

Mentors

Montreal, Canada...1979

The man in the smart Maple Leaf jacket and knitted snowflake toque looked closely at the figure; the twisted, human shape bunched up in the wheelchair stuck in the icy mush at the foot of the Post Office steps. He pulled up his collar against the driving sleet.

He didn't like what he was seeing.

The wheelchair at the man's feet groaned. There *was* someone there below him. He looked down.

"Got any spare change?" The wheelchair said.

"Why no ask for more?"

"No thanks, I'm bagged – I'm worn out. Hope that's alright with you."

The man looked away, over the uncomfortable figure below him and up the long concrete steps leading to the imposing government building where, over a decade before, the troops had stood as solid as statues, speechless, grim, dangerous and armed to the teeth - weapons cocked and ready in the face of an unknown peril.

The man remembered. There was a body in a trunk.

The voice came back up to him. "What do you want from me?" It was a crippled sound blown away almost instantly by the rising wind – the wind that was freezing and turning white.

"I remember the smell of the snow," the man said, feeling the comment drift out of him like a sigh, conversationally and absently. He forced himself to return to the moment. "You're alive?" he asked.

The man in the chair lifted a mitten and pulled his hood back. He raised his face.

“...Christ Almighty!”

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1967...The Beginning-12 years earlier

Jay's Uncle Humbert showed up for the burial with a glamourous new girlfriend in tow, as well as two aunts, his Granny and a vaguely familiar office pal of his dad's. Jay stuck to his grandmother, and she kept him by her side. The office man kept his head down, nodded once in the widow's direction and left as soon as he could without saying a word to anyone. The only other attendees at the funeral service were the graveyard crew and funeral home staff, although, on the road above the cemetery, a few cars slowed, and one pulled over - to enjoy the service, presumably.

“It’s a shame, it really is.” Thomas (Tommy) Grimond was the manager and the sole salesman of Brookside Internment, the least expensive of the meagre options offered to the grieving widow. Tommy pulled Jay aside after the service to have a ‘quiet’ word, resting an unwelcome paternal hand on Jay’s shoulder and turning his sales voice chummy. “It’s difficult to get an invite out fast enough for a quickie event like this and...,” Tommy paused. “With the cause of your father’s death a little in question...” Tommy coughed behind a raised hand - “well, you know...a bit tricky.”

The jerk rehearses this crap, Jay thought; the cough, the voice, the creepy shoulder squeeze – it’s all a sales job. But at least he didn’t screw up one element, depression, he nailed it.

“Maybe it was all for the best, kid,” Tommy said, then coughed, squeezed, and slid into the black limo beside the driver. As the big car pulled out of the cemetery, Jay could hear the Beach Boys blaring through the open window. California Girls...great song, nice harmony.

“I’ll get some pop and nachos,” Jay called back to his mum as they passed through the rusty iron gates and left the cemetery grounds. “I’ll pick up a movie; a

pick-me-up.” She waved back and walked off. Jay stopped for a moment, watched his mother retreat. Even at this distance, she looked tired and sad.

Jay turned back to the grave site. The digger men had stamped out their smokes, grabbed waiting shovels and rakes and gone to work filling in the hole. The one with the stringy hair stopped for a moment and looked up to where Jay was standing alone, poked the other one, the one with the wet nose, and clapped him on the back.

The two gravediggers laughed.

The short one blew him a kiss.

Instead of popping into Long Johns for the party food and the movie, Jay Smith ran the full length of Ottawa Drive to the lights at the bridge to Hull, turned onto the pedestrian walkway, and broke into a full gallop. The roar of the Ottawa River rose up around him in the dark from the black void below; threatening to overtake and engulf him in his panic to get away.

Forty minutes later, on the other side, in the laissez-faire province of Quebec, he found a bar that would take him, no questions asked – no ID required. Young Jay Smith got smashed promptly, spent the cash in his pocket, and mixed up and swallowed enough hard liquor and draft beer to stupefy himself.

Finally, Le Grande Pont was dead empty, it was two in the morning, and Rudy the waiter dragged the young drunk out into the parking lot and slammed the steel door behind him.

Jay made it to the highway and held out a thumb. It didn’t take long. All he could see of the driver when the door opened was a bottle on the seat between his legs. Jay looked around him. There were no witnesses. There was no one to see what he was doing – what he was getting himself into. - only the sneering face reflected in the car’s windshield, studying the fresh boy it had found out on the road in the middle of the night.

“This is how it happens.” Jay shook off an awful thought. He could hear the newscaster. “...for young Jay Smith...last seen getting into a car outside the...the public is asked to...”

“Get in.” The driver was checking his mirror. The flickering cab light cast a sickly yellow glow on the bloated face. He seemed agitated, excited. The hand cranking up the volume on the radio was shaking - badly. “Christ, in or out, make up your fucking mind!” he spat. “It’s completely up to you...how far you want to go.”

It took nine hours and one frightening detour, but Jay made it to downtown Montreal in one exhausted piece, and a ten-dollar bill in his pocket.

After waiting, and waiting, in her apartment two hundred miles away in Ottawa, the mother gave up and ate alone. When darkness came and the cold-white walls closed in around her, she turned off the radio, jammed the empty macaroni-dinner box in the pail under the sink and set a bowl and a spoon and a cup out for breakfast. A car squealed by on Ottawa Drive far below her one window and two minutes later she was pulling the blankets over her head. “At least you could have stayed and helped with the dishes,” she said to the empty bedroom. “Now I turn out the light,” she nursery-rhyme whispered as she switched off the lamp. She left her diary untouched on the bedside table and hugged her pillow goodnight.

Jay’s mother would call the police the next morning, but the Desk Sargeant and the mother knew full well what the son had done.

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April, 1970...Jay

Three long years after his father’s funeral and his run across the Hull bridge to Quebec, Jay Smith bunched up the old blanket and jammed it behind his back against the bricks. He got a smile and wave from Jenny, the Bank teller, who was swinging the big glass doors open beside him. He opened the guitar case, spread it on the sidewalk in front of him and propped up his cardboard sign. It was nine in the morning, but the day, the month...the year didn’t matter anymore; he was unaware of these meaningless trivialities. It was just nine in the morning, and he was ready, they wouldn’t bug him here - he was harmless.

This was the ritual, every day – rain or shine. Today was shine.

The foot traffic was picking up as the pants and skirts and bikes streamed by on their way to elsewhere. Jay looked up, occasionally, but mostly kept his head down

like an apologetic dog, wondering lazily what the world passing by made of the alien sight below it - the awkward lump discarded on the sidewalk. - the bum wrapped up in rags and thrift shop dregs. Jay guessed it was hard to tell. Was this a boy, a man, a glob afloat in a lab dish? He was a curiosity. He was ugly and he smelled. He was something to avoid.

So, another day began for Jay, the tramp on Saint Catherines, but it had no purpose. There was no point. But the sun sure felt good.

The first strong light of the first Old Montreal day of April 1970 hit him square in the face, flowed down his jacket, melted through the damp sweater, smoldered in his chest and warmed the petrified bones deep down inside. After an hour, Jay studied the lean scattering of coins in the case and did a quick count - it didn't take long. Three dollars and seventy-three cents (three fucking cents?), plus one rusty metal washer and the useless half of a bus transfer, minus the two bucks he'd seeded in the pot - that left.....

“I should have stayed a kid,” Jay muttered to the healthy-looking lady bicycling past, wearing the tight jean shorts and a big grin, her long red hair streaming and her glistening legs pumping. “I could have cut lawns and washed cars for the rest of my life.”

There was no reply. Jay Smith didn't encounter many women these days – they didn't come near him.

A leather toe poked at the empty guitar case. “I've seen you around.” The man shifted his weight to the other leg as if to settle in. “What are you doing here?”

“Can you get out of my sun please?”

“What do you want?” the man asked. “What are you looking for?”

“The sun.”

The guy looked up and down the sidewalk as he was speaking. “So, if you need money, what's with this spare change shit.” He pointed at the cardboard sign lying in the guitar case lid, and it was all Jay could do but laugh out loud at the stupid fingerless mittens waving in his face.

“Please, tell me you’re not that dumb!” The stranger took a step forward. “You have a job here: make fucking money, and you’re begging for scraps – garbage. ”He was now almost standing in the guitar case. “You don’t even *have* a guitar?”

“I think I might vomit - are you going to give me anything?”

“My name is Louie.”

” You look like the con man.”

“What con man?”

“The one in that movie.” Jay said. “You know...”

“Mind if I join you?” the man said after sitting and making himself comfortable beside Jay. He dangled his arms with the mitts on the ends over his knees. He sighed and smiled. “A beautiful, beautiful day indeed,” he said. “Okay, so what’s your name and where’re you from.”

Jay was used to these guys; slumming, preaching...blocking the sun, and he knew enough to stay silent and not react. Once they got bored, they left him. Alone. Again.

“Okay, I get it,” Louie said. “I say words and you ignore them.” He shrugged. “I know the story.”

Jay turned his head, just a fraction, not to be noticed.

But Louie was still talking. “A baby birdy falls from its nest. It’s not very smart. It looks like a hairy little monster lying on the forest floor – or on the sidewalk. It really is an ugly creature, without even a small brain and a...”

“Okay, I get it! Ugly and stupid.”

“The forest is dark and dangerous and before too long the helpless, stupid little ugly birdie cries so much that something, a whole-lot bigger and almost as ugly, walks up and eats it - whole. The little bird is gone now – just a few chewed up feathers and a spat-out bit of beak left on the pavement, right outside the bank.”

“The point?”

“It was so stupid and ugly that no one cared it was gone, and nobody missed it.”

