

Chapter 14

THE FIREFLIES ARE OUT

RAYMOND LOST HIS taste for playing landlord in September. Cowboy plied his charms, and before the month was over we were back. Good thing, too. Nighttime lows were dipping below zero.

“What’d I tell you?” Cowboy said, ritually sweeping with the former tenant’s broom. “Nothing to worry about.”

A lot less optimistic about Raymond’s change of heart, I’d spent the summer cultivating regulars who wanted me all night. By the end of August, almost any evening I could count on one to pick me up. Sometimes when they showed up early I’d just tell them to come back. They never got upset. Though lying to themselves—did they really think I saw them as Samaritans helping out a kid whose looks were only incidental?—they understood that lodging for the night took second place to real money made by sucking dick in parking lots.

Mostly inoffensive, their only real flaw was gullibility. Hustling’s a con and cons are based on being credible. If a scammer pulls that off his mark’s a victim, not a fool. But buying love at curbside? Gullible’s the only word for anyone who thinks it’s real.

Gullible, and tedious. And none more so than Ken, the restaurant designer from St. Catharines.

While acknowledging the future value of his hotel room for winter nights that otherwise might find me sleeping on a subway grate, I

grew to dread the polished grill and squared-off headlights of his station wagon coming down the street.

Middle-aged, moon-faced and balding, his routine never varied. Always around two, and always on a bad night, his shamelessly suburban retro-wheels would sidle by a time or two before he stopped. He never rolled the window down or cracked the door or even looked at me until I'd gotten in. He had a knack for knowing when my night was almost over and that no one else was going to pick me up.

We'd circle round the block. Why, I never knew. He showed no interest in threesomes. Then he'd ask me about Cowboy. He'd been Cowboy's regular before and imagined he was cheating on him now. As if Cowboy gave a damn.

Then off to his hotel, so few blocks away we could have walked in half the time.

Upstairs in six-fifteen—always six-fifteen—Ken would order up two bourbons and a club. I didn't like the bourbon and no amount of mayo saved the dessicated clubs. Afterwards he'd deke into the bathroom, douse himself in Polo, and come back in his underwear. He'd watch me strip and comment on the hard-on I'd worked up while he was gone.

In the following half hour he'd let me service him. We'd stick at it till he came without a sound, then he'd set his travel clock and douse the lights. I'd have left then if I could, but he never paid till morning. Besides, the point of putting up with him was room-insurance for the winter.

His breathing whistled when he slept. It never bothered me. In fact I found it soothing, perhaps because it signalled liberation from a man so bland I wondered if he had a soul.

Deep in the dog days of August, Ken drove by and picked me up as usual. Back at the hotel, the air conditioner in six-fifteen was on the fritz. Instead of changing rooms, he haggled to stay put. The sex that night was slippery but over fast. Afterwards, for once, I couldn't sleep. It didn't trouble me. Eyes half closed, I cast a thread ahead of me to David Balfour Park with its certainty of morning

cool several hours hence.

The whistling of Ken's breath was like a lonely peeper early in the spring. My mind, already in the future, began to roam in dreams I'd yet to have. I didn't notice when, instead of being *like*, Ken's breath *became* a little frog in spring, then two, then twenty, then two hundred—a glee-club racket of spring peepers trilling round the pond behind my foster home.

And that's when I remembered.

I'd had an imaginary friend.

There were four beds in the upstairs room that, spring and summer, smelled of heat and cow shit from a farm across the highway. Only three were occupied: mine, and the boys who hatched up plots they'd never let me in. The fourth one, almost touching mine, had rumpled sheets but no one ever slept there.

Yet in the memory Ken's breathing had set off, I heard a whisper from the empty bed.

The fireflies are out.

"I know."

Let's go see.

"We'll get caught."

Aren't they all asleep?

I did a mental tour of the house. The two boys sleeping in their beds across the room. The toddler and the two girls down the hall. The foster parents in their squeaky iron bedstead. No one stirred.

"It's safe."

Let's go.

I slid softly out of bed and tiptoed to the door. The threshold had a board that creaked unless I hugged the frame. A splinter caught on my pyjamas as I inched around.

"Hold on," I whispered.

Take them off. It's muddy out there anyway.

No, not here. Creeping downstairs naked didn't seem quite right.

The stairs themselves were treacherous. Any one might make a sound. I stuck close to the banister and tested every one. Lifetimes

passed before I reached the bottom.

In the safety of the kitchen I got out of my pyjamas and stuffed them round the screechy storm door spring.

The air outside was sweet, a little cooler than indoors, just enough to really feel naked. Gravel bit my feet as I crossed over to the barn. The half-moon light was just enough to see my way around. The field behind had long, wet grass that cooled my soles and made them hum. The tingle seemed to travel up my legs.

There.

To my right, a pale green light winked on and off. A moment later and a metre distant, there it was again. A second prick of phosphorescence answered. And a third. And a fourth.

There'll be way more by the pond.

“Tons.”

Race you there.

And I was running, fast and hard. Even more lights started flashing, rising up in front of me and etching sparkler trails in the dark.

The pond lay still, an inky pool spreading out from reedy banks. I leaned against a willow tree whose branches swept the surface. Heart pounding, out of breath, I felt as if the world had stopped. I alone was energy and movement. The atoms in me whirled while the universe had come to rest.

I looked up. Across the pond, threaded in cattails, a million fireflies were putting on a show.

