



Robert G. Sherrin/A SPECIAL SECTION

CERTAIN THINGS

I

I'm not sure if the doctor told us the Latin name, but I do recall that he leaned back in his swivel chair behind the desk and performed a half-twist, first to Mother and then to you. As he talked, his hands were gently rising and separating as if he were tossing water to a thirsty garden or releasing a small bird. I saw nothing but the full extension of his fingers, and I retracted a little from the sound of his happy voice. This was the man who'd removed my tonsils, promising me ice cream in endless amounts after the surgery but who did not warn me of the hours in the recovery room where I would lie on my side, flexing like an accordion as I vomited blood. This was the man who'd removed the wart on my finger by drawing from a smoking steel cylinder a cotton swab he claimed was so cold I would feel nothing. But I did. The ice, impossibly, had burned me, and my face went slack in shock. A week later in school, the wart fell like the dark node of a tiny toadstool to my desk, and I rolled it over the slanted writing surface, through the shallow trenches of the initials of past students, until the tiny ball disappeared into the well that during penmanship period held my bottle of ink. Now as the doctor folded himself toward you and Mother, I stepped a little closer to the window of his office.

“... or let’s just call it a slipped disc,” I heard him say.

I imagined a plate skittering over the floor, as mine had done when, in a rage because my sister Maralyn would not let me near the stove, I swept our luncheon tableware off the counter, one Melmac plate twirling on its edge like a top, the other sliding loudly across the linoleum to a clattering halt against the wall. Maralyn had simply turned to me and declared in nasal tones, “Wait till Mom and Dad get home.”

Now, in the doctor’s square little office in a building that overlooked a flattened grey ruin of a cold Calgary spring, I heard him begin to explain the problem in detail. I put my face to the window where already on that late Saturday afternoon tiny wings of ice were stretching outward from one corner. In the empty lot, a boy my age stood kicking at a lump of darkened snow, and across the street from him the sun, seemingly too weak to extricate itself except by surrendering to gravity, was momentarily snagged in the bare limbs of a tree. I put both hands to the glass to feel the cold, and I heard behind me the same coolness now in the doctor’s voice. There was no laughter as there had been when he’d pulled that steel cylinder from an even larger one and asked me if I liked icicles. There was no clucking of his tongue as there had been when he’d pressed flat my own with a little wooden paddle to check the condition of my tonsils. And I knew he wouldn’t ask me after this consultation if I wanted a few of those wide depressors to add to my popsicle stick collection. There was just the steady tone of his voice, the boy outside kicking that frozen lump, the growing ice near the palms of my hands, and the word “operation” uttered several times. When the voices were finally stilled I turned. The doctor was writing. Mother was looking at the clock behind him. Her hand was in yours, and you stared at her. I imagined for a moment I was on the edge of a play, the type that older students performed for Friday morning assemblies. How could a person be another person as well, I’d wanted to know as boys and girls of Maralyn’s age went through their ritual actions. Now I watched you watch Mother. You were wearing an old Air Force jacket, and on your feet were the sheepskin-lined flight boots that I would secretly don in our basement before climbing our trunks that were piled against one wall. Sometimes I’d be scaling one of the Rockies we could see from the base on a clear day. Sometimes I’d be piloting one of the old bombers that rumbled low and wobbly over our school before

settling with a loud mechanical sigh to the runway. Now, one of your flight boots tapped nervously against the edge of the chair where the wood leg dug deeply into the dark carpet. Your free hand moved back and forth from knee to chin, rubbing one and scratching the other. Between gestures you patted a jacket pocket where I knew you kept the cigarettes that Mother often rolled on the big Vogue machine. I could smell the open tin, the slice of apple, and I could see the rubber sleeve of the roller like a dog's long tongue holding the strips of paper, the thin rows of tobacco. When she pressed the handle, there'd be a sharp snap, and the tongue spat out finished cigarettes. Now, without looking up, the doctor said, "It's okay, go ahead," and you reached for the pack inside your jacket. You used both hands to light the cigarette, and as you turned to exhale you noticed me. You beckoned me over, and I went to stand beside you.

"Mom's going away," you said quietly.

I nodded.

The doctor looked up and grinned.

Mother glanced at you. "Oh God, don't say it like that."

The clock clicked into momentary place. If this were a school day, I thought, I would already be at home. I sniffed the smoke from your cigarette, and when you reached for the paper the doctor had slid across his desk, I returned to the window. The boy was gone and so was the sun.

The hospital was called Holy Cross. You took me four times, usually on Fridays when school was finished. You'd wait for me at the end of the bus loop in the sky-blue Hillman, its tailpipe putting clouds of exhaust, your window half down, cigarette smoke spilling out, being immediately whipped up and away by the cool wind. The last of the snow squealed under my rubber boots. I sat beside you in the front seat and took a deep breath to better appreciate the smell of leather and smoke. You gave me a wink.

"How goes it, Mister B.?" you said while putting the car in gear, cigarette in your mouth.

"Okay. I won the spelling contest."

