

# 'The Art of Forgetting'

A novel in progress

**Kathryn E. Ball**

BLLKAT003

A major dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of the degree of a **Master of Arts in Creative Writing**

Faculty of Humanities  
University of Cape Town  
February, 2008

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# 'The Art of Forgetting'

## Descriptive Abstract

'The Art of Forgetting' is a novel in progress. It can be classified as a work of psychological fiction which adopts the form of a circular narrative. The story is set in Northern Wisconsin, USA. Part One takes place in a mental institution and examines the psychological landscape of Kai Hawkin, the protagonist, in response to events in her life; the precise nature of these events is not elaborated upon. Part Two traces her recent history and ends where Part One begins, thus giving background as to why Kai has been committed to psychiatric care. The setting for Part Two alternates between a Native American Indian reservation and a holiday town close by.

Within this piece, I have explored three modes of narration. Part One includes first person narrative (Kai's diary entries and Al's emails) and direct verbatim (the recordings of the therapy sessions). Part Two is told in the third person. I have chosen these modes in order to foster a sense of intimacy in Part One and to form a platform for objectivity in Part Two.

I have pursued a number of personal interests through this novel. Firstly, I have researched and written about Borderline Personality Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Both of these conditions have been ascribed to Kai Hawkin. Secondly, I have examined the nature of the relationship between therapist and patient, both in their given roles, and as individuals free of their roles. Also pertinent when considering this type of exchange, is the notion of perspective –

specifically, two different people's perspectives on the same situation. I have explored this idea through Kai Hawkin's diary entries and the emails written by her therapist, Albert Bronowitz, to his friend and ex-lover, Hannah.

Part Two focuses on the love relationship which develops between Kai Hawkin and Benjamin O'Connor. In the process of following this relationship through its various stages, social questions arise, namely, issues faced by cross-racial couples and the implications of a socio-economic gap within a relationship. In addition, Kai and Ben each have layers of childhood attachment trauma. This has a significant impact on the way their relationship plays out. Parental influence also becomes important, not just within the context of Ben and Kai's relationship, but also as a template for behaviour forged in younger years.

The novel is approximately halfway to completion. Part Two will be concluded and followed by Part Three which returns to the psychiatric institution and charts Kai's progress two years into her therapy with Al. Please see the denouement at the end of the piece for details on the plot's development.





# Part One



Saturday

**MY LIFESOURCE**, beating and alive. It's weathered the pulse of many currents. Enough to know that, sooner or later, all currents run rough. But imagine it now as a ball of clay – river clay, sticky and red. Now imagine a broken bottle; shards of glass are scattered on the floor. How do these unrelated objects relate? Here's how: someone came along, gathered up the glass and pushed the slivers into my clay-heart, wedging them in deep. Don't ask me how this happened. I'm not even saying it did happen like this. All I know is that there's glass stuck in my heart and it can't be removed unless I have an operation. However, surgery in cases like mine is against the establishment's policy, Dr Hagan says. I've told him I don't have long to live and if they don't act soon my blood will be on his hands. He says he'll take the risk.

At first, it hurt to breathe. As my lungs got big with air, they pushed against the glass, making it dig in deeper. I've learnt to take shallow breaths so my heart doesn't hurt so much. If I cry enough, they give me things to make it go away. After a couple of those little white pills, my whole body feels wrapped in cotton wool. Nothing hurts; I can even kick a concrete wall and won't feel a thing. When Dr Hagan first gave me his medication, I'd play a game where I had to think of the saddest things possible, even *that* thing, and see what I felt. Nothing. I cared about nothing. But the problem is when they stop working. Then all the feelings come rushing back, furious they were barred out. Clutching the side of my bed, eyes scrunched closed, I brace myself as they hit.

On good days, I can convince my imagination to make a different reality for me; one where I took the other road when life forked last spring. Sometimes it backfires though. Memories from before break into my dreaming and take my mind captive. I'm locked in my head. I can hear screaming (does it come from me?); my face is hot and wet. My eyelids wrench open and I scan through the blurriness for the one thing I need. But there's nothing like that in here. So I use what I've got – claw with my nails and bite with my teeth. And then a miracle: a needle shoved into my skin and they have done it for me. The world swims sluggishly into focus once more.

Being in here doesn't bother me too much; I suppose it's the only place I *can* be right now. Quite frankly, I'd rather not be alive, but the alternative doesn't seem to be an option. At least I'm told it's not. I came here on account of my life unravelling. Well, to be honest, I was put here. When things fall apart like they did for me, you can't go on like before. Maybe tougher people can do it. I can't. My strength is gone. It climbed into a rusted pickup and drove to Colorado. The atlas shows mountains there, stretching luxuriously across the state. Here in Wisconsin, we don't have mountains. Lots of lakes though. Not that you'd know it from in here. The building looks out onto a parking lot on one side and a half-hearted garden on the other. I like it on mornings when the sun streams through the windows. Sitting here in a patch of warmth, I can close my eyes and pretend things are different. The sun feels the same, no matter what you've done. From behind the reddish glow of my eyelids, I could be anywhere – on the porch of our cabin, dangling my toes in the lake or lying in the long grass behind Aunt Jane's house.

From the outside, Nayati Psychiatric Institution is a grand, old place but on the inside it's shabby. There are faded posters on the walls. I think the pictures are meant to be calming. Perhaps the decorator imagined that Austrian hillsides populated by contentedly grazing farm animals would deflect us from slicing open our wrists. Perhaps he decided that dolphins leaping over Pacific waves would give us a taste of freedom. Honestly, I'd prefer white spaces. The institution's decor should mirror the institution's intentions. Reduce, strip away, purify – for that is what they're trying to do here.

My room is a pigeon hole. I like it. The walls are bare, I have a pinewood bed; my quilt is white. Neutral. If someone were to look down on me from above, like God for instance, he'd see a figure curled in foetal position, sometimes on the bed, usually on the floor. My hair would be spread out around me, devil-black on the white linoleum. It would be a lonely sight, so he'd look somewhere else. I have my own bedroom. Normally you have to share rooms but I'm a 'dangerous resident' so I get a single. For me it was here or jail and the staff members are well aware of that. I suppose you get some dubious privileges when you're brought in by the police. Only a few of us live fulltime at Nayati. The rest are daytime patients. The other residents are jealous of the girls who live with their families. I'm not. I don't want to go out into the real world again. It's too risky. My dad once told me, "It's a gamble to live, Kai." He was standing in his lucky corner at the

casino, his eyes locked on the screen of his slot machine. "It's safer in here than it is out there." I feel the same way about this place.

We're a peculiar assortment of girls at Nayati. Like garish, forgotten-about shoes in the back of someone's closet, we congregate here in our strangeness. I think we should be categorised according to our conditions (really, I don't think it's healthy for some of us to be around each other) but Nayati doesn't have resources to isolate us. This home is for the Lakeland district and there probably aren't enough anorexics, borderline personalities or compulsive liars to form colonies for each condition. Plus, I doubt a mental home in the groin of Northern Wisconsin is entirely up on the latest trends in the treatment of psychopaths.

Of all the things I imagined I'd be when I grew up, a psychopath wasn't one of them. At age four, I wanted to tame tigers in the circus. Two years later, unaware that the need for such individuals had dried up, I dreamed of becoming a pharaoh (the few times I went to Sunday school sowed this ambitious seed in my head). From seven to nine, cowboys captured my fancy and I hankered after a career like Annie Oakley's in the Wild West. At ten, I discovered books and I've wanted to be an author ever since. Well, that's a lie. Since my life splintered thirty eight days ago, I don't care anymore. My future is blank – not white-wall blank, black-hole blank.

If I look in a mirror, not much seems to have changed since I became property of Nayati. My face is still angular and my skin stays dark despite the long chain of days spent indoors. I guess psychopaths look like normal people on the outside. But does it hide what's wrong on the inside? I wonder how much people can see on my face. Perhaps I give it away without saying a word. There are no lines on my forehead or creases round my eyes. I've got grey hairs though. I often pluck silvery threads from above my left temple. Since being here, I've lost weight. I become bonier by the day. You'd never believe it to look at me, but once, a million years ago, I was ample like a pear.

People have always stared at me; on the street, in the store. When I was a little girl, I complained to my dad about the eyes that trailed me. "Because you're a beauty, Kai," he answered. "In you, they see the lake and the birches and the stars all at once. There's God's fingerprint on your face. He let his helpers make the other people, but you

he shaped himself.” I never believed him. I just felt like I didn’t fit in. Being different from other people is a feeling I should be used to by now. I’ve been different all my life. But somehow it still hurts.

I wasn’t always like this though. There have been many versions of Kai. Life before was not without pockets of happiness.



*Kai S Hawkin*

*Age: 19*

*Patient was submitted to Nayati four weeks ago following a court ruling of mental instability. She arrived in a condition of delirium and reacted violently to staff intervention on three counts. She has been placed on Clonazepam [mg 20, tid] and responds with docility and drowsiness. Her emotional coping mechanisms seem to have deteriorated to the point of memory suppression. Patient’s mediation of the world around her is severely impaired by the rippling effects of recent trauma ... she has alienated herself from interpersonal relationships, residing, whether by choice or perceived necessity, inside a constructed mental space with extremely rigid boundaries. She presents a variety of defence mechanisms such as inventing medical conditions for herself and abandoning them soon afterwards, obsessive-compulsive devices, antagonism in response to other patients and autistic behaviour if her emotional boundaries are challenged. Her basic-reality contact goes through controlled phases followed by critically impaired phases. Quality and style of patient’s responses during psychiatric sessions are indicative of high or superior intelligence. Patient’s view of her environment is deeply pessimistic and fatalistic. She is in a state of aggressive withdrawal; in her view, she is trying to escape a world populated by devious, unreliable, conflicted people. I do not think it is a premature diagnosis to suggest that patient suffers from symptoms of borderline personality disorder exacerbated through secondary to acute grief, as well as post-traumatic stress disorder.*

*Roger S Hagan MD*

*(Head Psychiatrist, Nayati Psychiatric Institution)*



**To: Hannah Coetzee <[hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za](mailto:hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za)>**

**From: Albert Bronowitz <[al.bronowitz@gmail.com](mailto:al.bronowitz@gmail.com)>**

**Title: Attempts to settle in Woodruff**

Dear Hannah,

At times I feel bitter. Twice today, I found myself looking up at the sky and demanding explanations from God. Not that he answered. I guess I should be able to answer my questions without his help. We were bad, naughty children and this is our punishment; a perfectly logical answer that I should accept. But I suppose the patterns of human emotion rarely adhere to the rules of human logic. With this in mind, I'm trying to acknowledge my anger and channel it in constructive ways. I split wood in my backyard, swinging the axe high and teaching each log a lesson it will never forget. At least the fruits of my frustration will keep me warm in the winter. I unpack boxes and attempt to create some semblance of order in my new house, hoping it will carry over to the rest of my life. When I unpack something that is too painful a reminder (like the Borges anthology you gave me as a 'Happy Tuesday' present last fall), I stop and turn to domestic tasks. They become sadness rituals. Soulfully, I wash the dishes. I vacuum (even though I did it yesterday). This morning I scrubbed the windows, for God's sake. At least the house is clean.

Before this happened, I believed happiness was just a choice ... 'you can't adjust the wind but you can adjust your sails,' you were fond of saying. I guess in times of stability, enlightened thinking is easier to apply. In times of pain, the teachings get tossed. Or at least they do for me. I can't help struggling against the way things are. Life didn't play fair. *Why* did you have to go back? *Why* was I fired? *Why* are you married? And *why* did you even walk into my life if I can't have you forever? Three years was just a tease. As you observe, I'm having trouble adjusting my sails.

I know that I need to start dwelling on the positives. For instance, I'm lucky with my new place; it's on a small lake ... or at least I have access to the water. My property doesn't exactly have lake-frontage but I can cut through my neighbour's yard. My house is log-cabin style; it would be dark except that there are large windows and a couple of skylights. My things seem out of place here. There should be antlers over the fireplace and rifles on the walls. My Buddha statue, vegetarian cookbooks and Tibetan meditation cushion are struggling to replace the lingering aura.

I need to start work. The period granted for 'settling in' is driving me crazy. I want to immerse myself in other peoples' problems to distract me from my own. Are you distracted? What paths are your thoughts following? Sometimes, flashes of you come to me and I remember suppressed details, things I forbade myself to think about because they made me too sad. I just remembered your doodles around the edge of the grocery list (always spirals and Matisse stars).

You began your family holiday in Botswana today. You've warned me: no internet for two weeks. So I write to you knowing full well that I won't get a response ... at least not for half a month. You'll return to an overflowing inbox: my ramblings on life, chronologically ordered. I could halt the emails until you return but even in your absence, writing to you is a comfort. I suppose I could call you my diary. When this letter eventually finds you, I hope you're at peace.

AI



Sunday

**I'M NOT** crazy. But I deduce (from the court ruling that was strung like a necklace of euphemisms around my neck) that being incredibly angry can overlap with what some people consider crazy. *Yes*, I was pissed off. It was not the kind of anger that burns itself out, or the kind that festers beneath the surface. If it was either of those types, I could



have stayed on the rails. My breed of anger was wild and alive, cavorting like Macbeth's witches. *Round about the cauldron go; In the poison'd entrails throw, Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting, Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing, One dead baby, one ditched girl, In the depths of woe they swirl.* I've visited some strange places this past month.

When my anger was at its hottest, the only thoughts that offered comfort were those of revenge. Planning my comeback got me through the blackest times. When things go horribly wrong, everyone wants retribution – a balancing force that will even out the scales. It's only when the deed is done that we realise it was all smoke and mirrors and life is still unfair. In my case, enlightenment hatched too late. His feeling worse did *not* make me feel better. But do not, for one moment, think this is a confession of regret. I did what I had to do.

So, my 'madness' comes in the colourful package of crying, yelling, banging, thinking too much, being sad, playing with matches and some other things. I don't see what's so bad about all that. They call it 'symptomatic of borderline personality disorder', but there's nothing wrong with my personality. It's my heart that hurts. Many kinds of madness can be found here at Nayati. I'm learning that insanity is a creative business. I can't help wondering about the other girls. Some of them are so screwed up. For example, there's a girl here called Meredith. She doesn't eat. Maybe she was pretty once. She's ugly now. The skin hangs off her skeleton, sheet-like. Because her body is so shrunken, her eyes look enormous. They perch in her skull like marbles stuck into bread dough. Her face is grey and vacant; she's turning herself into Gollum. At mealtimes, she pretends to nibble but really she's just drinking diet coke and working on the same celery stick the whole way through dinner.

Outside of mess hall, she likes to page through magazines and tear out pictures from the cooking sections, then glue them into an exercise book. She left it on the sofa one day and I flipped through it when she left the room. Next to collages of pastries, steaks and fries, she'd written details of what she'd eaten and the estimated number of calories belonging to each thing. At the bottom of the page, her total calorie intake was tallied up neatly. On average she consumes a little under a hundred calories per day. Evidently it's a huge accomplishment to eat zero calories – on those days Meredith

awards herself a gold star. She came in while I was looking at her book. I should have been more careful. Racing over, she tore it from my hands.

“You filthy Indian bitch!” she shrieked at me. “Why don’t you mind your own business? Didn’t your parents teach you not to mess with other people’s things?”

There was a pause and I thought she was done. As it turned out, she was just beginning: “Oh, I forgot. You’re a reservation brat so your parents were probably drunk all the time. If you even had parents.”

I stood there, not moving. By now all the girls were watching. Meredith sensed she had an audience and kept going, “You think you’re so great because you’re thin. But I know why you’re here. We all know.” A nurse ran up and tried to lead her away. She resisted but I could see she was getting weak from the outburst. Her hundred calories must have been used up. They pulled her out of the room and I could hear her screaming, “Psycho bitch! Cunt!” all the way down the hall. Ugly words, writhing like snakes in my head. And I panicked thinking what she might know.



**July 20<sup>th</sup>; 11:00**

**Recording of Psychotherapy Session 1 with Kai Hawkin**

AL: Hello Kai. I’m very pleased to meet you. My name is Albert Bronowitz but you can call me Al. All my friends do.

[A pause; Kai says nothing; Al clears his throat]

AL: I guess it’s never easy to know how to start off in the first session. Perhaps the obvious thing to do is to explain how Dr Hagan and I have agreed to structure your treatment. Your sessions with him will continue to take place twice a week and I’ll see you every day, except the days you meet with him.

KAI: *I don’t get it. I’ve already got one shrink. Why do I need two?*

AL: That's a good question. Dr Hagan, as you know, is a psychiatrist and I am a therapist. He prescribes medication in response to what you tell him. During your sessions with me, we'll take a different approach – we're simply going to talk.

KAI: *About what?*

AL: Mainly about you – in therapy, we'll try to understand your thought-patterns and find out why you react to things in certain ways.

KAI: *What if I don't want to talk to you?*

AL: Well, it'll make things a little more difficult if you don't feel like talking. But we're not under any pressure, so I'm happy to wait until you do feel like it. Take your time. You're also welcome to ask me questions.

KAI: *[A silence] What? Are you waiting for me to say something? I don't have anything to say.*

AL: Okay, no problem. I guess I can yak for a little while. Perhaps I should explain a bit about the premise I work from. From the outset I want to stress something very strongly. That is, *you are not your mind*. Your mind is a tool. It isn't you. I like to emphasise this because it simplifies the theory of our work. Looking at it in this way, your mind is something separate. You, Kai, are just fine. Your *self* doesn't need healing; it never will because it's perfect as is. Your mind, however, needs our love, attention and acceptance.

[A pause]

I guess the first thing I'm interested in knowing is why *you* feel you're here.

KAI: *That's a stupid question. You know why I'm here. You've probably been given forms and reports and testimonies all telling exactly what happened and why they put me in here.*

AL: Actually, I don't have much of that stuff. I only know what Nayati requires me to know – and that's minimal. These situations are treated with a lot of confidentiality. In any case, there's a big difference between words on paper and what actually happened. And hey, in the grand scheme of things, 'what happened' isn't even important. I like to think of life as a sky – one of these nice summer skies filled with ice-cream clouds. Events in life are like the clouds. They come and go. It's easy to be preoccupied with the clouds because they're big and flashy. But, what's more real, the clouds or the sky? Well, the sky of course. The sky stays constant: it's always blue and sunny behind the clouds. So we need to look at things from a sky-point-of-view, not getting too caught up in the cloud cover.

*KAI: I don't get what you're trying to say. Does Dr Hagan know you're telling me this? He's your boss right? I bet he earns more money than you do. I bet you're jealous that he can give people pills to mess with their heads and you can't.*

AL: Well, no. That doesn't really bother me. Dr Hagan and I work in very different ways. I am sorry if I confused you with the ideas I described. They're not easy concepts. [Pause] Kai, have you had any therapy before, besides Dr Hagan?

*KAI: No, I've never been to one of you people before. In fact, I don't need to be here now. You should save your energy for the real crackpots. And believe me, next to some of these people, I look like Mother fucking Theresa. Why don't you just tell Dr Hagan to drug me up with a little Clonazepam, Zyprexa and hell, why not add some Olanzapine to the mix. Then I can fly high all day long and we're all happy.*

AL: We're going to try and avoid the drug-approach. If you're 'flying high', all you're doing is ignoring your issues and they'll just be there waiting for you on the other side. [Pause] Okay, let's try something different. Let's play a game – it's kind of fun. Here's what I'd like you to do: immediately after I say 'go', you have to say the first five words that come into your head. Go.

*KAI: Slice - blade - trickle - wrench - spine - axe - sink - deep - into - my - skull. There's eleven. So, am I screwed up enough for you? Or what if I made all those words up and the real words on my mind were things like rabbit, daisy, sunshine, dream and chocolate? What would you do? Your conclusions about me would be all wrong.*

**AL:** You've heard of Freud, Kai? Well, I think I know the answer he would give you. He'd say everything that comes out of someone's mouth, whether they fake it or not, is on some level indicative of that person's mental state. In other words, the mind can't lie – you just have to reposition your approach to it. In this line of thinking, the sixteen words you've given are valuable just because you said them. So, if you were to choose from one of the fifteen words you gave me, which one would you pick as the best one to describe your emotional state right now?

*KAI: Sunshine. I feel like a ray of fucking sunshine.*

**AL:** Hmm ... an interesting choice. [Pause] On first thought, that word seems inappropriate. But thinking about it again, maybe it's more apt than I gave it credit for. Perhaps you don't feel like sunshine now, but your soul would like very much to feel the warmth of emotional sunshine brightening up its depths.

*KAI: So now you're making judgments on my soul. What kind of therapist are you exactly? I think I should tell you now that whatever you're trying to do, it isn't gonna work. There's no point in us sitting here day after day trying to make forced psychological conversation. You're wasting your time. I just want you to leave me alone. Actually, you know what I want even more than that? I want to get out of this hell hole.*

**AL:** Well, I appreciate your honesty. However, as I think you know, it's compulsory that you be here. I'll make a pact with you though: if you try to reserve your

judgments and approach our sessions with an open mind, I'll try to get you out of here as soon as possible. Agreed?

*KAI: I don't know you from a bar of soap. I'm not making any pact with you.*

AL: I guess I can understand where you're coming from. All I can say is that at some points in life we have to make an intellectual choice to trust or not. Look at your options, Kai. The way I see it, I'm probably your best card.



**To: Hannah Coetzee <[hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za](mailto:hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za)>**  
**From: Albert Bronowitz <[al.bronowitz@gmail.com](mailto:al.bronowitz@gmail.com)>**

**Subject: Ho ho ho, it's off to work we go**

Hi Hannah,

Today was my first day of work. I woke early because I was nervous, even in my sleep. The sky was streaked with pink and woodland creatures were just emerging from their homes to begin scuffling about. I sat on my porch with a cup of coffee and tried not to think about anything, but certain thoughts kept banging on my mind's door. The thoughts were (a) how much I missed you, (b) my trepidation at now being a state-employed psychologist, (c) my desire for a raspberry-peach muffin from the bakery on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in Philly. However, I overrode these thoughts with one peaceful and entirely legitimate morning reflection: that is, at every point in the world's twenty four hour day, there is a dawn somewhere. Someone is watching the earth wake up – even if it's flying fish in the middle of the Atlantic. And the same is true of the sunset. I marvel that you will watch the sunset just a few hours after I watch the sunrise.

It takes me twenty minutes to get to Nayati. I like my drive there. The road winds past lakes and rivers, through swamps and wooded pockets. This morning

I arrived early and prowled around before I had to meet with the austere Dr Hagan, head psychiatrist here and effectively my boss. I showed up at his office early and waited inside until he arrived. It's a spacious and airy place with a large mahogany desk in the centre, shelf-lined walls populated by yellowed psychiatric journals and an olive wingback chair. No computer on the desk, just a large black telephone. The only thing the room lacked was a bust of Freud. By the time he arrived, my curiosity about the room's occupant was piqued. He strode in (indeed, his is the essence of a stride) and gave my hand a competent shake. A wiry man in his sixties, his hair is silver and he wears a bowtie.

Our meeting was brief. He outlined the treatment structure, handed over files, and subtly indicated that his rule of the roost is absolute. Then he showed me to my office. I couldn't help but notice the difference in size between our respective offices: three of mine could fit cosily into one of his. My room is furnished with a pinewood desk and two chairs which I recognise as being identical to the hospital's dining-hall suite. Fortunately I have a decent sized window. The place needs some dedicated TLC – I'll need to be Martha Stewart to make it liveable. I will see what I can find in the nearby hamlet which calls itself the 'Big Apple of the North Woods'.

My first patient was at nine o'clock sharp. A seventeen-year-old called Sammy. The angst she's encountered in her short life makes private practice clients look well-balanced and thriving: a history of abuse, severe attachment trauma followed by several years of drug addiction. Apparently her psychological health has degenerated since being here. However, she was very responsive in today's session. Perhaps it's a case of her needing to be paired up with the right therapist. I hope I can be that person.

After a coffee break, I had another session at eleven. This girl I find interesting. Her name is Kai. She's nineteen, of Native American origin, striking to look at and extremely difficult to work with. She tried to wear me down with an array of tactics, some of them disturbingly perceptive. The session did not go well. At points, I felt like I was floundering. It's a shock to the system working with

someone who's in my office completely against her will. From a therapeutic point of view, it's excellent that I'll be seeing her every day. I hope that fast-tracks her progress. In the notes that Dr Hagan gave me prior to the session, he writes that she suffers from severe PTSD (well, that took some genius ... I imagine all the people in this place suffer from some form of PTSD, including me). There are definitely some other things in the mix though. She and I are setting out on quite a journey.

The rest of the day I attended meetings. Just the memory of it exhausts me so I won't go into detail. I'm starving and I need to go home. I wonder what animals you saw today. I'm crossing fingers for a leopard.

Al



Monday

**I'VE BEEN** forced to start therapy with Al, a new psychologist here. Al is a strange man. He seems like he should be older than he is. Sometimes I think he's one age and then he'll say something, or look a certain way and I'll be convinced he's a different age altogether. His hair is long and he has large teeth. He also has a scar running down his left cheek; I try not to stare at it but I want to know what happened to him. Maybe one day I'll ask.

Al looks very different to Dr Hagan. He has the air of a hippie with his copper bangles and hemp shirt. Dr Hagan wears a bowtie (I didn't think people wore bowties anymore) and has a gold watch. I can't imagine that the two of them get along very well. If they were to have a fist fight, Dr Hagan would win – not because he looks stronger than Al (in fact, Al is younger and bigger than him), but because Al couldn't hit anything. He's the kind of person who'd tie himself to a cedar tree to prevent it being chopped down for a housing development. Dr Hagan, on the other hand, would do well as a wartime medic in the frontlines. I wish I could be a fly on the wall during their meetings



about me. I don't understand how Al thinks he's going to help me. It's easy to see what Dr Hagan does: he gives me pills and I feel better. It's like having a messy bedroom in my head and instead of having to clean it up, Dr Hagan gives me a maid. I have a feeling that Al is going to make me tidy the room myself. I dislike him. There are many reasons for this; for starters, he makes eye contact far too much. His eyes lock into mine and, although I want to look somewhere else, it's really difficult to pull away. It feels as though he's trying to find a way to look into my brain through my eyes and if he stares long enough, he'll be able to get inside. Also, he takes far too many liberties with my personal space. I mean, there are some things you just don't ask a person. But Al asks. The whole therapy thing is completely lopsided. I'm the one taking all the risks while Al's insecurities and weaknesses are smugly protected. If I were to do that five word thing about how I feel, my real words would be: pissed off, going crazy, vulnerable, naked, exposed, screwed up, and I hate this whole world. That's fifteen but who's counting.

There's not much to do here. I sleep a lot. I think a lot. Fortunately there are shelves of books filled with 'approved reading', whatever that means. I've read some of the books before, but many are new to me. My recent discovery is William Shakespeare. I can't believe I missed out on him for so long. I remember the Shakespeare books all lined up on one of the shelves in the Minocqua library. Their spines faced out to the world in shades of blue, failing to entice readers who walked by looking for Danielle Steele novels or paperback comics.

When I was at home, before any of this happened, I'd go on a weekly pilgrimage to the library. What with walking to the bus stop and the 40 minute bus ride to get there, my journey one way took well over an hour. I was allowed to take six books out so usually I'd get four for myself and two for Ashkii. The library, which smelt of glue and varnished wood, was my sanctuary. I'd sit on my favourite beanbag (maroon fake leather which leaked styrofoam balls at the seams) with books piled in my lap. When I wasn't reading, I'd watch dust dancing in the sunshine which streamed through the library windows. The building wasn't much to look at from the outside – a plain, flat-roofed brick structure with some spindly birches growing out front. I suppose it wasn't much to

look at on the inside either. But I delighted in being there. It was like spending time with a homely poet who had a secret garden in his mind.

Ever since I read my first real book, I've had a love affair with words. Often one of them will lodge itself in some cranny of my brain and won't leave for a whole day. And to amuse itself while overstaying its welcome, it repeats its syllables in different voices, so I hear "mawkish, maw kish, maaawkish ..." or "incognito, Incogni Toe, incognito ..." And then there are phrases. I store them away in one of my mind's drawers, retrieving one every now and then so I can repeat it to myself. *Beguil'd me, to the very heart of loss* or *As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods*. Or any manner of things. When I was thirteen, I hoarded money for many months to buy the thing I wanted most of all – a dictionary. This took far longer than it should have because my father sniffed out all my cash. He didn't mean to steal. In his head he justified it with the thought that he'd repay me when he came out tops at the casino. The problem is, he never comes out tops. After he pocketed my original \$7.85, I learnt to hide my money in a number of secret spots so I'd have some insurance.

