

Are you lost?

The headlights sting my eyes. I keep my hand in front of my face, squinting. My backpack digs into my shoulder, too much stuff packed in there I guess: sandwiches, my Thermos, some comic books. I wasn't really sure how long I'd be gone.

I squint into the headlights and try to yell over the big, loud truck engine. I'm just out for a walk, I say.

A what?

A walk, I shout.

It's true, I've been out here for a while, walking up the gravelly side of the highway. I'm not sure how long. Long enough to get right out of town, past the Welcome to Marvin sign, past long dark stretches of ditch, barbed wire fences, and now and then a driveway, with a floodlight at the end, up above a farmhouse door. The wind whips grit up off the road; it gets into my teeth, makes it hard to breathe.

The passenger door opens and a woman gets out. She walks over and squats down in front of me. Lines around her eyes, puffy cheeks. A blue bandana wrapped around her head, a starched blue dress.

You can't just walk up the highway in the middle of the night, she says, you'll be run over by some maniac. No one knows how to drive around here.

The truck is huge, not a pickup but a big blue farm truck, a red hood, a wooden box with sides tall enough to hold cows. A man with a thick brown beard and denim overalls sits at the wheel. In the back of the cab are five kids, all of them in crisp overalls and checkered shirts. Behind them I can see dark shapes. Wooden crates, hay, egg cartons, chicken wire.

Get in, she says, get in. Shoos me up into the cab, between the quiet kids. No one says anything while I squeeze up onto the seat. I look for seatbelts but there aren't any. The woman climbs into the passenger side and slams the door. Some maniac would have just run you over and not even noticed, she says. Just driven right by, like they'd hit a badger or a porcupine.

Just out for a walk, I say.

The man shrugs and puts the truck in gear. We drive off, everybody quiet, no radio. The kids sit still and don't say anything. Their chins dip and then they jerk awake, wide-eyed for a while, until they start to doze off again.

It sure is dark all over, driving up the highway. Sometimes headlights whoosh past and you have to squint. You can see them coming, the sky over a hill getting brighter, then two white circles that sting your eyes and cut the whole road away, leaving little blue spots. We drive past the old chicken farm. Long rows of black windows with a white glare. I wonder what happens inside the chicken farm at night - are all those chickens sleeping? Or are they up, working on their big escape? If you stand outside the long chicken-farm walls, you can probably hear them inside, clucking, scratching at the concrete floor with their dirty chicken feet, trying to find a way out. Standing on each other's backs, trying to reach the windows. Trying to lift the latches, before tomorrow when the lights come on.

We pull off the highway into the Aldersyde truck stop. Even this late, trucks are parked at the diesel pumps. Teenagers with red shirts under heavy red and black jackets climb up on the big rig tires to clean windshields. The father rolls down his window, waves a hairy hand toward the diesel pump.

We're on our way back to the colony at Cayley, he says. We can drop you off wherever you live, though.

Well, the thing is, I was on my way here.

He narrows his eyes at me.

I was just out at a friend's place in the country, and I was on my way here to get picked up. I just live over in Marvin.

You were in the middle of nowhere.

Yeah, I went up the wrong road. But this is where I'm supposed to get picked up. Right here at the truck stop. Turned out perfect I guess.

His wife shrugs. I don't know, she says, how often do you find children out by the highway in the middle of the night?

You're from Marvin, he says, so we'll take you there.

But they'll be looking for me here, I say. They'll get pretty worried if they show up and I'm not around.

The Hutterite shrugs. He pulls crisp five-dollar bills out of his wallet and holds them out the window for the gas jockey. I climb overtop of the quiet kids and out the door.

Inside the truck-stop restaurant old men hunch over their coffee cups, faces pressed close to sports pages, want ads, laminated menus. I wander over to the counter and pull myself up on one of the round stools. Put my chin down on the counter, careful about the old coffee rings and sticky spots. The waitress cocks an eyebrow at me. I listen to the truck drivers mutter to each other. Over by the door a heavy trucker plugs quarters into the pay phone. Drums his thick fingers on the plastic. The waitress picks up a pot of coffee, sniffs at the steam. Makes a face and pours it in the sink. I watch her for a while then slide back off the stool.

The toilet in the washroom has a sign taped to the tank: Out of Order. I have to stand on my tiptoes to reach the urinal. On the brown tile wall there's a checklist: paper towel, soap, washed. Some checkmarks and initials. A vending machine: instant tattoos, and Mixed Adult Novelties, and something called a RoughRider. A picture of a blond woman with bare shoulders, her head thrown back and her mouth open.