Louie finished talking and got back up suddenly. He held his arms out from his side and spread his fingers wide in a grand gesture and grinned. “But I could show you some really good stuff,” he said as he stepped back onto Saint Catherines and was instantly swallowed up by the passing mass.

Jay poked through the bottom of the guitar case. The crazy man hadn’t left a thing. “Not even a dime,” he said to himself, out loud, but not loud enough for anyone to hear. “Asshole.”

The Monk

They found him. They always found him. It was never fun – and here they were.

“Where’ve you been?” Monk asked. “Here, have some of Lester’s,” he added, handing Jay a mostly eaten sandwich: smoked beef, still warm, soaking wet - just the way he liked. It had been too long between feasts like this, and Jay wasted no time with this morsel, the soggy mess sliding down his throat easily, like honey, no chewing.

“I’ve got something for you,” Monk said, drawing an expensive-looking comb through his strings of yellow hair. From Jay’s down-and-out point of view, Monk was an unfortunate looking creature in his own right, summed up by the wax-museum skin, the tiny grapefruit head with the pulsing temples and worn-out funeral suit he wore ritually. To the young Jay, it was as if Monk wanted the whole world to laugh at him, just so he could pay it back in his own nasty little way. But Jay also knew that no one ever laughed out loud at “The Monk” – at least not more than once.

The last time Jay had tried to say ‘no’ to a Monk adventure, he and The Monk and Frenchy and a few others from the house were in the Tommy Tavern getting ready for last call and splitting up the day’s pickings. “The wages of sin.” Monk always got a kick out of proclaiming this morsel of wisdom to his followers - like a wound-up priest in full sermon.

Monk looked up from his growing pile and gave Jay a shoulder squeeze. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. “Don’t worry,” he said.

Jay waited - and worried.

“If you end up in The Joliette,” Monk elaborated, “where they put people like you, I have lots of friends inside. My friends will look after you, real well.”

Jay continued to wait for the part where he stopped worrying.

All this jail talk was too much for Monk’s partner Frenchy, and it was obvious that just the thought of Monk’s friends and this kid locked up together, in close quarters, amused the man tremendously. Frenchy hacked and choked and spat up with such enthusiasm that heads turned in alarm on the other side of the bar.

“Can someone turn the Juke Box up...please!” A voice cried out.”

“Or call an ambulance?” Someone else piped up. “There’s a frog croaking over there!”

Gales of laughter.

“If you gentlemen would excuse me,” Frenchy said to the table as he drained his quart, pushed back his chair, and rose with a grandiose bow, “I believe the Anglos at table thirteen have invited me over for a chat.” Frenchy’s comrades were used to these interruptions, barely noticing or acknowledging their boisterous buddy’s side shows or the havoc he wreaked around them.

The only true-blue French Canadian in Jay’s world, Frenchy hung out with the Anglo low-lives for reasons that had yet to surface in conversation. What Jay *had* figured out was that Frenchy loved to drink and smoke and scrap (he was truly bilingual: he spoke French and English fluently, and he beat up both French and English people, also quite fluently), and when he spoke, he spat thick globs out and horrible, cackling sounds came from his mouth. Frenchy really and truly enjoyed his hobby of beating people up, preferring the larger and uglier variety of male opponents he came across during his day-to-day activities. The local brawler’s punched-up strawberry face, soft boiled carrot nose, ears seemingly dangling on sinew, and stray tufts of gluey white hair clumped on top of his pared, gouged scalp, put together a disturbing image scorched permanently into the tender skin of Jay’s brain like an instantly regretted tattoo.

As if one brain tattoo wasn’t enough, Jay got another one during the blizzard the winter before when, thanks to the storm, he and Frenchy spent a night together in a room at the Regina Inn. “I’m going to teach you how to fight,” Frenchy told Jay. “I’m going to be your Guru.”

“You mean Mentor...like teacher,” Jay said.

“No, I mean Guru, it’s more spiritual – like me, right?” Frenchy said. “Now put the beer on the bed and take your clothes off...let’s get started!”

And what better place to learn the fine art of street thuggery, Jay thought, than in a creepy motel room in the middle of a snowstorm – with a real “thug”.

“You get in a fight because you want to beat somebody up - not to be fair, not to be nice - but, of course, you should always make sure you enjoy yourself, have some fun.” The Guru had already finished one of the bottles and dropped the empty back on the bed. “Just remember one thing,” Frenchy choked and waved wildly like a drowning man, then stopped suddenly and belched like a cow. “The guy you’re beating up is not a *real*, real person; he’s a thug, a stupid, ugly, smelly thug.”

Jay waited in vain for the irony to sink in. “That’s it, Guru?” He said, after a full minute had passed.

He could hear and smell the new snow collecting and piling up outside the motel window.

Frenchy moved to stand in front of Jay. He stared at him with swollen eyes - just a bare foot away.

Jay couldn’t help but notice. “I didn’t think anyone actually wore those boxer shorts?” he said.

“I have to; I’m going to have a dozen kids, six of each,” Frenchy said. “These things help.” He shrugged. “Now listen to me...watch *me* for fuck’s sake.”

Frenchy assumed his thug pose...

“*They think you are not ready.*

...You turn as if to walk away, like this...

...You have your hands hanging by your side, like this...

...You shrug, like this...

...You pretend to cough, like this...

...They blink

...You smash their faces in, like this... ”

Frenchy's fist skinned Jay's cheek.

It was a long training course; a long night and looking back Jay was surprised that no one in the building had called the police, or maybe someone had called the cops, but they didn't want to come.

Jay's training fell into an uneasy rhythm.

“You won't see it coming, watch?” Frenchy demonstrated his special move.

“I saw it.” Jay demonstrated avoiding the special move.

And so..., the training went on. They kept at the education until sunrise, but it finally and mercifully ended, without ceremony, as the French Canadian with an advanced hangover on the way and the young panhandler with an almost complete mental breakdown in the works staggered out of the Regina through the mountain of snow and headed back to downtown.

Jay looked up from his inventory of the almost empty guitar case. He wiped at the dripping wet beef sliding and dropping from his greedy lips. The guy with the fingerless mittens and hypnotic story had vanished, and in his place, of course, stood Monk and Frenchy. The two of them showing up together was never a good sign – it was always a very bad sign, meaning that instead of being left alone he was being summoned to perform.

Whatever it was, the stunt would be illegal, and most likely dangerous. On the brighter side, Jay, the street bum, got the means to get back in the bars, the only bright side of his life. He hadn't spent a full day and night in Tommy's for too long, and he missed the dark corner where he sat, alone, and the howling, pounding, endless music, and his head throbbing and his entire being empty of all thoughts and feelings. It was good, and it was his goal, the only one he had.

“Yeah, where you been, my petite shithead?” Frenchy garbled as Monk glanced sideways at Jay and rolled his eyes. “You don't come to the house anymore?”

The ‘house’ was a large rental ground floor room with cots and beds scrambled about in the big room, and two card tables and a handful of folding chairs scattered in a smaller area along with the appliances: a greasy cookstove, an oven, a sink filled with beer empties and cereal boxes, and a toilet in a closet. The ‘house’, while mainly functioning as a rogue’s warehouse, was also home to a Montreal street-mix of thieves, hustlers, fighters, con-men, one writer (who never made eye contact and didn’t mix with the others) and the professional blood donors who came by to sleep and regain their energy - and colour. Jay had to be desperate for food, drugs, alcohol, or money (usually all of these), to come near the place but, when he did drop in, he stayed clear of the toilet in the closet - it wasn’t safe in there.

“It’s warmed up a little out there. I’ve been around,” Jay said. “You know, playing in the streets with the other kids.”

“The cops still call you ‘Snoopy’ when they haul you out from under the bridge with your baby blanket?”

Jay shrugged.

“I’ve got something for you,” Monk said again.

“I’m too tired.”

Please, Jay implored silently, no more stupid stunts: shinnying up power poles, cutting telephone wires, long nights gaffing parking meters and vending machines. No more running down dark alleys - no more, please. Jay had finally found a place of his own in this world of bad behaviour, a place that tolerated him - and he tolerated in return. He had become the loner, the oddball; an eager receptacle of others’ charity, aloof and as harmless and forgettable as the stray cat that shadowed him and would find Jay anywhere, day or night. It was as if the little beast cared about this lonesome street boy. When he found Jay, ‘Cat’ curled up and purred for a few hours of warmth and safety, and companionship - and the boy always held the lonesome beast as close and for as long as he could.

“There’s a guy wants to meet you, lives out by the University, he’s seen you in the park. He will pay you well.”

“What do I have to do?” Jay’s scruples had grown quite flexible.

It was the older man’s turn to shrug. “Just keep him busy for the night. Here’s

the address and bus fare," Monk said, dropping two coins bus fare in the case and handing Jay a scrap of sandwich wrap with something scribbled on it.

"Tonight." Frenchy waved goodbye.

Franklin

That evening, Jay walked north to find the sandwich-wrap address. It made a lot more sense walking; rather than taking a bus, he could put the fare saved towards a table of draft.

After cutting through the edge of the cemetery, he found the neighbourhood on the North side, bordering the University grounds, and as he turned the corner off Renfrew the din of the traffic behind him disappeared and he found himself walking in a different world. As he stretched his sidewalk-cramped legs and drew the cool, fresh air, deep down into his belly, he shuddered, and it occurred to him that he had not left the four downtown blocks he called home since his arrival in Montreal.

Jay stopped at the top of the block and looked down a boulevard of antique-looking streetlamps on black-iron posts growing from the strip of manicured grass and stone edging. As he paused, the lamps flicked on in the dwindling twilight and a soft, cool beacon swept out and touched the picket fences and modest gardens that graced every ivy-covered brick homefront on the street.

