

‘thus you write a history  
use words you’ve used before  
your own voice speaking in the morning whispering’  
– bpNichol, *The Martyrology*

‘It’s a hard world for little things.’  
– Robert Mitchum, *The Night of the Hunter*



Dawn

The red start of the morning.

This will happen, if it happens at all, for the same reason that all things happen: because they are inevitable. It's 9:30 in the morning and it's the middle of the bottle.

Happen.

Chase sat in the Jeep for a while and looked out over the now shining lake. Fingertips along the wheel. Two black crows arguing about something in the pine trees. Dew on the hood. Thirty-seven years old. The time to think. A little time. When the frogs died all over the lawn, and when they ran from their parents and when Mary's grandfather died they kept him in a pine box on the porch for two months until the ground was warm enough to dig a hole to put him in. He might have another drink. Probably not. He probably shouldn't bother having another drink now. Haven wouldn't want to see that in the toxicology report. That's what that was called. Maybe that. Or something else like that. How many drinks did it take to show up? Probably too late.

Now.

Like putting on a sweater and taking it off because it didn't fit well. It was the right thing to do. Haven was always right about things. Right about everything. She always knew what to do. She wouldn't do this. But she wasn't living this life, holding everything against the dark.

Watched Lucky chasing around the campsite, running from one Oh Henry! wrapper to the next, back and forth and barking at the yellow paper. They'd find Lucky okay. He shouldn't worry about that. He could stop that. Stop now.

Now.

Waited.

Didn't think about his father. Never thought about his father. But he thought about the train, how when the train came the

whole world just shook. How it shook under his feet. No, stop. Just stopstopstop. Just wanted to lie down for a while. Wake up rested and get this done in a pure way.

Simply.

He was right to do what he was doing. It was the thing that should be done. That's all. So he set about doing it.

Because it was inevitable.

The thing that should be done.

Do it.

Chase looked out over the lake again. Put the handbrake on. Got out of the Jeep and gathered the things he would need. No other way out. The dry crunch of leaves. Went to tie up Lucky.



# One

*These are the things that took place  
in the morning with the return of the sun*

‘You know what I do, Grandma?’ April asked.

There was still early frost on the windshield. Mary had brought April with her so Haven could get some sleep after being up all night with her medical books. Haven needed rest. April needed some mothering. And groceries. Everyone needed groceries.

‘What’s that, my darlin’?’ Mary answered through the rear-view mirror.

‘I squinch up my eyes ... like this ... like this, Grandma.’

‘I’m looking.’

‘And then I open them and there’s all these little stars swimming and falling down.’

‘Yes, well, that’s okay.’

‘And I pretend God’s coming ...’

‘That’s nice, darlin’ ...’

*We all pretend that, sweetie,* Mary thought, pulling into the parking lot. *We all do that.*

She bought four bags of cookies with April’s help. They weren’t on the list, but the world could always use more cookies. When your father ups and leaves you for no good reason, an extra cookie won’t hurt. Be cheaper to make ’em, but April liked her Oreos and Chips Ahoy! Mr. Christie, you make good cookies. She wondered at the world. Chase and Haven ending up on her doorstep years ago. Her never thinking she’d have children and then suddenly those two. Bringing them up as best she could. Like they were hers, and they were, and now Haven’s little one. She helped April sort the bags of cookies in the cart. Her little fingers. And herself, she thought, plain amongst the women. This week she would keep on packing the lunches, keep on dusting and sweeping and doing all of the work that continued the world.





When Haven was little, before going to live with Mary, before marriage, and before April, before the end of marriage, before everything became too real on cold winter mornings, she would lie in on spring mornings in the growing warmth, and in the summer with the sun lighting up the thin bare wood panelling of the trailer, and would float up as if she were pulled by a long cord from the sky and she would rise up through the thin roof, the pink insulation and the shingles, hover over the small yard and leaning woodshed, up past the trees and above the highway and the black roads and the Kemptville creek, the tiny cars and people moving slowly down streets and sidewalks past the small houses and shops. The air blew through the bathrobe she wore to bed, lifting it away from her body, and she could stretch through the lazy sky beneath her as if it were a blanket.



‘Has it ever occurred to you that we’re grown-ups now?’ Haven asked him once.

‘No,’ Chase said. It hadn’t.

They met for coffee in different places. This was way before the Tim Horton’s opened up. Mostly they met at the Bright Star and watched the cars go by the window. People doing their errands.

‘You know those inappropriate thoughts that go through your head?’ he asked her.

‘Which ones?’