"Oh yeah?" You checked the mirrors, revved the engine, and cautiously edged the little car onto McLeod Trail, keeping well behind the big diesel buses while they made their lumbering turns towards the airbase. "Get *all* the words right?"

I was watching the army kids walk home, some of them with hockey sticks already setting up an impromptu game in a driveway. The girls would stay to watch, I knew. I let them disappear from view before I answered. "No. I missed two. Carol missed five, and she was second."

"I guess you'll just have to learn to spell, won't you?"

I looked over. You were concentrating on the road. As usual, your hair was slicked back so you looked always in motion, and I suppose you always were in a hurry to be somewhere else. Your favourite expression was "Let's get a move on!" even if it only meant finishing dinner before retiring to the livingroom and the pleasures of our first TV set. Even then, I used to wonder if you'd had a childhood, or if you'd leaped over it, like a strong puppy prodded from behind by its master who called out as his training cane clipped its heels, "Let's get a move on. You're going to have to learn to jump faster!" Maybe your pace was due to your being a boss. I'd visited your department and knew you had an office of your own with baskets overflowing in paper. You had charts on the wall, and they were littered with numbers and coloured bars. There were maps and blueprints that still smelled of ammonia. On them were marked all the buildings on the airbase, even the house we lived in. When I stared at those maps I felt like a bird sailing high above the prairie, looking down on our little military village: there between #139 and #151 ran the path where I'd race Brightman's borrowed bicycle; there the hill by the swimming pool where we'd toboggan in winter; there our driveway where you'd pull away in the mornings, and I'd mimic you in my wagon, carefully backing out of our sidewalk onto the main one, remembering that the first movement ahead was always a brief movement back towards our house, as if your car and my wagon were nodding a farewell to those inside. Then we'd correct our steering and be off for the day. Now, I was tempted to say to you, as you nervously slowed for an easy turn on the hard, crusty road, "I guess you'll have to learn to drive in the snow, won't you?" But I just watched you slow the car and asked instead, "How do you know when to shift gears?"

"The engine tells me." You butted your cigarette.

That made no sense at all. The engine didn't speak any language I knew. "But how?" I turned in my seat to face you.

You glanced at me then checked your mirrors to make sure there was enough room for this lesson in motor communications. "Watch *and* listen," you said and put your foot on the gas. The little

Hillman darted ahead. I watched the speedo needle climb the inside curve of its dial. I heard the engine grow louder. Then suddenly one hand left the wheel and you moved the gear shift. "There," you said, satisfied.

"There what?"

"The engine gets so high pitched it tells me to change gears."

That still made no sense to me. I plopped back in my seat and crossed my arms and legs to show my dissatisfaction. "That engine does not talk," I declared.

You chuckled and pressed the lighter into its socket. I glanced up a sidestreet to see another hockey game in progress. You waited till you'd lighted your cigarette and that first, sweet smell of ignition had gone. "Well, someday certain things will just make sense," you said softly then banged at the horn as a car at the next corner dared edge beyond the stop sign. "Be careful, buddy." You wagged your finger at the other driver. In my annoyance I thought you were warning him. But I should have realized that given our destination and the dilemma of Mother's injury, you were really warning yourself. That's why you slowed down after that intersection. That's why you smoked two more cigarettes before we reached the hospital. That's why, while stopped for through-traffic a block from that eerily glowing cross, you turned to me just before the light went green. "Okay, Mister B. You tell me when to change gears." And I did.

The cross was what unnerved me. It stood alone in front of the hospital. In the thin darkness of evening it produced a cold light that cast a circle that I saw as a definition of private property. It was not a cross of wood like the ones I recalled from the cemetery, unable to support a human body, merely signposts: "X marks the spot," I used to say to myself whenever we went to place flowers on your father's grave. He was a man I'd never known, so his absence was meaningless. The photos I'd seen of him were simply images of an old man who didn't, to my eye, resemble you. He had close-cropped hair and a moustache, while you were always slicked back, clean shaven, lean of face. Even the picture of Mother, Maralyn, and me, as well as the rest of your family, gathered around this plot was simply a document that tested my powers of detection: this was Grandmother in her stout dark clothes, staring dully at the camera; and this was Mother on one knee in a summer dress, her head to one side, whispering to the chubby little boy in formal shorts and

shoes who grinned happily, raising a hand to wave at the photographer; this was Maralyn behind us, both hands clasped over her first purse, a little hat on her head which supported the hand of your sister who was obviously crying. The light, like that of Holy Cross, was harsh, and you, as the photographer, were simply a shadow that intruded on the lower privacy of the image. All that I knew. But this cross in front of the hospital, planted in the earth still frozen and caked in snow, was different. It was large enough to support a body, and it too marked a spot where people might die, where even children might become still shapes that are wrapped in white and carried away in the hours after dark.