Jay waited while his eyes adjusted, and the street materialized against the now almost complete darkness. Living rooms lit up like candles from behind heavy, drawn curtains as figures moved about silently within; characters in a stage play unfolding in front of this audience of one.

A lone owl called overhead in the soft evening air; a silver squirrel raced home along a fence rail; a gate creaked open and clicked shut somewhere at the end of the block, beyond the lights - and Jay stood helpless and empty in an instant of sudden and utter peace.

He found the number, pushed through the iron gate, and walked up to the door. Monk had told him not to knock, just go in and find the upstairs. Jay took one more long deep breath and held it as long as he could before letting it out slowly.

Jay spoke to the owl in the darkness. "Well, as someone dead could've said, 'There's always a perfect time for stupid.'" The thought seemed somehow deep, and profound, but didn't make him feel any better about what he was about to do. So, he tried another thought, another approach. "Run for it!" a voice cried out far away in the back of his mind." This call from deep inside him sounded more sensible and altogether better and more helpful...Jay ignored it.

There was no comment from the owl, Jay noticed - it really didn't give a fucking hoot.

What was clear to him was that he was not going to go back to Saint Catherine's and the Monk's kingdom with nothing to show for this night, so he pushed open the heavy door and stepped into the house, walked down a dark hallway, climbed a badly lit set of stairs to an upper floor and found an open door waiting for him.

"Do you want to wash up?" A large man in a burgundy bathrobe asked, pointing to an open door in the corner of the room. One hand was pointing to the door, the other was pressed to his side, gripping a melon-sized lump through the material of the gown. "And there are some clean clothes in there as well. Put them on, you can have them."

He must have seen the look in Jay's eyes and how they shifted to the door he'd come in through. There was a long moment as the younger man focused on the escape route, and neither spoke.

"I am a homosexual, and I have a disfigurement." The man said. "But why on earth would I want to harm you? That's *not* why you are here young man. Go on..." He pointed to an open door on his left. "Take the bath. Take the clothes. Take your time. No charge, no deposit, no strings."

Jay was running the water when the voice came through the bathroom door. "Would you like a tea?"

"Okay."

Jay stretched out and floated in the steaming tub. His eyes closed easily; his breathing slowed to a purr, and every taut tissue, burning muscle and aching bone in his body relaxed and uncoiled. A long-lost smile found his face and crawled back to resettle in familiar flesh. Jay Smith dreamed. He dreamt he was walking barefoot along a white sand beach on a tropical island in a far-off sea...in a land of

palm trees and parrots and grass huts and the sexiest people and tastiest food he had ever imagined. He was at a beach-cottage door, and he was knocking....

Jay Smith became happy in his dream world - he had forgotten what good old happy felt like.

“Jay, you okay?” It was the man with the money and the large goitre knocking on the bathroom door, calling him to come out.

“Here’s the tea, hope you like whiskey.”

Jay nodded. “I’m about to find out.”

“My name is Franklin.”

“Jay,” he answered, looking straight over Franklin’s head, not at the bulge.

“With a ‘Jay’?”

Jay couldn’t help it; he smiled a little.

They talked, the older man propped up on the bed and Jay sitting on a creaky wood easy chair in the bay window, and before he knew it Jay was caught up in a conversation that captured his tired, sad soul and wrenched the locked-up memories out of him that he had locked away in a vault - sworn to never open. He listened, mostly with his young ears, to the older man who spoke of years long gone, but as the hours passed into the early morning, Jay listened with his heart as well.

At one point, Franklin refilled their mugs and Jay sat on the bed beside him, propped up against a pillow behind his back. It felt weird, sitting here on this bed with an absolute stranger, listening to another’s dreams and conjuring up the images of a life alien to him, but it only felt weird for a moment, until a memory surfaced – a recurring favourite. He was back at the summer cottage, on the night he and his dad did the same ‘weird’ thing, except that they were lying on their backs in their sleeping bags on the beach under a moonless, star saturated sky. Father and son managed to stay awake all night drinking hot chocolate and figuring out the meaning of life, the vastness of outer space; the workings of a rotary engine and the workings of his mother; why she said the things she said and did the things she did. By dawn, they had put some pretty good dents in the locker of life’s

secrets but had to give up on the mother and wife mystery. "Some mysteries are best unsolved," Jay's Dad said. "But they are the best of all."

It was a good memory.

"His name was Douglas," Franklin said in a far away dreamy voice. "After twelve years together in this house, we both became ill. Dougie didn't make it and I'm obviously still here, but increasingly ready and prepared to move on - to be wherever he's gone, and that's way up in the heavens for sure. I hope I get to go there." He cleared his throat. "Me? I'm just this lonely old shell of a man shacked up with the rapidly fading memories of the good old days. I shuffle around endlessly through this clutter. I've become like one of the trinkets I keep moving from shelf to shelf and then back again for no reason but the need to do something, rather than rot in place until I die."

The man shook suddenly and violently, then gathered himself together and went on. "I have very little to live for now, I guess, but God help me, I still love an all-nighter with an old friend, like this." He laughed. "Or a new friend; sharing a bottle or two and brightening up the days remaining." His mouth smiled but his eyes were shiny, and his lips quivered.

"But my God, just listen to me." Franklin raised his cup, and Jay touched it with his. "To Jay...so tell me, new friend, how old are you? Fifteen...Eighteen?"

"I guess."

But now, in this old guy's room with the new warm alcohol doing its work deep down inside him, Jay let it all come out. A dam had broken - there was no stemming the flow. It was totally unexpected, and it took over an hour before he stopped and put his empty mug back on the bedside table.

Jay tells Franklin everything, and Franklin listens intently to the troubled story: the father's death; the mother's broken heart; the end of the line for a happy young family... the desertion of the only child, the son.

"Phew..." Franklin looked out the window when Jay stopped and slowly wagged his head. "Not exactly a happy-go-lucky tale."

It took a minute for one of them to speak again. "Jay," Franklin said. "I really and truly believe that when we humans cross paths on this lonely piece of space rock, whether through a brief encounter like this one, or a lifetime spent together

like the lucky ones, we trade some elemental parts of our beings, our deep cores, with each other. We bond. We become partners with each other.”

The older man was breathing hard, and his face was suddenly running with rivers of perspiration.

“Are you okay?” Jay didn’t know what to do.

“Okay, Jay. Just give me a moment.” Franklin pulled up a sheet corner, wiped at his head, and lay back against the bedstead. “Sounds corny, I know, but it’s unavoidable and inescapable - this crossing paths thing - like getting a melody stuck in your head that you can’t unhear. We’re singing the same song now, young man...and sorry world, neither you nor anyone else can erase this harmony.”

Franklin picked up the empty whiskey bottle and turned it upside down over Jay’s head. “Okay young man, that’s enough of my tiresome drone and scrambled metaphors.

Nothing came out of the inverted bottle. Not a drop.

“And that’s also more than enough whiskey. It’s way past time to get a move on; time to meet another sunrise.” The old man swung off the bed, walked stiff legged to the bay window and pulled the heavy curtains open with a flourish. “Like it or not, young friend,” Franklin proclaimed. “*This is a new day!*”

“Would you stop in again to visit this old man?” Franklin asked as he handed Jay an envelope and let him out of the room.”

“Sure, I’d like that, Jay said. He nodded, yawned - apologised for the yawn - and closed the door behind him; let himself out of the house the way he had come in.

The Haul

“You want to see the haul?” Monk asked.

“What haul?”

“What we got from the old queer while you had him upstairs.” Monk waved expansively at the table. “Everyone knew where he hoarded his stuff, but we got there first.”

“You didn’t tell me.”

Frenchy picked up a notebook and opened it. “The fags diary.” He flipped through the pages and stopped at one of interest. “Listen to this... ‘Doggie and I...’

“Douce,” Jay corrected.

“Yeah. Sure...Doogie and I are making more and more plans. I love him so much, can hardly wait for the future. It’s here now. How, I...’

“Stop it, Frenchy.”

“You want it, Jay? Okay, each to his own I guess.” He tossed the diary back into the pile of bills and jewelry and what looked like bank certificates strewn between them. “Take it.”

Jay reached for Franklin’s diary.

“Just the book, you little shit.” Monk slammed Jays wrist down on the table. “You can have this collection of fairy tales – leave the rest for me.” Monk said. “I have no need for this useless literature garbage.”

Jay took one last look around the room where he had spent so much time over the last two years. He had learned the tricks of a dirty trade here, and beyond the door he had scrounged, lied to, and cheated people that had simply smiled in his direction. Dreams that once lived and thrived in him like best friends had been destroyed in this room - Jay Smith had betrayed them all in this rancid shelter of thugs.

Monk held the door open like an impatient butler, and with a deep, formal bow waved Jay through and out onto the street. Jay didn’t look back, he didn’t stop. He vowed a gut felt good-riddance to it all as he headed back downtown - well, good riddance to most of it - the forty dollars that Monk had tucked in his collar like a tip was safely and tightly clasped in his fist.

“Well done,” Monk said to his back, “See you soon!”

Frenchy laughed merrily.

Jay felt his heart shrink another size. He wanted to cry, but he didn’t remember how.

The Bug

Jay Smith disappeared from the streets of downtown Montreal on April 6, 1971, three days after his betrayal of Franklin. He made himself invisible. He spent the next three months doing what he did best; he wandered the streets day and night like a restless ghost - hands out and head down. Jay survived on Church back-door sandwiches, hotel kitchen scraps, the contents of garbage bins, food banks and the kindnesses of the male and female prostitutes who bought him a drink, or a hot meal, once in a while. “We’re going in the same direction sweetheart,” a young gay hustler told him. “Right to the bottom, and then straight on to some freakish hellhole in a Bat cave.” They were drinking Gin at Bayanass. “Only difference is, you and I are in different lanes on the road down.”

