

Mentors

Montreal, Canada...1979

“You’re in my spot.”

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

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

“Spare change?” The wheelchair said.

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.

There was a body in a trunk.

A voice came up to him from the heap below. It spoke. “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 replied, absently, 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 said. “Do you remember me?”

The voice lifted a mitten. The voice pulled its hood back. It raised its face.

The other man stumbled back. “...Christ Almighty!”

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1967...The Beginning-12 years earlier

Jay's Uncle Humbert showed up for the burial with a glamorous 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, the depressing part - 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, perfect 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 drunk 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 sergeant and the mother knew full well what the son had done.

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 Alice, 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 a cowed dog, wondering idly 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 he a boy, a man, a semi-human specimen afloat in a lab dish?

Jay Smith was barely a curiosity in a distracted world. He was ugly and he smelled. He was something to avoid and he was cold - but this morning the sun felt good and he soaked it in. He closed his eyes and tried to smile, but his lips cracked and his teeth throbbed.

The young man's heart shrank away and hid.

But the sun sure felt good.

The first strong light of the first Old Montreal day of April 1970 hit Jay 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 from the cyclist. 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?"

"*My* 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 to 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? This is embarrassing.”

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

“My name is Louie.

Something wiggled out from between Jay and the brick wall. It stared at the stranger and arched its back.”

“Is that your cat?”

“Sorry, I can’t afford pets,” Jay said... “You look like the con man.”

“What con man?”

“The one in the movie.” Jay said.

“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 we have going here,” he said. “Look! Over there! A bird of some kind!”

“So, what’s your name? 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 buggered off and left him alone.

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

Jay turned his head. He got a hand on the back of his neck and started to rub it where it hurt.

But Louie was still talking. “A baby birdy, just like that one, except smaller and different colours, 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 uglier, walks up and eats it up whole. The little bird is gone now – just a few chewed up feathers and spat-out bits of beak and an eyeball left on the pavement right outside a bank.”

“The point, mister?”

“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 foot traffic.

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

“Asshole,” he said again. It felt good.

The little animal came and settled on the blanket spread on his crossed legs. “Hi little cat, the psycho’s gone. You’re safe. Where’ve you been?” Jay felt the purr startup as the the warm, tiny body curled up in his lap. “Throw up anything interesting lately?” He touched the coral nose pointed up at him. “Mouse puke? That’s gross.”

The Monk

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

“Where you been?” Monk asked. “Here, have some of Lesters’,” 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 slid down his throat easily...so smoothly, like the soft ice cream he remembered, but warm. He dropped a bit behind his back.

“I’ve got something for you,” Monk said, drawing an expensive-looking comb through his sparse 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 young Jay, it was as if Monk wanted the whole world to laugh at him, just so he could enjoy the payback in his own nasty 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 the losers and lost souls like you, my pals inside will look after you real well.” Monk winked. “I know people.”

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 busted at the seams, hacked and choked and spat up with such enthusiasm that heads turned in alarm on the other side of the bar.

A voice cried out. “Can someone turn the juke box up...please!”

“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-lifes 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 also truly bilingual, spoke French and English fluently, and beat up both French and English people, also quite fluently, and when he spoke, he discharged thick tobacco-stained globs out of his mouth and produced an impressive variety of horrible, cackling sounds from the same mouth. Frenchy really and truly enjoyed his beating-up-people hobby but was fussy in his choice of opponents, preferring the larger and uglier variety of males he came across during his day-to-day neighbourhood rounds.

The local brawler’s punched-up strawberry face, soft boiled carrot nose, ears 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.

And as if one brain tattoo wasn’t enough, Jay had 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 like a grownup,” 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 dropped the case of Canadians on the bed, cracked one open for himself and lobbed another to his student. “T’es-tu pret?”