I come back and there's a piece of pie on the counter, where I was sitting. The waitress sits on the other side, her chin propped up on an elbow, sips ginger ale from a straw.

I don't have any money.

I wouldn't worry about that, she says. Where do you live?

In Marvin.

How'd you get here?

I was out for a walk.

That's a long way to be out for a walk.

I guess.

Eat your pie, kid.

I unzip my backpack and get out a comic book. Flip the pages and eat pie. In the city under the ocean, the Under Queen gets ready to unleash her tidal wave on the Surface. But millions of people live on the coast! She catches the hero and ties him, upside down, above a vent in the molten crust. The Under Queen laughs and laughs. I guess if I ruled the city under the ocean, I wouldn't much care about the Surface Dwellers either.

I watch the gas jockeys outside, pumping gas. One of the gas jockeys props open the hood of a car, peaks around the side to see if the driver is paying attention. The driver just sits there in his car, drumming his fingers on the wheel. The gas jockey goes back behind the hood, where the driver can't see him, and yawns. Stretches. Scratches the back of his neck. After a while he closes the hood, gives the driver the thumbs-up.

The gas jockey looks up and makes a face. Drops his squeegee. Points. Truckers put down their forks, look up. Their eyes get big, their mouths drop open. The tidal wave rushes in above the fields, over across the highway. Fence posts and cows and pickup trucks all pushed along in front of the massive, boiling wave. Everybody screams and drops everything, truckers turn and run, and inside we get under the tables and hold our hands over our heads as that wave comes crashing down.

Where were you walking to? asks the waitress.

I shrug, eat some pie. It's pretty good pie, not too sweet. I guess a lot of people like really sweet pie, but I can only eat so much of it.

Well, I thought I'd go to Calgary. I'm looking for a job.
She chokes. Lays her hand flat on her chest. Takes a deep breath.

How old are you?

I'm ten.

Right. Ten.

The bell above the door rings and in comes Mullen's dad. I turn around so that he won't see me, but you just can't pull one over on Mullen's dad. The older gas jockeys all stand up to say hello, slap him on the shoulder. He starts to take off his jacket. Sees me and stops laughing.

I play with my pie. Mullen's dad sits down on the stool beside me, has to pull his long, skinny legs up into the tight space. The waitress sits up. Straightens her apron. Mullen's dad pulls off his black toque, sets it on the counter beside him.

Having some pie? he asks after a while.

Yeah.

Apple pie?

Yeah.

He looks up at the waitress. Hello, Hoyle. Nods his head toward the coffee pot. She pours him a mug. He pushes away the little bowl of creamers. Has a little sip.

Long way to walk.

I got a ride.

He was asking for a job, says Hoyle the waitress. Starts to say something else and he looks at her and she stops. I play with my pie, tap the crust with the bottom of my fork. He sips his coffee. Then he pushes the cup away.

Finish that last bite, he says. I stab it with my fork. Put it in my mouth. Mullen's dad pulls out his wallet, unfolds the leather. Hoyle shakes her head. He shrugs and puts five dollars down on the counter. She shakes her head again, and he pushes the bill toward her. Pulls his toque over his hair.

Come on, he says. I zip up my backpack and follow him out the door.

We drive out the back highway, past the old magnesium plant, its dark windows all empty, its chain-link fence locked up. The new Meatco plant is all lit up in the distance, big white lights in the parking lot, the parked trucks, everything new, big. We drive and all the farm lights are out now and it's just our headlights on the narrow highway, fences, ditch garbage. Mullen's dad drives with one hand, elbow up against the window, his other hand resting on the gear shift. He whistles to himself. Rolls his shoulders, like his back hurts.

In High River some cowboys sit outside the bowling alley and drink beer out of stubby bottles, their shirts unbuttoned in the cold. We stop at the traffic lights, the only set in town, red.

Hey, open the glovebox, says Mullen's dad. Get me that pen. I open the glovebox: a map of Calgary, a socket wrench, some crumpled candy wrappers. I hand him a blue-capped ballpoint pen. He puts it in his mouth and grinds the plastic between his teeth. Mullen's dad is always chewing on something: straws, keys. Sometimes he chews on pencils and gets little flecks of yellow paint on his teeth.