Jay faded away. He didn’t die, but he was gone for awhile.

On a warm, clear evening in late July 1971, under a full moon, and after close to a year of city-wide lockdown and soldier dodging, the fed-up citizens of Montreal took back their city. The War Measures Act; the Army; the police sweeping up vagrants every night; the FLQ terrorist crazies; and the curfews amid the threats of murder and mayhem -every remnant of the last year - they got rid of it all; swarmed back to the streets like hostages released from captivity. The city celebrated, at the top of its lungs, and with joyous abandon, from the throbbing beat in the discos to the sexy jazz clubs and taverns where it smoked a lot and drank too much - did anything, and did anyone, it desired.

Montreal had its fun, then the next morning it woke up, reborn, if a little unsteady, and went to the parks.

As the city recovered from the revelry of the night before, a light breeze moved softly into Dorchester Square in the heart of Old Montreal, touched and nudged the old Elm at the entrance, flirted in the strong arms of his companion, the gorgeous

towering Maple, and whispered sweetly to the busy squirrels and songbirds kibbitzing in the flower garden beds next to the lush Peonies and Rhododendrons. Early morning joggers trotted through the green space, over the dewdrop grass and along the cobbled paths, breathing in the scene around them; the towels spread out carefully by picnickers and book readers, and the lovers basking and cooing and dozing in the rising sun.

Jay Smith looked up from his favourite 'bed', the fancy black iron bench in the corner of the park where he spent nights from time to time when he wasn't under the bridge or at the house. He felt safe under the protective gaze of the Lion statue. Now fully awake, he studied the tree above him, searching for the source of the sound that had tickled his senses and opened his eyes. After a minute, or a day, or a year (he didn't know; he didn't care), he spotted it; a bug, a pretty big bug with long stick legs and a fat head and a shiny blue shell tiptoeing along the limb a mile over his head. He watched the tiny creature. "Where are you going to?" he asked the insect. "Where are you coming from? Do you even know that you are alive? Do you have any friends around here?"

Jay felt himself drifting from one world and into another; from the one where he was hungry, filthy, and miserable, to the other one where he was suspended high above himself looking down from a branch in the bug world - just walking around, doing his thing: scratching and exploring - counting his legs - trying not to trip. He was never closer to a feeling of contentment - being okay, belonging - than when something like this bug consumed him and swallowed him up whole in that outer space far beyond his reach.

Deep down inside, Jay knew he was far from 'okay'. He knew crazy. He saw it in the faces of the strangers shuffling around him. Nothing frightened him more than going to exist in that world of nutbars, but he didn't know what to do. There was no U-turn route on his life-map. Jay Smith had crashed like a badly maintained car, careened off a highway, and settled, wheels up and spinning, in a deep ditch - and the traffic passing him on the road above couldn't even see he was there or, if it did, care.

Sometimes he would accidentally allow himself to revisit a happy childhood moment, and before he could shut it out, the moment would grow inside him until he'd fight it off with a street drug or a table of beer, or an act so bad and ugly that the memory would shrink away, leaving him exhausted and hollow. But, during the rarest of moments, like this one, Jay Smith was far too busy to pay any attention to the silly and trivial realities around him - he had his bug.

The insect had reached the trunk of the tree and was reaching out with little crane-arm-claw-hands, feeling the new surface, exploring, trying to get a grip, when the sun's growing heat suddenly clicked off and a cold shade replaced it. Jay rolled back on his side and squinted out from under an elbow.

Something was blocking the light. At first, he thought it must be the policeman, the boney faced, shitty little man that hated his guts and let him know it every time they crossed paths. Jay never understood anything the guy was saying as he shrieked and spat at him, but he always got the message and moved on, unless he got busted, if he was lucky, and was taken away for a night or two where he was safe and warm and fed - and could get some sleep.

But it wasn't the cop, it was worse.

"Hey guitar man, got any spare change yet?"

Jay rolled over.

"I'd say that's a no," the silhouette said.

The man pulled Jay back over. "Do you like the new outfit?" He grinned, holding his jacket wide open and swinging from side to side to expose the orange, fluorescent cowboy shirt with the huge collar and cuffs, topped off with the carelessly draped purple tie. "My new work clothes."

Jay tried to disappear under his elbow again. This had to go away.

"Okay," Louie said, "that's enough - get up!"

"What?"

"I can't watch this anymore."

"What?"

"You're killing the mood here." Louie looked around the park. "Let's go."

Jay Smith had a recurring memory of a scene in grade five at Jacob Public School in Bells Corners. A kid in his class got nose bleeds - a lot of nose bleeds. When he got them, the teacher would have her now- sobbing student sit with his

head bent back, eyes staring straight up at the ceiling and wads of dripping red toilet paper jammed up his nostrils. To his classmates, the student was a bona fide freak, thankfully put off in a corner of the classroom on a wooden stool well away from them, where he obviously belonged, and where he couldn't get at them and kill them.

The spectacle of this cornered creature struggling to breathe, gurgling and growling and snorting through soaking wet bum-wad and blot clots, was a spectacle that any low budget run-down drive-in theatre would have killed to own: a locally filmed flick featuring a strong cast of heartless, insensitive, and cruel children.

Jay never forgot that boy and his humiliation, but on the morning in the park, as he was dragged from his bench and led through the crowd, past all the whispers and snickers and pointing fingers and the parents pulling their children back against them protectively, the schoolboy returned to the classroom.

Sometimes from Baltimore

Louie and Jay Smith were sitting at the round glass table enjoying the view from the sixth floor Luxury Suite of the Richelieu Hotel. Each had a nicely chilled Canadian in front of him. From his perch Jay got a pretty good look at his old neighbourhood spread out below him, and beyond that the dark, cold looking, Saint Lawrence River flowing through and around Montreal on its way to the Atlantic Ocean. Two blocks to the East in Dorchester Square a couple settled on a bench, snuggled, and held hands. Jay wished them off it; it was his bench.

“How are you feeling?” Louie didn’t look up from the stack of credit cards he was dealing out onto the tabletop like a round of poker hands.

“I’m alive.”

“You’re welcome.”

A week of good food, room service, laundry and his own bed had quickly created a new Jay, and he wasn’t sure he liked this remake; there had been so many versions of ‘bad Jay’ over the last two years that this ‘better Jay’ seemed out of place, and somehow wrong.

“I didn’t ask for this.” He said, sipping his beer. “I didn’t ask to be saved.”

“So leave.”

After a week back sleeping under the Henri Overpass and shuffling around the streets of his three-block world, Jay reverted to his former self, the role he knew so well and was completely comfortable playing - the downtrodden beggar - or as many would see him, the bum with the heavy street stench; the trapped starving-rat glare, the damaged-barfly croak, the limp-spit swagger and the nasty-ugly chip on the shoulder. It all returned to possess him, naturally and completely.

Jay Smith and the young beggar were a perfect fit.

But Jay’s character quickly wandered off-script as it walked past a downtown cafe and stumbled on Louie, sitting at a table, outside, reading a paperback and spearing fries from gravy on a plate.

“You don’t owe me anything,” Louie said when Jay asked.

“I feel like I do.”

Louie slid the fries and gravy across the table to Jay. “Tell you what, I’ll make you a deal. I’ll show you how to do it - how *I do* it. Then when you make your fortune, you pay me back, with a ton of interest, of course.” His plate had been licked clean while he spoke. “What do you say?”

“Can we get another plate of fries?”

Louie laughed and called Michelle over.

When the fries arrived, Michelle smiled at Jay, in French, and while Jay was busy falling in love with the waitress, Louie paid the bill. When the fries were gone, Louie pushed away from the table, waved a goodbye to “...’Schelle” and motioned to Jay. “Let’s go, tomorrow’s a school day – we need a good night’s sleep – and you need at least three showers and a flea treatment.”

True to his word, Louie had them out of the Richelieu and back at Michelle's first thing the next morning. Louie got to work; raised a hand to shade his eyes and spot prospects. It didn't take long, a hapless pedestrian, an innocent – a catch – rounded the corner at the far end of the block and swam straight for them.

Jay watched...

Louie walked up to the man, but instead of passing him and carrying on up the block he swung at the last possible and perfect moment, grabbed the available elbow, and walked now alongside his catch as if he and his new buddy were simply walking down the street together, talking hockey – or girls.

This was his stock and trade, Louie had told Jay the night before. The incessant, breathless, auctioneer turkey-babble machine gun spiel stunned his prey and wore any resistance down to nothing. This guy never had a chance - Louie stuck with him every inch of the way, to the other end of the block, and took the money that came out of the wallet.

Louie never offered a "thank you". Why would he? He didn't get the eighty bucks he asked for - demanded. Louie, the destitute unfortunate, stranded in an unfamiliar city in dire straits, had to settle for a measly twenty dollars – again - just like the last time.

Michelle brought Jay a coke with ice. "You're talking to yourself." She flashed her Hollywood smile straight at him as she swung away in a swirl of billowing skirt caught in the fresh spring breeze. The young man stared in jaw-dropping admiration at the balancing act taking place in front of him, the airborne plates of Blueberry Crepes destined for the folks at the next table. Nothing escaped his attention; not the bright blue pleated skirt covered with embroidered red and coral rose blossoms and cheery white puffy summer clouds, and certainly not the Crepes, smothered in foaming cream and syrup. Jay was suddenly very hungry, in so many ways – his appetite was returning.