‘Any of them. Things you don’t want to think about. You know, thoughts that, really, you shouldn’t think – that you wouldn’t, like, you wouldn’t want to share them with anyone.’

‘Sure.’

'You have those?'

'Sure.'

Chase poured another sugar into his coffee.

'I'm not telling you what they are,' she said.

'No, it's just, well, how often do you have those?' he asked her.

He picked up his spoon and turned it around his cup.

Haven looked at him. 'Once in a while ...' she said. 'You?'

Chase made himself laugh and tossed the empty sugar packet into the garbage by the waitress station.

'It's the only kind I have,' he said and made himself keep laughing and she laughed with him then and it was okay and they picked up their menus and ordered some breakfast.

But it was mostly true.

And he thought that probably she knew that it was mostly true but he didn't want to go any further than that. And she didn't ask him to.

'Do you ever think about when we were kids?' she asked him.



Haven found Chase's other boot behind the couch next to the cat.

'Hurry up, you two, I will not be late walking into church.'

They never went to church but it was Easter and she had been up all night cooking and whatever else she did all night when she was like this. She had pulled them both out of bed and told them to hurry and get dressed.

'The worst kind of people on earth are late for church.'

Everything was melting outside. There was a puddle of water on the floor near the door.

'I will not walk into church late on Easter of all days.'

Easter was pretty much the only day they ever walked into church.

‘The worst kind of people on earth, the lowest of the low, and that is not us. Jack, get those eggs done like I said so they’ll be ready by the time we get home.’

Their father was apparently not going to church. Their mother had the car keys in her hand, shaking them like the house was on fire.

‘C’mon, Chase, it does not take this long to get a pair of boots on,’ she said.

Their father was watching a fishing show.

‘You know what to do now, Jack, with the eggs,’ she was calling to him.

‘Colour the eggs,’ he said, his eyes still on the tv.

‘Dye the eggs,’ she said as if she were explaining it for the third or fourth time, which she probably was.

‘Right. Dye ... the ... eggs ...’ he repeated slowly.

It was time to go, Haven knew, time to get them separated.

‘We’re ready, Mom,’ she said.

She had Chase by the door. Their boots were on, coats and hats.

Now her mother was doing something at the oven.

‘And this cake has to be taken out in exactly twenty minutes or it won’t be any good.’

‘Dye ... the ... eggs ...’ he said again from the couch, a little louder this time with bigger spaces between the words.

‘Okay, we’re ready to go, Mom,’ Haven said.

She was looking around the kitchen like she’d forgotten something.

‘Mom?’

‘Okay,’ she said and then she turned and came toward them quickly, opening the door and shovelling them out in one motion.

‘The eggs, Jack, and the cake,’ she called back into the trailer.

‘DYE ... THE ...’ You could still hear the word *eggs* muffled after she closed the door.

When they got back from church, Haven made sure she was through the door first. Her dad was not on the couch and the eggs were just where Haven was afraid they'd be – still in the carton on the counter. They weren't coloured, but he had written on each one of them with a pencil and a marker: *Happy Fucking Easter, Happy Fucking Easter, Happy Fucking Easter.*

'C'mon,' she said to Chase.

He was still looking at the eggs.

'C'mon,' she said and she took his hand and pulled him down the hall.

Their father was coming out of the bathroom. The sound of the toilet behind him.

'How was church?' he asked. He was wiping his hands on his pants.

'Good,' she said.

She kept them moving quick towards the bedroom. She got the door closed just as she heard their mother come in and drop the two boxes of mashed potatoes she'd bought on the way home onto the counter.

It was quiet.

'What?' Chase asked.

She waited.

Then they listened as the eggs hit what sounded like the kitchen cupboards one at a time and their father yelled out things like 'Hey!' and 'What the hell?' and 'They're decorated for Chris-sake, willya stop?'

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12

Haven counted to herself.

‘You can take off your coat now,’ she told Chase.



She had a box of things she liked to take out when no one was around. Crayons. A watch. Safety pin. Pennies. A marble. A pencil. Jacks. Two little dolls Chase had found once. She loved to draw pictures of birds.



They were driving a long way. Chase was wishing for his eighth birthday and what he wanted was a radio. He was sitting in the front seat of the station wagon and resting his head against the window. He lifted his feet when they went over train tracks. He counted mailboxes but there were too many of them and then they were in the city and there weren't any. His father smoked cigarettes and listened to the radio. The news. Music. They went over the big bridge to Hull and Chase held his breath for as long as he could so he wouldn't smell the smoke from the mill. They made paper there. He didn't know why making paper would stink so much.