We drive past Lester's Meats, the parking lot all empty for the night, a few dirty cattle tucks under the single light post. Proud To Be Union Free Since 1977. I wrinkle my nose at the smell.

So I pulled the toboggan out of the garage the other day, he says. It's not doing so well. Bottom's all scratched up. Were you guys riding it on ice last winter?

There wasn't snow for so long, I say.

I was thinking of getting Mullen a new sled for Christmas, he says. You think he'd like that? The sort with runners, that you can steer. You guys could ride one of those anywhere.

Christmas is pretty far away, I say.

Yeah. Christmas is pretty far away.

We drive through the dark, past wooden gates, long driveways. People put wagon wheels on their gates, their names on

wooden arches over the road. We drive through the dark and the circles of light, under posts, around driveways. We drive through the snow and onto the highway in the dark. We get back to Marvin and Mullen's dad drops me off at my house.

You want me to come in and say something?

No, I say, it'll be okay.

It's pretty late.

It doesn't matter.

I close the door of his truck and wave goodbye.

W e ought to make the lemonade sweeter, Mullen says.

Most of the leaves are already brown and falling off the trees, all the way up the street. In school we colour pictures of autumn leaves: brown and yellow and red and orange. None of the leaves on Mullen's street turn red, though, or orange. Just brown and yellow and then they fall off the trees and get wet and soggy and stick in the grates. They stick to the roofs of people's cars.

We ought to make the lemonade sweeter, says Mullen. Now that it's fall. I bet people would buy more lemonade if it was sweeter.

That sweet stuff is for kids, I tell him. We're after the adult audience. Real classy. Mullen pours himself a glass and puckers.

You're sure out early this morning, says Deke Howitz. Leans on his fence. Deke Howitz hasn't shaved this morning, and his hair is greasy and not combed. Eyes red like he's been up all night. Hey, Deke, Mullen says, do you think we ought to put more sugar in the lemonade? Deke shrugs. I don't know anything about lemonade. Shouldn't you be in school? School doesn't start for another forty minutes, Deke. I know I wouldn't be up this early if I didn't have to, says Deke.

He waves us over to his fence. Leans over and reaches back into his scruffy blue jeans for his wallet.

Did they come, Deke?

He coughs and grins. Opens up the worn leather wallet, flips through the little plastic flaps with his driver's licence, his credit cards. He pulls out a little paper card.

Davis Howe Oceanography, Mullen reads, Davis Howe, CEO. What's a CEO, Deke?

That's me, kid. Sole owner and proprietor.

I don't get it, says Mullen. Why do you have a different name on your Oceanography business card?

Because they really stack the deck against you when you've got a name like Deke Howitz. Everybody just thinks you're some hillbilly. Some real asshole.

So the bank will loan you the money now? The money to buy your submarine?

All I'm saying is that Davis Howe is a lot more likely to get \$400,000 from the bank than Deke Howitz is. He puts the card back into his wallet. Now I just have to get my suit cleaned.

Is that the suit you wear to pay your parking tickets?

Yeah, that one.

I thought you had a washing machine in there, says Mullen. I thought you even had a dryer.

Sure, says Deke, but you can't wash a suit in a washing machine, it gets all ruffled. I'm ruffled enough already. Hey, Mullen, is your dad home? I need to borrow his jerry can. He's already gone to work, says Mullen. Deke leans on his fence. I need to borrow his jerry can before McClaghan comes around for the rent, says Deke. Just the four-litre would do. He's already gone to work, says Mullen. Deke goes back into his house. After a while the windows start to steam up.

Hey, buy some lemonade, best on the block. People mostly ignore us. They pull by slowly in cars, their dogs' faces pressed up against the glass, panting. They walk by reading newspapers or just looking at the sidewalk.

Across the street Mrs. Lampman tugs on the rusty hinge of her mailbox. Hey, Mrs. Lampman, you want some lemonade? She shuffles through her mail, skirt creased, hair frizzy. It's too cold for lemonade, she says, you should get a coffee pot. Well, Mrs. Lampman, we're not allowed to drink coffee,

and besides, we've got the best lemonade, and people love it even if it's cold. Mrs. Lampman roots in the pocket of her jacket, finds some credit card receipts, a sticky mint, a kleenex, a dollar. Here, give me some lemonade. Hey, Mullen, get Mrs. Lampman some lemonade. Mullen blows a bubble.

