

**WHERE
ALL
YOU CAN
SEE
IS SKY**

(A NOVEL)



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KNUTE POINT
publishing

This book is a work of fiction, which means that it's a made-up story, so nothing in it should be taken as truth, gospel or otherwise. Some of the places are real and others are not, but all of them are real in my mind, and I hope yours. No zucchinis were harmed in the making of this book. Any resemblance of anything in this story to anything in the real world is entirely coincidental (apart from the things that everyone can access, obviously, like learning how to grow zukes). Or maybe not. I'm no psychologist, but even I know it's impossible to entirely separate the fictional from the real. This might not satisfy you, legally speaking, but it's the best I can offer. Or maybe not. I'm no lawyer.



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Cover and interior design by BvS. The typeface used in the body text is Charter. You'll have to guess the other fonts.

For Rosalee, Nora, and Alida, who made this Algonquin
bedtime tent-story come alive, and for the real AG,
medic, warrior, hero.

Carving is easy—you just go down to the skin and stop.

Michelangelo

Part I: The First Cut

Friday, June 24

(Just Had) the Last Day of School

After the supper dishes had been cleared away and the table wiped and Oma and Opa had made their celebratory cups of herbal tea (the good stuff from that organic place downtown—they had made it to summer too, after all), Jan Geoffrey Shirley dug out his whittling kit and sat back down for the Daily Debrief, or DD. The DD was a set-in-stone family ritual, where each person would talk about how that day had gone. Oma said it reflected Good Family Communication Habits (she had this way of saying things she found important, like every first letter had to be capitalized), though Jan thought it was probably more designed to get the goods out of him than anything else.

And his grandparents were very good at doing just that. By necessity, they had become his guardians when his parents died when he was six months old, but they liked to call the arrangement Second Chance Parenting. All that knowledge and experience was applied with crazy precision, and their parenting skills were epic. They could get truth out of a tree.

Which they would, soon enough.

Jan sighed and, to keep from fidgeting, unrolled his whittling kit, a leather flat with pouches for knives and sandpaper and tied with a leather strap. He took the rough block of basswood in his left hand and his favourite knife in the right and thought about where he could make the first

cut. His vision was to carve a miniature duck decoy that would have no purpose other than being, well, a miniature duck decoy. An odd choice, given that neither he nor anyone in his life were hunters, but he had seen a photograph of a merganser duck and had kind of fallen in love with the bird, which was just ugly enough to be cool.

Thankfully, Oma went first for the DD, which she had been doing lately to get her lack of news out of the way. She talked once again about her job search and how she had made some interesting connections but had no concrete news to share. A few months earlier, due to government funding cuts, she had lost her job as the local school board's special needs coordinator, which was why they had moved from their nice house a few kilometres away to the end unit of a Graham Park rowhouse. Graham Park was a rough place, with noisy neighbours all around and spaces that often filled with sirens.

Predictably, she did not take long, leaving a gap in conversation. Jan studied the basswood and his knife and even a bit of shepherd's pie on the table that had been missed in the after-dinner cleanup.

"Uh, I have some news," Opa said.

Whew, Jan thought. Thank you, Opa.

His grandfather hesitated for an instant, then shared how the people whose living room crown mouldings he was reworking had asked him to do their family room and kitchen as well. He was a carpenter, a really good one, but had been struggling to find enough work since the move. In the old house, the garage had been his workshop, full of lathes and presses and all sorts of woodworking gear. Now he worked out of his van, travelling wherever the work was needed. A crown moulding here, a baseboard there. Whatever it took.

"But that's great news!" said Oma. "Why the hesitation?"

"Well, I didn't want to rub anything in—"

"Pah! Your success is my success is Jan's success, right?"

Her voice was a spark but Jan could see a tiny bit of sadness in Oma's eyes. She was very big on Encouragement And Positive Thinking, but even Jan knew some feelings could not be pushed away so easily. Losing her job had been really hard.

"Well, that's simply super," she said to Opa, reaching across the table and patting his hand.

"Thanks, my love," he said.

He turned his hand over and took hers in, completely surrounding it. He had the largest hands Jan had ever seen. They were calloused and strong, and there were little bits of sawdust caught in the knuckle hairs, which made Jan kind of wish he had his own knuckle hairs, which at his age was, of course, ridiculous. Opa always smelled like cut wood.

Oma smiled at Opa and took her hand back, lifting her tea and blowing steam away. "And now you, Jan. How was your day?"

This was where things really got tricky. The DD was a time for stories and questions, but questions often meant that Oma and Opa had noticed something in Jan's account of his day that Required More Attention. So his usual approach was simply to supply enough positive details to keep them from needing to ask follow-up questions. It was a delicate exercise: too many details could be as concerning as too few.

Today, though, he knew that no matter how many or few bits of information he supplied, there would be a blizzard of follow-up questions. So, after he dutifully recounted the usual last-day-of-school shenanigans (stinky lockers, awkward yearbook comments, barely escaping stampede injury at the final bell, etc.) out came the problematic part of his day, plain and full: that afternoon, just before releasing the students for the summer, his homeroom teacher had given them optional homework. I want you to learn a new skill, Mr. Smith had said. Try

something new! Make something you've never made before! Challenge yourself!

Jan went quiet after delivering the information.

"Optional homework?" Opa said.

"For the whole class."

"Sure, maybe for them, but does he know *you* at all?"

Exactly, Jan thought. Optional was not an option. Who could leave a project unfinished to follow a guy around the entire summer like a moody puppy? Unfinished. The word gave Jan the chills. What you started, you finished. Simple as that.

"He told us it would get us ready for 'a new and unsettling' grade eight environment."

Opa glanced at Oma. "Does the teacher know about, you know..."

"Of course he knows!" Her words came out way too quick and sharp, but she seemed to hear the edge in her voice. "Sorry. That was unkind."