Jay shrugged. What better place to learn the fine art of street thuggery, he thought, than in a creepy motel room in the middle of a snowstorm, with an honest-to-goodness street 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.” ... He suddenly seemed to

choke, flailed his bare arms over his head like a drowning man, then stopped just as suddenly, grinned and beat his chest with his fists. "Excuse me, but that first brew is the best one...So, like I was saying, the guy you're beating up is not a *real*, real person; he's a thug, a stupid, ugly, smelly brute."

The snow was coming down harder now. Jay felt the building shudder; he could smell the snow as he listened to the moaning wind. He backed away from the window; there were ghosts out there in the blizzard, clutching at the window frame - trying to get in.

A full minute passed as Jay waited in vain for Frenchy to speak. "That's it, Guru?" he said as something crashed into the outside wall with a wicked crack. It did it again - the Vacancy sign must have lost a chain; he got a glimpse of it swinging and twisting in the blizzard like a cowboy hanging from a tree. It crashed again, lifted and smashed furiously again and again at the window frame. He heard voices approaching through the wind, but all he could do was stare at the single pane separating him and the monsters outside. The glass is holding - the glass is holding - he was repeating under his breath when suddenly a cadaverous face appeared on the bottom corner of the window, pressed against the sleet, mouthing words, pressing closer and closer to Jay. The petrified face looked horrified, either due to what it was experiencing outside the building or what it was observing inside the room. Either way, it looked intensely disturbed, at least up until Frenchy stepped to the window, waved cheerfully to the specter, and pulled the curtains closed.

"That's just Marcel fucking around," the Frenchman said and moved to stand in front of Jay. He stared at him with swollen eyes - just a bare foot away. "Now, where were we?" he said.

Jay couldn't help but notice. "I didn't think anyone actually wore those boxer shorts," he said.

"I have to. I am a fighter. Right? Get it? Fighter...boxer...fighter...boxer? And I'm going to have a dozen kids, six of each kind there is. These things help." He snapped the elastic. Jay looked up and away. "Now listen to me...watch *me* for fuck's sake."

Frenchy assumed his thug pose...the urgent tapping on the window had stopped.

"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 decided not 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. See?" 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 shuffled back to the old part of town.

Jay looked up from his careful inventory of the almost empty guitar case. He saw the two men. The other guy with the fingerless mittens and stupid bird story had vanished, and in his place, of course and quite naturally, stood Monk and Frenchy above him, watching him devour the tail end of the half-eaten sandwich. Jay wiped at his face with a torn sleeve, the dripping wet beef sliding and dropping from his greedy lips. He waited.

These two showing up together was never a good sign; it was always a bad sign. Instead of being left alone, he was being cornered and summoned to perform.

Whatever The Monk wanted from the young beggar, he got, and what he wanted was almost always illegal, nasty, and frightening. After one adventure as the lookout in a dark alley event, Jay asked the older man why he always picked on *him* for these jobs. Monk thought a moment. “You’re here, you’re barely alive, you don’t fight me, and as far as I can see you’re not leaving, going away anywhere...anytime. I need people like you, until you disappear, and another body takes your place. It’s business, Jay, and you’ll do for now. End of story. Satisfied?”

“Yeah, like what he said,” Frenchy garbled. Monk rolled his eyes. “And where you been, you don’t come to the house anymore?” the Frenchman finished.

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, he stayed clear of the toilet in the closet - it wasn’t safe in there.

“It’s warmed up a little. 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 wagged his head.

“That kills me that they say that.”

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

“I’m too tired.”

“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.

Frenchy waved a goodbye. "Have fun!"

Franklin

That evening, Jay walked north to find the sandwich-wrap address. It made a lot more sense walking, rather than taking a bus. Bus fare or a couple of drafts at Tommy's? No contest.

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 traffic disappeared behind him 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 casting shadows in a stage play unfolding in front of an 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.