Louie explained his art to the young protégé. "When that guy gets home, he's going to tell his family and all his friends that he shook off this street beggar. He'll boast to all his buddies that a big tough guy in Montreal wanted to screw him out of a hundred bucks, but he stood tall and stared the guy down; made him take a twenty instead. "What a fucking hero he is!"

"I'm sometimes from Baltimore. That's what I tell them. Who's ever been to Baltimore? You can't get caught, saying you're from Baltimore."

“Makes me want to live in Baltimore,” Jay offered.

Louie’s story was simple – his script simple genius, Jay thought, while trying to absorb some of it.

Travelling to see an ailing mother in St John... mugged at the airport the day before while waiting for connecting flight... broke. Sleeps down there under the walkway (Hostel is full) ... money for airfare and room and his ID copies on the way through American Express... All this will arrive sometime tomorrow...needs eighty dollars to tide him over, get him a bed and some food for just one more night...he has a pen and a paper, here give me your address, I’ll send you money when it comes in...I promise, YOU CAN TRUST ME...blah, blah and lots more blah-blah.

Louie did his expansive-gesture thing. “Bald faced lies served up on a sucker’s platter. You just keep at them no matter what they do or say,” Louie said. “And pretty quick they’re eating out of your hand and putting money back in it. This is important, so listen up,” he added. “You don’t stop talking or pushing the pen and paper at them - you’re the biggest pain in the ass they’ve ever met and all they want to do is get away from you. You insist on the eighty; you can’t live with less - but of course, you can, and you do. There is only one way they shake you off - they *pay* you off.” Louie clapped his mittens together. “It’s a life lesson,” he said. “Never ever accept less than more.” He shrugged. “Unless you have to.”

Louie snapped his fingers with a dull soft- mitted thud. “And never give up. You getting all this?”

“Sure.”

“When was the last time you saw one of these street bums, like you, offer a money-back fucking guarantee?”

Jay started to say something.

Louie’s hand went up. “Exactly. Never!”

“Do you know what a metaphor is?” Louie asked.

“Is it French?”

Louie shook his head. “You should look it up. You’re living in one.”

Louie's train of thought was just picking up steam. "These people are vending machines."

"That's a metaphor?"

"Vending machines. But they don't dispense chocolate bars and vinegar chips, they're full of cash; you just have to know how to get at it. What you put in them is the real trick, what the dumb machines need to function. Feed the machines with your best stuff, don't hold back – make the effort, ramp up the enthusiasm - give them a good - a great! - show, and watch their little plastic doors pop open. Voila... Moolah!"

Jay had to smile at the image; dozens of vending machines lurching down the sidewalk towards him, spitting out dollar bills and rolls of quarters.

Louie ended with a flourish. "You need big brass balls and stainless-steel nerves to pull this off, and you need your own story. For instance, you're Johnny, the nice-guy student." He warmed to his creation. "You're lost and broke and not too bright - just perfect – and you're on your way to first year at university in Moncton. You were mugged blah blah blah and you've never been on your own blah blah....." Louie took a breath. "Memorize everything I say - this is called education."

"We've gotta get you a kit: one thrift shop backpack, a pen and pencil and a small pad of paper with easy tear out sheets; a pair of those large black googly eyeglasses with a sissy string; brand new looking white runners and dark blue slacks - no jeans - but badly ironed, obviously slept in slacks. You're holding a grocery store bag with a half-eaten chocolate bar and a dog-eared pocketbook in it. This is your luggage, and your wallet combined - all you've got to your name." Louie winked. "Our schoolboy Jay is now wonderfully decrepit and perfectly pathetic."

"This could work." Louie clapped his mitts together. "On the other hand....."

It was a good summer. Jay the 'student' made some money and had a few laughs; pushed his mum and dad and painfully good memories and his reality to the brink of extinction. It was a good summer - until it went bad.

The ‘boys’ (Michelle’s pet name for her *favourite* guys) were wrapping up a successful day when the big fat guy lumbered onto the block. Jay watched with customary awe as his partner paced the man, mittens waving in his face and eyes locked on eyes; never letting the attention stray too far.

It was classic Louie - until he broke into a run. “Go!” he yelled as he passed the table. Jay took off behind him as fast as he could. The fat guy was gaining.

Tommy’s Tavern was a lifesaver. You ran in the side door, raced across the bar - waved hi to your pals - and went straight into the back hallway where the staff washroom was always open, even if there was someone in it. The window, just big enough, pushed out and when you slid out you ended up in the dumpster. It was no fun, but it got you into an alley that got you onto a back street that got you away from whatever was after you.

You lived to run like hell another day.

Louie shoved Jay through the window, and they fell and collapsed, exhausted, against the metal container. Louie pulled something purple and hairy looking from his right pant leg. “Want a bite?” he tossed the moist globule at Jay.

“Guess what,” Louie panted, “fatty was an American Express manager and he was on to me.”

“Not good.” Jay offered.

“No, he was really enjoying himself too, told me he would open the office, right around the corner; expedite my paperwork.”

“Nice of him.”

“Yes, fatso was playing me. I could see him scanning the block for a cop.”

“Time to run?”

“It was indeed a very good time to fucking vamoose.”

A large rat fell out of the bin, missed Jay by a foot, squealed and skittered away. A bag cartwheeled out the window overhead and broke on the edge of their bin. Jay picked up a piece of something and inspected it. “Looks like cheeseburger with onions and ketchup, no pickle - that’s good.”

“Order up!” Louie chimed.

‘The Long and Winding Road’ by the Beatles was playing in the Tavern. A pretty song, Louie said, but too long - and too ‘winedy’. They looked at each other in the dwindling back-alley light. “We should get going.” Louie said. “You’re covered in shit!” Jay laughed. “At least I *know* what I’m covered in.” A moment later, Louie joined in and it was unstoppable; the laughter grew and swelled until the shrieks and hoots echoed up and down the alley, magnified brilliantly by the open dumpsters and high slimy concrete block walls.

“We *have* to go,” Louie said when he could speak again. They stood and shook themselves off like dogs after a swim, all the while singing along with Beatle Paul as they started down the long and winding alley. “Many times I’ve been alone and many times I’ve cried.....”

“Does it ever straighten out?”

“The road?” Louie shook his head. “No Jay, it just keeps twisting so you can never see around the next bend.” He held his hands out and twisted his arms together like ropes. “Then everything goes black and you’re dead.” He held his open hands wide apart over his head. “Dead. See Jay? All gone.”

“I’m not sure that’s what the Beatles meant.”

Louie and Jay ran and whooped and crooned that night. They had fun for a little while.

The life of Louie

The television on the desk had the Expos game on, a low commentary drone ...comforting and hypnotic. “Home sweet home,” Louie raised his glass and held it out like a camera, scanning the suite around him. “Here’s to piracy and loot.”

Jay laughed. “And pillaging.”

“And cold beer.”

“And Michelle.”

After a quiet moment Louie spoke. “I guess I have to thank you.”

“Drunk?”

“I’ve never had a friend,” Louie said. “But now I have an honest to goodness goofball for a pal.”

“You’re welcome, I think.”

“But I think you should go home.”

“I think you should mind your own business.”

Louie shifted in his seat. “Don’t worry, I mind all of my businesses, now listen to me.”

After another quiet moment, Jay spoke. “I should go see Franklin.”

“Do it!” Louie nodded passionately, sloppily. “I’ve met the man. That, my friend, is an honest to goodness, good and honest gentle man. A fine specimen of a human being.” He held up his glass against the table lamp. “Empty...again? Shit!”

Another long quiet moment passed.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

“Use a coaster, for fucks sake.”

Louie put down his bottle. “I’m from Bolton, you know.” he said.

“The one in Ontario?”

“You been to a lot of Boltons?”

“My dad was born in Bolton, I think,” Jay said. “Did you know him?”

“What, a father named Jay? Don’t be so stupid.” Louie leaned forward. “And just how fucking old do you think I am?”

There was another liquid pause.

“He’s dead, right? Your dad.”

Jay nodded.

“You told me once you wanted to write a book.” Louie said.

Jay looked up at the ceiling and let his eyes close. “I did once, back when. I think I once saw myself as a writer...yes, but that thought was my first, and probably my last, piece of work and as it’s turned out it was all pure bullshit fiction.”

“Well, if you do write something, don’t put yourself in it.”

Jay lowered his head, eyes open. “I beg your pardon?”

“Because you’re not ready to be in your own story.”

“That sounds awful, and impossible.”

“Sorry kid, you’re not there yet.”

Jay laughed. “But you, the Great Louie, *will* be in it. Right?”

“Do I get a happy ending?” Louie asked.

“How the fuck should I know!”

They both laughed at that. There was a pause and some more beer. “Didn’t you have a mustache before?” Jay asked. “One of those gross thin ones?”

“That was the *other* Louie.”

It was now dark outside the window; the summer sun had set, and the Old Town had ignited with the bright lights and dance beat of cabaret and hustle. Jay heard a familiar voice wailing in the street below; it reached him through the open sliding glass doors. He fought the unkind impulse to laugh.

Margee was truly crazy; she was the real thing.

“I have to tell you some things,” Louie said, after Margee’s cries and screeches died down.

“What now?”

“From me...Louie the con, the operator, the thief, the detective...”

“Detective?”

“A bounty hunter without a gun.” Louie said. But I have some important truths to tell you. I’m talking realities from someone who loves you...” Louie put his hand over his heart. “You know, like a little brother. Okay?

“Okay.”

“Why won’t you go home?”

“I don’t even know how to answer that.”