We walked towards it without talking. The snow squeaked. When we reached the bare sidewalk, you stamped your feet and left two white imprints on the dark concrete. You tossed your cigarette aside and thrust your hands in your pockets. For a moment we stood alone, and I watched you prepare yourself because, in fact, you were preparing both of us, and I too put my hands in my pockets. The light from the cross lent a prominent curve to your forehead over which a strand of hair had fallen. You twisted your shoulders, not quite a shudder, not quite a shiver, and when you next exhaled it was the pure white of breath that escaped you. Finally, you looked down at me and withdrew a hand to rest it on my head. You squeezed lightly. "Well, Mister B.," you said so softly I could barely hear you over the long hisses of traffic on the roadway far below us, "let's get a move on." I went a step ahead of you, and to the figure who appeared briefly at the lobby doors, it might have seemed that you were directing me, whereas I felt the tug of your hand and I pulled against it.

You were known at the reception station and were called by name. The shift nurse smiled at me. "How are you tonight, young fellow?"

I was not a young fellow, and like you, I was not in the mood for jokes or chit-chat. "Okay," I said.

"Hard day at school?" she wanted to know as she scribbled our names in a book, a light behind her blinking, a soft bell bonging in another corridor, a rack rattling with bottles as it was wheeled past her station. I nodded, but she didn't notice. I thought about school to which someone had brought a garter snake that morning. It had been half frozen, half asleep in its midwinter nightmare, for the boy who'd produced it from a brown shopping bag swung it about like a striped whip causing girls to shriek. Maralyn and her friends had

turned away in disgust while I'd stood rooted, watching the green and yellow line rise and fall over the head of the boy who grimaced as he swung the creature. The snake had whistled through the air, a moving line no one could cross or interrupt. Finally, after it was all over, I walked away to the door at the far end of the school where we younger students were admitted. Now, the nurse tapped her pencil and my eyes focused on her again. "Go ahead," she said to you. "I'll take care of the conversationalist here."

You touched my head, unzipped my jacket. As you squatted to straighten the front of my clothes, I could smell the tobacco and hair oil. Your brow was furrowed. You sighed and then raised your eyes to mine. "I'll be back in a little bit," you said. "And then you can go in, okay? Meantime, you stay here and read." You pointed to the seats in the waiting area and the piles of magazines and comic books strategically scattered on little tables. Then you were gone.

The nurse guided me by the shoulders. "Hard day at school?" she repeated.

I shrugged.

"Lots of work?" She stopped by a large, well-padded chair. A man on crutches hobbled past and mumbled something.

"No," I said. Then I looked at her. "But they killed a snake."

Her mouth opened in feigned surprise. "Oh they did, did they? In your science class?" Her large warm hands brushed my neck as she helped me remove my jacket and scarf.

"No." She pulled a stack of comic books closer to me. "They swung it until it hit the side of the school. It was almost frozen."

She looked down at me, quite puzzled. She leaned closer. "Just what sort of school do you go to?"

"Elementary and junior high combined."

"And who kills snakes there?"

"The guys. The ones in Grade 8."

"I see." But I could tell that she didn't. She squatted beside me and dropped her hands to her knees. They were covered in white stockings so her skin was revealed like a pale chalkboard through a layer of dust. I looked up. Her eyes were wide with concern. I wanted to explain it to her. I tried to gulp a little air, but my chest was already full, so I felt as much as heard my words fall out of me. "And when I came out of school today the snake was there, but it was broken into pieces, and some of them were flat, and some of them were sort of smashed open, and people just kicked them." I blinked at her. I couldn't explain anything.

She cupped my face and gently forced my lips upward. "Don't worry about cruel boys now, you hear? Just think about your mom."

"Why?" I managed to say through my reshaped lips. The nurse dropped her hands. "Is she going to die, too?"

The nurse shook her head. "Not a chance, honey. She's going to have an operation, that's all."

"When?"

She sighed and glanced back at her station where a couple had arrived and were now gently tapping their boots. "Look, I got to go," the nurse whispered. "Now you just read and don't worry about your mom. And don't think any more about snakes." She pushed against her knees and stood looking down on me. "Okay? Just for me?"

I nodded.

"Good." Then off she went, her white shoes chirping on the hard floor.

In the alcove by the stairs was a large statue of the Virgin Mary. She stared into space, and I wondered if she saw anything there. If I were to climb to the level of her eyes, what would I see? Maybe it was the future and that's why she stared so steadily outward—so as not to lose it or have its image crack. I turned in my seat to better judge the Virgin's point of view. She was staring beyond the reception station, out the front doors of the hospital where the white cross glowed in the dark. Some future, I thought, annoyed that she would see only the death of her son. I shivered a little. I thought of Mother and felt my stomach creep under my ribs. I took a big breath and eased back in my chair. I reached for the first comic on the pile. It was *Wonder Woman*. I put it back and closed my eyes.