“Funny how mistakes don’t always happen by mistake - they’re created sometimes, Mister Owl, and here I go again, being really creative.” Jay looked up. “So, Mister Owl, you really don’t give a hoot what I think - do you?” he said to the void above him; to the woof...woof...woof of wings taking the big bird away

Jay braced his tired body the best he could (I feel like an old man already, he thought), reached out and touched the door as if exploring the surface, seeking answers. 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 slab 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.

“My old owl told me you were here. Do you want to wash up?” the large man in the 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 didn’t move a muscle.

“Please,” the man said. “Humour me.”

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

“I guess.”

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.

“You all right?” It was the man with the money and the large goitre knocking on the bathroom door, calling him to come out.

“Here’s your tea.” The man handed him a steaming mug. It smelled strong. “Hope you like whiskey.”

“My dad gave me a shot once - I survived.”

“My name is Franklin.”

“Jay,” he answered, looking straight at Franklin’s forehead, 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. "They can be 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 left behind, 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 shackled 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, like *this*, sharing a bottle or two and brightening up the days we are facing." 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 get in the clubs."

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.

Franklin looked out the window when Jay stopped and slowly wagged his head. "Wow, young man," he said. "I would say that in the most-depressing-life-story-event we both win first place. You and I are deadlocked in a tie for the gloomiest tale."

“What’s the prize?”

“What else? More tea.”

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 cores, our very souls - with each other. We bond. We become partners in the universe.”

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, you and me; we are no longer strangers. So, I apologise to the endlessly cold and cruel world; sorry, but you can’t 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 your relentless good nature.”

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

“And that’s obviously more than enough tea. 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!”

Franklin wasn’t finished. “Last night,” he said. “Did you happen to notice the elephants in the room with us?”

Jay looked around. “I’ve heard of elephants in a room,” he said. “You can’t *not* think of them, or they’re in the way, or something like that.”

“Two of them. Kind of hard to miss. There have been two of them standing quietly over there in the shadows ever since you arrived.” Franklin took Jay’s

shoulders in his big hands and turned the youngster around. “Look at them Jay,” he said. “I believe these are your parents; here with you, watching over you, all along.” He laughed and turned Jay back around. “Corny, eh?”

Franklin handed Jay an envelope and led him out of the room. “Hey you, think you might stop in again to visit me?”

“I’d like that,” Jay said, and walked toward the landing where he stopped abruptly.

“What’s wrong?” Jay was just standing, fixed, at the top of the stairs, both hands gripping the railing. “What is wrong?” Franklin asked again.

Jay turned and held out the envelope. “...I just need a hug. That’s all I want.”

“Of course...of course you do.” Franklin said. “So what are you waiting for. Just careful of the bump.”

The two said their goodbyes and Franklin’s voice followed Jay down the stairs and out the front door. “Don’t forget the elephants, young man; they’re going with you. You can’t shake them.”

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...”

“Doggie,” 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. “But I have no need for useless love stories.”

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 now 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 a size.

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 down from there.” They were drinking Gin at Bayanass. “Only difference is, you and I are in different lanes on that crowded road to hell.”

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

On a warm, clear evening in early June, 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 encamped Army, police sweeping up vagrants every night, the FLQ terrorist crazies and the enforced curfews – every miserable remnant of the last year they got rid of; chased out of town as they 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 steamy jazz clubs and taverns where it smoked a lot and drank too much - did anything, and did anyone, it desired.

Montreal had its fun, it was loud and sexy; then the next morning it woke up, reborn, if a little unsteady, and searched out the waiting peace in the city 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 its companion, the towering Maple, and whispered to the squirrels and songbirds kibbitzing and chattering in the flower 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, Jay 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 care; it didn't matter) 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 *know* that you are alive? Do you have any friends around here? Do you have bug difficulties in your bug life?"

Jay felt himself drifting away from one world and on into another; from the one where he was hungry, filthy-wet 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 up. He was never closer to a feeling of contentment than when something like this insect swallowed him up whole and dragged his broken self up into the treetops where it lived, and he would start fresh as something else entirely; preferably something with no heart and no memory.