“Here is the biggest truth you’ve got to understand. Mothers love their sons and their daughters, forever, always and without conditions...no matter what.”

“I doubt that somehow”

“No matter what, I said. And they forgive everything. I don’t know how they do it – I can’t, it’s not my style.” Louie smiled. “But they do it forever. Always.”

Jay let his eyes close. He settled deeper in the chair.

There was a soft knock at the door.

“Did you order something?”

Jay shook his head and went back to his beer and his dreams.

Louie went to answer the door. “I’ll let you in on a big secret,” he said as he left the room. “Hang in there for a sec, this one will knock you over.”

Jay heard the door open. He got himself another beer.

After a minute or two and an ominous silence coming from the hall, Jay went to the door. The door was wide open but blocked by a giant man in a black suit and

tie, wearing a knitted ski mask. For some reason Jay didn't find the creepy, horror movie, getup as odd as the fact that there was only one man - and he completely filled up the door opening.

"Where's my friend?" Jay asked.

"Can you understand what I'm saying?" The man said.

Jay felt the urge to say 'no' to the stupid question but changed his mind when he looked at the lifeless eyes. "Yes," he said. It sounded feeble and scared.

"We don't want you. Get out."

Jay caught the movement in the mask, and he turned his head to follow the direction of the look, just in time to see another man at the end of the hall holding the fire escape door open with his foot and dragging a crumpled-up body through the opening. "Louie!" Jay's cry rang down the length of the empty hall. Louie twisted in the grip of the man and Jay could just make out what looked like a wide bandage or heavy tape wrapped tightly around his head, covering his mouth and chin. It must have been brutally applied because any skin left uncovered was bloated and blood red. Even though Louie couldn't speak, his bulging eyes were broadcasting pure terror.

The man in front of Jay reached and pulled the door shut behind Jay, locking them both in the hall.

"What are you doing to him?"

The man pushed a thumb into Jay's chest. "You really want to know, don't you?"

But the giant turned his head at a sound. His partner had Louie under one arm, almost through the Fire door but was struggling with his boot, caught up in the heavy jamb. A low howl was coming from his awkward load. In that instant Jay took off as hard as he could toward the opposite stairwell.

As Jay hit the steps on his way down, another voice boomed from the hall. "Don't bother with that little piece of shit. He's a goner already. Let's go!"

It was a half hour run from the Richelieu Hotel to the Rue Henri overpass and the late-night traffic was still boozing overhead as Jay spread out Snoopy, and

began to settle in. But he stopped - shook his head -cleared his thoughts, picked up the blanket, folded it carefully, and walked back out from under the bridge.

Sorry, Cat," he said.

Jay had never been to the downtown shelter; he would have to find it now.

The Cottage

"The next morning, Jay showed up at the 'house'." I'm here for Franklin's stuff," he blurred when it was the Monk that let him in. Frenchy and the writer, and two of the blood donors, were the only other occupants, in the back at a table playing cards. The writer had his head on the table, slumped over - passed out.

He heard the ghastly toilet flush with a chug and a third blood donor pushed out through the one-hinged doorway. He didn't look well at all.

"Frank who?" Monk was all innocence.

"Most of it was personal. You couldn't hawk it or give it away - I want it."

"Oh, *I* see now." Monk said, "you are telling *me* what to do."

"So...?" Jay blinked and squeaked.

Monk slid up to face Jay.

Jay took a step forward. He and Monk were almost touching.

"Don't do it," Frenchy warned the youngster.

But Jay Smith was back in the Regina Inn, in the middle of a blizzard, practising a very special move.

And the Kid was ready...

And the Monk blinked...

And the Kid smashed the Monks face in... "Well, not quite, but at least I hit him," Jay bragged later.

Monk got up. "I don't even have that shit anymore." He rubbed the left side of his head. The hand came away bloody, and he studied it with curious disbelief and sat down on the floor again.

There followed a long and dangerous silence. "Come over here." Monk slapped the floor beside him.

Jay couldn't move.

Frenchy gave him a shove. "Go on," he said.

"Come here you little fucker!"

Jay sat down beside the Monk.

"That was the first spark of life I've ever seen from you."

"I just wanted to..."

"Don't get me wrong, you little runt. I don't care about you. If you ever think I do, come to me, I'll straighten you out. Understand? Good."

"Hey Frenchman! Get me a towel or something!" Monk waved toward the bathroom. "I don't like people seeing me bleed. It's not good for business."

Monk looked back at Jay. "Where was I?"

"You were saying how much you didn't like me."

"Right. Thanks." Monk caught the towel from Frenchy and dabbed at the left side of his head. "Even though I don't like you, I'm going to tell you something – ed u cate you.

Jay shrugged.

"You are a very sad guy. You think you are a man, but you are not even close. You are afraid to be a man because then you will have to stand on your own, like a man. Jay, you may not like me, but I am a man, I do what I want whether you or anybody else likes it or not. I can also take a punch." Monk checked the towel, then pressed it back on his face. "If, by some miracle, there is actually someone out there that's missing you and gives a shit about you, you are breaking a heart." The

Monk was getting up from the floor. “And I would never forgive a little shit like you for doing that.”

Monk got on his feet. “Never! Get him out of here Frenchy, before I kill him on purpose, or hug him by mistake...and then kill him.”

“Hey, you!”

Jay turned. The Monk was stabbing a long, crooked finger at him.

“I don’t want to see you again in this town, ever. Got it? So long brat, get lost.”

Frenchy pushed Jay out the door and around the corner of the building. “Get in the car, quick, before he changes his mind.”

“This is a car?” They were looking at a derelict vehicle jammed against the block wall.

“Get in - I want you to meet someone.”

“You can drive?”

“Hop in, we’ll go for a spin.”

“When I go to the cottage I don’t like to look back,” Frenchy said as he turned the rear-view mirror all the way around. He cranked his window down (Jay didn’t need to, there wasn’t one) as bits of hair and eyebrows and dandruff floated around in the cab.

“Consider this a tour and yours truly is your guide.”

“No more motels.”

Frenchy laughed and punched him.

“No, seriously.”

“I need a smoke. There should be some in there.” Jay’s tour guide pointed at the gaping hole in the dash in front of Jay. “Help yourself. I can’t believe you slugged Monk - you really socked him!”

“I used the move.”

“You showed some backbones. I’m impressed.” Frenchy pulled out a faded blue Bic lighter and lit up. “Monk has a son. He’s about your age. I’ve only ever seen him once, about ten years ago, and then he left and never came back, as far as I know.”

“What happened?”

“Everyone has a story, even Monk...does that surprise you?” Frenchy tossed the lighter in Jays lap. “Shit it’s hot...I wish I’d stolen a convertible.”

The Valiant was limping and lurching westward, the traffic was thinning, and they were leaving Montreal. “God, this is the hottest fucking day ever!” Summer was in full force; heat waves shimmered and danced on the winding blacktop as the city streets melted away behind them, replaced by trees, tractors in fields and rail fences. There were no tall buildings out here to block the sun - this was full-on summertime - and Frenchy was grinning from ear-fragment to ear-fragment.

“I think you might remind the Monk of his kid.”

“Does he hate his son.”

“He *says* he hates him.”.

“What’s that smell?”

“You’re like the dog that jumps the fence and lands in the yard right beside the barbecue. Nosy and smelly. Just don’t take a shit on the seat.” He laughed at his good one. “That’s burned up chicken and cooler beer.” Frenchy licked his lips. “I can’t hardly wait!”

Twenty minutes later, Frenchy spotted what he was looking for. “There, the LaSalle,” he told Jay, “Pull over - we need to shop.”

“You’re driving.” Jay pointed out.

“Oh...Yeah.”

The travellers filled up the back seat of the old Valiant with flats of Canadian and chicken parts and got back on the road.

“Have you ever killed anyone,” Jay asked.

“On purpose? No.”

“Not on purpose?”

“It was an accident sort of. There were two guys. We met by accident.” Frenchy shot a soggy plug of something out of his mouth and Jay watched it cruise out the open window. “One of them called me a runt - that’s how I learned the word - it was a terrible misfortune that he did that.” He looked over at Jay. “I think it was the bigger one that got accidentally killed.”

The Valiant hit a curb and sheared off into the wrong lane.

“That’s when I became a rogue. It was a promotion, I guess, and Monk kept me under his wing until it was safe.”

Frenchy fought the car back into the proper, less lethal lane, grinned back and waved to the couple chasing their bags and scattered groceries around on the pavement. The man shook his fist and spat on the sidewalk. The woman screamed a torrent of powerful obscenities as the Valiant hobbled away.

“And that, mon ami, is why I do what he tells me.” Another chewed up wad flew out the window. “Mon Dieu!” Jay got a friendly smack on the side of his head. “But that air smells good! Eh? N’est-ce pas?”

One hour into the countryside the Valiant was rolling onto the little Cable Ferry to Isle Bazard, joining two other cars and a small farm truck carrying a loud goat. The ferry was full up as it pulled away with its human cargo – plus Nanny - and headed for the dock visible on the other shore.

Jay stood on the deck and savoured the soft breeze pushing against him. He closed his eyes and opened his mouth wide, allowing the sweet river air to flood in. He imagined himself falling asleep on this spot and drifting up to a cloud high overhead and far away. I could fall asleep standing here - and I might never wake up. Sometimes you just feel good, for no good reason, he told himself. Sometimes your toes find a grip on the slippery slope, and you stop falling - just long enough to have a good look around - before you continue your skid.

“So, what do you think?” Frenchy’s spirited croak brought Jay crashing back to the moment; to the deck of the little ferry and the world of the small waves slapping against the boat’s planks, and the gulls soaring and diving and crying out in the wind over his head.