"I forgive you. It's just been so long since we talked about... I just didn't know if his grade seven teachers had the whole story."

"They do."

"Okay."

Where Opa was the handy person, Oma was all about the details. Before moving to the school board, she had been a resource teacher for many years, helping challenged high school kids Find Their Groove. So every year, saying how much she had always appreciated parents who communicated, she made sure the teachers knew the essentials. There was a checklist:

- ✓ Jan's name was pronounced in the Dutch way, where the J sounded like Y and the a in the middle was a bit clipped as it landed halfway between a and o, like in the word Zebra
- ✓ Introverted

- ✓ Both parents dead
- ✓ No siblings
- ✓ Lives with maternal grandparents
- ✓ Needs to keep hands busy

“So what would you like to do?” Oma asked.

“I have no idea,” Jan said.

“Surely you can come up with something.”

Opa nodded at the duck-to-be. “What about your whittling? You, uh, haven’t technically started the project.”

“Yeah, but I’ve whittled before, remember?”

“Right,” Opa said, nodding. “The, uh, snowman. I’d forgotten.”

Sitting on the piano in the living room was Jan’s first attempt at woodcarving, a snowman that had seemed simple in concept but difficult in execution. The whittling had been Opa’s idea; months ago, before they lost the house and the workshop where Opa used to build fine furniture, he had noticed that Jan really calmed down when he watched his grandpa work. So Opa taught him about whittling, supervising Jan’s first efforts and teaching him everything from carving techniques to sharpening the knives with stone. Oma worried about him cutting himself, but he had proved capable and careful, so she had gotten on board. Opa bought him his own set of tools and a nice selection of basswood planks.

The snowman had kept him busy for weeks. After Jan declared it complete, Oma and Opa graciously offered the piano as a place of honour for the misshapen chunk of wood. He tried not to look at it: there were only so many things you could see in a brown lumpy mass that tended to fall on its side.

“Don’t worry about it,” he replied. “I’ll get it done.”

Oma and Opa traded a quick look, one of those ones older people use where they say lots of things with just their raised eyebrows. In this case, he could tell that they

were worried about what offensive carving would next find its way onto the piano.

“Right,” Opa said.

Oma nodded. “Let us know if you need any help.”

“I will.”

“And remember: it’s optional. We don’t mind if this one time you need to take a pass.”

“Okay, Oma. But I won’t.”

“I know.”

Jan waited for the next round of questions, but it never came. Oma and Opa got up, stretched, and went off to do who knew what, leaving Jan alone at the table. He picked up the rough knife, took a deep breath, and carved away a large chunk of wood somewhere near to where the duck’s neck would hopefully be. He used a push-cut so the blade ended up away from all the tender parts Oma worried about when he used the knives.

There, he thought. I’ve started.

Bad News Cocoa

Jan's hands were starting to cramp, so he put the knife and the block down and stood, flexing his fingers to get the blood moving. He yawned, glanced at the clock, and was startled to find that it was well past his normal bedtime. The house was mostly quiet, apart from the distant murmur of Oma and Opa talking in their bedroom. Had they already gone to bed? He bundled up his gear and went into the kitchen for the hand broom and dustpan to clean up the wood shavings, rolling his shoulders against a creeping stiffness.

As he swept (after Safety, immediate cleanup was the other Big Condition that Oma had placed on his whittling. I don't want to find a single sliver. Got it?), his grandparents came into the family room, where the dining table was. They were still dressed in the same clothes, and looked tired.

"I'm on my way to bed, guys," Jan said. "I must've lost track of time. Sorry."

"Before you go, we need to talk about something," Opa said, pulling out the chairs. "Have a seat."

The three of them sat down, with Oma and Opa in their usual spot right beside each other. Jan carefully laid the broom and full dustpan on the table. Oma laid her arms on the table and studied her hands. Opa sat and leaned his long, skinny body back in the chair, frowning at the tiny

creak it made in protest. He folded his hands on his small paunch. They looked so serious.

Jan asked. "What's up? Is everything okay?"

Oma gave Opa a pointed look, which he did not notice for a long moment. When he did, he flinched, as though he had forgotten something vital, his hand coming up to scratch his head right at the boundary between fringe of thinning grey hair and bald crown.

"Right," he said. "On it."

He creaked up from his chair and moved towards the kitchen, laying a warm hand on Jan's shoulder as he passed.

The main floor of the townhouse was mostly open, so from the table, which sat between the kitchen and the family room, Jan could see Opa's back as he filled and switched on the stainless steel kettle. He had untucked his work shirt from his jeans, and the wrinkled tails billowed out at odd angles, making the shirt look too large. He had a drawer full of work shirts in that strange greenish grey you only find in work shirts, and more pairs of jeans than you could count. Down came the tea gear once again, and two of the matched mugs Oma preferred.

"Would you like some honey this time, Honey?" Opa called over his shoulder to Oma.

"Ha ha. No thanks, Sugar."

Jan groaned and rolled his eyes. "You guys are hi-la-rious. Are you sure I need to be here?"

Opa chuckled as he reached up to the cupboard, bringing down a massive Starbucks holiday mug, decorated with pine trees and snowflakes, and a tin of instant cocoa. The sound of the spoon dipping into the mug, once, twice, three times, and the slur of stirring made its way to the table. Jan was instantly on alert. Hot chocolate was a Red Light Food, the worst of the worst, according to the food chart on the fridge. Delivered only after intense begging on

snowy days or brought out for Deep And Meaningful conversations, most of which brought bad news.

“What’s going on, Oma?”

“Let’s wait for your grandfather.”

It had to be bad news. Good news was delivered on the fly. Bad news needed two caring guardians to be delivered properly, one to say the words to the fragile kid, the other to pick up and reassemble the pieces with soothing words and, in extreme circumstances for a guy who was beyond such things, hugs and cuddles.

