

# Chapter 2

## A SEAGULL'S FLIGHT

**W**HEN I WAS seventeen I woke up in a doorway in an alley—knees bent, head back, spine against the wall. To my left, a cargo door: steel, graffitied over, with a padlock rusting on the hasp. Across the way, old brick buildings slick with rain. Overhead, spent storm clouds shuffled in a pre-dawn sky. The whine and rumble of a garbage truck cut through the humid stillness.

*Where was I?*

I had no memory of walking—stumbling?—here. No memory of choosing this one alcove from another. No memory of sinking down and waiting until sleep had taken me past caring about memories at all. No memory, in fact, to tell me even if I knew what city I was in.

Down the cracking asphalt, an oil barrel barfed out pizza slices, orange rinds and sardine tins beside a loading dock. A small black cat with eyes like grass was nosing round the bounty. A decaying scent hung in the air—deeper, more primaeval, than the smell of trash. I closed my eyes. *Water*. Not far off, fish and algae rotted round the pilings of a quai.

Eyes still shut, I raised my head and let it fall toward my knees. No dizziness accompanied the movement. My arms were at my sides. I lifted them and laid them on my thighs. Sleep or something heavier still weighed them down. I forced my eyelids open on a view of mounding crotch. I needed to relieve myself but couldn't till the

swelling went away.

*How long had I been here?*

I rubbed my jeans. The clammy air had made them soft. They didn't feel thick and stiff the way they would had they been drenched the night before. The rains had come and gone, then, while I slept. How long ago? And how long had they lasted?

A gull screeched overhead. I looked up, wondering, if I followed, would it lead me to a waterfront where I could get my bearings? When I reached the shore, would I, turning round, see a skyline that I knew?

My erection finally subsided. I stood up cautiously to pee. My sinews groaned, but not beyond what sleeping out of doors accounted for. I unzipped and let go in the middle of the alley. The small black cat with eyes like grass stopped sniffing at the trash and watched. I *tsk*-ed and saw a flick of ears, a quivering of tail.

While my urine bubbled and bled off, I studied my surroundings. The buildings were four storeys each with mammoth windows sectioned into panes. If the garbage by the loading dock were any indication, there might be lofts inside.

As my stream began to dwindle I looked down, realizing then that even if I didn't know precisely where I was, at least some things were as they should be. My shoes were canvas hightops, black and frayed. My jeans were tight and faded, rolled up at the cuff. My T-shirt—crew-neck, white—was snugged in at the waist. *James Dean*, I thought. I'd been teased with that before.

*By whom?*

The doorway that I'd slept in had a stoop, as good a place as any to return to and take stock. My feline watcher must have found me seated more inviting than when standing, for she—even at a distance I could see her teats and swollen belly—inched toward me, pausing at invisibles as if I weren't the object of her interest.

When she got close enough I *tsk*-ed again and wondered whether she was wild. If behind the windows here were lofts, she might belong to someone. She hemmed and hawed, then sauntered over and began to wind herself around my legs.

I dangled my left hand to brush her fur as if by accident. When she gave no sign of cat offence I provisionally scratched her tail. She meowed but pirouetted and came back for more.

The dance of introduction over, I stroked her absentmindedly and thought my situation through.

Wherever this place, I'd gotten here somehow, either under my own steam or brought and dumped. The posture I'd awoken in suggested choice, not force, but I felt my head for lumps in case. None, as I'd expected. A blow that wiped out memory would surely leave a pounder in its wake.

I broke off petting my companion and untucked my T-shirt, raising it to look for scrapes and bruises. My chest, with its familiar darkish nipples and down of sable hair, revealed nothing. Neither did my abdomen. I squeezed my legs for tender spots but none cried out.

My pregnant furry friend butted an impatient head against my shin. I ran a hand from tail to neck, raising pelt, then scritch behind her ears.

"Do you have a name?" I asked and thought: *Do I?*

An answer rose: *David Ase*. And with it, like a bit of flotsam, *seventeen years old*.

I tugged a wallet from the left back pocket of my jeans—a kin-aesthetic reflex out of step with full amnesia. Cracking it, I thumbed, then counted, twenty hundred dollar bills. That put paid to being mugged unless the thieves were after my ID. No official cards, no photographs, no addresses or phone numbers were lurking in the pebbled leather slots.

What leads a seventeen-year-old to wind up in an alley with no memory of getting there? An alcoholic blackout? A party gone from wild to stupor? I cupped my hands around my mouth. No fruity stink of stale spirits. Drugs? I checked my arms for tracks. I peered beneath the waistband of my jeans. I removed my shoes and socks and pried my toes apart. The skin between was clean. I tried recalling if I'd ever taken drugs this way. Nothing surfaced. Which didn't mean I hadn't sniffed or swallowed them, but what could pos-

sibly have left a memory gap so utter?