Selling lemonade is a lot easier in the summer. In the summer we hardly have to ask people; they cross the street for lemonade, their quarters right out of their pockets. We had a big grasshopper problem this summer, I guess worse than a lot of other years. Grasshoppers all over the lawns and in the gravel, grasshoppers in garden hoses, in dog dishes and mailboxes, trapped underneath newspapers. Anywhere you went you could hear them, scritch and hopping, rattling around like pennies in a jar. All the cars on the street had grasshoppers ground up in their tires. We had to put tinfoil over the lemonade jug and wrap the lemons in cellophane. Grasshoppers jumped on and off the tinfoil, like popcorn.

Mullen's dad pokes in the black mailbox. Lifts the metal flap. He pulls out a few letters, looks at the addresses. Puts one of them in his mouth and the rest in his back pocket. He takes the letter out of his mouth and tears it in half. Tears it in half again. Stuffs the torn paper in the front of his blue jeans.

Mullen's dad is probably the tallest guy in town. He comes out of the house, stretching his skinny arms way up above the top of the door frame. He scratches his chin. He puts his hands on his narrow hips and leans backward, rolls his shoulders around.

How's the old man's credit?

It's fifty cents a glass, Dad.

Come on. You know I'm good for it.

Dad, you've got a job.

Mullen's dad sits down on the curb. He takes a toothpick out of his shirt pocket and sticks it in his mouth. Mullen pulls a plastic cup off the stack and digs his tongue into the ice

bucket. Takes his dad a cup of lemonade. Then he gets a duotang out from under the bag of sugar and makes a tick on his dad's tab. Mullen won't ever let me look at his dad's tab; I can only guess how big it is. Someday he's going to pay it, though: a jam jar full of quarters, five-dollar bills tied into lumps with elastic bands. Enough nickels to fill a Thermos. We'll both buy new bikes, with handbrakes, not the back-peddalling kind, when Mullen's dad pays his tab. Buy every new comic book the week it comes out, with plastic bags so they don't get sticky and torn up. We'll skip school and buy slurpees and boxes of Lego, and if they throw us out of school we'll laugh, on account of our financial security. I think they ought to try and throw us out of school. We'll just make the lemonade better.

At 8:20 we take down the signs: Lemonade! and No Dogs Please. We take the cooler and the lawn chairs into Mullen's garage. Mullen's dad lets us leave the cinder blocks and the plank on the lawn. We go to school.

At school all the Dead Kids from up the hill take off their outside shoes and put on their inside shoes. White with stripes and velcro instead of laces, or high-tops with thick laces that are always clean. Inside the school it's dark and hard to see, especially after having been outside for so long. Kids move around in the dark like they're underwater, bubbles rising from their yappy mouths.

Today I figure the whole school is underwater and all the Dead Kids are jellyfish, and you can't touch a jellyfish 'cause you'll get stung, see. Good thing I've got my snorkel and my flashlight. I figure some conquistadors must have sunk around here somewhere. Jellyfish come close and I duck and pivot like they taught us in basketball. Jellyfish stare at me with their buggy jellyfish eyes, floating on stalks in the murky water. A bell rings, it must be a fishing lure; all the jellyfish start floating off in the same direction. I bet it's a trap, I bet there's nets and harpoons waiting down the hall. They clog up the hall, all their oozy tentacles get caught up into one big jelly lump. I bob along behind them, breathing through my snorkel, in, out. Far enough behind that when the fishing starts, I won't get trampled if they panic. I wonder if jellyfish panic when harpoons start sticking into their crowd, when brother and sister jellyfish get hauled up all of a sudden, out and away. Or maybe they just bob along stupid-like, waiting, bubbling, not knowing any better, until the harpoon gets them right square.

Pete Leakie sits on the sidewalk, legs spread out, drawing with chalk. Hey Pete, what are you doing? Drawing, he says. He rubs a stub of chalk into the grainy concrete. A house, with orange flames, and people sitting on the roof. Are they yelling, Pete? They're laughing, he says. See? See all the smiles? Why's the house on fire, Pete? Pete shrugs.

Pete reaches into his knapsack, blue and full of holes, reaches in and gets some green chalk. Starts drawing green circles above the house. Where's Mullen? asks Pete. Mullen's at home, I say, doing the dishes. Mullen's dad makes him do the dishes? Sure, I say, every night after supper. Pete starts drawing green X's inside the green circles. What are you drawing now, Pete? Well, the house is on fire, says Pete.

