet shadows before colliding faceless.

Steak says, That one's morphine.

Michael's found a pill, holding it between thumb and forefinger like a precious diamond he's about to examine. Got anything to drink on you? Flask?

Go on. Swallow it, pussy.

Michael looks Steak right in the eyes as he slides the pill past his tongue and into his throat. He lets his mouth fill with spit, then swallows hard. The thick pill works into his esophagus where it sticks. Michael pretends it's going down fine. He feels the burn as the chalky coating wears off.

Good man, says Steak.

At the top of the stairs leading into the after hours bar, Michael feels the morphine hit him. His limbs go heavy. Both eyes roll around his skull, two big pupils knocking from one side of the whites to the other like a game of Pong. He makes it past the doorman into a huge, stuffy room that extends again in a set of stairs up the building another storey. People on ecstasy and cocaine dance wildly in each other's faces while some line up to pay fifteen dollars for a screwdriver at a discrete little bar setup in the corner of the room.

Steak pushes them further, acting as a tour guide to Michael, whose wobbly legs haven't yet adjusted to the morphine's effects. They join the crowd at the middle of the room.

Steak dances aggressively into a circle of women. By himself, Michael tries to move to the music's rhythm, getting lost in the bass and snare drum beating so hard he can't tell if it's the sound system or the heart in his chest. He lets the sound take him over. His limbs feel it out, his body twisting and turning more with the song as he picks up pace. He becomes a blur in the midst of the other dancing bodies. He only stumbles when Steak grabs him.

Come on, we goes.

Steak takes Michael into the men's bathroom, past a few guys at the urinals into an empty stall. They shut the door, and Steak roots around for his Ziploc bag. He takes it out, fishing for a smaller bag inside the bigger one. He pulls out a dime baggy packed full of white powder. Steak has a grin on his face. Michael responds with a lick of his lips, sniffing back hard in case any snots might get in the way. They both blow a nostril free, preparing themselves. Steak wipes the top of the toilet tank, then he cuts up a few fat lines and offers the first one to Michael. After Michael snorts one he leans back against the stall, the old rush gripping him in the hug of a close friend he hasn't seen for years. He's somewhere else— not the sticky stall of an after hours club, someplace beautiful and comfortable far from the filth.

Steak says, There you go, loves it.

Michael stays leaning against the side of the stall, putting a foot against the other to keep himself from tipping over. The cocaine and morphine intertwine. He feels a warmth tickle his skin all over. He watches everything go dark, and he can't tell if he

passed out or if he's only blacking out momentarily. It isn't until Steak's voice breaks through Michael understands the power went out.

Oh, that's perfect. Line on the toilet and I can't see shit.

Michael can't see the shape of himself, nor that of Steak. The black in front of his face relaxes him, the familiarity a balm over his skin. He instinctively reaches a hand out. He feels Steak's shoulder, and without thinking puts a hand on his hand, running fingers through his hair.

What the fuck?

Sorry, man. Freaking out.

You're burnt. Steak chuckles, too occupied with trying to figure out how to snort a line of coke in the pitch black to register anything strange.

The stall shakes. A voice from the other side says, Listen, you two fruits. Just because the lights are out don't mean you can blow each other in here.

Fuck off and mind your business.

Forget him, Michael says.

Listen to your boyfriend, my buddy.

Steak says, You're no buddy of mine, asshole.

True enough. If you were my buddy you'd be over here tonsils deep, I suppose.

Steak erupts with a suddenness that frightens Michael. He shakes the stall, like a great animal cage trying to shake down its bonds. He shouts, near indistinguishable. Michael only picks out every second or third word—the same one repeated, its hard g sound resonating off the bathroom walls. He has to stop Steak from barrelling through the door, or right through the stall itself. Michael feels the heat coming off him in a violent wave. He can't stop Steak from putting a shoulder down and ramming the wall separating

the stalls. He's not sure what happens next because Steak is pulling him out into the club and through the crowd. They get out on the patio and over the stairs when Michael wonders if anyone got crushed beneath the fallen wall. He just laughs and looks to Steak, who's laughing with him. Pain in his stomach comes from out of nowhere. Michael doubles over, puking hard onto the concrete. He feels better, but the sight of his tooth in the vomit reminds him of all things inescapable.

Chapter 4

1949

The wind whispered between the cracks of the house. It worked through his skin, weaving around the cracks in his bones urging him to go. His hands were sopping wet. He wiped them in the pillow next to her head. Her mouth stretched open, both eyes closed. He thought about resting his head against her chest, just one last time. Instead, Harlan went to the basin and took the little crying boy then put him right next to her in the bed.

Moments later the crying died out. Harlan passed through the house and out the front door like a ghost. His quiet, still wife, the upset child, they were all behind him.

In the pasture across from their house, Harlan felt the high grass dampen his shirt across the belly. Next, his pants got soggy, hanging heavier at his ankles. All of a sudden he touched his eye—the place it used to be. It'd been the longest he went without touching it in ages. His finger circled around the fleshy, scarred divot where it used to be.

He wondered, Where will you go? Al Bargery and his wife Clara would see him if they were out at the horses. He decided to go down around the cove, so long as nobody was out in boat. He might be able to hide there.

Morning still sat cold and dark above the world. Fat clouds hung in the sky. Harlan moved further along the wet field. He felt trickles of dew slide down his rubber boots, working between his toes. Sweat stung his heels, their skin dried out and cracked in places like pieces of hard tack.

When Harlan made it to the trees he ducked in under their canopy. The earth was all but without sound. Somewhere among the fallen birch and the archways of alders ran the pitter-patter of a tiny animal. Probably rabbits, he thought. Then one poked its head out from under the nearby bush, beady eyes stared into Harlan's single, slick eyeball. The little animal blinked at him three times. Then, quick as it appeared, it was gone. Like it knew all about Harlan.

Harlan thought of his father, James— a Welshman who came over and settled on the West Coast of Newfoundland before eventually moving to Twillingate. It wasn't often James spoke of home. He only spoke Welsh when he was angry, except when he would sit with little Harlan in his lap on the porch staring out across the bay towards the ocean, repeating the word *hiraeth* under his breath. They would stay that way until James seemed sad, then he'd send his son off inside and stay on the porch. When he came back inside he was always in a dark mood, and then the drinking started.

Harlan never asked his father what *hiraeth* meant, afraid of incurring the wrath of James's late night drunk. He wondered until he was sixteen and working in the lumber mill, where an old lad whose grandmother came from Wales told him the word's meaning. By then, his father was dead. Harlan wondered if James was going back to the

hiraeth he spoke of out on the porch, if the home he never thought it possible to return to were on the horizon.

The main road wasn't far off. His wife felt so distant, in another life.

He dragged himself to the road's edge. After a look up and down to each end, Harlan crossed to the other side and into the woods. The cove sat just a mile away through a thicket of black ash trees.

Harlan finally pushed out of the darkened forest reaching the jagged shoreline. His legs ached, his feet were swollen. Each hand throbbed with heat, every crease chapped and red. He fell soft on both knees in seaweed at the ocean's edge. Harlan looked out at the sun pushing up into the sky high above the fog across the water. For a moment he was completely blinded.

Noise came in from off the water. He squinted to see where it came from, and his eye slivered to the size of a hangnail, the other socket quivering like an animal's open maw.

Aye, a voice said. Aye, Harlan.

A boat carried the voice closer through the light haze on the cove. Aboard were two middle aged men, both clad in flannel. One man smoked a dark wooden pipe and big grey puffs lifted out of it, curling back over his face into the air then gone. The man calling out leaned against the bow of the boat, he looked hard towards the shore then leaned back towards his friend. He said, That's him. You knows it is.

Harlan saw the boat more clearly. The man smoking was Mart Head, local crab and lobster trapper. At the head of the boat stood his friend Kevin Hann. Their families knew Harlan and Ally well.

Harlan, my son, Kevin said. What are you at out here today? He hopped into shallow water, pulling the boat with him.

Harlan moved back from the shoreline. Seaweed clung to him and he tried to brush it off.

He only mumbled under his breath.

Mart stepped into the water, sloshing his way to the rocks. Where you to? He snapped a finger.

Ally, said Harlan.

The look on Kevin's face was uneasy. He pulled the boat all the way ashore and started gathering driftwood. He kept an eye on Harlan the entire time.

What about her? Mart said.

Ally— she's up at the house.

Right on. Mart laughed a little. And the boys are up at the house too, hey?

Harlan went silent. The flesh pocket where his right eye once sat pained. It shot up into the back of his brain. His skull was a candle holder, the pain running like hot wax down his neck.

The look in Mart's eyes changed. You listening? Scaring us, me buddy.

Sorry, Mart.

Mart looked at Kevin a moment, then back to Harlan. You seems awful shook up.

Yeah. Suppose I do.

Soaked to the bone, it looks like, Mart said.

Harlan rolled his head down looking at his wet pants and shirt. Was out walking the main road. Thought it might start raining.

A hard laugh slipped out of Mart's lips. Better off on the road by the look of it.

Kevin lit a match a few feet away. The slight crack of its head bursting frightened Harlan. He jumped, startling Mart, and Kevin's face filled with worry.

Mart said, Jesus. Come on, Harlan. We're taking you back to the house. Enough of this.

With that, Harlan ran. His feet slipped and his ankles twisted on the blanket of rocks between the water and the trees, but within seconds he was a ghost, lost behind the forest's veil.

Somewhere behind him Harlan imagined Kevin and Mart speechless. Neither of them would understand. Harlan disappeared like fog rolling back to oblivion, evaporating to nothing. Along the inner reaches of the forest he ran through waist high grass, bony armed alders grabbing his clothes. Towering stands of wet fescue rocked back and forth like a pendulum on the wind.

Harlan felt the heavy brush slap against him as he rushed past. Their rhythmic knock against his body gave way to the musical pattern of pulp and weighty bits of sawdust against him, something he once knew, in another life. From the depth of the forest he was transported. He felt and smelled the old room at the sawmill. No longer was the damp grass giving off a sweet, moist smell. His nose filled with a spiced warmth, clinging to him, filling his chest with rustic beauty. Out in the middle of the woods, resting absent minded against a fallen mossy birch, if only for a moment, Harlan felt himself return.

Harley. A voice rang out over the treeline. Birds scattered in a tiny fleet, flapping out into the afternoon sky.

The mill, Alice, even the voice which was no doubt either Mart or Kevin— everyone aside from himself existed in another world. In this one, there was Harlan with his one working eye and the other a reddened crater, and there was the life he took. Everything else was out of reach.

The voice said, Harlan. It reverberated off one tree, then the next, and so on, until nothing but its sound filled the forest. It was Mart. He and Kevin never stopped looking. Harley, you got us spooked. Time we goes up to the house.

The further into the woods Harlan went, the further he lost his bearings— on himself and the world. All he saw in front of him were tree trunks, patches of moss, and branches whirring past. From out of the dark green blur emerged a rocky patch ahead, a slope headed up above the trees. Eventually the voices lost their way behind him. Harlan imagined Kevin, nervous and lagging behind Mart. And Mart— bless his soul— would keep on going until he figured out what went wrong. Then somewhere along his trail one of them just decided to let him go. Soon they'd both seem him again. One way or another.

Harlan crept up on top of the rocky hill. His legs pained worse than before. His back felt as if it leaned in different angles, at the top and the bottom— a human abstract. Yet he made it over the terrain, scuttling past jagged edges of land from side to side like a crab. Harlan's condition wasn't usually fit for climbing. Today, his raggedy body would take him anywhere he needed to go.

At the top, Harlan's own edges became the edges of the rock and he stood looking out at the ocean. Hiraeth, he said. He moved along the rim of the cliff. From the cliff to the water there was nothing but rocks. In a blink he saw his body, cracked like an egg, lying there across them.

Harlan was hypnotized by the ocean's gentle sway. He finally thought about Alice again. Far back in the darkness of his mind, there sat his wife, her face beautiful, ripe again. Not drained of colour, like some mannequin in a department store in the city. Harlan saw Alice the way she was a couple years ago, before Henry was born— happy, her soul beaming through her skin. He remembered the time before the last time they were in bed together, lying like seeds in the earth connected at the root, bodies intertwined. He remembered her open mouth and the way her eyes closed, as the arch in her back extended, her stomach went into the air, and his pleasure was her pleasure and their pleasure was one.

But all that went out of him with the tide, trickling from the inner parts of his soul. Harlan saw Alice again, except this time as she really was, as he left her. Or, how he remembered it. His insides felt cold, the clothes on his back matted wet to his skin. A breeze rolled up over the craggy hill wrapping around his shoulders, then his waist, chilling him worse.

The thought of tumbling down over the rocks toward the water had passed. Then he remembered exactly what he'd done, every solitary second of it. He knew where he was headed after this little escape— from life and death, from reality. He only wanted a little more freedom before it was all gone.

Harlan heard more voices from back down in the trees. Not just Kevin or Mart— other people, and lots of them. Their sounds— the talking and the twigs snapping beneath their feet— made it up to where Harlan stood at the cliff. Hearing this he wavered at the edge, wobbling a little. His knees felt weak.

An hour later, Harlan pushed through yet another thicket of trees. This time he was out past the cove, nearly out of Comfort Cove altogether. In the afternoon light shadows already crawled over everything. A murky sun lurked in the sky. The voices were still out there in the forest behind Harlan, but distant, and though many they were only a hum to him. Only the sound of his heart pounded in his ears, pulsing in his throat at the Adam's apple, and the delay of guilt beginning to throttle in his veins. Harlan caught the moist scent of sawdust. His nose perked up, along with his brain. The smell led him in a trail throughout the woods. He was a lost Hansel with no Gretel, not even a witch. Hansel alone in the midst of nowhere.

After another mile, Harlan came to a small cabin. Outside, a man worked with an axe in one hand, a saw resting on a waist high makeshift table. There were already many pieces of sawed and sanded wood set aside. The man's beard shined with sweat. He looked tired, but he never stopped working. His thick arms and legs carried him from one place to the next, picking up wood and hauling it, setting the next chunks to be split. Harlan watched on from the treeline, and he waited to see the man swing the axe. He saw himself swing it. He saw himself at the sawmill, splitting a jam from out the machinery, freeing those big, gnarled teeth to keep chewing wood.

But there Harlan was, standing on a limping set of legs by the trees, looking on at another man, a whole one, who could do all the work he'd never do again— a man who'd never do what he's done. Again, Harlan saw Ally's big, soft eyes looking at him. He could hear her, all the things she said to him after they took his eye out at Twillingate Hospital. Time passed and her eyes were cold and dry, and hard. They stared at Harlan, he watched them pass over his own remaining eye. She could barely look at the hole in

his face, not after so much time had passed, so many hard, jagged words exchanged between them.

Skipper.

Harlan didn't hear the man at first. After the fog of memory passed he heard him the second time around.

My friend, you okay? The man stayed away somewhat. His eyes were kind and his concern evident.

Where are we to?

The man moved closer a step. Out by the main road. You're Harley Green. Sure I knows you. What are you at over this way?"

Panic rose in Harlan's chest. Out for a walk. Got lost in the brush.

Well, if you wants we can go inside, sit down for a cup of tea.

Before the man said any more Harlan turned, quick, and ran toward the powerlines. He called back over his shoulder to the confused man, Take care.

Later, along the main road, Harlan crept invisible among the long grass and alder bushes in a deep ditch. Light began to leave the earth and darkness crowded in. Every so often a truck rattled, its headlamps cracking through the early dark, burning over everything ahead before slipping out of sight. Harlan poked his head out to watch them go, the red of the tail lamps casting him in a red glow.

Once he managed to make it unseen over the road, Harlan found himself no further than before, no particular destination in mind. He only wanted to go somewhere, to lay his head down and find one last place to rest before the inevitable shatter of his life into pieces. Until the quiet of his mind was all there would be, the only thing aside from

concrete and steel and three meals a day. He thought briefly before going northeast, out towards Campbelton.

The walk saw day finally drift completely into night. Harlan's shadow disappeared and he did, too. All that remained was him and the hidden animals amongst the trees, as he moved further away from the road into the pitch black. He picked up his pace fading into the middle of the forest.

A mile out from Comfort Cove, Harlan curled up on the top floor of a farmhouse barn he stumbled onto in the countryside. Beneath him stirred several cows, a horse, as well as a rough looking dog watching over a litter of fresh new puppies and a sleeping mother. Not one of them appeared to care about his being there, only noticing briefly then going back to resting in the night. Harlan laid in the hay and it soaked up the wetness in his clothes, slowly warming his extremities. And somehow sleep came.

Dreams brought a vision of Ally. Her frail and lifeless corpse now replaced the warm version of her body once stretched out next to him in bed. A skinny skeleton shambled towards Harlan. He was trapped in the dreamy four walls of his quaint home, no way out. She came for him, hands stretched out to meet his face. He backed up until he hit the wall abruptly. Her mouth opened wanting to ask why, only no sound escaped—Ally's throat was bruised, its windpipe bent and crumpled. She croaked the most wretched sound Harlan had ever heard in his life. When he woke after just minutes of sleep, the sound echoed from his ear canals right down through the neck, the chest, before plummeting into his guts.

Harlan came away from his dream with a sick stomach. He felt the urge to vomit, but only leaned over the top floor of the barn retching into the balmy air. The haggard

dog perked up, leaving the mother and her pups to walk up the small set of stairs. It limped on its way and leaned to one side as it went. Its face was long, the fur around its jowls an unkempt beard. One of its eyes was different from the other, the colour gone and a silvery streak running through the iris.

A run of drool slipped from Harlan's mouth, the retching done. The dog stopped close, then sat his hind legs down with a pain in his face. Harlan frowned, as if the pain were his own. To see such a sorry animal left out in the barn on a cold, wet night tore up his heart.

Come here, boy, said Harlan. What happened to you? He reached a hand out slow towards the dog. The animal's one bright eye looked him in his own. Harlan moved towards the dog. Then, when the time felt right, he reached closer and pet the dog. Harlan felt the clotted fur, running his hand down and feeling the old boy's skinny ribs jutting out from between the hairy tufts. The dog shifted himself lazily until he pressed against Harlan. The two laid together in a bed of hay, and the moon beamed harder in the sky, peeking through the cracks of the barn and falling across their faces.

The whirring of the machines throbbed in Harlan's head. He smelled nothing but sawdust and sweat. He could barely concentrate. Every thirty seconds another log went onto the carriage and the saw blades whined through from end to the other, a piece of lumber clattering to the side with the rest of the stack, and the carriage moved side to side until the log was entirely cut. That day was cold— early November and the temperature was already low enough to freeze over the lake by the mill. Even inside the mill it was chilly, enough for Harlan to put on a light coat. Then he got warm after a while. He started to sweat, and it was colder again. He was putting on the coat, taking it off, putting it on.

Harlan didn't notice how tired he felt. Not until he was taking the coat off and saw a piece of loose wood stuck around the bottom of the machine's blade. He threw the jacket over a hook on the far wall, grabbing one of the steel rods from the storage locker. He used the rod to push the loose wood free. But it started twirling around the sides of the blade, and Harlan was sure it was about to flick loose at him before it went to bits completely and disappeared into the mouth around the blade.

Lord Jesus, Harlan said. He looked around to see if there was anybody watching. Lucky for him the only person nearby was the other operator, Terry Folkes, and he was too busy on the carriage to pay attention to what Harlan was doing. He got back to work watching the next log go onto the machine. The monotony soon had him back in the rhythm, like nothing had happened.

After a few more logs Harlan got cold again. He rubbed his hands together, rubbed his forearms and his biceps. He felt his fingers getting weak as he clenched two fists, balling them up and shoving them in his pockets. His body couldn't get warm and his whole frame started to shake. He walked around the saw while the next log went on the machine, trying to keep moving. The shaking wouldn't leave him, his bones knocked together.

The machine's conveyor made a grinding noise when Terry came back towards Harlan's end. The blade stuck into the log, and the carriage brought up solid, forcing Terry to put it in park. Harlan was startled. He quickly noticed there was bark and a shard of wood with a burr on it squat against the blade and the opening in the machine below it, leaving nowhere for the blade to move.

What is on the go with this today? Harlan said. He walked over to get the rod again.

I don't know. Been like this all week. I told the fellas in the office, and you knows what they said.

Yeah. They're going to have someone come in from Grand Falls to look at it.

Terry said, Exactly. He laughed. They were always getting the same answer when anything went wrong with the machines. After that it would be a week, sometimes two, and a man from town would come in, check it out. It took another couple weeks then, unless it was absolutely urgent, for the right parts to be ordered, or for the proper repairs to be finished. Terry and Harlan knew this would be no different. So long as they could still get the work done there wouldn't be any scramble by management to dole out any money.

Harlan came back over to the machine. He started chipping away at the bits of bark around the blade. Once he had a better view of the wood, he pushed at it trying to snap it in two. He wasn't expecting it to be so hard. He pushed but there was no give. The burr in the wood was solid. He jabbed with the rod several times. He saw the wood split open. It was about to loosen and fall through.

But half the world left like a candle snuffed out. Harlan heard everything around him—the whir of the blade starting up again, the saw cutting into the log and the carriage moving, and Terry said, Christ, are you okay?

Harlan couldn't speak. He heard a sound come out of him that he'd never heard before. An animal noise. A wounded dog's howl. He howled and howled at Terry. He wanted to tell him he couldn't see. But Harlan didn't speak dog, and neither did Terry.

Sit down, Terry said. He went scuffling around over across the room.

Harlan sat where he was, feeling the machine behind him and pressing his back against it. The hum and the vibration of the metal calmed him down. He felt the blood

running over his cheek and into his beard. It was hot, thick like syrup. Colours swirled and there was an open spot in his vision, glimpses of light filtered through the darkness in his injured eye. He blinked to try getting the blood out. It stung. His eyelid couldn't close, squeezing against what felt like a thick splinter of wood stuck into the corner of the socket.

Terry came back with a rag and a bottle of rubbing alcohol. He wiped away some of the blood on Harlan's face.

This is going to hurt now, Terry said. He dipped a small bit of alcohol on the rag, then dabbed light at the corner of the wound on the eye. Harlan winced, but made no sound. He took whatever pain came, watching Terry, a face soaked with sweat and worry. When it was finished, Terry helped Harlan up off the floor and they went out towards the front of the mill.

Terry said, Going to take you up to the doctor. Probably have to go into Grand Falls for surgery by the looks of it.

Harlan stopped them in their tracks. He grabbed hold of Terry, shaking him. Will they take it?

What?

Me eye. Will they take it?

I don't know, Terry said. That's why we needs to get up to see the doc right quick. We got to go.

Terry hadn't stopped the machine. He was so frantic it didn't occur to him. It certainly never occurred to Harlan. All he heard was the sound of the saw running, not coming up against any wood but whirring away into the otherwise silent cutting room. It was the sound that would chase him the rest of his life. Until Harlan was in the truck with

Terry, he was afraid the blade was going to come alive, step out of the machine, and chase him across the road. He kept looking back behind them as they drove off towards the centre of town.

The scream of the saw moved from sleep into waking life. Harlan came out of the nightmare wailing. He looked around, just to make sure the blade hadn't finally caught up with him. It wasn't morning, but the dark sky started to break into a bloody hue. Pink stretched across the distant sky, while a deep blue still sat high over top. Harlan saw the dog moving away from him headed back down to the bottom of the barn. Noise outside brought most of the animals alive. Their shuffling around against the wooden floor and the scratching of the hay made Harlan stiffen up alert.

When the barn door opened only one man came through it. A tall man with a handlebar moustache. The badge on his heavy jacket said Newfoundland Ranger Force with the crest of a caribou head. The word *ubique* was printed on the arm. He didn't have a gun drawn. It sat at his hip in its holster.

Hello, the ranger said.

Harlan tried not to make a noise.

The dog greeted the ranger, licking his hands and rubbing around at his legs. I know you're in here somewhere. Heard you from outside. Harlan, is it? He waited a moment, petting the dog. He eased his way up the stairs to the barn's top floor, taking each step slow, steady. Well, Harlan, we've been up to your place. There's a search party out looking for you. I think you know why.