Still, hot chocolate was almost guaranteed to help. Opa made it so thick with chocolate you could make a whole second mug with what was left on the bottom. And Jan had a strange love for the tiny, dried-out marshmallows buried in the mix that popped to the top like a fleet of lifeboats for ants. Opa came back to the table and Jan took the mug, breathing in some of the sweet steam that did not remotely smell like chocolate, but made his mouth water and reduced whatever was bothering him to a manageable size. It was also way too hot to drink right away, which was a convenient way to make time for serious talks.

“So, lay it on me,” he said, forcing his voice to go low and serious, making his grandparents smile.

Opa went back and retrieved their mugs of tea, and sat. “Well, you know money has been tight since Oma lost her job...”

“And since you lost the workshop and have had to work out of the van,” Jan said.

“Right. That, too.”

“But business is picking up, right?”

“Sure is, and I’m thankful. But not soon enough, unfortunately.”

“Soon enough for what?”

Oma turned her mug around and around until the handle was pointing away from her. “Soon enough to save our trip out west this summer, Jan.”

Jan looked over at Opa, who nodded sadly. His shoulders were slumped, like he had begun to bear the weight of everything bad. Oma was serious, too, her lips twitching, a sign that she was fighting back more tears and just winning the battle. For now.

“We can’t go to Adam’s Lake?”

Opa sighed. “Not this year.”

“But the anniversary... We were going to...”

“I know, kiddo. I’m sorry.”

“Can’t we borrow the money?”

Oma shook her head. “Not for this, no.”

“I can try to find a job.”

“That’s not—”

“No, I’m serious, guys. I can find something in the neighbourhood, you know, for cash.”

“Under the table, you mean,” Opa said, chuckling.

“Exactly. I want to help.”

Oma smiled. “You’re lovely, Jan Geoffrey Shirley. I’m so proud of you.”

She spoke with such fondness and confidence he was filled with hope. Usually, it was bad news when the awkward string of his names came out, but not this time. (Jan was his dad’s name; Geoffrey was Opa’s, which Jan’s mom had insisted on; and Shirley, their family name, was its own mess of problems, always requiring clarification after the inevitable gender and first name confusion.)

“It could totally work. Even Joe Donski mows grass for cash. Why anyone hires that guy, I have no idea, but I’m really nice and kind and I bet people would hire me instead of him.”

Opa glanced at Oma. “Uh, about that...”

Jan groaned. “You didn’t...”

She winced. “Back in April, actually.”

“Now there’s a kid with a vision,” Opa said.

“Ouch, Opa.”

“What can I say? I like a kid with a plan.”

“Double ouch!”

Opa just shrugged.

“You could break contract—this is an emergency.”

“We’re not going to do that, Jan” Oma said quietly, shaking her head. “We made a commitment.”

“Plus, we’d have to buy you all the gear ourselves,” Opa said. “And with the head start he already has...”

“It wouldn’t be enough,” Oma said.

“I’d make it enough! I would!”

“Jan...”

“No, Oma, I could make this work. You guys always tell me I can do anything I set my mind to, and I could do this for us—”

Oma took a hitching breath, sudden enough to cut Jan’s words off, and brought her hand to her mouth. Her eyes filled and spilled over just as Opa’s hand made it to her back for a comfort-rub, like his touch was a kind of permission to cry. She would need it, too, because she rarely cried. She was yoga strong and basketball height and could carry an entire family if she needed to. She would be the first to grab a weapon in the zombie apocalypse and be the first to figure out where you needed to strike to put those walkers down for good. (Movies and TV shows always target the brain, but he would not plan his entire zombie defence on Hollywood’s advice, thank you very much.)

Opa saw it, too. His own eyes got all shimmery and his back rubbing moved wider and deeper. She leaned into him and he held her. “Aw, babe, it’ll be okay.”

“It won’t,” she said, her voice trembling. “The one summer it really matters to be out there, and I can’t make it happen.”

“This is not on you.”

“But it is, Geoff, no matter how we spin it.”

In that moment, Jan was torn between three universes.

First, the immediate disaster of his Oma losing it, the first crumbling of everything certain.

Second, though he knew he should pay more attention to the first, the one he would probably take to bed with him that night was the loss of their annual summer trip out west. Two months of fishing, hiking, and playing in the mountains and forgetting about normal life. Frankly, the idea of trying to keep himself busy here in Graham Park for two whole months was scary. What would he possibly do in a place with so little sky?

Third, there was the anniversary. Every August 31, Jan, Oma, and Opa hiked out to the spot where his parents died to say a few words and clean up the small memorial stone they had erected there. It was probably not the exact spot, but it was as close as could be known, according to the final reports. On that date ten years ago, Amber and Jan Shirley, out hiking a popular trail on their first getaway since Jan was born, had been killed by a grizzly bear, leaving Jan to be raised by Oma and Opa.

“We’re so sorry, Jan,” Oma said.

“Maybe next year...” Opa began, but his voice trailed off at a look from Oma. Do Not Make Promises You Can’t Keep, the look said.

“So that’s it? There’s nothing we can do?”

“Of course we can—we will—do something,” Oma said. “There’s—”

“But it won’t be the same!” Jan stood. “They need us to go there! It’s the only thing—”

He could not finish what he was saying because of a tiny but ferocious itch forming behind his eyes. Then the room began to shimmer and wobble as tears, salty and hot, began to spill out, which just made him even madder because he could not see properly to grab his whittling things like he wanted, banging them together in a show of anger before storming out.

To make up for it, he was briefly tempted to yell at Oma and Opa, maybe even say dark words he was never supposed to say, but he did not (there were Some Words You Can't Take Back). Instead, he knocked his chair over and stomped out and through the kitchen, heavy up the stairs, and slammed the door to his bedroom, which was of course smaller than his old bedroom, with barely enough room for his bed and his desk.

