

Chapter 16

A LOW, SLEEK, SILVER JAG

CATCH YOU LATER. Cowboy's final words as he left the library, the tragedy of Michael Nemecek—Bandanna—tucked under his arm.

I went back to *Amber*, “The Courts of Chaos”, but had trouble getting into it. The library felt hot, even though I seemed to be the only one who noticed it. I visited the washroom and splashed water on my face. It didn't do much good. Perspiration popped out on my forehead and my arms stuck to the carrel. From my T-shirt came a smell that left unchecked would blossom into full BO.

By closing I was eager for the air outside, but half a block down Yonge I started shivering. A nasty breeze was blowing off the lake, the kind that cuts through winter clothes and actually smells cold. My stomach felt peculiar, too, as if the chill were scraping out a hollow in my abdomen.

Fran's held no appeal, so I stopped at a falafel counter north of Wellesley. The chickpea sandwich helped but I wound up throwing half away.

Things were quiet on the block. I spotted Cowboy down by Women's College Hospital, his back against the wall and one leg crooked so that his boot was flush against the brick. A dark sedan, its headlights dimmed, idled at the curb. Tatters of exhaust whipped round the side. The wind caught in my eyes and made them tear.

Halos flared around the streetlamps. The vignette by the hospital glazed over for a moment, then seemed to split in two.

I blinked and shook my head. The double image vanished, but something wasn't right. A tracery of brass surrounded everything in sight. Cowboy shrugged and pushed off from the wall. The rear door of the car swung open. Cowboy ducked his head and clambered in.

The headlights were searing and I had to look away, but as the car rolled by I turned and saw two men in business suits up front with Cowboy in the back, his dove-grey Stetson pointing straight ahead.

All at once a wave of nausea hit me. The hollow in my stomach blew up like the airbag in a steering wheel. Not bothering to signal, the car turned left at Grosvenor. The nausea redoubled, as if the dwindling taillights had hooked my belly and were reeling out my guts. I stumbled to a lamppost. The street began to shimmer. The sedan turned right and entered traffic circling Queen's Park. I tracked it with uncertain eyes.

Suddenly my stomach spasmed and I vomited, splattering the sidewalk and my boots. The heaving carried on long after I had nothing left to puke. My clothes were drenched with sweat and my teeth were chattering like castanets.

I tried to leave the lamppost but the world began to spin, and I sank down on the slushy sidewalk with my head between my knees.



I didn't see the second car turn onto Surrey Place, rather felt its headlights as a pressure on the right side of my face. Expecting them to pass I didn't bother looking up, not even when they stopped.

"Are you all right?"

The voice was formal, with an accent like Dracula's. I wanted to say *Yeah, fine, go on* but even thinking about talking me made me queasy. I wagged my head from side to side. The car door opened

with a quiet *snick*.

“Can you stand?”

Strong, thin fingers probed the armpits of my jacket. I let them help me up, but as soon as I was standing I began to retch again. I gripped the stranger’s overcoat.

“Tell me where you live,” he said in his peculiar accent. “I will take you there.”

I spat out bile and stuttered Raymond’s address. The effort was too much. The street began to whirligig again. My legs went out from under me.

The last thing I remember was the undercarriage of a low, sleek, silver, E-type Jag.



Hot air on my face. A leather seat all pillowy and warm. The purring of an engine through the floorboards.

A blast of frigid air. Skillful hands supporting me up Raymond’s steps. A flurry of porch-lit concern. More hands guiding me indoors. Up the fake mosaic stairs. A near-accident outside the bathroom.

Down the hall and to a bedroom. Boots removed and clothing peeled. Some blankets and a bucket bustled in. Cool sheets that set me shivering again.

A dry palm on my forehead. Fingers prodding soft spots on my chin-neck-groin. Palpations on my abdomen. A thermometer, still bitter from a dunk in alcohol, stuck in my mouth.

A rosy bedside lamp switched on.

“Do you feel well enough to answer questions?”

I signalled yes.

“You are David?”

I nodded.

“My name is Ferenc. I am a doctor. How long have you been ill?”