Not a sound came from Harlan. The voice in the back of his mind rose up, it told him maybe he ought to run, hop down from one of the windows up there and maybe, if

luck would have it, not break a leg. Live to see another day out in the fresh air and the damp grass and the crisp mornings down by the water. But he didn't listen. He laid there in the hay where he woke.

We found Ally, said the ranger. She was in rough shape. Not sure what happened, but listen now: we haven't got to make a scene. My revolver isn't coming out. Not unless you want it to, anyway. Can you do me a favour before I comes any closer? Tell me if you can hear me.

Call me Harley. His voice croaked.

Okay, there we go. I'm coming all the way up now— is that fine with you, Harley?

No worries, my son. Haven't got neither weapon. Not even a nail to be found up here.

The ranger came up over the stairs into view. He moved closer and kneeled next to Harlan, whose head was propped up against a lump of hay.

How many's out there now? Harlan said.

Few hands on the go. Some of them is mad, too.

Like they would be.

Harley, one of the fellas told me you used to work down near Lewisporte at the sawmill. Said you was a lead hand on the pulp crew.

Yes, sir, Harlan said. He straightened his back and sat up. Was down there until about six months ago. Racket one day at the machine. Had to take me over to Twillingate. Eye come out same day.

The ranger shook his head with a grim look. Sorry to hear. Hard luck, that is.

If not for hard luck, I'd have no luck at all.

The ranger was moved by the sight of Harlan— half blind, alone in the damp hay of the barn with the smell of animal piss and shit and mould. He could only nod at the man.

Harlan got up on his own. The ranger only offered him a hand going down the stairs because he extended one for help. Otherwise, he let Harlan walk outside without restraint. The ranger walked next to him over to a dusty Mercury Eight parked close. He put Harlan in handcuffs then settled him into the back seat.

Harlan watched the ranger outside the window talking with a few men from Comfort Cove who drove in behind him on the way. Harlan watched their mouths move in mumbles faded through the glass. He could only see the angry shape of their words. Behind his eyelids when they closed, he saw Ally's dead, open mouth.

Then the old dog pushed his way from out of the barn, the door swinging behind him. He walked past everyone, edging around the Ranger and the men, and stood next to the car. He looked at Harlan. Their eyes stared into one another again. This time, the dog looked on in pity. He saw Harlan alone in the backseat, head leaning against the window. The dog didn't stay long for fear of Harlan's sadness infecting him.

The Mercury Eight pulled away from the barn, Ranger at the wheel. On the ride into town, Harlan let his head rest hard against the glass. He looked out at the gory sky above, streaking over the earth, over everything, and closed his weary eye to the world. He spent the bumpy ride thinking of the final smile he saw on Ally's face. It was interrupted by her motionless blue mouth, throat arched to the sky screaming in silence, calling to him from across town.

Chapter 5

When St. John's starts to fade in the rearview of Michael's car his shoulders relax, a tension slips off him, the city's spider web untangling from his bones. He rarely goes home— not entirely by choice. A few hours gas was less he had for rent and food. After Alberta it got harder to survive, and small comforts like driving home, even for the holidays, were nearly distant memory to Michael.

This trip is different. And it gives him time away from the city's cold weather, the cold people. Everyone back home says they want to get away when they're young, planning big things for after high school. Then they all migrated out to St. John's, where they were followed by all the same blood feuds, irrational small town hatreds and hangups, all those familiar faces of one's hometown traumas. Nothing changes, except the big fish from the tiny pond begin to drown, lashing out worse than before, except the facade of a friendly Newfoundland and Labrador is muffled in the mad, suffocating labyrinth of the city.

Not that home in Grand Falls-Windsor is any better, except it's authentic in its faults. People there have long come to terms with the town— they understand it, it understands them. There's a naked silence when Michael arrives. The first thing he sees before the overpass by the Mount Peyton Hotel is the stoney frame of Christ emerge over the coming hill, erected tall and crucified over the cemetery, the dead in quiet awe of its presence. All Michael thinks about each time he sees the dying Jesus with its arms stretched out— more a welcoming hug than the arms of an executed man— is having sex with his high school girlfriend Sarah on top of one of the graves, high on mushrooms, during the summer before Grade 12. The only time he ever went to church was on

Christmas Eve years ago with his nan, and after that night in the cemetery he would spend the night before Christmas in a pew, trying to avoid eye contact with the stained glass windows, their various religious figures staring in judgement, seeing under the skin to his blasphemous core.

Michael stops into the Shoppers Drug Mart at the intersection near the cemetery. He picks up a fresh bouquet of flowers and has them wrapped in plastic, a spritz of water the clerk sprays on them runs along the clear wrapping in teary streaks. Michael walks from the parking lot over into the cemetery. On the way, his phone buzzes. A notification that he missed the doctor's appointment he made last week. He forgets it for now.

It's been several years since he was home, more since he last visited his grandparents' plot. His nan passed and then his pop— after she was gone, it was only nine months and he went to find her. Michael manages to make it through the Anglican part of the cemetery and into the sprawl of Catholic graves. He makes his way down to the far end, then spots the unmistakable crooked tree hanging over the area where the family had stood, hand in hand, twice in the same year, each leaning on the next person as they all went weak with grief.

One of the young cousins said, Is Pop up in Heaven? With Nan? Michael's mother wept, only mustering a nod to her little niece.

I can't wait to go, too, Michael said.

Don't ever say that. His mother grabbed hold of his shoulders, shaking his frame the way she might a vending machine unwilling to let go of her purchase, hoping to shake loose the depression lodged in his heart.

Michael stands over the grave and lays the flowers against the stone, propped between his grandparents' names etched into the marble. He holds himself in a loose hug

as a cool breeze starts lowering the summer afternoon into evening. He spends a quiet moment with Nan and Pop before walking back to his car.

Michael's mother Terri is on the porch waving her arms like she's signalling an airplane down the runway, the smile on her face bright in the low afternoon sun.

Hi, honey, she says. The car door isn't even open yet.

Hey, Mom. Some good to see you again.

I know— Jesus. She hugs him tight around the neck, planting a kiss on his beard. I used to hate your facial hair because it covered up that sweet baby face, but honestly I likes it now.

They head inside. Michael sees not much has changed, aside from the new dog, and a new boyfriend named Rick his mom's been seeing since last year after she met him online, though they weren't yet living together. He's from Gander, so they spend time between there and Grand Falls when their schedules allow. Michael sees Terri's in a good place, also meaning she hasn't yet said a word about work, money, or the potential of going back to school. She's preoccupied with filling him in on all the extended family. She has no idea her son came with questions about the family tree, not prepared for the ghosts he's preparing himself to confront, nor the tragedy he's about to exhume.

Uncle Rod's not great, either. Diabetes is finally catching up with him.

Poor fella, Michael says. He still down in Norris Arm?

Yes, him and his daughter Jean are both there, they live a few doors down from each other, she got a kid of her own all grown up, going off to Grenfell next year to study in Corner Brook, I think.

Time flies, hey.

Oh, my love— you got no idea. Wait until you're my age.

Sure you're not old yet.

You're still sweet as ever. You want something to eat?

Starved.

Awkward silence lies over top of the dinner table. Terri knocks dishes together lightly, clinking a fork or knife off her plate and her glass in a passive-aggressive symphony. She only looks up from moving the food around her plate to sip water, sneaking glances at her son across from her. Michael can't stop looking. His head hangs over his dinner, eyes straight at his mother. He wonders what she's thinking. He's never been able to tell— not as a boy, not now, whatever he's become.

Michael worries she can read his thoughts. When he was a boy he felt like his head was a satellite broadcasting everything he thought, so he waited until he was all alone to think about the bad stuff he imagined beaming out of his skull all day in public. Always the same image. At least it has been the last fifteen years. A terrifying zoetrope spinning around his brain, only occasional flashes at all perceptible.

Are you okay? Terri says.

Michael looks up from his plate. His skin is pale and his eyes are wide enough they could fall from their sockets and roll into the food.

You look awful. You want to lie down?

The room whirls and Michael grips the table. It isn't the dining room in his mother's house. The walls are a muted pink colour instead of the powder blue it is usually, and what was hardwood only moments ago is shag carpet Michael feels under his socks. The dining room table, Terri, dinner, all gone. A bed sits where the table used

to be, quilts atop quilts, and on the wall behind its headboard hangs a mahogany crucifix, its Christ hanging on for dear life against the wall's pink sunset fading behind him on the sky.

Terri says, Honey. Her hand on Michael's arm brings him back to the table, the dining room, all as it was before. My god, I thought you were going to pass out in your dinner.

Me too. He shakes his head to rattle himself free. He tries to keep eating. His stomach is turned, a sick pit opening in his gut. Did you ever have a pink bedroom?

What— like when I was a girl?

No, when I was young.

Don't think so. I wouldn't have painted anything that colour myself.

You were never real religious, were you? That was mostly Nan, hey. Did she have a pink room?

Terri says, This is strange. You're being weird.

I'm sorry, I was just thinking about Nan and Pop's old house, I guess.

Neither of them had a room like that. She finishes eating and takes her dishes to the kitchen, followed by her son. Michael sees the frustration in her face, he hears it in the faint grunts and groans under her breath as she cleans. They had barely spoke about anything and already she was sick of talking.

I know about Pop's dad.

Michael wasn't planning on blurting it out. He feels the words leave his lips like snake's venom. He doesn't like the way she was looking at him, he hates the tone of her voice when she thinks he's spending too much time on something she believes is foolish. His words stop her in her tracks. Terri turns from the sink, unable to totally look him in

the eyes but looking at him nonetheless. She looks halfway between wanting to punch him or hug him.

Oh, my love. I only found out when Nan died.

When were you going to tell me?

To be honest, I wasn't.

I already don't know my real father, Michael says. And then you all hid this from me, too. It's like I don't know anybody.

That's just how it was. I never wanted to upset you, there was enough going on in your life by the time you was a teenager. You didn't need any of this in your head.

Upset me? How did you figure it was going to feel never knowing?

Better than you going off the deep end. You spent high school fucked up on drugs— who knows how you would've reacted.

But you lied. Everybody lied.

No, we never, we just didn't talk about it.

Michael says, That's the same goddamn thing far as I'm concerned.

Terri goes to the fridge and pulls out a bottle of beer, barely cracking the cap off before getting the neck to her lips. You want one?

Michael wants one, and he doesn't, and he feels the dry itch of his throat silently call for even a single sip. He wants to drown in beer. He wants to choke on a wave of it.

No, mom. You forget I'm on the wagon?

She looks at his hand, then at his eyes, which avoid her own. Something tells me you fell off hard recently.

Yeah, probably because I found out my great-grandmother was murdered in her bed, left there with her youngest baby crawling over her cold corpse.

Jesus, Michael. Shut your lips. You're sick.

That's what happened.

You don't know what happened.

It's all in the old papers I found. Sure, you don't even know yourself. Michael looks hard into his mother's eyes— this time she looks anywhere but at him.

Terri says, Us kids only knew so much. Your Uncle George, he knew more than me, and your Aunt Shirl. George was the oldest, and a boy, so pop talked to him about things now and then, at least when he was drunk. Even then, he never heard it all.

And no one ever went looking.

Of course not. Your pop didn't want anybody to know.

But that's our blood, it's where we come from. You must have wanted to know.

No, I didn't. Life was hard enough without knowing all that.

It's not all about you. What about me? Maybe I want to know who I am, why I am the way I am. I deserve to know.

It's not all about you, either. You can be so selfish sometimes, you know? All of us— your nan, your pop, your aunt and uncle— we took care of you, we loved you to death, even after all the drug shit, being brought home by cops, or that time you spray painted the school gym before you and your buddies passed out loaded drunk in the showers. So much of my life, of our lives, has been spent looking after you.

That's how families work, Mom.

It isn't, Michael. Another five years and you'll be thirty. You've got to stand on your own, give the rest of us a break for a minute.

The colour drains from Michael's face. I don't even know who I'm talking to right now.

Everybody's got their limits. You'll have yours, too.

Michael's widened eyes are vacant. He goes to the fridge and takes out a beer. He necks the bottle in just three gulps, carbonation tickling his throat. His watery eyes continue to avoid Terri's, and he goes straight for the front door.

There you go, Terri says. Go on, my love— dump all your shit on me, wipe your ass and leave again. What a man.

The sound of the door slamming behind Michael seems to hang on the air, carrying in the valley where Terris' neighbourhood sits. People nearby look out their windows, hoping to catch a glimpse of the drama, only to push the curtains closed once they see it's another normal small town day.

Michael drives around town, along the old routes he and his high school friends used to take. He passes over the train tracks that used to divide Grand Falls from Windsor, the car bumping over the old railway tracks. He used to buy drugs not far from there, where the train station used to be before the railroad stopped running in the late '80s. They called it the Front— an unimaginative name for a spot located at the geographical beginning to the town of Windsor. He wonders if anyone still goes there.

On Main Street, Michael sees the Front hasn't changed, remaining busiest on the weekend like it always was, and on Saturday afternoon people are already buying their party favours for the night ahead. Cars and trucks are parked in a row facing out at the street. The train station was turned into a lot for the business on Main Street. On nights and weekends the lot becomes designated spaces for buying and selling drugs, as well as other sketchy activities.

Michael pulls into a spot at the far end and parks. He's sure everyone there is a generation behind him. He won't know a soul. It doesn't matter, though. He gets out of the car, then takes a walk across the lot, trying to see into the cars, looking for even a vaguely familiar face and barely able to pick anybody out from the blinding sun bouncing off windshields making him squint and screw up his face.

A voice calls from a car, What are you gawking at, buddy?

Michael can't tell from which vehicle the voice is coming, turning side to side and shielding his eyes with a cupped palm over his forehead.

Over here.

Michael notices a head peeking from a tinted window, a baseball cap barely perched atop a head of shaggy hair. Oh, I'm just looking to pick up.

What are you looking for?

Whatever's on the go.

Before Michael says another word he sees a man get out of another car and stare at him. The man says, That's not Michael Healey, is it? You got to be shitting me.

The man walks closer and Michael recognizes his face. He's much older, he looks ragged and worn with dry skin spreading over the tops of his cheeks, a beard covering parts of it. Michael recognizes him as Robbie Verge— a drug dealer he used to buy from in the last year of high school, whose special skills were fixing motorcycles and making hash in his kitchen while his mother was at work.

Robbie says, How are you getting on, stranger?

Not half bad. You?

Can't complain. I never sees you home these days. When was the last time you come back?

Man, I'd say at least three years.

Time gets away from you. I never ever left.

What are you at all the time anyway?

Few beers, few pills, few spliffs. You know, when I'm not working a shift over at the Ford dealership.

Don't sound too bad, Michael says.

I loves it. Keeps me in the cash.

Speaking of cash, I got some here and wanted to see if I could hook something up while I'm home.

Came to the right place. Step into the office, look.

They get into Robbie's car and he passes Michael a joint left burning in the dashboard ashtray. They puff and pass in silence a moment. Robbie takes out several plastic Sobey's bags, pulling other Ziploc baggies from inside, laying them across the dash and centre console like a merchant displaying his wares in a bazaar.

Robbie says, Browse away. And for an old buddy like you, them OxyContin are buy one get one free.

Michael feels the dry evening heat tighten his skin. Only minutes walking and already his lower back is moist, sticking the shirt to his body. He fans the fabric away from his chest as he continues walking. He can't stop. The further from his mom's house he gets, the less the choking in his throat, the less he feels encased in a shag tomb, old stucco ceiling lining the inside, and the crucifix sitting above his final resting place, sinking in the carpet's embrace.

Jesus, Michael says. He stops at a set of lights on a busy intersection, leaning over himself trying to catch the breath escaping his chest. He wonders if this is how it feels to drown. He can't shake the crucifix, the bedroom, the colours, like he's standing right there in the room, standing there his entire life pawing around at the walls searching hopelessly for a doorknob or a crack in the peeling wallpaper but finding nothing except the smoothed walls of a perpetual prison.

Watch out, a voice says.

Michael's feet leave the ground. He topples backwards onto his ass, rolling onto his spine over hard, hot concrete. He looks around angry, then sees a man with crazy eyes kneeling next to him, feeling the cool whoosh of traffic near, a fading car horn blaring as it speeds off across town.

Are you okay? The man is scared, looking Michael up and down.

I'm fine. Are you?

Yes, but you just about walked into traffic.

Yeah. Thanks a lot, says Michael.

The smell of Jimi Jak's is not that of a bar— it's the scent of a time gone by, a fragrance part cigarettes and booze just as much as it is blood and testosterone and the occasional whiff of piss. This was where Michael cut the manly teeth from his gums, the MMA octagon of the arena in which he and his fists grew, the place where he and so many other men across the town's generations learned how to embrace the primordial chaos of man's true nature.

Michael isn't sure if the men melted into the stools at the bar are different than the ones who would've been there back when he was around years ago, before he got clean

and sober. The thought is funny to him now— that he ever thought staying off the booze was realistic, for him, for the environment he lives in and the one in which he was brought up. The smell of alcohol used to make him sick. After he found out about his great-grandfather and what he did to his wife, Michael seemed to step right back into those comfy, worn out shoes from that old life. They fit so well. He's not so sure it was ever smart to kick them off in the first place, not when they're so comfortable, so comforting.

Michael sits on a stool, nodding to the men at the bar, a couple of whom tip a glass in recognition. Everyone in the bar has the same look, whether they're sitting motionless with a drink or shooting pool. The place is a crypt. Michael orders himself a glass of Jim Beam and Dr. Pepper. He tries to remember if the bartender is someone he knows. Brown hair falls over her bony, tattooed shoulders covering her chest. She's wearing a t-shirt that certainly came out of a box of beer. She reminds Michael of a girl he knew. But everyone here feels that way, like they were a person you used to know, and in Grand Falls they likely were, once upon a time.

Do I know you?

She says, I don't know who you know.

Sorry. My name is Michael Healey.

Nice to meet you. I'm Karen Shea. Don't think we know each other. I graduated with the class of 1998— first year the schools came together, amalgamated, or whatever.

Oh, Christ. Worst year of my life.

How come?

I was only in the seventh grade, and we were in there with everyone that year from my grade to yours, I guess. And these two assholes used to pound the shit out of me.

That sucks. But look at you now, all grown up.

Michael laughs, taking a long gulp of whiskey.

That was a depressing chuckle.

It's my first trip home in ages. Not entirely a great time.

Karen says, I know that, man. I lived in Halifax until five years ago. Came home for what I only wanted to be six months, and look at me now— behind the bar at one of my old stomping grounds. Could be worse. Could look like I'm ten years older than I am. At least I clung to my looks, and my tits. She laughs and moves around behind the bar nervously, finding things to shuffle and wipe, anything to occupy her hands and eyes.

You do look great, if you don't mind me saying. And you look better than I feel. Well, you look much better than I look, too.

Thanks. You do look rough, I've got to say.

Can you keep a secret?

Sure can.

I found out something terrible about my family, and I fell off the wagon right after. Almost ten years, gone.

Should I be cutting you off? Karen says.

Please don't. It's all that's keeping me hanging on.

Karen serves a couple of the men on their stools. She watches Michael sip on his drink, she sees his heavy heart hanging right behind those tired eyes. She pours him another drink, sliding it in front of him. You want to do something after I'm off?

He drains the first glass and takes the other one to his lips, finishing it off with a satisfied sound and a smile. Give me your number. I've got to run somewhere for an hour or so, then I'll get in touch, we can get into some fun.

I like the sounds of that, Mr. Healey.

Call me Mike. Mr. Healey would've been my father, if he'd stuck around.

She cackles, immediately holding a hand over her mouth and looking embarrassed. Sorry, I couldn't help it.

Why? It was supposed to be funny. And my mom was way better than any dad.

Mama's boy— my favourite.

Dark sense of humour, sarcasm, she's got it all. I'm going to run right now, but I'll give you a shout in about an hour and a half?

Karen says, Please do.

The cabbie ignores the sound of Michael and Karen snorting bumps of coke off a house key as much as he does the rattle of Michael's belt being undone, the brittle teeth of his zipper ripping open, and the loud sucking smacks of their lips eating each other alive in the backseat. He turns the radio up to let the sound of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards drown out the sloppy foreplay behind him, pushing the gas pedal deeper into the floor. He doesn't bother counting the crumpled, sweaty mess of blue bills Michael tosses into his lap before climbing out of the cab, he just speeds off into the dark.

Karen's apartment is in Windsor, not far from the school they both attended as the denominational schools crumbled into one melting pot. She lives below an older hippie couple, Greg and Cindy Faulkner, whose black and orange muscle car Karen and Michael squeeze past on the way to her back door. She unlocks the door between wiggling her hips around the tickling gropes of Michael's hands under her shirt, moving along her smooth stomach and waist like they are lines on a map. They stumble through the door

together quietly and make their way through to the living room. He flops onto the couch, calling her over to him. He notices a dusty crucifix behind the television.

You religious? Michael says.

Nah, I rent this place. The landlord's into Jesus. I didn't bother taking it down.

Michael looks around the room. He could swear it looks pink until Karen flicks on a lamp and the walls reveal their eggshell colour. She goes to the kitchen, disappearing from the living room's light. Michael hears her at the fridge, the freezer door pulling open then closing again. Ice cubes rattle in a glass. They crack hard as liquid rolls over them, coating each side. Karen comes out of the kitchen's shadows with a drink she's sipping. She straddles Michael and tips his head back. She takes in a mouthful of gin, swirling it around with her tongue. She holds him by the throat, letting a thin dribble of liquor spill out into his mouth below her. He drinks as the gin splashes into his throat, not missing a drop.

Thirsty man, Karen says. She jumps off his lap, lying with her back on the couch. She smiles and winks, swallowing another mouthful. She undoes her jeans, starting to slip them over her hips with one hand. You going to help, or just sit there like some pussy?

Michael rips the jeans off her body. Karen laughs. He runs his hands up under her shirt as he puts his mouth all over the inside of her thighs, skin glistening wet with each drunk kiss. He pulls aside her underwear, burying his face between her legs. He kisses deep. She moans. He feels the warmth of her body turn to fire. She pulls him up on top of her after a while, kissing his mouth and sharing her taste. Michael's mind is wild with ideas of what he'll do next, all the body parts already linked together in his head. If only

he could do the things he wants, if only his sole good asset were as ready as the rest of him.

What's the matter? Karen says. She pulls away from him, she knows the feel of his body is soft, the fierceness dying on the couch between their now chilling corpses.

I just need to take a leak.

Charming. First door on the right there, down the hall.

Michael locks himself in the bathroom. He whips out his phone and undoes his belt. He opens an old Google search in the browser. A field of tiny images pop up. Bodies everywhere. Breasts, ass cheeks, bare feet, spread legs. The temperature in Michael rises, but he's holding nothing except lifeless skin clenched in his fist so hard the skin starts to itch. He swipes over to the video search. Tons of video clips emerge which he picks through like he's in a restaurant browsing the wine list. One video still stands out. He clicks, slowly stroking as it loads. The sounds of bare skin slapping and the fake pleasure aren't enough to keep him hard. Michael's worried he'll soon bruise his pelvic bone from hammering away at himself, and all for nothing.

A knock on the door. Karen says, You fall in?

Actually I'm not feeling great.

Poor thing. Take your time, I got some ginger ale in the fridge if you wants any, okay?

I'll let you know. He looks in his phone to find Verge's number. He texts: SOS. Only seconds later, he gets a response.

What you need?

Any chance of Viagra?

You know this. Where you at?

Michael goes about explaining to Verge how he can get to the bathroom window outside Karen's apartment, managing to map the layout of her place from inside and with gin and whiskey and cocaine piled onto his senses of perception. Grand Falls-Windsor, even all together as one town, isn't that big thankfully, leaving Michael with just five or ten minutes tops before Verge arrives with the clandestine drug deal.

Michael hears the light knock on the window and opens it quietly.

Verge says, That'll be a Queen Liz, sir. No refunds.

You're hilarious. And a life saver.

Saving your cock's more like it. You ought to crush that up and snort it, or you'll be waiting another hour.

That's safe.

Sure— ten minutes, you'll pull her through the floor.

Thanks, man.

Cheers. And with that, Verge goes on again, hopping back into his idling car not far down the road. Michael listens to his motor disappear. He crushes the blue pill into a powdery cloud on the sink's top with a glass by the toothbrush holder, using a bank card to set up one swollen line. He snorts it all up, straight into the nostril, and he sniffs hard, back to his brain. He wipes off the sink, then heads back out to the living room.