It was so unfair. All of it.

He did not remember much about his parents—he had been too young to form forever memories when they died—but their absence was a constant hole in the fabric of his life. His grandparents still grieved their loss, especially of Amber, their only child. And Jan had resolved that this year, the tenth anniversary, he would do something special. He had not yet begun planning what that could be, but now he wondered how to mark the saddest of anniversaries when he could not be in the last place they had been alive.

He lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, fighting the tears that kept trying to form. The effort was enough to wear him out, and his body shut down, pulling him into sleep before he realized he was fading. He slept in his clothes and did not move until morning.

Saturday, June 25

Now What?

When Emmaline Bonner, his best friend, came over the next morning, she was less than sympathetic when he told her about the cancelled trip. She just rolled her eyes. And she could really roll her eyes. She said it was because her eyes were green, which was super rare in the world of true redheads, or what she called the “Real Ginger Club.”

Jan scowled. “But I won’t get to go to the place where my—”

“Of course I’m sad for you about that,” she said, “but you getting all dramatic about having to stay home for the summer? Sorry, J, but what do you think the rest of us do every year?”

She called him Jay rather than Jan because she decided she should have a version that was all her own. (He did not mind, because you made allowances for BFFs, and because she let him call her Emma even though she insisted everyone else use her full name.) He was also insanely jealous of her middle name, which was super unique, although she rolled her eyes at that, too. Her middle name was Reef, given to her by her Mom, who had left the family a couple years ago to return to her former surfing life in California. (Reef? Honestly, Emma had said on a thousand occasions, how could a parent do that to their kid?)

“But what’s there to do around Graham Park?” Jan asked, kicking at a piece of garden mulch that had escaped the confines of the small garden Opa had not yet had a chance to plant.

“Graham Park? Could you sound any more snobby when you say it?”

“Hey, I—”

“Nope, don’t want to hear it. You need to stop acting like everyone in GP farted at the same time and made you sit in it.”

Jan’s eyes got wide, and he laughed, despite himself. “Sorry. It’s just so different.”

“Your old house wasn’t that far away.”

“Feels like it was.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re here.”

He smiled, a half-smile given when a response is expected but the smiler cannot commit to the full one. He was glad to be closer to her, of course, but being happy to be living in Graham Park? Even though his old house was in the same school catchment as hers, their neighbourhoods had been so different. Not to the degree where he lived in a mansion and she in a cardboard shanty, but the divide felt as wide as the Ottawa Valley.

Truthfully, it still did. He was a detached-one-family-home child, and could not get used to claustrophobic row houses and parking lots and almost postage-stamp lawns. Not to mention the crumbling brick, peeling paint, and cracked pavement. Or the food bank a few units over. Once, he had even heard gunfire. Emma told him it had probably been just an old car backfiring but he did not believe her, and besides, who lets their car get to that level of disrepair, anyhow?

“So what next?”

Emma made a confused face. “What do you mean?”

“What do we do now? I mean, where do we go? What activities do we plan, where—”

“You’re hilarious, J.”

“Wait, what? I am?”

“We don’t have to plan anything.”

“You mean we just wake up every day and wait around without knowing what happens next?”

“Isn’t it awesome?”

“But—”

He fell silent looking at his friend, who sat contentedly, her elbows on her knees and her hands up under her chin, looking down their short front path and across the parking lot beyond. Smiling, of all things. Like weeks of nothingness was the best thing—well, the best nothing—in the world. He did not get it. At Adam’s Lake, Oma and Opa would always have plans lined up for him, whether it was getting out to explore the nearby mountains or create things inside when the wether did not cooperate. He frowned and closed his eyes, once again dropping into that shady place of almost-anger towards the circumstances that had brought him to this here and this now.

Emma moved too fast for him to react. He heard a sigh, and a rustle of her clothing, and the sudden flash of pain as she punched him, hard, on the upper arm. Right where the shoulder muscle wedges into the bicep. The most painful spot.

“Ow! What was that for?”

“Wake up, J.”

“Huh?”

“You’re here, and I know it sucks in all sorts of ways, but I’m here too.”

“I know that.”

“And I’m excited that we get to hang out all summer.”

“Well, I am too—”

“Yeah, but, see, you’re not. Not really. You’re thinking that nothing worse could happen to you and that you miss everything you’re used to, and that hurts my feelings.”

“Punching me doesn’t help.”

“Right. Violence doesn’t solve anything.”

“I’m so confused.”

Emma made an exasperated sound and stood, placing her hands on her hips, looking down at Jan as he rubbed his shoulder. “Look, I’m sorry. But I saw your face and it felt like you were sad about having to spend time with me, and I thought, No, Emmaline, that isn’t right, that’s not fair, and the next thing I knew I was trying to find your Charlie horse.”

“You found it.”

“Of course I did. Ginger got combat skills. You needed to wake up.”

He had the urge to grumble about bruises, hurt feelings, already being awake, et cetera, but Emma’s appearance gave him pause. She was different somehow. An instant later he realized that she had changed her clothing for the summer. Not changed like a person does in the morning to have fresh things to wear, but like she had transformed for the new season ahead. Gone was the fitted, athletic wear she wore at school and for all her sports (she was big into technical wear) and arrived was a pair of frayed jean shorts and a loose, faded t-shirt without a single sports logo in sight. Instead, it read,

**DON'T
TELL ME
TO
SMILE**

And she had flip flops on her feet, not runners. Hang out clothing. Lazy. Summer wear.

“I like your shirt,” Jan said.

She looked down like she needed to read it again and smiled. “Cool, right? Dad gets a service discount at the sports store where they make uniforms and stuff, and knows I have a lot to say, so...”

“Girl power?”

A giggle. “Right on, sister.”

“No sports for you this summer?”

