

Years later, Audrey Cole bumped into a van on Centre Street, just up from Cash Corner, and thought, This is just like Wrists' van.

She bumped into the van's passenger-side mirror walking head down against the wind, a mid-December wheezing wind blowing over Calgary off the eastern faces of the Rockies. The Beltline street lights glowed orange in the brittle sky, and Audrey, shoulder forward against the cold with both fists in the pockets of her too-thin-for-walking-around jacket, knocked her arm against the glass.

She shouldn't have been walking south down Centre Street on a Friday night at ten o'clock. Home was west, the other way along 12th Avenue. At home Shelly was in bed, hopefully had been for hours, herded up the stairs by her grandmother, who would have come back downstairs to put all the colouring books, bead-eyed stuffed bears, plush hedgehogs, and stringy-haired plastic princesses left in front of the television into their Rubbermaid tub.

Audrey should have been at home, on the couch with her mother for the late cycle of the local news while her daughter slept upstairs, except that she'd seen the Skinny Cowboy.

She'd got a clear look and she was sure.

Her first feeling was to run. Turn around and run in the other direction, who cares what anyone looking thought. For two months she'd been telling herself that of course she would never see the Skinny Cowboy, even if she'd wanted to find him, and there he was plain as day, and her stomach dropped and she wanted to run.

She spotted that worn leather jacket with the flowers stitched on the shoulders and the long silver hair under the wide-brimmed black hat on the other side of 8th Avenue. Her stomach wanted to run.

I want to talk to him, she reminded herself. I want to talk to him and get it out of the way.

She stuffed that fear down and didn't run away. She started to cross 8th, to follow him, but a crowd of partygoers just emptied from the Palliser Hotel flagged down a cab in the intersection, snarling traffic while they haggled with the cabbie, and by the time she'd shoulder-cut her way through the throng, he was disappearing under the train bridge southward on 1st Street.

You should have shouted at him, Audrey told herself, standing on the sidewalk of 12th Avenue and Centre Street – Cash Corner. The wrong way from the late evening news and her mother and daughter and all the toys in the Rubbermaid tub. *Hey, hold up*, you should have shouted. Before he disappeared into an alley or down a manhole, into the night.

She didn't shout at him but by Cash Corner she'd lost him.

They called it Cash Corner because in the morning men would lean on the fence and wait for trucks to stop with work. They would hang their tool belts and backpacks from the chain-link. A truck would stop and the driver would say, 'I need two drywallers,' and some of the men would pick up their tools, put out their cigarettes, and crowd around the window, and the rest would sit back down.

You should have shouted at him, Audrey told herself. She walked south down Centre Street, farther the wrong way from home. Then she bumped into the van mirror.

She jumped, startled at the contact, spun sideways by the lever of her pocketed arm. She put a hand on the van's window frame to straighten herself out.

Maybe not like Wrists' van, she decided after a more thorough look. This was newer. She cupped a hand on the glass to see into the cab through the street-light glare. This van had a proper modern plastic dashboard and a full complement of rear-view mirrors. Seats you'd last in for longer than an hour without losing feeling below your waist. Without thinking, Audrey pulled on the handle. The door didn't open and she let go of it like a hot pot lid, realizing what she had done. But no alarm sounded.

Of course it's locked, Audrey. Every car door is always locked. Some things people aren't careless about.

Audrey Cole walked up Centre Street pulling on door handles. Just to be right about the always-lockedness of car doors. She pulled handles and the locked car doors did not open. Sedans and hatchbacks and bulbous, oversized utility trucks all sealed securely. Red lights blinked behind the glass on some dashboards and these she avoided. A station wagon with a ski rack beeped at her when her fingers touched the handle. A boxy old Impala honked once when she was six inches away. Two strikes, Audrey, she told herself, and skipped the next two cars.

The last car on the street was a sleek grey Audi sedan, washed that day and not yet recoated in winter road salt. A car that lives in a garage, she thought, that never gets snowed on. She pulled the handle and the door opened.

Audrey stood on the sidewalk looking down into the open door, at the leather seat inside. Cars like this have little fobs with remote lock buttons. People get in the habit of shutting them off, walking away, and then thinking later, *Did I lock the car?* They press the button that locks the door with a short, sharp click. One day they ask themselves, *Did I lock the car?* and as a test of trust they say *Yes, of course, I always lock the car,* and put the keys back in their pocket without touching the button. *I always lock the car, it's silly to think otherwise.*

She shut the passenger door. Walked around to the driver's side and climbed into the seat. Wrapped her hands around the steering wheel. Ran a palm along the dashboard. The car smelled like eucalyptus shampoo and shea butter. Everything felt the right size and scale. Her feet and hands could easily reach everything they needed to. In Wrists' van, or Joe Wahl's van, or even her father's pickup truck years and years ago, she always had to stretch, extend a leg to push a clutch, lean up and ahead, even with the seat pulled all the way forward. She was always two sizes too small for anything she ever drove. But the Audi was all the proper proportions, everything right where she would want it. As if she'd been there in Munich and the robot arms had assembled it around her, fitting each piece to her body.

Audrey pulled down the sun visor. In the movies when they're in a hurry to escape the scene of the crime they look under the sun visor, where the car owner has left their keys, because apparently that is where people in movies leave their keys. She opened the glovebox: AMA maps, registration.

The elbow rest had a flip-up lid, which she opened. She picked through CD cases and a packet of tissue paper, and at the bottom was a set of keys.

They put out bait cars, Audrey. She'd seen the newscasts: desirable makes and models left by the police in tempting places for someone to come and yank. The cops follow at an easy pace, the work all done. They put cameras in these cars. They run the footage on the six o'clock news. Teenage joyriders smoking joints at eighty kilometres an hour through school zones in the middle of the afternoon.

'Car,' said Audrey out loud, 'are you a trap? Or just a what-do-you-call-it. Statistical happenstance?'

That wide-brimmed, beat-up black cowboy hat: she didn't know anything about hats but she knew that hat from across a street. People think when they buy a cowboy hat that they're going to look like Clint Eastwood in Italy, but once it's on their head it's too stiff and doesn't fit right, and they wear it once a year for the Calgary Stampede with boots they can't walk in and a boxy, wrongly proportioned Navajo print shirt, and they are poorly prepared for Cowboy Hallowe'en. The Skinny Cowboy was not these people. The Skinny Cowboy was Clint Eastwood in Italy.

First she wanted to run away, flush with that old fear, but she told herself, Track him down and tell him what you want to tell him. And she followed him up Centre Street, the wrong way from her house, until he disappeared.

She put the keys in the ignition and started the car. Trying to picture that hat from across the street, trying to picture the silver hair and the stitched roses underneath it. The engine made a barely there purring sound. There were only thirty thousand kilometres on the odometer. The street was dark, just Audrey in the car. She felt with her feet and there was a clutch and she gasped with abrupt joy. Pushed in the clutch, put it in gear, and drove away from the curb.