Anyway, it was a nice thought.

Deep down inside, Jay knew he was far from okay. He knew crazy. He saw it in the faces of the strangers shuffling past him day and night, and nothing frightened him more than the possibility of ending up a permanent denizen of this monstrous world. He was close, very close to that border, but he didn't know what to do - he might have already lurched over the line.

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 notice him, didn't care.

Sometimes, without thinking, he would find himself basking in a happy memory, and before he could shut it out, the moment would grow inside him until he'd have to fight it off with a mystery street pill or a table of draft, or an act so bad and ugly that the memory would shrink away and disappear, leaving him

exhausted and hollow again. Living was easier when he was completely hollowed out.

But, during the rarest of moments, like this one lying drained on a park bench, Jay Smith was far too busy to pay any attention to his trivial reality; his past, present and future were consumed by one moment. 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 bonafide 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 bloody 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 that 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, foreboding, 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, somehow wrong.

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

“And I didn’t ask to save you. You didn’t have to get in that car, you know.”

“How the hell do you know about the car?”

“It’s easy. All you guys arrive here in someone else’s car. That’s all, but I don’t know how you leave...or if you ever do.”

Jay pushed his chair back and got up. “So, what am I supposed to do *now*?”

“Leave,” Louie said, not looking up – still intent on the spread in front of him. “Try going home, for fuck’s sake.”

But, 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 back together and they 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 copy of the new book, *The Godfather*, 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 put down the book. “You should read this. Smart stuff.” He slid his plate across the table. “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, blew ‘Schelle’ a kiss, 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, and all the times before.

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 said.

Louie’s story is simple – his script simple genius. Jay tried 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. Hostel is full. Sleeps down there under the walkway . 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 the cash 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. “You can’t let them slip away – you let up on them and you’re lost. But keep hammering them with your shit 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, or the seventy or the one hundred or whatever; 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. “Except when 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 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 show - no, a fantastic show and then go get ‘em - and watch their little plastic doors pop open. Voila, kiddo... Mucho 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 all over the streets.

Louie ended with a flourish. “You need big brass balls and stainless-steel nerves to pull this off consistently, 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 for you – 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 your 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 left to your name.” Louie winked. “Our schoolboy Jay is now wonderfully decrepit and perfectly pathetic.”

“Another thing. No booze, no drugs Jay, not during working hours. Okay, this could work.” Louie clapped his mitts together. “On the other hand.....”

It was a good spring for the youngster. Jay the student made some money, pushed the elephants and their loads of memories off to the side and even had a few laughs. It really *was* a lovely spring for the ‘boys’ working Saint Catherines until one afternoon when, without warning, it turned ugly.

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. “Flee!” 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-for-it another day.

Louie shoved Jay through the window, and they fell and collapsed, exhausted, against the metal container. Louie pulled something purple and hairy from his right pant leg. “Want a bite?” he tossed the moist globule at Jay. “Guess what,” Louie panted. “Fatty was an American Express guy, and he was on to me.”

“You yelled ‘flee’?”

“Pretty classy, eh?”

“No. Embarrassing, and everyone on the block heard it.”

Louie ignored him.

“So the agent was really enjoying himself. He told me he would open the office right around the corner, expedite my paperwork.”

“Nice of him.”

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

“Time to run.”

“It was indeed a very good time to flee.”

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 what looks like ketchup - or the customer’s teeth were bleeding. 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. 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 were like stars in the sky - 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.”

“Don’t force yourself. Are you drunk already?”

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

“You’re welcome.”

“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 own businesses.”

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

“Just do it!” Louie nodded enthusiastically. “I’ve met the guy. Mister Franklin is an honest to goodness, *good* man. First class. You should never have ripped him off.” He held up his glass against the table lamp. “Empty...again? Shit!”

Another long quiet moment passed.

“Here.”