I had been listening to the sounds of the lobby. I dreamed it as the waiting area of an airport. I created for myself a large room with rows of comfortable chairs. A woman like the nurse, but not dressed in white, would take your ticket and tell you where to sit. I could hear the footsteps of families around me as they moved to their appointed spots. I heard bits of conversation and the names of foreign cities and people unknown to me. I heard talk of Paris and Andre, words of delight about seeing George again. Mothers told sons not to eat all the candy before the plane ride, and sons told sisters that they'd have to wait until the plane took off before they could take a full breath or their chests would crack. I could smell

the luggage, the leather and the scent of face powders and perfumes in overnight cases that women opened and closed as they checked their faces. I could hear fathers rustling their newspapers and blowing their noses. I heard bells bong and announcers call for pilots and stewardesses. Families were paged and told their planes were awaiting them. And in the alcove, I could feel the presence of the airport statue, a woman in a long dress pulled back by a breeze, her hand raised in welcome and farewell, staring forever out the big glass doors of the building to the runways.

Then you touched me on the shoulder and gently wrestled me out of sleep. You gave me a moment to focus, to still my suddenly thumping heart. You chuckled at my look of bewilderment. "It's okay. I'm here," you said. "Mom wants to see you." You pointed to the corridor and told me the number again, though by that time I already knew her room. You would stay in the waiting area and smoke.

She lay on the inclined mattress and rested her head on a pillow. The door was ajar, so I looked at her for a moment before I stepped inside. She didn't seem like the woman in the photograph at the cemetery. Her eyes were closed now. Her glasses were folded on the night table where a tumbler of water stood beside a brown bottle. Her fluffy slippers were pushed half under the bed, and her pale green dressing gown was draped across the foot of it. One hand rested on her chest and around the wrist was a plastic bracelet. I closed the door behind me with a click. She didn't move. After a moment, I began to tip-toe a little closer. Before I could reach the bed, her face was released into a smile and she said, "Come here, you. So I can get a better look."

I jumped to the edge of her bed and put my nose to hers. "Is it me?"

She crossed her eyes. "Yup. No one else I know looks like that." Then her arms magically appeared, warm and nearly weightless around me. Then I sat back and we talked. That night the questions about school, friends, Maralyn were kept to a minimum. Finally, she said, "I have to tell you something."

I nodded and settled myself quietly on her bed.

"Monday morning they're going to operate on me, and when you see me again I won't be able to move very much. I won't be able to give you a big hug, and you won't be able to sit on the bed." She tried to smile. My insides were beginning to squirm. "But we can still talk," she added softly.

I didn't believe her. "Mom," I said, "What are they really going to do to you?" I looked down to see my fingers coiling round one another.

She reached to cover them with her hand. Then she told me.

For the most part, the ride home was quiet. The dashlights barely revealed your face. Only when you pulled on your cigarette could I make out your profile. You drove slowly, methodically. I started tapping my foot against the side of the passenger well. That's how the tension began.

When we turned onto McLeod Trail my boot was banging steadily. You shifted gears and looked at me as we reached the strip of highway that goes past the runway threshold, between the school and the airbase itself.

"Cut that out," you said, lighting another cigarette, blowing the words against the windshield with your smoke.

I banged a little harder.

Your voice bore down: "I said '*Cut that out*'!"

We were moving through a brief parenthesis of prairie night with the lights of the airbase ahead and those of Currie Barracks behind. To our left I could hear a Lancaster bomber coming in, engines wailing, its navigation lamps visible. Suddenly its landing lights burst across our path.

You swore and gripped the wheel. I booted at the passenger well even harder. Your open hand came out of the noise and the bright light to strike me on the back of the head. The car swerved for a moment, the huge plane grumbling wildly over us, and since my head had been turned by your hand to my window, I saw the aircraft's squat tail section come into view, the undercarriage touch down, the cloud of ice and smoke from its tires in the back light of the blue runway lamps. I kept kicking. "No!" I yelled and repeated that word for every boot I gave the inside of your car.

We lurched to a stop. The windshield wipers suddenly came on, and the horn blared as you slid across and grappled with me. I can't recall what you said at that point. Our arms flailed and finally, of course, you pinned me, your foot pressing on mine to stop my kicking. You bounced me against the seat till the wind went out of me and I sagged.

"Dammit! Just what the hell's the matter with you, mister?" You punched the blue leather beside me. "Just who the hell do you think you are?"

I couldn't get my breath.

"Huh?" you yelled. "Tell me, or I'll march you right down to the basement when we get home!" The basement was where you took either Maralyn or myself and removed the broad leather belt from your trousers and applied it to our bare buttocks.

My head was still turned away from you, and I could just pick out the Lancaster making its distant turn to the taxi strip. Cars were going by us, their passing wind rocking our little vehicle. Again, you asked me to explain myself and killed the windshield wipers with an angry flick of your hand.

"She told me," I said.

"Who told you what?"

"Mom." The Lancaster had disappeared now. "She told me they're going to cut her open on Monday."

You groaned and rolled back behind the wheel. "You already knew that," you said.

Now I turned to you. "She said I can't sit on her bed any more, or hug her."

You nodded, resting your forehead against the coolness of the steering wheel. You stared into the dashboard. You pressed the gas pedal, and the Hillman revved but didn't move. I leaned to watch the RPM needle mimic in its quick half sweeps the sound of the engine. Out of that movement came your tired, flat words. "They told me she may not walk again." Up and down the needle went, and with it your voice. "They said she has a disc in her back that has to come out." The engine whined, sighed, whined again. "Then they're going to fuse two other discs together to fill in the space." A car went past on the highway, and I listened to its tires hum against the cold pavement until their sound merged with that of our idling engine. You'd stopped pressing on the gas. The needle had come to hover over the number 1. "They say it's a tricky deal—no guarantees."

