

Chapter 4

BLUE AS MIDNIGHT

HUNGRY, I ATE. Tired, I slept. Restless, I roamed.

The grey clouds of my alleyway awakening blew off by early evening. The sun turned coal-fire red and sank, sparking off a timeless run of gilt-edged mornings, hard-sky noons and flesh-warm nights.

Adrift in an enigma, spellbound by the summer days, at first I ranged the city hoping for epiphanies: sounds or smells or sights more than just approximately known. I bedded out-of-doors—in Étienne Brûlé Park, the Christie Pits, Allen Gardens, David Balfour—any place with lawn enough to melt into the gloaming past the glare of vapour lamps and vanish in a twilight world of black and silver-grey.

I bought a canvas knapsack and used it for a pillow. A Sally-Ann on Queen Street had some faded Levis almost in my size. I found a public baths nearby and used it when the funk of sleeping in my clothes became too much. The men there stared or glanced away a second late when I slipped off my briefs and squished them under-foot while chlorinated water leaked from ancient pipes and dribbled down my chest. Of the gawkers, one or two got hard but none made moves or even said hello.

I could have sought out help. Someone might be missing me, might have filed a report. Twice I made it to the marble law enforce-

ment palace up on College Street. Twice I kept on going. What would I say? How would I present myself? *Hello. My name is David Ase. I'm seventeen. I don't know how I got here. The last thing I recall is going to school in a village south of Hamilton. Six years of my life have vanished. Can you help?* It sounded crazy. They'd detain me on a charge of vagrancy. They'd put me in a ward. They'd send me off to juvvie hell. Worse, if no report were ever filed, I'd be a missing person looking for myself. Did I want the shame of finding out that no one cared?

Besides, help did not apply, or so my mind kept telling me each time a fibre-deep distrust of agencies and bureaus stalled the foot or froze the dialling finger making moves in that direction. What assistance did I need? I had my health. I had cash. For the moment, shelter was irrelevant.

I'd always been a loner—different somehow, set apart. In my bones I knew it even if I had no proof. If I thought of family at all, or friends, it was with curiosity, an abstract wondering that had no urgency or longing. My phone book check day one had shown that no one with my name lived near, and while Ase need not have been the way my guardians or parents called themselves, I felt no pull to research further.

Still, those mornings when I woke on dew-wet lawns, I felt the breach of six years like a hollow in my skin, a ghost of pain inhabiting my arms and legs and torso. Moments later, eyes wide open on the gold-limned parkland grass, I'd know in ways I didn't understand that more than memories were gone, that another part of me was missing, too—an amputation from within. Someone? Something? Someplace? I knew it by its absence, the way the blind from birth intuit sight.

Can hollowness have mass? Absence weight? I'd feel a heaviness, and longed to let it sink me in the ground. But I'd get up, remove my shirt—my jeans as well if no one was around—shake off the grass, and make a Sun Salute as a forgotten teacher once had shown me. The weight receded into bafflement, and I'd keep roaming in a city both familiar and unknown.

I spoke to almost no-one, except the waitresses and counter help who dished up blue plate specials. Whoever I'd become in the six years lost to me, I had a taste for liver served with onions, minute steak with gravy, and pale pork chops rimmed with shiny fat.

The city had two arteries whose intersection formed the centre of downtown. East and west ran Bloor, a vast commercial thoroughfare: clean and many-cultured, prosperous and public. North and south ran Yonge, equally commercial, but splintered somehow, not so tidy. If Bloor Street was Toronto's public face, Yonge Street was its heart, especially the section south of Bloor that headed to the Lake. The Strip I heard it called—vulgar, loud, and always on the move.

The city's real hub, however, wasn't Yonge and Bloor. I found it further south, in an all-night restaurant on College Street called Fran's. Even early in the day, the diners had the hardened, far-off look of nighthawks. Around the booths, waitresses in thick-soled shoes dealt out greasy menus. Faces that had seen it all took orders at the counter. Aproned beer guts jostled round the friers in the kitchen.

This was Toronto's basement hideaway, not so much its underbelly as its belly in an undershirt. With Boystown and the Church Street hookers just a block away, with Bay Street and the bankers not far off, with UofT nearby, and north and south the Strip, I sensed that if I stayed here long enough the whole of downtown might come walking in.

Hiding, move. Seeking, sit and wait.