She shrugged. “I have soccer a couple times a week, but it’s just rec league to keep fit.”

“Em?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I ask you something, and can you promise not to punch me again?”

“Nope, can’t promise anything. You can still ask, though.”

Jan hesitated for an instant (the spot on his arm still ached) but then explained in detail the ways in which Oma and Opa kept their summers at Adam’s Lake fun and full, and how he honestly did not know how he could keep busy.

“So is there a question in my immediate future?” she asked.

“Uh, can you make sure not to go anywhere? I don’t know anyone else around here.”

“Sure you do. Lots of kids from the school live in Graham Park.”

“Yeah, but they’re not my friends. You are.”

“The best one you’ll ever have, J, and don’t forget it.”

“I won’t.”

She sat down again and brought her knees up and wrapped her arms around them like she had suddenly developed a chill. “Well, I’ll try my hardest, Jan Shirley. Best I can do. How about that?”

“Great.”

“Ginger doesn’t do promises. They just get broken.”

He was not the only one who had occasionally had his entire life pulled out from underneath. Emma’s dad was an Air Force engineer who specialized in helicopter engines and they had moved around a lot. She said that sometimes she felt like a suitcase that never got unpacked. Then her mom left, and now it was just the two of them, living in an

old house the government had bought fifty years ago, when the nearby military base was active and Graham Park was a regular neighbourhood. Both of them knowing that new orders could come in at any time, and off they would go.

Maybe nothing is really certain for anyone, he thought. And maybe he was not the only one whose family tree was not the shape you expect from trees. Or families.

"I'm glad you're here, and I'm excited about the summer," he said, then held up his hands, palms toward her, when he saw her looking at him sidelong. Suspicious. "No, for real."

She nodded and smiled. "Sorry again for punching you."

"Maybe I earned it. Just this once, though."

"Okay."

Behind them, the front door opened with a clunk and a cracking sound. Opa came out and knelt, peering at the weather-stripping on the bottom of the door that kept drafts out in the winter. It was old rubber, hard and crumbling. Opa mumbled something about nothing staying the way it should be and how he had just returned from the hardware store and of course the weather stripping would give out right then.

"Hi, Mr. Shirley," Emma said.

Opa looked up, surprised, like he had not seen them sitting right there when he came out. "Hello, Emmaline. And I told you you can just call me Geoff."

She shook her head. "Thank you, sir, but no thanks. My dad would freak if I called adults by their first names."

"Old school politeness, eh?"

"Totally. He thinks I'm in the air force."

"Nothing wrong with good manners."

Jan pointed at the strip of rubber that had come loose, split outwards like a faded black splinter. "Will you fix that now? We can help."

"Not right now, no. Besides, this is more of a one-person job."

Jan sighed. "All right."

"However, I was going to do some gardening. Picked up a few things to clean up the side yard and see what we're up against. Maybe grow some herbs or something simple this season. Want to help?"

Jan and Emma looked at each other and then at Opa and said they would. They walked to Opa's van and helped him carry a few basic gardening tools and bags of soil to the side of the house. In the fenced-in yard, against their house, there was a wild jungle of overgrown plants and weeds that hinted at a past life as a garden. The three of them spent the rest of the morning clearing the ground. In the end, they uncovered a bed of good soil lined with old paving stones that someone had once cared for. Opa was pleased, upgraded his plans to grow some late-season vegetables, and even wondered aloud if they could afford a small prefabricated garden shed where they could store the garden tools.

Opa removed his gloves, put his hands in the small of his back, and stretched with a groan. "Don't ever get old, you two."

"You're not old, Opa."

"Says you. Will you stay for lunch, Emmaline?"

"Sure!"

"Great. I'll go in and whip something up."

Emma and Jan went over to the tap and washed up, the dirt almost peeling from their hands (and Emma's flip-flopped feet) like a new second skin. As they stood in the sunshine, shaking the drops from their hands and enjoying the warmth, Emma sighed.

"Too bad," she said, "that we'll never find anything to do this summer."

"Ha, ha."

Jan reached down and tossed a clump of garden dirt at her leg, which just made his hands and her leg dirty again, so they had to go back to the tap and wash up for a second

time, which took a lot longer, because this time they couldn't stop laughing.

Monday, June 27

Structured

Jan got up early. Oma was already at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and working her laptop. She looked up, smiled, and wished him a good morning, then went back to her work. It was good to see her focused again, but he did not comment; Opa had told him to avoid the topic and Just Be Supportive. Right after losing her job, she had been aimless for a long time, wearing her PJs at all hours, sleeping in, acting perpetually sad and watching too much TV even though she always said it Rots Your Brain.

A couple weeks before, she had announced that she had decided to start looking for work again. She set her alarm early, showered, ate breakfast, and dressed in clean clothes. This chick has had enough feeling sorry for herself, thank you very much, she had said. She treated her job search like a job in itself. Well, a part time job. She would work until the early afternoon then break for the day. Late afternoons were for reading and yoga and running, and evenings for dinner and family time.

Jan laid his whittling gear on the opposite side of the table, got out his cereal, milk, and poured himself some OJ. He glanced at the clock and frowned. He wondered when his body would start letting him sleep in, which was supposed to be one of the best parts of summer.

“So you said this one was a kind of duck, right?” Oma said just as he was about to lever a spoonful of Shreddies into his mouth.

“Sorry? Tuck what where?”

“Ha, ha. I’m talking about your project.” She nodded at the rough-cut block of basswood.

He yawned, shook his head, spooned the cereal into his mouth, and replied as best he could around the food. “No talk now. Jan still sleeping.”

Oma made a face at his attempt to speak. “Gross.”

The word sleeping had given him the most trouble. Bits of masticated wheat and droplets of milk now littered the table. He took another bite, washing it down with a big gulp of OJ. Oma looked on with increasing but amused horror at this complete lack of table manners (he may have played it up a bit, enjoying the sparkle in Oma’s eyes). This went on for a few more bites and drinks before Oma held up her hands.