“Since this afternoon,” I chattered. The inside of my mouth felt

like I'd eaten chalk.

"It came on quickly?"

"Yes."

"Have you dined on anything out of the ordinary? An unusual fruit or vegetable? Or perhaps in a restaurant you do not normally frequent?"

I moved my head from side to side.

"No? Ah, well, that is good. May I assume you are not unknown on the street where I found you?"

A snort from Raymond answered for me.

"So you have contact with many partners? Intimate contact?"

"I'm a hustler," I managed to get out.

"And more direct than I." He touched my shoulder. "I believe you have contracted a rotavirus. Stomach flu. Normally a childhood ailment, but if your system has grown weak from spending too much time outdoors..."

"You must be careful. These things can clear up in a day but sometimes take much longer. Drink a lot of water. I will come to check your progress."

He stood. The change in mattress level made me want to barf. I clenched my teeth till he and Raymond left then threw up in the bucket.

My eyes roved randomly about the room. The bedside lamp glowed feebly and I couldn't make out much—just phantom furniture, posts around the bed, a canopy of some sort overhead. Through the door I heard instructions being given.

Experimentally I let my eyes fall shut. Right away the bed became a midway ride. I opened them again and gazed straight up. It seemed to help.

After a while, the canopy developed auras—orange-red and yellow-green all around the edges. Blobs of colour like the ones that float behind closed eyelids bled across the drooping shadow.

I must have dozed. Raymond was beside the bed, setting out a Thermos jug and tumbler. A bolt of pain slammed through my bowels. I grabbed his arm and staggered to the bathroom, where I

voided sulfurous liquid. Standing made me woozy so I called for help back to the bedroom.

“Poor thing,” Raymond fussed, snuggling sheets and fixing blankets. “Are you warm enough? Is the light all right? Can I get you anything?”

He sat and poured a little water from the jug.

“You have to drink, but only baby sips till your tummy stops going flippety-flop. By command of his Excellence, Tsar Nicholas, your doctor friend. He has this idea you’re going to dessicate or something and then God knows what—you’ll shrivel up like a raisin? Anyway, if we don’t want hordes of Cossacks descending on the house, we’d better do as he says. He’s a psychiatrist, did you know? Not one of your regulars, I hope. Men like that. . . .”

“He’s gone, Raymond.”

“Gone? Who? The mad Russian?”

“Cowboy. He drove off. . . .”

“Oh, hush, now. You don’t know what you’re saying. Pete’ll be back before the night is over.” He kissed me on the forehead. “Now be a dear and get some rest. There’s a school bell on the table. Tinkle if you need me. I’ll be down the hall.”

He left the door ajar. Weak light from the hallway crossed a patterned rug and climbed the wall. Fixing on it wide-eyed brought relief. I tried not to think of Cowboy. I was certain I was right; he wasn’t coming back.

The beam of light began to waver, bleeding past its margins, vanishing at times, then reappearing. Tiny spots, like luminescent ashes, swam before my eyes.

The pricks of light turned into objects floating in the air: paper clips, HotWheels cars, sand dollars. Just by opening my hand, I could catch them in my palm. A bit of quartz. A penny. Zippo flints in a dispenser like the plastic ones at Dale’s Hardware. . . .



A spring day after school. Sunlight on my arms and warm wind

through my T-shirt. The maple trees still waxy green; the chestnuts sweet with popcorn blooms.

“Wanna steal something?”

“Like what?”

“I dunno. Let’s go to Mr. Dale’s.”

“He’ll catch us.”

“No, he won’t.”

“You sure?”

“I’ll make sure.”

“What if it doesn’t work?”

“It always works.”

Dale’s Hardware Store is wide plank floors and pegboards hung with shiny tools, the chiff of nails scooped from bins, and cloying bags of Weed’n’Feed.

Mr. Dale is alone behind the counter with a newspaper.

“Good afternoon,” he says, all properly. “What can I help you with today?”

Mr. Dale always treats me like an adult.

“Is it all right to look around?”

“There’s not much new to see, I’m afraid. This year’s Toros don’t come in till next week.”