Before words, there were letters (during my pharaoh era). As a little girl learning the alphabet, it seemed to me that each letter had a distinct personality. J was mischievous; B was gentle and mild; V was a jealous letter; W was bumbling and confused; G and H were brothers – strapping boys who grew up on a farm; F was sneaky and you had to watch out for him; P was embarrassing; R was the no-nonsense, matronly type; L was dreamy ... and my own letter, K, was fiery and wild – there was nothing boring about K. Who would guess that K and B would turn out to be lovers? So opposite in their natures. Indeed, an unlikely pairing. Perhaps that's why they became enemies in the end and love twisted into hatred. There are very few words that contain both K and B. Berserk. That's one.

There is a preschool near Nayati. You can't see it from any of the windows but every morning I can hear the children playing in the schoolyard. On Mondays they go to the local swimming pool and walk along the road in a squiggly line. One little boy becomes a frog when he passes the big pine tree and again transforms (into a kangaroo this time; he has a thing for jumping animals) when he passes a streetlight. Another child tries to scale

the wire fence around the Nayati property. The teacher bringing up the rear has a tough time herding them all together. The preschoolers' outfits make me smile. Some stroll by in stockings and gumboots, red and pink paired gleefully together. Others have tried to braid their own hair, tangling it into a jumble that sparrows might use as a nesting location; some have been dressed by their mothers in striped sailor suits and matching colours – but their shirts are defiantly untucked and their bottoms muddy.

I always hang out by the window on Monday afternoons so I can watch the parade to and from the pool. Seeing those kids, adamant in their ridiculousness, eases the tightness in my chest. But sometimes it makes me think of *her*, what she would have been in a few years time. Then the pain, so carefully avoided, crashes into my head and I have what they call 'one of my episodes'. White pills please.



**July 21<sup>st</sup>; 11:00**

**Recording of Psychotherapy Session 2 with Kai Hawkin**

AL: Hi there Kai. I'm glad to see you. When you were late, I wondered whether you were going to make it at all today. How are you doing this morning? I heard you had a bit of a rough time after we last saw each other.

KAI: *What are you talking about? My episode yesterday? God, you people talk about everything in this place. What about confidentiality? Don't you take the Hippocratic Oath or something?*

AL: Most things are confidential but sometimes patient information is shared if it'll be helpful in therapy. How are you feeling now?

KAI: *Fine. It wasn't a big deal. They gave me my pills and now I'm fine. End of story.*

AL: How often does that happen, Kai?

*KAI: [A pause] I don't know. Maybe twice, three times a week?*

**AL:** What usually triggers them?

*KAI: What do you mean 'triggers'? Nothing 'triggers' them. They just happen. My brain short-circuits or something. It's not exactly something I can control.*

**AL:** Do you take the pills every time?

*KAI: Well yeah. They give me the pills. There's no other way out. They can't just leave me like that. [Pause] You don't need to get your panties in a knot. Dr Hagan's got this under control.*

**AL:** You know you can't go on like that, right? You can't rely on the pills to bail you out every time it happens. Two to three times a week is a lot – that's a huge amount of Clonazepam for your system to deal with.

*KAI: What exactly are you trying to say? You haven't been there so you don't know what it's like. Where's Dr Hagan? I think he needs to explain what's going on because you don't seem to get it.*

**AL:** I'm sorry. You're right. I don't know what it's like to be in your shoes. I realise it's one thing for me to sit here and tell you to get off the pills, and another thing entirely for you to do it. Don't worry – it won't be a cold turkey experience. We'll do a lot of work together first, starting with talking about your life history. In psychology, we believe that negative experiences in a person's past account for a lot of their emotional problems in the present. Whether it's the memory itself causing latent emotional pain, or a set of destructive beliefs which are an offshoot of the memory, these things need to be brought into consciousness.

*KAI: God, didn't you hear anything I said? It's not connected to anything. It just happens. But if you really want a reason, have you thought that maybe I had a*

*bad reaction to therapy yesterday? Four days had passed since an episode, which is a personal record since I got here. Then you came and I broke down again.*

AL: Maybe we need to start thinking about the break-downs in a different way – not as something bad, but rather as something that can be useful. It's like when a rash breaks out on your skin. Even though it's itchy and unbearable, it can be a blessing in disguise because it's your body's way of telling you that you're eating something that doesn't agree with it. Like maybe you're eating loads of ... let's see, how bout chilli corn-puffs, and you break out in a rash which makes your body look like a topographical map of the Eastern Himalayas. Are you going to keep on eating chilli corn-puffs?

KAI: *I don't get it.*

AL: Well, let's say the chilli corn-puffs are bad thought patterns. So if you stop thinking that way, you stop having episodes. Like if you stop eating the corn-puffs, your rash goes away. Our work together is to find out what the corn-puffs are so you can stop making yourself sick.

KAI: *What if I like corn-puffs? I'd rather take the pills, thanks.*

AL: Perhaps I should explain why I'm concerned about the medication. The stuff contained in those little white Clonazepam pills is not a light drug. If you take enough of them, you'll build up a dependency. It can evolve into something similar to a drug addiction. In therapy, we're looking to treat the causes, rather than the symptoms – which is what Clonazepam does. One day, you'll find you're able to climb out of the dark places yourself rather than resorting to the pills. Then you'll be able to leave Nayati behind and begin again in the outside world.

KAI: *And remind me again, why is it that I should believe you? Dr Hagan seems to think the pills are okay and he's the big boss. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't give me medication that's dangerous.*

AL: You know that expression, 'sweeping things under the carpet'? That's what the pills do. The issues are still there, you just can't see them. That's why Dr Hagan gives you Clonazepam. It's easier that way. Instead of sitting with you while you're a banshee, trying to reach you through the tears and emotion, he puts some tablets on your tongue and lets the drugs take care of you. But now I'm here and you're ready to take the next step. [Pause] Kai, do you mind if I ask what happened right before you got upset yesterday?

KAI: *I was looking out the window.*

AL: What did you see?

KAI: *I dunno. Just some kids.*

AL: Was there anything about them, or maybe one specific kid, that you noticed?

KAI: *There's this one little boy who pretends he's a kangaroo.*

AL: Did that bring up any thoughts in your head? Like a childhood memory?

KAI: *No, not a childhood memory.*

AL: How bout another kind of memory or thought?

KAI: *Look, I don't want to talk about this any more. I need to leave. [Voice slightly raised, sound of chair scraping]*

■

**To: Hannah Coetzee <[hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za](mailto:hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za)>**  
**From: Albert Bronowitz <[al.bronowitz@gmail.com](mailto:al.bronowitz@gmail.com)>**

**Title: Summer Gloom**

Dear Hannah

I woke up with that feeling I used to get on school mornings when I was a kid. My mother had to come into my room about six times, trying to get me out of bed. At first she'd wake me up using a sing-song voice. Then she'd turn the light on, becoming sterner with each visit. She threatened and warned and made predictions about my sorry future. That didn't work so she took to imploring me in guilt-rousing tones. At last she resorted to yanking the covers off, leaving my body shivering on the mattress. Then she grabbed my ankles and hauled me off the bed. A strong woman, my mother.

I was bullied at school – did I ever tell you that? I rejoiced in the days I was sick and could legitimately stay home. I never let on to my mom that the bruises were *not* caused by some rough-and-tumble football game. She took such pride in sending me to that school: private, all-boys, situated on a rambling New Hampshire estate. Tuition costs were well beyond our means, but somehow she found the money and fees were paid right on time every month. That place was responsible for much building of my character – it was the setting for prime suffering years. But was it worth it to have strength of character at the expense of a happy childhood? In retrospect, my answer would be no.

I spent my drive to work trying to understand why the old childhood pang had resurfaced. It felt like a regression into dark places that I've been working to get away from my whole adult life. By the time I reached the hospital, a memory had entered my mind, clear and ominous. When I was about thirteen, I made a friend. Frank. He was my best friend. He stood up for me when I found myself in tight spots. I wasn't afraid of school anymore; Frank was there and we'd laugh and make jokes about the teachers behind their backs. Then one day, a boy named Lionel made friends with Frank. Lionel started joining us when we ate lunch. Before I knew it, he was always around. He was civil to me but it was clear that he just wanted Frank's company. A few weeks after Lionel's intrusion upon our twosome, our class was told to pair up for a science project. This is the memory that arose in my mind today: the science laboratory, Mr Crawford telling

us to get into pairs, me turning to make eye contact with Frank, seeing Frank signal to Lionel and Lionel smile, Frank avoiding my gaze, me staring hard at the wooden desk, fighting the prick of tears on my eyelids. Someone had carved the word 'fuck' on the desk surface and then scratched it out with the point of a compass. Lionel died in a car crash six years ago. Frank is a tax attorney in New York.

I sat in the car for a while before going inside. When I eventually went, I slunk to my office, avoiding people. The advantage of being the new guy is no one knows what I'm usually like so perhaps they all assume I'm the sullen, taciturn type. I was in a black mood when Dr Hagan rapped on my door and entered without waiting for an answer. "Before you see Kai Hawkin, I thought you should know that she had one of her episodes yesterday afternoon: crying, screaming, aggression, banging her head on the floor ... we sorted it out and she's fine now." He left before I could respond. At least he didn't call me 'son' or 'champ'. Sammy was ill so I had an hour free to do something constructive – I played basket-ball with my trash bin and scrunched-up *Nayati Regulations* forms. My aim is improving. Amazing what sixty minutes' solid practice will do.

Kai was late. She arrived at ten past the hour, unapologetic. My gut impulse on seeing her was to walk out of the room. I hate having to give someone therapy when I'm in tatters myself. It feels like a lie. I want to say to my patient, 'I'm just as confused as you; let's skip this and go to the bar.' But I suppose the upside of being forced to run a session is that when you start trying to help someone else, you forget about your own crap.

Kai confirmed that she had a break-down yesterday and that Dr Hagan's method of treatment continues to be dosing her up with Clonazepam. I've got to get her off that stuff. It's psychologically more addictive than morphine. Man, I can't believe he's using Clonazepam. It's completely outdated – more or less the same vintage as shock-therapy. It's difficult to have Hagan's influence so pervasive during the sessions. It's like we're two parents and she plays us off against each other.



It's getting late and I must go home. Outside the rain's coming down hard. It's cosy or miserable, depending on who you're going home to. I'm planning to make myself a massive pot of gorgonzola-walnut pasta. I wonder what you had for dinner. You always were a good campfire cook. I imagine your wilderness menu is better than a lot of people get at home. I hope you're happy.

Al



Tuesday

**I'VE WRITTEN** a poem for Al:

Therapist

The-rapist

The Rapist.

He plans to undo me. I'm only just managing to keep the memories away as it is. But I still feel them all the time, trying to get in. Now and then, one slips through like a dead animal smell and I have an episode. But they give me medication and fix me up again. Dr Hagan understands how this works. During our ten minute appointments, we are professional, we are brief, and he sorts things out without any messiness. I also know that [frankly my dear] he doesn't give a damn. But I'm okay with this. I just want to stay out of the dark places and I know for sure that his pills get the job done. I don't know what it's gonna take to make Al understand that I have to have the Clonazepam. I just have to. I've thought of so many ways to describe how it is. Like, imagine someone pushes you down a well – the old-fashioned kind like in fairy tales – and you fall further and further, not knowing what you're going to hit, or when you're going to hit it. The sides are slimy with no footholds. The circle of light above you becomes smaller until it's a pinprick and you know that if it disappears altogether you'll be lost for good. Then panic sets in and

you realise there's no meaning in anything. When I'm down my well, don't tell me to talk through it, don't ask about my memories, just gimme the goddamn pills.

Sometimes I think the things we do with our time in Nayati must be similar to the schedule at the preschool round the corner. I've just come back from a movement-therapy class. First we had to sway like trees in the wind. The teacher told us to concentrate on releasing tension from our fingertips (which, she tried to convince us, were really our leaves). She seemed to have great faith in her school of thought, if we'd just give it a chance. Most likely we're her community service project. Some of the girls made out like it was a big joke. Each snigger frayed her composure a little more till she left to go cry in the bathroom. But she came back fifteen minutes later, only the slightest trace of puffiness round her eyes. After we were trees, we had to fold ourselves into a position that most reflected how we felt inside. All I could think of to do was curl up in a ball. The teacher looked at my shape and said in an apple-pie voice, 'How wonderful Kai! You're an egg, waiting to hatch and emerge into the world.'

'No, I'm not,' I replied. 'I'm a rock; can't you see?'

I wonder how many people here actually know what *nayati* means. Lots of places in Wisconsin have Indian names but mostly people think it's just a concession to some dead culture. What percentage of the state's population knows that *wisconsin* means 'beaver' in Chippewa? Probably more people could name the past five American idols. As it happens, Nayati Psychiatric Institution has been quite aptly named: 'he who wrestles', though I always think of it as *she* who wrestles. I wrestle, there can be no doubt of that. Who am I wrestling with? Myself? God? Or perhaps with the past, just wishing, wishing, wishing there were a way to go back and change it...

Here at Nayati, we all have our preferred ways of weathering pain. I guess society thinks our ways are unacceptable, so that's why we're in here. How do normal people cope? Perhaps they just fold up their hurt, put it in a drawer in their minds and carry on like nothing ever happened. I don't know much about normal people. My father drank Jack to numb his heart and then he'd go to the casino because he felt safe there. Nothing mean could get through those light-proof doors; the cherries, dollar signs and leprechauns

on his slot machine screen were friendly shapes (especially during lucky streaks). My father isn't normal. I've always known that. But he isn't in a place like this, so perhaps his way of surviving is more acceptable than mine. It's a popular method on the reservation, to be sure.

When our coping-mechanisms are taken away from us at Nayati, life becomes like sharing a bathtub with a toaster – except you just won't die. Some of us find other ways. Like my friend Sammy. She came in for one set of problems, now she's got a whole other set. None of the other girls like her and I reckon it's because her breath smells so foul. But I can ignore it. Sammy will never be 'cool' in the high-school sense. She's one of those doe-eyed tortoise people who have little in the way of chins and are sentimental beyond reason. The colour of her energy is pale lemon, like chick fluff. She stands about 5"2'. She hates her hair which frizzes into haphazard kinks despite all her efforts to straighten it. *If hair be wires, then yellow wires grow on her head.* Her favourite thing to say is 'Good Golly, Miss Molly'. Sammy's tried to commit suicide four times, twice at home and twice here. Her chosen methods were macabre – all the more so because of her outward sweetness.

Sammy has to have an escort when she goes to pee. If there's no one to check on her, she throws up whatever she's eaten. In the days before the escort system was implemented, Sammy was eating enough for three people at mealtimes. She didn't talk during meals. There wasn't time. Then she'd need to pee about four times in the following half hour. A tiny bladder, she told us. One of the girls in a malicious state of mind told a nurse that Sammy was bulimic as a mama sparrow (the snitch's identity was never revealed). Now Sam has to pee in front of someone. She doesn't like the forced intimacy so she rarely uses the bathroom now. But she can't go on like this. You can see it in her face – there's too much building up inside. It's just a matter of time...



July 22<sup>nd</sup>; 11:00

**Recording of Psychotherapy Session 3 with Kai Hawkin**

AL: And aside from what you suspect might be a tumor, are you doing okay?

KAI: No.

AL: No? Why is that?

KAI: *I'm bored. The days go by so slowly. Living though each one is like passing a kidney stone. If I don't kill myself first, I'm gonna die of boredom in this place.*

AL: How do you usually spend your days here?

KAI: *I lie around and think about the coolest ways to commit suicide. Sylvia Plath's way was pretty original ... you know, with the gas oven. But I don't think I could do that. Too painful and kinda messy. I prefer Virginia Woolf's method. That was much classier. You know what she did? She put a whole lot of rocks in her pockets and just walked into a river. I like that – letting nature do the deed. What do you think? Is there any cool suicide that you'd choose if you were planning to die?*

AL: [Pause] Kai, that isn't healthy talk. When you say things like that, you put me in a difficult position. Round here, suicide comments land you in Acute Ward. You know about that, right? Trust me, you don't want to go there. *I don't want you to go there. If life is tough out here, it'll be a lot tougher in there. So I need you to be honest. When you say things like that, are you joking around, or should I be telling Dr. Hagan we need to think about...?*

KAI: *I'm kinda joking ... and kinda not. What do they do in Acute Ward? Put people in straightjackets or something?*

AL: That's pretty brutal, but it probably still happens on occasion.

KAI: *Hmm ... I think being in a straightjacket would be kinda cool. It would be like in the movies. If Dr Hagan straightjacketed me I could say I'd had the classic madhouse experience. In fact, come to think of it, no asylum visit is complete*

*without getting to wear the in-house attire. Hey – Nayati even sounds kind of like Armani.*

AL: I think you'd find that the Nayati version doesn't quite have the Armani flair. It wasn't made by Italians.

[Pause]

But seriously Kai, Acute Ward isn't something to kid around about. It's not a nice place.

KAI: *I have no intention of going to Acute Ward.*

AL: Good. That's smart.

KAI: *Yeah, I'd find a way to kill myself before they had a chance to put me in there.*

AL: Now we're back to square one. Are you trying to tell me something?

KAI: *Why do you care so much anyway? I can guarantee I'd be happier dead, I'd free up some of the taxpayers' money and you'd have an extra hour everyday.*

AL: If you were another patient, I'd give you the usual spiel. I'd tell you that every life is precious, that you have a purpose in this world and that removing yourself would cause a ripple of pain that reaches further than you could ever imagine – and frankly, this poor world doesn't need any more pain. And of course, I'd bring up your family. I'd tell you how much suffering you'd inflict, how your suicide would dent their lives irreparably. And I'd tell you in no uncertain terms that suicide is the ultimate selfishness. But for you Kai, I'm not going to dwell on any of that. It's all true, of course, but that's beside the point. You, my friend, have an amazing amount to contribute to the world; so much that I can't wrap my head around it. If you manage to get yourself out of this place and kick the unhealthy

thought patterns, your life will take some remarkable turns. You have the capacity to make a lot of people happy.

*KAI: [Silence]*

*You don't even know me. Why should I believe you?*

AL: I don't have to know you. With some people it's clear right away.

■

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**From: Albert Bronowitz <[al.bronowitz@gmail.com](mailto:al.bronowitz@gmail.com)>**

**Title: Reflections from the Dome**

Dearest Hannah,

What a wonderful surprise to find that text message from your cell phone in my inbox. I didn't know one could do such things. Thank you for your words – I especially liked the ones that included numerals (gr8; l8er). Hearing from you brought back memories of us sitting in that lovely café on sun-drenched mornings, me pretending to read the paper but really watching you out of the corner of my eye as you sipped your cappuccino. My favourite was when you got foam on your nose.

I'm doing okay today, although I've had a frustrating afternoon. I'm realising that I'll have to adjust my expectations while living in the North Woods. After driving half an hour, the tofu I ordered at the grocery store last week had still not arrived. Then, at the local coffee house, their 'espresso' turned out to be recycled filter coffee from yesterday's batch. So I climbed into my car and hightailed it here to write to you. This place serves good coffee. It is not, however, air-conditioned. I choose authentic espresso at the expense of a sane temperature.

I will describe where I am so you can picture me as I type away. I've found a spot where I feel at home and can get free wireless provided that I drink sufficient beverages. You would laugh if you saw the place. It's an eco-friendly

internet café on Route 91 run by a couple of ex-Harvard hippies. You can't miss it. The building is a large geodetic dome that looks like something out of *Lord of the Rings Beyond 2000*. There are skylights here and there and there's a loft with a spiral staircase running up to it. All around are bookshelves with books ranging from *The Art of Tantric Sex* to *Gone with the Wind* to *The Bible*. Yes, I think I've found my hang-out. One of the hippies, Fred, is the smoothie guy. He was doing a PhD in quantum physics before he threw in the towel for 'moral and intellectual reasons' and moved up here. Now he experiments with smoothie flavours. I sip a cantaloupe-banana one as we speak. The other guy is Ark (don't ask), the espresso maker and till operator. They seem to interchange roles, but after having observed them over some hours, I deduce that Fred's great love is smoothies and Ark respects this. I had a long conversation with Ark yesterday and he told me about their solar-powered wireless system. Also, the whole place is made out of recycled materials ... which makes me think I want to redo my house. Okay, I can see your gaze drifting heavenward.

Hmmm, what else can I tell you? Well, I'm feeling more optimistic about work. In particular, I anticipate that Kai is going to be a fascinating case ... and a difficult one. I find it tough to read her – the ambiguity of her statements, not to mention her demeanour, forces me to do a lot of guesswork in my approach to the session. It would seem that I get the brunt of her resentment. The staff reports that, in general, she's one of the more placid patients – rarely disruptive and tends to avoid conflict. A senior nurse described her as “always on the fringe of things, watching the others.” This is such a contrast to the, well, vixen, I have sitting in my office everyday. During the sessions, Kai has the testiness of one troubled teenager and the intellect of two. If I can just find a way to reach beneath her armour...

The hippies want to close up now so I must press send. Goodnight.

■

Wednesday

**I FEEL** myself getting sick again. There's a pain coming from my right temple and swaddling my entire brain. I've managed to diagnose the problem. A tumor. It sprouts like a mushroom from my frontal lobe. Or maybe there's a cluster of smaller ones budding from the crevice in the middle. It makes sense ... the place where I went to school was situated under crisscrossing power lines (mostly Indian kids went there so the state reckoned it didn't matter). The worst part is that when I tell Dr Hagan I need to go for a cat scan, he'll chuckle and prescribe something like Ibuprofen. By the time it dawns on them that I'm not crying wolf, I'll be riddled with cancer and it'll be too late. But with a little luck, the story of institutional incompetence will be splashed all over the news and Dr Hagan will end up fired. That would piss him off nicely – of all things, Dr Fuckwit prides himself on competence.

I had to spend the day lying on the couch because of the tumor. To be honest, I'm relieved I'm going to die. It's like being let out of school early. However, I'd prefer to go in a different way – a quicker way. I'm into sharp, intense pain, not gradual, rotting-away pain. I tried to read but couldn't focus on the words. The letters kept turning into little cartoon rabbits and playing leap-frog with each other. That kind of bothered me. The only thing that made the pain subside a little was imagining other stuff happening to my body. Like someone hurling a tomahawk at me and having it plunge in deep. Or diving off a very high cliff. I thought of myself being used as the target for someone's bow and arrow practice but that didn't have the same satisfaction – I think because there's not enough surface area involved. But having said that, Cleopatra's suicide is one of the most creative ones in literature and that didn't involve much surface area, just two cobra fangs sinking into her chest: *With thy sharp teeth this knot intricate, Of life at once untie: poor venomous fool, Be angry and dispatch.* And then, when her maid gets hysterical, Cleopatra serenely replies, *Peace, peace! Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, That sucks the nurse to sleep?* Sadly, we don't have any poisonous snakes in Wisconsin so that rules out the Egyptian method.

Sammy is also seeing Al. I didn't realise this until today. She had a tantrum because it's his day off. Everybody in a one mile radius heard her yelling. They've only



seen each other three times and he's her new best friend. I'll bet in the real world Sammy was one of those people who'd let anyone sleep with her. A sex-for-love kinda girl. After they gave her a tranquiliser, she calmed down some and got all glassy-eyed. She sat next to me on the couch, still sniffing, and filed her nails. It sounded like someone sawing through little bones. When I couldn't stand it anymore, I said, "So you're also seeing Al, huh? What do you guys talk about?"

She stopped filing and was quiet for a moment. I wondered if mentioning Al would make her cry again. But then she said, "Sex and drugs ... oh, and rock 'n roll." Her voice was a little hoarse from the screaming.

"Come on Sam, I'm serious. What do you talk about?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Because if you do, I'll tell you how he got that massive scar on his cheek."

This got her interested. "How do *you* know about that?"

"I overheard the nurses talking. It's a pretty wild story. But you can't ever let on that you know."

"So what happened to him?" She lowered her voice and moved closer.

"No way Sam, you gotta tell me about your sessions first."

She considered it, then said, "Okay, fine. But why do you care so much?"

"I'm just comparing notes," I said.

"Well, he told me a story about this wildlife photographer in Africa – he's on foot in a place with dangerous animals and he doesn't have a gun. So he's walking and walking, then he sees this bunch of lions under a tree. They haven't seen him yet. He's really scared but realises that if he, like, panics and tries to run away, they'll notice him immediately and think he looks like a great lunch idea. But if he creeps up quietly, they won't be disturbed and he'll get the next National Geographic cover shot."

"Okay, so what does that have to do with anything?"

"Al said that I'm the wildlife photographer and the lions are my fears. If we creep up quietly and figure them out without disturbing or giving in to them, we'll be able to understand why they're there and they won't seem as scary anymore."

"That doesn't make sense," I said. "How does the cover shot factor in?"

“Al says the upside of being a person who goes through a lot of shit is that on the other side, good comes out of it. Wisdom and stuff. That’s what the cover shot means.”

It sounded to me like he tried to stretch the metaphor a little too far but I didn’t say that out loud. Sammy seemed pretty pleased with the story.

“So what do *you* guys talk about?” she asked, no doubt hoping for another fable.

“Um ... it’s really not that interesting. I don’t have any wild animals for you.”

“Oh,” she said, disappointed. “What about the scar then?”

“Oh yeah, the scar. Crazy story. Even though Al sounds American, he’s actually from Iraq, so he’s putting on a US accent all the time. He was working for the Iraqi government as a lie-detector – you know, someone who can tell if a person’s lying with one of those machines. But then the American government bribed him to sell them inside information, which he did for a few months. And then he was found out and tortured. You should see the scars underneath his shirt – they used a branding iron to write the number pi on his back.”

“What’s the number pi?”

“It’s a number that goes on and on to infinity. Every time he refused to tell them something, the torturers burnt another digit into his skin. Fortunately for him, the day they were supposed to kill him for real, US troops stormed the prison where he was being kept and rescued him because he proved that he knew information that could destroy America. And he’s hiding out up here because who would ever think to look for an ex-terrorist in a madhouse in Northern Wisconsin?”

Sammy looked as though I’d just told her Al was a rare species of talking plant. I began to worry that she’d tell someone and I’d end up in trouble. But eventually she said in an eerie, calm voice, “I think you’re lying. Did you take your medication today?”

I may have underestimated her.



July 24<sup>th</sup>; 11:00

Recording of Psychotherapy Session 4 with Kai Hawkin

KAI: *Last session, did you really mean what you said about my life taking remarkable turns?*

AL: Yes, of course. Why do you ask?

KAI: *Well, it's just that ... [silence]*

AL: Yes?

KAI: *Well, I can't imagine getting out ... of here, I mean. It feels like I'm going to die in this place. I can't imagine things turning out another way.*

AL: Oh, you're going to get out. The question is just when. Part of when you get out is in your control, and part of it isn't.

KAI: *What part can I control?*

AL: You can control whether you decide to help the getting-better process. It's about having the right mental attitude.

KAI: *I hate that word 'attitude'. I've never understood how you can actually change your attitude. You feel what you feel, right?*

AL: In part, that's true. But you *can* try to alter the patterns your thoughts take. I know it sounds like a tall order. It is. But think of it this way: it's a rule of the universe that like attracts like. So positivity attracts positivity and negativity attracts ... ?

KAI: *Well, negativity.*

AL: Exactly! So if your thoughts are along the lines of, 'oh my goodness, I might have a tumor in my brain and I'm going to die soon,' is that positive or negative thinking?

*KAI: Well, for me it's positive thinking.*

AL: Why?

*KAI: Because I'm tired and I've had enough.*

AL: Of what? Life?

*KAI: Yep. I'm ready to call it quits.*

AL: When life isn't fun anymore – no, scratch that, when life downright sucks – it's tempting to want to opt out. Thing is, this is just a tiny slice of your whole life. Is there a food you hate?

*KAI: What? Well, yeah, I guess so ... anchovies. I hate anchovies.*

AL: Okay, so think of your life as a pie made up of all different kinds of slices. There's a peach slice, a pumpkin slice, an asparagus slice ... and this is the anchovy slice. But don't quit now – you'll miss the peach.

*KAI: How do you know there is even peach?*

AL: I have a strong feeling there's a big, fat peach slice coming up. But I couldn't swear on it, if that's what you're asking. You can swear on it though. That's one of the things you're in control of.

*KAI: How can I possibly have control over that? Have you forgotten I'm locked in a madhouse?*

AL: One of my teachers once said that if you want to know what you'll be like in the future, look at the way you are now. And I don't mean what the circumstances of your life are. I mean, what are your thoughts like? The way you think has the single biggest influence on how your life turns out. And that, you can control. So

to get to the peach slice, you need to be thinking peach pie thoughts. Imagining tumors and suicide, well, those are anchovy thoughts.

*KAI: What difference does it make? No one can see what I'm thinking.*

AL: The world runs on energy. Thoughts are energy, just as everything else is. Putting positive energy out there attracts more of the same. Plus, thoughts are the foundation of actions, and the nature of your actions is the start of a ripple. What usually happens if you smile at someone?