He has risen, Karen says.

In more ways than one.

Feeling okay?

False alarm. I feel fantastic, actually. Michael pulls her into him, kissing her. He places one of her hands against his crotch. She feels him harden, she squeezes it.

Now that's what I'm talking about, handsome.

Karen undoes his pants and Michael's startled when she takes him all the way into the warmth of her mouth, her face resting on his belly. He feels himself turn to marble, all the anxieties in the bathroom a million miles away from the two of them there, standing in the dark.

Michael can't see Karen's face, only a shadow below him, worshipping at his feet. He sees her hands stretch out of the darkness, touching his body, grabbing at his chest as his muscles flex tensed at the feel of her fingers over his nipples. But then he doesn't recognize them. Her hands become the rough hands of a man, two hairy arms reaching from the shadows and pulling at him, grabbing hard, pinching. Michael shuts his eyes tight, unsure if he's enjoying what's happening. He feels the knot in his gut tighten hard as his cock. Everything is dark, even when he opens his eyes again.

What the fuck is all over your face? Karen says. She's looking up at him with shock.

Michael looks down at her and sees the red dripping down the front of his shirt, a damp spot widening as his nose keeps dripping. He wipes his face and streaks blood from his wrist to his elbow.

You're disgusting. Like, who the fuck does that?

Michael says, I'm so sorry. I snorted a pill in the bathroom.

Just get out.

You serious?

Of course I'm serious. Get out.

Wow. Because I tried to bleed, right?

Go have your period someplace else, okay, Brenda?

When Michael gets back to Terri's place he smells the body heat and sweat right as he opens the front door. All the lights are off, save for the dimmed living room. Terri's nowhere to be seen. But Michael hears the faint syncopated moaning. Distinct male grunts pepper the air around the groans. Michael sees the empty bottle of wine with two glasses near— one empty with a stain of lipstick, the other with a splash of wine left in it. He takes the unfinished glass and swigs the rest of it back. The noise from Terri's room grows. Sound and smell amplify, driving Michael over the edge.

He flips out his phone and gets online. He opens a couple dating apps cluttering his phone: one for women, another for men. He flicks between the two, seeing who's still online at this hour, if anyone is willing to meet up. He doesn't care where, or who, he only needs the taste of someone else.

If Michael says the right name, so long as he keeps the interchangeable flesh in the correct order, he'll make it through another encounter pretending there's not another part of him, a whole other person altogether trying to escape, barely let out and only in the night when it can play unseen.

When Michael's in the room with this next warm body he wants to enjoy it. He feels the tingle of arousal spreading across his skin in fields of goosebumps. Underneath is something else, some sinister thing that will not allow him to enjoy the mouth currently moving over his body. He fights it. He shuts his eyes tight, wards off sound. He hopes not to hear the familiar voice creeping. The one that never lets him rest, that never let him actually feel what's happening. Michael always needs to get to the end, to be finished. It's a chore to complete. There's fleeting seconds when the pleasure melts through whatever it is lodged in him that won't come loose. He savours them later, when he needs something to get him off. He carries these scraps of memory from one encounter to the

next, lugging his baggage everywhere he goes until it does nothing to excite him anymore.

When he's finally done, Michael slips out into the now warm morning. Outside he sees he's on the opposite side of town from his mother's place. Only an hour ago he got there. The drugs washed everything before his orgasm away. No money left, other than a five dollar bill that would barely take him halfway back. He starts to walk with the sun climbing higher, burning his face.

There it was, all along, and there it remains gaping like an open ulcer. Now the scab is gone— nothing left to hide behind. Michael feels it all come back. He sees clearly the pink wallpaper, shag carpet on his feet tickling between each toe even through socks. A cross above the bed's headboard catches a streak of light through the barely parted curtains, sun shining off the golden washboard abs of Christ.

She says, It's been, what— twenty years?

Michael takes a second to see he's stopped in the middle of a sidewalk. A woman's hand rests on his elbow. Not quite grabbing. Hovering, like she might grip on if he moves away.

How's your mother? Can't remember the last time I saw her. Wouldn't know her now.

She's fine. I'm sorry, who are you?

My god, yes, I'm foolish. It's Donna. I used to babysit you and your friend Matthew when you two was little. Lives up near the United Church.

Oh, Michael says.

Her eyes shift away to the boy next to her. Michael hadn't noticed the kid by her side until now, hiding behind the woman's tall, thin frame.

This is Johnny. I look after him while his father works on shift over to the hospital. Anyway, how come you're back home?

Came back to see mom. Short trip. Michael's guts knot. There's a watery feeling at the back of his throat. He has to swallow back not to spit up half his lunch.

I wish I could talk longer. Johnny and I got to get over to the grocery store, I'm making apple caramel pies this afternoon.

Yeah, it was nice to see you again, Michael says. He isn't sure why he said it. He doesn't mean it. The words hang in the air around him until they start to stink.

You too, Donna says. You look so good all grown up. Hope it won't be another couple decades.

Michael watches her and the boy go. His stomach hurts. He feels swollen. If he didn't remember expelling it, he'd believe his tooth was still swirling around in his belly somewhere, gnawing at his insides trying to get out.

Where you been? Terri says.

Michael isn't actually through the door and she's calling to him. He takes off his shoes and sits with her in the living room. She's having a coffee. He's pretty sure there's a couple nips of whiskey or rum in her mug.

Michael says, I was out. I stayed over at a friend's place.

Friend, was it?

Yes, a friend, mom. I have friends. You do, too. Heard one of them here last night with you upstairs.

Terri feels bad. Michael sees it written all over her, the way she drinks from her mug and looks at the television rather than him. She was never shy about sexuality. Neither did she want to flaunt it around. She wasn't used to having him around these days, and Michael feels, for the first time, he's intruding on her.

I know things haven't been great, Michael says. I'm sorry for coming back here and tracking all my shit through your life.

You needed to come back.

Terri grabs her son's hand, squeezing hard. She's not looking at the television, she's looking at him. He strokes his thumb over the top of her knuckles.

You remember when it was just the two of us? Terri says. Before I met Rick, when we'd go for trips out to St. John's?

We stayed at the Hotel Newfoundland once, they had those big round windows. Like on a ship.

Yes, and you used to sit up in them and pretend you were one of the captains out in the harbour.

Michael remembers it well. He gives his mother's hand a squeeze.

Terri says, It wasn't always easy. But I liked when it was just you and me.

You know, one of my earliest memories is when you pulled me out of that pool at the playground when I was a little guy. Remember that?

I honestly thought you was dead for a second. Can't believe you even remember that. You were four.

It's one of the first memories I have, coming to and seeing you over me. Never seen someone so scared.

And you never will, sweetheart. Terri squeezes his cheek.

It really wasn't fair for me to come back like this, Michael says. Been a bit of an asshole.

That's how we are sometimes, you and me. We can be assholes. Your grandfather was the same way. Loved him to death, but could he ever be a prick.

He never talked about his dad?

Terri says, Not at all. Once when he was drunk he said something about his mother and father. Other than that, not a word.

I don't blame you for not telling me. I know what I said before. But, it couldn't have been easy.

To be honest, Michael, I don't think about it much. I just, can't.

Michael nods, knowing it must be hard for her. He sees the weight of the years on her face. His mother's only in her mid-forties, though she looks even younger. But all the stress and the fatigue of a complex life hangs right there—the light purple bags beneath each eye and the crow's feet at their edges she hides with makeup, the pleated set of wrinkles perpetually furrowed across her brow. She's so beautiful, Michael thinks. He wishes she looked less tired.

Oh, I just thought of something, Terri says. Hold on.

She rushes down to the basement. Michael hears the sound of cardboard rubbing together. A few books fall to the floor. Curse words bounce around Terri's shuffling feet. It's only a minute and she's back over the stairs, carrying a heavy photo album with her. She plunks it down on the table and it rattles the dishes left out from her breakfast.

Michael says, What'd you break out the dictionary for?

Some funny. I haven't touched this album since we boxed up some old shit and stowed it away.

And you took it out now for a laugh.

No, I took it out because I remembered something you said the other day. She skims the pages, their laminate coverings slapping together as she flips each one. She goes past memories Michael remembers and others he doesn't recognize. He sees everyone as they were younger. The fashion and the hair change, smiles on their faces wider with all the new kids popping up as the family, and they all grow up before his eyes.

Terri stops on a page. Here it is, look. She pulls a photo out from its transparent slot. She looks at it, then puts it on the table in front of her son.

The pink room, there, with the cross on the wall and the familiar carpet. Michael's afraid if he looks at it too long he'll tip over the edge of the photo and fall right in, heels over head. He tries not to let on to his mother that he's about to collapse.

That's what you were talking about, Terri says.

Whose room is that?

That's Donna's place. Your old babysitter. She lives up on Beaumont Avenue. Or, she did. I suppose she's still up there. Don't know.

The tightening knot continues to twist in Michael's stomach. I saw her on my walk home.

No way. That's funny. But you knows what it's like. Can't pitch a rock around here without hitting two or three people you know.

Michael says, She said she hasn't seen you in a long time.

His mother's eyes wander away from him. She goes to refill her cup with coffee from the pot warming on the perk. She sits back down, stirring cream and sugar into the mug, and she takes a sip, careful not to burn her tongue.

I never told you this, Terri says. There was no reason to, because I was done trade school then and I basically never needed nobody to look after you, so I would've had to let Donna go anyway. But one day, she told me something about smacking your ass. Said you was being saucy and she had to smack you. And she told me you were upset about it, that if you was acting strange later it was probably because of that.

Every word from Terri's mouth is a boot on Michael's throat. He waits to hear the cartilage crunch, for the lights to go out and everything to fade away. He wishes it would, that his misery might come to an end.

Terri says, I just never took you back to her. I wasn't going to have anybody spanking you. I never did that to you. Even your pop didn't smack your ass. After that whenever I saw her out to the store or wherever, I'd avoid talking to her.

Makes sense. Michael's talking, but he isn't there. He's untethered from everything he thought he knew, floating away from the world, from himself. He watches his body below, sitting at the table across from his mom. He sees his mouth move. He sees his hands touch the picture, trying to get a grip on the past, turning it around and looking at it from different angles but only ever seeing that pink tomb.

Oh, Michael, you were some cute little guy. How come you were asking about that room?

Michael is eight again. He's in Donna's house. The smell of caramel pie everywhere. The walls are pastel blue. Michael feels the shag carpet on his feet, his bare toes wiggling over the fabric. He looks up to the stucco ceiling, its spiky drips hanging in stalactites like they were going to come loose any minute and impale him.

Come upstairs.

Donna's voice is coming from the bedroom at the top of the stairs. She usually cleans the house while a pie is in the oven and she's got Michael and Matthew in front of the television watching *The Adventures of Teddy Ruxpin*. Michael notices Matthew's not in the armchair next to the couch anymore where he was after they finished in the kitchen.

Come up, Mikey.

Young Michael climbs the stairs and the scent of caramel is replaced by the faint flowery potpourri Donna always has going in her house. Michael goes to the pink bedroom. Inside are Donna and Matthew. She's standing in the corner of the room wearing a lace satin robe, fluffy slippers making her feet look like one belonging to a big fuzzy kids' show host— maybe a dinosaur or a bear.

And Matthew's standing at the front of the bed, only he's facing in at the wall behind the headboard, his eyes fixated on the cross above it. He isn't looking at Michael. He isn't wearing anything, either. He's dressed in just a pair of white underwear. Not even in socks.

Okay, Michael. I need you to get undressed like Matthew. This is going to be lots of fun.

Michael doesn't know any better than to listen. He removes his clothes until he's shoulder to bare shoulder with Matthew at the edge of the bed. He presses himself against his friend, their shoulders touching in a nudge. Matthew still doesn't look anywhere but straight ahead.

Donna says, You get in the middle, Michael. That's the best place for a boy like you. Monkey in the middle.

What got you thinking about that? Terri says.

Michael takes a second to remember where he is— his head is a balloon letting out air, about to zip away once the last little bit spurts free. No reason, Mom.

Be honest with me. Are you okay?

He isn't sure if he answers. He watches himself down there at the table, getting further, higher, until he and his mother are specks below.

Chapter 6

Rain falls in a wavy curtain along the Trans Canada's slick lanes. Michael nears the exit into St. John's. He doesn't bother unpacking when he's home. He tosses his duffle bag onto the couch, then heads for the bedroom. He strips naked along the way, wrapping himself in his blanket and sheet, curling up into a foetal ball on the bed. The pink room vibrates in his head like a noise. He wants to shut down, go to sleep. The room shakes and twists in his mind— alive, wriggling.

Relief never comes. Michael stares into the ceiling. He thinks about jerking off, his nightly liturgy. Even that disgusts him. Nothing feels right since being home. Michael's discovery of his great-grandmother's death was already terrible. The other terror in his past is stronger, hungrier, and if the city's jaws don't entirely chew the meat off his bones, old memories will digest whatever is left.

Michael stops downtown, parking along Duckworth. He feeds the meter with an hour and a half of change. He starts to walk down towards the harbour, the scent of salt water pulling him, a light smell of seafood carrying on the warm early afternoon breeze. When Michael smells fresh bread it takes him back to his nan's kitchen in the fall, when all else

was cold but her kitchen was warm, windows dripping with buttery condensation. The smell of raspberries reminds him of being on the hills behind his grandparents' cabin, where he'd often pick a pile of ripe red bundles off the bush to take with him on a walk up the trails through the woods. The salt water breeze takes Michael back to a trip he went on out around the bay with his childhood best friend Matthew Clark and his family.

Michael watches himself there with Matthew on a muggy summer's evening, the kind that sticks to the clothes, when breathing is the same as trying to suck a too-thick milkshake through a thin straw. The salty water's taste fills his mouth again, as it did on that night. He remembers he and Matthew taking turns, each jamming their bony, nine-year-old knees into the rocky shore, hanging off each other's elastic waistbands, neither of them knowing why or particularly wanting to be there, only knowing from habit. Michael remembers the sense of ritual. It was their learned habit, together, like boys kneeling at the altar in prayer.

Quick as the memory comes to Michael he's rushing for a patch of bushes with the salt water coating his nostrils, those memories at the back of his throat. He coughs up chunks that used to be waffles, trying not to remember how good it was on the way down while he stopped in Goobie's heading back from Grand Falls. He's bent over urging so long he starts imagining that the whole Atlantic is about to gush out of his throat, leaving nothing in its wake other than his deflated corpse. But his mouth tastes of nothing except half digested dough and ghosts. He wipes his face off, looking around to see if anybody watched his unfortunate moment. Nobody looks interested— just another day in downtown St. John's.

Michael diverts from his initial stroll to the harbour, doubling back up onto Duckworth and heading east. He feels the vibration in his pocket. He checks his phone to

see a bunch of missed texts and calls. He can't remember the last time he checked the phone, having flown out of Grand Falls in a whirlwind of sexual frustration, anger, and bitter confusion. There's a text from Julianne asking about dinner. He can't pay attention long enough to respond. He remembers he needs to make another doctor's appointment. That thought doesn't last long, either.

He sees the pink room's door open, just barely. Two gentle hands reaching out from the shadows behind it. He feels like a boy again. A woman calls him into the pink room, her hands guiding him through. The salt water tickles his nose again. Another smell, like raw meat, underneath the others makes Michael's stomach twist in a bowtie. Somebody says his name from the daydream's void. The voice says, Just between us three. He's at the bed, the pink walls surrounding him, closing in. He sees the cross above it. The woman calls him onto the bed, and as he crawls under the covers he turns to see another boy behind him. They go under together.

He looks up, and no longer is it sky above the city. A tower of long, smooth legs disappears past the cloud canopy. Michael looks around the street into a sea of people. He sees nobody—no faces, only limbs and appendages in rows like fields of corn, and in the middle is Christ on the cross. Not adult or baby Christ, but Jesus the First Grader, his back draped in 1980s wallpaper, two scarecrow arms stretched out to embrace passersby into His salvation.

Michael stumbles off the sidewalk into a parking lot, squinting his eyes to try and will the visions away. He trips and falls onto his hands, scraping bits of skin off over the pavement.

Fuck, he says. He sits down cross-legged and inspects the bits of gravel embedded in bright red gashes across each palm. Another look around—this time a few people are

looking. A woman in her twenties looks on concerned. She takes a step towards Michael before noticing him take a pill bottle out of his pocket.

Are you okay?

Michael says, Some fucking day.

The woman frowns then turns away, heading back onto the sidewalk with the rest of the foot traffic. Michael wipes the blood and dirt off his hands, then he opens the pill bottle Verge sold him before he returned to the city. Inside is a pick-and-mix of pharmaceutical and party drugs. There are three or four painkillers, one fat, chalky ecstasy tablet, two Xanax, half a dozen morphine pills, as well as a separate baggie containing a handful of OxyContin and Percocet. He fingers out one of the Xanax, dry swallowing it with a mouthful of frothy spit and rubbing his throat to make sure it gets all the way down.

It takes a few minutes before the memories slip into nothingness again. They'll only stay gone another little while until the buzz vanishes, so Michael picks himself up and texts Julianne back. They arrange to meet at Jungle Jim's in a few hours for supper. She's the only person he has to talk to anymore—the only person who won't be sick of his shit after she realizes he took a hard fall off the wagon and isn't doing much more than be dragged across concrete under its wheels.

You look great.

Julianne says, It's only been two weeks. But thanks.

Michael smiles and it's awkward. He's waiting for her to say something about his big sunken blue eyes, his bandaged palms, or the faint whiff of alcohol on his breath. She looks like she belongs there with the other well-dressed cafe patrons. He looks like he's

been sleeping in the trash, aside from the surprisingly unwrinkled polo shirt he's wearing. His beard is getting full. He hasn't bothered to shave since finding out about what his grandfather did all those years ago— not a conscious decision, a part of his steep fall over sobriety's edge.

But you still look great, Michael says. And how's the little man?

Nathan smiles wide. His teeth are clenched to hide the mouthful of food he's currently chewing. Michael admires the manners Julianne has passed on to her son. The five-year-old is busy eating, which doesn't seem to affect the familiar stuffed frog tucked under his armpit. He has an unmistakable faint glow of fruit punch already across the top of his upper lip in a childlike moustache.

Julianne says, He couldn't wait to have dinner with mommy and Uncle Mike, as you can tell. Jesus, Nathan— you state. I'm horrible. She laughs, licking a finger and wiping it across the boy's stained lip. Her son crackles at her in response.

It's only Jungle Jim's. And I know Jim, he won't mind. Michael winks at the kid, who tries to return the gesture but only closes both eyes.

Julianne looks hard at Michael's face for the first real time since they sat down. You don't look so great yourself. What's been going on?

I found out some family history that kind of rocked me.

Shit, family stuff is never good. Why didn't you text me? Or call?

Didn't want to say anything over the phone, really.

So it's serious.

Michael can't help looking at the oversized drinks servers are carrying to other tables all around him. He chokes back on the tight dryness of his throat. He doesn't care about drinking when he's around anybody else, definitely not when he's by himself.

When he's around Julianne it makes him want to be better. He's watched her become such a responsible person since having Nathan. She's able to go out and have a drink, even a snort or a puff, and treat it as the temporary weekend escape most people enjoy, returning to those responsibilities again the next morning. If Michael was a better man he would have tried to turn his relationship with Julianne into something more romantic. But he knows she deserves more.

Michael spends the rest of their dinner keeping Nathan distracted and filling Julianne in on the tragic story of his family's past. He doesn't mention the waking nightmares he's been experiencing, like the one that collapsed him to the pavement earlier in the afternoon. He keeps the images of the pink room and the cross to himself. The rest is sad enough on its own.

Well, I can't believe this.

Michael looks up from checking the counter in his hand— already at over one-hundred-and-thirty for the night, and only early— and sees a tall, strong looking man around his age. The guy has a friendly smile, which Michael returns, though confused.

You don't remember me.

I'm sorry, I really don't, Michael says.

Frig off, you remembers— John Scott.

Oh my Jesus.

See, you knows.

I haven't heard tell of you in ages, man. Michael pulls him in for a hug. John puts his arms around him tight. They both linger.

John says, So you're on the door?

This is my gig for a while. Trying to go back to school actually, up to MUN.

Right on. A degree's best kind. I heard you were in Alberta at some point.

Did electrical. Got laid off from a company in the oilfield, after the fly in, fly out jobs in the camps started to die out.

Too bad.

Honestly, I hated it. Michael checks an ID card, sending a young woman and her significantly older boyfriend on through the front doors of the club.

I've got friends waiting in there, John says. I'd love to catch up. Been a whole lifetime since I saw you home at Christmas back in the day.

Michael checks another ID, barely looking at the card passing through his fingers as his eyes are drawn to John, remembering that year during the holidays, back when he was still drinking. He had the nerve to meet John on that quiet trail after the bar closed on Tibb's Eve. He catches the faint scent of pine needles, looking up and down George Street expecting a lone tree to sprout right from the pavement.

Can I put my number to your phone? John's holding a hand out. He takes the phone from Michael and enters his contact into the address book.

Michael watches John's face in the dim glow of the phone's light. It was just shy of a decade ago. None of the nights he's spent in those dark rooms mean a thing other than impulse and money. Christmas holidays nine years ago is the film reel he plays over in his mind when nothing else can turn him on. There are a few of those moments in Michael's sexual imagination repertoire, saved over the years and stockpiled in a filthy warehouse to which only he holds the key— one is his first girlfriend and the clammy summer night in his mom's car she put him in her mouth the first time, another involves seeing his mom's best friend getting out of the pool when half her bikini was dripping off

with the chlorinated water, and amongst the others is being out in the snowy trees with John, both their shins and feet soaked as the snow melted around them until their knees were mushed in wet dirt below.

Give me a shout after you're done, John says. We'll have a drink.

He's gone inside, and Michael can't wait until his shift is over. Something inside him is coming alive.

Any minute one will poke a hole and let the sunlight in. Thoughts like bullets. They ricochet around Michael's skull. He's never felt genuinely attracted to a man. Those dark encounters, hidden away are always about getting off. The face, the body— none of that matters.

Michael's barely clocked out and done sending a text when he spies John across the club. He wants to drop to his knees and let John fill him until he can't breathe, until the rest of the world is gone. All these feelings rush into him. They don't entirely feel new. He slips behind the bar, thinking no one's watching. He pours a hefty shot of whiskey, knocking it back, then another. He stops at two, knowing more will come later. He'll not be able to stop himself then.

In the men's bathroom upstairs, Michael pulls John through to a stall, locking the door behind them. Nobody's seen us, Michael thinks. What a thrill. He starts to undo the button of John's jeans. They're pressed together. Michael's liquor breath goes right into John's mouth, each of them breathing heavier.

John says, I thought we were going to sniff a line.

Michael kneels on the floor, not paying enough attention to his feet sticking out into the next stall, and puts John in his mouth. John gasps, pulling at Michael's hair

gently, grabbing the back of his head. Michael feels the warmth of John's bare skin on his tongue. He tastes the faint salt of John's sweat. It's only moments before John's legs tremble and the rest of him quivers. He lets go. Michael's not ready, lost in bliss. The bitter warmth of what follows shocks him back to reality. He spits, hacking at the toilet. John sighs, rubbing Michael's hair, but Michael moves from his touch— not a repulsed motion, something out of instinct, a survival mechanism. Silence comes off Michael in an ugly wave.

You okay? Sorry I didn't give you any warning.

No, that's fine, Michael says.

Something's wrong.

A stall door slams next to them. Someone leaves the washroom without so much as rinsing their hands in the sink. Michael's preoccupied by the door's noise ringing in his ears.

John says, Do you always get like this after, with guys?

I don't do this kind of shit all the time.

Michael feels regret for every word. He can't stop himself. Two minutes ago he felt like his cock was about to rocket through his jeans and leave the zipper's teeth embedded in the wall like fossils. Now he feels a deep, piercing sensation, imagining a sword sunk into the soft flesh of his belly— Excalibur, forever to stay in its stone.

Calm down, bud, John says. Only worried you're pissed at me.