“Thanks.”

“Use a coaster, for fuck’s 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 dim.” Louie leaned forward. “And just how fucking old do you think I am?”

There was another fluid 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 crazy thought was my first and probably my last piece of work. The Life of Jay was pure fiction, and as it turned out it was all bullshit as well.”

“Well, if you ever try again, don’t put yourself in the story this time.”

Jay lowered his head, eyes open. “What?”

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

“That sounds stupid.”

“Sorry kid, you’re not there yet.”

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

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

“How should I know; I’m just the non-existent writer.”

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 my greasy Louie period.”

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?”

“More a bounty hunter without a gun or a horse.” Louie said. “I find people.”

“Like me?”

“You were an accident - I literally tripped over you - sorry.” But I do have something you should know. I’m talking reality here for a second.” Louie put his hand over his heart. “From someone who cares about you like a little brother. Okay?”

“You are definitely cut off.”

“But you’ve gotta go home.”

Jay emptied his beer and stared out the window into the dark.

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

“I wouldn’t know.”

“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 thoughts.

Louie went to answer the door. “I’ll let you in on a big secret,” he said, over his shoulder, as he left the room. “Hang in there for one more second, kiddo; this truth 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 an ill-fitted ski mask, also black. For some reason Jay didn’t find the creepy, horror movie getup as odd as the fact that there was only one man in the doorway, and he completely filled it up. He was a perfect fit.

“Where’s my friend?” Jay asked.

“Get out,” The door man said.

Jay caught a 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 blocking 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. In his whole life, Jay had never been so scared - not even Monk did this stuff. He shrank away from the monster’s touch, but the thumb kept coming, plunging and driving deeper into his chest. He tried to catch a breath, but there was no air to be had.

At the end of the hall, the partner had Louie under one arm, almost completely through the fire door, but was struggling with one loose shoe caught up in the heavy jamb. A low howl rose from the man’s awkward load, and as Jay’s giant leaned back to catch the struggle going on to his right, Jay squeezed out of his grip and bolted to his right. As he hit the steps on his way down, another voice boomed from the hall. “Don’t bother with that little piece of shit. He’s nothing. He’s a loser. Let’s go!”

It was a half hour stumbling hobble from the Richelieu Hotel to the Rue Henri overpass, and the late-night traffic was still booming overhead as Jay spread out his Snoopy blanket 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. “You’re on your own tonight.”

Jay had never been to the downtown men’s shelter, but 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 blurted out 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. The table looked wet.

He heard the ghastly toilet flush with an obscene belch, 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’s eyes were stinging. He blinked.

Monk slid up to face Jay; he looked down at the youngster.

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

“Don’t do it,” Frenchy warned Jay.

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 in 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* care, come to me, I’ll straighten you out fast. 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 my business or their welfare.”

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 - educate you.”

Jay was trying to open his closed fist. It felt broken.

“You are a very sad little fellow, but today you got lucky.” The Monk turned the youngsters head until they were locked, eye to eye. “You think you are a man, but you are not. You are far from that. And you are not a man because you are afraid to be a man, because then you would have to act like a man, all by yourself, and stand on your own two feet like a man. So...you may not like me, but I am at least a man; I do what I want when I want, and everyone else goes to hell and waits for me. It’s actually kind of fun being a man - it’s nice.” Monk checked the towel. “I can also take a punch.” He pressed the towel back on his face.

Jay Smith, the young man, thought he should say something, but the older man wasn’t finished.

“If, by some miracle, there is someone out there that’s missing you, and is looking for you, and actually gives a crap about you - you are breaking their heart.”

The Monk was struggling to get up from the floor. “And if that is what you are doing, there is simply no forgiving you.”

“Help me up, for fuck’s sake!”

Monk was on his feet. “I would never forgive the likes of you! Get him out of here Frenchy, before I kill him on purpose, or hug him by mistake...and then have *you* kill him.”