*KAI: I suppose they smile back.*

AL: Yes. The world works in the same way. If you love it, it loves you back.

*KAI: So how does knowing this help me get out of here?*

AL: You're in here because you tend to think in unhealthy ways. It's all those anchovy-thoughts. And anchovy thoughts lead to anchovy actions, which lead to a life-slice of anchovy pie. It's our job together to shift your thinking away from anchovy and turn it towards peach.

*KAI: Okay, but I can't just suddenly start thinking peach. My mind doesn't work that way. It's useless to just say to myself, 'I'm fine, I'm happy, life is good' when I'm not and life isn't.*

AL: You're right. When you can't put your mind in a good place automatically (which is most usually the case), you have to do it manually. You have to find ways to jumpstart positive thinking.

*KAI: Like how?*

AL: By doing things that you enjoy, that make you happy. What made you happy before you were at Nayati?

*KAI: Reading, cooking, being with my brother, swimming, walking in the woods, writing ...*

AL: Okay, so two of things you can still do here. Read books and write. There's a library, right?

*KAI: Yeah, but I don't like a lot of the books there. It's mostly stuff like Sweet Valley High and Stephen King novels. I've read all the books I want to.*

AL: Well, we can definitely make a plan with that. I can bring you books if you like. And how about writing? Do you keep a journal?

*KAI: Yeah, but it doesn't make me happy. It's got a lot of anchovy thoughts inside.*

AL: Then I'm going to give you writing assignments. Would that work? That way you'd have to write about specific things.

*KAI: I dunno. I guess we could try it.*

AL: Yeah, let's just see how it goes and if it doesn't start peach pie thoughts flowing, we can stop. [Pause] Your first assignment is to write about a childhood memory. Anything that comes to mind. Oh, but Kai – don't ditch your journal. When you get out of this place, it could be really valuable to you.

■

**To: Hannah Coetzee <[hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za](mailto:hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za)>**

**From: Albert Bronowitz <[al.bronowitz@gmail.com](mailto:al.bronowitz@gmail.com)>**

**Title: Elusive butterfly**

Dear Hannah,

I'm sorry I didn't manage to write to you yesterday. By the time I left the hospital, the dome was closed up. Driving along Route 91, I passed by just in time to see Fred and Ark reverse out of the parking lot in their VW bus. It's a Woodstock relic the colour of cornbread. In my rear view mirror, I watched them crawl along the highway in the slow lane until I turned off towards my house. I wonder where they live. Maybe one day we'll get to be friends and they'll invite me over for chess and shrooms.

When I got home, it was dusk. I think my favourite times of day are those transitional hours in the morning and evening. I appreciate them out here especially; the semi-wilderness allows the stillness to permeate in a way that city life couldn't dream of. I got a beer out of the fridge and headed down to the lake. I stood in the shallows and watched the minnows dart around my ankles until it got too dark to see them anymore. A blue heron waded daintily amongst the lily pads. Have you ever noticed how smells become much more intense in the evening? I wonder why that is. I got so intensely involved in listening and noticing, that for a few moments, I felt as if I was part of the landscape ... like I imagine the Native Americans of old felt all the time. Wouldn't that be amazing – to *be* the water rippling or the reeds swaying? You know, most of the time, I go around thinking about peace as some elusive butterfly that I'm trying to catch. And paradoxically, it's the times when I stop trying, when I'm just being, that it lights gently on my shoulder.

I had a good day today. It took me by surprise. This does not mean, however, that I miss you any less. I still think about you all the time, and make mental notes of things to write to you later.

I had a productive session with Kai this morning. I hope we're hitting some sort of stride after the initial disjuncture. My work with her doesn't seem to be following any conventional structure (thank God Hagan doesn't bug my office), but it seems that an intuition-based approach is necessary. I still think I talk too much; soon I hope we'll be at a stage where she talks and I just prompt her with

the right questions. What I'm most optimistic about is the discovery we made rather haphazardly in our session two days ago. As it turns out, Kai is a budding writer – and quite a gifted one, I think. With this in mind, I'm hoping to integrate writing into her therapy. It might evoke a depth of response that conversation isn't yet able to draw out. I gave her an assignment for today. She had to write about a childhood memory. I've typed it up to share with you.

*Daddy was cross. He stalked around the house glaring at everything. I hid under a table and listened to him slam things. We had a scratchy carpet on the floor. It pressed into my knees making red grooves in my skin. Now and then his legs walked by and I could see the blue jeans that he never took off. They were flecked with paint and grease spots. His shoes were really long – three or four times the length of mine – and looked like they'd walked a million miles. The laces were frayed and there were deep creases in the leather where his foot bent to take a step. He forgot to put on socks. I thought about pointing this out to him but it didn't seem like a good time. So I stayed put and tried to send love currents through the floor to stop him from being angry. When I couldn't stand the pain from the carpet anymore, I shifted onto my back and wedged myself against the wall. From where I lay, I could see a small triangle of window across the room. Outside, the pine branches thrashed about and the slivers of sky between them looked dark. The world was working itself up for a big mama storm.*

*Then he marched back into the room where I hid. He said some black words. Even his shoes looked angry. Then our dog Shadow wandered in to see what was going on. I couldn't see Daddy's eyes but I don't think he was watching where he was going. And Shadow wasn't very good at getting out of the way. Daddy's knees whammed into Shadow's side and Daddy fell over. I saw his face for one second; it was scrunched up like a knob of bread dough. He sprang up fast and the tip of his shoe kicked Shadow so hard. Shadow let out yelps and limped away as fast as she could. Daddy stood there for a long time. Then he walked slowly into my bedroom and sat down on my bed. It was all quiet except for Shadow whining outside. Then there was a terrible sound. I didn't know what it was. I listened some more. It came again. Then I realised it came from Daddy. I crawled across the floor and peered through the door.*



*He sat with his back hunched, his head hanging down, his elbows on his knees. His hands drooped. As I watched, a tear plopped onto his blue jeans. And again. Daddy ... was crying. Everything inside me stopped. I waited. Then I crept over to the bed and slipped my small hand into his big one. A couple of seconds later, I felt a squeeze. That's when I understood that even though he looked big, Daddy was soft and scared on the inside ... like a turtle inside his shell. He needed me so I had to be a strong girl.*

*Later, he said sorry to Shadow. He held her ears and their noses touched.*

I hope this was cathartic for her. And I hope she's starting to trust me more. Although it's tough for me to admit, there were times in the sessions before today when I was lecturing rather than listening. It fed Kai's aggression and reinforced the walls between us. I need to consistently remind myself that pursuing the path of psychological health is not to heal people (that would be presumptuous and ultimately impossible), but rather, to be present during their journeys of healing themselves – to witness.

When I left work today, I felt quite different. Not about anything specific. I noticed little things that I haven't really seen before. Like a stained-glass window above the archway in the main entrance to hospital. And a birch sapling in the car park. On my way to the dome, I was very aware of colours – greens and yellows; the sky was an intense blue with a thin scraping of cloud near the horizon. On some of the roads, I noticed for the first time, trees craning over and the branches swooping low as if to brush the top of my car as I drove underneath. The light streamed through the leaves, making each one glow. I almost forgot where I was going. At some point I realised the oddest thing – that I felt happy. This is the same world as it was a few days ago but today it's a good world. What changed? The world? My mind wants to believe it was the world so I can put today's satisfaction down to a cocktail of fortuitous circumstances and avoid the responsibility of knowing that the power is mine. However, a deeper part of me begrudgingly acknowledges that it was a shift in attitude. I talk to my patients about attitude all the time but neglect to apply it to my own life.

I must go now. They're waiting for me to finish so that they can close up. But I want to say one more thing before signing off – even though we are separated by a rather large chunk of earth and haven't talked in two weeks, your presence is still strong my life. I'm reassured by that.

Al



Thursday

**IT'S EARLY** afternoon. I'm sitting by the window, looking up at the sky and watching the clouds change. I'm trying to keep my mind entirely empty. Life in here might be better if I can learn to be blank-brained. Al's all about what he calls 'peach pie thoughts' but that's too tall an order for me right now. I think I'll try for an intermediate step and stop my mind altogether. Thing is, I never realised how difficult it is to quit thinking. Staying thought-free is possible for a few seconds but then something floats into my head so inconspicuously that I don't even notice my brain is at it again until I'm halfway down a thought-chain that has nothing to do with anything.

I just caught myself thinking about Al and wondering what kind of food he likes: whether he's one of those guys who throws spaghetti-o's into the microwave for dinner or cooks stuff like lentils and spinach. And spinach got me thinking about the farmer's market that I used to go to with Aunt Jane when she could still drive and how, that one time, we got the best watermelon of the summer and she bought me a bunch of poppies. I didn't have a table so I lugged an old crate from the backyard up the stairs to my room and put a plank on it so that the flowers didn't have to stand on the floor. Then I remembered something else about my bedroom: the collage on my wall with things I liked. A photograph of Aunt Jane as a young girl, a scrap of fabric with a leaf design, an advert for Celestial Seasonings tea, some National Geographic pictures, an old postcard of a sidewalk café in Rome that I found marking a gnocchi recipe in one of Jane's

cookbooks, an envelope with foreign stamps from Jane's friends in France, a pressed leaf, my favourite Margaret Atwood poem:

You fit into me  
Like a hook into an eye.

A fish hook.  
An open eye.

And then, for some reason, I began thinking about those old sandals I used to wear and how they broke on the way home from the bus stop and I had to walk all the way back in bare feet. Then I paused to look down at my feet because I haven't looked at them in a very long time. In fact, I forgot I had feet.

It was only as I eyed my toes that I realised I'd been thinking for five minutes without knowing it. My brain had gone wandering even under the strictest surveillance. So I tried again, this time staring intently at my feet – I noted the too-long toenails, a blue vein snaking beneath the skin's surface, a few black hairs sprouting on my big toes ... Al has very hairy toes. I know this because he wears Birkenstocks to work. Once, during one of his soliloquies, I spent the whole time looking at his feet so I'm well-acquainted with them. I think you can tell a lot about someone by their feet. Or their hands. I don't know what it is precisely – it's not something I could put into words. But I feel I know something about a person if they have, say, really long fingers or stubby, short ones. The way they keep their fingernails is also telling. Mine are gnawed down to the quick and my cuticles are raw. Sometimes they bleed. Dr Hagan's nails are trimmed with precision. Aunt Jane's were long. She'd spend great lengths of time filing them into neat ovals. Sometimes she'd get me to paint them for her – always fire-engine red. I usually messed up and got nail polish on her skin. My hand was so steady when I was extracting a splinter from Ashkii's foot or measuring spices for a recipe, but when time came to paint Jane's nails, I shook like a birch leaf. I always wondered why she put so much time into making her nails beautiful. It wasn't like there was anyone around to see. Maybe it was a small rebellion: an effort to draw attention away from the age spots on her skin. I wonder if --

And there I go thinking again. My brain won't stay still for even a few seconds. It's like trying to hold onto an eel. Who knew thoughts were so wily? But at least these are not bad thoughts. My head feels clearer today. I can trust myself a little more, but never too much. If I relax my guard, I could get sloppy, and getting sloppy might mean they find out ...

When I smuggled her in, I knew it was a risk but it was one I had to take. And so far, so good – there she still is, beneath my bed, snug in her basket. She sleeps all the time, so sweetly. I like to just look at her, especially at night when a sliver of moonlight slices through my room. On clear nights, there's enough light to make out her pinhead toes. She still has no teeth. If they knew, they'd steal her away.



**July 26<sup>th</sup>; 11:00**

**Recording of Psychotherapy Session 5 with Kai Hawkin**

AL: Your writing assignment for yesterday was good. I thought you did a great job of getting into the head of your childhood self. Have you written much before? Poetry, short stories?

KAI: *Yeah, I like to write. I wrote a couple stories a few years ago but I realised before I even finished that they were terrible, so I destroyed them. There's only one thing I've ever written that I know is good for sure.*

AL: What was that?

KAI: *It was kind of weird – not a poem and not a story. Just a page of writing. It probably wasn't that good anyway. Do you ever write stuff?*

AL: Not anymore. A long time ago, when I was in my last year of high school, I wrote poetry. It was bad – there's nothing worse than anguished schoolboy poetry. But I

had this great English teacher who made me fall in love with books. Naturally, I responded with my own attempts to add to literature. But I used far too many adjectives. ‘Flowery’ – that’s the way my writing was described to me once.

*KAI: What writers did you like most when you were in high school?*

AL: Authors or poets?

*KAI: Both.*

AL: Well, to start at the beginning, it must have been Tolkien who got me reading. There’s no escape for an unhappy teenager like the catastrophes of Middle Earth. In fact, I missed one of my exams because I couldn’t tear myself away from the final chapter of *Lord of the Rings*. Then we had to read Steinbeck in English class and I loved him. Others followed like Hemingway and Melville, and soon I was reading everything I could get my hands on. Then, of course, I tapped into Shakespeare and nothing quite matches him. Later, I became very interested in some of the feminist writers because they’re fascinating from a psychological point of view. [Pause] How about you Kai? Or let’s put it this way – if you were to invite five writers to dinner, who would they be?”

*KAI: That’s a pretty good question. Let me think. I guess maybe Nabokov, Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf, Shakespeare and Bruce Chatwin. Not in that order.*

AL: What a marvelous platter of people. I wonder how they’d all get along. Did you have to read those authors for school?

*KAI: No, we didn’t get to read anything that good in school. School was basically a write-off. Aunt Jane had bookshelves with all sorts of books – that’s where I found a lot of the writers I like. When I’d worked my way through her shelves, I started going to the library every week.*

AL: Did your Aunt Jane live with you?

KAI: *No. She lived nearby in a big house that was pretty deep in the woods. She wasn't really my aunt either but we got close. [Pause] Really close. She hired me to take care of her since she was getting old and didn't want to get a nurse. Plus, we lived so far out, she probably couldn't have got one anyway.*

AL: Why did she live way out there?

KAI: *Do you mean why did a white woman live by the reservation?*

AL: No, I didn't mean that. It just seems strange that she'd choose to be out there since she was so frail.

KAI: *She was in a sort of self-imposed exile, I guess. She said the world had lost its art and spirit in pursuit of making another buck.*

AL: Wow. That's pretty drastic. What did she do before moving up north?

KAI: *She was an artist and she lived all over the place when she was young – mainly in France and India and South Africa. Then she had a pottery studio in Madison and she taught art to high school students.*

AL: So did she start you off reading or did you just pick up a book one day?

KAI: *Well, she was disgusted with my school syllabus. She was determined to give me a proper education. In the beginning she read aloud to me and then I got so excited about the stories that I couldn't wait until she had time to read, so I started reading to myself. Then I got so hooked, I'd stay up till four in the morning just to finish a book.*

AL: And how about your parents – did they like to read?

KAI: *No. My dad wasn't the reading sort. And I didn't have a mother.*

AL: What do you --

KAI: *[interrupts] What about your parents – did they read?*

AL: [Pause] Um, okay. Let me think about this. Well, my mother was a big reader and the better parts of our relationship were based on reading the same books and discussing them together afterwards. I remember long summer evenings on the porch when we'd share a bottle of wine and talk about books, seldom agreeing but both relishing the dispute. That's how we finally became friends after fighting each other for the whole of my adolescence.

KAI: *What about your father? Did he like to read?*

AL: I don't know. I know very little about my father. He was killed in Vietnam.

KAI: *Oh.*

AL: [Long silence]. Well, enough about that [clears throat]. Hey – let's set another writing exercise.

KAI: *Okay. At least it's something to do.*

AL: Another memory perhaps? Maybe one from when you were a little older.

■

**To: Hannah Coetzee <[hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za](mailto:hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za)>**

**From: Albert Bronowitz <[al.bronowitz@gmail.com](mailto:al.bronowitz@gmail.com)>**

**Title: Puzzle pieces**

Dear Hannah,

Here at the geodetic dome, a remarkable collection of people drifts through the doors on a daily basis. This place is a magnet for all the strange characters in the district, both regulars and those passing through. They come for different reasons: a couple of old men meet here every afternoon to play checkers underneath the moose antlers; a struggling novelist brings his manuscript and broods over it in the corner (a few days ago he brought a friend and divulged the plot over coffee; it's a futuristic romance – from the snippets I heard, it sounded terrible). And yesterday, a trio of free-spirited hippie girls on vacation came to check email. I was a little traumatised by Ark and Fred's attempts to flirt.

I'm in a good mood this afternoon. Tomorrow's my day off and I'm going fishing. It continues to be hot as all hell though. We need a storm to break the heat. Every morning when I wake up, I check for signs of cloud cover. The sky remains a spiteful blue. I suggested to Ark that they consider installing air conditioning and he suggested to me that I buy another smoothie. So I did, and retreated to the darkest nook with a mint-lime-pineapple. Apart from its mugginess, I enjoy being at the dome. It's nice to have acquired the status of a regular. I can't help feeling smug when I walk in and, despite a small queue at the till, Fred nods at me and says, 'Hey Al. Your favourite's comin' right up.' It's so different from Nayati where people tend to be suspicious, especially of someone who looks like me. I wonder if it's the scar. I forget about it most of the time, then I'll catch sight of myself in the men's room mirror or in my car window and remember with a thud. You once said to me I just wear a bit of history on my face, that's all. That's a kind way to look at it.

The great thing about seeing my patients everyday is that there isn't a sense of urgency to get somewhere during our sessions. We can afford to have



conversations about things that aren't necessarily on the critical path. Kai and I spent a good part of the hour talking about literature. I'm hoping we can build a report through discussing neutral subjects. She's very well-read. Slowly, pieces are beginning to fall into place. Today she told me that she looked after an eccentric old woman for many years. This relationship accounts for much of her cosmopolitan education. Although she no longer uses sarcasm to redirect the focus from taboo topics, she still resists talking about family members. Her mother remains an especially conspicuous question mark. All I know is that she disappeared shortly after Kai's younger brother was born. Kai must have been about four or five – old enough to have a fair number of memories about her. My hope is that she'll mention something in a writing exercise. It seems that she finds pen and paper less threatening than sitting face to face. Sometimes I try to sneak in questions that will implicate family members, but she's quick to pick up on it and veer the conversation back to something safer. Lately she's taken to asking me questions about my life. I don't entirely know how to deal with this. Something tells me that refusing to answer for the sake of protocol would be the wrong approach. I feel that I can divulge a small amount about myself – enough to remove the mysterious edge – but remain safely distant on a personal level. Here's the piece she wrote for me today:

*My cat, Shay. A sack of damaged organs and bones. There was no gash to say 'this was where'. His fur was soiled. Blood oozed between his precise little teeth. His eyes stayed open. I wished they had closed. I didn't want him to see his body.*

*I don't recall where we were coming from. It was dark and the rain poured down. I do recall sitting between the guys: Dad on my left, driving, and Ashkii, asleep on my right shoulder. We pulled into the driveway and the headlights swung an arc of light into the yard. For a brief second I saw Shay looking up at us. I almost said, 'Dad, be careful' and then I didn't. There was a bump as the tire drove over something. My breath caught in my throat. "Oh shit," Dad said. I don't recall the in-between seconds of getting out of the truck. I do recall vomiting and scooping Shay up to my chest.*

*"I didn't even see him." Dad's voice sounded bottled.*

*I had seen him ... and I hadn't said anything. I killed him. Dad picked me up and took me inside, still clutching Shay. I sat on the floor in the living room, cradling him against my chest. His fur was matted with blood and rain. I could feel how broken he was beneath the skin. There was a murky smell. I stayed up the whole night.*

*By morning I was empty. There was a pain in my head. Just after the sun rose, Dad told me it was time to let Shay go. He brought an old towel and spread it on the floor. When I laid Shay down, he kept the position I'd cradled him into the night before. The towel was patterned with splotchings of flowers. Funeral flowers. Dad folded the corners over him, making an oddly shaped bundle. While I had a bath, he and Ashkii took Shay away and buried him in the woods. They never told me where.*

Both her memories have been dense and sad. I thought of you after reading this – I remembered one of our walks in the hills when I asked you about your childhood pets. You were quiet for a time and I wondered if you'd heard me. Just as I was about to repeat myself, you said in a dry voice, "There was only one. Molly. And she met her end under the tire of my father's car." You articulated your words sharply. If not for the silence beforehand, I might've taken you for detached. We kept walking and I didn't know what to say. It was early days and I was just in the process of learning your sides. I'd held you when you cried and I'd weathered your anger, but this I had not yet seen. In time, I learnt that when your words were sparse, it was the lid for feeling not yet worked through. Like when you told me your husband had refused to get a divorce. I said, "What about the woman who answered the phone when you called his house? What about the fact that he hasn't seen you in two years?" You were silent for a long time before you replied, "Marriage is marriage, Albert." As I recall, you only called me that twice. The other time was when I gave you my ultimatum. Your response: "Why do you bother, Albert? You already know the answer." I didn't, actually. I thought there was a chance you'd choose me.



Friday

**AUNT JANE'S** in the morning. Sunlight streams through the kitchen windows; a bunch of wildflowers is stuck haphazardly in a red teapot on the table. Strains of Bach float from the radio down the hall. I sing to myself as I cut open a melon, scrape out the seeds and arrange the slices on a plate for Aunt Jane's breakfast tray. Hummingbirds dart to and from their feeder which hangs from the eaves – the sugar-water I added this morning is already half gone. Aunt Jane's kitchen smells of happiness: cinnamon rolls in the oven, coffee on the stove. This is where I feel safe.

When I first came to Nayati, I existed on memories like this. I lived more in my head than anywhere else. I'd visualise tiny details to take myself back into the familiar spaces – the pattern of the wood on the kitchen counters, the willow china in the cabinets, the floorboard that creaked. One of the worst aspects of a sentence in Nayati is the deprivation of small things that are part-and-parcel of everyday life in the outside world. They need some bunches of wildflowers around this place; they should also bake cinnamon rolls sometimes. The smell of cinnamon and butter can reach your nostrils, no matter how sick the doctors say you are. All I can smell right now are lunch odors wafting in from the hospital kitchen. I envision limp green beans, Kraft macaroni and instant potato mash. We'll see if I'm right. Usually I'm not here for the cacophony of pre-lunch smells but today is Al's day off. My morning felt wrong without him ... like I got dressed and forgot to put on underwear. Directly after lunch, the afternoon takes a different turn from the usual span of boredom till supper. We are to watch a movie. The girls rolled their eyes at the announcement. With my scant Nayati experience, I didn't know not to be excited. Sammy explained: "It's probably Disney. Else it's a documentary." I don't care. At least we get to walk to a different building. I haven't left this building in a month.

Lunch bell rings. Actually it's more of a buzzer than a bell. I'll be back late afternoon.

She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. She. Is. Gone.

*Anna.*

**July 28<sup>th</sup>; 09:00**

**Recording of exchange between Kai Hawkin and Albert Bronowitz in the ICU Ward following Hawkin's suicide attempt**

AL: Kai? Kai, it's Al. Can you hear me?

*KAI: Ben?*

AL: Al. This is Al. Your thera- your friend from Nayati.

*KAI: Ben, they took her. They stole her away.*

AL: Who did they steal?

*KAI: Anna.*

AL: Who is Anna?

*KAI: They stole Anna away.*

AL: Kai, can you tell me who Anna is?

*KAI: Ben, they took her.*

■

**To: Hannah Coetzee <[hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za](mailto:hcoetzee@capecuisine.co.za)>**

**From: Albert Bronowitz <[al.bronowitz@gmail.com](mailto:al.bronowitz@gmail.com)>**

**Title: Disaster**

Dear Hannah,

I've just come from the hospital. Kai tried to commit suicide last night. Slit her wrists using the jagged edge of a soda can that she twisted in two. She was found at about 3am, barely conscious and in a critical state. They rushed her to the emergency room. She's stable this morning but delirious and confused. I spoke to her doctor – he said the cuts weren't deep enough to kill her but she did a lot of damage with what she had. I was by her bedside for an hour and a half. Hannah, I don't know what to think or to feel. Sorrow, certainly. Fear, yes. But most of all, guilt. She gave me warning signs and I didn't take her seriously ... at least, not seriously enough.

Yesterday I was off so I didn't see her. I've talked to the staff, trying to find out if anything significant happened. The nurse in charge said that Kai seemed completely normal – cheerful even. She wrote in her journal for part of the morning and read a Jane Austen that I lent her. The girls watched a documentary in the afternoon. There was one odd thing though. While the girls were away, a cleaning service came in to see to the common room area and the bedrooms. Kai's room was cleaned and something was removed from under her bed – a box containing a single potato. Other than that, the room was neat and sparse. Apparently she has no possessions besides her clothes, toiletries and diary.

At the hospital, Kai didn't recognise me. She kept calling me Ben – a name I haven't heard before. And Anna. She repeated over and over that Anna was taken. I haven't heard this name either. Could Anna be her mother? This afternoon, I'm going to see what I can find out about her personal history. I think her family will have to be contacted about the suicide attempt. Perhaps I can talk to Aunt Jane. I don't know though – there's far more red tape in Kai's situation than would usually be the case.

I'm waiting to have a meeting with Hagan and the night staff to discuss the incident. I've just been warned it'll start in five minutes so I should wrap this up. Hannah, I wish you weren't away. I wish I could hear you say that it wasn't my fault.

Al



# Part Two





**THAT MORNING** there was nothing to signify it was a remarkable day. But by the afternoon things had begun to happen – small things, which on their own wouldn't have been significant, yet strung together, Kai couldn't help but take notice. First, she dropped a teapot that Aunt Jane inherited from her grandmother. Despite clattering on the wooden floor, it didn't break. Then she sliced open a watermelon that had no seeds – watermelons always have seeds; this was strange indeed. She lost a twenty dollar bill on the road, only to find it an hour later, tucked neatly under a stone so it wouldn't fly away. When she found a bird's nest on the path, a red ribbon woven playfully amongst the twigs, she knew something unusual was about to happen. So she was hardly surprised when Benjamin O'Connor walked into her life later that day.

Ben, however, was taken very much by surprise. His day had been like any other. When he saw Kai Hawkin sitting at the bus stop in the pouring rain, he didn't quite know how to react. He hadn't seen her before, which was odd because in such a small town, he'd grown up knowing pretty much everyone. And this girl was the type one took notice of. She was ... beautiful. There was no other word for it, although generally he wasn't one to use such words. As he packed groceries into his truck, oblivious to the rain, he tried to think of legitimate reasons to go up and talk to her. Ben was out of his depth in situations like these. He was tongue-tied and shy around girls. Although this was something he'd come to accept about himself, this afternoon it was an inconvenient shortcoming.

After finding the bird's nest, Kai went about her day, placidly waiting for the unusual thing to happen. She gave Aunt Jane her lunch, washed the dishes, hung some laundry, then left for the library. What with walking to the bus stop and the 40 minute bus ride, her journey one way took well over an hour. She'd left it late in the day and knew it would be dark when she got back, but her books were due and she needed something else to read. When she finished at the library, nothing had yet happened. For the first time, a shadow of doubt fell across her mind. Had she misread the signs? But the moment Kai spotted Ben, she knew he was it. Unsure of what to do, she sat tight and hoped things would happen without her having to do much.

When Ben had no more groceries to pack, he knew he'd either have to walk over

to the girl or climb in his car and drive home. Right then, his dog, Bronnie, jumped off the front seat and trotted purposefully towards the bus shelter to take a pee on the grass nearby. He felt a surge of gratitude towards her. Maybe on his way to retrieve Bronnie, he could drop a casual 'hi' or comment on the rain. But upon finishing her business, Bronnie, as though commissioned to be a canine cupid by some higher power, walked straight to the bench and placed her muzzle on Kai's knee. As Ben saw it, he had no choice but to go up and apologise.

When Bronnie's wet, warm muzzle found its way onto her leg, Kai reached down and rubbed the dog's left ear between her thumb and index finger. Without looking up, she knew the boy was approaching.

"I'm sorry about my dog," he said cautiously. "She's not usually like this."

Kai smiled at him, looking into his face for the first time. It was a good face, honest and uncomplicated. "Oh, that's okay," she said, "Bronnie's a nice pup."

"How'd you know her name?" he asked, startled.

"She told me," Kai replied.

Ben was confused. Then, seeing Bronnie's dog tag, he laughed. "I see you two go way back ... I'm Ben by the way."

Kai was wearing a green dress. Ben liked green. It reminded him of leaves and forests. Although he wasn't aware of it, the print was almost identical to the fabric of his baby quilt. When Kai wore the same dress to his house a month later, his mother noticed but didn't say anything. Her long-repressed romantic side dared to wonder if it was a signal of some kind; the practical side brushed away the notion and focused instead on her dismay at Ben's being in love with an Indian girl.