Fuck. I'm sorry. Michael feels the tide of anger let go. All the depression, the guilt, and the sorrow floods back in its place. John, I'm so sorry. He starts to cry and sits on the toilet with his head hanging between his knees.

Oh, my god. Mike, you didn't do anything wrong.

Yes, I did. This isn't fair to you. I'm all fucked up lately. You shouldn't have to put up with this.

John kneels in front of the toilet. It's fine, okay?

They look each other in the eyes and Mike smiles, grabbing John by the hand with a thankful squeeze.

You mind if we get out of here? John says. Smells like piss. He laughs and so does Michael, then they head for the door, mostly unnoticed by the few other men at the urinals and the sink. On the way downstairs, John palms a fat pink pill of ecstasy into Mike's hand, popping one into his own mouth. Mike happily chews his, too. They go to the front of the club. Mike's unsure of where the night will take him. He sends Julianne a text, hoping she might meet up with them later. Another minute and he's being hauled out onto George Street by John, then they get in a taxi and they're gone.

The world spins. Its edges are soft and blurry. It's been so long since Michael took ecstasy the buzz is a homecoming. He's sitting in a hotel chair across from a huge bed. He can't remember getting there. He can tell it's John's room, judging by the suitcases and the shirt John wore at the club draped over the bed. He hears the rattle of ice in a bucket coming down the hall, followed by laughter— a man and a woman.

John enters the room with Julianne, both smiling, remnants of their previous laughter fills up the empty room and seems to animate Michael back from a temporary coma.

Look who I found, John says.

That's what took him so long? Michael has a content, silly look on his face.

Oh, wow, says Julianne. I haven't seen this Mike in a long, long time. You're feeling well.

Yeah, long time. Everybody has their weakness.

John's curious. Have you been keeping away from it all or what?

He's only been sober and clean for near six years.

Jesus— for real? You should've told me.

Yes, but like I said, things have been crazy lately.

You tell him about the family stuff? Julianne eyes Michael, looking like a cop trying to work a confession from a perp.

We haven't had a chance to fully catch up.

John says, Do tell. He gets some drinks ready at the mini bar while waiting to hear Michael's story.

Well, you remember I lived with my nan and pop for years, how close I was to them growing up. Anyway, I found out recently that pop's dad killed his mom. Heavy.

The look of astonishment in John's eyes is wide, full of disbelief. He can tell the story's truth, he senses it from the seriousness of Michael's voice. He listens until every detail has been spilled.

And that, my friends, is why I've plunged back into the bottle, and everything else.

The room is quiet. Ice cubes jingle in the glasses and no other noise is heard, except the three of them breathing. Michael wishes he could shower his friends with all the ugly emotions he's dammed up. He smacks himself in the face, laughing. The other two look uncomfortable but laugh along with him.

Julianne says, Usually I try to encourage your sobriety. Today I'm saying it's probably best to let off steam, get fucked up.

John passes drinks around. He takes a couple more pills out, offering one to Julianne which she gladly takes, swallowing it back with a gulp of vodka and cranberry.

I'm glad you told us, says John. Can't be easy to deal with on your own.

And I'm on my own, too. Mom, man— going home was a mess, I wish I never went back. Michael takes out the remaining pills from the bag he bought back home off Verge in Grand Falls. A couple left. He takes a thick downer out and eats the tablet.

Julianne says, At least you're here, with us.

The trio cheers glasses together and take a drink in unison. John's sitting on the bed with Julianne while Michael paces the floor, sipping at the tumbler in his hand. The pill only went part of the way down his throat. He sips until it slips all the way to his gut. He wants to feel nothing. He wants to forget what it is to feel at all.

You still here? John says. He sees Michael on two feet in a zombie's shamble.

I'm here. Just got my head someplace else. Michael flops across the bed laying his head over the opposite side. He places the near empty tumbler on the floor in front of him, watching condensation drip off the glass soaking into the carpet like rain sucking back up into a cloud.

Forget it all tonight. Julianne gets up, putting a song on her phone full volume, and starts to dance over to the liquor bottles. She dances while making a new drink. I know it's tough, Mike. Actually, I can't really imagine— I just know I'm here for you, always.

John says, And I am, too. Whenever I'm around.

Michael chugs the rest of his latest drink. I appreciate the both of you. He burps as an exclamation point.

John says, Enough sappy shit. He gets up off the bed to dance with Julianne. I'm ready to get blackout drunk tonight.

Now, that's a plan, Michael says. He gets up to mix another drink. The drugs make his vision thin to a small circle. He fumbles around while making the drink, barely managing not to spill liquor everywhere. He goes back to the bed and lies down with his head against the pillows this time, stretching out over the bed and kicking his shoes off, the first coming off much easier than the second which he kicks and kicks until it flies halfway across the room. He has a mouthful of drink, then lays it down on the bedside table. The room won't quit moving. It becomes a carnival funhouse spinning around him, nothing distinguishable except the noise.

Michael waits for the room to slow down, and it returns to normal with the sound of music filling the room again. He watches John and Julianne dance. They haven't noticed a thing. He didn't want them worrying any more than they were, it won't make for a good night. They're better off.

Michael closes his eyes and falls asleep. When he opens them again Julianne is lying next to him, propped up on one elbow drinking and talking to John, who was slipping off his shoes now and taking off his socks, unbuttoning his shirt to relax. John stretches on the end of the bed.

Time for bed? Julianne says.

I had to lie down for a second. Mike goes to move but Julianne stops him with a hand on his chest. He likes the feel of her palm— not even on his bare skin, just on him, anywhere.

I could stay on the go all night, John says.

Julianne keeps her hand against Michael and finishes her drink. He lies back, staring at the ceiling again. For a brief blink of the eye, the walls of the room are pink. But they're quickly back to the hotel's cream colour. Michael wants to hold onto the feeling coursing through Julianne's palm. He doesn't realize his whole body is responding.

Wow, Michael. Julianne's surprised, though doesn't move, her hand gripping onto his shirt. She's looking right at his crotch. His pants are tight as he lies on the bed, revealing the erection popping out in a more than obvious manner.

Another side of you I've never seen.

Fuck, Michael says. That is embarrassing.

It's fine, honestly.

John notices the bulge. Turning into an interesting evening.

Michael's beyond embarrassment now. He gets up to go to the bathroom. Julianne calls for him to stop, but he doesn't want to look her in the eye. Then he feels John grab a loop in his belt before he can get any further. He's stopped in his tracks.

John says, You know, that's nothing to be ashamed of, at all.

It's not that. It's just, I don't want her to think—

Michael shuts up when he feels John undo his belt, then the zipper. He looks to Julianne, with her smile and watching, waiting eyes, and he looks down to John.

This okay? John says.

Michael won't speak the words. He nods—the silent exchange with which he's familiar. Somehow, if he doesn't say it out loud, he doesn't have to accept it. He can keep each part of himself compartmentalized so long as the delusion remains intact in his head.

While Michael enjoys the comfort of lips and a tongue caressing him he maintains the illusion. Except Julianne, watching, looking straight in his eyes and bearing witness. Michael can't deny John's mouth and hands travelling the landscape of his body now. He looks to John, then Julianne, then back and forth again. It turns him on. Julianne pulls Michael back onto the mattress and John repositions himself on the floor at the edge of the bed. She rubs his chest, feeling his biceps and lightly scratching them. John's head bobs in Michael's lap, both hands gripping his thighs and pulling his pants all the way off.

Then John sits up, back against the bed. Come here, he says. He pushes Michael to stand in front of him and keeps going. Julianne instinctively moves to the bed's edge, grabbing Michael by the back of the head, a fistful of hair in her hand. She bends him down to her mouth and they kiss. Michael about goes weak. Their tongues touch and their lips close, their breath tangling. Julianne pulls harder on his hair, making him go wild with the added sensation of John's mouth pounding against his lower stomach. Michael wants to let go. He feels the precipice of orgasm.

Wait, John says. He stops and moves around behind Michael, pushing him onto the bed.

Julianne moves back and slips off her pants. She looks Michael in the eye. They communicate with no words. He sees her direct him to her underwear. He pulls them off with his teeth, smelling how wet she's gotten watching John go to work on him. She again grabs the back of his head, steering him into her as he kisses her and tastes what he's imagined only in the blue moon dirty dream.

Michael feels John behind him, fingers gently prodding into him: one, two, three. After a little while John's hands are on either of Michael's hips, squeezing to the bone. A

split second and John is inside him. Michael keeps his face between Julianne's legs, kissing every bit of exposed skin, his tongue reaching into her with sweet strokes. He feels a tear of pain. It doesn't bother him. The other tender beauty he's feeling makes it all seem familiar, like returning home after so long away. John thrusts into Michael, whose mouth is in worship, speaking in tongues along Julianne's inner thighs. The sounds of their pleasure are loud. Their moans are a choir— Michael's are the melody sounding off the other two lovers from either side.

When Michael comes up for air, using his strong hands to keep Julianne in rhythm, he watches the walls bleed from the regular cream to that dreaded pink. The bed moves with John's thrusts, every one causing the cross on the wall to bang against it like a stone knocker beating on a thick wooden door. Michael wishes the room was spinning like earlier, so the whole vision would spin right out of his mind into the ether. But he can't escape the pink room. He can't lose himself in the pleasure anymore, either.

And when he turns back to Julianne she isn't herself— she's in her late thirties, her hair's not black now, it's blonde, long over her chest covering both breasts. She has two big gaudy earrings on, like artefacts of the eighties. She's smiling, wagging an index finger in front of her face. Behind Michael is no longer John. Neither is Michael really himself. They're both boys, no older than seven, maybe eight. They smile, but the smiles are the same as dolls, pressed and painted on. It's a game. The older blonde woman is leading as they follow. She orders them each step of the game with instructions like a nursery rhyme. It's all a game.

When it's over, Julianne goes to shower, leaving John and Mike lying in bed. The two men are close, their bodies almost touching. John knows something has changed. He

doesn't want to force any talk out of Michael. He gets out of bed, his naked body in full view, and Michael watches him.

You want anything while I'm up?

I'm fine. Thanks.

John pulls a couple bottles from the mini bar and pours them into a glass with pop to mix. He looks back and smiles at Michael. This has been so much fun, you know that?

I'm glad. Nice running into you after all this time.

We had fun last time, too.

I'm not gay, Michael says.

John's taken aback. He laughs. That's fine, you don't have to be.

I'm serious.

I heard you. John's eyes strain, looking at Michael trying to say calm down without needing to say the words. And I'm saying you aren't gay if you don't want to be, you can still fuck women, too.

The sensible sounds extraordinary to Michael, his face stuck in a confused grimace.

Listen, Mike, you like to bang guys sometimes. Most times it's ladies. You're not the first bi guy who's mostly straight, a little gay. You looked on the internet lately?

What's that supposed to mean?

John laughs again. Good thing you're handsome. The look in his eyes is one of pity, like seeing the face of a dog on a leash, tethered to a post and unaware there's even a leash. He sees the tangle of confusion.

Michael says, I can't tell anymore what's actually enjoyable. I feel nothing, no matter who I'm with, like I'm not even there when I'm fucking— I'm in some other body, outside my empty, weird shell.

You should have another drink with me.

That all you've got to say?

John says, I only offered. You can say no.

I'm off the wagon bad enough. I'm here baring my frigging soul and you just want to mix a drink.

Hey, don't you blame me for enabling you. I'm not your father. But last night I was your daddy, and you obviously can't deal with it.

Shut your mouth, Johnny.

Or what? Big tough fella's going to get out of bed and smack me around? Some man.

A tear rolls down Michael's face, though he tries to hide it, turning away and rubbing the salty trail from his cheek pretending he's only scratching an itch.

I'm really sorry, John says.

Michael switches from crying to leaping from the mattress. He swings a punch and catches John off guard, smacking him in the cheek. The blow topples John into the mini bar. All the small bottles of booze come out and Michael rolls an ankle on them as he walks across the room. He's rushed by John. The two men, still naked, slide across the carpet, burning their skin in harsh red patches. They trade punches, then lock in a grip of biceps, necks, and grunting. They're in a Greco-Roman position when Julianne steps out of the bathroom, a towel around her waist and another around her head.

What the fuck are you guys doing?

Michael looks up. He's caught with a strong right hand at the corner of his jaw. He's out before his face smacks the floor.

Seriously, Julianne says. What did I miss?

John stands up slow. His ribs are tender, and a dark red spreads over the swollen hill on his cheek. He spits out a mouthful of blood.

Talk to me, John.

Your friend's a psycho. He punched me in the face.

He's going through a strange time.

We all go through strange times, Jules. It's not an excuse to treat people like shit. Especially someone who's had your dick in his mouth.

Don't go.

John's already dressed. He goes to the door, making sure he has his room key, wallet, and car keys. I'm going for something to eat, he says. I'll give you an hour to get him out of my room and out of my life.

Julianne can't come up with anything to say.

You can give me a call if you ever want to talk, have a drink. Tell him not to speak to me again.

Please stay. I've tried to help him, I don't know how— there's nothing left to do.

Honey, some people can't be helped. Some people are hopeless. Maybe Mike's one of them. That's for you to decide.

On down the hall goes John, not looking back, and Julianne sits on the desk surveying the latest damage Michael's created. His unconscious body in the midst of a trashed hotel room is the pathetic eye of a storm that never seems to end.

Oh, Michael— you don't have to be happy, I just wish you were in a little less pain.

In the cab, Michael fully comes to, remembering little of Julianne taking him through the Delta's halls and out front into the brisk dawn air. The taste in his mouth is blood and the vapours of leftover booze, his tongue feels furry and he scratches at the surface with his teeth trying to remove the stench of the living dead from his breath. He doesn't remember what all happened, only that it wasn't good. Those shards of memory are scattered like all the rest. He knows that he hit John, assuming he got hit back. John's not with them. Did I hurt him? Michael wonders. One look at Julianne and her eyes and Michael doesn't need anything else. The disappointment beams from her, thick as the fog sitting over the city's streets.

At Julianne's place the cab stops and she gets out. She heads for the door, not realising Michael is only steps behind her. She's inside, closing the door when he steps into it and beats his toe off the stoop.

What are you doing? Julianne says.

Just smashed my feet. Christ.

Why are you coming in? You need to call another cab.

But, I thought maybe we could get some sleep. Like really sleep.

She's seeing him for the first time— all of him. She sees how hollow he is, and how fragile. She's afraid whatever she says next will crack him in half.

I don't want to sleep with you, Michael. Why would you think that?

Tonight, for one.

You spent tonight with John, too. He's not here. You made sure of that.

Whoa, whoa.

You want to punch me, too?

That's over the line.

The shittiest thing about you is you pretend to be different. You act like you're better than other men. You're a wolf in sheep's clothing. I don't think you try to be that way, it's second nature.

Michael says, I never said I was better.

You act like it. Your body felt like it earlier. The things you do speak for you. Good thing, too. Or nobody would get a word out of you.

Michael isn't sure what to say. If he had those minutes back from all the times his own behaviour left him speechless he could live a whole other life, start over with all that extra, wasted time. He could shed this skin and slither off someplace else with those minutes, abscond somewhere dark and quiet. He wants to die. He knows every word out of Julianne's mouth is true.

She says, It's not easy being around, for anyone. You're either getting people's hopes up, or you walk around like a black hole sucking everything in your miserable orbit.

Tell me how you really feel.

I'm serious. You're a menace.

I've had enough of the lecture, thanks. Michael storms off towards the road and walks into the early light breaking through the morning's dark sky.

The apps bring nothing. There are men and women up at this hour, as usual. But pleasure eludes Michael. Nothing catches his eye. All boring skin, page after page of flesh. None

of it is what he really needs. He doesn't actually want to fuck, he wants the closeness and warmth of another body cradled into his own.

At home, Michael runs the bath until it's full and steamy, the bathroom mirror fogged, obscuring parts of his face as he walks by, like a vampire passing the glass. He feels like one. His skin is pale, his eyes ringed with deep purple circles hanging in puffy bags just beneath. He barely sees the rectangle bruise along his jaw, though the pain is enough to indicate he probably looks ghastly.

He slips into the tub and the heat folds him up in a warm embrace. His body stings as the water touches the parts of him he somehow forgot were touched back in that hotel room. He feels John wash off him, out of him, and as he puts his head below the water's surface the smell of Julianne evaporates from his beard. He still feels their bodies against him, his own caught between their thrusts, each pulling him in different directions, limbs drawn and his whole form about to be quartered.

Michael forgets he's underwater. A single breath pulls a bubble of water into his nose. He chokes and splashes up from the tub, spilling water over the floor everywhere. He finishes choking and cackles until his gut hurts. After that he cries— he sobs so hard his ribs hurt, his skin screeches as his shaking frame rubs against the tub's white acrylic. A big dick is all he's worth. After all these years he sees it, finally. After the conga line of angry, loud, flesh-filled relationships through which he's battled. He knows the one thing he does well is use the endowed flesh between his legs. He's started wondering if it's even him calling the shots anymore, that maybe the dick is the one walking around, talking, going to work, and he's only a head and torso. The few near successful relationships he's had that didn't go down in flames were never about love, only lust. It

was never, Can't wait to see you again, or, It was nice catching up. It's always, Call me when you need that thing taken care of again, like he's an incompetent snake handler.

He imagines what it used to be like in high school. He was one of the few boys who actually preferred having a steady girlfriend, someone who cared about him, someone to care about in return. And the sex felt beautiful. He doesn't know when that stopped. The only thing he's ever been good at is giving others pleasure. Too bad those things can't go on your C.V.

Michael remembers being no more than five and standing at the toilet. His pop was with him, teaching the boy how to take a leak standing up— like a man. His pop's penis was so big Michael wasn't sure they were both of the same gender, the five year old couldn't recognize the heavy flesh appendage dangling out of his grandfather's pants as the same species as his own.

He was a boy, yet to grow, he didn't understand. He stared at it. Already he sensed something not in the manly order about his curiosity, so he kept his eyes on his stream, doing his best to keep up and learn. Michael remembers thinking a dick that big couldn't have been an actual penis. It had to be a strange pet his pop carried around with him. It took near twenty-five years for him to grow into his, now it's in the driver's seat. And he's nowhere as good a man as his grandfather, he doesn't have it in him to sacrifice for others, to spend his life taking care of a family and being responsible and the rest of it, that normal life. His pop always lived with his brain and heart. Michael lives only with the throbbing, sentient mind between his legs.

Hard not to when it calls out to Michael all hours of the night, begging to be fed, a dragon in its lair demanding sacrifice. The urges are as strong as the booze or the painkillers, they come on like a fever, taking over his body. He trawls the internet,

demonic passion brewing in him, crotch burning for anybody at all. He becomes a beast, prowling online and in the streets, taking whatever meat he can get hold of, devouring until it's bloated and tired. It may be satisfied for a night, but it never stops for long, never satisfied quite enough. Little by little, Michael disappears, only the devilish engine in him remains, thrusting him head first into the fire.

Sometimes Michael contemplates lopping it off, excising the destruction right from his body. It's the only part of him that makes him of any use, and also that which brings him closer to ruin with every fuck. He thinks, if it's gone, like a voodoo curse, the ugliness of his life will vanish and a new, beautiful existence will begin.

Michael stands at the bathroom mirror looking at his naked body. He hates the gut hanging in a fanny pack above his pubic bone. He slaps an open palm against the pale skin of his belly, the fat rippling under its force. His love handles sag at either side like loaves of bread. And there it is, just below—the appendage of love and hate. He hangs it into the sink, the cold porcelain shrinking the skin on his balls tight and goosebumps creep up his body. He looks down at it, the white of the sink blinding against the faded peach colour of his foreskin.

He's deep in the drink, and some of the drugs continue flowing in him. A voice inside—his voice, calm and sober, a sweet, unnatural tone to it—tells him to remove the source and symbol of his pain. Like in all those Alcoholic Anonymous meetings when they'd tell him to treat enablers like dead skin over a wound and, as a surgeon would, remove the rotting flesh to allow the wound to heal and the body to thrive. It makes sense, to his wet brain.

Michael flicks through the medicine cabinet for anything sharp, any object with an edge to get the job done. There's a single Gillette razor on the shelf. Michael wields it

like a scalpel, and he stretches his cock out over the sink's drain, standing on his tippy toes to reach. He slices into himself, gouging the razor in a bit. Hot blood pours over his fingers and drips onto the tiles by his feet. He drops the razor, slipping backwards into the wall frightened by what he's done. Michael sits against the tub, its freezing touch not registering against the sizzle of his skin. His head rests in his hands. Tears mix with the trickle of blood running from between his thighs. He's glad he turned the Lou Reed vinyl up on the record player before getting in the bath, concerned the carpenter in the next apartment would otherwise hear him sobbing. He weeps on the floor along to Lou, crooning about how nice it is to have a drink. All the crying just makes him thirsty.

Chapter 7

There was a crowd outside the courthouse. It wasn't everyday people in Grand Falls got the chance to glimpse a real life murderer. All eyes were scanning the road, waiting for the police transport to bring the accused for preliminary trial. The killing was only a month prior.

A police cruiser crawled up the hill next to the courthouse, its ageing engine sputtering as the car pulls into the parking lot and comes to a stop away from the crowd. An officer stepped out, adjusting his belt and holster that had jammed into his gut on the ride over. He opened the door to the backseat right behind the driver's side. Helped a man from out of the vehicle, making sure he was securely on both feet. He checked the handcuffs to make sure they were tight, as well as the shackles around the prisoner's ankles, then he began to shuffle the man along the pavement towards the courthouse doors.

People in the crowd, including several reporters from newspapers and radio all over the island, watched in relative silence as Harlan Hynes walked in stuttered steps with the officer guiding him by the arm. Harlan had a bushy growth of hair all over his face, covering his mouth and making his eyes look like an animal's poking out from cover in the trees— feral and wild, not angry but confused with terror. His body was skinny, worse than before his arrest, and some of the reporters noted he looked the way a scarecrow does, propped up in a field wearing clothes too big for its frame. Even the stiff shuffling of his feet was shaky. Some of the crowd expected him to collapse before getting inside.

Harlan blinked his eye to try slowing down his field of vision. The world was flying past, flying around him. He saw flashes of light in bright starry punches. Voices of people whose faces he couldn't make out were bleeding from the crowd as he whirred past. The officer held onto his arm, leading him through the building's double doors into the main hall where more people already gathered, most of them court employees, the Crown's lawyers, and security. Harlan was brought in to a smaller room, where he and the officer waited for ages, so long he couldn't remember if it was hours or days since they'd arrived.

When Harlan was finally taken inside the courtroom he felt the way a celebrity might feel taken on a publicity tour. He wasn't sure why they were actually there, despite all the fanfare. He whispered for Allison now and then. His lawyer told him to keep quiet, shushing him discretely and gently squeezing his knee under the table. Harlan looked around the room. So many faces. He recognized his children— what were their names again? He knew them. They were on the tip of his brain. His oldest daughter was twelve, she was sitting right there with her two sad eyes quivering, avoiding contact with his

own. One of the boys was at her side, too. And he stared right at Harlan, not breaking contact. He wanted his father to see him. He was only ten, yet already a man by circumstance. His glare bore into Harlan, cleaving the father open. For whatever reason, Harlan couldn't remember his son's name, he couldn't think of any of the children's names. All except for Henry— too young to remember his father, he'll only hear the stories, if that. Baby Henry was left in bed that night with Allison's corpse. A tiny child left there amongst such death.

Harlan thought of Henry, and his sole eye clouded with a sticky tear. The whole courtroom vanished in the wet line gluing his lashes together. He saw nothing anymore, nobody's name mattered. Harlan wished, for the first time, he was totally blind. He wanted to be deaf, too. He wanted to be robbed of all his senses. He didn't want to feel the world any longer. He contemplated new ways to go, night after night in lockup. He wanted to punish himself, worse than anybody else ever could. He didn't want to keep living in a world that was tainted by his horror.