“This reminds me of the raft my dad made.” Jay had to yell to be heard over the birds and the wind and the river churning around them. “One summer at the cottage, from the cedars he cut down to make room for the cabin and the bunkhouse. He nailed planks across the logs, put up a mast with a coal-oil lamp hanging from a homemade crosstree and stuck the two-and-a-half Johnson on the stern - you never saw anything like it.” Jay laughed. “I got to drive Dad and me around the lake all summer long that year while he sat in his deck chair at the bow with his binoculars and his cooler.”

“Magnificent,” Frenchy applauded. “Bravo Papa!”

“Dad called it the ‘Ossiwope’. It was a local Indian name he liked...or made up. His ‘ship’ was tiny and tippy and a thing of beauty - and the best thing in the world - just like this little boat of yours.”

“This ‘little boat’, as you call it, is La ‘Jolie Fille’, named after the most beautiful lady I’ve ever seen, or met. She lives around here, and she is a woman that would never take a second look at someone like me, and who could blame her.” Frenchy shook his battered head back and forth, like he was wounded – in pain. “I’m sure she regretted the first look she had of me, and she’s made sure it was the last look she would ever have of me.”

“I think your ‘Wopolossee’ really meant the Great Dad” Frenchy poked Jay’s shoulder and pointed at the other shore as they approached.

“What the hell?” Jay shaded his eyes trying to get a better look. From the middle of the river, at this distance, the high bank on the other side appeared to be crumbling; bits and pieces and chunks of it falling into the river.

“Wait...” Frenchy said.

After a minute more the approaching scene revealed itself - Jay saw it all suddenly appear; throngs of stark-naked bodies; leaping, running, wrestling, and pushing each other off a cliff edge, plummeting to the water far below. Frenchy ran to the ferry’s bow, tore off his shirt, waved it back and forth like a signal flag and

sang out to the leaping, flying bathers at the top of his tortured lungs as they waved and called in return.

Frenchy turned to Jay. “Les Quebecois my friend,” he bellowed out over the song of the gulls in the hot wind. “.....c'est la!”

The old Valiant kicked up a cloud of dust as it climbed the hill from the ferry dock and pulled over in front of the smallest cottage at the top. Frenchy cranked the emergency brake, and he and Jay got out, stretched their legs and backs and wiped off the streaming sweat with their shirts.

Before them, inside the wonky gate, was a tiny white clapboard building trimmed with the bold strokes of an artist, in strong blues and deep greens, and flourishes of candy red holding up a yellow metal roof and a crooked black chimney pipe. Two windows, one on each side of the red trimmed screen door, had their curtains drawn against the mid-afternoon sun, Jay guessed. The curtains reminded him of the quilts he had seen at his grandmother’s cottage years ago in Lakefield, in Ontario, all colourful and brilliant. Add the three apple trees, bent over from the weight of their bounty, almost lying down in the long grass around the biggest picnic table Jay had ever seen; the kinked garden hose running off into a patch of towering sunflowers in the corner of the yard, and the strains of what sounded like fiddle music coming from inside the tiny building...and he knew he was seeing something, not for what it looked like, but for the magic that it was, and with those fresh eyes Jay Smith couldn’t stop staring at the wonder before him.

Frenchy was handing him stuff from the back seat. “Wake up. You can take the groceries in; you’ll get some credit. I’ll take the beer; I know where the fridge is.”

“You never told me who we’re seeing.”

“I didn’t?”

“Mama, c'est moi Pierre!” Frenchy called and knocked at the screen door until it swung open. “Jay, this is Mama.”

“Who is Pierre?”

Frenchy shrugged. "It's what my mother calls me."

"Mama speaks two languages, Quebecois and Lovee-Dubee. Don't worry about mixing them up, you will always understand her," Frenchy said, scooping up the little woman in his arms and tossing her gently from side to side and around and about like a favourite stuffed toy. Jay watched her, up in the air – silver hair and green eyes blazing - spinning and laughing and singing her son's name over and over like she was chanting a much-loved nursery rhyme. "Pierre...mon Pierre...mon Pierre...Pierre...Pierre...est-ce vraiment toi...mon Pierre...."

"Mama is the reason I speak such good French." He said to Jay and then repeated this new joke of his to Mama who laughed brightly back, pretending to understand what her son was saying in his English.

"Mama, this is a gift for you." He put a shopping bag in her hand and turned to Jay. "She's picking up some Anglo. She knows how to scold me, and she knows when I am in trouble - but she especially always knows when I have got her a present."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"I know, it's Anglo."

"Oh Mon Dieu, mon poivre, petit garçon...merci merci!" The mother reached up and held her son's battered head between her hands and gently massaged the lumps and bruises and tried, in vain, to flatten out the tattered curled-up ears.

"She doesn't like me fighting and she knows someday I'll lose one." Frenchy's voice had changed, and his mother was staring up at him. "Mama knows someday I won't come home no more."

The silent moment of mother-and-son grew so long that Jay, the intruder, turned to leave.

"No!" She was now hugging Jay with the same gentle passion he had just witnessed.

"You are not going anywhere." Frenchy laughed. "I'll get the rest of the stuff; you and Mama get to know each other – but don't gamble with her on the hockey."

"Hockey? It's the middle of August."

“That won’t stop my Mama, she bets on the replays. Fais attention, Jay. Careful.”

That night, after the burned-up chicken and icy cooler beer’, or as Frenchy called it - The Feast Of The Pecker Beast - the tough street scrapper; the brilliant and beautiful Mama; and the lost Anglo-boy, sat around the picnic table teaching each other card games, drinking Canadians and singing and dancing to Gilles Vigneault on Mama’s brand new stereo album.

They all went to bed, eventually.

“This is my brother’s room - you sleep here.”

“What’s his name?” Jay asked.

A dark cloud passed between them. “He has no name - he doesn’t exist.” Jay knew better than to ask about any father.

The next morning, the “boys” were sent for a swim and, after a plunge off the cliff, returned panting and shaking like dogs to the cottage where a feast had appeared magically on the picnic table in the garden. This breakfast was the largest, most colourful, flowery, display of food and treats that Jay had ever seen; platters smothered in pounds of thick crispy bacon oozing sizzling fat, like lava, drizzled over the piping hot fresh fried eggs – and - as if that course wasn’t enough to lay the boys out flat on the table, Mama served up sweet and sticky apple crepes, stacks of home baked toasted bread and tumblers of chunky orange juice and bumpy hand-spun, clay mugs filled to their brims with piping hot, steaming coffee.

Everything went down and stayed down, for a change, and Jay Smith felt safe and warm and content. He would have stayed at this table, with these people, forever, if given half a chance, but too soon it was over and it was time to leave Mama and the island.

After helping Mama tidy up, Frenchy took Jay outside to the car. “When Monk said he didn’t have the stuff you wanted, he wasn’t lying.” Frenchy was opening the Valiant’s trunk. “He thinks he was ripped off; that’s also the truth.” He had the trunk wide open now and it was full of bags and boxes. “What Monk doesn’t know is that I was the one that ripped him off.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The whole fucking thing stunk - that’s all I’m going to say.”

The Valiant was running, thanks to neighbour Jackie’s truck and cables, and the boys were ready to leave Mama and Isle Bazard. She came around to Jay’s side, leaned in the open window and said something across Jay to her son. She rested one hand on Jay’s shoulder.

“Mama wants to know if you will come back to see her. You know, work on your French and learn how to play cards better.”

“I’ll try my best.”

“Not good enough.”

Jay looked into Mama’s eyes and spoke slowly, hoping that she would hear some truth in his words. “Tell your Mama that I *will* come back.”

Mama laughed and planted a big red kiss on Jay’s forehead and ruffled his hair wildly about. It shocked him - it was the same way his Mum always said goodbye to him, minus the brilliant lipstick. “Bullshit,” she said clearly in his ear, in English. “But I will *always* miss you, Anglo boy.” She released him and turned away, walked back to her cottage stoop.

Mama didn’t turn around before going inside the little building, but she raised her right arm and wagged her hand. “Au revoir, Jay,” he heard.

The Valiant made it to Franklin’s house, stopped long enough to drop Jay and his load off and disappeared around the corner at the end of the block. Jay thought he caught a wave coming from inside the car as it pulled away, but he wasn’t sure.

“Thanks, Frenchy Pierre,” Jay said to the now-empty street.

A tall, exhausted looking lady opened the door and looked at him, first with disinterest, then with suspicion. “Is your name Jay?” she eventually asked.

“Yes.”

“Go straight to hell, you monster!”

She turned to go back into the house. “I’m calling the police!”

The large body of Franklin stopped her.

“No need to call anyone, Margret dear,” he kissed the distraught woman on the cheek as she pushed past. “I can deal with this.”

That left Franklin and Jay facing each other over the sill of the open door.

“My sister is very protective of me.”

Jay had no idea what to say.

“You didn’t know what your friends had done to me, did you?” Franklin helped.

Jay could only look away. “I brought your things,” he finally said, pointing to the cardboard boxes on the porch beside the door opening. “I think it’s all there.”

Franklin didn’t look at the boxes; he kept his eyes directly on Jay. “Look at me Jay,” he said. “How did you get all this?”

“A good guy.”

The street was as quiet and peaceful as Jay remembered. It was Franklin who finally spoke. “I’m not well.” He checked over his shoulder, but they were alone. “Sometimes there is absolutely nothing more to be said when two pals say a final goodbye,” he said. “Come here, Jay. Give me a good hug for goodbye.”