On the day he met her, Ben didn't realise that Kai was Indian until she directed him to the Lac du Flambeau reservation half an hour out of town. Bronnie sat between them in the pickup and the windscreen fogged up so badly that Ben had to rub it with his sleeve. Thanks to a fortunate collection of circumstances – the rain, the late bus and Bronnie's refusal to leave Kai's knee – he'd managed to offer her a lift home without sounding too obvious. Ben's truck was warm and dry. It smelt of boy. They didn't talk much on the way home. The silence between them was comfortable though. Both were surprised. Ben played music and hummed along as if he were by himself, tapping the

steering wheel in time with the beat.

“I like this,” Kai said. “What is it?”

“You don’t know Jack Johnson?”

She shook her head.

“We’ve got a lot of catching up to do,” he said, then reddened at his use of ‘we’, but Kai didn’t seem to notice. He took sly, sideways glances at her, noting the delicateness of her hands and her long, black hair.

The moment they turned into her father’s driveway, Kai regretted that she hadn’t told Ben to drop her at Aunt Jane’s house. She saw her home through his eyes – the shack-like cabin, junk lying around the yard, the sagging porch roof. She no longer noticed the shabbiness; this was where she’d always lived and she had ceased to judge it. But now she was painfully aware of how clear it must be to Ben that she came from poor stock. Embarrassment overrode her desire to linger in the car and she hurriedly opened the door, muttering her thanks.

Ben watched her run inside. The ragged house looked as if it wouldn’t last another winter. He felt a foreign emotion rising up inside him. If he’d paused to analyse it, he might have called it indignation. A girl like that, he thought, shouldn’t live in a house like this. It was only as he drove away that he realised they hadn’t exchanged phone numbers.

## 2

**KAI WANTED** to tell someone about the afternoon. The memory of it swelled up inside her, and she suspected that she might choose the wrong confidant if she didn’t find the right one first. The problem was that she didn’t really have anyone to tell. It wasn’t the kind of thing you shared with your father or your brother. Furthermore, she doubted they would meet her news of another male with much enthusiasm. And Aunt Jane was wary of these sorts of things. Men were, in her opinion, the downfall of the species. But still, Kai reasoned, confiding in her was better than keeping this thing to herself. She resolved to talk to Aunt Jane the next day. Feeling more peaceful, she opened one of the new library books. On the first page, just beneath the title, something was scrawled

faintly in pencil. Bringing her nose a couple of inches away, she tried to make out what it said: 'Shall the day of parting be the day of gathering? And shall it be said that my eye was in truth my dawn?' The Prophet.

Unsure of what this meant and whether it was yet another strange sign, Kai closed the book and looked at its cover. She'd chosen her books in a daze and could hardly remember what she'd taken out. It was *The Little Prince*. She tried concentrate but after reading the first page eight times without being able to remember a word, she put it down and went to sleep. That night she dreamt of her mother for the first time in years. They were cooking together in Aunt Jane's kitchen. Both wore aprons. Her mother's hair was black streaked with silvery threads, and hung in a ponytail reaching to her waist. Kai chopped herbs and tipped them into a pot; her mother ground pepper into the mixture and tasted the broth. They didn't speak. Both knew the recipe by heart and worked as if they shared the same mind. As her mother tasted from the wooden ladle, Kai knew it needed more garlic. When it was finished, they sat down, each with a bowl of soup. Kai took a spoonful and closed her eyes, trying to identify the flavours of each separate ingredient. When she opened them, her mother was gone; just the bowl of soup was left steaming on the table. She'd taken the spoon with her.

### 3

**BEN HAD** a bad night. He tossed about, trying to get comfortable. Replaying the events of the afternoon in his mind, he kicked himself for not making some sort of plan to see Kai again. There were a dozen things he could have said – he could've asked her if she wanted to see a movie, or have a burger or ... well, that was about all he could think of. She knew he lived in town because he'd mentioned it, so it was out of the question to casually drop by her house to say hello; not that he was the kind of guy who did that anyway. But he didn't know what kind of thing a guy like him might do. When he finally fell asleep, he dreamt that he camped out at the bus stop day and night, waiting to see her again. He was in a bad mood when he woke. He stalked into the kitchen and poured himself some cereal, ignoring his mother who eyed him with an arched eyebrow.

Ben was a waiter at one of the restaurants in town. The money was good during

the summer when the tourists poured in. He didn't mind the work and he'd made friends there. But today he hated his job. Ben's face tended to reflect everything going on inside his head, so was a bad idea to be at the restaurant when he felt like punching a wall. Everything irritated him, from the cheddar and pickle relish sandwich he'd served a million times, to the sun-burnt customers who wore their newly purchased Minocqua shirts to lunch at The Minocqua Bay Café. When he dropped his second coffee cup, his boss told him to take a break and go for a walk down to the pier. Once outside, Ben tried to reason with himself. *C'mon O'Connor, he scolded, you're an idiot – this time yesterday you didn't even know her.* But it didn't help. There was something else, something that was being chaffed by the fear that he'd let Kai slip away.

In a town like Minocqua, there were plenty of summertime vacation girls to go around. Holiday flings were part of the package and the crew at the restaurant catered for the expectations. So you'd expect a boy like Ben to have been round the block a fair few times. It was easier because everyone assumed ... but also harder *precisely* because everyone assumed. If anyone cast their minds back over the past two summers that Ben had worked at the restaurant, no one would be able to remember seeing him with a girl. That's because he hadn't been. Not once. And now he was nineteen and it was plain embarrassing. The worst part was that Ben couldn't figure out the reason for it. He wasn't gay, that was for damn sure. He could talk to girls okay, but at the critical point he pulled back. Once, the year before, a pretty girl flirted with him and stood close enough that their cheeks were almost touching. Given another minute he was sure she would've leaned in to kiss him, but he excused himself to go to the bathroom and walked straight out of the bar instead.

Looking at Ben now, you wouldn't suspect that from age eleven to seventeen he'd spent every Sunday with his hair plastered down and his neck pinched in the collar of a button-up shirt, sitting next to his mother, Annie, in a church pew. Nor would you think that on Wednesday evenings, he would've been found at a youth group prayer session led by the local pastor. It was only in his second to last year of high school that he'd finally said 'enough'. His mother kicked him out the house and he camped in the woods on the edge of their property for a week. Annie could see him from her kitchen window and watched

as he got up each morning. A few days into his exile, she was holding a glass of orange juice when she saw him emerge from his tent. She didn't realise her fingers were clenched until the glass cracked. She watched her blood mingle with the juice. Later that day, it occurred to her that she hadn't felt any pain, despite the deep cut across the cushioned part of her thumb.

The first Sunday Ben didn't appear at church, Annie lied and told everyone he was sick (which wasn't really a lie, she reasoned; it was sickness of the soul). A week later, she broke down and consulted the pastor. After an hour of listening to advice, she convinced herself that Ben's atheism was just a phase and allowed him to come home. Ben wasn't an atheist though – he didn't mind God; it was the other stuff he disliked. Although he tried to explain to his mother that he wasn't rejecting the Almighty, she couldn't understand why the Christian son she'd raised was virtually signing up for Hell. But she figured he'd have a better chance of returning to the fold if he lived in a Christian home as opposed to in a tent with his dog. So they lived together, not happily, but tolerant of the situation. Both of them were waiting: Ben for the time when he'd have enough money to move out and Annie for her son's spiritual transformation.

Although Ben had renounced the religious trappings of his adolescence, there was one legacy that lingered. It confused him because he no longer bought into it, yet it continued to infringe on his life. Within the church community, interactions between boys and girls had been strictly chaperoned. Teenagers were expected to socialise in groups with adult supervision until getting engaged. Premarital sex, well, that immediately condemned you to Hell. When he left the church at age seventeen, Ben had never been alone with a girl. This was exacerbated by his natural shyness, so he generally steered clear of the opposite sex. When he picked up the job at the restaurant, he had no choice but to join the mainstream teenage world. The guys were okay. He slotted into their group pretty easily; they liked him because he wasn't trying to prove anything. But when conversation turned to girls, which it did every few minutes, Ben was mysteriously quiet. Sure, he made quips like the rest of them and told a couple of jokes, but if they thought about it, his friends would realise that he never added any stories of his own. By the time he met Kai, Ben was sick of maintaining the balance between saying just enough to go unnoticed, and not

saying anything stupid that would give the game away. All he wanted was to find some girl, go from zero to a hundred as quick as he could, and say good riddance to his virginity.

4

**WHEN KAI** walked across to Aunt Jane's the following morning, she kept laughing for no reason. She liked to think she knew herself well, that all aspects of her character were accounted for. But this giggling girl was a stranger to her – Kai might have found her annoying if she weren't so happy. She thought about the previous afternoon, remembering details as if sampling chocolates from a Christmas box. Like the way the skin around his eyes crinkled up when he smiled, and how he rested his right hand on Bronnie's neck as he drove. Kai had read about all sorts of men – from Rhett Butler to Ralf de Briccasau to Mr Darcy. In her daydreams, she'd always imagined herself with one of these types: older, experienced. Ben wasn't at all what she pictured, but suddenly the Darcy-type lost its allure. All she could think about was the boy from the bus stop.

Aunt Jane, as Kai could have predicted, was well-acquainted with precisely this breed of male and had a number of things to say.

"Honey, the love-bug's bit you bad. This can't lead anywhere good. Either he'll knock you up and run off, or he's got another little girl from the other side of town who thinks he's all hers. You gotta be careful with those shy types; they lie better than any other kind of man. He'll look at you with puppy-eyes and you'll swallow every word he says. Meanwhile you've got only half the story."

Although Kai didn't expect her news to be embraced, she hadn't prepared herself for this. Each of Jane's words stung. "I have a feeling you'd say something similar about anyone I was interested in," Kai said coldly. "Surely *some* men in the world are decent human beings. How is it that you haven't even met him but you know every inch of his character?"

The old woman peered at her, eyes narrowed, jaw set. Kai returned her gaze, taking in the crepe-paper cheeks and thinning hair. When Aunt Jane broke the silence, it was with a sound that was halfway between a whistle and a sigh.

“When you get to my age, you realise that the good Lord used the same pattern for the whole damn lot of them. There’s nothing new in this world of ours and young bucks who go picking up girls at bus stops are after one thing. It’s nature.”

Kai felt foolish. That ‘one thing’ was like a slap across her cheek. The events of the day before were soiled. She left the room, tears blurring the floor in front of her.

When Kai left, Aunt Jane turned to thinking. She tried to revisit herself at age eighteen and found it difficult. She could remember facts about her life at the time but had trouble tapping into the mindset that guided her during her late teens. She’d been at boarding school in Philadelphia and was more concerned with becoming an ‘emancipated woman’ than chasing boys. When she came home for the summer, wearing men’s pants and sporting a bobbed hairstyle, it was clear that she was rejecting the way of her mother and forging her own path. She boasted that on the train to Chicago she’d used the ladies restroom and been told by a snobby looking woman that the men’s facilities were down the passage. Aunt Jane’s mother said she quite agreed with the woman on the train, but her daughter was too headstrong for scoldings to have any impact.

Men only entered Aunt Jane’s life later, when she was studying at the Art Institute in Chicago. She dated a few boys her own age, but those pursuits didn’t hold her interest for long. The foundation for her distrust of males could be traced back to her first engagement: she’d promised herself to a young lecturer who admired Oscar Wilde and read to her from Byron (she’d hated Byron ever since). Their romance ended when she walked into his office to find him embracing a member of his *Quattrocento* class. The student was a lanky Spanish boy of about twenty, who continually flicked hair from his eyes. Needless to say, the ring found its way off her finger and out of the window which stood open behind them.

It exhausted her to remember all this. She rarely returned to the past. She’d found peace in the present. Even though her body was growing weaker and she was heavily reliant on Kai’s help, she could hear the wind in the trees and felt connected to the earth. Her home was beautiful; filled with colour, music and good things to eat. She could still go for short walks in the woods by herself. And she had Kai. She shuddered at the thought of losing the girl who unobtrusively held her life together. Without Kai, she’d



have to get a live-in nurse. And men were dangerous things – her whole life bore testimony to that. God forbid anyone hurt her girl; the very thought made her quiver and she felt certain she could rip that sorry boy apart with her bare hands. But you'd never know this from the placid expression on her face. She lay back on her pillow, eyes closed, hands folded, a faint smile on her lips. Which was why Kai, walking past the bedroom ten minutes later, interpreted the look as one of smug satisfaction and determined to prove Jane wrong.

## 5

**JANE WASN'T** actually Kai's aunt. For one thing, she was white. For another, she was old enough to be Kai's grandmother, even great-grandmother, but the cobwebs of ego still left inside her would not permit the title, 'Grandma Jane'. She was a ceramicist and had a doctorate in women's literature. She'd lived on the border of the reservation for the past eight years. A lifetime of cities, academia and chauvinism had driven her to seek out the solitude of Wisconsin's North Woods. It was where her family had vacationed when she was a child, making the three-day journey without fail from Chicago every summer. She'd always wanted to return and it was the failure of a thirty-year marriage that finally pushed her to do it. The Hawkins were her closest neighbours. Their house was a five minute walk if you cut through the woods, ten minutes if you took the road. Jane met the Hawkins six years before when she'd had a bad fall during a thunder storm and broken her leg (rickety ladder; candles on the top shelf). The phone lines were out, so she'd hopped along the wooded path in the rain using a kitchen stool as a crutch. Solomon, Kai's dad, took her to the hospital. When she returned some days later, the family took turns looking after her. Of the three Hawkins, Kai was Jane's favourite caregiver. Solomon Hawkin was unreliable. He was intelligent but irritable when sober, and kind but clumsy when drunk. Jane reckoned that if she could just fuse his two personalities, eliminating the bad qualities of each, he'd be a sterling man. But as it was, she couldn't tolerate his petulance in one state or his liquor-breath in the other. Ashkii was too little to be of much help unless directed by his big sister. Kai was a good nurse. She was sensitive and respectful. Even at age twelve, she had a sense of adult capability resulting from

being slotted into the role of family matriarch so young. But besides all this, there was something else. A light perhaps ...

So it was that Aunt Jane offered Kai a job – to be her helper in whatever capacity might arise. The original job description included reading aloud, occasional cleaning and help with the grocery shopping. As Aunt Jane became older and weaker, the description grew to encompass cooking, nursing and basically the running of the house. Essentially, Jane hired Kai as a companion, though she never described it that way. She introduced Kai as her ‘assistant’ when they saw people she knew out and about. However, near the time of her death, Aunt Jane came to realise the core reason she’d asked Kai into her life. It wasn’t because the Hawkins were short on money (though they were) or because she needed help (though she did). It was because she needed a recipient of her legacy, whatever it was. Her legacy ... she would muse over this at length during her last days. It was, she eventually decided, a legacy of seeking. Since she was a small child, she’d been pushing at boundaries, reading, asking, wanting to know. When she grew up, probing at the human psyche became integral to her sense of self. Her only book, *Women’s Art*, was considered ‘insightful’ by most critics and two of her papers were still required reading for first year courses at Chicago’s Art Institute. When Kai showed up, her life seemed to be winding down – or rather, grinding to a halt – of its own accord.

She vividly remembered the day she met the girl ... it had taken her almost forty-five minutes to hobble along the path with her broken leg. She was half crazy from the pain. With each step she convinced herself to take just one more before sinking to the rain-soaked earth. In this way, she somehow managed to reach the Hawkins’ property. She’d been looking at the ground ahead of her, which swam in and out of focus, when a dark head slipped beneath her arm. Jane leaned gratefully on her unknown helper, muttering something about candles and phone lines. The body supporting hers felt slender and supple as a birch sapling. It was strong though, and for the first time since she’d fallen, Jane dared to hope that things might turn out alright. The rain was still coming down hard. They left the chair in the drive and she hopped on one leg using the girl as a crutch. When they got to the porch, she collapsed into a wicker chair that was missing an arm. Closing her eyes, she tried to stifle the nausea which surged up from her belly.

“I think you need to see a doctor,” said a little voice on the fringes of her consciousness.

Jane opened her eyes and saw the girl’s face looking into hers. She had a forehead like the surface of a river stone which has been washed smooth by innumerable currents.

“Yes... that would... be for the best, I think,” she said.

“I’ll call my dad.”

“Thank you. I’ll wait here,” said Jane, as if there was a chance she might wander off.

Even though it was the first in a chain of ailments that would drive her health steadily downhill, Jane never resented her broken leg. Had she not had the accident, she wouldn’t have gained Kai. Their relationship resurrected aspects of life that she’d once cherished and had lain aside since choosing a solitary path. She taught Kai to cook, presiding over goings-on in the kitchen like an Italian matriarch, scolding the girl one moment, embracing her the next. They went to markets together and chose the season’s best produce, destined to be made into the next fabulous dish to add to Kai’s repertoire. And then, of course, there were the books. Disgusted with the Lac du Flambeau high school syllabus, Jane decided to take the girl’s education into her own hands. She made reading lists which she followed as vigilantly as her pupil. She saw Kai’s mind as a bed of rich loam, waiting for green things to be planted, and she, the careful gardener, was in charge of sowing just the right seeds in the right seasons. Under Jane’s tutelage, Kai became uncommonly well-read for a reservation child. While her contemporaries were smoking pot and drinking behind the family planning centre, Kai was comparing Virginia Woolf to Sylvia Plath and eating steamed artichokes doused with balsamic reduction marinade.

## 6

**A** WEEK later, neither Ben nor Kai had thought up a way to see the other again. For his part, Ben was beginning to assume that the window of chance had closed and life would return to normal. Kai was more optimistic; she was convinced that their paths would cross but wasn’t sure of how or where. At least he knew where she lived – that consoled

her some, but it had disadvantages too. Every time she thought she heard a car engine, her breath would catch in her throat and she wondered if he was turning into the driveway. She started to imagine noises and, thinking she'd heard the crunch of a footstep on the gravel or a tap at the door, she'd run to the closest mirror to check if there was anything in her teeth or, God forbid, toothpaste on her cheek. Realising it was yet another false alarm, she'd curse her paranoia and vow to return to her formerly sensible self. But then she would start to fret that he'd come at a time when she was at Aunt Jane's and find an empty house, or worse – her father in one of his depressions, whisky bottle in hand.

By the second time they met, Kai had managed to build Ben into her life, installing him as the solution to all her problems. Thinking about him became a refuge. When she had a disagreement with her father, she thought about how Ben would always see her point of view. If her brother annoyed her, she imagined that Ben would soon be coming to pick her up and take her away in his truck. While she was working at Aunt Jane's, she began to invent a future for the two of them, envisioning details right down to the dress she'd wear when he took her home to meet his family. He was the third of four brothers, she decided. His eldest brother had a wife and baby (she loved babies). His happily married parents lived in a cabin on the shore of Lake Minocqua and they owned one of the stores in town. She wasn't sure which, but she suspected it was The Old Tree Emporium which sold Scandinavian furniture.

When they did eventually meet, their encounter was what some might call coincidence. Ben hardly ever went to the library. In fact, he'd probably only been there a handful of times before. He went to return a book for his mother who was sick in bed. She'd taken to reading Danielle Steele novels. A few days before, she'd left her book on the kitchen table and Ben, vaguely curious, picked it up. It opened naturally to a page which started with the words, 'and as he ran his tongue along the inside of her thighs... .' Ben grimaced at the thought of his mother reading that but sat down and read to the end of the chapter. By then he was hooked and had to wait for the times when Annie was not reading so he could safely sneak the book to his room. He termed his new occupation 'shadow-reading'. Shortly after he finished it, he almost gave the game away by remarking to Annie: "So how's about the twist at the end – did you see that coming?" She was surprised when he offered to drop the book off at the library and pick up another.

It wasn't like him to initiate a favour. But her migraine was wearing on her and she needed something to take her mind off it, so she accepted his offer, giving him a list of the titles she'd already read so he could be sure to get something new.

Ben felt awkward walking into the library. When he asked the librarian where he could find more Danielle Steeles, his voice was too loud. She gave him a reproachful look and answered in an exaggerated whisper. Following the directions he'd been given, he walked between the shelves, peering down each aisle to find the popular fiction. And then he saw her. She was sitting on a maroon beanbag chair in a pool of sunlight. There was a pile of books in her lap and she was immersed in the one on the top of the stack. Her face was turned away slightly and the light behind her cut a sharp profile. Her sandals were kicked off and her legs crossed beneath her. She looked like a child, peering intently into the book, lost in the story. Not sure what to say, he ducked behind a shelf and tried to think. He needed a line – something casual, something cool. And then, as though a different Ben took over, he stepped out of hiding and said in a voice that did not sound like his, "I was wondering when you'd show up again."

After having watched for Ben for a week, Kai was astonished when he walked up to her during the one time she'd forgotten about him. She was submerged in *Jane Eyre*, grateful to have an escape from her thoughts. When Ben's voice cut through her concentration, she looked up, startled. She'd been sitting in the sunlight for a while and, peering back into darkness of the library, all she could see was a silhouette. Her eyes took a moment to adjust and when she saw the voice belonged to him, her heart skipped a beat. But she said, "Oh, it's you," as though she always saw him at the library on Tuesday afternoons. "I mean hi," she back-peddled.

"So this is where you hide out," he said, glancing around at the shelves.

"Yeah, I'm a regular here." There was a pause and she wondered why he didn't say anything. "You know you're a nerd when all the librarians know your name *and* your favourite author," she added, regretting it the moment it was out of her mouth.

But he smiled and said, "Well, the librarian at the desk looked at me like I'm some kind of Nazi-punk. I think they prefer your kind around here."

She furrowed her brow and seemed to deliberate.

“So you’re definitely not a nerd?” she asked, almost wistfully.

“No,” he said, “But I do admire nerds. I think they’re under-appreciated.”

She laughed. “I feel the same way. We should start a Nerd Appreciation Society.”

“I’m in. And hey, I even have a place for the headquarters ... with your approval of course.”

“Sounds good. Where is it?”

“Can’t tell you in public. Location has to be kept under wraps. It’s code 52 of the organisation guidelines. Besides, it would be like revealing my deep dark secret.”

“What’s your deep dark secret? You have to tell me everything now. You can’t hide stuff from fellow members of Nerd Appreciation.” She wondered if this was what you’d call flirting, and if it was, she was amazed she knew how to do it.

“Damn, I guess I’ve given up all rights to be mysterious. I’m warning you, this is not a secret I should not be revealing in a library. But here it goes: I’ve always been jealous of people who like books because, to tell the truth, I never really found one that grabbed me.”

She looked appalled for a second and he wondered if he’d said the wrong thing.

“But I want to get into reading,” he added quickly, “which is actually why I’m here.” Something told him not to mention the Danielle Steeles.

“Oh yeah?” Kai asked, “Why the sudden desire to attain nerdship?”

*Oh shit*, he thought, but out loud he said, “Well, it seems like a good escape, y’know?”

She looked pleased, as though he’d passed some sort of test. “Yes, I totally know what you’re talking about. That’s one of the main reasons I read – to get away from the not-so-happy parts of life. It can get pretty lonely out where I live.”

“That’s why I have Bronnie – for the loneliness I mean. We live close to town, me and my mom, but we don’t get along so well. Bronnie’s good to have around ’cos no matter what I do, she thinks I’m great. But she doesn’t talk much, so I reckon books might fill the gap.”

So, Kai realised, he didn’t have happily married parents or three brothers. But she found that she didn’t care. “You seem like the kind of guy who’d have a lot of friends though.”

“Well yeah, I got friends, but friends only go so far. They can’t be around all the time. They’re good guys, but we just joke around. I can’t really talk to them about, well, stuff, y’know? How ’bout you?”

Kai did a quick tally. Her friend situation looked bleak: Ashkii, Aunt Jane and her father ... sometimes. Two and a half friends. Not a lot. She cleared her throat. “Well, like you said, friends only go so far. So what book are you looking for anyways? Or are you hoping the right book will find you?”

“Kind of ... How does that work by the way? Will the book fall off the shelf as I walk by or will I just choose the right one by fate or something?”

“The latter actually.” Noting his scepticism, she added, “I’m serious. That’s sometimes how it happens. But there’s also another way.”

“Oh yeah? What’s that?” he asked.

“Maybe I can help you find the right one.”

He thought for a moment then said, “How ’bout you find me that book, then we should go on our first mission for the Nerd Appreciation Society and visit the headquarters.”

“Okay. Have you read any Tolkien?”

“Nope.”

“Well that was easy. I know exactly what book you’re meant to read. *The Hobbit*. I love that book. I only associate with people who’ve read it.”

“Well, I better start reading then. I’d hate for that to be a bone between us.”

## 7

**SO DANIELLE** Steele was forgotten and Ben took out *The Hobbit* on his mother’s library account instead. The librarian looked at them quizzically when they approached the loans desk. For two years she’d seen Kai in the library every week – she always came and left alone. Kai could feel the librarian’s stare, like hot breath on her shoulder. This woman had helped her navigate her way around the shelves when she first started coming.

The librarian turned to Ben. “So you’ve given up on Danielle Steele have you?”

she asked, noting an almost imperceptible raise of Kai's eyebrows.

Ben wanted to kick her. He didn't know where Danielle Steele ranked on the scale of good literature but, from the tone of her voice, it wasn't high. "Yeah, I'm told this is more important for my book education," he said.

"I would agree with that," she said, stamping the card. "And Kai, how are you enjoying *The Little Prince*?"

"Uh – I've sorta lost interest."

When their books were checked out – Kai's six and Ben's one – they left. Out in the sunshine, away from scrutiny and fluorescent lights, Kai wanted to cartwheel down the street. She felt a sudden mastery over life and the frustration of previous days was forgotten. Bronnie was waiting in the truck. She didn't seem remotely surprised to see Kai. It was different today – Bronnie rode in the back of the pickup, trying to stand up like a surfer, being thrown off balance when they turned corners. Her ears caught the wind like two kites attached to her head. They drove along, summer spilling into the wound-down windows. Kai thought to herself, *so this is what it is to be happy*. Ben's truck ambled along a dirt track flanked by woods. The road ended abruptly and he turned off the engine.

"Now we walk," he said. "You should feel honoured. I never bring anyone here."

He climbed out of the truck and whistled to Bronnie who leapt out the back, tail wagging. Kai tied her hair in a ponytail and opened her own door which creaked as she pushed it with her foot.

"So, do you often leave the library with strange boys?" Ben asked.

"All the time. It's the best pick-up joint in town." She was met by silence. "I'm just kidding," she added quickly. "I've never met anyone there before. Why do you think the librarian was so nosy? She was like, oh maybe Kai *does* interact with live human beings after all."

They were walking along a path that was barely there. If she wasn't following Ben, Kai doubted she'd be able to find it. She wondered where they were going but had a feeling he didn't want her to ask. He took long strides. She was almost trotting to keep up. Kai looked at his back – broad shoulders, a T-shirt which said 'John Deere' and cargo shorts. His hair was longish; his mother would probably tell him to get a haircut but



everyone else would like it the way it was. She could see the edges of wet patches beneath his arms and wondered if he was the type of boy to care. On this kind of day, there was no avoiding it. Occasionally a drop of sweat rolled down between her breasts and made her shiver. Her ponytail stuck to the back of her neck and stray wisps grew curly from the humidity.

The place they finally arrived at was a small, one-roomed cabin. “What do you think?” Ben asked, “Will this work?”

“It’s perfect. And very well hidden – if the organisation has enemies, no one will be able to find us. How did you discover it?”

“I built it,” he said proudly, “A few years ago I decided I needed a place to run away to when things got rough at home. My mother’s like a hornet sometimes, especially in July. I like being out here. It’s a good place to think ... or to stop thinking.”

“I can never stop thinking,” she said, “My mind’s going crazy all the time. Sometimes three thoughts try and force themselves into my brain at once – like three fat guys trying to fit through a doorway.”

He laughed. “I know what you mean. When I’m around town, my head’s buzzing. Sometimes I think about just moving out here and getting away from it all.”

“Would I be the only person who’d know where to find you?”

“Yup, so I’d have to keep you here with me to make sure you wouldn’t tell anyone. I’d tie you to a tree.”

“Should I be nervous?”

“No. Soon I’d win you over to the simple life and you’d be here by choice.” He sat down and patted the spot next to him. “It’s cooler down here, especially if you don’t move at all. There’s a stream pretty close by. On days when the heat gets too much, you can go dunk in the water then come back here and the coolness lasts about half an hour before you have to do it again.” With a wry smile, he added, “I guess that’s caveman air-conditioning for you.”

It *was* cooler sitting down. But a couple of minutes later, Kai began to feel Ben’s body heat from a few inches away. She wasn’t sure if she was just profoundly aware of his nearness or the ninety degree weather was fuelling her imagination. There was a silence and she wondered what he was thinking – or if he was thinking at all. A sense of

drowsiness hung about the afternoon. She figured it her turn to talk, but all she really wanted to do was to put her head on his shoulder.