“That’s okay.”

My unseen friend prompts me toward my favourite aisle, the one with all the little stuff: keychains, wax pencils, plumbs, retracting blades, rubber bands, folding rulers, penlights. My eye lights on a box of flint-dispensers. They’re clear and flat, with little plugs of flint in a channel up the middle. At the top, a wheel with a single notch snags the flint; a half turn and it drops out in your hand.

Mr. Dale is still behind his counter. I can see him just enough to get a sense of what he’s thinking. He’s nice to me but he’s not stupid. He knows boys steal.

“Is it safe?”

“He’s going to check real soon.”

If he catches me he’s going to feel betrayed. And if he goes to Mr. Bennett at the foster home, I’ll get the belt.

I feel as if I'm standing in the middle of a teeter-totter. Fear's on one end and my friend is on the other. His excitement tips the balance.

Suddenly, I'm not just in the aisle I'm in, but in another, near the back, the one with power tools. The image is as clear as where I really am.

Mr. Dale folds his paper and gets up.

I freeze and feel my heart rise to my throat. His footsteps move away. I grab a handful of dispensers and jam them in my pocket. The bulge is obvious. If he sees me I'm a gonner.

I scurry to the door. "Goodbye, Mr. Dale!"

"Oh," he says, emerging from the power tools, "there you are. Have a nice day. Enjoy the weather."

"Thanks."

My feet are quivering to run—down Homestead Drive, up the long lane to the house, behind the barn, through the grass and to the safety of the pond.

Is Mr. Dale following? I don't dare look back.

I break into a trot.

The trot becomes a headlong dash.

My imaginary friend thrusts up his fist.

"*Ye-ess!*"



I made it through the night, careening to the bathroom between bouts of fitful sleep. Raymond came in twice to swab my brow and make me drink. His well-intentioned, gin-soaked breath was more than I could bear. Both times I threw up.

Dawn crept in without my really noticing. The room was red—all red—a deep blood colour that made morning seem to grow out of the rosy bedside lamp. The canopy above me sprouted golden fringe with tassels. Ruby curtains flowed around a leaded window. The room's dimensions doubled in a gilt-framed mirror.

Rolling over, I struck something solid but invisible. I put my palm against the barrier that couldn't be there and discovered that the bed was only half the width it seemed. The rest was painted on the wall.

I turned back over. The scenery outside the leaded panes was fluffy snow on drooping spruces, long blue shadows and an ice-free brook that didn't flow. By studying the real shadows objects cast around the room, I was able to determine that at least the window opposite was genuine. I noticed that reflections in the mirror didn't move, and I couldn't tell for sure, but the patterned rug might have been painted on the floor.

"Brekkie!"

Raymond pushed in backwards with a tray. His good cheer vanished when he turned around and got a look at me.

"Oh, dear. Death warmed over hasn't got a pinch on you this morning, now has it? Shall we ix-nay the *petit-déjeuner*?"

I tried to smile and wished I hadn't.

"Not a problem. It's just a soft-boiled egg. Hate the things, myself. Mum'sy used to feed me them whenever I got sick. What am I saying? I'll bet the very mention of food makes you want to gack."

He set the tray down by the door, as far away as possible.

"At least try some of this," he went on gamely, bringing me a glass. "Flat ginger ale. Said to calm the tummy."

I took a sip and momentarily felt better. The reprieve was short. My bowels clenched. I sprinted to the bathroom.

"I must say," Raymond offered when I wobbled back, "you certainly look fetching in those briefs, but I'll bet you'd like some fresh ones. Where do you keep your unmentionables?"

"Dresser. Second drawer."

"I'll cart up T-shirts, too. Is there anything else?"

I'd grown a billion extra nerves. Everything was painful, from the flannel of the sheets to the smell of Raymond's aftershave.

"The light. It hurts my eyes."

Raymond drew real curtains over real glass.

"It's early still. Go back to sleep. I'll pop in from time to time."

He pulled the short chain hanging from the lamp, and crimson darkness swallowed me . . .