“Hey, you!”

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

“I’m not just talking about me and you. You don’t need my blessing or approval; you don’t need that from me, and really, who gives a shit whether I do or I don’t forgive anybody - I don’t give a shit; I never have and I never will. I am talking about you forgiving yourself, and it takes a real man to pull that one off - so good fucking luck I suppose.”

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 service, like Magnificent Frenchy’s Limo Tours, and yours truly is your guide.”

“No more motels.”

Frenchy laughed and cuffed him.

“No, seriously.”

“I need a smoke. There should be some in there.” The 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.

“What was he going on about?” Jay asked.

“Monk has a son. He’s about your age. I’ve only ever seen him once, about ten years ago. Then he disappeared and never came back. Who knows, he’s probably dead, but the Monk has never stopped looking; he has people out there. It’s been years now.”

“What happened?”

“Who knows. Everyone has a story, even Monk...does that surprise you?” Frenchy tossed the lighter in Jays lap. “Shit it’s hot out here! - 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,” Frenchy said.

“Does he love his son.”

“He *says* he hates him.”.

“What’s that smell?”

“You’re like an ugly dog at a barbecue. Nosy and smelly. Just don’t leave a dump on my nice upholstery.” He laughed at his own wit. “That’s burned up chicken and cooler beer you’re smelling.” 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 because I’m short and look weak - that’s how I learned the word – but it was a terrible misfortune that he said that.” He looked over at Jay. “I think it was the bigger one that got accidentally killed. Boy he was ugly. And stupid.”

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 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, mon ami?”

“Do you know you get Frenchier as we leave Montreal?” Jay laughed; and for the next ten minutes the Anglo kid and the French Canadian fighter stopped talking and enjoyed the open space; each in his own quiet world.

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. “He built it 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...and his Puccini Opera on the radio.”

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

“Dad called it the Ossiwope,” Jay said. “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. She tried one time and she didn’t like it - 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 I would ever have of her.”

“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 for it,” Frenchy said.

After a minute more the approaching scene revealed itself. Jay saw it all appear suddenly; 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 out 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 the streaming sweat off their chests 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; a defence against the full on 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 highlights and replays. Fais attention, Jay. Careful.”

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

They all went to bed, eventually.

“This is your room.”

Jay pointed at the only picture in the room, a framed photograph on the wall beside the bed. "Who's that?"

"That's my younger brother and me at our junior college graduation."

"Nice, what's his name."

A dark cloud passed between them. "He has no name - he doesn't exist," Frenchy said, and Jay knew better than to ask about any father. "Don't mention him to Mama. Ever."

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 they stopped in their tracks at the gate, towels over shoulders, grins stretched across faces already starting to burn in the summer sun.

"The smell of that bacon alone is strong enough to melt your taste buds. But just wait 'till you eat the stuff - you'll be able to sleep standing up tonight. It's heaven on the earth," Frenchy said, pushing through the gate opening. "Come on..."

Jay caught up to Frenchy at the table where Mama was still loading more food from the cottage. Fried eggs joined the slabs of bacon on platters the size of the Valiant's hubcaps; sticky, sweet crepes appeared, folded on plates with blocks of butter beginning to melt; and toast, tumblers of chunky orange juice and, at each of four places, a red and blue webbed lawn chair waited in the long grass with a steaming coffee in a huge bumpy clay mug placed exactly in the centre of a plastic Canada Flag place mat.

Mama brought a tee shirt out for each of the boys and took each one of them to a chair and made them sit. Jay got a pat on the head and what felt like a kiss. "Dig it in and eat it up!" she sang out in English.

Frenchy was already pulling bacon apart with his teeth, stabbing egg yokes and testing the coffee. "Mama's breakfast is the only thing that has ever made me cry like a baby," he said through his loaded jaws. "Well, that and the figure skating on her tee-vee."

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

After helping his mother 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.” 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, my Anglo boy,” 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. The light was failing.