“Why do you want to get away from everyone?” she asked at last.

“Well, it just gets kinda frantic out there, y’know?” he said, then paused, searching for the right words. “I feel like people forget what actually matters and make stupid things important. I work at this restaurant in town and I see a lot of people. I watch them and hear the way they talk to each other. I wish people were kinder to each other. Especially in families. All the time I witness little wars – like a dad putting down his wife in front of the kids, or a mom yelling at her children for some tiny, insignificant thing and it’s like relationships are being destroyed because someone knocked over a glass of water or ate the last fry. When I see stuff like that, it makes me want to check out of the human race and come live out here where there isn’t anger.”

She listened, surprised. It seemed like all this had been stored up inside him and he’d been waiting to say it to the right person. “I know what you mean,” she said quietly, “People don’t realise they’re adding ugliness to the world with each mean word. It’s like ... what would you call it? Emotional pollution, I guess.”

“Yeah, that’s it. Emotional pollution.” He seemed pleased with her phrase. “Out here there isn’t any of that. It’s just aliveness. None of society’s shit to ruin it.”

There was a pause and Kai considered asking what she was most curious about. Eventually she said, “So why don’t you and your mom get along? I don’t get it – you seem like the type of guy who’d get along with anyone.”

He didn’t answer right away and Kai was worried that she’d probed too far. She was about to retract the question when he spoke.

“Well, we used to be real close. My dad ran off with this hippie chick when I was eleven and I was all my mom had. She leaned on me a lot – probably too much. I guess that was part of what drove me away. It was just too intense; she’d cry everyday and want to know where I was all the time. And then there was the other stuff too ...”

“What other stuff?”

“Well, it’s kinda hard to explain.” He paused. “She’s real into church and being Christian and all. I used to go to church with her – not because I wanted to but because that’s how things were. I didn’t realise there was an option until I was older. When I

stopped going, she took it personal and things have never been the same between us since.”

“Why did you stop going?”

“Guess I found God in other places,” he said, “and I started asking questions that church couldn’t answer – at least not in ways that made sense to me.”

“What places did you find God?” Kai’s voice was almost a whisper.

“In the trees, the sky. I like God better out here. I don’t like the God who tells you what you can and can’t do.”

“So you like nature-God, not people-God.”

“Yeah,” he said softly.

“Me too.”

Ben’s fingers had been interlaced behind his head as he leaned back on the wall of the shelter. Now he released them, relaxing one hand on either side of his body. As he did so, his hand brushed Kai’s, sending waves of electricity up her spine. The length of his baby finger was now touching the length of hers; their hands rested side by side on the bench. They sat in silence, their whole beings tuned into the things happening on the space of wooden plank between them. Then Ben lifted his finger and curled it around Kai’s. *We’re talking with our fingers*, Kai thought. After a minute or two, he slid his hand over hers. Her heart was beating so loud, she was sure he could hear it. Eventually she flipped her hand over so their palms were pressed together. Encouraged by her boldness, he began to explore her hand, visiting the crevices at the base of her fingers with his thumb, running his palm over her knuckles, brushing his fingertips across hers. She didn’t know how long they sat there, initiating the courtship with their hands. It was getting dark when she felt his fingers run over her wrist, up her forearm, pausing at the inside of her elbow. They continued up to her shoulder and, finding her clavicle, followed it to the hollow at the base of her neck. Then they dropped downwards and fanned out, delta-like, to encompass her breast. He was kneeling in front of her now. They hadn’t said anything for a long time. She felt her nipple harden against the cup of his hand. Opening her knees, she edged closer towards him. They were a hand’s breadth apart – close enough for her to feel his breath on her chest. She leaned forward; paused, her lips an inch away from his. They stayed like that a moment, possibility hovering between them. Then he closed the

gap, bringing his mouth to hers.

A few weeks later, lying in the sun, Kai's head resting on his shoulder, Ben said, "Truth or dare, who was the first guy you kissed? Was it one of those scrawny casino-rats?"

She poked him in the ribs. "Who do you think I am, Benjamin? My standards are a little higher than that." When he didn't say anything, she added, "It was you, you fool."

"Are you serious?"

"Well, yeah. I told you I was a nerd. Nerds don't get a lot of action. How 'bout you? I'll bet I was girl number 87 or something."

"Actually girl number 89."

"You slut," she teased. "I hope I'm the best at least."

"You're absolutely the best." He squeezed her. "You're also the first – at least the first real girl. The other 88 were all imaginary."

"You're bullshitting. I can always tell when you lie: your nose begins to twitch."

"It's twitching because I need to sneeze."

"Yeah, whatever."

He sneezed loudly.

"Okay," she said, "but I still bet you're lying."

"Seriously, Kai. You were the first." He looked uncomfortable. She lifted herself onto her elbow so that she could lean over and look into his face.

"Wow, I honestly didn't realise that," she said, when she saw he was telling the truth. "Ben, that's amazing."

"Really?" he looked doubtful.

"Oh yeah. It means that we discovered everything together. It makes us closer."

## 8

**DURING THE** first weeks of Kai's reign over his life, Ben slept only four hours each night. He'd try to get to sleep in the evening, but was too excited about seeing her the next day to nod off easily. Reading helped him get through the long night-time hours. She chose books for him and was delighted every time he finished one. Everyone around Ben

noticed a change. He had a confidence now that wasn't there before. But despite this, his relationships with other people began to disintegrate. Whereas before, nothing short of paralysis or natural disaster could have kept him from watching Monday night baseball at the bar with his friends, now, he forgot about it and was to be found, instead, out at the hideout with Kai.

His mother hardly ever saw him and things between them went from bad to worse. At first she didn't know about Kai. Well aware of her Old Testament views on such things, Ben said nothing about spending time with a girl. Annie would have remained ignorant of Kai for a lot longer, had she not run out of detergent one Sunday evening. Her work clothes for the next day were waiting in the washing machine and she had no choice but to go into town and make an emergency grocery stop. She was waiting at a red light when a couple rounded the corner and came into view. They were holding hands. She squinted, trying to make out who they were in the fading twilight. Then she recognised the boy's grey sweatshirt. She had folded it that very morning.

Her son was holding hands with a girl she'd never seen before. The girl was wearing a dress that Annie felt was cut far too low – not that she had much to show off. Ben and the girl walked in her direction, laughing and talking. He paused once to pull her towards him, and they kissed in full public view. Annie was so absorbed in trying to get a better look that the light turned green without her noticing. The car behind her honked. On hearing the noise, Ben looked up just in time to lock eyes with his mother before she burned rubber on tar.

“Oh shit,” he muttered and dropped Kai's hand.

“What is it?” She looked at him, confused.

He just stood there. She followed his gaze to the taillights receding swiftly down the road. Aunt Jane's words echoed in her head and her pulse began to race.

“Who was that in the car, Ben?”

He still didn't say anything.

“Answer me.” There was a hardness in her tone that he hadn't heard before.

“That,” he said in a hollow voice, “was my mother.”

“Oh.” She was relieved. “Have you told her about us yet?”

“No. I wouldn't be surprised if she kicks me out of the house again. Bitch.”

“If that happens, we may have to move out to the Nerd Appreciation headquarters and start living the simple life,” she said, trying too hard to be light hearted.

When Ben saw his mother later that night, it was clear she’d been waiting up for him. Her face looked haggard. She wore a dressing gown she’d had forever – daisy print on a green background. He hated that gown.

“So,” Annie began curtly, “Are you engaged to the young woman on the street?”

“Jesus, Mom. Don’t start.”

“Don’t you dare blaspheme under my roof.”

“Okay, okay. Just please lay *off*. I’m nineteen and I can make my own choices.”

“And what if those choices take you straight to Hell?” She put her hands on her hips and looked him squarely in the eye.

“I’ll take the risk,” he said.

“Pretty high stakes, don’t you think?”

He felt the urge to walk out the door, but instead, found an even-sounding voice and attempted to talk reasonably. “Look, Mom, we don’t see eye to eye on this and to be dead-honest, I don’t think we ever will. I’m sorry that’s the way things are – really, I am. I’m not asking you to change your mind. All I’m looking for is a little bit of ... what’s the word? Acceptance.”

“I can’t stand by and give ‘acceptance’ as you put it, while my son lives in sin. You’re sleeping with some girl from heaven knows where and I’m supposed to let it be? I don’t think so.”

“For Christ’s sake Mom, you saw us holding hands and now you assume we’re screwing like rabbits. Did it ever occur to you that maybe you added two and two and got fifteen?”

“Well, *are* you having sexual intercourse with her?”

“That’s absolutely none of your business.”

“That sounds very much like a yes to me.”

“I don’t believe I’m hearing this.” He turned, then paused, thought for a second, and turned back. “What about the Danielle Steele books, Mom? Are all the characters chastely married? You sure seem to love those books, but I gotta say, things can get

pretty steamy on the pages of *Second Chance* and *Bungalow 2*. Surely a good Christian doesn't read that kind of thing. Let's just call it what it is – soft porn.”

Annie looked as if she was going to be ill.

“Those are books, Benjamin; this is life. They're very different things.” Then, gaining conviction, she added, “By the way, how *dare* you read my books?”

“Geez Mom, you don't own the words. I just wanted to see what's keeping you so interested. I wouldn't have brought it up, but all considering ...”

“This is ridiculous. You ... you can't compare books to an illicit relationship.”

“It's not 'illicit', whatever that means. You're just a bitter old woman who swallows whatever the pastor tells you to believe. It would do you a lot of good to think out of your box for ten minutes.” Then he walked past her and headed for his bedroom.

He lay on his back for a long time, staring at the pine ceiling boards. He knew every knoll and ripple in the wood. When he was eleven, he'd stare at a specific cranny where two of the boards joined. It looked like an entranceway to somewhere. As his parents shouted at each other downstairs, he imagined being sucked up through the hole and finding himself in a different place. Like Narnia or somewhere. Now, eight years later, he caught sight of the old cranny and found himself thinking about how it would be if things had turned out another way – how his father would react to all this if he were still around. After a while there was a knock on his bedroom door. He didn't answer. It came again, louder.

“What do you want?” he yelled.

The door opened and his mother walked in. She was calmer than before. “You have one of two options. Either you leave my house now and this time you're not coming back, or you bring the young woman to meet me and go about it properly, like a man. I want to know exactly who she is.”

Ben thought it over. He didn't like the idea of introducing Kai to his mother; in fact, he couldn't think of a less appealing way to spend an afternoon. But it was a damn sight better than being kicked out again. “Fine, but you better not give her a hard time.”

“Oh, I won't,” she answered. “If she's a decent girl, things will go just fine.”

**LIKE** A tiny pebble rolling around in the bottom of her shoe, Ben's reaction on the street bothered Kai. He'd told her little about his home-life. It was generally a topic he sidestepped during their conversations. She wished he'd tell her everything – reveal stuff that he'd never said out loud before. There was one topic that was taboo. He'd mentioned his father's departure only once and closed up all the other times she tried to ask. Kai felt that if he told her about his parents' split, recounting it in detail, their relationship would reach some sort of pinnacle. It would signify that their trust was complete.

When Ben dropped her at home, she went to her room and closed the door. She needed space to think about what had happened. Though it was painful, she couldn't stop running back through the memory: Ben looking up, his face not registering any change but his hand flexing almost involuntarily. What ghosts had been evoked during the look exchanged between mother and son? Lying on her bed, knees drawn up to her chest, a thought occurred to her for the first time. It entered her head tentatively, like a rat poking its head from a garbage can. She recoiled, but then forced herself to consider it. Was Mrs O'Connor angry, Kai wondered, because Ben was seeing an Indian girl? She didn't sleep for a long time that night.

When Ben extended his mother's invitation the next day, he seemed detached. "I'm apologising in advance," he warned, "She'll be rude and say all the wrong things but we have no choice. It's that or I get kicked out of the house."

Kai, however, felt differently about Annie's summons. "Don't be so pessimistic. If she wants to meet me, things can't be that bad," she said cheerfully, "I'll bake one of my cherry-rhubarb pies and make ginger lemonade. No one can resist that."

Ben looked at her warily. "My mother isn't a ginger lemonade kind of person."

"Okay, I'll just make the pie then."

The pie was never eaten. It left the O'Connor premises with the Thursday morning trash collection. The cherries stained everything in the bag red.

Annie did not make anything for Kai's visit – she didn't even boil the kettle. Her intention wasn't to wine and dine the girl, she told herself. She just wanted to see who



was leading her son into temptation. The enemy you know is better than the enemy you don't.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs O'Connor. Ben's told me an awful lot about you," Kai lied. She'd always imagined herself as the type of girl that parents would like.

"Well, he hasn't told me anything about you," Annie said.

There was a silence. A loud silence, Kai thought. Annie eyed her from head to toe, nostrils flared as though she was smelling something bad.

"I brought you a pie," Kai said at last, holding out the dish.

Annie didn't thank her. She put the pie on the kitchen counter, pushing it into a far corner. Ben shifted his weight from one leg to the other. When Kai glanced over at him, she could see that the muscles in his jaw were tense.

"Um, I think I'll leave you two to get to know each other," he muttered and turned towards the truck. Kai caught his hand and dug her fingernails into the skin. Shaking loose, he walked away.

"Ben, please stay," Kai called after him.

He didn't answer. Instead, he climbed into the driver's seat and reversed down the drive. Watching him go, Kai felt like the only tree on a hill during a lightening storm. This wasn't what she'd envisioned the night before when she hummed along to the radio, choosing what to wear. After going through her entire wardrobe, she'd settled on the green dress. Although other outfits were perhaps more striking, this one made her feel most herself. And it was her lucky charm – she'd been wearing it that day at the bus stop. Had she known she would not wear the dress again, she would've chosen one she liked less. From then on, she couldn't look at it without remembering the minutes of sitting on a straight-backed chair, her fingers twisting around each other, her knuckles white. Annie sat across the table and interrogated. Kai answered best she could, aware that her credentials were falling short by a matter of worlds.

When Ben returned, he didn't come in. He honked twice from the driveway. It was the most merciful sound Kai had ever heard. She stood up and managed to walk out in a semi-dignified way, but on reaching the door, she broke into a run. Outside, she tripped over a pot plant and grazed her knee. By the time she was at the truck, she was crying hard. Ben didn't pat her leg or rub her hair. He looked straight ahead and drove.

“Why’d you leave me there?” she said eventually.

He didn’t answer. She waited. Her crying quieted down to snivels.

Then, without warning, Kai shrieked, “*Why* Ben? Answer me!”

He still didn’t say anything. She started pounding him with her fists. The truck swerved and Ben over-corrected, veering off the road. He slammed on the brakes. Kai was thrown off her seat and crashed into the dashboard. They skidded, coming to a stop a few yards away from a pine tree.

“Whaddya think you’re doing?” Ben yelled, “Do you wanna to get us killed?”

Kai lay crumpled on the floor. Then Ben saw blood smeared across her arm.

“Kai! Are you okay?” he leaned over and put his hand on her shoulder. She didn’t respond so he got out of the car and went around to her side. He tilted her face towards him and saw the blood came from a gash on her cheekbone. Her eyes were still closed.

“Oh shit. I’m sorry, Kai. Please wake up. *Please.*”

He shook her gently and she opened her eyes. But whatever Ben was hoping for, it was not was what he got. She looked straight past him as though she couldn’t see his face at all, or wouldn’t see it. Right then, there was a crunch of tires on the gravel behind the truck. Ben jerked his head up and listened. They were on a deserted country road. The engine of the other car cut out and the door slammed. The person Ben saw a couple moments later made his stomach clench. He stood up and took a deep breath.

“Everything alright folks?” the sheriff asked, “Looks like we got ourselves a situation here.”

Ben glanced around, saw the tire tracks showing how the truck had fishtailed off the road, blood on Kai’s face and the doors to the truck standing wide open.

“Yeah, we skidded a little,” he replied, trying to sound calm, “We’re both okay though.”

“That girl doesn’t look okay to me.”

Kai sat up stiffly. “I’m alright,” she said, “It looks worse than it is.”

“You care to tell me what happened?” the sheriff said to Ben.

“It was an accident. Maybe there was oil on the road.”

“Don’t look like oil to me, son.” He walked over to Kai and said, “You sure you’re alright? You need to go to a hospital?”

“No. It’s just cuts and grazes,” Kai assured him. She leaned on his arm and he helped her to the seat. She sat down heavily and rested her head on the shoulder. The cop turned back to Ben, who was standing a couple of paces away.

“I’m gonna need you to step over to my car so we can have a chat.” His tone was different to the one he’d used for Kai. Ben stood up and followed him. When they got to the car, the sheriff said, “If you been drinking, I’m gonna slap your ass in jail, boy.”

The breathalyzer test came out negative but he didn’t stop.

“I’m not gonna lie to you, son. This is all looking mighty fishy to me. How did that girl get the cut on her face? Did you have something to do with that?”

“I swear I didn’t touch her.” Ben’s voice was thin. “She knocked her cheek on the dash when we swerved. Look, I haven’t had anything to drink and I haven’t done anything wrong. Would you please leave me alone?”

“I dunno if I can do that. I think there’s something you’re not telling me.” He narrowed his eyes and sniffed.

Then Ben heard a voice from behind him. “Officer, I know it looks bad. But it was my fault. I distracted him.” Kai had brushed the hair out of her face and was holding Ben’s sweatshirt to her cheek.

“What were you doing?” he asked.

“I’d rather not say. It was boyfriend-girlfriend stuff.” She paused, looking embarrassed. “Please. I’ll take the blame for this.”

The officer looked from Kai to Ben and back again. “Car accidents are a big deal. You could’ve both been killed.” He paused and glanced once more at the tire tracks. “I’ll let you off with a warning this time, but I’m gonna take your names and keep an eye on you kids, so you better watch it.”

When they got back in the truck, both were silent. The sheriff trailed them all the way to Aunt Jane’s. Kai thought it would be better to go there rather than risk her father getting involved. They were relieved when the trooper did not follow them up the drive.

Ben switched off the engine and put his hand on Kai’s leg. “Look, I’m sorry that all happened. Please let’s just forget about it?”

Kai looked at his hand with distaste. Then she got out of the car and headed towards the front door.

“I said I’m sorry, Kai!” he called, “I made a *mistake*.”

She didn’t turn around so he got out and ran after her.

“Please, girl. Just let me talk to you.”

“Go away, Ben.”

“I promise I’ll go if you just tell me it’s not over. It’s not over, is it?”

“I don’t know.” She walked inside and closed the door.

## 10

**ONCE IN** the house, Kai cleaned her face at the kitchen sink. The water stung but she felt better when the dry blood had been washed away. All her pie dishes from the morning of baking were stacked up on the counter. She ran a sink full of soapy water and began to wash. The water was far too hot, but to her surprise, the pain felt good. It stopped her thoughts. So she ran more scalding water and held her hands under the tap as long as she could stand it. Halfway through the stack of dishes, her finger collided with a knife blade underneath the suds. That also felt good. Taking the knife in her hand, she made a small incision on her left forearm. It didn’t hurt at all. She watched the blood stain the soapsuds red and felt peaceful.

After finishing the dishes, she went upstairs to check on Aunt Jane who was dozing in the late afternoon sun. Kai crawled beneath the blanket and listened to her breathe. She too must have fallen asleep because it was dark when she woke to Ashkii’s voice calling her name from the bottom of the stairs. She slipped on her sandals and ran downstairs, trying to be as quiet as possible.

“Kai, what happened?” Ashkii asked, pointing to her cheek. “You look like you were in a fight.”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry, kid. I tripped in the kitchen and cut my cheek on the counter. I know it looks bad but it doesn’t hurt. What’s that?” She motioned to the paper in his hand.

“That boy came by the house. He was looking for you. He told me to give you this.” He held out a piece of notepaper folded in four.

“Thanks,” she said, pocketing the note. “Are you in the mood for cookies?”

“Always,” Ashkii smiled.

Having cookies with her brother made Kai feel better. She’d sort of forgotten about him over the past month. Ashkii was sitting on the counter, wholly absorbed in dunking his cookies into milk. The way he went about it – soaking his cookie for two seconds, then lifting it up and giving it a little shake – was so familiar to her. She’d watched him do this thousands of times. Shortly afterwards, Aunt Jane came down to join them and Kai had to explain again about her cheek, showing exactly where and how she’d fallen in the kitchen.

It was ten before she got to Ben’s note. As she unfolded it, she caught sight of the cut above her wrist. The scab hadn’t quite formed yet and the skin around it was red and sore-looking. *There’s my pain*, she thought, *right on my arm where I can see it*. In front of her was half a page of messy scrawl. This, Kai realised, was the first time she was seeing Ben’s handwriting. It was a mixture of capitals and small letters. His A’s had rounded tops and the tails of his y’s tapered off without curving.

*Dear Kai,*

*Today was one of the worst days of my life. I wish I’d done things different. I want you to know why I did what I did. It felt wrong to stand there and watch my mother be mean to you. Somehow I thought it would be better if I left. Like maybe she’d get nicer if I wasn’t there. I reckoned part of the reason she was being so mean was because she wanted to get at me through you. It sounds stupid now. It cut me up to see you hurt today. This is dumb but for a second I even thought you were dead and thank God you weren’t. I know you might not want to see me again. Please think about seeing me again. I was a jerk. Thinking about being without you makes me feel like there’s nothing left inside. My life is a whole lot better when it has this beautiful girl named Kai in it.*

*Love, Ben*

Kai read the letter four times over. She tucked it under her pillow before going to sleep. She would see him, yes. But not just yet.

Ben went to Kai's house a number of times in the next week. Each time she refused to see him. Sometimes she sent Ashkii to tell him to leave, other times she locked the door and ignored him while he pleaded through the windows. Once, he sat on the front step for half an hour in the rain. Not being able to see Kai made Ben realise how much his life had started to mould around her. He had so much spare time he didn't know what to do with himself. He didn't really talk to anyone – everyone was boring in comparison to her. When he wasn't working shifts at the restaurant, he was at the hideout with Bronnie. At first it was painful to go there because remnants of Kai were everywhere. She'd left some of her books on the bench and he'd find long black hairs all over the place. In the month they'd been together, she'd been bringing stuff out to the hideout to make it nicer – to 'girlify' it, as she put it. There were a couple of blankets and cushions now; she'd even put wildflowers in a jar. They wilted and died but he didn't throw them out. The place felt hollow without her chattering, but there was nowhere else for him to go. He sure as hell didn't want to be home when his mother was there. They hadn't talked since the afternoon Kai had come to the house.

Ben re-lived the day again and again in his head. Sometimes he'd have dreams that he and Kai were still together, then wake up and remember that she was shutting him out. He tried giving her flowers once, but when he went back to her house the next day they were still on the step where he'd left them. Driving home after the fifth failed visit, he decided it would be his last. *Only a fool wouldn't give up after this*, he told himself, *you gotta get it into your head that it's over – you blew it*. That night he cried. Only a few tears, but they leaked out unexpectedly onto Bronnie's fur.

## 11

**TWO DAYS** passed. Ben tried distract himself. He was back to reading Danielle Steele. On Tuesday afternoon, he went to the library hoping to run into Kai but her maroon beanbag sat empty. On the evening of the second day, he hung out with his old crew again. They went to the bar and knocked back some drinks. His friends toasted to singlehood and good riddance to the bitch 'cos he was better off without her anyways. He'd never slotted into the group so easily. Everyone seemed to enjoy having someone

around who was worse off than them. Ben got so trashed he had to spend the night on a buddy's couch. In the middle of the night he got up and, thinking he was at the hideout, peed onto the wall by the TV. The morning was agony – the base of his skull felt like it was chipping away. He missed his early morning shift and was warned that the next time it happened he'd be fired. His tips were pathetic because he was deadpan and still smelt vaguely of booze. When the clock hit four, he all but ran out. And there she was, leaning against the streetlight directly in front of the restaurant door.

The dress she wore didn't have straps. It was tight around her chest, then dropped down to just above her knees. The fabric was yellow – a shade that made him think of lemon sherbet. Her hair fell loose over her shoulders. Stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, he put his bag down and didn't say anything. She didn't talk either. For a while they stood looking at each other. He noticed that her cheek was healing. Once or twice, someone walked between them, but mostly people walked around them.

“Hey,” he said at last.

“Hey.”

“You need a ride?”

“A ride would be good. I missed my bus.”

“Is that why you came?”

“No. I missed it on purpose.”

“Okay,” he said simply, and picked up his bag, then hers, which lay on the ground next to where she stood.

On the day Ben had stopped coming to the house, Kai didn't feel the way she thought she might. When he hadn't arrived by five, she found herself listening for his car. By six, she was distracted; by eight she wondered if he'd had an accident. She didn't sleep that night. The next day he didn't come either. Her body converted itself into a listening mechanism. Where was the familiar crunch of tires? The slam of his truck door? Bronnie's barks? As night approached, she convinced herself that he'd found another girl, one of the college holiday-makers who targeted him as easy prey. She hated herself for being so stubborn. If she'd just decided to forgive him, none of this would have happened.

Lying in bed that night, Kai imagined Ben having sex with the college girl. She'd

probably taken him back to her hotel room and let him fondle her breasts. She was blonde and petite, and her thighs were skinny. Ben would be so drunk, he'd hardly know what he was doing – or worse, maybe he would. Kai felt sick. She banged her head on the bed post, trying to force the thoughts out of her head. But between bangs, an image of a nipple crept in, plump as a cranberry. Next she saw lacy underwear, the type of which she had never owned.

“Silly little girl,” she hissed to herself, ‘lying here in your grandma nightgown, panties the size of a sail. Why would he want you?’”

Then, like a cool hand on a feverish forehead, she thought of the one thing that could make it better. She tiptoed downstairs to the kitchen. Opening the drawers as quietly as she could, she searched. It was difficult because her vision was blurred by tears and the kitchen seemed exceptionally dark. She didn't dare turn on a light. Rummaging through the cooking utensils, Kai grew anxious because it wasn't where she thought it would be. Then, on the verge of giving up, her fingers closed around the fat wooden handle. She brought it out from the back of the drawer where it had been hiding. The blade looked a little dull – it hadn't been used in a while. Still, it would do the trick. Just holding the knife made her feel more in control, as if she could brandish it against the images. Kai climbed back up the stairs, cringing at every creak. Any second she expected to see her father stumble out into the hall. But she made it to her bedroom without an encounter. Once inside, she pushed her bed against the door so that no one could come in. Positioning herself in front of the window, she held out her arm so the moonlight fell across it. There was the cut of a week ago, fading away now that the scab had fallen off. This time she wanted to do something more lasting, more conspicuous. Laying the blade across her forearm, she hesitated. It had seemed easier before; the idea of pain hadn't even occurred to her then.

“C'mon, you sissy,” she whispered. Then she took a deep breath and sliced. It did hurt. It hurt a lot. But the pain was good – and she wanted more. Kai examined the cut; it was about an inch long but not very deep. So she did it again, running the knife across the same place. And again. Now it was deep and long. Blood dripped down her arm onto the floor. Laying the knife down, she dabbed at the cut with her nightdress until the bleeding subsided. Then she got under the covers and fell into a deep sleep.



Next morning, Kai awoke to the chirping of birds. Sun streamed through the window, making a rectangle of light on her quilt. She sat up. Her gaze landed on the knife which was still on the floor at the foot of the bed. Her nightie was encrusted onto the cut. Pulling it away made her bite her lip. Underneath, the wound looked painful. She smiled a small, sad smile and rubbed her thumb across its length. That day, Kai wore her cut as if it were a treasured bracelet. Sometimes she forgot about it, but then caught sight of the newly-formed scab and her heart gave a little jump. She hid it from Aunt Jane, using her right hand whenever possible.

It was around noon when she resolved to go find Ben. On Saturdays, he worked both the breakfast and lunchtime shifts. He'd be walking out of the restaurant by four. If she left in a couple of hours, there'd be enough time to catch the bus and walk down to meet him as he finished. Kai had been hanging up sheets and stopped what she was doing to think about which dress she should wear. She needed to look spectacular. If there was a college girl, she wasn't going to give up without a fight. If there wasn't, well, hopefully he'd learnt his lesson and they could get back together. By mid-afternoon, she was riding to town, wearing a yellow dress.

Kai positioned herself right outside the restaurant so he couldn't miss her. It took a while before he appeared. She had no idea what to expect and, more than once, thought of turning around and going home. But she knew she looked good and every time her nerves threatened to get the better of her, she glanced down at her arm and felt braver. Ben, on the other hand, looked terrible when he walked out. His eyelids were purplish and he had two-day-old stubble sprouting from his chin. *Did she keep him up all night?* Kai wondered, panic-stricken. Ben was taken aback when he saw her. Dropping his bag, he stood there dumbly. She didn't know what to do and wondered if she should walk away. But she wanted him so much and maybe there wasn't a college girl. So Kai stayed leaning against her lamppost and waited for him to talk.