The two girls at the foster home are scared of me. I see it in their eyes, in the way they turn their backs, in the way they huddle close when I'm around. It's not just me who frightens them. Not belonging, being ridiculed at school—these scare them, too.

They hide their fear with scorn. They know exactly how to flip their hair and flounce away from anything that tells them who they really are. Their contempt for anything they do not understand, for what does not conform, is absolute.

I do not conform.

Their attitude should bother me. Instead I understand. They feel as I do, frightened and alone. I'd tell them but they'd never listen. They know I know their scorn is cheap. They know I penetrate their fears and live them as my own, which only terrifies them more. They think it gives me power. I'm the reason no one ever asks them to a birthday party. I'm the reason they trip playing volleyball. I'm the reason evil dreams disturb them in the night.

Unable to confront their loneliness, they form a club of two that tattles and tells outright lies.

The two boys, Paul and Jimmy, have been moved from home to home. They, too, have strategies for hiding from what truly frightens them. Mostly though, they're puffed up with the arrogance of boy-ness. They'd feel as the girls do if they had the sensitivity. They don't. They're boys. Masters of the universe. Everything is theirs by right.

I am the boys.

I am the girls.

I am too much them for them to let me in.

Lying by the pond out back, I talk with my imaginary friend. He isn't scared of anything. He has me and I have him. Our feelings are our own. No one else intrudes. Like the girls, Caroline and

Deborah, just like Paul and Jimmy, we form a club of two.

This is the only friend I'll ever have. I feel his love as surely as the love I feel for him. It is a fierce, exclusionary love.

I would die for my imaginary friend.



“Are you keeping up your fluids? Drinking, as I said?”

“Yes, doctor.”

“Ferko, please.”

He pronounced it *FAIR-koh*.

“Ferko.”

He'd dropped by in the afternoon, maybe of the first day, maybe of the second. Raymond had installed a small TV with no remote. The single channel had embarked on *Star Trek* back-to-back. Every time I found the energy to watch, it was Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock, or Mr. Spock and Captain Kirk. The endless sameness made me lose all track of time.

“How are you feeling generally?”

“Like shit.”

“Has the vomiting stopped?”

“Mostly.”

“But the diarrhoea continues. There is no blood when you evacuate?”

“No.”

“Excellent. My diagnosis was correct. A simple rotavirus.”

“Easy for you to say.”

“True—you are sick, and I am not.” His accent gave the words a little lilt. “Now, please, I must take your temperature.”



Midsummer. Noon. The park behind the town hall in Mt. Hope. Underfoot the grass is scorched and crispy. Flies are breeding in the smell of cow manure. There's little shade so no one is around.

On such a day the baseball bleachers make a fine place to hang out.

I'm smoking cigarettes from Smittie's Groceteria. Getting them is easy. I ask Mr. Smith to make an ice cream cone. While he's digging in the freezer, I lift them from behind the cash.

The cigarettes don't taste too good. It's the smoke and fire that I'm really after. I have a lighter, too, a Zippo Mr. Bennett has been looking for for weeks. It's silver, with initials: TB. Mr. Bennett's name is Tom. I like its weight, the *snick* the lid makes when I flip it back, the smell of fuel coming off the wick.

The bleachers' wooden posts have tufts of grass around them where a mower cannot reach. I light a single stalk. The end flares up, then turns into a tiny ember crawling down the stem. Its retreat is fast, like grease on water fleeing from a single drop of soap. I light all the grass around the post and watch the noose of embers tighten round the wood.

"Do it over here."

I light the grass around another post. Then another. And another. A cloud of yellow smoke wafts through the bleachers. They start to look like gallows rising in the mist.

Dark red flame erupts. I run to stamp it out.

"Leave it. Let it burn."

Time stands still. I shouldn't listen, but the voice is just too strong. Excitement seems to quiver in the air itself. I feel it pull me in like quicksand in a jungle storybook.

"Come on!"

I hightail it across the baseball diamond to the hot-dog stand. Flames are ripping through the bleachers now. Black smoke races for the sky. Sirens will be starting soon.

"Cool."

The syllable is long, drawn out, and satisfied.