“Okay, stop,” she said. “For the love of all that’s good and decent, stop. We raised you better than this.”

“Big day ahead. Must get calories.”

“So your plan is to whittle all day?”

“Not all day. Emma’s coming over later.”

Oma folded her arms, sat back, and nodded. “Good.”

She was clearly glad that Emma lived so close by. For weeks after the move, when Jan could still smell how different the new house smelled compared to their old place, there had been a number of late-night DM’s (DM, or Deep and Meaningful, was the spontaneous version of the DD). Oma and Opa had thought he was asleep, but it had taken him a long time to adjust, and most nights he stared at the ceiling (which he could see really clearly because GP had a lot more street lights to bleed through the curtains) for what felt like hours. They had been worried about him and how he was coping with the move. Emma’s name had come up a few times in those talks, with his grandparents

unanimously agreeing that she was A Saving Grace In All Of This. They said they had bought the town house in Graham Park because there had been limited downscaling options in his school's catchment, but sometimes he wondered if they had moved here just so he could have a friend nearby.

On one hand, if it was at all true, he was thankful. A close friend is a very good thing. On the other, it was a lot of friendship pressure on top of all the newness.

"Do you need me to plan some things so you and Emma can—"

"No thanks, Oma. We'll figure it out."

"Really?"

Jan smiled. "I know, I know, it's so unlike me."

"You're not wrong."

"Besides, I have this—" he held up the wood, "— if I need some Structured Activity Time."

"Hearing those words is reassuring, kiddo."

"I know, Oma. Busy Hands, Healthy Life, right?"

Oma smiled and shook her head in mock disapproval of his own mocking tone. It was nice to see her playful again.

"It's a merganser, by the way," he said.

"A merg—"

"A kind of duck. Big. With a cool crest of feathers at the back of the head."

She nodded. "Oh, okay. Right."

"No one hunts them. I like that."

"So it's a non-decoy decoy."

"Exactly!"

Oma smiled and went back to her computer, its screen reflecting blue in her glasses. He finished the last few bites and his juice, brought his things to the sink and wiped up his mess, and set to working on the merganser. By the time Opa came down, still dressed in his nighttime uniform of wrinkled, faded boxer shorts and an ancient, frayed

Algonquin College t-shirt, Jan's pile of shavings covered the table in front of him.

Opa stopped when he saw his two favourite people silently working away at the table and gave a kind of sappy smile. Opa could get so emotional about the smallest things, Jan knew, even laptops and woodcarving and early mornings that had begun before he was even awake.

How Hard Could it Be?

Emma finally came by about noon. Jan had been on pins and needles for the last hour, wondering when she would decide to come, if at all. Despite his best intentions, after breakfast he had only been able to whittle for slightly more than an hour before the ache in his hands from the constant effort had become unbearable. Still sore from the other day, he supposed. Oma and Opa had disappeared to their own routines, too. Opa had gone to his jobsite, a large home over in Rockcliffe, and Oma had taken her laptop into the study and closed the door.

Emma knocked and went right into the house as soon as the door was opened. “Hey. What’s up?”

“You’re late.”

“Real Gingers are never late.”

“Em—”

“We never set a time, did we?”

“But you said you’d come over, and we could—”

“I’m here, aren’t I? This is what summer is all about. No one watches the time.”

“I do!”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Clearly.”

She then proceeded to turn her back on him and walk into the kitchen, leaving him standing in the front hall with his mouth open. He followed, and discovered her standing in front of the open fridge, reaching in for leftover

containers, which she opened and sniffed and made faces at before reaching for the next.

“No food at your place?”

“Plenty. My dad loves to cook.”

“So why are you digging in our fridge?”

“Because it’s not mine.”

“Have you had anything to eat today?”

“Of course I did, silly! Breakfast. Now it’s lunch time. Oh, what’s this?”

She brought out a large round container and opened it. Her eyebrows raised and she held it out for Jan to identify its contents, looking hopeful. Inside was a medley of lentils, rice, and various pastas, topped by a sprinkling of crispy onions. Their smell filled the kitchen, making his stomach growl, a clear reminder that it was indeed lunch time. He told her to bring it over to the counter and took out two more containers, bringing them over to where Emma stood, shifting from foot to foot.

“Well?” she asked with an exasperated tone.

“Well, what?”

“Are you going to tell me what this stuff is?”

“Sure I will...” He paused, smiling a little as she rolled her eyes, savouring her impatience. “...precisely when I mean to.”

“Ah, yes, the summer comedian. Maybe I should punch you in the shoulder again.”

“Easy now,” he said. “It’s koshary. A family favourite.”

“Never heard of it.”

Then he opened the other two containers, one filled with a tomato sauce and another with a lemon-garlic liquid, and described how everything was combined into a fantastic mix of starchy, tomatoey, garlicky deliciousness. He shared what he had been told, that koshary was an Egyptian dish that his dad loved and brought into the family. He had a momentary rush of sadness as he spoke—it had been a long time since he had really thought about

the food, which they made every so often—but coughed and told Emma to get out a couple of bowls to hide it.

“Your dad was Egyptian? I didn’t know that.”

Emma clunked the bowls down, and Jan began to spoon koshary into them, topping each with a crown of the tomato sauce and a sprinkling of garlic-lemon. “No, he wasn’t. Oma and Opa said he spent some time in a refugee camp there after leaving where he was from.”

“And that was—?”

“We don’t know, not exactly. Mom knew, but they never told Oma and Opa.”

“Wasn’t that hard for them?”

“Big time. Still is, especially in the summer.”