Franklin walked Jay to the gate. “Remember when you and your father looked up at the stars and contemplated the universe?” he said to his young friend. “Someday, not in our lifetime but someday, humans will travel out there, to those stars and beyond; but those travellers will never return, we will never know what happened to them... they will never be heard from again.”

Franklin opened the gate. “You, my young friend, can still return. It won’t be easy, I know that, but you must go home now.”

Jay started to walk down the sidewalk. “You must, Jay.” He heard the clank of the gate close behind him.

“Hey Jay-with-a-Jay.” Franklin was leaning against the fence, looking at him.

Franklin had made him smile. Jay opened his mouth to speak.

“Do you need bus money?” Franklin asked.

Jay shook his head. “I can’t leave yet - there’s something I have to do first.”

Franklin held up a hand. “So long, Jay. And feel free to make a good memory of me - the old faggot you spent a night with.”

That night Jay settled under the bridge, rolled up in Snoopy, and fell into a sound sleep listening to the rumbling chorus of the overhead traffic. He spent the next day at the hostel and then returned to the bridge. He followed that pattern for the next three days: days at the Club, as the staff and volunteers called it, and then back to his bridge. He felt oddly serene and in control for the first time in years. He wasn’t afraid, but he was apprehensive...something was missing.

And then, on the sixth night under the Henry Bridge, Cat showed up.

“Welcome home scruffy.” Jay lifted up the edge of his bedding. “Come on, get in...cuddle up.” Cat never needed to be asked twice, and he knew the sweet spot to get a good purr going. “You better get a good sleep, my friend, because tomorrow you learn how to hitchhike.”

On their way out of the Old Montreal, Jay Smith and Cat stopped at a corner thrift shop and bought a bag.

“This is your house,” Jay told his companion. “See, it’s nice and big and it’s burlap or something, it’s warm and thick like a good bed. Come on, try it.” He dropped a hunk of dried-up ham (Cat’s all-time favourite) in the bag, got down on his knees on the concrete and laid out the bag, open, in front of the animal.

Half a dozen exploratory snuffles and the Cat was in the bag and Jay stood up with his friend swinging from an arm. “All set?” He reached down and gave the purring head a finger rub and the pair headed north, out of town.

He got the first car.

“Nice night, eh?” Frenchy had that scary puppet grin on his face. “Juicy, hot air blowing around. Just the way I like it.” The passenger door swung open. “Get in, no charge for the big rat in the bag.”

Jay checked the back seat.

“Don’t worry, he’s not here, but he’s had me tailing you for the last week. He really wants to make sure he’s rid himself of you, for some reason. This is his new car - Mustang Mach 1 Fastback.” Frenchy patted the dash. “Smokes are in the brand-new glove compartment. Like it?”

“You stole Monk’s new car?”

“Nope. This is his idea, his idea of a treat. Get rid of you for good.” Frenchy floored the thing, cranked the wheel with a wild ‘whoop’ and pulled out in front of a semi truck that careened into the passing lane to avoid them. “Gotta love that guy’s horns, eh?!” Frenchy laughed; one hand cupped over the remnant of his left ear. “That’s real powerful music.”

“God help me.” Jay was shaking. Cat had disappeared under the seats.

“Let’s take it for a spin. Address?”

“I don’t remember. Just drop me at the Hull bridge.”

What Cat dragged in

Going back didn’t work. She let him in, but he felt her wrestling with the decision. She later told her son that it was Cat that tipped the balance – he leapt into her arms the minute he saw her - they bonded in the doorway.

“Cat? You need some proper loving, so welcome - come and get some.” She turned with Cat, and Jay followed, feeling like an afterthought.

The reunion didn’t start off well, and in the coming days, it showed no signs of improving. Mother and son avoided talking to one another after his return from ‘God knows where’. They traded curt notes instead of speaking. One of them would get up in the morning to find a handwritten message waiting in the centre of the kitchen table. Meanwhile, the other would be long gone out the door for the

day. When they passed in the narrow hallway, later, they would say “sorry” politely, coolly, avoiding any eye contact - denying recognition, stifling affection - even though they hadn’t bumped or touched.

One afternoon, he found his mother on her knees, fumbling through the bottom clutter of the hall closet. “I can’t find my boots, my pretty boots.” She was crying. “Where are my pretty boots?” Jay knew he should help, give his mother some comfort, but instead he simply waited for her to settle down so he could back away.

If there is a heaven, he thought, dad is up there with God, watching his heartless son ignore his mother’s cries for help.” Jay prayed there wasn’t a heaven - or a God – to allow his father to witness this moment.

They kept their distance like that for two long, painful, years, although they communicated grudgingly over the Christmas leftovers. Two years without the real Santa, his dad. It was tough going, but mother and son at least talked. They were civil. They were not affectionate. They fought over the mashed potatoes – but not the Brussels sprouts. They didn’t actually fight; to fight would have required spirit and heart.

Mother and son remained strangers, like distant relatives with nothing in common but cold blood, until one evening the mum stood in front of the son in the narrow hall and wouldn’t let him pass.

“I’m going out.” Jay said to his mother.

“No. You’re not.”

“Mum...”

“We’re going to talk, Jay, and then if you want to leave, I’ll help you rent something somewhere, and we can really call it quits, if that’s what you really want.”

He shuffled to his right. She stepped to her left.

“Mum...”

“You owe me this. You’re still my kid, and I won’t give you up without a fight.” She held her arms out. “Come on, kid.”

The mother sat on the couch – the son sat at the kitchen table. “One thing about this place,” she said. “It’s so small you can sit anywhere and still be everywhere at the same time. Okay, here are the rules.”

Jay started to stand up.

“Pretend your father is here,” his mother said. “That’s all - I promise.”

She told her son about the father’s dismissed will, the nonexistent life insurance, the bank foreclosure, and the sale of the family home from under her feet. She tried to describe the avalanche of despair and panic that forced her to accept this awful apartment. “I really wanted a balcony,” she told him, holding back a choke. “I guess it was for the best that there wasn’t one; I would’ve jumped off it.”

“You would have flown.”

“The Flying Mum?”

“Can I tell you about a man named Franklin?” Jay asked.

“I’d like that,” his mother said. “Let’s get a pizza.”

“And Frenchy – and Monk?”

“We’d better get two.”

“And Frenchy’s Mum?

“Some garlic toast.”

“And Michelle?

“Add a salad.”

“And Louie.”

“What was that last name?”

“Louie...why?” Jay asked.

“Nothing. We’ll need lots of ice cream for this,” she said quickly. “What about Cat,” she asked.

“Cat would like a ham sandwich. No mustard. No lettuce. Lots of real butter. White bread with crusts attached. Cheese. Oh, and...”

Jay’s mum held up a hand; she was already on the phone.

“I’ll do the dishes.” The son mouthed the words.

The pizza was sloppy and splendid. When they were done Jay did the dishes and they said goodnight.

“I looked for you,” she said before closing her bedroom door. “I had help.”

The next morning there was a rare phone call at the little apartment without the balcony. “It *was* an accident,” Jay’s mother said. They just ruled on the petition this morning. Your dad looked after us.”

.....

Montreal, Canada...1979

“Christ Almighty!” Jay Smith gasped as the face revealed itself.

“Alive? Is that what you call it?” The wheelchair rattled violently for a moment.

It couldn’t be him: it *shouldn’t* be him, after all this time.

It was time to go on, but Jay couldn’t move - he didn’t know how to walk away from a ghost.

There was a tug at his shoulder. “Come on honey, the baby’s freezing here.”

Jay Smith turned to join his family, to leave the steps and the formless voice behind him, but he stopped suddenly and turned back.

“What did you say?” he said.

“What do you *think* I said?”

“It sounded like ‘goodbye Jay’.”

“I said ‘go away’.” The figure raised a mitten fist. “I meant it. Leave me alone,” he said. “Fuck off!”

Jay bent down and squatted - his hand found a mitten, and he held onto it. “Left you behind. Sorry,” he said. There was no reply, but the hand stayed in his grip until he felt something. He squeezed back.

He got another tug from above. “Come on, we have to get going.” Mary helped her husband to his feet and hugged him, slowly, softly. “Michelle needs a bottle, and so will I if we stay out here any longer.”

Jay looked up. “Why won’t he answer me?”

“Is that the guy?”

Jay tried to speak, but all he could do was shake his head; he couldn’t answer his wife.

“You’ve moved on,” she said.

“I guess I have.”

She took off a glove, raised her hand and pressed it to his face until the flesh warmed. “You’re crying.”

“That’s sleet.”

“That’s bullshit.”

“Okay let’s go.” There was one last look back. He had to be sure. He had to do the right thing here.

Then it was done. “Don’t forget the kid,” he said.

The wheelchair was now alone in the growing storm at the bottom of the Post Office steps. There was a hint of the body’s shape shaking under the blanket. As Jay watched, a figure in a bulky winter coat and a red and blue Alouette tuque pulled down as far as it would go, ran up and got behind the chair. He began

rocking the thing back and forth, trying to free it from the freezing slush, from the rut it was caught in. One last heave and it was out.

Jay turned and ran to catch up with his wife and his baby

The man in the wheelchair got one last look at the family before it disappeared around the corner at Saint Henri. They didn't look back. He pulled the hood back down over his face. "Should've gone to Baltimore." He shuddered in the ice filled wind coming up from the big river and roaring through the old part of Montreal.

"How you feeling?"

He looked up. "Like an old shutter banging around on one hinge about to fall the fuck off the wall." He lowered his head. "And God! It's cold!" It was a cry, but the lone voice was swallowed up in the blizzard and blown away down the street, and lost.

Louie waved a mitt to get his ride going. "Take me back now boss – I got a wallet; that's enough for today."

The end