I moved a little so I could rest my feet on the transmission hump near the heater outlet. I crossed my arms. "You should have told me."

"Yes." You still stared into the dials. "Yes, I should have told you."

I could hear another Lancaster making its approach. For once, I didn't want to be there when it dropped low and loud and brightly lighted out of the night.

“Can we go home?”

You looked at me and nodded, then slipped the car into gear, and slowly we moved out onto the quiet highway.

II

The Chinook came on the second following Friday. In the morning, I stood on the cold creaking boards of the bus platform, stamping my feet with the other children, keeping one eye on Maralyn who wore a pink toque and had a habit of slipping away from me to join her friends—those young men with thin dark wisps of hair on their upper lips and other young women who were newly rounded under their wool coats and ski trousers. She'd disappear into a hole in the crowd, and before I knew it the blue buses had arrived, and she was waving to me from the first one as it departed while I nervously sought the company of classmates who, if we were late, would at least comfort me in the gymnasium where demerit slips were handed out by the vice principal.

And you? You had become something of a mother who rose well before us and began heating water for porridge, who dashed in your blue winter uniform from kitchen to diningroom calling out your orders for the day: me to clear the table, Maralyn and me to do the dishes, she to lock the door behind us. Then you'd sit at the head of our shrunken gathering, sip a coffee, and smoke a final cigarette before leaving for work. You'd not pick me up after school that day, for I'd seen Mother twice since her operation, and she was coming home on Sunday.

"Don't forget to lock the door," you said from the hallway.

Maralyn looked at me, rolling her eyes and shaking her blonde bangs. I toyed with the mush in my bowl and wished that the brown sugar hadn't been put away.

"Did you *hear* me?" you called, stamping your feet into your boots.

Maralyn set her spoon aside and turned in her seat. "Yes. I heard you."

"Then why don't you answer?"

"I'm not supposed to talk with my mouth full."

"Yeah, right. You be home before five."

Again she rolled her eyes. "Yes," she moaned.

"What was that?" I heard the storm door open.

"Yes. I said 'yes.'"

Then the creak of the screen door. "Okay. Bye you guys." Both doors slammed. In a moment the Hillman was started, and Maralyn left the table to watch you drive away, waving, before she put Pat Boone on the record player and turned up the volume. Then she wagged her finger at me and mimicked you. "Now get a move on there, Mister B. You can't leave the table until you eat that porridge."

"But Dad," I sighed, playing her game. "It's cold, and I'll throw up if I eat it."

"Then you'll eat it again."

"But Dad," I whined.

Maralyn pulled on her finger as if it were a cigarette and exhaled a mighty cloud of imagined smoke—pink, I saw it billow forth. "You're just going to have to learn to eat puke then, aren't you?" she snapped.

We laughed as we scraped our half-empty bowls into the garbage, pulling aside paper towels and a porridge box to conceal our waste from you. We did the dishes. We complained about Mother's absence, and we complained about the cold. Maralyn was drying the silverware, and she said to me, "What did Mom tell you when you saw her after the operation?"

I watched Maralyn's fingers slip the spoons, the forks, the knives into their appointed slots in the bright orange cutlery tray and slam shut the drawer. "She didn't say much. She looked sort of tired."

"That was the anaesthetic."

"The what?"

"The gas they use to make you sleep."

"Ether?"

"Yeah, so what did she say?"

"She was happy to see me. She'd be happy to come home."

"Nothing else?"

"No." I glanced out the window to see Roxanne leaving her house across the street. I knew that in two minutes she'd knock on our back door to walk Maralyn to the bus stop. "What did she say to you?" I asked while watching Roxie say goodbye to her dog.

"Oh, not much," Maralyn sighed, carefully folding the towel and draping it over the chrome bar inside the sink cupboard.

"Like what?"

"Like nothing you should know until she tells you."

Roxie was on her way now. "Like what?" I insisted.

Maralyn smiled down on me then went grim. "She showed me the incision." I imagined a little line of stitches on Mother's back, and that's exactly what Maralyn wanted me to see, for after a moment's pause she pointed to herself and drew her finger in a line from hip bone to ribcage. "That's where they went in," she said as if she were indicating a flap to a tent. "They pushed everything aside and took her disc out. Why do you think she was lying on her back, Mister B.?" I tried to swallow so I could say something, but my mouth wouldn't work. I could hear Roxie's footsteps. "Now get ready to go," Maralyn said, clapping her hands and giving me a push toward the clothes closet in the hall. "Roxie's here. We have to get a move on."

