

Chapter 8

AN OLD-FASHIONED GIRL

WAS IT THE wall of pain I'd headlonged into or the aftermath of living on the street?

I slept for days, in long, deep stretches broken only by the need to pee, the growling in my stomach and the sound of Cowboy going up or coming down the stairs. Up, I'd be alone for hours. Down, it meant a stripping off of jeans, a folding back of sheets, and quiet breathing lengthening to sleep. A sharp, sweet scent came off him then—a mix of sweat and mens' colognes.

He came and went and occupied his rooms with total ease. Whatever noise he made was that of someone on his own. Any time our waking coincided he said little and demanded less.

"There's stuff in the fridge," he told me, sitting on the bed while smearing Dubbin on his boots. "And I got you a towel of your own."

Another time he bought us take-out coffees, but instead of chatting took his to the other room and picked up his guitar.

*Hear that lonesome whipporwhill
He sounds too blue to fly...*

"Doing okay?" he enquired once or twice. "Gonna sleep yourself to death, you know?"

The rainy weather carried on. Dawn to dusk the bedroom was

in twilight. Time became irrelevant. If I fell asleep at night and woke up in the dark, had hours had passed or minutes? I'd get up long enough to have some bread and margarine, relieve myself and climb back into bed.

If I had dreams they never rose to consciousness.



The third day—so I reckoned—the basement brightened suddenly and buttery, warm light poured in. Cowboy, in the kitchenette, began to whistle. Half-asleep, I listened to him don his boots and set off up the stairs. I was on my back and staring at the ceiling. The perforated tiles had gone sepia with age. A water leak had left behind a shit-brown South America.

Leaky roof... a stained, age-jaundiced ceiling...

The room dissolved around me. I was in Mt. Hope again—in bed, a child. Evening sunlight wound through bamboo curtains. Outside on the lawn below, the squeal of girls at play. In single beds across the room, two boys traded brags and planned the next day's mischief. Another bed, beside me, was unoccupied. Down the hall, a young girl cried. A man's voice groused above the TV: "Do something, will you? I'm going crazy here."

Weary footsteps on the stairs. A woman shushing through an open door.

Three boys, three girls... dormitory rooms...

The air was hot and smelled of summer dust. The ceiling sloped at forty-five degrees. The roof leaked, leaving splotches I found animals or landscapes in depending on the light. Sunday school pictures dangled crookedly from nails.

The scheming boys went on, whispering just loud enough to let me know I wasn't in their plans.

Then I was at breakfast.

A table with two leaves, the cracks between them filled with crumbs. Nine chairs all around. No one sitting next to me. A sour gas-stove stink. The smell of eggs and sausages.

The man alone gets hot food from the skillet. The rest of us get cereal, and toast from stacks on plates.

“David wet his bed again.”

The oldest girl has spoken. *Nyah nyah nyah-NYAH nyah*. No one comes to my defence.

“I’ll bet he turns out crazy like his mom.”

The woman looks up sharply. The girl pretends she doesn’t see.

“Crazy moms have crazy kids.”

Between forkfuls, the man grunts: “Shut up, Caroline.”

Another voice chimes in: “It’s not like it’s a secret. Everybody knows.”

And another: “I wonder what it feels like when you jump? Do you really see your whole life flash in front of you? That’d be cool.”

“She didn’t jump. She was only going to.”

“Yeah—with company.”

A round of titters. I look at Caroline, the girl who started it. I can’t hate her even though I should.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she snaps. “It’s creepy.”

I keep on looking. She falters, reaches for a slice of toast. . .

A car honked out on Jarvis Street. Half a second later, a crash of metal and the hiss of glass shards showering the pavement. I got up to have a look, but the accident was too far down the street.

From the light, I guessed it was mid-afternoon. The trees had started turning while I slept. Red and yellow leaves stood out against a chicory-blue sky.

Three days earlier, maybe four, a memory had brought me to my knees. Now I’d had another one and. . . nothing. I’d been young this time, maybe six or seven. Did that mean the fire that had burned a swath through consciousness was temporally closer to my missing years? The pain had scared me good, and I didn’t want to tempt it wondering. But now at least I knew a little more. I’d grown up in a foster home. My mother had been crazy. The other kids were scared of me.