**MAKING UP** after the fight could have been easy, but Kai was determined to get all the mileage she could out of it. At first she wouldn't believe him that there'd been no girl.

Then the friend called up and demanded that he go take care of the mess resulting from his night on the couch. Ben was grateful to have his alibi proven, and Kai was forced to drop it. She was strangely disappointed to find out that he'd been truthful.

Not long after they'd reconciled, Kai was lying next to Ben on the floor of the hideout. They'd spread a blanket on the floor and spent the afternoon reading. A fly landed on Ben's cheek and Kai shooed it away. He reached up and caught her arm, bringing it closer to his face.

"Babe, how did you get this cut?" Ben asked, "It looks nasty."

Kai was silent. All plausible excuses eluded her and she was left with nothing to say. Had she thrown out some answer, he wouldn't have given it a second thought. But now he sat up and looked at the wound more closely. It was white and a little raised – in the first stages of scarring.

"Kai, how did this happen?"

She still didn't reply.

"Why won't you answer me?"

Ben examined the cut again. "Baby, did someone do this *to* you?" he whispered. He tilted her chin up and looked into her face. She avoided his eyes. Tears were gathering on her lashes. One broke free and rolled down her cheek.

"Tell me who it was," he said, "I swear I'll go after him. Was it your father? God, the bastard won't know what hit him."

"Ben, stop it. You don't even know my dad. He'd never do something like that. No one did this to me."

"Okay, well how did it happen? Cuts like that don't just appear."

Kai hesitated. Then she drew her knees to her chest and started to cry. Ben put his arm around her.

"You can trust me, girl. You should know that by now."

She let out a shuddering sigh. "The thing is, I don't know if I can. Remember how you ran away and left me to deal with your mother on my own?"

He removed his arm. "I can't actually believe you're bringing this up again. For the millionth time, I'm sorry. It was a mistake. I wish I could take it back. I thought it would make things better. We've been over this. Will you please let it go and move on?"

For a moment she looked stunned, then her face crumpled again. Ben stood up abruptly as if he was going to walk out the door. Then he paused and turned back. With a sigh, he crouched down beside her.

“Girl, I’m sorry. Just forget I said that, okay?”

Outside it started to rain. The drops fell softly on the pine needles which released their fragrance into the air. Kai took a deep breath and wiped her nose on his shoulder.

“Are you ready to tell me what happened to your arm?” he asked.

She brushed away the tears and hiccupped twice before speaking. “Well, about five days after *that* day, it occurred to me that, despite everything, I wanted us to get back together. I was planning to tell you that when you came round again, but you didn’t show up. That night I started to have images – visions almost – of you with some girl. It made me feel sick to my gut. I didn’t know what to do. So I did this. It made me feel better, like some of the pain inside me dripped out with the blood and the pain leftover was an amount I could deal with.”

Ben didn’t know where to look. He glanced up at the roof, then at his hands, then out at the rain. Sounds seemed to magnify in the space. They could even hear a chipmunk scuffling beneath the eaves. When at last Ben spoke, his voice startled them both.

“So are you saying it’s kind of like *I* did this to you?” he said slowly.

“Not you, Ben. The situation.”

“But I caused the situation.”

“It’s not that simple. But things are better now so let’s just forget about it, okay?”

“I can’t just forget about it,” he said. “It’s not okay for you to do this, no matter how upset you are. I can’t a hundred percent promise that I’m never gonna hurt you again. I don’t want to, but what if something happens? It scares me thinking you’ll do stuff like that.”

“You say that like you foresee something happening,” she said, “Do you?”

“*No*. That’s not what I’m saying. It’s just the way life is; you never know what’s around the corner. And hey – *you* might hurt me. Actually, you already did. Those eight days were hell. But I didn’t cut myself. I found other ways to get through.”

“Yeah, like going out drinking with your friends. This isn’t *that* different, Ben.”

“Oh, really. You care to explain how that is?”

“They’re both ways of coping. Except I didn’t pee on someone’s living room wall.”

“Cheap shot, Kai. I’m surprised you pulled that one out of the bag.”

“Well, you’re making me feel like some freak. I wish you’d never seen my arm.”

“Okay, let’s just stop. I don’t want to fight with you.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t think you’re a freak. It just scares me. That thing is only three inches away from your wrist. I never want you to do that again.”

“Well, just like you can’t promise that you’ll never hurt me again, I can’t promise I’ll never do this again.”

“Oh shit, Kai. I don’t know what to do when you tell me that.” Ben stood up and paced across the floor. After a while, he turned to her and said, “Tell me when you feel like you want to do it, okay? We can try talk through it.”

Kai looked doubtful but said, “Okay. I guess I can do that.” Then she rubbed her finger across the cut and added, “It’s healing up. Like us. Ben?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

**THE FIRST** time Kai and Ben had sex, it was a weekend in the last quarter of summer. The nights were still hot but the air smelt of seasons changing. They’d planned out all the details in advance: Kai read a contraception pamphlet at the library and Ben bought a package of condoms at Walmart. Kai brought extra pillows to the hideout and stole candles from a box in Aunt Jane’s pantry labelled *Entertaining* – she doubted it had been opened in over ten years. She told her father she was sleeping at Aunt Jane’s because the old lady had flu and shouldn’t be left alone through the night. He remarked that she should be paid extra. She rolled her eyes and asked if he ever thought of anything beyond slot machine fodder. Aunt Jane was, in fact, hale and hearty. Kai just hoped Ashkii wouldn’t wander over there after she’d left with Ben.

In preparation for the night, she spent twenty-five dollars on lingerie from a boutique in town. It was an expensive place. Ordinarily Kai wouldn’t have dreamt of

setting foot in there, but they were having a summer sale and she reckoned she could afford one of the cheaper pairs. As she shopped for underwear, she imagined she was one of those women in magazines, someone who lived a leather-purse and big sunglasses kind of life. She loved the way she felt in Italian lace (which, the tag revealed later, was made in China); she liked the change-room with the candy-striped wallpaper and a brass handle on the door. Knowing she actually planned to buy something made her self-confident. She felt affirmed when the sales assistant told her she'd made a good choice and she relished the pink tissue paper that her purchases were wrapped in once they'd been paid for. The second after getting home, Kai put on her new underwear and stood on the side of the bathtub so she could see her torso in the mirror above the sink. The cut of the panties made her hips look smaller and the bra pushed up her breasts, giving some semblance of cleavage. She hopped off the tub and couldn't help grinning at herself in the mirror.

Ben went about his day as normal, but his thoughts rarely left the event scheduled to take place at the hideout later. The guys at the restaurant commented on his good mood and assumed he got lucky the night before. They were a day off but Ben didn't bother to set them straight. Working his lunchtime shift, he kept thinking, *This time tomorrow, I'll finally be able to walk into this place and hold my head up high.* On his way out to the reservation, he sang along with the radio and got Bronnie all riled up. She barked excitedly and her tail slapped against the seat. Kai was waiting at the bottom of Aunt Jane's drive. She was wearing the yellow dress and, just before he pulled off the road, the wind caught her skirt and blew it up in a Marilyn Munroe display of upper thighs. He felt a tingling in his groin. Pulling up to where she stood, he did something he'd never done before – he got out, walked around the truck and opened Kai's door.

"Why thank-you, Mr. Rhett Butler," she said.

"My pleasure, pretty lady," he replied, not having a clue who she was talking about.

Kai got into the truck and tucked her feet beneath her. When Ben got in, she glanced at his crotch and laughed. "Oh, so you *are* excited to see me."

"Nah," he joked, "I was just thinking about the game on TV last night."

"Liar," she shot back, "You didn't watch TV. I was with you, remember?"

“Oh yeah, that’s right. You’re too smart for me. How did a dumb jock like me pick up a smart, beautiful girl like you?”

“It was raining and I needed a ride.”

“Hmm. I hope you keep me for a little more than rides.”

“No, I only spend all my free time with you in case it rains again and I need to get somewhere.”

He chuckled and leaned over to kiss her shoulder, trying to keep his eyes on the road at the same time. The truck swerved into the other lane.

“Careful!” she chided, “I don’t want to die a virgin.”

“Okay, give me an hour and I’ll make sure you don’t.”

When they arrived at the hideout, it was getting dark. There was just enough light to pick their way along the path, which had grown more worn during the past seven weeks. Ben helped Kai light candles; he didn’t care about stuff like that but he knew Kai needed the trimmings. They made up a little bed on the floor and put the pillows side by side. Then Ben went out to feed Bronnie so she wouldn’t whine and interrupt things. Outside, darkness had settled. He tripped over a tree root and took a while finding Bronnie’s dish. From where he stood underneath the pines, the hideout was an aquarium of light. The windows glowed and he could see silhouettes of things on the windowsills – a half-finished bottle of rootbeer, Kai’s dictionary, a bird’s nest he’d picked up near the creek. When he returned, Kai was turned away from the doorway; her dress lay crumpled on the floor. Candlelight flickered on her skin, accentuating the curves of her back. She’d pinned up her hair so her shoulders and neck were exposed. The lingerie she wore made him think of dew-bedecked spider-webs stretched between birch branches. Ben crossed the room in two strides. Putting his hands on her hips, he brought his lips to the nape of her neck. Then he turned her around and stepped back a little so he could observe her from the front. She reached up and removed the pin from her hair, letting it fall over her shoulders.

“Do you know how beautiful you are?” he whispered, “Just looking at you would be enough.”

If Kai were to list all that she remembered about the night, one of the first things she'd mention would be the crickets. They chirped with fervour, as if there would never be another summer. During the build-up, she was free of thought and alive to sensation. She heard Ben's breathing above, next to, within the cricket-song. She felt the things he was doing to her body, felt her back arch, her own breath quicken. And then there was pain, sharp and raw. Ben didn't seem to notice that she stopped moving with him. She let him finish and only when he'd flopped down next to her did she begin to cry. They were just whimpers at first and got lost beneath his panting. But then the sobbing started. Ben didn't understand what was happening for a few seconds, then he put his arm over her and brought his face close to hers.

"Oh God. Please tell me I didn't hurt you."

He sounded far away. Kai was locked inside; only the pain and the stickiness between her legs seemed real. As the minutes passed, she calmed down and the crickets resumed their dominance of the air waves. She let Ben hold her. He fell asleep somewhere close to midnight, but she stayed awake long after, things shifting around deep inside her.

## 14

**TWO WEEKS** into August, Ben arrived home to find his mother reading the church newsletter and sipping iced tea.

"Hiya, Ben," she said in a friendly voice that he hadn't heard in a long time. Annie also hadn't called him Ben in a while. It had been 'Benjamin' since she found out about Kai. She snapped out the syllables like she wanted to get it over with. During his childhood he'd hated his full name because, when his mother used it, a hiding followed soon afterwards.

"Hi Mom," he said a little warily, and headed to the fridge for some orange juice.

"Please use a glass," she called from the other room.

"Sure thing," he called back and took another swig from the container.

He was mid-swig when he heard her chair scrape against the floor. Hurriedly replacing the juice in the fridge, he managed to get across the kitchen and open a

cupboard before she entered the room.

She glanced at him while he pretended to rummage. "If you're looking for the Kettle Chips, they're in a bag on the floor. I haven't had a chance to unpack the groceries yet."

It had been a long time since she'd bought him Kettle Chips. He was starving and the thought of salt and vinegar made him salivate. Grateful though he was, he paused momentarily to decide whether or not he was still holding a grudge. Well, he thought, if she was making an effort then it wouldn't hurt him to match it.

"Thanks Mom. That's exactly what I was looking for."

"Okay, but don't fill up on that junk. There's chicken casserole in the oven."

"Right on. I think I'm due for a home-cooked meal." He was surprised by the ease of their conversation. Had she completely forgotten about Kai?

Annie filled her glass with more iced tea. "Well Ben, there's a church community picnic this weekend if you feel like coming along. I know there'd be plenty of folks who'd be glad to see you."

"Um, no thanks, Mom. You know I gave up those things a long time ago."

"I thought you might want to think about giving it another chance. You've changed; the congregation's changed. There's lots more young people around these days."

"You know how I feel. I haven't changed my mind."

Annie sighed and looked into her tea.

"I wasn't going to bring this up but as your mother, I think it's my place. You've been drifting lately. You need an anchor."

"What do you mean?" Ben asked suspiciously.

"You've been hanging out with that girl long enough. I was worried at first but then I realised it was something you needed to get out of your system. Now it's time for you to come back to your roots. And you know, I've seen some pretty girls going to church lately."

"Here we go again. It's not the Middle Ages, Mom; they don't have arranged marriages anymore. I know you'd love to see me settled with some nice church girl, but it ain't gonna happen." The kitchen was suddenly too small. He felt like a bee caught in a



glass jar. The chips forgotten, he walked out the screen door.

“You better not leave,” Annie yelled after him, “I spent all afternoon making that casserole.”

Ben wasn't planning to leave. He was hungry enough to endure his mother's pain-in-the-ass comments, but needed some air before facing her again. It wasn't quite dark yet. He started down the driveway, and tried to calm himself by listening to the different sounds. A dog barked in the distance; there was some scuffling in the long grass on the edge on the drive. He turned his attention to his own footsteps, measured and even in their fall. Now and then a mosquito would whine near his ear and he swatted the air aggressively. When he got towards the end of the drive, he noticed that the arrow on the postbox was up. He undid the latch. There were a few things inside, mostly flyers. His mother must have forgotten to check the post that morning – she was usually vigilant about bringing in the mail. It was the one chore that she didn't nag him about doing. He flipped idly through the stack. At the bottom of pile was a different kind of envelope – better quality paper. He brought it close to his face and squinted in the darkness, trying to make out the name on the front. To his surprise, it read 'Mr. Benjamin O'Connor' printed in neat block letters beneath the stamps. There was no return address on the back. He couldn't remember having received a letter since he was in fourth grade and his grandma in Florida sent him five dollars for his birthday. Had there been enough light, he would've ripped the envelope open right there. But instead, he walked back to the house, much faster now, and sat on the porch where light from the living room windows could spill onto the page.

*Dear Ben,*

*This is the twentieth letter. I told myself if I didn't hear back from you by letter fifteen, I'd stop writing altogether. Fifteen came and went, and, of course, no word. So I held out all summer and fall. Then winter came and with it, memories of the time you were born. You came to us two days after Christmas. We hadn't done much to mark the season. There was no tree. All eyes were on your mother. Man, she was big. While you were being*

*born, I walked through the streets to calm down a little. It started to snow, making the tired world new again. Now I can't see it snow without thinking of the night my son showed up. So around Christmastime I found myself writing letter sixteen. Now here it is letter twenty.*

*I was never much of a letter writer. Damn, I probably only wrote two letters in my life before moving away. Now I find myself looking forward to it, if you can believe that. But it ain't much fun writing to someone who won't write back. I've thought up a lot of excuses for you, son. Best case scenario is that somehow I got the address wrong, but that's doubtful – I used to live in that house. Worse case, and probably the likeliest, you want me to quit trying to reach you. So that's what I'm gonna do, much as it breaks my heart.*

*I hope life is giving you what you want. You had big dreams when you were a kid. Maybe one of these days I'll see you on TV.*

*Yours,*

*Dad.*

Ben sat still for a long time. Then he picked up the letter again. When he finished reading it through the second time, he leaned back in his chair and watched a moth crawling up the window. The moth had made it almost to the top when Annie called him for dinner. He stood up and went inside, taking the letter with him. There were two places set at the table. He could tell which was hers because the fat-free salad dressing stood next to the placemat. Annie was still in the kitchen getting dinner out of the oven. He put the letter on her plate and waited.

"Maybe next time you could offer to help," she said, as she walked into the dining room carrying the casserole.

"Yeah, maybe," said Ben.

She put the dish in the middle of the table and sat down. Then she noticed the letter. Ben watched her face carefully as she scanned the first few sentences. Her expression hardly changed. Had he not been looking for it, he might have missed a slight

tightening of the lips, a miniscule flare of the nostrils.

“What happened to the other nineteen, Mom?”

She continued to stare down at the page. It had all gone very quiet and Ben could hear his own breathing. A clock ticked somewhere in the house and the kitchen tap dripped steadily. Annie’s fingers curled round the edge of the table. Ben noticed her knuckles were white. Then, in one quick jerk, she snatched the paper and scrunched it into a ball. Leaving it on the plate, she pushed her chair back violently and walked out of the room.

The chicken casserole was still on the table, untouched, the next morning.

## 15

**T**HE PLAN was for Kai to meet Ben outside the Old Tree Emporium at five. She could tell something had happened. His voice sounded strange on the phone and he snapped at her when she asked what was wrong. Kai prepared herself for the side of Ben she hated most. When he was gruff and silent, she thought about knives. He wasn’t doing anything specifically wrong so if she tried to bring it up there was nothing she could accuse him of. When he didn’t say anything, she babbled about nothing in particular. Eventually she’d fall silent too and begin twisting a piece of hair around her finger again and again until it left a red groove in her skin. She’d twist until the familiar lump began to form in her throat, then she’d start to snivel quietly. Ben would sigh – deep, throaty sighs that told her she was a drain on his life. Both knew what was coming. When the sobs arrived, Bronnie tried to crawl under the seat. Now Ben had broken her and he had to fix her again.

Before leaving for the Old Tree Emporium, Kai packed extra tissues just in case. She was ten minutes late. Ben was sitting in the truck, waiting. When he saw her coming, he got out and walked towards her. She watched him, trying to pick up clues of his mood. Two steps away, he opened his arms. The hug was almost fierce. He held her as if she were an oak tree and he, a man caught in a hurricane. *Good grief*, she thought, *it’s gotta be something bad*. She hugged him back until her arm muscles ached. Even when her grip relaxed, he didn’t let go. A boy on a bicycle rode by and whistled at them. Ben

pulled away abruptly and shouted, "Fuck off!" down the street. Kai wished she could poke a stick into the boy's spokes. She followed Ben to the truck and waited until they were inside to talk.

"Do you wanna tell me what happened?" she asked.

"Let's get to the hideout first," he said and turned on the radio.

His hand found hers and held it tightly. They didn't say anything. Kai didn't mind though. His thumb rubbed hers and every so often, he'd squeeze and she'd squeeze back.

Once at the hideout, the Indian summer evening was so lovely, they sat outside despite the mosquitoes. The last rays of sun shone through the branches, making dappled pools of light on the pine needle floor. Ben was lying on the ground, his head in Kai's lap. He kept taking abbreviated breaths as if he were going to say something, then thought better of it. Just when Kai was on the verge of speaking herself, Ben said, "You know, babe, sometimes I think you're the only one in this whole world I can trust."

Her heart surged. This was what she wanted. But she said, "There are other people you can trust. You just don't know it yet."

"I dunno. Most of the time it seems like people are so screwed up." He was silent for a long time after that.

Kai noticed a shadow on his knee. When it reached the hem of his shorts, she decided it was time. "Ben, I know something happened. Do you want to tell me what it was?"

"Did you love your mother?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered, "There was always love but often after she left, there were other feelings on top of it."

"I don't know if I have any love left. For my mom, I mean. The last of it burned up last night. I used to feel sorry for her - since my dad left and all that. But I gotta say, there are times when I think, damn it, I don't blame him."

"It seems like she takes her anger towards him out on you."

"She does. And I've had enough of it. All that stuff between them - it had nothing to do with me. They screwed up their *own* lives. They didn't have to screw mine up too."

"What happened last night?"

"I got a letter from my dad."

“What did it say?”

“You can read it.” He rummaged in his pocket and brought out the letter. It looked like it had ridden around in his shorts for years.

Kai took her time reading, going over some sentences twice and examining the handwriting. Ben watched her face while she read, observing her eyes dart from left to right. When at last she looked up, her expression showed all the things his mother’s had lacked the night before.

“God, Ben. What happened to the others? Did she take them?”

“She must have. All these years – and I thought he was the biggest bastard on the planet.”

“So your mom knows about this one?” She waved the letter.

“Yeah, I put it on her plate at dinner.”

“What did she do?”

“Just left. She was pissed.”

“*She* was pissed?”

“Yeah, she was shaking, she was so mad.”

“She should have been begging for forgiveness,” Kai said.

“She’d never do that. She probably doesn’t think she’s done anything wrong.”

“Was she always so mean or did it start when your dad left?”

“Definitely after he left,” Ben said, “She was nice before that. She was fun. She let me do stuff like change gears in her car while she drove, and camp out by the creek with a walkie talkie. My friends always liked coming to our house. They knew they’d get good food at the O’Connors. When I was in third grade or somewhere round there, I went through a joke phase and I’d tell her all the jokes I made up. She’d laugh her head off.”

“It sounds like she was a completely different person. Did she go to church then?”

“No. The church stuff happened about a month after my dad walked out. At first I was glad she started going because before that she was a mess. She cried for days and she didn’t wash her hair or get out of her PJs. The house got disgusting – I tried to clean up best I could but I was only eleven. And she wanted me to be with her all the time.”

“Geez, that sounds horrible – so unfair.” Kai gave his shoulder a supportive squeeze.

“Yeah, it was bad. So when this Christian friend of hers came over one day and started pushing the church thing, I told Mom I’d go with her if she gave it a try. It took a lot of persuading but eventually she had a shower and I picked out a dress for her to wear and we went. We were half an hour late because she started crying again in the car and we had to pull over.”

“Did she like church right away?”

“Yeah, in fact she went back to the evening service that night. Next day, she cleaned the whole house and threw out all my dad’s leftover stuff – oh, and she told me to make her a big fire in the back yard, then she burnt a whole lot of papers. I didn’t ask what they were.”

“Weren’t you curious?” Kai asked.

“Kind of, but not enough to risk opening the floodgates again.”

“And then what happened? Did she get nicer?”

“Well, sort of. But she changed a lot. She was stricter than before and didn’t let me hang out with some of my old friends. And I had to go to Sunday school, which I kind of liked in the beginning. I liked the stories and they gave us chocolate cookies. But I think most of all I was just glad that Mom didn’t cry anymore.”

“And what about your dad? Did he just disappear?”

“Pretty much,” Ben said, “He promised he would see me each year but then ... well, at least now I know he tried. I remember the last time we saw each other. He’d moved into Marcy’s house by then – that was the woman. When he came round to pick me up, he honked and stayed in the car. I went out quick as I could so Mom wouldn’t have the chance to run out and start yelling. We drove to the Flowage and went fishing for bass. He brought some beers and let me have a couple. Those were the first whole beers I ever had. Didn’t like them much but I kept on drinking anyway.”

“What did your dad tell you about Marcy?”

“Not much. Just said that sometimes things happen and you don’t know why but you gotta go with them.”

“Well, that’s as good an answer as any, I guess,” Kai said.

“Not really – at least I don’t think so. I still think he’s a bastard for going. You don’t walk out on your family, no matter who comes along. And Marcy wasn’t that great

of a person anyway. I met her once – she was kinda loud. Dad didn't talk much around her. Her jeans were tight and she wore a shirt that said, *A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle*. Man, I couldn't figure that one out. I thought about it so hard. Finally I asked Mom. She laughed and said, 'I need one of those.' I sure as hell didn't tell her where I saw it."

"Ha, Aunt Jane had a bumper sticker with that slogan on her car." Kai was quiet for a moment, feminist musings edging into her thoughts. Then she snuffed them out. Ben's head was comfortably heavy in her lap. It felt good to be needed.

"So, where did your dad go to?" she asked.

"Moved out to Colorado with Marcy. Her old man passed and left her a place near Aspen. She wanted to open a B&B and took my dad with her to help get it up and running. She said she was gonna call it *The Prancing Doe* or something dumb like that."

"That is dumb," Kai agreed.

It was getting darker now. The branches looked like black cut-outs against the sky. They'd been there for so long, Kai started to imagine them each as trees. She'd be a little Balsam Fir, her branches fragrant, stretching far. Ben would be a White Pine, growing tall and straight toward the sky. She didn't want to leave. Whenever Ben shifted his position, she was afraid he'd suggest they go.

"So what you gonna do, Ben?" she asked, "Are you gonna write back?"

"I dunno. At first I thought yeah, but then I got to thinking about the way he screwed up two lives so he could be with that woman. And then he ducked."

"He chose his happiness over yours."

"Yeah, and the weird part is I don't even think Marcy made him that happy. The time I met her, she was trying to get Dad to lose weight and buy new clothes. She said his old ones made him look like a hillbilly. He didn't even stand up to her. Just let her walk on him like that. By the time we went to the Flowage, he was drinking lite beer and wearing a T-shirt that said *Bermuda Blues*. She musta picked that out for him. He'd never've chosen that for himself. And he sure as hell never went to Bermuda."

"I wonder what he saw in her," she said.

"Yeah, I've often wondered that. She was a psychologist. Maybe that had something to do with it. After she met him, she stopped working. Sometimes I'd see her

with her friends in *Caribou's Coffee* on my way home from school.”

“I know *Caribou's*. I tried to get a job there once.”

“I hate that place. It's gossip-central in this town.” He sat up and shook the pine-needles from his shirt, then leaned over and kissed her forehead. “You're a good friend to me, girl. You wanna go inside? I'm being munched alive out here.” He stood up and reached for her hand. “I hope you're hungry. I brought leftover quiche from the restaurant.”

## 16

**THE QUICHE** was good. Kai could taste dill and black pepper. Ben didn't have much. He seemed pleased to see her eat. The gas lamp cast big shadows on the walls. She looked like a goblin in her shadow – a goblin devouring a small village child. Tonight the hut was somewhere between cosy and eerie. With Ben it was cosy, but if he wasn't there she might be frightened out in the woods like this. Under the shroud of branches, the darkness was deep and there were some scuffling sounds close to the shelter. A couple of times, Bronnie lifted her head off her paws, suddenly alert. Then Ben put his hand on her fur and admonished her gently. Kai finished eating and lay back on the floor, putting a pillow behind her head. It felt good to have her belly stretched out. Ben settled down beside her and made animal shadows on the wall. He was particularly skilled at this – it was a talent gleaned from boy scouts. Kai's favourite was Mr Kangaroo with the humungous willy, though she also liked Mr Ostrich who could fluff up his feathers. The third was Ferocious Marcy-eater whose species wasn't quite clear.

“Do you think my willy is handsome?” Mr Kangaroo asked Kai in a tone that demanded ‘yes’.

“Handsome isn't quite the word I would use,” she replied.

“What word *would* you use?”

“Um, large. And a bit scary.”

“Not sexy and delicious?”

“Nope.”

“What?” Mr Kangaroo was hurt. “But he's a prize specimen, famous among



kangaroo-women.”

“Well, maybe it’s because I’m not a kangaroo woman,” Kai suggested.

“Okay, how ’bout my boy Ben’s prize, humungous willy?”

“Also a little scary.”

“You’re teasing.”

“No, I’m being serious. It can be pretty scary, especially when it gets like a broom handle or something.”

Mr. Kangaroo vanished and Ben propped himself up on his elbow so he could look at her face.

“You find my penis scary?”

“Yuck. Please don’t use that word. I hate that word.”

“What word? Penis?”

“*Don’t*,” she said.

“C’mon. It’s a perfectly nice word. In fact it’s a great word. Say it with me: P-ee-nis. C’mon baby – say it.”

“I’m not kidding. I really hate it.”

“Why?” he asked.

“I dunno. I guess I don’t like the sounds in it. Especially ‘nis’.”

“But do you like *my* penis?”

“Can you please, please, please use a different word.”

“You’re a funny girl.” He ruffled her hair. “Okay. I’ll tell you what. You get to name him, okay? Then we can talk about him without your delicate senses or whatever being offended.”

She thought for a moment. “Okay. I like that. How ’bout Mr. Pickle?”

“Absolutely not. My manhood is *not* green and knobbly.”

“Fine. How ’bout Mr. Sausage?”

“Babe, you’re missing the point. This,” he said, and pulled her hand down to his shorts, “is a warrior. He needs a warrior name.” He paused, then added, “He knows we’re talking about him. Maybe we should call him Hercules.”

“How ’bout Ferdinand?” she offered.

“That’s the gayest name I’ve ever heard. How ’bout Braveheart?”

“Pathetic. How 'bout Sebastian?”

“Also gay. Give me a *little* credit here – at least choose something masculine, like Arnold.” He looked at her hopefully.

“As in Schwarzenegger? Forget it. Maybe something simple ... like James.”

“Only if it's short for James Bond.”

She figured it was the closest they'd get to a compromise. “Alright. But *I'm* not calling him James Bond.”

Ben nodded, satisfied. “Fine. I'll add Bond in my head then. By the way, I haven't forgotten about what you told Mr. Kangaroo. You're not going to wriggle out of this one. Why don't you find James sexy?”