By that afternoon I'd almost forgotten Maralyn's words, though on the bus to school I kept hearing them, while the old commissionaire who supervised us did his missing-finger trick, and I stared out the window at the fields where the tips of brown grass showed above the crusty, grey snow. A Lancaster was taxiing onto the main runway, and just taking off was a Harvard trainer, mustard yellow, climbing at a steep angle like a wingless yellow grasshopper. Beyond the base, beyond the foothills, were the Rockies—clear that day, steep blue and white. I kept hearing Maralyn's words: "That's where they went in." I could see those doctors in white. They had stood over me when I'd had my tonsils removed and stared down as the rubber mask came over my nose and mouth, someone behind me saying, "Count to ten." And I did while looking up into the face of our doctor, white-capped, white-masked, his glasses reflecting my sheet-covered body. And now I could see them going in, climbing over the white pickets of my teeth and angling themselves against

the steep incline of my tongue, finally reaching the site of my problem, one of them probing with a stick then yelling back up my throat, "We're going to need the big one! This kid has a real set of tonsils here!" And likewise, but with greater mystery and fear, I imagined the same white-smocked crew cautiously entering that long opening in Mother, with packs on their backs and little leather bags in their hands. But after that, nothing. I had no idea what was in there, no notion of intestines, pancreas, lung, liver, or appendix, much less what a disc looked like or how big it was. I squirmed in my seat. I felt my spine move. I cringed at the thought of an arm moving past my stomach to grasp my backbone and twist it into correctness, hearing a parental voice call out, "Now straighten up, or you'll be walking like a monkey."

All I remember about school that day was the mid-afternoon when we fourth graders sat quietly hunched over our desks, scratching away with nib and ink in penmanship period. I was pleased with the roundness of my Os and the deft curlicue that initiated my capital Ts. Then the bell rang. It was mid-afternoon recess, and by that time the Chinook had truly arrived.

We ran about in near hysteria. When that warm wind comes, it affects me like a narcotic. Gone was all care and half my clothing. I, like many others, would first simply turn my face to the breeze and inhale the warmth, the scent of water and newly liberated prairie soil. Something stayed in the nostrils: it was the smell of instantaneous spring, the actual leap of a season into one's blood through nose and mouth and every exposed pore. There were those first few minutes of stunned delight and slowly accruing acceptance, then I, and the rest of us, would feel the body begin to tingle, the blood begin to cheer as, oddly, the pulse grew stronger yet smoother. Then off we'd go, running about, some like me with arms spread and eyes slitted against the warm sun reflecting off the melting snow, pretending to be little aircraft of swift birds, swallows swooping after imagined insects. The schoolyard was full of children chasing one another and yelling, pounding their feet in new mud, smelling the lift of turf, others wading in the rivulets that flowed from the shrinking crust of snow. Teachers strolled, coats open, heads back in laughter, tolerant of any activity, madly allowing the first use of soccer balls, chatting with students and colleagues as they patrolled the grounds. They held the assembly bells by their clappers and on that day did not turn them down and begin ringing them until twice the normal recess time had passed. The last

portion of the afternoon was a series of peaks and troughs as classes were slow to calm down then sank almost as awkwardly past the point of efficiency into dreaminess and near sleep. Later that day, when I alighted the bus at the platform, I carried my coat over my shoulder, my toque and mitts stuffed into pockets, my sweater unbuttoned, and boots left to flap on my feet as I splashed through the water rushing along the curbed street past our house. The snow was all gone.

Saturday was washday. Mother would always do the laundry by herself while you played golf, made repairs around the house, cut the grass, or went back to your office to do more work. That Saturday was warm and damp. You were in a good mood but nervous at breakfast. During Mother's absence the house had grown untidy, laundry had waited longer than usual to be washed, and you were not one to rely on neighbours. "No, no, everything's under control," you'd say when Mrs. Henderson appeared with an empty clothes basket. Or "Dorrie, I've already done this week's load," you'd chuckle to Mrs. Andrews if she stood on the porch with a box of soap flakes in one hand and a jug of bleach dangling from the other. Oh no, we were self-sufficient. We would get things done on our own.

"You clean your room and sweep the floors, okay?" you said to me over our bowls of cornflakes, sugar like a white pavement over them, a weekend treat.

I nodded vigorously.

"And you," tipping your cigarette in Maralyn's direction, "clean the kitchen, bathrooms, and livingroom."

She nodded as well.

"I'll do the vacuuming and dusting, and this afternoon I'll do the laundry."

We were in agreement. The morning would be devoted to housework. In the afternoon, I'd be free to play outdoors, and Maralyn would go with Roxie to the movies. Dinner at six, hot dogs as usual.

There was one thing I wanted to know. "What's that box in the den?"

The den was not a den. It was an alcove on the main floor near the stairs. It was where our freezer was kept. The night before I'd noticed a heavy curtain had magically appeared across the alcove entrance, and when I pulled it aside, I noticed a box against the

wall, a square box with a lid. It was a little taller than a night table.

You pushed your bowl to one side and looked at Maralyn. She shook her head. You looked at me. "It's a toilet."

I was puzzled. "But there's a toilet upstairs. And there's a toilet in the basement."

"Mom's coming home tomorrow."

I bounced once in my chair. "*I know that.*"

Maralyn piped up. "Mister B., she's not going to live in the basement."