I turned away and went to gather up my underwear and T-shirts in the other room. My knapsack had a funny smell as if the rain

that drenched it hadn't been too clean. I didn't need a shower but took one anyway to figure out my moves. Cowboy wasn't home. If I went out, I'd have to lock the door. There'd be no way to get back in. Was I even welcome to return? Cowboy's world was one where kindness was the solid earth, but solitude its oxygen.

No, I had to leave. I couldn't stay forever in a basement. Cowboy would be somewhere if I needed him. The city-zones we occupied were not so very different. Besides, I'd gotten by just fine before. Bed-sleep hadn't softened me that much.

Decision made, I towelled dry, got dressed and left.



The air outside was crystal clear. Spindly shadows zebra-striped the house with Cowboy's rooms. The sumacs at the back were all ablaze. The grass glowed green the way it only does in fall. The house itself was yellow brick, trimmed in black and fronted by a covered stoop. A birch tree shed its leaves onto a little square of lawn. It was chilly in the shade; by nightfall I'd need something more substantial than a T-shirt.

I was shrugging on my knapsack when a pink-faced man with thinning hair turned in toward the house. Loaded down with groceries, he struggled up the stoop, dropped his bags, rubbed his back, and felt around for keys. His paint-daubed shirt was open. Underneath, the cotton of an undershirt stretched tight across a little gut.

"Are you a friend of Pete's?" he called.

Was I?

He found his keys, but instead of going in he turned around and came back down the steps. The smell of booze preceded him.

"Raymond Kiefer." He held out his hand. "I own this dump."

"David."

He kept the handshake going. His eyes were grey and webbed with veins. The liquor reek was deep, as if the alcohol were anchored to his bones. For all that, he didn't seem the slightest bit unsteady.

"I'll take a wild stab and guess you're not a customer of Pete's," he said, letting go at last.

He wanted me to find it funny, but I didn't know the setup so I couldn't get the joke.

"No."

"One word answers. *Très intelligent*. We'll have to watch our step. I was trying to be ironic, dear. You do know what irony is, don't you? 'The native eloquence of we people of the fag.' No, you wouldn't get that either. O'Neill. Tedious and tortured. Be glad you haven't read him. Now, are you planning on hanging around here a lot?"

"I don't know."

"Three words. We're making progress."

"What I mean is, I don't think so. Pete was just sort of helping me out."

"Was he, now? Let me guess—and he didn't even touch you. No, don't answer that. He didn't. Saint Pete. When he's not screwing half the balding queens in town, he's so decent it makes my teeth ache. Well, in case you do come back, you'd better know, I have a rule. No customers. I'm an old-fashioned girl. Bring home anyone you like. Bring an orgy. Bring the Blue Jays and the Maple Leafs. Just don't bring customers. How old are you, anyway?"

"Seventeen."

He winced.

"God, to be so young. Well, now you know the rules, have a good day. Or night. Or whatever. Maybe I'll see you around."

He ambled off in a cloud of fumes that really didn't smell so bad.

"Irony," I called after him. "A mode of speech where the intended implication is the opposite of what is said."

"My, my," he exclaimed, his back to me. "Not such a dullard after all. Perhaps we should invite him round for tea? Let him see the etchings?"

He climbed the stoop and bent to get his groceries.

"Don't mind me, David," he grunted. "I'm an over-the-hill lush

rapidly ageing into a nasty queen. It was nice to meet you. I hope you do come back.”

I'd seen used clothing stores on Parliament the other side of Allen Gardens, so I set off for the park, two blocks away, and cut across.

The dummies in the window of *L'Avion Rose* were white and dressed in purses, hats and scarves. One of them had both arms sheathed in rhinestone bracelets. Folded at their feet were sweaters, shirts and faded jeans.

A jowly woman reading at the register glanced up, alerted by the bell above the door, then proceeded to ignore me. The only other customer was male, around my age, trying hats and mugging in a mirror. The racks of clothing didn't leave much room to navigate. He grinned as I squeezed by and doffed a grey fedora.

I didn't want a bulky coat. I tried some leather jackets, but none fit well and most were too expensive. I settled on a thick, plaid shirt and fleece-lined denim vest.

I kept the shirt on while I paid, and crammed the vest inside my knapsack. The top flap wouldn't close, so I shoved my wallet to the bottom for security.

On the street, I stood a while and let my eyes adjust. The sunlight warmed my shirt, which had a pleasant, musty smell.