His father swore a few times driving up and down little streets looking for the address. He kept looking at the dashboard and swearing at it too.

‘When you grow up, Chase, you get a good job, and a good car,’ he said.

Chase said that he would.

‘Then you can drive me around,’ his father said, squinting again at a piece of paper that had the address on it. ‘If I’m not dead.’

They turned another corner.

‘Yes!’ his father exclaimed, looking at a little house with painted white wood and blue shutters. It was on a hill street crowded with little houses like it.

There was a couch sitting on the front lawn.

‘There we go,’ his father said and he pulled on the emergency brake and got out of the car with the engine running.

He never turned off the engine if he didn’t have to because sometimes the car didn’t start again. Unless they were in their own driveway and then it was safe. There was a cardboard pine tree hanging from the rear-view mirror that was supposed to smell but it didn’t have any smell on it anymore. You could scratch it even and all that happened was the green ink got under your fingernail. Chase got out of the car. His father was at the top of the little concrete steps at the front door ringing the doorbell.

Chase stood looking at the couch. It had glass ashtrays stuck in the arms.

‘Nobody home,’ his father said, coming back down the little steps. There were little metal railings on either side of the steps and one side was loose and leaning.

Right then the car shuddered and stopped.

‘Shit,’ his father said and ran to the car and jumped in to start it again. Sometimes if he started it again right away it would go. It didn’t go.

‘Shit shit shit shit sonofabitch,’ his father yelled, slamming his hands against the steering wheel.

He sat there for a while and then he got out again and slammed the door hard twice. He walked over to where Chase was standing and looked at the couch. He stayed looking at the couch for a while.

‘Look at those ashtrays,’ he said.

‘I know,’ Chase said, ‘they’re cool.’

His father stood looking at the couch still and then he took out his cigarettes and lit one. He walked around the back of the couch looking at it and then sat down at one end and tapped his cigarette into one of the ashtrays. Then he sat looking out into the street.

Chase sat down next to him. His father got back up and tried the car once more but it didn’t go. He didn’t swear this time and he left the radio playing and then he got back out. He sat back down on the couch and they listened to the music. It had started to rain.



Chase started to write his first novel at the age of twelve. Just a couple of years after they ran from their parents and ended up with Mary. And many years before the campsite. Before the bear.

‘I’m writing a book,’ he told Mary over oatmeal.

‘Y’cn barely read,’ she said.

‘I’m writing a book,’ he insisted.

‘Fine then. Just don’t trouble me with it,’ she relented. ‘Just leave me out of it or I’ll smack you.’

She didn’t mean it, though, and that was the difference with Mary – first she told him she would hit him, and then she never did. When she was mad she just gave him the look. And sometimes she hugged him very tight.

‘You’re the star of it,’ he told her.

She gave him the look. That book never came to anything more than a page, but when he was twenty-one he self-published a book of short stories and brought it to her.

‘I wrote it,’ he told her.

‘You did what?’

‘I wrote this book.’

‘You never did.’ She took the book from him and held it at arm’s length as if it might jump at her. ‘It’s got your name on it ... What’s in it?’

‘Stories.’

She looked at him. ‘What, out of your head like?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Like, lies? Stuff you made up that’s not true?’

Chase thought about it. ‘I guess that’s right.’

She looked at it more closely for a minute. ‘And they pay you for that?’

‘Yeah. Well, when people buy it.’

She put the book down. ‘Right. Well, that’s good then.’

She studied the cover again. ‘A cup of tea wouldn’t be a terrible thing. Are you just gonna stand there in the hopes that the tea’ll brew itself?’



Lonely. Making up the bed with the flap of crisp white sheets. Her breasts hanging pale in the long mirror screwed to the back of the closet door. White, and lonely.

‘Children wear you down,’ her mother once told Haven. ‘Everything wears you down, till there’s nothing left.’

No sense wishing you were born to something better. You get what you get.





Afraid. That's what he was.

'Listen, April,' he said.

He'd brought her to the Bright Star for breakfast. Haven had to work, so he picked up April and drove her to school.

'What is it?' she asked. She knew it was something. She was like Haven.

'What's Grade 10 like now?' Chase asked her.

She smiled. 'It's okay, my friends are pretty cool. Some of the teachers are okay ...'

Chase ordered pancakes. He never had pancakes there. He was doing more of that lately – doing things he didn't usually do.

'Pretty cool ...' he echoed.

'What?'

'Your friends, they're pretty cool?'

'Oh, yeah, we have a great time. We're pretty tight, you know?'