Pete wears sweaters and glasses and has two chins. There's yellow chalk smudged in his black hair, and chalk handprints all up and down his overalls. Chalk on the arms of his black-rimmed glasses. Last year, when Mullen and I got sent up for putting wallpaper paste on all the shower floors at school, Pete brought us potato chips in the detention room. Pete Leakie isn't a Dead Kid. He's all right.

Pete shuffles backward on the concrete; he sticks a piece of blue chalk into his mouth and creases his forehead up all critical-like, examining his work.

Do you know how to draw horses? Pete asks me. I don't like drawing horses, I tell him. Yeah? What do you like drawing? You know, I say, the same old stuff. Today at school I drew some rhinoceroses. No kidding, says Pete. Yeah, no kidding.

I look at my watch. If Pete Leakie were a Dead Kid, it would be a whole different ball of wax. If Pete Leakie were a

Dead Kid we'd just talk about Mr. Weissman's math class and how many problems there are to do. A Dead Kid would be shift-y and stutter-y, 'cause Dead Kids don't much like me and aren't supposed to talk to me. But a Dead Kid would never draw on the sidewalk with chalk, so Pete Leakie's not so bad.

Mullen comes around the corner. Hey, Mullen, Pete Leakie says, your dad makes you do the dishes every night?

Oh yeah, Mullen says. We make quite a mess, the old man and me. Spaghetti sauce and baked-on cheese. Stacks of dishes up past your head.

Don't you have a dishwasher? Pete asks.

We got a sink. Mullen looks down the street, looks at his watch. A sink and one of those wire brushes, with the soap inside.

My parents bought a new dishwasher last year, with the tax-return money, Pete says. You don't even have to rinse the dishes off first, just put them right in. That's great, Pete, Mullen says. Yeah, I say. Great, Pete.

Mullen's got that look, that look he gets, like the time he found the boat at the bottom of the river, or when he wanted to start collecting flyers from all the offices on Main Street. It doesn't do any good to ask him, Hey, Mullen, why do you want to fill garbage bags with driver's-education pamphlets and pizza-delivery menus and bible-retreat brochures and mortgage application forms? He'll just get that look. I bet they'd have a lot of flyers at the IGA, he'll say, I bet they've got all kinds of flyers there.

Mullen grabs my elbow and whispers, Hey, do you know where we can get a telescope?

A telescope?

Yeah, he says, we oughta go and do some what, some surveilling.

I've got some plastic binoculars, I tell him, but they're at my house.

We have to go now. She might leave any time.

Who might leave?

Mullen stretches his arms up above his head and his black T-shirt tugs up above his belly button. Gosh, Pete, Mullen yawns, it sure has been something, watching you draw, but we have to go. See you around.

Yeah, Pete Leakie says, see you guys around. Pete Leakie finds his orange chalk. Starts drawing an orange octopus on the sidewalk.

Where are we going, Mullen?

We have to go surveil, he says. Down the street, across from the post office.

There isn't anything across from the post office.

There is now.

You can smell the Russians' barbecue all the way up the street. We walk up the sidewalk and there they are, out in their yard, sitting in their lawn chairs, reaching over now and then to prod at the steaks sizzling away on the grill. Most people have already put their barbecues back into their garages on account of it being fall, but the Russians do everything later than everybody else. They probably won't put up their Christmas lights until two days after Christmas again this year, and then leave them out until June. They wave with their brown beer bottles.

Hey, Mullen, Vaslav hollers, where's your dad?

Still at work I guess, he says.

Solzhenitsyn sticks his hands into the pockets of his skinny jeans. I left work an hour ago, says Solzhenitsyn, and he had already gone.

Well, Mullen says, I don't know then.

Tell him to come over when he gets home, Solzhenitsyn says. Solzhenitsyn works with Mullen's dad at the meat-packing plant, smashing ice. Every day they get into the truck together, wearing their overalls and rubber boots, and drive out of town, almost to High River. They smash ice with sledgehammers, in a small steel room, and come home red

and sweating, with sore backs and wet socks, ice in the toes of their boots and seams of their blue jeans.

We walk down the alley instead of down Main Street, 'cause we like to throw rocks at garbage cans. Mullen gets a few pretty good dents into a stainless-steel can outside an empty garage. I like the sound the plastic cans make when you hit them with a rock, especially if they're empty. Even though it's only six, the sun is starting to go down out on the other side of town, where the foothills start. Sometimes Mullen's dad takes us for drives out into the hills, up past the provincial-park line, and shows us the forest-fire watch towers and abandoned farmhouses and other good stuff.