“I dunno,” she answered, “I find the rest of you sexy – very. Just not your middle part. Or any guy's middle part for that matter. The Jameses of the world seem kinda tacked on, like an afterthought, y'know?”

“I could get offended for the whole male population.”

“Don't get offended.”

“I'm kidding. I actually kind of agree with you. Women are much more beautiful, especially when they're naked. Which is why,” he said, starting to unbutton her shirt, “we should get you naked quick as possible.”

They hadn't had sex since the first time and Ben was anxious to try it again. But Kai's reaction made him think twice. She wouldn't talk to him after they did it; just cried and turned towards the wall. He didn't know whether he'd done something wrong or whether it was a normal girl's reaction to losing virginity – or if it was just Kai. In the beginning of the relationship, things were simple. They seemed to understand each other without trying. But now it was hard. Ever since the incident with his mother, he couldn't predict what would happen in Kai's head. They'd be getting along just fine, then he'd make a wrong turn and everything would change.

But tonight the space between them felt good. She listened to what he said. Each of his words sunk deep into her. So the words kept coming. With her as witness, remembering didn't hurt so much. In the years since his dad left, he'd managed, for the most part, to avoid the memories. Sometimes when he was younger, fragments of that

nauseating summer would force themselves into his thoughts and he'd have to do something drastic to force them back out. One year he had a discman with heavy metal blaring constantly in his ears so there'd be no room for thinking. That was the year he gave up church. Not long after, a friend's dog had puppies and Ben agreed to take one. He found that Bronnie was more effective than industrial rock, so he traded the discman for the dog. By the time Kai came along, Bronnie had been with him for almost two years. Had Bronnie not approved of her, the relationship would have stood little chance. Their affection for each other vouched for more, in Ben's eyes, than perhaps was reasonable. On this night, Ben forgot his tattered family and the day's discontent, and found himself thinking instead, *I got my woman and my dog – what more could a guy want?* With Kai lying next to him, he felt an overwhelming desire to make her feel pleasure, to let it fill up every crevice and hollow so she could go swimming around in it.

17

**SO BEGAN** what Kai dubbed *The Era of the Fireflies*. When Ben asked why fireflies, she shrugged and said, "I dunno. I guess that's what I feel like – a little gray insect most of the day and at night you turn on the light in me." She began to spend all of her time waiting for the moment when she heard Ben's truck in the late afternoon.

Ben usually fell asleep after sex. Lying next to him, Kai felt peaceful. When his mind hibernated, leaving the rest of him to her – that's when she felt the safest, protected from all the bad things that had ever happened or would ever happen to her. He slept like a child, arms folded against his chest. He got hot during the night and the place where his hair met his forehead grew moist, then he kicked back the covers and settled down again. Kai used these times to think.

She and Aunt Jane were getting along better now. They hadn't discussed Ben since the first day but it was clear that Kai was still seeing him. All Jane had to do was glance out of her window around five o'clock and she'd catch sight of Kai climbing into the truck which waited for her like some rusted Cinderella pumpkin. They seemed to have come to an unspoken agreement: neither mentioned Ben and life in the house went on pleasantly as before. If Jane was perturbed by Kai's relationship, she hid it well.

Ashkii reacted similarly. His only acknowledgement of Ben was to yell, "That boy's here!" when he heard the truck before she did. Only once did he comment further. It was a rainy Sunday afternoon and they were playing cards on the couch. Kai had made popcorn and sweet tea. Just as Ashkii was about to win the game, they both heard the truck. Kai jumped up immediately and started to gather her things. Ashkii watched while she through stuff into a bag.

"Okay, kid, I'm off," she called over her shoulder.

"Why you always gotta go, Kai?" he asked quietly as she put her hand on the doorknob.

She turned around and met his eyes, which held her steadily in their gaze. For the first time, Kai felt guilt nibble at the edge of her conscience. All she could think of to say was, "When you find a girl, you'll understand." And with that she was gone, into the rain, then into the warmth of Ben's truck.

Around town, people started to expect Ben and Kai together. At the library, Ben was now regarded as a regular. On his seventh visit, the librarian told him to call her Miss P like Kai did. Miss P began to take an active interest in what he was reading, how he enjoyed it, what he planned to read next and when he was applying to college. Truth be told, unless Kai read aloud to him, which she did now and then, Ben preferred to browse through National Geographics. They spent Tuesday afternoons in her alcove. Ben had changed his shifts to correspond with her afternoon off. He dragged a beanbag chair from the children's section and placed it opposite hers. For leaving-time, they developed a number of tactics to avoid drawn-out conversations at the loans desk. Most commonly, they'd have lost track of time and need to get to the chemist/copier/bait store/butcher shop before it closed at five. Else they were late to meet friends in Woodruff (neither of them knew anyone in Woodruff), or Kai was feeling ill (she'd give Miss P a knowing look which insinuated it was that time of the month). One of them would start with an A.S. (Avoidance Strategy) and the other would chime in, backing up the story so convincingly, it was as if they'd rehearsed it beforehand.

One week in late August, Kai took out a book that surprised Miss P – it was a learner's manual for rules of the road. Ben was teaching her to drive. Come weekends,

they went out to the back-country roads where a car would pass by maybe twice a day. Kai waited all week for these lessons. Ben doubted there was anyone in the state with less of a knack for driving than Kai, and often, after she had just stalled for the fifteenth time, he had an aching desire to tell her this. The truck, however, was not the kindest learning vehicle. It was an old Ford – a stick-shift with stubborn gears. To show how her feet should work, Ben made diagrams with vigorously-drawn arrows. Kai was attentive, nodding in all the right places when he explained things, but when she actually got into the driver's seat, the theory failed her. Ben almost gave up when she reversed into a tree. They'd had an unusually good lesson and Kai was finally getting the hang of coming to a complete stop at intersections, switching to neutral, then switching back to first and continuing along her wobbly way. In light of her progress, Ben said she could try going backwards. With his hand cupping over hers on the gearstick, he guided her into reverse and she felt the mechanism click satisfyingly into place. Without any prompting, she stepped lightly on the accelerator as she released the clutch. The truck rolled grumpily back.

“Nice work, baby!” Ben said.

Kai smiled. Feeling triumphant, she stepped harder on the pedal. They gathered speed. Ben's expression changed.

“Look where you're going,” he warned. She didn't appear to hear him – her gaze stayed fixed in front of her. They were approaching a slope.

“The brake!” he said, “Put your foot on the brake!”

“I can't find it,” she wailed.

Ben fumbled for the handbrake and yanked it up just as she went off the road. Though it slowed them down, it didn't stop the truck's rear end from plowing into a tree.

“THAT IS IT!” Ben said, slamming his hand on the dashboard. “You're riding buses for the rest of your life.” He got out to check the bumper. Fortunately Kai had chosen a slender birch that left no serious damage beyond a mildly conspicuous dent towards the left-hand side.

They skipped the next weekend, and the next. The leaves were beginning to turn when Kai next got into the driver's seat. She was reluctant and Ben had to use a variety of tactics to coax her into trying it again, the most effective being to show her some of the

dents that he'd made during his first year as a driver. Although she pretended to be calm, Ben saw her hand quiver a little when she reached for the gearstick. He made up his mind to be encouraging. The first time she stalled, he lied and said that he'd done the same thing that very morning – the truck was becoming obstinate in its old age and needed more patience. She nodded gravely and managed to get going with the next try. He bestowed lavish praise. They tactfully avoided reverse.

After the driving lesson, Kai took Ben home to Aunt Jane's. The kitchen tap was broken and, when she mentioned it, Ben suggested he take a look before they call a plumber. Kai hesitated. Doing a quick tally of pros and cons, she came to the conclusion that Ben would have to meet Jane at some point so it might as well be now. Things could go either way: Jane seemed to have accepted Ben as a somewhat lasting fixture, however, she hadn't been forewarned of his visit and didn't take well to surprises. Then, of course, there was her inconvenient feminist agenda which might flare up. Kai was less concerned about Ben liking Jane – though granted, if Jane was in an acidic mood, she wasn't pleasant. She decided that while Ben looked at the tap, she'd go upstairs and warn Jane they had a visitor. It might help that he was there on an errand of mercy. The tap had caused them both considerable inconvenience. They'd been filling up jugs in the bathroom and keeping them on standby at the kitchen sink, boiling water on the stove for dishes.

Jane's reaction was not what Kai had anticipated.

"It's about time," she said, heaving herself out of the rocking chair by the window. "I want to see this young man."

Kai was surprised when, instead of heading to the stairs, Jane went into the bathroom and started dusting rouge onto her cheeks.

"You never know," she said in answer to Kai's quizzical expression. "I might want to steal him away from you."

**WHEN THEY** got downstairs, Ben had dismantled the tap and the parts were lined up neatly on the counter. His sleeves were rolled above the elbows and his hair was tousled.

His forearms looked strong and his hands, capable. The late afternoon sun shone through the window above the sink and illuminated the left side of his body. A kitchen-Jesus, Kai thought. She was glad Ben looked like this on the day he met Aunt Jane. He was one of those people who looked better after a day of activity rather than immediately following a shower and a shave. Ben caught sight of Jane behind her and gave one of his smiles – the kind that started with a crinkling of the eyes and gradually spread to the rest of his face, deepening his dimples. These smiles were rare and Kai was glad he'd saved one.

"Aunt Jane," he said simply, "I'm Benjamin O'Connor."

"Benjamin O'Connor. Hmmm," Jane rolled his name around in her mouth as if it were a toffee. "We meet at last."

"Yeah. It's been a long time coming."

"Indeed it has. And here you are, in our hour of need, to fix the offending kitchen tap. A perfect knight errant of the modern age. So Don Quixote, when you're not rescuing distressed maidens, what are you doing?"

Ben glanced briefly at Kai, who gave a little nod.

Clearing his throat, Ben said, "I, uh, work at a restaurant in town." His tone was almost questioning, as though he was testing out an answer and if it didn't work, he'd try another.

"Pray tell, which one?"

"Um, Minocqua Bay Café."

"Oh thank *God*. I was afraid you'd say Bosaki's, and then for sure I'd have to kick you out of the house."

"Why's that?" Ben asked.

"Oh, I had a run-in with Bosaki sixty years ago. The rift hasn't quite healed."

Kai snorted. "You were twelve sixty years ago."

"That's right," said Aunt Jane. "My family was up here on vacation. My sister and I went skinny-dipping and George Bosaki hid our clothes. That's the kind of thing that isn't easily forgotten, or forgiven." Turning to Ben she said, "Minocqua Bay Café, however, is a perfectly lovely establishment. As I remember, they used to have a rather delectable Wisconsin cheddar and pickle relish sandwich on local rye."

Ben laughed. "Yep, they still have that. An old favourite. I can't figure out why

people like it so much. I mean, cheddar and *pickle relish*?”

“We’re all traditionalists at heart, my boy. The old favourites remain old favourites for a reason. Once you’ve hit on a winning combination, best to stick with it, eh?” She winked at him, then peered doubtfully at the parts on the counter. “So, have you fixed my tap?”

“Well, not yet,” Ben answered, “But I know what the problem is. See, you’ve got old plumbing and -- ”

Aunt Jane interrupted with a snort and said under her breath, “In more ways than one, my dear.”

Ben pretended not to hear and continued with his diagnosis. “A whole lot of metal filings have collected at the mouth of the faucet and blocked off the water flow. Give me five minutes and I’ll figure it out.” He turned back to the counter and, with the air of a surgeon, began to scrape out metallic gunk from the dismantled tap onto a paper towel.

“And of course you’re staying for dinner,” Jane asserted.

Ben looked at Kai.

“Um, Ben probably has to go,” Kai said quickly.

“How ’bout you let Ben decide for himself?” Jane said. Turning to Ben, she asked, “Has Kai cooked for you yet?”

He shook his head.

“You’ll like her even more after she’s fed you. I guarantee it.” There was a pause and she tapped her foot impatiently. “Well, are you staying?”

“I guess I could,” Ben said slowly.

Jane faced Kai triumphantly. “Make your spinach crêpes. He’ll like those.”

Commissioned to cook, Kai took control. “No. That’s too much work. I’ll make something simple.” What she really wanted was a low-risk dish. A coconut-chicken soup perhaps, with a green salad and some of Jane’s sourdough bread. Jane rarely cooked anymore but she did bake bread every week. Her sourdough put store-bought to shame.

Jane went into the pantry and emerged some minutes later with a dusty bottle of red wine. “A friendly little zinfandel from Sonoma,” she said, “I’ve been waiting to open it.” Taking out three glasses, she poured generously into each one, then ushered Ben onto the porch, saying the cook needed solitude for her masterpiece.



“No pressure then,” Kai remarked wryly as they went out the door.

Sipping deeply from her glass, she got to work chopping vegetables. She could hear snatches of conversation from the porch. Regularly, Jane’s head-thrown-back laugh would boom out, Ben’s chuckle following it. Now and then she heard the clink of the wine bottle refilling a glass. The laughing grew louder as the clinks increased. Kai too, was beginning to feel the wine’s effects. A sense of wholeness settled on her, along with which came relief that the evening had turned out the way it had. Indeed, there was something pleasurable about knowing that Ben chatted with Jane on the porch. It seemed right.

Half an hour later, she tasted the soup she’d made and decided it needed more garlic. As she reached for the cloves, she remembered a dream she’d had three months before. It contained her mother. And they’d been cooking right here in this kitchen. Kai rarely thought about her mother. It had been a process of systematic forgetting. When she was in her early teens, her mother was constantly on her mind – sometimes she romanticised her, sometimes hated her. On her fifteenth birthday, Kai made a resolution. She stuck to it vigilantly. Every time a memory of her mother entered her head, she’d replace it with another, usually of Jane. Three years later, her mind instinctively veered away from mother-thoughts. So she was surprised when her dream resurfaced. She tiptoed around the memories, ripping lettuce as she did.

## 19

**FAITH HAWKIN** left the spring after her son was born. There had been a fight. Dishes were thrown and voices, raised. A knife was brought out and held in Faith’s trembling hand. The incision she made on her left forearm was an inch long. Solomon Hawkin cried for both of them. His pleadings skated like water-bugs across her surface, failing to penetrate. Upstairs, five-year-old Kai had climbed into the baby-crib and was holding her brother, pressing her hands over his ears. She sang a lullaby, as much to herself as to him. The yelling went on for a while and then there was silence. Kai loosened her hold on Ashkii’s ears. A moment later, she heard footsteps coming hurriedly up the stairs and her mother appeared in the doorway. She flew around the room, throwing things into a bag

which sat open on the unmade bed. In went clothes from where they lay jumbled on the floor. Her hairbrush followed, then a handful of underwear, the bedside clock and her nightdress.

“Where are you going, Mommy?” Kai asked. Her question was never answered, at least not by her mother. The zip broke as Faith tried to force the bag closed, so she grabbed some of Ashkii’s nappy pins to use instead. When the last pin was in, she came over to the crib and leaned over so her forehead touched Kai’s.

“I’ll come back,” she said, sounding unconvinced. Then she reached over to pick up Ashkii. As she did, Kai saw the red line on the inside of her forearm.

“Did Daddy do that?” Kai pointed to the mark.

“No. Mommy did.” Faith kissed the baby’s forehead and placed him back in Kai’s lap. “You take care of him for me, okay?”

Kai nodded solemnly. Only when her mother had walked from the room, did she begin to wail. Ashkii started to cry too and Faith, biting the inside of her cheeks, ran out the backdoor. That afternoon, Kai looked for her mother in the woods. She had an idea that Faith was just hiding out, perhaps near the creek. She’d found her there once before – the time when Ashkii wouldn’t stop crying from an ear infection and Faith, exhausted, had almost burnt the house down by forgetting a pan of oil on the stove. She beat out the flames, put the baby in his crib and took off. Kai found her half an hour later. She caught sight of her mother’s red dress between the trees, tiptoed up to where she crouched and laid a hand on her shoulder. Faith whipped around, fierce-eyed. When she saw it was Kai, her face softened. She didn’t say anything, just put her head back in her hands. She was only twenty two at the time. She’d frequently escape to the woods, sometimes for an hour, sometimes a whole afternoon. She’d leave when the children were napping. A number of times, Kai had woken to her little brother’s cries and found that the two of them were alone in the house. Faith had always come back. When she returned, she’d be refreshed, sing happy songs and tell stories about the animals she’d seen while she was away. Once, she brought Kai a bird’s nest. Inside it, she’d placed a little white pebble that looked like an egg.

Solomon Hawkin worked hard for his wife. Before she left, he only drank on weekends. He was a good bit older than she was – five years. For him, it had always and

only been Faith. He could remember when she first came to the reservation, a little girl of seven, with ribbons in her hair and shiny maryjanes which were stolen soon afterwards. Her mother was a Cherokee and even as a child, Faith had cheekbones that cast shadows. The schoolhouse for the little ones was next door to his own. During lunch break, he would leave her gifts – a tiny birchbark canoe with a lollipop in its belly, an acorn necklace, a rabbit he'd whittled from a pine log. Solomon could make anything. He had clever hands. He'd watch from behind the schoolhouse as Faith discovered his offerings. She smiled secretively, her black eyes dancing. She knew she was being wooed. He gave her piggy-back rides on the way home from school and everyone, from the youngest child to the headmaster, knew that Solomon Hawkin was sweet on Faith. It was no surprise when, ten years later, Faith's belly began to swell with Solomon's child. They were married quickly and Kai was born in the winter on a night when the sky was clear and the moon round as a newly polished nickel.

When news came of Faith's death, Solomon stayed drunk for two months. His hair got shaggy and his eyes, bloodshot. He stopped working. The children could hear him talking to her in the nighttimes, begging and making promises. Ashkii was five and didn't know who Faith was. Kai told him that their mother had been a river-spirit who took the form of a dragonfly. Whenever he saw a dragonfly, she said, he should know it was likely Faith coming to visit. Faith had died from a disease called Leukaemia. She'd been with her mother's people in North Carolina. On the night they heard, Kai left the house with the pinewood rabbit that her mother had once given her. Going to the place by the creek where she'd found Faith in her red dress, she dug a hole and buried the rabbit. Some years later, she looked up Leukaemia at the library. *Cancer*, the book said, *When bone marrow makes too many white blood cells. Family members can donate marrow, and if it's a good match, chances of recovery drastically improve.* Kai knew she would've been the right match.

**NEITHER BEN** nor Aunt Jane could understand why Kai was so sad during dinner. It was clear she'd been crying. She told them it was from cutting onions. Jane tried to keep

conversation going by telling stories of her childhood summers. They were tales that Kai would have enjoyed, had she not been distracted. She hardly ate anything and her only contribution to the conversation was to comment that the soup needed more garlic. Ben and Jane assured her it was delicious, even though, had she been in one of her franker moods, Jane would have remarked that it was not one of Kai's best. When Ben left, he asked Kai to walk out with him to the truck. She shrugged, but let him lead her outside. Away from earshot of the kitchen, Ben turned to Kai and put his hands on her shoulders.

"What happened, girl? Something's wrong."

"Nothing," she muttered, focusing on the outline of her shoes in the moonlight.

"That's not true. When we went onto the porch you were fine. Then an hour later, I'd swear your mother died or something."

She snapped her head up and glared at him, then turned and walked back towards the house.

"What? What did I say wrong?" Ben didn't know what had happened to Kai's mother. He just knew she wasn't around. He didn't even know her name. Once, he had briefly considered the symmetry of their situations but had since forgotten about it. Now he ran up and caught Kai's arm. "Look, I'm sorry. I just blurted that out. It had nothing to do with anything."

"For your information," Kai said coldly, "she did die. Of cancer. But you never asked, so you wouldn't know."

He paused. "I'm sorry, girl. I didn't ask because, well, it didn't come up."

"You don't wait for this kind of thing to *come up*. You ask about it because you *care* about someone. I've listened to hours of you babbling about your family. Hours."

"That's not fair," he said, "If you really want to know, I didn't ask because I thought you didn't want me to. Like it was a sore point or something."

"It is a fucking sore point. She *died*, Ben. At least your father is still alive."

"I'm sorry, Kai," he mumbled, "I don't know what to say."

"You don't say *that*."

When she walked away this time, he let her go. She didn't head back to the house. She took the path that veered into the trees and went towards her father's place. Ben got into his truck and drove home.

**T**HE NEXT day was Saturday. Ben pulled up to Kai's house in the late afternoon and waited ten minutes in the car. Eventually he got out and knocked on the door. Ashkii opened it a few moments later and said that Kai didn't want to see him. When Ben asked why, Ashkii shrugged and said, "You never know with Kai, man." His voice cracked on the last word. He reddened and quickly closed the door. Ben turned around and walked slowly back to the truck. Before arriving at the Hawkins', he'd planned to apologise again and ask Kai to tell him about her mother. Now, he climbed back in the truck, shook his head and drove off. This time, he decided, Kai would have to come to *him*. He didn't realise how angry he was until he got home, turned on the TV and the only thing he felt like watching was a boxing match where one guy was beating the shit out of another.

Annie walked in a few minutes later. "That shouldn't be on public television," she said, but didn't ask him to turn it off. "You feel like getting pizza? I'm not in the mood to cook."

"Only if it's pepperoni and olives. And only if I don't have to pick it up," Ben said, not taking his eyes off the screen.

"I'll fetch it," she said, reaching for her car keys.

She came back half an hour later, a large box in her hands and two cokes balanced on top. By that time, the match was over and Ben had changed the channel to baseball. Annie put the box on the coffee table and opened it without bothering to get plates. She pushed one of the cokes toward him and sat down.

"Golly, I haven't watched a game in ages," she said, biting into a slice of pizza.

Ben was briefly reminded of how she used to watch sports in the old days. His dad would say proudly, "Benny, your mom can drink and swear like one of the boys." Annie would laugh and say, "I realised a long time ago, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." It had been almost ten years since Ben had seen this side of her. She never drank anymore, or watched sports.

They spent three hours flipping between sports channels. Nothing was said other than to occasionally comment on a play. It seemed like the letter thing had never happened. Neither had mentioned it and Ben found that he didn't have the energy to be

hostile. When it was getting close to eleven, Annie yawned, got up from the couch and went to the bathroom to brush her teeth. Ben turned off the TV and headed to the kitchen to make a cup of hot cocoa. As he waited for his milk to heat up, he realised he'd actually had a pretty decent evening.

Annie came into the kitchen in her pyjamas. "Will you do me a favour?" she asked.

"What is it?" he said suspiciously.

"There's another church lunch thing tomorrow. Wendy Olson's baby is getting baptised. I've made pecan ice-cream for afterwards but it can't be out of the freezer while we have the service. I'd come back and get it but I'm helping to serve up lunch. Would you drop it off at the church hall for me round two thirty?"

Ben considered. Wendy Olson had been his Sunday school teacher. The one who brought cookies. "Yeah. I guess I can. If I don't have to go in."

"I'll wait for you outside," she said. "And thanks. That'll help a bunch."

Ben hadn't been to the church in two and a half years. It felt strange to drive into the parking lot. Annie wasn't waiting for him. Instead, there was a girl of about his age leaning against a car. She was tanned and wore a white sundress. He parked but didn't get out. The girl walked up to his window.

"Are you Ben?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"Your mom asked me to get the ice-cream from you. She's still busy inside."

"Okay," he said, and reached for the tupperware on the passenger seat. "Better get people to eat it quick. It's already melting." He handed it to her through the window.

"Thanks," she said, "I'll put it in the freezer."

"I thought there wasn't a freezer." He frowned.

"Oh. There is one. In the kitchen."

"Well, put it in the freezer then." He reached for the ignition.

The girl looked at him. "Aren't you coming in?"

"No. I've gotta get home."

"Really? My sister-in-law will be disappointed. She wanted to see you."

“Who’s your sister-in-law?” he asked.

“Wendy.”

“Oh. Yeah, I heard Wendy got married.”

“Yup. Two summers ago,” the girl said. “It was a fun wedding. I got so trashed, I fell into the cake.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, but only after they cut it so it wasn’t a big deal. One of my brothers told my mom that senile Uncle Bob knocked it over, so I was never found out.”

“Huh. That’s funny,” he said.

“Yeah, it was a good time. I’m Janina by the way.”

“I’m Ben.”

“I know,” she said.

Ben reddened.

“Why do you have to get home?” she asked.

“I, uh, have to do this thing.”

“Can it wait? You should come inside for a minute and see my nephew. He’s really cute. And Wendy wants to see you.”

“Um, I don’t know. I should get going. And you should put that ice-cream in the freezer.”

“Okay. Well, see you around Ben.” She turned and started to walk away. He reached for the key again.

Just then, a figure appeared at the entrance to the church hall and called out, “Oh no you don’t, Benjamin O’Connor! I’m not going to let you get away without saying hello.” It was Wendy. She ran up to the truck, put her hand on the window and said breathlessly, “Oh good, I caught you. How’ve you been, boy?”

Wendy had changed. She looked happier and not as skinny. And she’d done something with her hair. “I’m good,” said Ben. “How ’bout you? You look ... different. Good-different,” he added quickly.

“Yup, having a baby changes a lot – especially when you’re thirty. Why don’t you come in and see him. I called him Joshua.”

“You liked the story about Joshua in Sunday school.”

She laughed. "You remember!"

"Sure. You even said if you ever had a son you were going to call him Joshua."

"Did I really? Well, he's a cutie. He looks just like his aunt."

Janina had been standing a couple of paces away, a bemused smile on her face.

"Yup," she agreed, "He has my ear lobes."

Ben laughed.

"He *does*," she insisted, "Come see for yourself."

## 22

**NO ONE** asked Ben why he hadn't been to church in more than two years. Folks were friendly and, to his surprise, it was kind of nice to see some of them. Wendy made him hold Joshua, who giggled while Janina tickled his feet. Ben liked holding the baby, and was almost disappointed when Wendy's mother took him away. Janina introduced Ben to her three older brothers. He recognised Jake, the youngest, from a few times at the bar. They got talking and Jake said he'd ordered some new lures. They were due to arrive any day and he wanted to try them out. Ben offered to show him a good spot for bass.

"Can I come?" Janina asked.

Ben looked doubtful.

"Oh, Jan's a regular tomboy," Jake assured him, "She looks girly but she hunts and fishes like a boy. Growing up, we didn't give her much choice."

Another brother came around with four glasses of champagne. He handed them out and made a toast to his nephew and to new friends. Ben was surprised. He'd never seen alcohol on church property.

"My parents put their foot down," Janina explained, "We like our booze in our family, church or no church."

Later, Ben and Janina went and sat on the swings in the park adjacent to the church. Ben expected a chaperone to be sent after them but no one followed. Janina told him that her parents had moved to the North Woods after selling the family business in Milwaukee two years before.

"They love it up here," she said. "I like it too. In fact, I'm taking a semester off



school to spend time at home. I've been away from my family for so long. I went to boarding school, then straight to college on the East Coast."

"That explains it," said Ben.

"Explains what?"

"Why I haven't seen you before."

"Maybe you have and just didn't notice me."

"No," Ben said, "I would've noticed."

"That Janina's a beauty, isn't she?" said his mother when she saw him at home that night. "Real nice girl too. Her parents gave a lot of money for the new Sunday school building. Wendy's lucky she married into that family."

"Why? Because they have money?" Ben said.

"No. Because they're good people. On the liberal side, but good people," She reached for the remote and flicked on the TV. "Thanks for bringing the ice-cream. You saved me."

"No problem," he said. He didn't mention the freezer.

That night, he didn't feel upset about Kai. In fact, he didn't even think about her. He watched television with his mom before going to bed. At one point, Ben said "So what's with Pastor Henderson's comb-over?"

"I *know*," said Annie, and leaned over towards him, lowering her voice as if the pastor might be crouching outside the window. "He thinks people won't notice. He doesn't realise there's still a big bald patch in back. And did you see Harriet McNab? Well, Essie reckons she must have had one of those breast implant operations because she never had cleavage like that before. She went away for two weeks last winter, all mysterious. Of course no one would ask."

"I did notice actually," Ben said, "She could balance a tea cup on those things."

Annie laughed uproariously.

"So, uh, does Janina's family go to church every Sunday?" he asked, once Annie's laughter had subsided.

"The Synnesburgs? Well, her parents do – Fred and Sarah. And of course Wendy and her husband go every week. Janina is starting to come more. Went through a

rebellious phase but it seems like she's giving it another try."

"Oh," said Ben. There was a silence and then he asked, "Where do the parents live? Close to town?"

"A little ways out, on Lake Catherine. They've got a beautiful old place. Big windows looking onto the water and Sarah's so artistic, the house looks like it's out of *Home and Decor* magazine. I went over there once for a Bible discussion. Fred made me the best Long Island Iced Tea I've had since 1989."

"You had a drink?"

"Well ... yes. Just one. Even Pastor Henderson had a small one. Fred had just got a new shaker sent from New York. It would've been rude to say no."