"Chicken soup, sweetie! Got the recipe from one of my clients'

mothers in Forest Hill. Adorable little Polish thing about four feet tall with an accent so thick you could spoon it over pierogies.

“Now, eat up or I’m going to call that doctor friend of yours and have him run up an IV. He left his number, by the way. I expect that’s so you’ll call him back and work out something in the way of trade.”

My fever had dropped, the vomiting had stopped, and the gratuitous nastiness of explosively voiding teaspoonfuls of foul liquid was happening less and less. My limbs still felt like jelly, but at least I could sit up in the disorienting half-bed.

“Did you bring crackers?”

“Melba toast. Better for the figure.”

Raymond balanced the tray on my legs, arranged the covers, and tucked a napkin in my T-shirt. Up close, I couldn’t smell the gin, and his eyes looked worried in a sober sort of way.

“I *am* going to be all right, aren’t I?”

“Of course, silly. You just caught some rugrat’s flu while servicing his daddy.”

“What’s on your mind, then?”

“Absolutely nothing, darling.” He framed his face with both hands and bared a Hollywood smile. “Happy as a lark.”

“So how come you’re sober?”

“Bitch. I’m perfectly capable of sobriety without just cause. Don’t worry your pretty little head. Eat up. Ve vant you stronk like bull again.”

Chicken soup, tapioca, Raymond, sleep; consommé, *Star Trek*, rice pudding, nap; more worrisomely sober Raymond, tea, arrow-roots, snooze...



Mrs. Chenoweth lives in a tarpaper shack. She’s about a hundred and fifty years old and has fruit trees in her back yard. Sometimes she offers kids passing by money to pick apricots and plums.

Everybody knows she’s a witch. You don’t stop at her place on

Hallowe'en. The candies might be poison. She sticks pins in her caramel apples.

Mr. Chenoweth goes shopping every Thursday afternoon.

Her door is locked, but breaking in is easy—just smash the pane of glass, lift the dirty lace and turn the handle from inside.

Her kitchen has a funny smell, not like rotting food, more like smells themselves so old they've started to decay. One entire wall is floor to ceiling pickles: dills, watermelon, bread-and-butters, mustard beans.

I didn't come here with a plan. Lying by the pond, I heard a whisper:

Let's break into Mrs. Chenoweth's.

The first jar at the top is dills. The zinc lid isn't easy to unscrew. I prise one out and take a bite. It's not quite what I'm used to so I put it back but leave it sticking out without the lid.

The next jar is more dills. I taste a sample and replace it, just like in the other jar. Soon, there's a whole row of Mason jars with pickles poking out.

I move onto the mustard beans, which are better than Mrs. Bennett's at the home. Then a row of pickled eggs, then cinnamon crab apples that look really funny when I take a bite out of their sides. Carrot sticks in brine, murky beets, yellow cauliflower...

By the time I hit the fourth or fifth shelf, I'm just tonguing juice and spitting in the jars.

"Check the cupboards."

Mrs. Chenoweth has metal cannisters of sugar, flour, oats, cornmeal. Each one has a silver scoop. I like playing with the scoops, jamming them in deep. I misjudge the flour and a white film settles on the counter. I trace my name, filling in the letters from a jar of ground black pepper.

This is fun.

I pour cornmeal on the floor, trace my name again and pour molasses in the letters. That doesn't look too hot. Anyway, I shouldn't leave my name. I scatter sugar overtop. The molasses still seeps through, so I scruff the whole thing up and attack the kitchen

counter.

My hands are gooey when I'm done. Everything I touch gets dirty. I dump out all the cannisters and make a mountain in the middle of the floor.

Next come the fridge and cupboards. Corn syrup, honey, milk, orange juice...

My exhilaration grows. I've passed some sort of test. I feel approval in a part of me I scarcely understand. My penis has grown hard, which gives me an idea. I unzip and, trembling, attempt to start a stream. It doesn't come. Breathing deep, I wait. A wire of heat snakes from my bladder.

Hold back? Let go?

Standing in the mess, I loose an arc of piss while my imaginary friend looks on.