I closed my eyes and tried to summon something from the night before. I knew—from reading, surely—that past a certain stage of chemical intoxication, the recording functions of the brain shut down. Experience and learning stay intact and can, if fuzzily, be called upon—a tavern drunk still walks and talks and pounds the table for another beer—but nothing new gets registered. If something similar had happened, what came before should still, by rights, be in my head.

The universe beyond my closed eyes stretched out to forever. I waited for an image to appear—a gauzy face, a fragment of location, some remembrance of volition to be *here* or *there*, do *this* or *that*. None came. None at all. It seemed that where last night should be was only hollowness, a block of mental space a shade of silver like a mirror with no world to reflect.

Can anyone recall when dreams begin? Track down the moment of their onset? Dreams arrive burlesques intact. We do not so much enter them as are inserted incognoscibly. When awareness dawns we do not ask: Where was I before? Were we to, *in bed asleep* most likely wouldn't come to mind. A little history precedes the first act of a dream, and the history is given whole. We never recognize the instant of beginning. We simply *are*, as in real life we simply are, and go from there. Few recall the moment of their birth, and birth inside a dream's the same; we join the drama and react, unable to remember when or where we were before it started.

Waking in the alley, I'd come to in a dream whose nominal beginning was *I don't know where I am or how I got here* but whose prologue, given whole, was everything that made me me. Since how I got here wasn't going to solve itself behind shut eyes, perhaps eyes-open and the *where* of here might make a better starting point.

In the time that I'd been sitting on the stoop with my ever more demanding mom-to-be, the city past the confines of the alleyway had come to life. The clouds had lightened to a pearly grey, hinting at a valiant sun. The garbage truck, still audible, had gathered an accompaniment of tires on wet pavement. A breeze began to stir.

I stood and raised my arms—thumbs joined, fingers pointing back—then bent forward, dropped my arms, and let their weight unlock the muscles of my back until my palms were resting on the pavement. The beginning of the Sun Salute. I'd obviously done it many times before. I held the bent-in-half position, then reversed the spinal roll. Mentally, I went through all the stages of the exercise, confirming what was evident: somewhere, somebody had taught me this. Mom-to-be watched on, then twisted round and licked her ass, mocking yogic efforts to emulate her kind.

Cats are cats. If they suffer conscience or the acid of regret, they've kept their secret hidden. The promiscuity that brought this one to me would lead her to forget our tryst the moment I was gone. So it was me, and only me, who needed a goodbye.

I stroked her back.

“So long, little one—I hope someone's looking after you.”

Then I rose and started walking with the half-formed plan of following a seagull's flight.



Paris has the Eiffel Tower, Rome the Coliseum, New York the Empire State—man-made marvels so distinctive, so imposing, they don't so much identify a city as shout it at the world.

I'd barely gone a dozen metres before changes in my trigonometry revealed an engineering fanfare visible for sixty kilometres around: Toronto's CN Tower. At least that solved the question of what city I was in. Inside my head, the mirror space where memory should be began to glow with lines and shapes, the geometric phosphor of the known.

The Tower to my right, I must be heading south. Thus, the street the alleyway decanted off ran east and west. I knew that if I crossed it and went on, I wouldn't reach the water—Lake Ontario, whose greenish, rotting odours had been blowing inland—without first surmounting railroad tracks, the Gardiner Expressway, and other barriers that cleave the city from its shoreline.

The east-west street was called The Esplanade. I recognized the name and had a sense of where it was but not much else. My knowledge of the city here seemed hazy, as if this were a neighbourhood I'd passed by many times but never bothered to explore. Uncertain what direction I should go, I chose the obvious—west, toward the soaring concrete needle whose tip was broken off by clouds.

North of me, I knew, was Front, and at the nexus of two streets called York and University was Union Station. Why the Esplanade seemed unfamiliar while a street just one block north felt known made little sense, but having thought of Union Station, I decided to head over.

A few blocks on I came to Market Street. Turning right because it seemed to speak to me, I climbed a not-completely-unfamiliar slope past cozy-looking restaurants to Front.

I wasn't sure what time it was. Despite the nighttime rains the air was summery. A hidden sun had risen not too long before. Traffic on the street was mostly blue and yellow taxis. It had to be five-thirty or approaching six. Train stations never close, or, put another way, are always open, making Union at this hour a wise decision. My stomach growled at the thought of breakfast.

Heading west on Front, I crossed first Church, then Scott, then Yonge, then Bay, suffering the oddly dislocated feeling that my knowledge of the city came from someone else. At Yonge I passed a centre for the arts, and while I couldn't think of any show I'd seen there, I was pretty sure I could have found the cloakrooms in the dark.