"Huh. Well, that sounds like a fun bible discussion," said Ben.

"It was," Annie agreed, "Everyone likes it when the Synnesburgs host. And Janina made a mean apple pie."

"Janina was there?"

"Oh yes. She was in from Wellesley for the long weekend."

Ben didn't say anything.

"You've heard of *Wellesley*," Annie said, "Hillary Clinton went there."

"Oh," he said.

Monday was another good day. Things weren't too busy at work but he made some decent tips and people were friendly. Kai crossed his mind only once. When he left the restaurant, he briefly expected to see her leaning against the pole opposite the door. But she wasn't there, so he got in his truck, went home for a shower and headed out again round eight. The bar was filling up when he arrived. The summer's last wave of tourists was petering out, so the folks there were mostly locals. Ben saw the restaurant crew in the corner and went over. He bought a beer, complained about the boss, added his two cents' worth to the daily breast survey of female clientele and ordered another beer. He was taking the first sip when he saw Janina walk into the bar. She wore tight jeans and a low-cut black top. Her hair was piled on top of her head. He hadn't realised before what a long neck she had. He swallowed quickly. Jake walked in behind her. He spotted Ben and waved. The two walked over to where Ben was standing.

“Hey, Ben,” said Jake, “Long time no see.”

“Yup,” he said, “Twenty four hours. I was beginning to miss you guys.”

“This is a surprise,” Janina said.

“What is?”

“To see you here.”

“I come here all the time,” Ben said.

“Huh. I wonder why we’ve never run into each other.”

“Oh, yeah, I guess I haven’t hung out here much this summer, but I used to come all the time.”

“What do you want to drink?” Jake said to Janina.

“What are you drinking?” she asked Ben.

“It’s called Fat Squirrel. It’s local. Pretty hardcore stuff.”

“Get outta here. I love Fat Squirrel. Jake thinks it’s disgusting but he’s such a conformist.” Turning to Jake, she said, “I’ll have a Fat Squirrel.”

“I refuse to buy that for you,” he said, “Can’t you get something normal, like Coors?” He looked at Ben. “I can tell you’re gonna be a bad influence.”

Ben laughed. “Yup, I stand for the dark side.” He got out his wallet and said to Janina, “I’ll buy you some squirrel.”

Jake groaned. Janina smiled.

Once they’d got their drinks, they went over to a table in the corner. Ben saw the boys from the restaurant glance over curiously. He avoided their eyes.

“So, when are we going fishing?” Jake asked, “I got my lures today.”

“It’s your call.” Ben said.

“Tomorrow?”

He thought for a moment. “Um, yeah. Sounds good. I’m off work on Tuesday afternoons. Should we meet around three? Fish won’t be biting till then anyhow.”

“Works for me,” said Jake. Turning to Janina, he asked, “You free tomorrow?”

“Of course I’m free tomorrow, dumbass. I don’t have an agenda.” She winked at Ben and said, “All I do is suntan, water-ski, and eat my mom’s chocolate chip cookies. It’s the perfect antidote to academia.”

“Academia?” Ben asked.

“Yeah, I’m doing a BA in political science, minoring in psych.”

Ben raised his eyebrows.

Jake playfully shoved his sister. “Brightspark over here has taken to psychoanalysing everyone in the family. She thinks I’m – what? – obsessive compulsive.”

“I said obsessive compulsive *tendencies*.”

“What would you say about me?” Ben asked her.

“I’d say you’re well-balanced and healthy. Unless, of course ...”

“Unless what?”

“You’re schizophrenic and you’ve only shown me the good side.”

Ben laughed. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to find out for yourself.”

## 23

**KAI MADE** a cut for every day he didn’t show. By the end of the week, there was a ladder of them running down her arm. She took to wearing long sleeves. Fortunately it had turned cold on Wednesday.

On Tuesday afternoon, she’d gone to the library. She wore the yellow dress, Ben’s favourite. There were only two cuts then and they weren’t big, so she wasn’t wearing long sleeves yet. She went a little early and dragged the other beanbag from the children’s section, placing it opposite hers so that Ben wouldn’t have to do it when he got there. The new National Geographic was out. She took it off the shelf before anyone else could get to it and put it on his beanbag. For herself, she chose *Out of Africa*, an old favourite and sometimes Ben liked hearing snippets from it. She’d whisper across to him so that they didn’t disturb anyone else.

Kai didn’t read one word at the library. She sat rigid. Every time she heard footsteps, she thought it was him. And then it wasn’t. There was a draught and she had goosebumps on her arms but she refused to put on her sweater in case he appeared. She noticed a spider in the crook of one of the book shelves. If someone reached for either 4356.17MORR or 4356.171MORR, the spider could climb easily onto their hand. Kai let it crouch. The library closed at six. She didn’t realise it was six until Miss P walked down

the corridor, checking for any straggling patrons.

"It's closing time," she said, "You're not usually here this late."

"Sorry," Kai muttered and gathered up her things.

"Where's Ben?"

Kai didn't answer her.

"Where's Ben?" she said again, louder.

"He's sick," Kai said.

"Oh, that's too bad. Are you taking out any books?"

"No."

"Really?" Miss P raised her eyebrows. "How 'bout you take one for Ben to read in bed? There's a good Bill Bryson that just came in. He'd like that, I'm sure."

"No thanks," Kai walked passed her without saying goodbye.

There was no one else at the bus stop. Kai waited. She looked up and down the street, not wanting to admit to herself that she was scanning for Ben's truck. Ten minutes went by. The bus was late. When ten more had passed, she looked at the schedule. No late bus that day. *Shit*. By now it was almost dark. She walked to a pay phone, put in a quarter and dialled. It rang shrilly on the other end. *Please pick up, please pick up*, she murmured. On the fifth ring, Ashkii answered.

"Is Dad there?" she asked.

"He just left."

"Where did he go?"

"The usual," said Ashkii.

"Dammit. Can you catch him?"

"I guess can walk over there. What do you need?"

"I'm stuck in town," Kai said, "Can you tell Dad to come fetch me?"

"What about what's-his-name – Ben?"

"Please just go get Dad. I'll be at the bus stop."

Kai waited an hour and a half until she saw her father's old Chevy. She didn't have a book to read. Not that she would've been able to read anyway. There wasn't a streetlight near enough to give decent light. While she waited, she dug her thumbnail into the place where the next cut would be. She dug it in so hard that it bled. When the Chevy pulled

up, she got in without saying a word. She could tell her father was annoyed. He didn't say anything either, just drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. Part of her was surprised he'd come at all. When he got going at the casino, it was difficult to pull him away.

Halfway home, Solomon said, "Did you have a fall-out with that boy?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Kai said.

"Okay."

They were silent for the rest of the way home. Solomon dropped her off at the house and headed back to the casino. She went straight up to her room without bothering to find Ashkii. She closed the door and pushed her bed against it. Then she rummaged in the back of her closet and brought out the knife. It was comforting to close her fingers round the fat, familiar handle. Sitting on her bed, she observed her work from the bus stop. Pretty good for a thumbnail. She laid the blade on her arm and began. She never hesitated anymore. Cutting didn't hurt like before – it was so easy now. The incision was the longest and deepest one she'd ever made. She went over the place again and again, not thinking about what it would look like the next day.

She was shocked to see it in the morning. For the first time, Kai wondered if she'd taken it too far. Had the knife gone any deeper, she would've needed stitches. The cut throbbled all day. When Aunt Jane took her nap, Kai pulled her sleeve up and saw that blood had leaked through the bandage. She resolved not to do it again. But five o'clock brought with it no sound of tires, nor did six o'clock, nor seven. By eight she was back in her room, fingers around the handle. The cut she made was smaller today. It ran along the edge of the bandage, nice and straight.

She hadn't talked much since the dinner at Jane's house. She avoided Ashkii and spent as little time as possible around Jane. Strangely, she felt most comfortable with her father. On Friday evening, Solomon walked outside on his way to the car and found Kai sitting on the back step, slumped against a wall. He put his hand on her head. His hand was so big, it fit her like a cap. For the first time that week, she felt held. Then he went back inside and re-emerged with two drinks. He sat down next to Kai and handed her a glass. The liquor made her chest fiery. They didn't say anything. Just sat and drank and watched the sun sink behind the trees. It was cold but they didn't go in. When the sun

was gone, Solomon sighed deeply and patted Kai's leg.

He didn't go out after all that night. For the first time in ages, Solomon Hawkin stayed home to cook his kids dinner. Pancakes. He was good at pancakes.

## 24

**JAKE CAUGHT** nothing, Ben caught a small one, and Janina caught all the rest. Six nice, fat small-mouth bass. She pulled them out of the water, one after the other like they were queuing up beneath the surface.

"What are you? The fish-whisperer or something?" Jake said with disgust.

Janina glanced at the boys, the slightest trace of a smirk on her face. "No, they're just stupid. In countless generations, they still haven't worked out that the shiny gold thing is a trick."

"Well, we must have the smart ones 'cos they sure aren't biting over here. Let's switch rods."

"Okay," she said, handing her rod to Jake and reaching for his. "But only because I feel sorry for you. See if your luck improves."

Five minutes later, she caught her biggest one yet. Jake barely got a nibble. Ben pulled out his only catch right after. It was about two thirds the size of Janina's. She laughed and said, "I'll refrain from commentary."

"I'd appreciate that," Ben said, "My ego's bruised enough."

"*Your* ego?" Jake chimed in, "Mine's grovelling at the bottom of the lake."

Jake and Janina invited Ben round for dinner. He accepted without hesitating. The road to the Synnesburgs was off 51, ran through the woods for about half a mile and ended in a circular drive at their front door. It was a large wooden house with dominant windows. The Synnesburgs had bought it from an architect. There were slate tiles on the floor and modern art on the walls. The kitchen was airy, with marble counter tops and an island in the middle. Pots hung from a rack overhead. When Janina led him through the lounge, Ben saw a large-screen TV which took up half a wall and wrap-around leather couches in front of it. In the back of the room was a well-stocked bar.

“Come meet my parents,” Janina said. He followed her onto a patio which stretched out towards the lake. Part of it was on stilts because the ground below sloped to down to the water. Fred and Sarah Synnesburg were sipping gin and tonics. Sarah’s feet rested in her husband’s lap.

“Look who I brought home,” Janina said, “You remember Ben, don’t you?”

“Hi Ben,” said Sarah, “I don’t think we’ve met formally but Fred and I certainly know your mother.”

Fred extended his hand. “What can I get you to drink?”

“A beer would be great, thanks,” said Ben.

“Ah, a man after my own heart,” Fred said.

Ben helped Jake clean the fish. Sarah battered the fillets and fried them, sharing the stove with Fred, who was expertly making French fries. Janina set the table. The family chattered about things ranging from the antics of Janina’s lewd professor, to the limitations of the Minocqua grocery store. Fred was funny. He made everyone laugh, especially Sarah. At one point, she was laughing so hard, she had to sit down on the floor. Ben was reminded of his own parents when he was a kid. His dad knew just how to make his mother crack up. Sitting in the kitchen, his hand comfortably round a bottle of beer, Ben felt he’d known the Synnesburgs since childhood. Despite the big house, he told himself, they were just nice, regular people.

Dinner was good. Afterwards, everyone moved into the lounge. Janina sat down next to him and tucked one foot beneath her. Sarah brought out coffee and the conversation continued. When the fire had burnt down to embers and Ben was thinking of taking off, Janina leaned over and put her head on his shoulder. Ben glanced around but no one else seemed to notice. He’d been sort of sleepy before but now he was wide awake. From the corner of his eye, he could see Janina’s hair, a little tousled. He could smell her shampoo. He no longer wanted to leave. Eventually, Fred and Sarah announced they were going to bed. Jake yawned and got up too. Janina lifted her head. Ben lingered for a moment, then stood up and began to say his goodbyes.

“Come round again,” Sarah said. “Our house is always open.”

“Yeah, come for the game on Saturday,” Fred echoed.



On his way home, Ben remembered that Tuesday was usually his library day with Kai. He wondered if she'd gone like usual, then decided she probably hadn't. She was obviously still pissed off. He hadn't heard a word from her. It didn't feel good to think about it. He realised he hadn't said one thing to Janina about Kai. That didn't feel so good either. But he shrugged it off and told himself it didn't matter because Janina was just a friend. All she did was put her head on his shoulder. Big deal. It wasn't like they'd kissed. They were just becoming good friends. And good friends are affectionate, right?

25

**SATURDAY.** A week and a day since the fight. Kai was in town. It was just after lunchtime. She went to the chemist to pick up Aunt Jane's new prescription, then to the post office to buy stamps. Her plan was to finish her errands and wait outside the restaurant to confront Ben when he came out. She'd stayed up half the night writing down what she wanted to say. All she'd been able to eat that morning was a piece of dry toast. Walking around town, things looked different to her. The colours were kind of garish, and the outlines of things, too sharp. Noises seemed unnaturally loud. People's faces looked agitated and when someone said something nice, it sounded fake.

Around two o'clock, she looked at her watch and decided to go to the library to pass the time until four. She was walking along the main road and had just passed the Five & Dime when she saw Ben come out of the bottle store a little further up. She stopped dead. She didn't call out. A girl walked out behind him. A blonde girl wearing sleek three-quarter length pants. Ben waited for her to catch up and took the box of beer she was carrying. The girl looped her arm through his and they walked across the street. A big SUV was parked at a meter. The girl rummaged for the keys in her handbag. She found them and beeped the car open. Ben put the beer in the back. It was about then that he looked up and saw Kai. Their eyes locked and, for a few seconds, neither moved. Then Ben waved. Kai didn't wave back. By this time, the girl was in the driver's seat, putting on lip gloss. Ben walked to her door and motioned for her to roll down the window. He said something and she laughed. Then he crossed the street to where Kai stood.

"Are you still mad at me?" Ben asked when he reached her.

“Who’s that?” Kai said and motioned towards the SUV.

“Who? Janina? Oh, Janina’s just a friend of mine.”

Kai looked at the car. The girl was watching them curiously. “How come I’ve never met her?”

“Well, she’s a new friend.”

“She’s pretty.” There was something jagged in Kai’s voice.

“I guess,” said Ben, as if the thought had never occurred to him. “What brings you to town?”

“I came to see you. I thought you’d be at work.”

“I got the day off.”

“So I see.”

There was a silence. Ben looked uncomfortable. “Um, I should go in a minute. I don’t want to keep Janina waiting.”

“Ben, we need to talk.”

“I can’t today. There’s a game this afternoon and Janina’s family invited me to watch it with them.”

Kai felt like something inside her stopped working. Like her heart perhaps.

Ben must have seen a change in her face. “Are you okay, girl? What’s wrong?”

She didn’t answer.

He bit his lip and looked back towards the SUV. “There’s a bus at two thirty, right? You won’t be stuck in town long.” There was slight pleading tone in his voice.

Wordlessly, Kai pulled up her left sleeve.

“Oh *my God*.” Ben lifted his hands to his temples and pressed down with his fingers. “Okay, let me think.” When he looked up, his face was white. “I don’t have my car and I have to go watch this game. Her father invited me. But I’ll come to you as soon as it’s over, okay?”

Kai still said nothing.

“*Please* Kai. It’s the best I can do. Just hold out till I get there. Please.”

Kai looked at the girl in the car. Ben followed her gaze.

“She’s just a *friend*,” he said.

Kai turned and walked away.

Ben muttered, “Fuck it,” and crossed the street, back to the SUV.

Kai walked straight into the Five & Dime and bought a penknife. Then she went down to a deserted place by the water and made the seventh cut. She didn’t go too deep because she didn’t want it to bleed out of control on the bus. After she finished, she fished around in her bag for a wad of Kleenex and pressed it against the wound. When the bleeding subsided, she pulled down her sleeve and walked towards the bus stop. The two thirty bus was just arriving as she got there. Once on the bus, she relaxed. The skin around her eyes no longer felt pinched. Her hand stayed in her bag the whole ride back, fingers curled around the new penknife. By four o’clock she was home. She walked to Jane’s house, dropped off the medication, folded some clothes, then went back to her house and waited.

26

**THE HOURS** went by. She cried a lot. At seven, he still hadn’t come. She got out the penknife and made a twin cut next to the one from the lake – pain-tracks across her skin. Ashkii knocked on her door. She told him to go away. Getting a pen from her desk, she traced the faint blue vein running down her wrist and into her hand. The vein looked disturbing, outlined in black. She licked her thumb and tried to rub it off. It only came off partway. She must have fallen asleep because she awoke again to the sound of knocking.

“Ashkii, I said *please* leave me alone,” She called out groggily.

“Kai, it’s me.”

Ben’s voice jolted her. He’d never actually come into the house. She crept over to the door and opened it a crack. He stood in the dark passage. She couldn’t see his face.

“Baby, it’s okay. I’m here now,” he said softly, “Will you let me in?”

Kai opened the door some more and let him enter. He folded her in his arms. She sobbed onto his shoulder, getting snot all over his shirt. He said he didn’t care. When she’d stopped crying, they sat down on her bed. Ben glanced around the room, taking in the rumpled sheets, the closed curtains, the penknife on the floor. On seeing the knife, he reached for her left hand and pushed up her sleeve. She winced as the fabric brushed over the new cuts. When the sleeve was scrunched up at her elbow, he bent forward to look.

Her forearm looked as if she'd conducted a study to show the different phases of scarring. Tuesday's was the biggest. It was only just starting to scab over.

Ben cringed. "Oh, Kai. *Oh*, Kai." He said it like a mantra.

"One for every day you didn't come," she said.

He was silent for a long time. Then he said, "Why didn't you find me? I would've been there."

She sighed deeply. "I ... couldn't."

"You promised you'd tell me if you wanted to do it again."

"You weren't around."

"I was waiting for *you*."

Kai pulled her sleeve back down and cradled her left arm in her right. She looked up at the ceiling, her eyes filling again. She blinked and said, "What about that girl?"

Ben sighed. "I told you, she's just a friend. I haven't done anything."

"I could see she liked you."

"Please. You saw us for two minutes."

"Have you slept with her?"

"*No*."

"Have you kissed her?"

"No. This is ridiculous."

"Have you held her hand?"

Ben was silent.

"Ben, have you held her hand?"

"It didn't mean anything."

She felt nauseous and closed her eyes, letting her head slam onto her knees.

"Kai, it was nothing, okay?"

She could hardly hear him. She started coughing and couldn't stop. She heard herself dry-retching and felt her body shudder. His arms were around her now, pulling her towards him. She didn't resist. Just let him do what he wanted. He rocked her.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, "So sorry."

She lay there and let her tendrils of pain wind tightly around him.

It took three hours and twenty minutes for them to make up. And even then, it was only partway. They went round and round in the same well-worn circles. When Ben was defensive, Kai would glance at the penknife. It lay on the floor in the same place it had since her use of it four hours earlier. Ben glanced at it too. He wanted to pick it up and put it in his pocket, but he found he couldn't. The room was small and stifled. Halfway through, Ben stood up and pulled back the curtains. Despite the cold outside, he opened Kai's window and put his hands on the mosquito screen. Kai didn't move from the bed. At some point, she remembered the knife hidden in her cupboard – the one he didn't know about. She didn't mention it, just let the thought cushion her other thoughts. The night wore on. Ben's defensiveness was lapsing. Kai fed hungrily on his guilt, coaxing out promises and apologies.

It came to an end when they heard Solomon's car pull up outside the house. Kai's breath caught at the sound. She ushered Ben out into the passage and down the stairs. She led him towards the front door, figuring that her dad would be coming in the back. Solomon met them on the porch. He didn't say anything.

"Daddy, this is Ben. He's on his way out," Kai said quickly.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Hawkin." Ben stuck out his hand.

Solomon didn't shake it. He looked hard into Ben's face. "You be careful, boy," His voice was very quiet. There wasn't malice in it, just stony authority.

Ben nodded and Solomon brushed passed him into the house.

## 27

**DESPITE THE** hours with Ben, Kai did not feel peaceful the next morning. Their reconciliation had a stitched-up quality to it. And there was one thing that Kai had been unsuccessful in getting Ben to do. He refused to commit to never seeing Janina again.

"She's my *friend*," he said, over and over again. "If you can't understand that, it doesn't say much for this relationship. And it's not just her. It's her family. I'm friends with them too."

"But she *likes* you, Ben. How would you feel if I was hanging out with a guy who wanted to hold my hand?"

“I’d understand he was your friend and I’d trust you.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” she shot back.

When he came to pick her up on Sunday afternoon, he was dressed nicely. She was surprised to hear he’d been to church. He was, he said, working on his relationship with his mother – since he only had one parent around, he might as well try to patch things up. Kai fell silent. She felt unsettled.

Eventually she said, “That’s nice, I guess. My dad and I are getting on well too.”

“That’s great,” said Ben, a little too enthusiastically. Kai wondered if he’d completely forgotten about meeting her father the night before.

It was the first time either of them had been to the hideout in a while. It felt strange, as though something had happened there while they were gone. Kai went around tidying things up, throwing out old flowers, blowing dust off books. When she’d finished, she wrapped one of the blankets around her. It was chilly. The wind blew through the screens on the windows. There wasn’t any glass – it was only ever intended to be a summer getaway. Ben was also cold but didn’t reach for a blanket. Sitting in his Sunday clothes, he looked out of place. And without Bronnie there, the hideout felt empty. Ben had come straight from church and had left her at home. Outside, the sky was grey and the wind blew leaves off the trees in agitated gusts. Ben remarked that it was a fireside and hot cocoa day. Kai suggested they make a fire outside. He obliged but the wood was kind of wet and it smoked so much, it only made them cough. Their conversation came in trickles. Neither had much they wanted to report back on the previous week. Ben was oddly polite. After there’d been a particularly long silence, Kai said, “So ... where did you meet your new friend?”

Ben hesitated, then said, “I really don’t think we should talk about that. Not now. It’s just going to make us upset.”

“We should be able to talk about anything,” Kai replied, “Anything at all.”

“Yeah, but maybe we need to be smart about when we talk about things. Right now, stuff is too raw.”

Kai didn’t say anything in return.

Eventually Ben said, “Well, tell me about what you’ve been doing with your dad.

You guys been hanging out?”

“Yeah,” she said sarcastically, “It’s been a real blast.”

They endured the hideout for another hour. Kai didn’t remember it ever being so miserable. When Ben dropped her at home later, she didn’t know what to do with herself. She considered talking to Aunt Jane about what was going on but was too afraid of an ‘I told you so’ to follow through with it. It had started to rain outside. She stood in her dark house and looked around at the outlines of things. There was a murky smell. As she inhaled the odour of damp furniture and stale food, she realised that she didn’t want to be there anymore. She didn’t just want to leave and come back later. She wanted life to change at the roots. Quickly, she began to go around the house, throwing open windows, letting the rain come in. Gusts of wind blew down the passage and doors slammed. Then she went out into the backyard and yelled. She didn’t say any words, just yelled.

By the time Ashkii and Solomon came home, Kai had closed the windows and put a pan of cornbread in the oven. She’d turned on every light in the house. Her voice was hoarse and she wouldn’t say why. Solomon made a fire and turned off some of the lights without asking questions. Kai made hot cocoa for the three of them and her father got out a pack of cards. By the time she brought the food to the living room, he’d dealt. They gambled with buttons till after midnight.

28

**FIVE DAYS** later, Ben told Kai that the Synnesburgs had invited him to go up to Lake Superior for the weekend. She reached instinctively for her left arm. He shook his head.

“Kai, I’ve been thinking. What you do – to yourself – it’s not okay. Really, not okay. I don’t want you to do it anymore.”

She didn’t say anything.

“You heard me, right?” He looked into her eyes, his jaw set.

She swallowed. “I can’t help it.”

“That’s not good enough.”

She started to cry. Ben didn’t react. They were parked in her driveway.

“I’ve gotta go now,” he said, “I’m sorry this has been hard. I get back on Sunday night. I’ll come see you Monday, okay?”

“What about work?” Kai stammered.

“Things are slowing down. Summer’s over. They don’t need me this weekend.”

“What about me?”

“I’ll see you Monday.”

Again, she reached for her left arm, this time burrowing her fingers underneath her sleeve and running them across the cuts.

Ben watched her fingers move beneath the fabric. “I’m serious, Kai,” he said quietly. “If you do that again, even once more, we’re over.”

She pulled her hand from her sleeve.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll see you Monday.”

She got out without saying good-bye. He turned on the ignition and drove away.

The idea came to her at about three in the morning. She hadn’t slept at all. She’d been lying in the dark, her fingers wrapped around the handle of the big knife. Her forearm itched. It was as though she fought a magnetic pull between the blade and the next place on her skin. When the idea presented itself, she didn’t let go of the handle right away. She thought it through for a few minutes. Then she got up and crept downstairs, taking the knife with her. Once in the kitchen, she gave it a thorough scrubbing using disinfectant and very hot water. Then she dried it and put it in the back of the drawer where she’d found it. She put on her boots and walked outside into the woods.

Morning found her at Aunt Jane’s. She’d been wandering and thinking for four hours. She made a pot of strong coffee and got out the ingredients for pumpkin muffins. When Jane appeared an hour later, Kai was humming and spooning the mixture into muffin pans.

“You’re cheery,” Jane remarked, “It’s good to see. I’ve been worried about you.”

“Me?” said Kai, as if the idea was insane. “I’m just fine.”

“Well, you weren’t last week.”

“PMS,” Kai said, “Serious PMS.”

“Oh. Okay. If you’re sure that’s all it was,” said Jane as she poured herself some



coffee. “Will you remind your father that he has to take me to Woodruff on Monday? I talked to the doctor and he wants to keep me at the hospital overnight for the tests. I said he was a fool, but what can you do?”

“Overnight?” Kai looked up.

“Yes, overnight. I’m out of your hair for a day.”

“That’s not what I meant. You’re never *in* my hair. I’ll remind Dad.”

“Thanks,” said Jane, “When will the muffins be ready?”

“Fifteen minutes,” said Kai, “Enough time for you to go outside and look at how yellow the birch leaves are. Fall is on its way.”

Kai was in the library all Saturday afternoon. She didn’t sit in the alcove. Instead, she went to the tables in back and borrowed a notepad and pencil from the loans desk. She was glad Miss P was off on weekends. There was a stack of books next to her. The one on top was about plants in Wisconsin. The ones beneath it were not. When she was finished with a book, she’d lift up *Wisconsin Flora*, grab the next book, and replace it with the one she’d just read. By the time she left, she’d filled thirteen pages of notes. She stopped at the chemist after the library, bought a home pregnancy test, and then caught the bus back to the reservation.

On the bus, Kai gazed out the window and thought things over. God was looking kindly on her. Aunt Jane’s house would be vacant on Monday night and she was three days away from ovulating. The books said she had a one in three chance of getting pregnant – she was young, healthy and, from a fertility point of view, the timing would be perfect. She didn’t know what to expect of Ben when he returned. Her plan depended on two things: firstly, that he would want to have sex with her, and secondly, that she could persuade him she was on birth control. She was fairly confident that neither of these would be a problem. And, just in case, Aunt Jane had well-stocked liquor cabinet.

Kai rested her head against the pane of glass. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Things were going to change from the roots. Peace settled on her. A few minutes later, the bus pulled up at her stop.





## Proposed Denouement of the Plot:

### **Continuation of Part Two**

Kai falls pregnant – waits a while before telling Ben

Ben's initial shock: he reacts with anger, fear, suggests an abortion

This is not what Kai expected; she is terrified when she doesn't see Ben for two weeks

Ben goes to Colorado to see his father; does some thinking, decides he wants the baby after all and consequently wants to make a go of things with Kai

Kai's pregnancy; the repercussions; telling the parents and Aunt Jane

Janina decides to go back to school; Kai's relief

Ben and Kai draw closer together again – with Janina out of the picture and Ben's attentions all to herself, Kai flourishes; she and Ben share an 'us against the world' attitude

Ben becomes deeply attached to the notion of having this baby – starts to make provisions for the future; gets a better paying job (driving a snow truck? i.e. a high-paying, relatively menial job ... perhaps a dangerous one); finds an apartment for them

They are sure the baby is a girl and decide to call her Anna

Kai gives birth; Anna is stillborn

Both are devastated but Ben more so; decides he needs to have a fresh start; he leaves Kai

Aunt Jane has a stroke

Kai douses the O'Connor house with gasoline and torches it; it burns to the ground

She's convicted of arson; declared mentally unstable and put in state psychiatric hospital

Ben moves to Colorado to live with his father

### **Part Three**

Back to Nayati

Two years on; Kai has been working with Al consistently; her case is soon to be reviewed

She's released; gets a job at a coffee shop; writes in her spare time

Enters a short story about madness in a writing competition; her story gets published

She's awarded a scholarship to the NYU writer's program

Perhaps finds love again? Conclusion of the Kai story

Conclusion of the Al/Hannah story



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