As long as I can remember, the windows in the building across from the post office have been covered with paper like you wrap boxes in at Christmas to mail to Ontario. We sit on the sidewalk in front of the post office and Mullen takes some comic books out of his backpack. Here, make like some dumb kid, he says. We make like to flip through comic books but peek over the tops at the woman in the window.

She doesn't look like other women, the woman in the window. The women down at the hair salon or the drugstore wear sweaters and short jackets, with blue jeans. The women at the United Church wear gold earrings and black blouses. Mrs. Lampman across the street always wears a blazer when she teaches social studies at the school. The woman in the window across from the post office wears a sweater, but it fits different than any I've ever seen. Looks thin, and when she moves, it holds on to her. She wears a grey skirt that goes down to her ankles but stays close to her thighs and the backs of her knees. Her hair is pulled back into some sort of clip, but it sticks out in all sorts of directions, trying to escape.

What do you think she's doing in there? I don't know, Mullen says, peeking over the top of his comic book. The room is empty, bare drywall with putty patches showing, and

the electrical sockets unfinished, hairy clumps of wire. She wanders around with a tape measure. Measures a wall and writes on a pad of yellow paper tucked into the belt of her skirt. She sticks the pen behind her ear and frowns.

I bet she's from the city, Mullen says. That's how all the women look in the city. I sat on a bus in Calgary with two women like that. All pretty and high classified.

She drops her tape measure and lights a cigarette, a long, thin one. Smoke mixes in with the sawdust in the air. Mullen flips a few pages of his comic.

We watch her for a while. She writes stuff down and holds her hands in front of her face like a square, at arm's length, looks at the walls through the square. She doesn't ever look out the window. People drive by, and if they know us they wave. Nobody cares if Mullen and I sit on the post office steps and read comic books, 'cause nobody cares what we do, so long as it isn't causing public mischief. That's what the caretaker at the First Evangelical Church said when they made us apologize about the flyers. That we were causing public mischief. Public mischief, it turns out, is when you climb up on the roof of the school with three garbage bags full of flyers, fold them into paper airplanes, and throw them at Dead Kids. Even if you only get through half of one bag in two hours. They sent us up for that: for skipping class and making a mess of the playground. They said taking that many flyers was like stealing, even though flyers are free and in piles that say Take One. And after we'd cleaned up the whole playground we had to go down Main Street and apologize at the insurance office, and the bank, and the First Evangelical Church. When they told Mullen's dad he laughed, but the way people sometimes laugh on television, when you can tell they're only actors.

I have to go home soon, Mullen.

No, come on, she's still doing stuff, he says. I bet she'll smoke another cigarette soon. Look, she has sawhorses in

there. You think she might saw something up? Maybe she's got one of those circular saws.

I have to go home, Mullen. Seriously.

Since when does it matter when you go home?

I stand up and hand him his comic. I'll see you tomorrow.

Yeah, tomorrow.

I walk down to the end of the block and turn around.

Mullen's still sitting there, pretending to read his comic, watching the woman in the window.

An old man with patches on his elbow leans on McClaghan's counter, looking at the lighters in the rotating shelf. One of those flat hats on his wrinkly old head, all covered in buttons. Annual Rotarian Convention, and Legion Number 19, and Vets Get Set. He takes a scratchy old Zippo lighter out of his jacket. A flint, he says to McClaghan, I need a new flint for this.

Where'd you get this? McClaghan takes the lighter, turns it over. Mail order?

Antwerp, says the old man, I got it in Antwerp. Pressed into my hands out of gratitude.

McClaghan spits in his jar.

McClaghan's jar is the worst thing in town. You always have to go to McClaghan's hardware store after school, though, for model-airplane paint or thirty-five-cent gum or hockey tape, so you always have to see the jar. He leaves it on the counter right beside the hockey cards, this beet-pickle jar two-thirds full of old-man phlegm, brown tobacco juice, stubby toothpicks. He takes it everywhere. Any time you walk by, there's McClaghan out on the step, under the 40% OFF sign, listening to his radio, spitting. But spitting on the sidewalk is bad for business I guess, so he spits in the jar. You can hear it all up the street, the hack and plop of old-man spit landing in that beet-pickle jar.

McClaghan rummages in his drawer. Pulls out envelopes, paper boxes. Opens them, frowns, puts them back. The old man puts all his nickels on the counter, one at a time, lining them all up and trying to get them all straight, but his hands shake and push the nickels all over the place.