I heard the tinkling of a bell and turned to see the hat guy sidle out. Bareheaded now, he sauntered several metres, then twisted round and pulled the flattened grey fedora from the waistband of his jeans.

He waved me over.

“Hey, dude.” He punched his booty into shape and modelled it. “What do you think?”

His build was slender and he had a baby face. The fedora made him look like he was going out for Hallowe'en.

“Nice,” I said.

He tilted up the brim.

“Which way you headed?”

“Yonge.”

“Wanna share a joint? I got some buddies waiting in the park.”

Had I ever smoked? I wasn't sure, but it felt good to be invited after months of feeling shunned.

“Sure.”

He set off quickly with a little bouncing step.

“I'm Max.”

“David.”

“Have I seen you around?”

“Could have.”

“Where do you hang out?”

“Around.”

“Yeah? Where do you crash? Ever been to Covenant House?”

“No.”

“Cruel place, man. You don't want to go there. Too many rules. You got folks?”

“No.”

“My old man's a drunk. He hit on my sister, so I whacked him with a two-by-two. Had to go to the hospital. I can't go home now. What happened to your folks?”

“I don't know. I lost some of my memory.”

“Yeah? Bummer.”

He kept bopping along, asking questions, not listening to the answers, till we hit the edge of Allen Gardens. He stopped and looked around, then made a beeline for a maple tree ablaze in neon orange.

Max's buddies occupied a bench staked out with jackets and half-empty Cokes. One wore a red bandanna knotted on his scalp. The other had FuckYou! tattooed across his knuckles.

Bandanna spoke up first.

“Hey, dude. Nice hat.”

Max lifted the fedora and twirled it on one finger. Faster than I could see, FuckYou! leapt up and snatched it, holding it at arm's length and dancing on the balls of his feet. Max made a lunge but FuckYou! frisbeed it to Bandanna, who vaulted over the back of the bench. Max fainted and got to him, but the hat was already sailing back to FuckYou!.

They carried on for maybe a minute, then suddenly, the game got serious. Max pivoted on one foot and kicked up-back with the other. The foot struck FuckYou!'s chest. Bandanna had the hat again but Max kept his attention on the staggering FuckYou! An easy leg-hook had him on the ground.

Max dropped down and jammed a knee in FuckYou!'s windpipe.

"Tell him to give up the hat," he growled.

FuckYou! started to go red.

"I want my hat."

FuckYou! couldn't breathe. His eyes grew large.

"The hat, asshole."

FuckYou! opened his mouth. Nothing came out. Max let up a bit.

"Give it to him, man," FuckYou! gargled. "He's gonna kill me."

Max choked him off again. Bandanna shrugged like *what's the fuss about?* and handed Max the hat. Max put it on and spent a while getting it just right before letting FuckYou! go.

"Don't ever touch the hat," he said to both of them, getting to his feet.

FuckYou! rubbed the hollow of his throat. "Whatever you say man. Shit. That fuckin' hurt."

Ruffled feathers settled. FuckYou! struggled to his feet and brushed himself off. Max didn't introduce me. Neither of his buddies showed any curiosity. Bandanna reached behind his ear and pulled out a joint, holding it toward me as a way of asking if I wanted to join in. I nodded. He lit, took two deep drags and handed it to me. Following his lead, I puffed twice and passed it on to Max. So it went—puff-puff-pass, puff-puff-pass—as the joint made three full circles ending at FuckYou!

I hadn't noticed how beautiful a day it was. Or had I? Every blade of autumn grass was clear, distinct. The sunlight on my front was building fire in my solar plexus. The cool at my back was spicy and refreshing like the scent of peppermint. Whenever I looked up, blazing maple leaves sparked something like a memory, a recollection more of time than place that filled me with an aching to go

back, go back, go back. The city sounds of horns and brakes wove softly through the air. Not soft in volume; soft to touch, like fur.

Max, Bandanna and FuckYou! were talking lazily. I slipped my knapsack off and set it on the bench.

I don't know how long I sat. One moment, I was in a world of my own; the next, Max was there beside me with my knapsack on his lap. He had it open and was pulling out the vest I'd crammed inside. Next came a T-shirt and some socks.

And then my wallet.

"Check this," he said, pulling out the bills. "Nice stash."

Bandanna whistled. FuckYou! grabbed the money. I tried to stand but Max was faster, rising in a blur and blocking me while FuckYou! divvied up the cash.