I squirmed again. "I'm not stupid. I know that too."

Your voice came from the opposite side of the table, and I turned. "She's not going to be living upstairs, either."

That I didn't understand.

"Not for a while anyways."

"So where's she going to live?"

"Down here. On the main floor."

I didn't like the sound of that. I watched you closely for an indication of irony or the first wrinkles round your mouth which might suggest the smile that accompanies a joke. But your expression didn't change, and mine must have hardened, for in a moment our eyes had locked, and we began to stare each other down. You took a deep pull on your cigarette and didn't even break your gaze, smoke escaping your nostrils, fingers plucking a bit of tobacco from your lip. I didn't understand what was going on, and I resented not being allowed to know: the glance between you and Maralyn had seemed to register more than five years' age difference between her and me. Now, I heard Maralyn's spoon scour up the last of her cereal and rattle into silence as she dropped it into the empty bowl. I did what both of you wanted of me and lowered my eyes, taking up my own spoon to force the sugar platform beneath the milk, my cornflakes left bobbing like brown lily pads on the surface.

Smoke from your cigarette drifted across the table. Maralyn cleared her throat. "May I please be excused?" she said.

You must have nodded because she quickly rose, took her bowl, and went to the kitchen where immediately water began to run and the radio on the fridge was turned up.

"Hey Mister B.," you finally said, "what's on your mind?"

I stared at my bowl. "Nothing."

"Yeah, okay. So why aren't you eating?"

"Not hungry."

Another cloud of smoke bounced off the table in front of my bowl. I pushed it to one side. I'd only wanted to ask whether Mother could really walk, yet I already knew the answer in part. There was an even more important question I had to put to you, but I didn't want another struggle in order to force a reply. So, knowing you wouldn't dare say a word, I stood and walked away, leaving you to finish the stub of your cigarette, your fingers shaking just a little as you ground it out in the ashtray.

That afternoon I roamed the neighbourhood with Brightman. We loped about pretending we were cowboys, but there was no concentration to our adventures. We were still under the influence of the warm breezes. We didn't even carry our cap guns or bother with hats or regalia. We simply loped, like horses and riders, between houses, up the path to the swimming pool, down to the playground, and back. We paused at his house for a snack where his mother appeared in jeans and a loose sweater saying winter was over and gave us noodle soup and sandwiches stuffed with salami and cheese. By mid-afternoon, I'd fallen on a slippery lawn and soaked my corduroy pants. I presented myself to you at the back porch where you were hanging out some sheets. Your hair was windblown, and you were squinting even though you stood in shade.

"Take them off," you snapped, "and leave them by the washing machine."

I scuttled downstairs and disrobed, retaining my long underwear which was also wet, but I dared not confess it. I went hurriedly to my room, drew another pair of pants from my dresser, donned them, and sneaked out the side door to rejoin Brightman. Twenty minutes later I was back with the same problem. Now you were wrestling with sheets that had become entangled with one another. Roxanne's mother started over. She called to you as she crossed the street that she had a free line and you could use it. You waved her off, angry, and yanked at the sheet until it snapped free and flopped to the muddy lawn. You began to curse. Roxanne's mother stopped at the edge of our driveway.

"Hey Hercules," she said, "why don't you let me give you a hand?"

"No, dammit!" you yelled. "If I can't manage a sheet, how the hell can I do anything?"

"It's not the sheet you have to manage," she said.

"No, of course not. It's the damn wind I have to control."

She smiled. "Well, actually it's a lot closer to home than that."

You turned to her, one end of the sheet in your hand, the other trailing through the mud. "Edie, just what the hell are you driving at?"

She shrugged. "Well, buster, you can run yourself through the mill until she gets home, but it's not going to be easier when she gets here. It's going to be different—a *lot* different."

"I know that."

Edie stepped onto the lawn. She was wearing a dress printed with green flowers, and she had a large apron tied over that. Her hair was red, like Roxanne's but Edie didn't make fun of me. Now she put her hands on her hips and looked up at you. "It's going to be difficult, buster. So you'd better start treating your neighbours like neighbours, not a pack of intruders." With that she wrenched the sheet out of your hand and rolled it quickly into a ball.

"Edie."

"Don't bother," she said. "There's plenty of time for that later. Right now I've another load of laundry to do as well as find Dirk's damn fishing gear. You guys," she said. "Life is so awkward when it isn't 8 to 4."

"Hey, Edie, now wait a second." You took a step towards her, but she was already on her way back across the street.

"Later, buster," she called over her shoulder. "We can talk when you come to get your sheet and a coffee. Say an hour and a half. Now, take care of Mister B. I think he's got a present for you."

You turned then, spotting me behind one of the other flapping sheets. I stepped back.

"What now?" you said.

"I fell."

You looked down at your feet and kicked a small clod of grass onto the driveway then followed it and kicked it back onto the lawn. You pointed to the house. "Leave them by the washing machine. This is the last time. You hear?"

I fell again an hour later. I began to cry, but Brightman pulled me by the scruff of my jacket away from our house and the basement and your leather belt. We sat on a curb beyond a housing block and there, talking about airplanes and horses, making fun of friends, my trousers dried enough for me to go home.