In McClaghan's hardware store they've got everything you could ever want. Table saws and new bicycle chains, and four-man tents and car batteries, rubber boots, fishing rods, pickaxes and wheelbarrows – everything. Stacks of plywood and two-by-fours, router bits, camping stoves and jerry cans. They've got a paint-shaker, just about the loudest thing I ever heard, shakes so fast you can't read the label on the can. And all that stuff is great, but the best part about McClaghan's is fireworks.

So, McClaghan, Mullen says, pulling his elbows, his chin, up on the counter. McClaghan's counter is way taller than it needs to be. How about some of those roman candles you've got back there? I bet those pack a whole bunch, yeah?

McClaghan wraps his fingers around the jar. Out. Both of you, beat it.

How much does one of those big boxes cost, anyway?

Split, kid! McClaghan barks. We scoot outside. Sit down on the sidewalk. People sure get worked up about stuff, says Mullen. Hey, you want to come for dinner with the Russians? Me and my dad are going over, well, pretty quick I guess.

Yeah, that sounds pretty good, I say. We walk past the Lions Club playground. Two kids crouch on the teeter-totter. Neither one wants to go up because they know the other will hop off and crash the hard seat down on the hard ground. They just bob up and down, glaring at each other, never quite leaving the ground.

Hey, Mullen, what's Solzhenitsyn's real name? I don't know, he says, I thought Solzhenitsyn was his real name. I saw some other guy on TV with that name, I say, some famous Russian from history. Mullen throws a rock out across the street. They can't both have the same name? Course they can't have the same name. You never met anyone named Benjamin Franklin, did you? Or Genghis Khan? I met a Benjamin once, Mullen says. Back in Winnipeg in the second grade. When his front teeth fell out no new ones grew back, so he had fake

teeth. He could take them out. You can't name your kid after somebody famous, I say. It's not allowed. That's why you have to get a birth certificate when you're born, to make sure that you've got an allowed name. I don't know what Solzhenitsyn's real name is; that's what my dad always calls him, Mullen says. All the other Russians call him Solly. Is that an allowed name?

Mullen's dad comes out of his house carrying a bunch of TV trays tight against his chest. Closes the door with his hip. Walks out onto the sidewalk, past Deke's. Pushes open the little wooden gate with his hip. The Russians' lawn is about as dead as everybody else's on the block, except for Mrs. Lampman's maybe. In the summer she always digs little patches along the path, plants sweet peas. Everybody else on the street is doing pretty good if they keep their lawn cut. Pavel and Solzhenitsyn sit in their lawn chairs around the barbecue, their heavy jean jackets buttoned all the way up in the cold, brown beer bottles tight in black gloves. Vaslav sits on the step, his belt undone and his big stomach pushing the bottom of his sweater up over his belly button. He's working on his novel. Drinks beer and scribbles on a huge pile of paper in his lap. He scratches his forehead with his pen, leaves a blue line.

Hey, you ever torn the corset from the heaving chest of a kidnapped virginal millionairess?

The kids, says Mullen's dad. Starts to unfold TV trays.

The kids have never torn the corsets off anything. I'm trying to get the facts straight. So as to be historically accurate.

They've got a lot of buttons on them. Those corsets. It would take some tearing.

Right, says Vaslav, it sure would.

Does the virginal millionairess have a name? asks Mullen.

Well, I've got it narrowed down to a short list of about eighteen. Has to have the right tone, see. I've left it blank so far in the manuscript. He holds up the top few pages and, sure

enough, the pencil script is full of blank spaces. It's got to go well with all the other words, see, he says, especially the ones I use a lot. And it's got to evoke the proper balance of Victorian restraint and bottled passion. Voluptuous without being lusty, see. Owing to the virginalness of the character.

Pavel takes the lid off the barbecue and starts to turn chicken legs with his black-ended tongs. He squints with his one eye, making sure he gets the legs okay with the tongs. His glass eye looks off somewhere else, never quite in line with the real one. Solzhenitsyn goes back and forth to the refrigerator inside, bringing out all kinds of food: jars and jars of all kinds of pickles, and plates with different coloured strips of fish, covered tight in plastic wrap. A bowl of hard-boiled eggs. Him and Mullen's dad talk all serious-like, in between bites of pickled beets and anchovies, lots of big serious words, like newscasters on television.

Vaslav reaches across them for a pickle. Hey, he asks Mullen's dad, is there hot water in your house?