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

A tall, exhausted looking lady opened the door and glared 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 will 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?”

“From 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 another good hug, this one is 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, before it gets too late.” 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 made him smile again. 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 – go and be the good man I’ve seen. I am sorry I will miss it – my friend growing up - but feel free to make a good memory out of me; the old faggot you spent a night with. Maybe Doug and I will be watching. And never forget our melody.”

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 to sleep, and to wait. 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 found him.

“Welcome home scruffy.” Jay lifted up the edge of his bedding. “Come on, get in...cuddle up.” Cat didn’t need 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 the next morning, Jay Smith and Cat stopped at a corner thrift shop and bought a bag.

“This is your house,” Jay told his little 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 (a Cat favourite) in the bag, got down on his knees on the concrete and laid out the bag, open, in front of the animal. “Home sweet home – let’s go!” Jay finger-walked a hand in and out of the sack – in and out, in and out like a mouse.

Half a dozen exploratory snuffles and 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.

They got the first car.

“Nice morning, eh? Still summertime summertime.” 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. Cat poked his head up. “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?”

“Fuck no. This is his idea, his idea of a treat; getting 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 a real powerful horn.”

“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, except for Cat - Cat loved his new Mum. She let her son in, but he felt her wrestling with the decision. She later told him that it was Cat that tipped the balance, after he broke out of the bag and leapt into her arms the minute he saw her. Jay's mother and Jay's cat 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 sobbing. "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 watching his heartless son ignore his mother's cries for help." Jay prayed there wasn't a heaven, or a God for that matter, to allow his father to witness this moment.

Jay got a job in the mail room of the Ottawa Journal; his Mum continued working at the library. 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 and the same roof over their heads, 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 child, and I won’t give you up without a fight.” She held her arms out. “Come on, Jay-Jay.”

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 - not funny - but here are the rules.”

Jay started to stand up.

“Just pretend your father is here with us,” his mother said. “That’s all I ask. 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 might have jumped off it.”

“You would have flown.”

“The ‘Flying Mum’?”

After a full minute of stoney silence, Jay felt a sudden, almost violent, release of the awful pressure that had lived deep inside him since the night he crossed the Hull bridge. He would later tell his mother that it was like a clogged toilet finally flushing in his heart.

“I hate it when that happens,” she said.

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

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

“And Frenchy – and Monk?”

“We’d better get two.”

“And Frenchy’s Mama?”

“Some garlic toast.”

“And Michelle?”

“Add a salad.”

“And the elephants; I almost forgot the elephants.”

“What is this, a novel?”

“And Louie.”

“Who?”

“Louie...why?” Jay asked.

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

“Cat is a ham sandwich fan. No mustard. No lettuce. Lots of real butter. White bread with crusts attached. White 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 didn’t know where to look,” she said before closing her bedroom door. “Then I paid some guy, but I never heard back.”

The door closed.

“He didn’t let you down, Mum,” Jay said to the empty hall. “He was just unlucky.”

He felt something rub at an ankle. “Come on, Cat...race you to the bed.”

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 *did* look 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 mittened fist. “I meant it. Leave me alone,” he said. “Fuck off home little man!”

Jay bent down and squatted - his hand found a mitten, and he held onto it. "I left you behind. I'm 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 and 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're moving on," she said.

"I know. It's just that..."

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 he was done - he felt it - it was over. "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, Lou?"

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 like a discarded candy wrapper, down the street and lost.

Louie waved a mitt to get his ride going. "Take me back boss - I got a nice watch - that's enough for today."

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The cottage was almost entirely fallen in. The grass had turned to weeds and wild blackberries. The magic paint job was all faded and had mostly peeled off. The picnic table had collapsed and was stashed against the back fence. The man recognised the rusted aluminum chair leaning against the overgrown steps to the empty front door frame – he remembered trying to sit in it without falling over in the turf. There were still red and blue shards of webbing clinging to some of the tubing like old band-aids.