Or is it my imaginary friend who pees while I look on?



I woke up ravenous. Sometime in the night, the flu had fled. My tolerance for *trompe-l'œil*, too.

I padded to the kitchen in my underwear.

"Saints preserve us," Raymond exclaimed. "Lazarus walks. Having a bit of trouble with the shroud, though."

His eyes went to my briefs.

"Me need food," I grunted.

"Does this mean I finally get my room back?"

"Send me the bill."

"Oh, goodie. This calls for a send-off breakfast. What's your pleasure?"

"Anything, as long as there's lots of it."

"Meusli with plain yoghurt?"

"I guess that'll have to do."

"Kidding, sweetie. How does waffles, bacon and scrambled eggs sound?"

"Like diner heaven."

“It won’t be too much?”

“Probably not enough.”

“Ooo—I do so like a hungry man. Go make yourself decent while I get started. I washed your jeans. They’re on the dresser.”

“Do I have time for a shower?”

“Guest towel’s on the back of the bathroom door. Now, shoo!”

Raymond pulled out all the stops. On my return, he dished up waffles, creamy eggs, and bacon from a plug-in grill. Coffee burbled in the percolator.

Every bite was better than the one before. Raymond watched while I chowed down. His concern at the beginning—*You’re sure your tummy’s up to this?*—melted as I tore through everything in sight.

I only glanced up twice. Both times I caught that funny, bothered-about-something look.

“What is it, Raymond?” I asked, sitting back, sipping on the finest mug of coffee in the world.

“What is what?”

“That thing on your mind. The reason for the good face you’ve been putting on.”

He left the kitchen and came back with a *Toronto Star*.

US National to Face Murder Charges

Canadian immigration agents last night apprehended Peter Gilleys, a native of West Virginia, in downtown Toronto.

The operation, described as quiet, brings to a close a search involving the FBI, Immigration Canada and the RCMP.

Mr. Gilleys was being sought in connection with a seven-year-old double homicide in the small West Virginia community of Mt. Hope.

Richard Call and Dean Wilson, aged eighteen, were found shot to death in Wilson’s pickup truck. Both were on probation following an assault on Wayne Smith, also

aged eighteen. Smith played defensive end for Mt. Hope's highschool football team, of which Call was captain.

Reports from the time of Call and Wilson's trial indicate dissatisfaction in some quarters with their lenient sentencing. The prosecution characterized the attack on Smith as a wantonly sadistic hate crime.

Smith was a known homosexual.

"We all know what happened," a spokesperson from the Fayette County Sherriff's Office said. "Pete Gilleys and Wayne Smith were real close, and what Dicky (Call) and Dean did to Wayne was awful. They should have gone to prison. But that don't give nobody the right to shoot them point blank through the windshield."

Gilleys, of no fixed address, is believed to have been in Toronto since shortly after the homicides.

"He wasn't trying to hide," said an immigration official, "which may be why it took so long to find him."

A date has been set for Gilleys' extradition hearing, which will proceed quickly.

"We are satisfied the evidence against him warrants expeditious handling of the matter," says Immigration Canada.

Upon his return to West Virginia, Mr. Gilleys faces charges on two counts of first degree murder.

"How did you know, David? I thought you were delirious, saying Pete was gone."

"I saw him getting in a car with two men."

"Well, that's not exactly breaking news, now, is it?"

"I don't know, Raymond. It just looked wrong. I had the feeling part of me was driving off with him. A part that wasn't coming back."

He took the paper. From the way he folded it, he was never going to throw it out.

"I didn't want to say anything while you were feeling so miserable."

“Thank you. That was really nice.”

“And I didn’t want you worrying you wouldn’t have a place to stay without Pete. You do, you know. Have a place. It’s free. For as long as you like.”

“Until you rent it out again.”

“Oh, I only did that to bug Pete. It was a game, you know? So he wouldn’t think I’d fallen for him totally.”

He stared down at the paper, worrying one corner. His mouth began to tremble. Suddenly, his whole face crumpled.

“Oh, god, David. What if they have the death penalty down there?”