Each day in court was the same. Harlan watched on, best he could, and the trial happened like any other. There were no questions about the murder itself— Harlan did it. But the question was, did he do it out of malice, or out of madness? The Defence argued Harlan's work injury damaged his brain and sent him into a psychological tailspin that culminated in the frenzied strangling of his wife while she slept in the middle of the night. Harlan's lawyer called his and Allison's eldest kids to testify as witnesses. They told the court their father was never a violent man, neither with any of the children nor their mother. They said, if anything, he became silent and unapproachable when angry or upset, which only got worse after he isolated himself further following his accident. Although the

Crown tried to use the fact the children were out of the house most days at their aunt and uncle's home, the Defence, using the oldest children, successfully showed the jury that the kids were at home with their parents every evening and overnight, and in that time observed no fighting, no violence of any kind, and that Harlan often wanted to read to them before they were tucked into bed by mother for the night.

Every evening, Harlan was remanded to custody in the Grand Falls lockup, which was still, at that time, under the operation of the Rangers. A ranger named Paul Shea watched over the station at night and Harlan was his only charge. They talked, ate together, and sometimes played cards, though at night Harlan didn't like to play too long, finding the cards hard to read which would give him a headache after a while.

The night before the verdict came back, Ranger Shea sat across from Harlan in his cell and the two had a milkshake together—he brought them in for himself and the inmate, hoping to give the man a last luxury before what was inevitable.

You dream much, ranger?

Shea said, no more than the next man, I suppose.

I dream a lot. Ever since I lost me eye.

Any specific kind of dreams?

No. But sometimes I dream about all the things I used to want to do, before my accident.

Like what?

Always wanted to rock climb, Harlan said. I saw pictures of a fella climbing the side of a mountain once. Wanted to do it ever since.

I can imagine you now, up there pulling yourself along a big old rock.

Harlan chuckled. He stood up and paced the floor, sucking at the melting milkshake in his cup. I never liked ice cream, until right this moment.

Go on. Sure, everyone likes ice cream.

Harlan said, Not I. Give me a fresh raspberry pulled right off the bush, I says.

Shea looked at him with a genuine smile. You're one of a kind, my buddy. The ranger got up and tossed his empty cup in the wastebasket, taking Harlan's over, too. Now, good luck tomorrow, okay? Time for lights out.

The ranger went to the door and locked it, then shut off all the lights aside from one hovering above his desk.

Out of the dark, Ranger Shea heard feet moving slow over the cell floor. He heard rough skin touch the bars in the heavy silence, fingers gripping them tight like they'd never let go again.

Harlan said, I want you to know, Ranger— I never meant to do what I done. I was the one who did it. I just, never meant to is all. I loved her. And I still do.

Ranger Shea looked into the shadowy cell and barely made out the prisoner's sad, hunching shape. It's okay, Harlan. I know.

The lawyer had to explain to Harlan that the jury found him not guilty by reason of insanity, which still meant the court was ordering him remanded to the Hospital for Mental and Nervous Diseases in St. John's.

The lawyer said, You'll stay in the lockup until this afternoon. They'll take you into the city this evening.

He got a nod from Harlan, no verbal acknowledgement. Harlan was watching people look at him around the courthouse. He knew what he did to Allison, when he

could remember doing it, and he knew it was bad—the worst thing a person could do to another. He didn't think he was a monster. He saw people looking at him like he imagined they'd look at an angry animal caged in a zoo, or how those townsfolk looked at Frankenstein's monster. They pictured him as a wild-eyed maniac strangler, rushing through the night under cover of the trees fleeing across Comfort Cove trying to evade capture. This monster others saw was taking over, replacing the face he used to know, the one he wore on all those quiet nights with Allison and the kids on the porch during summer, the one he wore when he proposed to his wife while in the Middle of the Atlantic—he was waiting for a sign to pop the question, taking his chance after a whale spouted from its blowhole like the gigantic mammal was giving its blessing. It was becoming harder to remember that face, no matter how long he stared back into the mirror.

Lockup that night was quiet. Harlan would not speak, even when Ranger Shea tried to chat him up. The two men spent the night in relative silence, their shoes doing most of the talking as they scuffed the floor, and the occasional cough from Shea ricocheting off the walls as he worked the last bit of a flu out of his system. The ranger tried a few times to engage, but Harlan was slipping into the darkness. Harlan's state of mind only became worse over the course of that night, and by midnight he was taking on the constitution of a monk, not even pretending to form a single word on his lips.

Ready for lights out? Ranger Shea said.

No response from the cell. Harlan sat on his rickety bunk staring into the faded cement floor and the hundreds of marks left by previous prisoners.

Someone from the asylum will be here early in the morning, probably around seven. They'll check you over before transport, make sure you're okay, then they'll get you on the road.

Harlan only looks up and out through the cell's bars, his face and eyes blank, like a cover of clouds rolled in behind his face.

You haven't got to say nothing, said Ranger Shea. But I wish you would, before they take you away to that place and you might never talk to anyone again.

This comment raised Harlan's eyes to that of the ranger's, and he tried to look him in the face, tried to form a sentence that would mean something long after he would be gone. Nothing came.

I see lots of fellas come through here, Harlan. Like to think I know a little something about human nature, or whatnot. Want you to know I've met bad men—horrible ones— and, well, you just ain't one of them. I can tell.

Ranger Shea couldn't see Harlan fully. The prisoner was standing in the cell's shadows at the back. But the ranger thought he saw the glimmer of the man's lonely eye. He wasn't sure. It looked like a swelling tear about to plunge over his cheek.

Anyway, I wanted you to know that before you're gone. Thought I owed you that much.

Ranger Shea went about shutting the station down for overnight, locking up the doors and turning off lights. He lit a cigarette, puffing smoke onto the dark air that hung, never quite disappearing. He was about to finish his cigarette when he hears Harlan moving around in the cell, feet knocking against the steel bars as the prisoner pressed himself up into them.

Can I ask you a favour? Harlan said.

Sure can— if I'm able to help, that is.

I wants to get someone down home to bring out flowers to Allison, where she's buried, a couple times a year. Maybe her birthday, our anniversary in June. You able to make that happen?

Ranger Shea moves to the bars, inches from the prisoner. He extends a hand through the cell. I'll get a hold of someone in your family. I promise you that. He receives a shaky, firm grip from Harlan reaching out to grasp his hand.

The lights shut down, one by one in a daisy chain of bulbs. Once more the only light is over Ranger Shea's desk, its thick ray catching all the smoke that stayed floating around him. Shea sits at the edge of the desk watching his prisoner slide into his bunk. The lawman couldn't stop picturing the body at the morgue. Allison's mouth was open and would stay that way until a funeral director got working on her. It haunted the ranger. He imagined her final few moments alive, the sheer terror of being killed by the man she pledged herself to, in sickness and in health. Ranger Shea found it difficult to reconcile Allison's horrific end with the frightened, damaged animal twitching and whimpering under the tiny blanket on the cell's cot.

Some time during the night Ranger Shea must have dozed off. He opened his eyes and immediately his nose was sniffing the air— something rich and warm clinged to the hairs of his nostrils. He straightened his back, stretching the kinks out from sleeping slouched for who knew how long. The ranger lit a smoke and hauled in two lungs full. He choked somewhat when he flicked on the lights.

In the only occupied cell, Ranger Shea saw Harlan lying on the cot with its once white sheet soaked crimson. Underneath the bed was a congealing swamp of blood. The

jagged corner of the cell's steel cot was stained red with tiny flaps of skin dangling from it like streamers at a morbid party.

Jesus, Harlan— what have you got done to yourself?

Ranger Shea was torn between calling an ambulance and trying to stop any further bleeding. He left Harlan in the cell a minute to rush to the phone, dialing the hospital and shouting for them to send a paramedic to the jailhouse. He barely hung up the receiver and he was back unlocking the cell doors, trying to step around the messy pool that poured from Harlan's veins. He pulled the prisoner out of the bed onto the dry side of the cell. He held Harlan in his arms, grasping his opened wrists with one hand and trying to squeeze the wound shut. He couldn't stop any more bleeding. He hummed an old church hymn to Harlan as they waited for the ambulance to show up.

Ranger Shea said, You won't be rid of what you done by getting rid of yourself.

The good eye rolled around Harlan's head, his skin so pale he looked like a fish with its organs barely concealed under see-through scales. I wish the machine done me in, he said.

What do you mean?

Took me eye, then everything else. I can hear it now. Them blades whirring, the wood splitting. Sounds like home. Wouldn't mind going home.

Shh, don't use up your strength.

She married someone else, Harlan said.

Who?

Ally. She married some other fella back then. Not this one. Harlan broke into laboured sobs. His body was losing so much blood his eye couldn't spare enough moisture to shed a single tear.

Ranger Shea said, Relax now. Ambulance is on the way.

My lord. What did I do? What did I do to her?

Harlan quietly collapsed all the way into the ranger's arms, and Ranger Shea gripped the man tight, holding the broken lump of flesh the way a child might cradle a delicate doll. He wiped away the sweat and blood from Harlan's face, then hummed more of the hymn as he heard the ambulance's siren screech down the hill outside.

His eye opened and Harlan was immediately choking. He felt some force clamping down on his throat, a strong pressure bending his windpipe inward. He gasped but no air entered his lungs. Panic seeped into his skin. Harlan opened his mouth to scream, hearing no sound come out, not even a squeak. Out of the dark he saw his own face emerge, the single eye looking into his, a blank look behind it. He was on top of himself, choking the life from his bones. He breathed the rattle of death into his own mouth as he pressed down into his throat, cartilage snapping, Adam's apple collapsing in a harsh crunch.

Then, awake.

Harlan smelled the sterile hospital all around him. The beeps of foreign, unknown machinery and the low din of voices everywhere. He was connected to one of the machines, lines extending from him like an electric octopus. He felt weak. He could only move a little before his skin tugged against the stitches running up his left forearm from wrist to elbow.

Harlan said, Allison. His voice croaked and he couldn't remember what day it was, what year. The world escaped him. It slipped out of his hands no matter how hard he tried to grab hold, same as being a boy again out on the road trying to pick up all the marbles in two hands only to watch them spill out into the dirt and run away from him.

All he heard was the voice of his father shouting from down the road, calling young Harlan home, and the fear crept all over him remembering how angry his father would get after he saw the state of his son's overalls caked in grass stains and mud.

Mr. Hynes.

The doctor's voice took Harlan back from the edge of oblivion. All the memories receded, leaving Harlan back in that hospital room, staring at the walls wondering where the dusty dirt roads of Comfort Cove had gone.

Mr. Hynes, I'd like to talk to you about why you're here today.

Where'd the marbles go to?

The doctor said, You were found in your cell. You tried to kill yourself. I understand you've tried to do it before.

Harlan didn't pay him any mind, all he heard was the clack, clack, clack of falling marbles hitting the floor and bouncing all over the room, under the bed, out into the hallway. The sound echoed until it was throbbing out of Harlan's ears, his veins, everything pulsed with the beating of the marbles.

Please, Mr. Hynes— the asylum will be better able to help if they know some of your mental history.

Harlan said, Too loud. Make it stop.

Sir, I need you to pay attention. Sit back and relax.

The doctor tried to help Harlan lay back in bed, but the patient refused. He called out into the hallway for nurses from the desk. They all worked to hold Harlan down. The doctor got a syringe with some sedative, pulling back the plunger to fill the tube with clear solution. He jammed the needle quickly into Harlan, dosing him to sleep. They got straps from the supply room and cinched the patient tight into the bed. Harlan sank into

the sheets, the mattress, hoping he would disappear entirely, soak into the linen like a living stain.

But it was hours upon hours of Harlan staring at the ceiling, trying to remember how he ever got there and scrunching his whole face to scratch the itch under his nose. If he wasn't already going off the deep end he'd be wading towards it stuck to the bed—a rollercoaster ride he couldn't get off, strapped to the hood. He felt like screaming. He was always screaming inside. He felt raw. It was no use. They would hear, but they would only come to make sure the straps were still tight and Harlan didn't chew through them or his own arms.

Yet it wouldn't be as bad as where he was headed next. People all over the island told their own stories of the St. John's Mental, whether personal connections or just rumours about the place and the occasional mangled anecdote about someone's friend of a friend. Harlan knew of the Mental already from when he was a younger man. His own Uncle Austin spent time there after a complete nervous breakdown following the death of his wife, Marjorie, in a house fire. Austin was released after sixteen months, only to die because of a hunting accident a year later.

Harlan never heard his Uncle Austin tell the story himself, only heard it second hand. When Austin was in the Mental, he was put in a solitary confinement cell after a spirited shouting match with his doctor. He was left two days without light or food. He only got a few sips of water due to a leaky pipe jutting from the crumbling back wall of the cell. The water was rusty and gave Austin diarrhoea, which he soaked in for hours before anybody checked on him. The attendants washed him down with a hose and scrub brush, refusing to touch him, not even giving him a towel afterwards to dry off. Austin wound up with pneumonia and spent the next two weeks recovering in the infirmary.

That was only the beginning of his agonising time at the Mental. Austin often told his brother Alfred, Harlan's father, that he was surprised to have made it out alive at all.

Harlan felt he deserved to be locked away. That didn't stop him from wondering how long it would be until his mind softened into cheese and he spent whatever days he had left shuffling around the same two halls in a moldy pair of slippers. That night, he laid there against the bed in a crushing hug of straps and turned his face from the door so nobody would see that he cried himself to sleep.

In the morning, Harlan opened his eye to a clearer world. It looked ugly. He dreamed of the kids. He hoped to wake to them, their smiling faces back in their living room at home with the smell of Allison's cooked supper through the place. The sterile hospital room whirred around him again as he came from out of the darkness. He hated the bare white look of the walls, the shiny floor. It made him think he woke up in Heaven. He knew different. He'd never wake up there.

Heaven wouldn't reek of chemical cleanliness like the hospital, either. Harlan hated the stink. His moustache felt dusted with the taste and smell of a sanitary death. He was alone in that room, but the empty bed next to him made him curious if someone had only been in it until recently. Were they alive? Did they get discharged back to normal life? Or did they perish right there? Did they rot away from the inside until they were nothing but a shell left to be swept off the bed and into the bin? Harlan smelled them, the dust of their bones on the air.

Only the night prior Harlan barely recognized the world, it was foreign but dreary. In the morning light he couldn't ignore the terror of reality. Everything looked sharp to him. He was afraid to reach out and touch anything, for fear he'd cut himself into

ribbons. When the girl came in she was sharp, too. She stood in the doorway, afraid to come any further, and Harlan only worried that, if she did get near him, she might slice him in two. She was shiny and sharp as a knife. He couldn't actually see her face, it gleamed indistinguishable under the gloomy hospital fluorescent lighting.

Who's that? Harlan said.

It's me, daddy— Marnie.

Marnie?

She walked closer to the bed, keeping her distance from the edge. She stood against the wall, leaning back against her hands with a nervous, static energy. Her face was no longer obscured. Her face saw his daughter finally, and he knew it was her, seeing the face of her mother right below the surface.

I had to come see if you were okay, Marnie said.

I haven't seen you since Boxing Day.

You saw me in court that one day, too. You remember?

His face showed that he didn't and his brain went to work trying to dredge up the memory, only such a short while ago. He went blank, his face was long and pale. He frowned.

I'm sorry I haven't been around, daddy.

No, my love. Don't be. That's fine. I'm fine. How's the rest of them getting on?

Marnie said, Everybody's getting along. It's not easy. We miss mama.

I know. Harlan's eye teared up.

We miss her real bad. And none of us understand any of it.

I don't either, my love.

Marnie came to the end of the bed, grabbing the bar by her father's feet and shaking it with a sudden violence. That's just not good enough, daddy. You can't tell me that. I won't have it.

But I haven't got no other explanation. I don't know what happened. I wish I did.

Marnie shook the bar again and the whole bed rattled, startling her father. That is shit. You killed her— it didn't just happen for no reason.

Don't say that, honey. Please, don't.

It's true, though. Maybe the court doesn't think so, but it's true. You had a reason for what you done, even if I'll never know it.

Harlan turned his face into his pillow, still unable to move much under the straps all over his body, and he cried. He held his breath to keep from sobbing, his chest trembling under the thin hospital gown over his bony frame.

Look at me, Marnie said.

He wouldn't turn back.

I said you look at me. She moved to the side of the bed, grabbing her father by the mouth. Look at me, daddy.

Harlan couldn't move. He strained his neck to pull his face away from her. She was too strong. He looked right at her, his eye full of warm tears. He couldn't see her and knew she was crying too by the sound of her voice wobbling over each word.

Look at what you've done. Don't look away no more.

She let go of him and Harlan turned away again, driving his head into the side of his pillow. Nothing but silence. Marnie kept watching him. She dried tears in her sleeve, mumbling angrily to herself, mad that she got so emotional. She calmed herself down, taking deep, long breaths until she didn't want to tear the room down around them.

Harlan said, I can't do nothing but look. It's all I do. But sometimes, I dream, too. And then I can't figure out what's a dream and what's not. It's all a mess.

Marnie tried to look at her father, not what he'd done. It hurt. She tried to see past her mother's death and see him again. When she looked at his face without all the murder hanging over it, she saw he was telling the truth. That felt no easier to bear.

Marnie used to run into her father's arms years ago after Harlan got off a shift at the lumber mill. She remembered the smell of sweat, aftershave, and sawdust— his smell. She was always in awe of the tall, broad man she called her father. He seemed like Paul Bunyan to her, she imagined he could tear trees right out of the ground without need of an axe or saw.

And there in that hospital room Marnie saw her father as a pathetic pale creature, frail and withered. He looked less of a romantic backwoods folk tale, more an ageing cyclops straight from a sad Greek myth. She wouldn't have been surprised to see him die right there in front of her at any moment. A strong sneeze could have shattered his skeleton. Marnie was afraid to speak too loud again, in case the sound of her voice vibrated through her father's weakened frame and throttled him to death.

Daddy, I have to leave.

Harlan said, When will I see you again? Will you come out to the city some time?

She couldn't make eye contact with him.

Please. When?

Marnie choked back tears and turned from him, heading back for the door. She gave her father one final look before she was gone down the hall. Harlan laid there waiting, believing against all odds his daughter was going to come back— if not now,

someday soon. He had no way of knowing he was never going to see any of his children again, at least not that he would ever remember.

Chapter 8

Sorry, Mike, but that's it— you're fired.

Just like that, hey?

You were drinking on the job, first of all. Then you disappear in the bathroom with somebody for about fifteen minutes, doing lord knows what. And after that you walked clean out the fucking door.

Michael doesn't remember every bit of the night before. He does remember every word of what his boss is replaying over the phone. It's all a bad dream, he hopes, though he knows better than to hang onto those hopes.

When can I pick up my last cheque? Michael says.

Drop into the bar in a week.

The line goes dead. Michael stays on the phone over his end, just contemplating the again daunting task of finding work in a city already starved for it. He knows he'll have to start going back out more at night. He's going to need to put another ad online. He wouldn't have thought twice about it before. After his night with John and Julianne there's a pain about the thought of those darkened rooms that didn't exist before. He doesn't feel any of the taboo thrill anymore, only a sense of shame for having to hide behind closed doors to live out that other part of himself.

Immediately he's trying to take a picture from the waist down to post with an ad, conveniently doing his best to crop out the fresh cuts on the swollen mass of flesh in his lap. He starts to feel his body's just a hunk of beef. He wants to be cut up, chewed, spit

out. He wishes somebody would digest him and be done with it. He already feels like a gnarled piece of gristle.

He tosses the phone down, unwilling to look any longer at his disgusting body in the camera's frame. He blinks his eyelids tight for a second trying to wash the picture of himself from his vision. Michael doesn't actually see himself when he looks in the camera. He sees that little boy from almost twenty years ago— that young, scared child who only knew how to say yes, to keep everyone happy, smiling, together.

He picks up the phone again once the shakes in his hands start, if only to help him ignore them. He's texting Steak to try and get a buzz going, knowing his new friend will have a fix of some kind. Moments later, Steak texts back to get together. He's at Ches's for a feed of fish and chips, then he'll be up at the Village Mall parking lot.

Michael's sitting at the Village in his car waiting when he watches Steak walk up across the lot. He unlocks the door and waits for Steak to hop in on the passenger side. But Steak gets in the back rather than the front.

Get up here, Michael says. I'm not a cabbie.

I'm going to get a few lines on the go. Easier here. Come back.

Steak puts the passenger seat up from behind, then takes out his drug kit, as Michael gets out of the front and in back with him.

Thought I wasn't going to hear from you, Steak said. How you been, anyway?

Good. I was back home for a little. Some family shit on the go.

Oh, that's the worst, hey?

Michael nods, waiting until he can get his nostrils over the hefty, sweet lines starting to form on the tiny pocket mirror in Steak's lap.

Michael says, What have you been at?

Shit, I was down to Lottie's the other night and slipped one to this chick, managed to get her home, nailed her. Put her in a cab then she was gone. Haven't heard from her since. Best kind of weekend.

Steak laughs but Michael doesn't find the story funny, not in the slightest. The air is silent after Steak is done cackling at his disgusting behaviour. He keeps preparing the lines, not noticing the way his casual tale of date rape landed. Michael wants to kick him out of the car. He's too weak for that. He needs a boost, he'll fall to pieces without getting fucked up. So he pretends to smile each time Steak happens to look up from the powder he's lined up.

Steak rolls a bill up then passes it to Michael, offering him up the first sniff of the carefully constructed tracks like thin strips of snow that fell just for him. Michael leans over in the backseat, folding into Steak's lap. He snorts one line in his right nostril, the next in his left. He lingered, almost forgetting where he is, why he's face first in another man's crotch. Steak doesn't notice. All a part of the snorting process. Michael feels the heat coming off Steak, he has the taboo sense of excitement flowing in his bloodstream, right next to the Oxy working its way through him, too. He sits up before letting the moment carrying him past the point of no return.

You okay? Steak says.

Excellent. Some good shit, that stuff.

I knows all the good hookups, man. That's real Oxy— no knock-off stuff.

Wouldn't mind getting a few for myself.

Steak says, You can call my fella, he's cool. He won't mind you hitting him up if I put you two in contact.

Michael types the drug contact's number into his phone and Steak texts the guy at the same time. It's a sure way for Michael to slide back entirely into the ravages of his addiction. He's teetered the past couple weeks. He's ready to take a step over the edge and plummet.

Steak snorts his lines and lights a couple cigarettes, sitting in the backseat with Michael for a smoke. They sit quietly for a few puffs, dragging long and watching the slow smoke roll off the ends of their cigarettes.

Going at anything tonight? Steak says.

Michael's about to respond and his body jerks to one side in response to a sharp stab in his pelvis. He lets a strange sound out of his mouth, one that startles Steak and surprises himself. He can't take the feel of a spiny barb sticking up through his urethra and deep into him, penetrating through to his kidneys. His legs go weak and his brow gets slick with sweat.

Holy fuck, my gut.

Steak says. That's not your guts, bud. That's stones.

What, like kidney stones?

Guaranteed. Seen a few lads go through the same damn thing.

How long do it last?

Steak says, Depends, really. Just suffer it out, you'll pass them soon enough, I'd say.

Michael adjusts his belt and jeans, moving around in agony. He smiles through clenched teeth as Steak says goodbye for the day and heads off. He sits in the back of the car for a bit until the pain tapers and his vision isn't throbbing or contracting to a pinhole, and he only feels the dull pulse of inebriation once more. He gets back in the front seat,

sends a text to Steak's pill contact, then leaves the parking lot in search of a coffee to get rid of the bitter drip of Oxy running down the back of his dried out throat.

At a pub on George later, Michael tosses back shot after shot, feeling the whiskey burn his throat and nostrils. He hates the taste. He never liked it. Ironic for an alcoholic. All Michael ever wanted was the drunk. He's never been a connoisseur, not an admirer of brewing beer, craft or otherwise. He drinks to be drunk.

Right now it's only to numb the pain— that deep throb just around his waist, spreading in a fiery stretch to the flesh right above the testicles. Each shot dulls the ache. But it comes back faster each time. The bartender goes to pour another shot.

Not going to help, says Michael.

He needs something stronger. He pulls out his phone and texts Steak's connection again. They arrange to meet in half an hour at the pub. Michael orders a glass of water with cranberry juice and takes it with him to a booth where he sits and waits.

The booze closes some of Michael's wounds, if only for a brief time. When he was an infant his uncle would rub a trickle of Lambs across his gums when he was teething. The disappearance of pain was an early theme in his life. Somebody, or something, was always doing the heavy lifting for him. It's the same now, leaning on a bar, leaning on John or Julianne or his mother, or whomever would tolerate him. It's never Michael saving himself.