I found you in the basement. The washing machine was silent, but water gurgled in the drain beside it. The room was large, and it was shadowy now with the overhead lights turned off. This was where I climbed the trunks. This was where Maralyn and I played hockey, binding our legs in rags to simulate goal pads. There was the furnace, large and black in the corner, behind which rested the pedal-less bicycle that sometimes I boarded when I was lonely and rode it into the brighter projections of my imagination. You had promised to fix the bike for me when I was old enough to ride it, but we had yet to agree on that age. I was walking silently towards the old canning stove near the furnace when I spotted you. You were sitting on the edge of the rag bin, elbows on knees, cigarette in mouth, head down, staring at the floor. You seemed not to be breathing. Smoke curled upward and disappeared in the light of the window behind you. Your hands hung like a couple of cloths from your sleeves. Then you began shaking your head slowly from side to side. You took the cigarette from your mouth and pressed the balls of your hands to your eyes.

Carefully I backed away until I reached the stairs, and carefully, with tiny steps I went up them till I could take a breath. I waited a few moments then began loudly to descend. This time, when I rounded the corner, you were leaning into the washing machine, swabbing it out. Your voice was a low rumble.

"What?" I called out.

"Fall down again?" Your words boomed.

"No."

You stood up and turned to me. "Good. You getting hungry?"

"Yeah."

"Okay." You bent to retrieve the large round lid to the machine. "You get the weiners out of the freezer, and I'll go over to Roxie's and get Maralyn."

I turned quickly and went upstairs. I heard your slower steps behind me, then the swoosh, creak, slam of the screen door. From the kitchen window I watched you stroll, loose-gaited, hands in jacket pockets, towards Roxie's house. You paused at the end of our drive as two boys went by, guiding paper boats in the gutter water. You watched them move well down the street before carefully stepping over the fast running little stream and crossing the street. When you reached the other side, I turned from the window and

went to the alcove. I opened the freezer, half tossing myself into it, and balancing by my hips on the edge of the appliance I retrieved from amongst the carefully segregated loaves of bread and brown-paper-wrapped chunks of meat a package of weiners. I relished the cold breeze that washed my face as I leaned back, dropped to the floor, lowered the lid, and turned to go. But there was Mother's toilet. Its woodgrain was shiny, and now I noticed there was a chrome handle affixed to the wall beside it. I set the weiners on the freezer then cautiously reached to open this new contraption. Inside, it was lined in porcelain, and at its bottom was a removable bowl. Without thinking, I turned and hoisted myself onto that small perch in the little nook. I thought for a moment about Mother. When last I'd seen her in the hospital, she had, as I'd reported to Maralyn, not said very much. Her face had been more than a paleness, almost a translucence. Her neck pulsed. Her hair was brushed out. Her mouth moved dryly, but when at last she'd opened her eyes and noticed me on the chair beside her bed, she smiled.

"Hello, Mister B." Her voice was a rustle. She tried to reach for the water glass on her night table, but I was quicker and, somehow, bent the straw to the proper angle and put it to her lips.

"Thanks," she said, her voice clearer now. "How are you?"

"Fine." I watched her closely. I wanted to pull the sheets back and see for myself that she was all there. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "I'm doing fine. I want to come home."

"I want you to come home, too."

"Problems?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"How's Dad?"

"Okay."

She turned her head so she could look more directly at me. "Hey Mister B.," she called softly. I was staring at her slippers, still half pushed under the bed. Now I looked up. "He's scared," Mother said, "just like you are."

"But of what, Mom?"

She smiled. "Of me. Of change. That I won't walk."

"But will you?" I had to have an absolute answer, absolute proof—as you did—that not only would she walk but walk exactly as before. Mother looked away from me. Then under the sheets, slowly, her feet moved up and down. Her face was twisted with the effort. After a few moments, her feet came to a rest, and her face went slack. She opened her eyes to stare at the ceiling. Without her glasses she looked like one of the neighbour women or one of the older teen-agers who worked at the base cinema, or ran the cash at the grocery store, or played tricks on me at school. Her voice, when it finally came, was calm. "I'm scared, too."

I don't think another word was said. Eventually she slipped her arm free of the covers and offered her fingers which I touched with mine, much as we do when we teach children about pigs going to market and pigs going home. That warm Saturday, that was what I remembered of her: the fingers against the white sheet of her bed. Then I looked up, and I saw that from that toilet, which Mother would call her throne, I had a clear view down the hallway to the back door. Through that I could see the edge of the flapping sheets and two girls flash past on bicycles. Across the street I noticed movement behind the windows of Roxie's house, and then its door was opened and you and Maralyn emerged, Roxie and Edie waving the two of you towards me. Awkwardly, as if my back could not yet completely bend, as if my legs were still weak and unsteady, I reached for the new handle and slowly pulled myself off the toilet. I lowered its lid, reached for the weiners, and stepping back into our home, I pulled the curtain behind me.

—for Nicholas and Rose Sylvia





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