“What about his—their—things? You know, the stuff they left? After they, uh—”

Her voice trailed off when she seemed to realize that there might be Words You Do Not Casually Mention. Awkward. Jan shook his head as he placed the bowls in the microwave, side by side, and turned it on. The kitchen filled with the low hum of the microwave. Emma moved around, opening cupboards and checking out their contents, familiar as a queen bee in her own hive. When the food was warmed, they brought their dishes to the table and ate, Jan carefully watching Emma’s reaction as she took her first bite.

She noticed. “It’s good. Really good.”

“Right?”

They ate in mostly silence, apart from occasional bursts of talking. Though it was good that she was enjoying the food, watching her enjoy a dish that had become part of his family’s core history was unsettling, too. Like he had let out a bit of their collective blood and did not know exactly how much.

Jan only knew a smattering of details about his dad. He had fled a civil war and lived in Egypt for a time, until migrating on foot through Europe and eventually settling in

Holland, working hard to reclaim his career as a physiotherapist, which he had been before fleeing. That was where he had met Jan's mom, a doctor, at a medical conference for bone injuries and rehabilitation. Love followed, then marriage, then a baby boy they christened Jan. A baby boy who had his dark hair and broad shoulders, her blue eyes, and a skin tone that blended both of his parents'. Darker than light, but lighter than dark.

"Wow, J. You've been holding out on me. Make sure you tell me next time you have this stuff. It's delish."

"You'll be burping garlic for a couple of days."

"Worth it. Ginger has a new fave food."

"Glad you like it."

They got up to bring their dishes into the kitchen. Before he could open the dishwasher to load it, Emma had begun to fill the sink, grabbing the dish soap and scrubber from the cupboard below with a familiarity that made him smile. He playfully objected, telling her about this new technology called dishwashers, but she insisted, telling him she and her dad did not have one.

"Anyway, it's the least I can do," she said, "for changing my life with that dish—kombu—"

"Koshary."

"Right. That." She shook her head as he moved to grab a dish towel. "I got this. Relax. Besides, I always let the dishes drip-dry."

He leaned against the counter and watched her work. She was so focused, it was like she had forgotten he was there. Her forearms were covered in suds, and her tongue stuck out from the corner of her mouth. With a practiced motion, she plunged each dish into the water, scrubbed, then placed it in the empty sink beside. After all the dishes were washed, she rinsed them with a thin stream from the tap and carefully stacked them in the dish rack. Quick as anything. Then she put the scrubber away and turned to him, folding her arms.

She asked, “Do you miss them?”

“My parents?”

“I know you never really knew them, but...”

He was a little disoriented by her shift towards the serious, but he nodded. “I guess I do. It’s like something is always gone, you know? Oma and Opa are good about remembering, and—”

Emma’s eyes suddenly opened, her eyebrows raised, and she smacked herself on the forehead, hard enough to make him flinch. “Oh, my goodness! I forgot to tell you! This is the best!”

Jan had to keep from laughing out loud (Real Gingers DO NOT like to be laughed at) at the real Emmaline storming back into the conversation. She was rolled eyes and stubbornness and interruptions and Big Ideas in one package. Her questions about his parents had been more sensitive than she usually tried for.

“Tell me what?”

“The GP summer fair!”

“I don’t know what that is.”

Emma went into the details in her overexcited manner, which involved random facts and out-of-order times and days and self-corrections, all tossed together like a confusing salad. Her brain was already at the finish line while her mouth and body were still scrambling, out of breath, along the track, so Jan just tried to hold on as best he could; she had to slow down eventually. He managed to grab hold of a few details: junk mail pamphlet left in her mailbox, fair at the end of the summer, games and bouncy castles, and the best tofu hot dogs she had ever tasted which was a miracle because tofu dogs were gross. And something about vegetables.

“We’ll grow them!”

“Grow what?”

“Our entry into the contest, obviously.”

“What contest?”

“The biggest vegetable contest. Weren’t you listening?”

“I was, but—” There was no real way to explain herself to herself, so he just moved on. “You want to grow vegetables?”

“Yes!”

“Here?”

“In your Opa’s garden! It’s perfect, right?”

Jan rubbed his forehead, spreading his thumb and index finger to massage above his eyes, trying to push the confusion to the side. Too much, too fast. He had the sudden urge to grab his whittling things and sit down at the table, focus on grain and cut for a while. You need to get your head straight, am I right? Opa would have said. Speaking of Opa, if Jan was understanding his friend, she wanted to grow something for some contest at the end of the summer in his garden, which they had just helped him clear, and for which he had Big Plans. Plans they would have to convince him to abandon if they were to take over his space, which he was obviously excited about, which would mean stress and disappointment, which he would probably hide for Jan’s sake, because Opa was kind and supportive, and...

“J? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I just need a moment to—Opa will be so—I don’t want to take advantage—his garden is—”

“Slow down. Take a breath.”

Now that was funny. Her telling him to slow down. He snorted, the sound harsh in the stillness and landing right between Emma’s eyes. She frowned.

“Sorry, Em, it’s just a lot to process.”

“We’ll ask his permission, obviously. And we’re not taking the whole garden over.”

“Assuming he says yes.”

“Do you think he will?”

He nodded, realizing that Opa was probably still hurting about the other night, delivering the news about staying in

Ottawa over the summer. Jan sensed that this was one of those moments where, if he was one of those kids who liked to trick their elders, that he could get away with an awful lot right now. And the thought made him feel bad, because taking advantage of his grandparents had never been an entry in his playbook. Besides, growing vegetables? What the heck did he or Emma know about it? This would have to be handled very delicately.

“Leave it with me, okay? I’ll ask him.”

“When?”

“Tonight. If he’s in the right mood.”

“Okay. Cool. Lots of kids enter, so it can’t be too hard, right?”

Jan knew what Oma would have to say about that. Those sound like Famous Last Words, my friend. Where you say something confidently and the end result gets you in trouble. “Uh, have you ever grown vegetables?”