Michael wishes he could excise that part of himself— the weak bits. He remembers being ten, already with a head full of despair. He was in the woods with his pop, his uncles, and his cousins. It was a balmy day, the humidity making Michael's young legs stick together at the inner thighs, and the nippers were sucking his arms and

neck like they were drilling for oil under his skin, a thick cloud flying through the trees every now and then. It was all made worse because they were gutting a moose in a clearing. The blood and guts were drawing every sort of fly. The heat made the innards reek, and Michael remembers not knowing if he'd ever eat meat again after that.

Back at the camp, the moose was strung up out in the shed, each leg spread to the side and tied in four corners, the gaping slit ran up through its body, its dead ribs splayed open and the cracked white tips looked the same as fingers reaching from the cavity—two big hands opened up from inside and let everything go.

Michael thought of what the hands inside him were holding. He knew it was too much, even then. He wanted them to open up and spill everything out to let all the clutter in his heart tumble free. He stared into the moose's split paunch. He wished he could step inside the carcass, close it shut, and live life behind a second fleshy wall that would keep him safe.

Then he heard a howl. Michael knew it wasn't an animal. After that came a frantic rush of boots and voices. Someone was yelling gibberish— it sounded wet. Michael came out of the shed to hear his cousin Robby snorting and bawling. He saw Robby holding his leg and its lower half was an indistinguishable gush of blood. There was a chunk of flesh hacked from the left shin near the kneecap, right where he'd accidentally sunk the machete's blade near the bone. Henry and the two uncles scrambled to pack up the truck. Robby's brother, Harry, wrapped a tourniquet around the top of the squirting hole and cinched it tightly to stop the bleeding.

Get the keys, said Henry.

Uncle George tossed them to him, then everybody got into the truck. Henry, Uncle Bill, and Michael got in the cab while George and Harry stayed in the pan with Robby laying on his back trying to stay conscious.

The drive was harsh. Back then the road was treacherous, unimaginatively nicknamed Rocky Road. It took a couple hours to drive over while the truck heaved one way and jerked another and, sometimes, whoever was inside got bumped off the seat high enough to crack their heads off the roof of the cab. Uncle George tried to keep Robby as comfortable as possible on the trip home. Mostly he fed his son nips off the bottle of Jim Beam they brought along, originally meant for their game of cribbage at the camp before Robby all but hacked his leg off from the shin down. Halfway across Rocky Road, Robby was drunk. He was only fifteen.

Drink it up, Uncle George said.

And Uncle Bill said, That'll put hairs on your nuts. You'll be fine.

Robby just moaned drunken words, reaching to his leg before lying back, half in pain, half with a smile on his face. His father and Uncle Bill patted him on the head, sitting back against the truck's cab. Michael watched them pass the remainder of the bottle back and forth, into the cab and back out, giving Robby some more every couple passes.

Michael slid the cabin's window over and leaned out. I wants some, he said.

Uncle George laughed. Yes, now. Just watch.

Why can't I?

Uncle Bill said, You're only a young tadpole yet.

But Robby's not old enough.

That's for the pain, Uncle George said. Keep him settled until we're at the hospital.

Michael sat back into the seat and shut the window. He wanted to have a taste, even if it stank, even if it made people look dumb and tired. He would have to wait for the right time, until he was old enough. Then he knew he'd be able to take the pain away. He had lots of pain, it just wasn't gushing blood. His was invisible.

And there, in the pub, Michael is split wide, down the middle, wondering if he ought to leave without another drink, without the order of pills that's on the way. He'd love to get up, to walk out and never look back on any of it. He can't, so he doesn't, and he waits there until a burly man with a bald head and a thick black moustache walks through the door, so big he has to turn to the side a touch to fit through the frame. Michael knows it's Steak's drug contact, and the guy can tell by the look on his face that it's Michael he's there to meet.

The dealer walks over to the booth and slides into the seat. How are you, buddy? Mike, right?

I'm good. Mike's right.

Name's Brad, by the way.

Best kind. Nice to meet you. Steak told me about you.

Brad says, Yes, you mentioned in your text. Steak's all right.

I only met him recently. Good dude.

Brad notices Michael's glass. What's in that?

Just a bit of cranberry juice, some water.

Brad says, On your period, is it?

He laughs and gets up to go get a drink, leaving Michael rolling his eyes but also feeling the liquid lure call out from behind the bar, daring him to drink. It doesn't matter how hard he tries. It was the same going home years ago sober and having to fight at Christmas dinner to get family to stop offering him a drink.

Grow a pair, Uncle George said. He poured a glass of Lamb's, shoved it in Michael's chest, and acted like he'd drop it, to get a reaction and make him take it. George did drop it once. Michael let the whole thing topple into the carpet and soak through, while his uncle stared him down.

So, how much you want, anyway? Brad says.

Michael's startled by his return.

Pills?

Michael says, Shit, yes. I got eighty bucks.

I can give you, four. Sound good?

That's perfect. Michael gives over the money, then takes the pills right out of the tiny baggy he's handed. He puts two right in his mouth.

Jesus, Brad says. Slow down.

Michael doesn't pay attention. He slurps back a mouthful of cranberry juice and water, working the pills down.

Brad's phone vibrates. He takes it out and texts someone back. That's Steak. Says he's popping by for a drink.

Right on. I was going to give him a shout.

What have you got on the go tonight?

Not sure, Michael says. Just wanted a bit of company. Might have a drink, I don't know.

Another juice, or a real one?

Brad goes to get himself another round without waiting for an answer. Michael steps out for a smoke. He checks one of his apps on his phone. The booze is fading. In its place rises that anxious lust. And Michael's flicking through the small squares, mostly holding bare skin, a bicep, the occasional full frontal picture of an erect cock. Michael's profile shows nothing but his chest— anonymous, like the many nights in those dark rooms, indulging in all those things he enjoys but won't allow himself to admit he enjoys.

One man, with his actual face in the picture, stands out to Michael. The man's looking for Oral Only. He's around the same age as Michael, smaller build. There's something femme about his face that excites Michael, though Michael can't even recognize it. He tries not to look at the face anymore. He sends the guy a message, asking to meet up soon. He closes the app then heads back inside, flicking his cigarette into the cement of the walkway by the door.

Almost right behind Michael comes Steak, a slap on the shoulder making him jump.

Whoa, Steak says. You all right?

Michael tries a strained smile. On the Oxys.

Steak laughs and goes to the bar, waving at the booth where Brad's back sitting again. In the booth, Michael slouches into his seat while every part of him begins to numb. He feels each finger. Beyond that the rest of him slips and slides like jelly. He keeps readjusting in his seat, fidgeting nervously.

Brad says, Looks like we've got lift off. Those are the real deal.

No response from Michael. He's laid back with his head rested over the seat. He doesn't feel anything— body or mind. A blank slate. Michael smiles to himself.

Steak gets to the table with a round of drinks for all three of them. Here we go, lads. Drink up.

You sure Mikey wants one? Brad says. There's nothing sweet in his. He draws out each 'S' sound with a lilt in his voice.

Mike, what's wrong? Too fucked up.

Frig off, the two of you. Give me the goddamn thing.

Both Steak and Brad watch as Michael tips his head back, draining the glass of Screech and Coke until it's only noisy ice cubes circling the bottom.

That a boy, Steak says.

Michael lets a burp rip across the bar while the other two cackle like hyenas.

Roar, buddy, Brad says. Roar.

Steak says, So, what's on the go? Where we getting on the tear this evening?

I was just asking Mikey the same thing.

It's Mike, or Michael. Not Mikey.

Brad says, Excuse me, Michael.

Now, boys, relax yourselves. We'll have a few, smoke a draw. All that good stuff.

The other two chat and Michael goes back to his app, hoping to get a reply from the cute boy. He can barely let himself think it, but he knows the attraction exists. He feels the tightness at his crotch, the jeans pushing against his growing bulge just at the thought. No message back yet. He leaves the app open, putting his phone in his pocket.

Brad's getting up and finishing the remaining drops of his Screech. Okay, fellas. Got to go. Wheeling and dealing out in Paradise.

I'll give you a shout later, says Steak.

After Brad leaves, Steak goes for another round. Michael's too spaced out on the Oxy to refuse a drink. All his inhibitions melt away. He feels them drain out and pool at his feet on the floor. Michael looks down at himself. He hovers over the table watching his body. He sees Steak come back with drinks and watches on while they cheers, sip, and go on talking. He tries to hold on, to anchor himself back to the booth, but he floats until he's touching the roof, resting against it on his back like a stray balloon cut loose from a bundle.

Let me down, Michael says.

Steak says, Scream at me while you're at it. And come down. Nobody's stopping you.

What?

How many of them pills you get off Brad? You take them all or what?

Took two, Michael says.

No wonder you're off your head.

I'm fucked up, man.

We'll get even worse now the once. Drink that, look.

He slides another drink to Michael. They cheers and drink. The pills are drying Michael's mouth to dust, so he rolls the Screech around over his tongue and his gritty teeth before swallowing back.

Time to break the seal, Steak says. He heads in to the washroom.

Michael looks at his phone again, checking the app. There's a bright red dot over the mailbox. He opens the inbox and sees a reply from the guy with the pretty face, the long hair. The message starts with a picture: long legs spread, smooth skin, a round ass, the hair draped over his back, the lower half of which is covered in a bright tattoo of a

flying dragon coiled around itself. The reply contains a number to text, suggesting they get together over the coming weekend. Michael plugs the number in his contacts. He lays the phone down after replying to the message.

Steak returns. He immediately pounds the last of his drink. Another?

Let me buy these, Michael says.

Can't argue with that.

Michael goes to the bar and orders two more Screech and Cokes. He's still a bit hard from reading the message. He imagines the picture again, that sleek body, those girly curves from neck to hips.

Ten bucks, says the bartender.

It shocks Michael out of his sexy daydream. He pays, tips, and goes back to the table. He lays down the drinks. He sees Steak staring at him with a look of total disgust.

Michael sits, confused. But he sees his phone in front of Steak. What are you doing? Checking my messages?

I saw this flash on the screen. Steaks holds up the phone, the app on display, and there it is: a plump, waxed ass, bare to the world in doggy style, and a big dick in mid swing hanging between the thighs. The message reads: See you then, Daddy.

Are you a fag? Steak says.

That's not fair. You don't know what's going on.

I think I can figure it out, Mike.

No, you don't know me that well.

Well enough, Steak says. Now I'm wondering if you want to fuck me. Gross.

God, you're an idiot.

And you're a faggot.

Michael's blood boils with toxic fury. He smashes his glass into Steak's face, leaning across the booth, half over the table. He climbs the rest of the way until he's on top of Steak ramming a fist into his head, bouncing his skull off the table's top. Both men fall to the floor. Everyone else in the bar watches, standing around. The bartender's yelling for one of the patrons to call the cops while he attempts to break up the brawling. It's no use. Steak's thrashed all over the filthy floor. Michael keeps beating him relentlessly, each fist hammering open new wounds and blackening patches of flesh. The thud of meat and bone crashing together. The sound overtakes the music playing. Everybody wants to help. Nobody wants to get in the way, either. They stand back waiting for the terror to end. It doesn't, and Michael won't tire. He punches until Steak's cheekbone crumples.

Michael grips his hands around Steak's throat, squeezing tight. He wants to squeeze hard enough to pop the head right off his shoulders. He blacks out. When Michael's vision clear he looks down right into Steak's open mouth caught in a voiceless shout. One of his eyes is shut, the other wide and twitching around its socket. Steak digs his nails into Michael, scraping down his neck and drawing blotches of blood that run into his shirt. Michael's lost, the angry ocean pulling him deeper into its undertow. He sees the face of his grandfather Henry, his father before him, Harlan, and the hollow mask of his own unknown father, all swirling around him in the abyss.

My god, Michael says. He tears away from the bloody state, letting go of Steak's bruised neck. People are crowded around him. He pushes through them to the door. He forgets to grab his phone, but by the time he remembers he's in the street, and the sound of a police siren sends him running into a sea of parked cars, zigging and zagging and ducking behind the occasional parked vehicle. He looks around to see one cop running

after him. He darts into the road nearly getting run over. A few more seconds and he's gone, leaving the cop standing at the road's edge, out of breath and pissed off. Michael doesn't stop. He runs until his skin wants to slip off his bones like hot plastic.

Pain hits him again out of nowhere when he reaches Gower Street. Michael flinches from the burning pinch going through him. He trips over his own feet, landing against the trash cans in front of someone's house. He falls into the street with the garbage.

Not now, Michael says.

He lies there with the stink of trash all over him— a mix of stale coffee grounds, rotting fruit, and spoiled meat. He wants to get up. The pain won't allow it. He grips his back and gut, wanting to pull the pain— what he's only now admitting to himself are stones— right out of him in a single bloody tear.

In the distance are sirens. Michael knows he deserves whatever comes to him. He just doesn't want to go to jail. He waits for the pain to calm more. He picks himself up off the street, brushing the filth off him, and limps off into the early morning sun, some sad cowboy easing off over the horizon.

Chapter 9

All Michael sees are those horrifying eyes looking back at him and Steak begging without words for him to let go. He remembers it all in retrospect. Then, his body felt gnarled into a hideous shape doing things it had never done. He couldn't control himself. That's the story he's choosing to believe. Anything else would feel too cold.

Michael crouches against a building and then slumps down sitting on the concrete. He's in an alley not far from the top of Duckworth, halfway to Water Street. He lights a smashed cigarette that he pulls from his shirt pocket, puffing hard at it to get the flattened smoking. His eyes won't quit darting around, looking every which way around the alley for any sign of an RNC officer, a flash of blue and red lights.

On a whim, Michael goes back to the pub, hoping a different bartender will be around and that, somehow, nobody stole his phone. A long shot. He's got no other options, nothing else to do except try to find his phone, or he'll be stranded on the streets, wandering like Jesus in the concrete wilderness, except Michael was tempted and succumbed long ago to the visions of his sin.

At the pub, Michael peeks inside. A woman is behind the bar this time. He didn't see her there last night. He goes in and sits at the bar, looking around and acting casual, waiting to see if anybody recognizes him.

Nothing. Nobody blinks. He sits and asks the bartender for a drink. Everyone there— in a pub at just before noon— is busy with their own tragic life, too consumed with their drinks or whapping the VLTs in front of them to care about Michael, or anything else.

That'll be two bucks fifty, the bartender says.

Michael pays her, but doesn't touch the drink. Hey, I was wondering— do you keep a lost and found kind of thing here?

Sure do, my love. She reaches under the bar, pulling out a plastic basket filled with old keychains, Zippos, roach clips, scrunchies, cheap rings every shade of counterfeit gold and silver. In the pile is his phone.

Oh, thank you, Michael says. He takes his phone out and checks that it's still working. Aside from a small chip in the screen it's fine.

So you're the one who owns that, says the bartender.

Michael doesn't like the way that sounds.

Don't worry. Not the snitching type.

Probably sweeter than what I deserve.

The bartender says, Can you do me a favour though, hon?

Name it.

If I'm on bar and you're ever in here, don't go starting no shit, okay? You're lucky nobody in here right now gives a shit. If Rog were here? The bartender on last night? He'd beat the face off you.

She smiles, like she can tell he's wounded and needs help. Michael, like a shamed animal, smiles weakly. He turns and leaves before the tears are dripping over his cheeks and into his beard. He's out in the street. He tries to stop the tears, clamping his teeth onto his lip. He wants to bite it off. He wants to eat his own face, his head, until there's nothing left to him but a streak of useless gore marked on the earth.

Michael checks his phone. Missed calls from an unknown number. A missed text from Steak and one from Julianne, too. He doesn't want to look at either of them. He'd rather pull each eyeball out with his bare fingers, or maybe his heart. He could gut himself like one of pop's moose in the shed, it still wouldn't hurt as bad as confronting the trail of damage behind him.

He reads the text from Julianne first: At least let me know you're okay.

Michael doesn't know what to tell her. He flicks over to the text left by Steak: Ur dead, bitch. There's a voicemail message, too. Steak says, Listen, Mikey, you're lucky I haven't fucking found you yet. Can't hide forever. The phone cuts off after Steak makes a smooching sound followed by a loud spit.

A single pill remains in Michael's stash. He isn't worried about the booze, he hasn't fallen off the wagon hard or far enough to feel the withdrawal from it. The drugs are a different story. He's been chewing them like candies. He can't remember how many he's taken in the past week, let alone the last couple days.

Michael's life got smaller after getting sober going on six years ago. He said goodbye to many enablers who weren't interested in having a recovering addict around to harsh their buzz, especially at nineteen—he'd been an addict and an alcoholic since he was fourteen, a lifetime by then. He never sees those old friends anymore. They never call.

Michael has no clue how to get drugs on his own anymore. He needs them. Creepy, crawling fingers have started to inch up under his skin, all across his body. He's hot and itchy underneath, his skin pale and sweaty. Nobody could mistake him for anything other than a junkie.

Michael makes his way up to Duckworth. He takes a look up Church Hill. He knows some of the sex workers downtown use that area to attract Johns. He's curious if one of them might be able to hook him up. More than the itch or the wriggling feeling under Michael's skin is the guilt, the shame, the self-hatred bubbling up with the retreat of a medicated state to help dull the unforgettable. Again, Steak's eyes. The newspaper headline about Harland, its words dripping down the back of Michael's brain. That pink

room, the cross above the bed burning hot, bright, curling the wallpaper sitting right behind it.

A few women are standing on the hill by the fence bordering the cemetery. Two of them look young likely twenty, if that. The other is a woman over forty, though she could be anywhere from mid-forties to sixty. They're all chatting, passing a lighter around to get their smokes lit. One of the younger women and the older one share a tall coffee from Tim Horton's.

Ladies, Michael says. Got a question.

The older woman says, Go ahead. We don't charge for questions.

I'm not having a great day. I'm looking for something to take the edge off—chemically.

Do we look like fucking drug dealers? The older woman says.

No, no, I didn't mean that. I just hoped maybe you knew someone, or somewhere to look. I'm desperate.

Give me ten bucks, she says. I'll tell you how to find what you need.

Michael dishes out the money, his hands starting to shake. The woman gestures for his phone. She takes it from him and puts a number in his contacts under Score.

Thank you, says Michael.

No problem, honey. You should really go home, take a nap. You look like death.

I can't go home.

She looks at him and it makes her want to cry. You and me both, she says.

The afternoon sun is disappearing, setting towards the city's exits. It's already dark down by Quidi Vidi. A row of cars are parked near the water, some people sit for a coffee while

listening to music, some smoking weed or waiting for it, and others there to cruise, seeing what selection of young beef is traipsing around the trails seeking a quick way to get off.

Michael waits next to the water. He watches the long, black stretch of lake, still and silent, no mind to move the surface, not even a ripple. Inside him rages. He longs to be quiet, to be at rest. He wonders if all the prisoners at Her Majesty's nearby are at rest in their bunks, if some of them are looking out at the water like him.

A pair of headlights pulls up the road, as the gravel crunches and pops between approaching tires— if they made no sound, Michael might have thought it was a UFO. All his senses are out of touch. The world feels misaligned, none of the pieces fit. The closer back to sobriety the further away from the world he feels. He only wants a pill, just one, to bring him back to the world and give him life again.

Michael gets a text from the contact he got on Church Hill. It tells him to look for a car and it's the one with the headlights on. He's told to get in, so he walks over, blinded by the shining beams bursting out of the front of the vehicle, and gets into the backseat.

When Michael closes the door the automatic locks go down. They sound menacing. Michael looks to his side and sees Brad, whom he recognizes. He wants to get out. His skin senses what's in the air. Michael sees the man driving, whom he doesn't know, but doesn't need to look at who's in the passenger seat to know it's Steak with his mangled face. Anywhere else a city's disconnected, and people can go without seeing acquaintances for months, years. Michael thought St. John's was that type of city. Now he feels how small it is, the asphalt hands of the capital wrapping around his neck, smothering the life from his carcass.

You did some fine work on me, Steak says.

Shouldn't have acted how you did, Michael says.

Brad grabs Michael by the shirt with one hand and smashes his face into the window with his other.

Steak says, You're the one having sex with other fellas.

Probably wants to suck us all off, says Brad.

Michael chuckles, his breath steaming the glass around his lips. I wouldn't go near your dick, judging by the way your fingers smell.

Brad lets go of him, ramming Michael's skull off the glass with a rough shove. The loud noise it makes keeps echoing around in Michael's head how the *Pong* ball sounded hitting those paddles endlessly.

We're going to teach you a lesson, boy, says Steak.

Out past the Goulds, the driver— to Michael, an as of yet named drug dealer— turns off onto a dark road leading out into the trees. He parks the car in a short clearing and keeps the lights on. Brad hauls Michael from the backseat and slams him bent over the car's hood. He pushes down on Michael's neck, pressing hard with his forearms. The driver stays in his seat behind the wheel. He looks right into Michael's face and lights up a spliff. The tangy scent of hash oil mixed with bitter weed hits the air giving Michael a momentary release— he smells it and lets the aroma take him away, just for a second. Then he's back with his face in the car's steel. Steak is in front of the vehicle with Brad along the side.

And Michael hears the jingling of metal. Like a bell. Or a belt.

Two hands reach around him, fumbling at his jeans. His pants are undone and they're ripped to the ground, along with his underwear.

Michael says, Wait a minute.

His face bangs off the hood again. He pushes through the pain to feel around his mouth with his tongue, making sure he hasn't lost any more teeth. His vision is blurry. Shapes and shadows around him. He hears Steak laugh, then Brad pushes his feet open a bit wider.

Steak says, If you start crying like a little bitch. I'll only start again.

Michael sees nothing but the hood of the car, darkness around him. He braces himself for the pain. His breathing gets heavy. He wants to scream. Leather cracks across Michael's lower back and bare ass, leaving a thick welt as it leaves. His skin is on fire. He wants to look and see if he's bleeding, but he's stuck.

One, Steak says.

Another whip of leather belt smacks against naked skin, the tail end flicking around Michael's thighs and smacking one of his testicles. Michael bites into his lip, clenching his teeth hard, surprised his mouth hasn't burst into a shower of blood. The pain of the belt and the one in his lip are the same, they faded into a starry purple sky behind his shut eyes.

When Steak leaves with Brad and the driver, they leave Michael lying in the dirt. The car's lights move out of the woods. In seconds, they're gone after a single red flash of brake lights turn the clearing into a sea of red. After that, only darkness.

Michael lies on his stomach, letting out an animal's moan. Blood trickles from the back of his thighs, running between them. He doesn't want to turn over and turn his legs into the dirt. He takes his time getting up. He pulls his pants up around his waist, trying to ignore the pair of denim scraping over the lacerations where leather split him open in thin strips.

Michael sees his phone on the ground next to where he'd been lying. And next to that is a syringe, full of dark fluid. He picks up the phone and sees a message waiting from Steak's number. He opens the text: How's ur arse? Left a little pain killer. Be careful. He's a big prick. Michael pockets the phone in his jeans and puts the syringe in his shirt pocket. He starts walking towards the road. Once he's out there he walks back into the Goulds.

The cab pulls up outside the Captain's Quarters right as rain washes over the street and the whole city's immediately wet. Michael pays the cabbie— not much, after walking kilometres until reaching Bannerman Park, where his feet demanded he call Jiffy to take him the last bit of the way.

Michael goes to the front desk, pays for a night's stay, and goes up to his room. He doesn't bother flicking on the lights. The moon shines through a tall window at the far side of the room, the place is lit in a strange blue light like an Italian horror film from the 1970s. He sits at the bed's edge and takes out the syringe. He holds it in the slice of moonlight pouring over the hardwood floor. Around him are the sounds of loud television, faint humping and howling, among other noises of the city's landscape. It sounded how Michael imagined it would in Hell.

Michael rolls back his sleeve. He smacks at the skin inside his elbow, beating it red with his index and middle finger. Each motion is that of reluctance. Each move of his muscle a move of fate. He hates himself and it feels like destiny. The needle sinks into his vein. Michael pushes down on the plunger. Drugs rush into him, they pump around inside him and send all those sweet sensations to all the right locations. He drops the syringe, still hanging from the hole it punctured, weighing on the skin.