A screen door banged shut somewhere and a minute later he was joined by a woman in a cloth apron holding a large wooden spoon. "Sorry, I'm making muffins. Are you here to see the place?"

The man looked back at the For Sale sign pounded into the unkempt and overgrown lawn behind the picket fence. "I didn't know it was for sale. I'm looking for...Mama?"

"She's gone." The woman waved the spoon at the wonky building. "Somebody ripped the door off and stole it when she left. I'm the neighbour."

"Where did she go, do you know?"

“After her son Pierre stopped coming to see her, she just sat at that picnic table - for a full year, missed a few weeks over the winter. She played her solitaire and listened to her Gilles Vigneault record over and over and over until the men came and evicted her.” The woman threw her head back, her eyes blazed and hardened. “This is hard to say.” She spat on the ground at her feet. “The bastards put a padlock on the door and drove away - I heard them laughing as they turned the corner down to the dock. Mama came to me and we hugged each other until our arms grew sore and we had to let go. Then without a word she walked down to the ferry. And that was it. She was gone.”

“I’m sorry,” the man said.

“No, I’m sorry, I’m all wound up and I don’t know where she went.” She shaded her eyes with a cupped hand and looked closer at the man beside her. “Do I recognise you? Did you know her and Pierre?”

The man nodded. “I found peace here.” He pointed. “At that table.” He laughed and then smiled at the woman. “Well, first I found the burnt-up chicken and beer...then the peace.”

“Did she give you breakfast.”

“Yes.”

“Crepes?”

He rubbed his belly.

“Bacon...eggs?”

“Stop it!”

She laughed. “My God, you are indeed a blessed man.”

The neighbour looked at the man more closely. She saw some hard wear in an otherwise soft and kind face. She figured she was looking at a thirty-year-old with a sad boy stuck in him. She liked him, but after the moment of contemplation, her focus returned to the derelict cottage and the devastated lot. “Mama loved this time, the Springtime,” she said. “This is when she planted and sowed, and painted and sang, and danced...with anyone that came too close to her. Be we all adored her. We got as close as we could. The woman made the island smile - in return we

embraced her wonderful nuttiness and loved her right back.” She looked down and fussed with her apron. After what seemed like a long time, she lifted her head and looked the man straight in the eyes. “You won’t find one person here not crushed by her leaving.”

The neighbour lifted the spoon and wagged it. “I should get back to my stove...but what’s your name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Jay, and I’m hoping you’re Jackie.”

“How on earth...?”

“You boosted Pierre’s car; I was the other guy.”

The two stood facing each other awkwardly until Jay turned and started back to his car.

“Hang on. One second.” Jackie dropped the spoon into her apron pocket. “Please, don’t leave.” She held up an open hand. “I’ll be right back. Don’t move.”

“Mama gave me this years ago and told me if I ever needed it, I should use it. I didn’t know what she was talking about then, and I’d forgotten all about it anyway, until now, when you came.”

Jackie handed Jay a scrap of paper folded in half. He opened it and read the pencil scrawl. “It may be nothing,” she said.

As he read, Jackie was talking. “His name was Michel, Pierre’s brother. He ran away after the father deserted his mother. This is the address she gave me as a contact if she ever needed to find him, but she never wanted to find him because she new Pierre would kill him.”

Jay finished reading and fished a pen out of his jacket pocket.

“What are you writing on my note?”

“The Real Estate guy’s number.” Jay said. “I think this could be a wonderful project for me and my family. Our daughter would love to come here to visit.”

“Visit?”

“Yes, I think we’d rent it.” He held up the note with the address on it. “But only to the right person. What do you think, Jackie?”

He was at the car. She watched him open the door and get in. He waved.

“I’m just glad that Pierre had such a friend,” she said, as he drove away. “That’s what I think.”

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“Oh shit! The oven!”

The end