Hot water? Sure there is.

Vaslav sticks the pickle in the side of his mouth. Wedges a beer bottle against the arm of his lawn chair, hits it with the flat of his palm, pops the cap off. I called McClaghan three times last week about the hot water, he says through a mouthful of pickle. Each time he tells me to leave it alone. If it ain't broke, don't fix it, he says. I told him an ounce of prevention is the whole cure and he hung up on me.

Our hot water is fine, says Mullen's dad.

Our hot water is fine too, says Pavel. Vaslav makes a face. Pass me the herring, he says.

You left work early, says Solzhenitsyn.

Mullen's dad opens another bottle of beer. Shrugs. Sometimes you've got to leave work early. Solly drums his pencil on his knee.

I can't tell who's skinnier, Solzhenitsyn or Mullen's dad. It's hard to imagine the two of them with sledgehammers, in

a steel room, smashing blocks of ice. It must get slippery in the ice room. The floor must get slushy and deep, like outside the curling rink in March, when the weather starts to break.

Earl Barrie got hit by a side of beef just before three o'clock, Soltzhenitsyn says.

What?

A frozen side of beef. Took a wrong swing and hit him in the head. Luckily, his hard hat –

And he's ...

Jarvis and I drove him to the High River hospital. Had to clear all the empty egg cartons out of the cab and lay him across our laps. His head in Jarvis's lap and his feet sticking out the window. To keep his head steady. He got conscious every now and then, went on and on about spanking his wife. Lord, just let me spank my wife again, he'd say. Jarvis had to put the talk-radio station on.

Earl hates talk radio.

Right. Kept him awake. So he went off about how much he hates talk radio, and how he wants to spank his wife, all the way to High River.

Why does Earl Barrie want to spank his wife? asks Mullen.

His dad glares at Solly. I don't know, Mullen. He must have taken quite a bump. Pretty delirious.

Days I can't find Mullen I like to walk over to the gully and throw rocks. There's this grocery cart in the gully I like to throw rocks at. Rattles real good when you hit it. Or I like to walk over to the football field and watch them building houses in the new subdivision. Some of them wearing hard hats, with stickers: Safety First, and 1,000 Consecutive Hours. They've got heavy belts and hammers. If Mullen and I had hammers and tools like that, we could build all sorts of stuff. We could get shovels and dig out the back wall Underground. Dig tunnels and other rooms: a library for our comics and a workshop for all the building we'd do. We could build shelves, put down a plywood floor. We could put down roofing felt so we could take off our shoes and not get slivers. We could build a wall, like the fur-trading forts in social studies class, with sharpened logs, and a drawbridge. Then we could just stay down there and do whatever we wanted. Grown-ups from the school could come by and hammer on the log walls and we'd just ignore them from inside our underground fort. They'd fall into the sharpened logs underneath our drawbridge and we'd laugh and laugh.

After recess, all the Dead Kids stop what they're doing: hanging up coats or unlacing boots or popping open the rings of their new binders. They start to point and then realize what they're doing, and stand there, looking awkward. A few binders pop, like grasshoppers jumping.

Jenny Tierney walks to her coat hook. Hangs up her black leather purse. Takes off her black jean jacket. She looks around the hallway and all the kids have to pretend like they weren't staring at her, get back to taking off their boots or getting their textbooks off the shelf.

Jenny Tierney is the only kid who gets sent up more than me and Mullen. But me and Mullen get sent up for dumb stuff, like wallpaper paste and soap flakes and racing toilet-paper rolls down the staircase. Jenny Tierney told a kid to stick scissors into an electric socket, and he did. Jenny Tierney is twelve years old and still in the fifth grade, like us. She's two inches taller than me and four inches taller than Mullen. Jenny Tierney hit a kid in the face with her math textbook so hard he has to wear glasses now. They didn't even send her up for that, at least not like we get sent up, cleaning chalkboards or washing the windows on the school buses. She had to sit in the office for hours, and her parents had to come and sign forms. I remember her math book sitting on Mr. Weissman's desk, the brown paper cover with a dark red splotch. Some people say that every time Jenny Tierney hits a kid with her math book, she peels off the brown paper and puts it in a scrapbook. She's got pages and pages of other kids' bloody noses, beat into brown paper.

We all rush off to class with Jenny Tierney watching us. She waits until we're all on the way off to class before she follows, her hard-heeled boots ringing on the tiled floor.