Sleep. Or something like it.

In the ether is the pink room, only it's no longer a room. It's a never ending pink landscape. It becomes a part of Michael. He's indistinguishable from it. He can't tell where the pink ends and where he begins anymore. It starts to slither inside him. First into his mouth, until his cheeks are puffed out and his jaw opens wide. Then it sneaks into his throat.

Michael's choking. He's awake, panicking. He turns to his side, falling right off the edge of the bed. He hits the floor, hard, and spews vomit all over the place. He can't breathe. He can't control his limbs. His body stretches out stiff as board. Both of his arms are stuck at his sides. He tries to grab at his throat but neither of his hands will lift from the floor. The shakes start in his chest, moving down through the rest of his body until his feet are shaking. Michael's boots start knocking against the hardwood. One foot kicks the bedside table and knocks over the lamp. In a minute, someone's knocking at the door, beating on it. But Michael can't hear anyone. After that he can't see anything. And then even all sound has drained away.

From out of a shadowy nowhere Michael emerges. He's swallowing breaths of air like they're food. He thinks it's been days since he was last awake. By the dryness of his mouth, longer since he's drank a glass of water. The spit he's choking on feels dry, gritting into sand over his withered tongue.

Michael tries to move and his body jerks to a stop. He brings up against leather straps over his chest and arms. He's ratcheted down with a metal clamp on one side of the bed. The bed is in a hospital. Michael knows by the look of the room around him, the pale, sad walls, which, if he had to guess, haven't been painted in a generation. The

colour is pastel. It used to be red. Over time it faded. Now it's a big pink sunset touching everything in sight.

Hello, Michael says.

The door is closed and nobody outside hears.

Somebody. I'm awake.

Michael looks at his arms closer. He's hooked to an IV and being fed a bag of nutrients. He sees the small hole from where he put the syringe needle last night. He doesn't remember arriving at the hospital. He hoped it was going to kill him. He wants to go back to sleep. It's a good thing he's strapped to the bed, otherwise he'd jam his nails into his throat until he could grip onto his Adam's apple and tear it out like a shiny, bloody diamond.

People pass the room's door. Michael notices through the tiny square window.

Someone, come help.

An orderly stops at the window, looking over Michael from head to toe making sure he's in one piece. After that they're gone again.

Fuck, Michael says. He shakes hard at the bed. He's strapped so tight it barely moves, the frame's metal rattling and clanking loudly. Time goes on. Michael has no clue for how long. And then, a turn of the door knob. A doctor and a nurse come in together. The doctor checks the chart on the edge of the bed as the nurse looks over the IV and its tubing.

Do you need to pee? The nurse says.

I don't know what's going on—I don't need to piss.

The doctor says, Mr. Healey, no need to be angry. My name is Dr. Byrne. You were found last night at a motel. You'd overdosed on what we determined was heroin.

Jesus. Michael doesn't know if he feels more sick or more angry with himself.

We were able to give you naloxone— which you received in the ambulance from the paramedics— and then we pumped your stomach, and you've been treated with fluids via your IV here to help you get back to normal.

Thank you, doc.

I wanted to let you know, it seems you've got swelling I noticed, and it's possible you have kidney stones. Have you had any problems? Any pain urinating?

No, I'm fine, Michael says.

The nurse leaves after she's done with the IV. The doctor sits next to the bed, pulling a chair in closer.

Mr. Healey, I want to talk to you about a few things. First, you're very unhealthy. You haven't been treating yourself well. You're dehydrated and slightly malnourished. But, most importantly, while I was checking your swelling around the pelvic area, I saw an injury to your penis. Then I noticed the dried blood on you. We checked you over and saw the wounds on your backside. We treated the wounds. But they were, if I may be frank with you, horrifying.

Michael squirms in the bed. The mention of his member, from another man, makes him feel strange. He's only ever known it as an appendage of terrible passion, a disembodied part of himself. It's under his control, he knows that, but he and it feels like two separate entities, and hearing the doctor talk about them as one is an uncomfortable, unfamiliar sensation.

Dr. Byrne says, I don't want to be presumptive. It looks to me like self-harm. Is that correct?

Yes, you are.

I would really like for you to talk with one of our psychiatrists on the grounds. I think it would do you well.

I'm not a fan of talking. It does nothing.

Can I tell you a story, Mr. Healey?

It's Michael. And sure.

Okay, Michael. You see this?

Michael watches him roll up a sleeve. On the inside of the doctor's arm is a thick scar in the shape of a fat Band-Aid, the colour lighter than the rest of his skin, and shiny like a wet patch.

Dr. Byrne says, My father was a drinker. He knocked a hot pan off the stove— with me in the kitchen, twelve years old— and the handle struck me in the arm while I was helping my mother chop vegetables to make Jiggs' dinner. I used to tell people I got it from working on a golf course, my first job.

Why?

Because I grew up not talking about my father, or what he did when he was drunk. Then, one day, I did. The scar never hurt, but after that day it didn't feel like I was dying on the inside anymore. I tell people about this scar all the time now. And then I tell them I've never touched a drop of alcohol, except for a beer I drank with my uncle on my nineteenth birthday.

Michael isn't sure what to say.

Dr. Byrne says, Holding in what hurts us only kills us faster, Michael. It's toxic. It builds like a black cloud until there's too much, and then comes the rain.

The metaphors are a bit much, but I got it. The metaphors are real, and if you don't believe it then you're not paying attention. It's already poured on you. Either weather the storm, or drown.

The doctor gets up to write on the medical chart. He smiles at his patient, then finishes, putting the clipboard back in its place.

Talk to one of our psychs later— Dr. Lynch— or wait until tomorrow. Try.

Michael says, How long am I stuck in here?

You're on a mandatory forty-eight hour hold. Afterwards you can go on, or, if you feel the need, we can have you stay longer voluntarily. I'll come back to see you later, see how you're doing.

Michael follows an orderly through sets of corridors that soon all look like a single hall. He imagines himself a character in a Victorian novel being led through the corridors of some haunted place, towards the centre of a castle or a stately home. Parts of the building aren't actually in the 21st century like the people inside. They're scenes cobbled together from previous eras. A jigsaw of decades stack on top of one another. The further away from downstairs Michael gets the more modern the building looks. Left behind are the thirty-year-old decor, malfunctioning lights, the scuffed up floors, and all those damp, neglected rooms. The orderly brings Michael through a door into the offices off the main ward. The place looks newly renovated— bright fluorescent lighting, artsy blue and white patterned wallpaper, floors so shiny they reflected the light in a blinding flash every few steps. Inside one of the offices Michael's left sitting in front of a desk and the orderly leaves.

A doctor comes in and sits down at the desk. He shuffles around a few papers, finding one he needs.

My name is Dr. Lynch. You're Michael Healey, correct?

Yes, doctor. It's nice to meet you.

Same to you. Are you feeling okay today?

Michael says, To be honest, no. I'm not well.

How'd you end up in here? What I mean is, you've clearly been headed towards this for some time. Did anything trigger all this?

I found out something about my family. About my great-grandfather. He killed his wife, my great-grandmother. He wasn't well.

Did he have problems? Dr. Lynch says.

Well, I guess so. The newspaper I read about it in said he had an accident the year before. Worked in the lumber mill and got a piece of wood in the eye. After that he was never the same.

Why did the story of your great-grandfather scare you so much, then? Why did it set you off like this?

Michael's still stretching from the aching cramps the straps set into his bones and joints. He wants to stretch hard enough to burst from out his skin. He says, It scared me because I already don't feel at home in my own body, my mind. Knowing about what he did, knowing it was hidden from me my whole life, it's just more alienation.

Do you worry about genetics? That you might experience a psychotic break like him?

Everything else that's affected my family has touched me. This was never going to be an exception.

That's nonsense.

Your bedside manner's not fantastic, doc.

Wake up, Michael. You don't know what will happen any more than I can predict your behaviour.

So, psychology's what— garbage?

It isn't magic, that's for sure. Fate isn't real. Not in life, not in your genes.

Michael gets up from his chair and paces the room. He wants to be somewhere else. It's always how he's felt, in every room he's ever been. Things get tough and he wants to run. Or die. Whichever is easiest.

Tell me what you're thinking, says Dr. Lynch.

I'm imagining my escape.

Why?

Because I don't like thinking about the shit that hurts for too long, Michael says.

That's weakness.

Here comes the bedside manner again.

You don't strike me as weak, though.

Michael isn't sure what the doctor means. It makes him feel warm inside to hear someone say those words.

Dr. Lynch says, I saw in your medical records you've been sober until recently. Five years. That isn't weak.

Yet I fell off the wagon. Hard. And then I rolled right under its wheels.

But that's how it is for addicts. You still worked hard all that time. So, why is it you really think you're weak?

I don't know.

I think you do, you'd just rather run from it. You'd rather me explain it than figure it out for yourself. Bury it away with the family history.

No, it's not like that.

Yes, it is. And you'll keep coming back here, then one day you'll be gone and you'll leave all the people who care about you behind.

Michael stops walking the room. He sits on the floor where a window's afternoon light bathes him in warmth. Nobody cares right now, he says.

I'm sure they do.

I've hurt people lately. Badly, too.

They still care about you, Dr. Lynch says. Your mother cares. She's your emergency contact, I talked with her this morning.

It took her more than a decade to care.

Does she know why it is you're running away from yourself all the time, from your pain?

Michael shakes his head.

It's time to tell somebody about it, Dr. Lynch says.

Fuck sakes. Who knows where to start.

The pink room.

Michael looks confused.

Dr. Lynch says, You were mumbling about it after the paramedics brought you in. Tell me whose room it was.

It belonged to Donna. She babysat me, when I was around five or six. I've never said it out loud to anybody. I don't know if I've ever really admitted it to myself. Donna molested me— me and my friend Matthew. She babysat the both of us, and she'd make

us, do things together. And if we were good, if we did what she told us to, then we were allowed to do things to her.

I'm very sorry, Michael. No one should ever have to experience that.

But the worst was that me and Matthew never knew it was wrong. We kept on doing things together, before we ever even knew what it was we were actually doing. It was like a game, like dares for kids, and we never understood the consequences. We were living this secret life. We knew it wasn't what kids should be doing, so we hid it. We'd have sleepovers and camp outs, and we'd do all the things Donna showed us how to do. We just, never knew how it'd be. You know, later.

Dr. Lynch says, That's because she hurt you. A child is like a tree— if you damage it at the root, it's going to grow up warped.

We never knew it was wrong. It just felt good, so we kept doing it.

You didn't know any better.

Now I'm so confused, Michael says. I don't know what I want, who I want. I'm not even sure I really know myself. It's like there's another person wrapped around my bones.

Michael's breath catches. He starts coughing.

Do you want to stop? Dr. Lynch says.

There's a fear in Michael's eyes, as much as there's a fist of tension clenched in his chest. He wants to hyperventilate. He opens his mouth to let the air out of his lungs and nothing comes out. He leans back, his face caught in a stretched scream like Donald Sutherland from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, just without sound. Finally the breath releases. So does the tortured look on Michael's face.

Michael says, I think I'm having a panic attack. The words barely get across his lips. He's helped to the floor by the doctor, who cradles his head. The doctor pulls his sweater off, rolling it up to stuff under Michael.

Just rest a minute. I'll get you some water.

Dr. Lynch goes out of the room, leaving Michael on the floor rolling in a state of terror. Michael feels like if he just pushes hard enough he'll push these memories right out of his body, like expelling waste physically from the body, and then they'll be gone, washed away. All these years the secret history of his life was hardly buried, staying hidden from him. A few weeks and they all came back to the surface with such poisonous sting.

Dr. Lynch gets back with a bottle of water. He gives his patient a drink. He pours a drop of water in his hand and rubs some on Michael's forehead. The look in his eyes isn't the typical masculine distress. Michael is used to seeing on the face of another man so close to his pain. The look says it's all right.

Thank you.

What happened in that room, it was wrong, and it wasn't your fault, Michael. Most important—and I need you to really hear this, too—it doesn't define you. Not your emotions, not your sexuality, and not the kind of man you are, or the one you could be someday.

Ancient floodgates in Michael open wide. Tears cascade out of him. The floor soaks around his face and the sweater. He grabs the doctor in a bear hug, gripping the man like he'd crush him to pieces, and the doctor hugs him back, tightly holding him, caressing his back the way one does a wounded dog.

Let it out, Dr. Lynch says.

It's like this a while. Michael cradles into the comfort of his psychiatrist's arms until he can't produce another salty drop from his eyes and it feels like his sockets are dry heaving. He pulls away from the doctor, dabbing the wetness from the mess of his face with the stretched out sleeve of his shirt.

I'm sorry, Michael says.

There's no shame in that— showing the pain you feel. It's human.

It's ugly.

And that's what being human is sometimes, says the doctor.

Not everybody understands it that way.

Then fuck them.

Michael's caught off guard. He smiles.

Dr. Lynch gets up and walks to the window. He sees the sun shining bright.

You'll be out on the street again soon, back to your life. I need you to learn that keeping all your secrets and your hurt canned up inside is bad, for you and everybody around you. Emotions are perishable. Someday, some thing— might be the littlest or the biggest event— is going to make you do inventory, open those up, and what's left inside will do nothing but harm.

The sunlight catches Michael's eye and he leans towards the window from his chair, a malnourished plant lurching for the sun's restorative touch.

Dr. Lynch says, Now, that was a good metaphor.

Actually the first one was a simile.

Are you a writer?

I used to love English in high school.

You didn't go to university. How come?

I didn't think it was an option, Michael says. It was trades or bust.

Ever think of going back to school?

All the time. Tell me what you'd study.

Film.

Interesting choice.

When I was a boy I'd make people play toys with me and direct them like we were doing scenes. I always wanted to be a director. Ever since I saw the 1930s *Frankenstein*.

James Whale.

Michael gives him an impressed look.

I've been known to enjoy a film or two, Dr. Lynch says. Plus, working in this building? Gothic stories are my favourite.

I've wanted to make my own movie for years.

That's a way to let out what's caught inside you. You don't have to bawl and wail if it's not how you express yourself. You can use a pen, a camera, an actor, a set. But you've got to express those feelings, one way or another.

Michael stares down at his lap. Am I going to be okay?

Dr. Lynch says. Truthfully, I don't know. That's up to you. I do know that you seem intelligent, you have a drive to do something with your life. You just have to let yourself live. On your own terms. First, you've got to let some things go.

Afternoon warmth comes in through the outpatients entrance as a man and his daughter open the door and go out through the early summer heat. Michael waits for another

doctor— Dr. Foley— who’s writing out a few things, checking over the release forms and signing her name where necessary.

Dr. Foley says, You’ll need to take these once a day. And take them with food.

Michael nods, listening to her explain the pills he’s being prescribed and their potential side effects. He’s never taken pills for depression. He was afraid to ever see a doctor, of any kind, because he’d always known there was something wrong with him. He feels it, the hole in him devoid of happiness. He’s tried filling it with all manner of pleasure, and the emptiness eats away his happiness, time and time again.

He’s ready to be medicated. He isn’t ready to survey the damage he’s done, to face his own horrible mistakes. It makes his lips itch for a drink, his emotional inside calls to be lubricated before it otherwise transforms into a frothing, maniacal beast forcing his puppet mouth to say things that can never be undone and pulling the string of his limbs, making them do awful things. Michael wants to tame the monster lurking in his gut. If medication helps, so be it.

Just sign here and here, says Dr. Foley. We’ve made an appointment for you to see a therapist regularly. I’ve also included a few locations where there are Narcotics Anonymous meetings available to attend throughout the week— I suggest you try one out. Any questions?

Michael shakes his head. Thanks so much for everything. I didn’t get the chance, but could you tell Dr. Lynch his talk with me the other day was truly helpful?

I will, absolutely. Take care of yourself out there, okay?

Michael takes his prescription from her and pushes out the door to the parking lot. He goes across the road to the bus shelter. A couple other people are waiting, too. When Michael sees the Metrobus down the road, he laughs to himself, never once imagining

he'd be this happy to see that loud, smelly, incessantly late tube of steel as he is in this moment.

Chapter 10

1965

Harlan was waiting patiently for his chance to go out some afternoon on a day pass. Not just any afternoon. He was able to get in touch with his daughter Marnie again after fifteen years had passed, despite her changing her last name, getting married and changing it again— she was twice removed from the horrors of her father.

He wasn't sure what changed since last he saw her in that hospital in Grand Falls. Marnie hadn't told him why, she just agreed to come see him, if he was going to get out for the day. Harlan assured her he'd be getting out. He made sure his time at the Mental was quiet. It was also because he remained quiet— one orderly's cruelty was a tiny price to pay. Harlan didn't want anything to jeopardize his chances.

He didn't know how it was going to feel being outside the Waterford's gates. He couldn't imagine it, like if he stepped out of the doors, onto the street, and nothing would be there waiting for him except a blank void. He couldn't recall what cars were like— not up close. He'd see them from the window from time to time in the parking lot. He couldn't remember how they felt to ride in, or how they sounded, save the few muffled automobile noises that made it past the hospital's veil. He wasn't able to remember any other food except oatmeal, the occasional apple or orange. He spent years of his life eating out of the ocean, and he couldn't remember the taste of fish, nor could he close his eye anymore and think of the ocean so fondly the salt water would cloud his lungs. The

fifteen years locked away, the malnutrition, the medication, and the guilt had whittled him down to a husk of himself.

In the morning Harlan would go in to see the hospital board. He'd never been to see them, there was no reason until the opportunity for day release came. He'd finally served the fifteen years of his sentence that would allow him to get a pass. Earlier that year, he was told of the possibility, and he spent months trying to contact Marnie. The anticipation, only one more sleep away, of knowing if he would get the chance to get out for a handful of hours was the feeling of an electrical storm crackling beneath Harlan's skin. He wasn't altogether sure he wouldn't explode before the morning came and rocket through the roof, passing over the moon like some fleshy constellation crossing the sky.

He stopped looking in the mirror years ago. He used to cut his face to pieces trying to shave after that, so he quit shaving, too. He looked like a mountain man, his scarred eyehole could have been the wound from an animal attack for all anyone knew. His hair had grown out until it touched his shoulders. He was wild and overgrown, a human weed.

That night, Harlan stood at the mirror in the bathroom— an attendant at his side— and he had his hair cut by one of the young women from the beauty salon downtown. She clipped away at his head and his jaw, trimming down the unkempt, matted hair enclosing his face. The lady's name was Tara. She was young but tall. Her small ponytail bobbed on top of her head while she worked with the scissors and clippers in tandem, the way a buoy rocks around atop the Atlantic's rough surf. Harlan watched her in the mirror as she went on doing her job flawlessly without having to think about it, each move precise. He remembered doing a job once. It was second nature. He took it for granted— like everything else in his life, before Allie died under his two hands.

Big day tomorrow, is it? Tara said.

Yes, my love. Going to see if I gets to visit my daughter soon.

Oh, my. That is big. I'd say you're excited.

Nervous.

I can imagine you are.

Harlan said, Don't like speaking in front of people. Me words don't come out how I wants them to. Got to go talk to the board.

I'll tell you a trick: picture them people in their underwear. It'll calm you right down.

Harlan laughed. My dear, if you saw a few of the fellas I'll be talking to you wouldn't be telling me that.

They both laughed together, so hard that Tara stopped cutting his hair to make sure she didn't slice one of his ears by mistake. After they finished cracking up, Tara got back to trimming, and she smiled in the mirror at him.

Your daughter— is it long since you saw her?

Harlan said, Ages. Fifteen years.

That's a lifetime.

She's got a little girl, her and her fella. Been married about nine years.

Will you get to meet your granddaughter?

I'm not sure, Harlan said. Don't know if my daughter will bring her along. Might not be ready for that.

Who— you, or her?

Both, I suppose.

Tara said, I understand. Can't be easy, locked up in here.

Harlan said nothing, only looked away from the mirror, feeling a sticky tear well up in the corner of his eye and not wanting the young woman to watch it wriggle down the aged lines all over his face. She stayed quiet, noticing his body language— he was huddling into the side of the chair like a wounded animal shielding itself from harm. Tara went on cutting, stopping the head to go back to the face, depending on which way the man under her blade was moving.

You never asked why I'm in here, said Harlan.

That's none of my business.

You're not afraid?

No reason to be.

You would be, if you knew

Tara said, Then tell me.

Harlan sat there and wondered if he ought to bother. He didn't need to tell her. It made no difference ultimately. But the way she willingly stood there with him, her gentle hands passing through his tattered locks and stroking the heavy growth at his chin, she deserved to know him.

It was my wife, Harlan said. I killed her. I loved her, so much, but I killed her.

Tara looked him in the eye in the mirror. She keeps going at his hair, saying nothing at all.

I knew you'd be scared. I wouldn't want to be cutting my hair, either.

No, it's not that. I'm trying to figure out how a nice man like yourself could've done something so horrible.

I wish I knew the answer to that.

Tara said, Has your daughter forgiven you?

Don't think so. Not sure she ever will.

You never know. She may come around.

I wouldn't be upset if she didn't. What I done was awful.

And you know that— that's important.

Nothing's important to me anymore, Harlan said. After Allie it's all been a mess.

Well, when we're done tonight you'll be ready to get some good news tomorrow.

That's important.

Tara finished his hair, then she trimmed his beard. She showed Harlan each side to make sure he liked it, though he only cared about not looking like a primate. His eye lit up a little after he saw himself looking normal again. He said nothing, mouthing a thank you to her through the mirror. She replied a silent you're welcome. Tara squeezed his shoulder and packed her things. They spoke no more. Harlan thought about the lady's family while she left. He hoped she had people at home who loved her. He hoped her father was better than him.

Mr. Hynes, you've served fifteen years, and, as such, are eligible for a day pass. Do you understand the terms of the pass?

Harlan said, Yes, sir.

The board member, Mr. Greene, said, Just to reiterate for you, the pass allows you to go out for an afternoon— five hours, anywhere within the city's limits— from twelve noon to five pm. If you aren't back on time, the police will be notified, and they will immediately issue a warrant for your arrest. Do you understand?

Yes, sir.

Now, you may infer from these instructions being given to you that we've made a decision. The decision is to grant your day release.

Thank you so much, sir. All of you.

Another board member, Mr. Saunders, said, Mr. Hynes, you've been a model inmate and patient here. We're granting you this as a reward for good behaviour. But be aware— if you give us a reason to regret this decision, your few privileges will vanish. Is that clear?

It is, sir, Harlan said. And thank you, again.

Mr. Greene said, We were told about your daughter and had one of the staff contact her to let her know about your pass. One of the nurses will bring you the details about where to meet her next week.

That's very good of you, sir. Harlan was trying to contain his excitement, the first smile in years working its way through the muscles of his sullen face.

Mr. Saunders said, We want you to succeed. Go out there, be normal again amongst normal men.

Back at his room, Harlan smiled until his face hurt. He couldn't remember the last genuine smile to cross his mouth. The muscles were sore and tight from lying dormant, lost relics of a life he was starting to let fade back into the recesses of an ancient past. That life was fighting to remain, glowing somewhere behind that missing eye, buried below the scarred skin.

He didn't know what was going to happen when he met Marnie. He wouldn't be disappointed, no matter what happened. He wanted to see her again. He probably wouldn't remember what she looked like after a decade and a half. She was a girl no

longer, she'd become a grown woman and built a life— a life of which he did not deserve to be a part. It was going to be like meeting a whole new person. He hoped it would be for them both.

At the bus stop across from the hospital, Harlan stood by the shelter alone. The sun was shining hot. Harlan's pale skin fried like chicken under its glare. He was waiting to see somebody— a regular person. He knew they'd know he was from the Mental. He had that look. Not many people came to his bus stop regularly. Once he got out into the rest of the city he would see them, the non-mad. They'd see the face beneath the flesh and understand. They'd all be able to tell he didn't belong.

Go back, they'd say. Back to your cage.