"Hey, man," I said, "don't do that. It's all I've got."

It sounded whiny and pathetic.

"Them's the breaks," Max taunted. "We shared with you."

He jammed a sheaf of bills inside his pocket with a wide-eyed look of *Whatcha gonna do?*

"Please," I tried again. "I need that money."

"Don't we all? Looks like you're gonna have to find some somewhere else."

There was nothing I could do. One of me and three of them. Max had shown his prowess in a fight already and I'd never match his skill. Even if I could, the dope had made me sluggish.

I glared. All I had was words, and vengeful, violent images forming in my head: Max, crumpled on a washroom floor, a straw stuck in his nose; Bandanna, holding his gut, eyes wide with shock, blood spilling from his mouth; FuckYou!, naked on a shower floor, bleeding from the ass.

"Two of you are going to die," I said. "One of you is going to wish he could."

Futile words, dope-inspired, but I couldn't stop myself from saying them.

"Whoo-hoo," Bandanna hooted. "Listen to the big man."

FuckYou! tugged his arm. "Let's get outta here, man."

Max leaned over me.

“Which ones, *David?* Who’s going to die? You think you can take me? You won’t even *find* me.”

His eyes weren’t threatening, or even cold. What he said was simply true. I wouldn’t find him. Or his buddies. I wouldn’t even look. It didn’t matter now.

“Come on, man,” FuckYou! urged. “Let’s go!”

His eyes on me, Max straightened up and moved away. Bannanna and FuckYou! backed up with him in wedge formation. Max did his bouncing step and whirled about. The other two turned with him. All three sashayed off, laughing and jabbing each other in the arm.



The dope buzz gripped me while I flip-flopped from anxiety so fierce I had to hug myself to acquiescent calm that had me feeling I’d get by.

When Allen Gardens settled back into its state of mundane beauty, I quit the park and trekked up to the Library. I don’t remember what I read. Poe would have been right: “*There was a dim mist over all the earth, and a warm glow upon the waters, and, amid the rich October leaves of the forest, a rainbow from the firmament had surely fallen...*”

At closing time I still had no idea what to do. Dusk had settled over Yonge Street and I needed food. Out of habit I walked down to Fran’s. It wasn’t till I turned at College that it truly hit me: I’d be washing dishes if I didn’t find some cash.

Hunger won the battle with my pride. I parked my knapsack in a doorway and started calling out for change from passers-by.

It took two hours to pry the coins I needed from the puckered rectums Torontonians call pockets. Toward the end, I discovered that the game I played alone at Fran’s—predicting people’s destinations when they exited the streetcar—had a real-world application.

If I paid attention, some pedestrians appeared to move in chan-

nels separate from the others, leaving colourless but lucent tracks that spoke to me and said: *This one*. The final fifteen minutes netted most of what I needed for spaghetti, rolls, a salad and some cherry pie.

I left the greasy warmth of Fran's around eleven. The autumn chill I'd lost my stash of money getting ready for had fully settled in. The denim vest and flannel shirt were plenty warm as long as I kept moving, but not enough to let me bed down out of doors. I'd vacated Cowboy's thinking I'd survive, but that was when I had a safety net of twenty-dollar bills. Now I knew I couldn't. Not alone.

To stay in motion I walked up to Bloor and over to High Park, several kilometres west. I wandered to the southern end then started on the long hike back to Jarvis.

It must have been past two when I knocked on Cowboy's door. He wasn't home. I tried the window at the back but it was nailed shut. A sensor lit the front stoop like a runway so I couldn't wait out Cowboy on the steps.

Alone at night had never bothered me. I'd even grown to cherish it, wrapping it around me like a blanket while the city slept its not-quite-dormant sleep. But as cars passed by on Jarvis Street, their headlights glittering in bits of glass left over from the crash, a feeling, not of loneliness or panic, but of ended-ness came over me. The hollow scooped inside me by the years I'd somehow lost had suddenly expanded. My skin felt like a membrane stretched around a pulsing void.

Months ago I'd woken in a dream and carried on as if the dream would never end. Standing outside Cowboy's, fighting shivers while my breath made wisps of vapour in the air, I knew it had.

I paced from Allen Gardens down to Dundas Street and back again till Cowboy finally showed up.

It was dawn before he did.