My déjà-vu-like grasp of things was starting to wear off. My bearings now were mine. I knew Kew Beach from sleeping on the sand. I knew the Eaton Centre from the air-conditioned afternoons I spent inside. I'd felt the longing, lustful stares of men at Church and Wellesley. Less and less I asked myself: *Where does this memory come from?* Real knowledge was erasing any chance I had of wandering the city to a lynch pin recollection.

So, seeking I sat down, in a restaurant where missing years might stroll in any time, clap me on the back and say: "Hey, man, haven't

seen you in a while.”



The food at Fran’s was made to order for me: chicken in a basket, battered fish with fries, medium-rare Franburgers, thick ham steaks with pineapple. Mashed potatoes mortared up the holes on every plate.

I felt at ease. With every meal I understood that roaming I’d been going against my grain. Natural for me was sitting still—watching, listening—not wandering about in search of answers. Discovering the natural, the right-for-me, was in itself a kind of answer. Exploring it became a daily need. The patrons in the restaurant gave me something to connect to. Observing them, I felt part of things, which had a rightness to it, too.

The College streetcar stopped across from Fran’s. Red-and-silver cars pulled up, halting traffic in their wake. Then, like curtains being opened on a play, they’d ease away and leave behind a little cast of characters.

Most passengers went quickly to the subway, but those that stayed I studied, taking in their weight and height, age and bearing, clothes and hair. I’d predict where they were going.

That burly businessman: he’ll dash across the street and hail a cab.

The blue-rinse lady with the velcro sneakers: she’ll cross over at the lights and meet a friend.

That mother with her corn-rowed girls: she’ll stoop and take a Kleenex to her daughters’ cheeks then head toward the courthouse facing Fran’s.

That suburban jocklet in the baggy pants: he’s heard the Strip is hot but he’ll head north before he realizes all the action’s south.

In a minute they’d be gone, and another car would come. I’d study the new cast, look for telltale signs, and predict another clearing of the set. When they dispersed, a part of me went with them. It was as if, by figuring them out, I’d joined their lives to mine.



How long had I been homeless?

Living on the street had come so easily. My stash of money helped, but surely, if I'd known a different life, I wouldn't have so effortlessly found the beat of wandering by day and bedding down in parks at night. Nor would I have opted for the fluid commons of a restaurant instead of trying to find a place to call my own.

During daylight hours, the customers at Fran's were mostly older. It wasn't until nightfall, and especially after midnight, that a younger clientèle began to fill the booths. Many had the knowing, jumpy look that comes from living on the street. Had I been one of them? I started killing time where they hung out: on Dundas by the Eaton Centre, on Church Street where the pawn shops are, over by the Moss Park Armoury.

As with the men who onced me over at the public baths, the under-twenty drifters didn't speak to me. Interest was there: backs got turned but itched to turn again; social knots closed ranks but shuffled inwardly to get a better view. I didn't fit. My face was clean. I lacked the daub of beard beneath my lip. My jeans were snug, a throwback to another age. Not bruiser mean or junkie thin, my build said nothing about where I stood on the continuum of male pride.

Plus there were my eyes, two pricks of green I'd sometimes see reflecting out of storefront windows. They put the vagrant on their guard. Accepted as a member the species, I had grazing rights but only at the fringes of the herd.

There were others like me, exiled to the borders of the edge. Most had the far-off, far-gone look of drugs. One who didn't, though, stood out. I called him Cowboy. Lanky as a stickman, he'd have earned the nickname even in a barroom full of Stetsons. The heels of his boots were sharply underslung. A tooled buckle drew attention to his crotch. Blue eyes, blue as midnight, stared from underneath a dove-grey hat whose brim was smartly curled to the crown.

I couldn't pin his age. His face was long, an inch past handsome's limit. He could have been nineteen or thirty-nine. He swaggered when he walked, but only slightly, as if time had buffed the edges off a peacock strut. His boots and hat were natural extensions of a sinewy self-confidence that seemed to come from years, not imitation. Nobody cadged change from him or bummed a smoke the way they would have had he been merely passing through. Like me he was accepted, but only at a distance.

Most times when I saw him he was sitting on bench-back with his boots up on the seat. I didn't think he noticed me, but once, the cigarette he usually held between his first two fingers changed position and went inward so he cupped it in his palm. He studied it, then took a drag and raised his head, stretching out his neck to make a perfect line from chin to throat. Staring at the sky, he exhaled leisurely and I knew somehow I'd been acknowledged.

Acknowledged, though, was not the same as having someone call my name or cross the street to say hello.