“Awesome.”

Told you they'd be out.

I was watching fireworks and seeing neurons flash inside a floating brain. Some vast intelligence was talking to itself, blinking in a code I couldn't understand.

Let's swim across.

Vestigial fear of creatures lurking in the night-black water held me back.

Don't be a scaredy-cat. Bring the matches.

A woodpecker had gashed a nest into the willow's trunk. Abandoned now, its edges grey and smooth, it held a stash of goodies

lifted from the foster home and Mr. Dale's Hardware: rubber bands, a penknife, a steel-edged ruler, a pouch of Drum tobacco. My fingers found a metal cylinder of kitchen matches. I clutched it tight and waded into silt, then deeper till the water reached my waist. Kicking off, I sidestroked to the other side.

The ground was marshy, and though galaxies of fireflies still wheeled, I hadn't braved the night-pond just to watch. Feeling with my hands, I located hollow stalks of last year's reeds, pulled them up and jammed them in a swampy patch of rotting vegetation.

Light them.

I unscrewed the metal cylinder, shook out the paraffin-dipped matches, and scratched one on the sandpaper inside the lid. It flared bright yellow, blinding me a second, then settled to a steady flame. I held it over top a hollow reed, and *pffft!*, a soft blue light appeared, attached to nothing, dancing in the air.

Light the others.

I held the match above the other stalks. Six flames jiggled in the air like wickless candles while the gases in the marshland lasted.

One by one they petered out.

"We should get going back."

Not yet. No one's going to miss us.

A midnight creature scampered off as I swam over to the other side. I found a flat space free of willow roots and stretched out on my back. Overhead, the stars were fireflies affixed to blue-black cloth. Drops of water trickled down the inside of my thighs and made me hard.

"I wonder why it does that?"

Dunno, the lazy silence said. Feels good.

I rolled over on my stomach. A warm breeze played across my buttocks. I laid my head on folded arms and murmured thoughts aloud. Some were answered, others not.

My imaginary friend came up with an idea.

Let's cut the tires on the truck.

I got the penknife from my stash.

"You think they'll blame us for it?"

Nah. They'll think of Paul and Jimmy.

"Are you sure?"

Duh-uh.

"They're afraid of us. It's why they're mean."

Yeah, I know. They're scared...

Ken turned over in his sleep. The pond, the dark, the fireflies all vanished. Only my erection stayed, hard and adult-sized. I checked the clock. Six-thirty. The alarm was set for seven. I didn't want Ken waking up and finding me aroused. He might want seconds and I'd have to go along.

Half an hour gave me time to slip into the bathroom and take care of things.



"You see this?" Cowboy asked, holding up a soggy copy of *The Sun*.

He'd come looking for me at the library. Fresh December snow was clinging to his hat and jacket.

I shook my head. Thoreau wrote, *All news as it is called is gossip*, and I pretty much agreed.

He crouched beside my carrel. "Take a gander."

CHILD WATCHES FATAL STABBING blared the front page headline. Beside it was a colour photo: crime scene tape, legs crooked like a Swastika, quantities of blood. A portrait of a freckled boy—a school picture, judging from the sky-blue background—occupied one corner. Details on page two.

Cowboy flipped the page.

Page two's photos were in black and white. A full shot of the victim showed his T-shirt soaked in blood. The source was obvious: a gash dead centre of his abdomen. The inset close-up of his face looked like a mugshot.

Except it couldn't be a mugshot since the guy was wearing a bandanna knotted on his scalp.

The story's facts were few:

The victim—Michael Nemecek, early twenties, known to the police—had been attacked outside the washrooms of an East York mall. The time had been near closing. The child witness, answering the call of nature, had “heard voices in the corridor.” Peeping out, he saw “one man hit the other one in the stomach.” Fearful, he’d retreated to the safety of a cubicle. His mother, worried by his absence, had sought him out and found the victim “. . . dead, you could see it in his eyes.” The police “suspected drugs.” Follow-up on page fourteen (“ . . . see *Kid*”).

“That one of them?” Cowboy asked.

I looked the pictures over. “Yeah.”

Cowboy nodded. “I thought maybe. You said the guy with the bandanna would get stabbed.”

“I was buzzed.”

“You called it right.”

“Wishful thinking.”

“Don’t suppose you want to hit the track and do some wishful thinking there?”

“Sure beat getting robbed in Allen Gardens, eh?”

He stood and buttoned up his sheepskin.

“Nippy out there. You sticking ’round ?”

I was working through Zelazney’s *Amber* books. “Till closing.”

“Heading out tonight?”

“If the snow lets up.”

“Bad time of year. Not much going on.”

The Christmas season, with its cold and emphasis on family values, had put a damper on the traffic circling Grenville-Grosvenor.

“You want that?” he asked, pointing to the *Sun*.

“Nah.”

He tucked it under his arm.

“I’m going to go kill some time at Woody’s.” Woody’s was a bar on Church Street where Cowboy sometimes picked up happy-hour trade. “And maybe see what I can lift from Super Save. Need anything?”

Nothing came to mind.

He snugged his hat and fixed the brim. "Catch you later."

"Later."

I went back to reading, untroubled by the fate of Michael Nemecek. The year before, he'd had a hand in robbing me. I'd wished him dead and now he was. Things work out that way sometimes. Prescience plays no part.

In fact, prescience is nearly always absent when, in retrospect, we feel most we should have had it.