The road became a banging and crashing of metal. Loud noise assaulted Harlan and he dove, frightened, behind the shelter. He saw the Metrobus come closer. He recognized its shape from seeing it out the window in his room from time to time. He'd never heard the great modern monstrosity with his own ears. He remembered one of his school teachers reading to them about the Apocalypse in the Bible as a boy. He'd heard motors before, mostly on outboard engine boats or cars and trucks, the occasional freighter passing by the cove on its way over to Quebec. Back then he'd never heard such sounds as the bus made, and if he had he would have named the sound that of the Seven Seals opening, maybe the horn of Gabriel.

The bus stopped next to the shelter. The doors swung open.

You getting on? The driver said.

Harlan got up from behind the shelter and got on. He held out change. The driver pointed, with a nod, to a holder with a bunch of coins inside. Harlan put the money they gave him in and walked to a seat, sitting not far from the front.

The driver watches him, between glimpses of the road, through his rearview mirror. You coming from the Mental?

Harlan said nothing. He nodded.

Out for good, or just the day?

Only the day. Got to go back at five.

Just in time for supper, the bus driver said. He laughed but got no response.

Harlan sat there staring out the window. The world was moving so fast after all that time staying still. He thought of himself as a statue, but skin and bone and blood encased in stone, and each step he took out into the city again was another layer of granite and marble peeling away. The more of St. John's Harlan saw through that eye the more human he felt. The farther from the hospital the bus took him, the straighter his spine unfurled, his voice felt healthy, not diminished by the solitude and silence of his past fifteen years.

I'm going to meet my daughter, said Harlan.

That's nice. Where to?

Some place called A&W, I believe.

The bus driver said, You've been locked up there a long time, hey.

Yes, sir.

Don't worry. I ain't got no problems with you people. So long as you don't do me in and steal me bus. He thought this was funny, smiling ear to ear in the mirror back at Harlan as if awaiting a similar reaction.

Harlan said, How can you tell? Can you see it?

What are you talking about, fella?

What I done— can you see it?

Harlan was standing, shouting into the man's face before he could stop himself.

And, quick as that, the bus was hammering to a stop.

Get out, said the driver. Off my bus, you goddamn maniac.

Harlan bust through the doors before they were open and fled into a maze of buildings downtown. He couldn't bear the bus driver seeing through his mask, seeing what he was under the facade. He felt naked, terrified out there for anyone to see. When he was a boy a teacher once told him about Joseph Merrick. He thought it was sad they called him the Elephant Man. He knew how Merrick must have felt on the streets of Leicester, all those unkind eyes gawking, judging, passing him off as less than, or a monster. Sometimes he wished, like Merrick, that simply lying down in bed could end his life— to sleep the sweetest sleep of the dead and go far from this hateful world.

It took hours for Harlan to walk from the downtown area to Kenmount Road. The sights and sounds were bright, loud, scary. He didn't know this world. He barely knew St. John's before going away up the Mental, he'd only ever been once before that. But the whole fabric of the world and reality felt new to him. He didn't even recognize himself within it.

The A&W only opened a year before. Harlan heard about it from some of the orderlies who'd been there for a burger and a float. They talked about the pretty girls there who served customers for the drive-in orders, roller skating around the parking lot in their uniforms. They said that inside at the few tables it smelled of creamy root beer

and the smell of melted cheese. One orderly made it out with a big glass mug they gave people their drinks in, stealing it for his beer at home. Just the way they spoke about it made Harlan hungry.

Inside the restaurant Harlan felt cool air on him, the temperature dropping once he was out of the balmy July weather. He looked around and his eye found Marnie, sitting at a table by herself. He dragged himself over to sit with her. She got up before he made it to the table.

Hello, dad, Marnie said. She held her arms up for a hug. She hesitated, then opened them and moved towards her father.

Harlan said nothing. He recognized Marnie and, at the same time, she was a grown woman he didn't know at all. He wasn't able to remember when he last had a hug. He wasn't able to remember many things. He leaned into his daughter's arms, embracing her. Neither of them looked comfortable, but Harlan enjoyed the feeling of being so close to Marnie, after all this time. He could tell she felt strange, pressed against him. Yet she hugged into him, and he found himself curious if she needed it as much as him.

Marnie said, Sit down, look. She helped Harlan into the booth and then sat back down across from him.

Much of the meal was quiet, aside from the general noise of the restaurant, and Harlan's chewing—the few table manners he did have evaporated inside the walls of the Mental. He saw his daughter look at him, trying not to make a funny face. It was all that kept him aware. He watched her as he ate, and when she made the face he would close his mouth, or wipe his face, or sit up so he wasn't hunched over the table like a caveman. They finished their food. It stayed silent between them. Marnie stared out the window

while her father sucked at his straw, getting every last drop of ice cream out of the float in his mug, savouring all the different tastes.

Must be some different nowadays, Marnie said.

Harlan looked up from his empty mug. Yes, the city's awful big.

Did you ever come out here before?

Years and years ago. Didn't recognize it when I stepped out into it today.

Marnie smiled at him. It was a smile that looked like it was holding back pity, and a million other things.

Harlan said, First thing I thought of was your little one.

Allison, we named her.

This stopped Harlan. He looked at his daughter, whose face was half a smile, the remainder filled with an expression he didn't understand. He didn't think it was sadness. It wasn't happy, either. It was like the face of someone preparing for something that was about to hurt.

That's a beautiful name, Harlan said.

Myself and Bradley thought it was a nice way to keep mom around.

You know I don't blame you for not seeing me all this time, don't you? I can't blame you. Don't know how you or your brothers and sisters ever made it through.

Marnie looked away from him into the parking lot outside and the corners of her eyes soak with tears. She said, It wasn't as hard for me, I was a bit older.

I don't even know where the rest are. Who took little Henry?

Another family— a nice one from out in Corner Brook— they took him. He was too young to go with either of us, and they couldn't find nobody closer. Aunt Alvina and

Uncle Derek only had room for me and Tommy. Another family up in Lewisporte took Brian and Margaret.

Harlan hated the thought of all the children split up. He was the reason. He scattered them all to the wind with no idea where they would land.

Did they make out all right? Harlan said.

Physically we're all fine. But that family in Lewisporte, they was awful hard on young Brian and Margaret. Used to call them orphans. Said you was dead, that you wasn't actually in the hospital. And we all had to deal with the other kids at school.

What do you mean?

You were the bogeyman. Kids would say Harlan Hynes was going to come get you in your sleep if you stayed up too late, or if you never did your lessons after school. We all got teased. But Brian and Margaret got no rest from it, even at home with that family.

Harlan turned from his daughter. He hoped she wouldn't see his one eye glisten.

Marnie said, I saw Henry last year for the first time since he was adopted.

All grown up now, is he?

Tall, like you. He got mom's face— her eyes, her smile. He's some carpenter, too. I was out there, to his new family's place. They got a coffee table he made all by himself. Beautiful.

Harlan reached across the table, gripping his daughter's hand in his own. Marnie smiled. He smiled back, but couldn't look her right in the eyes. He caught looks at his haggard face in the reflection of the window. They frightened him. Like peering into his own grave. He was sure his daughter was frightened, too.

I love you, Marnie. I haven't give you much reason to love me. I just, hope you know.

Dad, I love you, too. I'll never be able to forgive you. But I love you. You'll always be my father. I can't speak for Tommy and the rest of them. I can only tell you how I feels.

Harlan cried. He didn't look away, keeping his eye on his daughter. He said, Thank you, my love.

Most of all, I wanted to see you one last time.

Harlan knew what she meant. He'd seen it on her face when he came into the restaurant.

My little girl's not so little anymore, Marnie said. She's nine. And she's starting to ask questions that I can't bring myself to answer.

About your mother.

Marnie's cheeks started to streak with tears. Her voice never wavered. She said, I can't lie to her forever.

You can't tell her the truth and keep coming to see me.

It wouldn't feel right. She won't be able to understand.

Harlan said, Don't cry, my girl. He reached out, thumbing away the tears on his daughter's cheek. He used his index finger then to wipe away the other one. He held the side of her face in his hand. They stayed that way, not talking anymore, and it was only after a car honked in the parking lot that they moved another inch.

Harlan got back to the Mental with time to spare before the pass was up. He spoke briefly to one of the doctors, telling him about seeing Marnie. He went to sleep extra early that

night. He was excited— technically, the last time he would see his daughter was going to be the following morning, before she, Bradley, and little Allison went back home to the Central. They were going to stop in so Marnie could say her final goodbye. It took Harlan a while, but he fell asleep eventually.

He dreamed he had his eye back. It was better than the old one. He could see the future. When he looked into it, he saw nothing. An empty hole.

Will you ever get out? Marnie said. She was standing at the window, the morning sun shining on her dark red hair.

Harlan sat at the edge of his bed. He said, I don't know. Maybe someday. By then I wouldn't know what to do with myself.

Where would you go?

Sure I could barely make it up to Kenmount. I'm not going anywhere, Marnie. Even if they lets me, I'd never survive on me own. Not after all this.

Marnie went to her father and hugged him. It felt more comfortable to Harlan this time. It still felt sad.

I'm going now, Marnie said. I don't want to drag it out no more.

I'm just happy you wanted to see me at all.

Listen, I know this is hard. So if you wait there by that window, I've got a small surprise for you, before we leaves.

Harlan wasn't sure what to say. He smiled and squeezed his daughter's hand a final time. He saw her off through the door to his room, watching her go down the ward's hall. After she left he went to the window and watched the parking lot. He felt the

sunlight's delicate warmth over his scarred socket. He wished his skin were like soil and the sun could sprout him another eye, so he might see his daughter better.

Then Harlan saw Marnie come out of the building, walking across the lot to a truck. She spoke to Bradley, who was sitting in the driver's seat. He got out with her, and behind him a slender girl with blonde hair tied in a ponytail. He saw his granddaughter for the first time. He watched Marnie talking to little Allison, pointing up towards Harlan's window. They weren't close enough to actually see Harlan. But he could see them. Harlan watched his granddaughter waving at him. He wept at the window— wept with a smile. He kept watching and saw the family get into the truck.

Harlan saw the truck pulling around the parking lot and turning towards the exit. He saw his granddaughter, and Marnie, again when they came back his way before pulling into the road. He knew that, to young Allison, he was only a shadow, and he would remain a shadow to her forever. The same as he knew he would never forget Allison's face— either of them.

Chapter 11

Michael's waiting in the Duke of Duckworth when the pain around his pelvic bone pulses. He wants to scream. He knows he should've had the doctors at the Waterford help him. He tries to put the feeling out of his mind, even if it's all he can feel. The thought of meeting Matthew after so long was also rotting his guts out— he was excited, but nervous, and along with the stone eager to get out of him it made him feel like how he imagined it would to die slowly.

The last time Michael saw Matthew they were a few years out of high school. He had no idea where the guy ended up. After his nineteenth birthday, Michael was home from Alberta, and he saw Matthew back in Grand Falls. They drank a beer, shared a joint. Matthew told Michael about his job at the corner store near his house, where he still lived with his parents, the same place where he'd lived as a boy, stuck in the concrete of time. Michael tried to play down his high paying trades job— one that would only last another year after that— not wanting to make Matthew feel any more depressed than he already seemed.

Michael wonders, did his old friend know? He was busy drinking and drugging, while Matthew was aware, present, the haunting ghosts of their intertwined trauma on his face. That's how it felt, looking at his friend in hindsight.

When Michael sees Matthew walk through the door it feels differently. Not only that time's passed, or that their faces were hairier, his own a tad dried out showing premature wrinkles from years of early alcohol abuse. It's that Matthew looks good— his skin is soft, from a distance and a healthy shade of red, his hair isn't long and haggard as it was six years ago when they saw one another, and even the way he walks is the stride of a happy, confident person. The sight of him makes Michael stand, trying to straighten out his posture and brushing his shirt to make sure he doesn't resemble a crinkled bill.

Man, is this a trip, Matthew says.

Don't have to ask, I'd remember you anywhere.

They shake hands. It becomes a hug, each embracing the other with the ease of an ingrained habit. They look each other over and their nervous laughter breaks what tension clings to them.

Sit down, Michael says. I don't drink anymore, so I just ordered water.

That's fine. Not much of a drinker myself.

I was able to get your number because, somehow, I remembered your mom and dad's phone number back home.

Good ole Rick and Debbie. Same number since 1990.

Matthew's smile is the same as when they were boys. His lower lip is bigger than the top. He has too many teeth for his mouth. Growing into a man made the boyish fool's grin a handsome Disney smirk.

How've you been? Matthew says.

Honestly, not great. But getting better.

That sounds good, and not good.

Michael sees a shine from Matthew's hand reflecting the low light of the restaurant briefly. Is that what I think it is?

Matthew holds up his ring finger brandishing an engagement band.

That is amazing, congratulations.

Thanks, man, Matthew says. I met Heather a few years ago. Proposed to her on New Year's Day this year.

Lucky girl. So, what have you been up to? What do you do for a living?

Michael wants to sidestep himself. He's working up the courage to say what needs saying. He listens as Matthew tells him about life, work, more about his fiancée. He listens, though he doesn't hear much, not really— everything is muffled by the power of those memories from when they were young, suffocated by the past's obscure weight.

Matthew says, And now this past six months I've been working at the Health Sciences. Great job, good benefits— goes a long way these days.

Do you remember our old babysitter?

The question pokes out of the conversation like skeletal graveyard remains bursting out of the earth in a ground swell. Matthew's not taken by surprise as much as it looks he's been waiting for the subject to erupt into their reunion.

I remember Donna, says Matthew. I try not to most days. But still do.

It only recently came back to me, in full.

I'm sorry, buddy.

Tears sit in Michael's lids, leaking in tiny streams from their corners. So, you've dealt with this?

I see a therapist. Have for a few years. I never forgot what happened, it's always been with me.

I let this ruin my life, Michael says.

We're only twenty-five. You've got a whole life ahead of you.

The things I've done. Michael trails off.

Matthew puts his hand over Michael's and rubs it. Don't be afraid of happiness, he says. What that woman did doesn't get to ruin you.

A waiter stops at the table. Matthew holds his grip on Michael, letting the waiter know they'll need more time. The two men are left alone. Matthew moves his chair around close to Michael.

Talk to me, Matthew says.

Everything confuses me. And I don't know who I want— who I want to love, who I want to fuck, who's my friend, who's more, who's the enemy. I'm tired, man. Sick and tired, and confused.

That's okay.

It isn't. I've hurt people closest to me, all because I was too hypnotized by my own pain to realize how dangerous I am.

You aren't dangerous.

You don't know me, Matt. Not anymore. I hurt somebody.

How?

A guy said some nasty shit to me, and I went off. Thought I was going to kill him.

Do you feel bad about it?

Of course. I don't want to hurt anybody. Makes me sick.

I think that means you're not a bad person. Doesn't change what you did. Still, you made a mistake.

Michael says, It wasn't a mistake. I meant to hurt him. But, I know I shouldn't have. And it doesn't matter—I did it, I hurt him, and I am a bad fucking person.

You're wrong about one thing, Matthew says.

What's that?

I do know you. Just because we haven't hung out in years doesn't mean I don't know you.

But I'm a different person now.

You still look the same on stage. Still act just as well.

Michael doesn't understand.

Matthew says, Barbara Barrett Theatre. *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

You were there?

Closing night. I had no idea you were in it until I saw you up there, your name in the program. I wanted to see you after but there was all kinds of people on the go, and I

had to get up early the next morning. You know, I was actually going to try and find your number, then I got caught up at work and it slipped my mind.

Michael isn't sure what to say. He's happy to know someone from his past was there to see him performing. It feels like a thread stitching the best parts of his old life together with the new one. Although he's not sure there's a way to hold it all together, that it won't bust at the first light tug.

Matthew says, What happened to us was out of our control. We were eight. We could barely control our bladders, let alone what adults did. But we're grown now, we're in our mid-twenties.

I've pissed half my twenties away.

You've got control. You can choose to be a real man from here— your own man, a gentle one, a kind one. You can be a happy man. I saw you on that stage, Mike. You looked like you were on top of the fucking world. That wasn't in another lifetime. That was only a few weeks ago.

I just, don't know who I am.

Then figure yourself out. No one else can do that for you. Be who you always wanted to be.

Michael laughs through tears. You sound like a postcard, you know?

Maybe I should write for Hallmark. Draw your big asshole face on the cards with my poems.

Oh, you're writing poems now?

Matthew says, You're a funny fucker when you're sad. When I laugh, I get hungry— let's order.

An overcast sky is perched over the city. Michael and Matthew come out of the restaurant into the weather downtown. People are everywhere. The heat remains, even as the clouds darken and the sky looks like a dirty puddle. Michael undoes the collar of his shirt, along with untucking the whole thing from his pants.

This really was great, Matthew says.

I'm so glad we got in touch again.

Don't be a stranger. We're both in the city. Should've happened sooner.

Michael grabs him without saying anything else and cinches him into his arms. Matthew hugs him back, grasping his waist, his shoulder. They stay this way as people pass them on the sidewalk in scattered lines.

Michael says, I know we've barely seen each other for the past fifteen years, but I love you, man.

I understand. I love you, too. So don't go another six years, or another fifteen—you've got my number now. I was telling Heather about you after you called. She'd love to meet you.

The world suddenly doesn't feel so dark, and more tears are settling in Michael's eyelids. He steps away to the curb lighting a cigarette from the trampled pack in his pocket.

It's always going to be with you, says Matthew. Wherever we go.

I just want to be better. I don't want the past to own me.

So, don't let it.

How? Michael says.

Again, nobody can answer that for you. You've got to find certain answers for yourself.

They say a short goodbye. Matthew calls for a ride, then he's in a Jiffy cab leaving Michael at the curb, still smoking, still unsure of himself and what he wants. He sputters into a sob, which sends him rushing to find a place to hide. He moves past people along the sidewalk who watch him and his tears like they're a cryptid walking among them.

Between a couple buildings, Michael lets his sob go. The sounds of his crying reverberate out to the road, though they die off in the noise of the street.

Man down, Michael says. He weeps until there's no strength left in his arms or his legs. He screeches until his eyeballs feel like they're throbbing out of their sockets, and snot runs off the tip of his nose. He collapses on his ass to the damp ground. He wipes off his face, then laughs and laughs until he's crying again.

Michael's getting ready to spend Saturday night out on the town. He's spent a handful of years downtown, working and going to shows at bars without having a drink. He wants to prove to himself he can keep on living without worrying about falling off the wagon again. He doesn't want to hide anymore— not from his problems, not from himself. He wants to let the sunshine in, to disinfect his soul.

He has to do something first.

Michael dials a number into his phone, waiting for the person on the other end to pick up.

Julianne says, Hello?

Hi, it's Michael.

Are you okay? My god. Didn't know what happened to you after the other night. Haven't heard a thing from you in days.

Yeah, I should've texted back the other day. Listen, I'm really sorry. About everything. The night at the hotel— that was the worst me, that I've ever been.

It's the scariest thing I've seen you do.

Michael says, I know. I'm sorry I put you in a position where you had to witness that.

I could've got in the way. What then?

I'm not asking you to forgive me. But I am sorry. I wound up having a worse couple days after that. I only got out of the Waterford a day ago.

Serious?

Maybe we could have a bite to eat some time soon. I'll tell you more about it.

Julianne goes quiet on the other end of the phone.

I get it if you don't want to, Michael says. You don't owe me anything.

I know I don't. You're still one of my best friends, Mike. It's just, you really scared the shit out of me.

It was ugly. Can't blame you for being frightened.

Did you talk to somebody at the Waterford?

Yeah, a psychiatrist. I've got regular appointments setup. Just need to make sure I keep going to them.

Julianne says, I hope it helped.

I think it might change things for me. I want it to.

It's a start that you actually want it to. Are you back on the wagon again? Off the drugs?

All of it. Well, there might be drugs in my future— prescription pills. Doctor said I probably should've been diagnosed with depression years ago, if I'd actually gone to see somebody about my issues.

Probably won't hurt. Most people I know are on some kind of pills, for anxiety, or whatever. No shame in it.

It was just good to talk. Got to say things I should've said years ago.

Like what?

Maybe we could leave that for dinner some time, Michael says.

How about we go for coffee instead?

Coffee works.

I'm taking Nathan out to the park on Monday morning. He's been asking where Uncle Mike is to. We could meet you somewhere. Have a coffee, a donut.

I'd love that. Not sure if the little man wants to hear about my stay up to the Waterford, though.

You don't have to talk about it, or anything like that. Not yet. Let's just have a normal day. Like we did before. I need to try to feel comfortable around you again, after the night with John.

That's fine with me. John— Jesus. I've got to call him, too.

Probably not going to be as easy as it was with me. He told me to tell you never to call him.

No surprise there, Michael says. Still got to try. He's a good man. I treated him like shit.

Like I said before, the fact you recognize it is a start.

Got to start somewhere.

Outside the Velvet Nightclub are a crowd of people smoking. Michael smells cigarettes. Weed is the dominant smell. A faint aroma of booze comes out of the door to the club each time someone opens it. A line of people stand moving a couple steps at a time as more are let inside. Michael stands with the others on his own, making his way in through the door. It gets warmer, louder. Saturday night and it's packed. People can't move an inch without rubbing into someone.

After Michael gets in and pays cover, he walks over to the bar. He stands in front of it looking up at the rows of bottles, all the different colours— their flavours run through his mind. He thinks about ordering a White Russian. When the bartender comes over Michael chooses 7 Up.

Michael has a look across the dance floor. There's a crowd of people all throwing their bodies around to the music in sync to the rhythm. Michael sees the way they move. Watching them feels of freedom. It's interrupted by the pain returning in his groin. The pain's different now, more of a burning than a pinching sensation. It sends Michael to find a bathroom, pushing through people while his pelvis feels like it could pop at any time.

Michael makes it to the bathroom upstairs and into a free stall. He can't bother with closing the door, let alone latching it shut. He unzips his jeans and starts pissing before he's free of them. Barely a thing. The pain's moved, all clogged at the tip.

Oh my God, Michael says. He's holding back a scream so hard he's humming loudly. He whimpers, trying to make the pain go away, trying to push it out of his body.

Someone knocks on the stall. Everything okay in there?

No chance for a reply. Michael feels the stone work out of him, tearing its way through the limp flesh in his hand. He growls right from the stomach. The stone ejects into the bowl with a small shot of blood and a stream of piss. Michael moans a sigh of relief. More like a dog's howl. He rests his head against the side of the stall and laughs at himself. He looks into the watery bowl, where the bloody mineral deposit rests on the precipice of the toilet's drain. He shakes his head, hitting the plunger and flushing the stone— never again, he thinks.

You alive in there, buddy? The voice outside the stall says.

I'm fine. I'll live.

Michael goes back downstairs. A new song just started. Some people flock to the bar, getting drinks to hydrate for their next personal dance marathon. A couple women are pressed up against the stage and each other, laughing together, kissing. An older man with salt and pepper hair, dressed for a business meeting holds a full champagne flute while dropping low to the ground and arching his back as he snaps up again. A group of young people are chanting lyrics to the song, jumping up and down like a cheer team. Michael thinks of how much nicer it'd be to bounce here than at the other club.

When Michael finishes his 7 Up he lays his glass at the bar, then goes to the edge of the dance floor. He starts to move with the bass. Usually he's self conscious dancing. In here, it feels like at home, when he's dancing and there's nobody around, nobody to judge or laugh, no asshole to say it's gay to move your hips, no fellas so insecure they think a man shouldn't even move a certain way. In here, Michael feels comfort he's never known— the kind of comfort he's always craved.

He goes out onto the dance floor, into the middle. Michael dances without a care in the world. He soon notices a bunch of people dancing together, and a couple of the

guys are looking his way. He waves at them, smiling. One calls him over with a wave. Michael goes across to them, moving with the song. He introduces himself, and the group introduce themselves. Nobody can really hear, but everyone smiles, nodding, and keeps on dancing. One of the women and one of the men dance more as a pair than with the rest. They pull Michael in with them. They each put an arm around him. All three writhe to the beat. Their bodies press together and drift along the floor as one. Michael has his arm around the guy's shoulders, his other around the woman's waist. He smells them both, their skin. He feels the woman's hand along the small of his back, grabbing at his hip. The man puts a hand in Michael's back pocket, not grabbing his ass but holding it while they all grind against one another.

Michael dances with the two of them all night. He doesn't care who's watching. He wants them to see. No more performing happiness— only living it.

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