'Yeah.' Chase poured his syrup.

He thought about himself in Grade 10. He'd spent most of high school learning about drinking.

This wasn't how he'd thought this out. Never mind. She probably knew anyway.

'You're not eating your eggs,' he said.

'What? Oh yeah ...'

That he loved her.



The cracking of the radiator, the smell of Ivy's perfume, cold cream, fried eggs, toast, lemon soap, strong coffee. Ivy. All the smells all at once, all awash with them. Like somebody talking too fast. It was him. The patterns in his head.

Cigarette smoke. Candy. Sport bra. Lipstick. A smell of the colour yellow.

Late slanting sun through the windows. He turned again in the sheets.

*What if I just tell her?*

Now.

Chase looked down at his toes resting in a pool of sunlight cast by the blinds. He felt disconnected from them and from the rest of his body as if he were tethered by small ropes like a balloon. Next to him, Ivy's body rose and fell steadily with her breath. He lifted his hand gently and slowly from the sheets, little balloons lifting his hand and resting it on her shoulder. On the slope of her waist where it met her hip. There. Warm.

'It was like this,' he told her.

Her open face and her jagged black hair shining. Her jagged black hair.

He told her about the Christmases, about the birthday parties, about the calls from the school, about the police, he told her about the pig, he told her about the guns, about Haven almost dying, about how they ran away then and ended up with Mary. He didn't tell her about the train. He didn't tell her everything. Never told anyone everything, not even Haven.

'Like this ...' And he told her about it, her dark eyes wider.

'Well,' she said finally when he was finished telling her his childhood, her hands lightly tracing the black hair from her eyes and then falling like small nesting birds between her legs. She was always in her underwear. White cotton underwear and her legs long and dark. A T-shirt, blue or green. Her courier bike rested against the wall in the bedroom.

'Well ...' she said again, tucking one leg beneath her on the bed and looking at him.

She smelled like lemons. The skin tight across her forehead.

Like oranges or limes. Citrus. Drank wine through a straw. The T-shirt cotton stretched across her. Each evening she'd wash the city from her body, standing in the shower for a full half-hour, and in the morning she'd go out and begin to apply it again. On Saturday she'd stay in bed, then make hot chocolate, standing in the steam from the stove. There were no envelopes to deliver on Saturdays. He'd watch her as she shaved her legs. Kiss her on the smooth skin. He had the first dreams he'd ever remembered having.

His hands after they made love, full of the smell of her. The taste.

Her skin light brown, like velvet, coffee, the soles of her feet like paper.

He lay still and studied the angles of the room. Pictured the surfaces of the bricks outside the window in the February light, the cold flat of their surfaces. The frozen iron of the fire escape. The grey-streaked glass of the window, which had hidden how many others from the winter dawns.

Having and keeping. Two different things.

*I am very still*, he thought. *I am not moving*.



There was nothing to do and they'd been driving since breakfast, which was toast without butter since there was no butter. Chase was playing a game where he pretended his hand was an airplane and he held it out the window and let the wind carry it up or down. The sun was gleaming off the chrome trim around the window. You could move your hand like the flaps on a plane's wing and your hand would lift up or go down. Sometimes you'd lose control of it and you'd have to go on the speaker and apologize to the passengers for the turbulence. He got tired of flying and opened the glove compartment to see if there was anything new in it.

Sitting there unopened was a box of Glosettes chocolate-covered peanuts. Once their mother had made their father stop at the Hershey plant in Smiths Falls and they had gone on a tour and they each got a box of Glosettes for free. This was a new one, though. Chase looked up to see if his dad had seen him open the glove compartment. His dad was looking right at him.

‘Go ahead,’ he said, ‘you can have it.’

He was smiling.



It was a snow day. There were no buses. Other kids cheered when there was a snow day. They got up early in the morning to listen to the radio for the announcement. They talked about it at recess the day before.

‘It’s gonna be one for sure.’

‘On the radio they said ten inches and freezing rain.’

‘No way buses are gonna go through that.’

And they stood around like they were congratulating each other on winning some award or something. For Haven it just meant working harder.

‘Finish those up and let’s get going,’ her father said.

Haven looked down at her Eggos. Chase was watching from behind the toaster. *What do you want me to do*, he was asking, *what should I do?*

He came back into the room with a BB pistol. They had never seen it before except on the shelf in Canadian Tire. She knew what it was because Chase had told her all about it. He had asked for it for Christmas.

‘Let’s go,’ her father said and she got up and put on her coat and boots.

She didn’t look back at Chase. He was safe. He had his Eggos and syrup.