It was the same with Union Station. I had no memory of waiting for a train or standing in a boarding queue, yet I made my way directly to the lower-level food court without pausing first to wonder where it was.

A mmmuffins counter girl was stocking shelves with Danishes. I bought two lemon and two cherry and a coffee, paying with a hundred dollar bill. The girl, whose name tag said Charlene, flashed a funny smile, annoyed at handing out her float but physically at-

tracted.

“You have awesome eyes,” she said.

I took my change and thanked her.

Breakfast bag in hand, I settled on a long black bench upstairs. Backed by steel mesh, it made the brick I’d woken up against a cushion by comparison. I scarfed the Danishes—when had I eaten last?—then cracked the sip tab of my coffee. The milky liquid on a stomach full of comfort food began to make me drowsy.

I knew who I was. I knew what city I was in. Physically, I felt okay, not suffering the backwash of a bender. My clothing was familiar. A surreptitious nose-check of my pits revealed my shirt, at least, was relatively fresh. That meant I wasn’t homeless.

Or did it? Who carries twenty hundred-dollar bills around? The money must have come from somewhere. Something told me that it wasn’t from a bank.

*Homeless... home...*

Where *was* that? Had I run away? I clearly knew the city, but like someplace I’d gone visiting, not someplace where I lived. I roused myself and found a bank of telephones. Less with disappointment than surprise I discovered the directory had not one single Ase. Was my name all that uncommon?

I went back to the bench—the only seating to be had—and polished off my coffee, watching ticket holders backpack, hoist and roll what of their lives they couldn’t do without toward the loading gates. Their hidden histories, secret points of origin and unknown destinations complemented perfectly my current situation.

Union Station’s lofty hall dwarfed everyone inside, dampening all sound while simultaneously echoing the sussurus of dialogue. From time to time loudspeakers chimed a five-note chord, followed by a voice intoning town and city names. *At-ten-tion... VIA... train ... from... Wind-sor... Cha-tham... Glen-coe... . . .*

Around six-thirty by the station clock the five-note-chime announced a train arriving from Niagara Falls: *Saint... Ca-tha-rines ... Grims-by... Al-der-shot ... . . .*

*Grimsby.* That name rang a bell. Not the sombre peal of an an-

swer, more like the hard-to-pinpoint tinkle of an inkling. Grimsby—close to Hamilton, the steel city harboured round the west end of the lake.

In my mind a line of energy appeared, neither visible nor felt yet somehow both, joining me to Hamilton. The city's name had colour, or something very like it—the red of the familiar, the sienna of nostalgia.

I headed for the phones again and called directory assistance. “Hamilton” and “Ase” I replied to curt, recorded prompts. Shortly afterwards an operator came on line and asked me for the spelling. A clicking of computer keys, then: “I’m sorry, sir. We have no listings for that name.”

The drowsiness of breakfast hadn’t gone away, so I visited the washrooms and splashed water on my neck. In the mirror afterwards I saw a mop of thick black hair and luminescent emerald eyes. Small wonder the reaction of the mmmuffins girl.

*Think*, I told myself. *Think back. If not to last night or to yesterday, then to the day before, or the one preceding that.* I had to have been someplace. I had to have seen someone.

Some years later I read Augustine’s *Confessions*, chuckling at his famous quip: *The mind commands the body, which forthwith obeys; the mind commands the mind and meets resistance.* Ordering myself to think, I might as well have told myself to levitate.

I finger-combed my hair, dried my neck with paper towels and tried to look like someone with a place to go.

The city past the station doors had come to life. Front Street was a wall of cars. Commuters choked the sidewalks, scurrying toward their days, certain of the homes they’d be returning to at night. Some bumped into me and turned around to stare.

No one comes from nowhere. I had to have a family. Surely I had friends. I must have gone to school.

But where?

In the hollow, not-quite-silver void of memory I sensed a shift like tiles in a fifteen puzzle sliding into place.

An image formed, or rather an impression—more idea than ei-



detic—of a school: long and low in front, an added two-floor wing behind, farmers fields around the playground, post-and-wire fences.

With the image came a name: Mount Hope Public School.

*Green terrazzo hallway... grade one at the far end... grade two at the other... grade three in the middle... across from that, grade four... grade five opposite grade one...*

No other classrooms glowed with *I know this* except the library whose second-storey windows gave on fields of corn.

Mount Hope—a farming village south of Hamilton. I'd gone to school there. That explained the resonance of Hamilton before.

Against a tide of bodies, I went back inside and took a final stab at 4-1-1. I didn't really have to hear the operator's *Sorry* to know "Ase" and "Mt. Hope" were not a match. If I couldn't call up memories of school past grade five, I must have moved away.

How old was a student in grade five? Around eleven? That seemed right.

Seventeen subtract eleven.

Six years of my life were gone.