“Nope. You?”

He shook his head, then his eyes brightened. “Wait.”

“What, you’re suddenly remembering a past life as a gardener?”

“Ha, ha. No, this could be our skill!”

“Our what now?”

“For Smith and his summer assignment! We could research, make a logbook, write up a final report...”

“No way, friend. In no way will Ginger spoil her vacation by doing schoolwork. Voluntary school work. In the summer.” She shuddered theatrically.

“Gotta do it right...”

“Uh, it was optional, remember?”

He snorted. “Meh. There’s no such thing as optional.”

“You’re so weird.”

“True story.”

...but Don't Call Me Shirley

An hour later, Jan and Emma still stood next to the freshly-cleared garden, talking about what they might grow, and where, and how they might do it, even though they had no experience with such things. It was just brainstorming, based on little more than summer faith, but it was still fun to imagine. The garden was soft and dark from Opa's work on the weekend. Transformed. He had turned the new soil into the old, hard ground, changing it into a spot where you could imagine things growing. A couple of cowbirds strutted around, pecking at the worms only they could hear just beneath the surface.

"The garden looks bigger today," Emma said. "Can you believe we did this?"

"Opa did most of the work."

"True, but from now on, that'll be up to us."

"Hold on, Em. I think we'll only need a small part of the garden."

"But—"

"Do you really think Opa will be cool with us taking over the whole thing?"

She fell silent and folded her arms, scowling at the reality of her over-ambitious ambitions. "You're probably right."

“I’m totally right. And don’t sound so disappointed about it. Even non-Gingers have good ideas once in a while.”

“Once in a rare while, maybe—”

The sound of a kid-sized fist knocking on big wood interrupted Emma’s words. They turned towards the sound. Standing in the open gate, holding a floppy sheath of goldenrod copy papers, was Joe Donsky. Jan could feel the excitement of the moment whooshing out of the yard. Joe was the biggest kid in their class, tall and good-looking and strong and super smart and involved in everything you would expect from someone like that. Sports. Clubs. Even the math squad. Parents and teachers alike loved him, completely unaware of the torment he rained down on almost everyone else in school, boy and girl alike.

“Hi, girls,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“You need new material, Donsky,” Emma said, rolling her eyes.

“Nope. If a dude’s got a girly name, it’s my responsibility to make fun of him.”

Jan shook his head. The guy thought that being called a girl was an insult. That he was attempting to mock a family name? Even more silly. Jan had simply been given his mom’s family name rather than his dad’s, which was common in the part of the world where his dad came from. Strange to an outsider, perhaps, but enough to base an entire insult system on? Not hardly.

Emma, whose mom had instilled a strong sense of gender justice in her daughter before leaving, simply disliked Joe’s total lack of gender sensitivity. And was not shy about it. “Genderist pig.”

Joe stepped through the gate. “Ha! Emmaline learned a new word! I’m impressed.”

“What do you want?” Jan asked.

Joe held up his papers, which were decorated with text and clipart leaves. “Came by to leave a flyer for fall cleanup.”

“Already?” Emma asked.

“Always one step ahead, that’s me.”

“Go away,” Jan said. “This is private property.”

“This is private property,” Joe said in a mocking falsetto. “I have permission to be here, dummy. I cut the grass, remember?”

Jan groaned. Joe was right. Like many GP row-homes, they had a tiny lawn, and Jan had to admit it almost made sense for Oma and Opa to have signed up so eagerly in the spring. Joe was proactive about advertising and priced his services strategically: people would rather spend five bucks a week than invest in all the gear needed for mowing and trimming and raking. As a result, Joe had cornered this end of GP, and he knew it.

He smirked. “Yep, you’ll be seeing a lot of me, especially now that you’re stuck in GP for the summer.”

“Wait. How’d you hear that?”

Joe lifted his chin at Emma. “Her dad told me when I went by earlier.”

“You went to my house?!” Emma said, fuming.

“Of course I did. I’m a businessman.”

“What did he say—”

“Oh, he didn’t want my services, but he was excited to tell me you were here. She’s at Jan’s house! You should go play! He snorted. “Play? What am I, eight?”

Emma glared at him, looking ready to find his Charlie Horse, too.

“Anyhow, off to make money,” Joe said.

“Don’t bother,” Jan said. “I can take care of our property.”

“Sure you can. Your grandparents can spend all that money so you can prove how manly you are.”

Jan found himself speechless at how precisely Joe had targeted the heart of things. Emma, too.

Joe noticed. Before Jan could react, he actually reached out and patted Jan's cheek. Once. Twice. A third insulting time. "You're adorable, Jan Shirley."

While Jan fumed, Joe chortled to himself, turned away, and went to the door. As he rang the doorbell, he turned his face towards them, winked, and blew a kiss. By the time Oma opened the door, Joe had switched himself into Entrepreneur Mode, all smiles and I-stand-up-straight-you-can-trust-me, and had a flyer ready for her. Jan and Emma could not hear the words, but Joe had to be delivering some smooth, rehearsed spiel designed to charm the leaves from his potential customers. Oma laughed at a bit of Joe's prepared humour, and even lifted her hand out towards his head, like she was about to tousle his hair, before placing it on her chest and laughing again.

"Wow, J, he's really good," Emma said, whistling. "She's eating out of his hand."

Jan wanted nothing more than to march over to the door and break up the happy little reunion with some choice words, but his feet remained rooted in place. (Or, as Joe might say, Got some nasty roots there, little lady! I can take care of them for you. Wouldn't want to trip and fall on your pretty face!) But he would have had to do it alone: Emma, caught between being visibly steamed and her reluctant admiration, did not move from her spot either.

Then Joe and Oma shook hands. "Thanks, Mrs. Shirley! I appreciate your business. See you Wednesday for your regular mowing!"

Joe walked away, having closed the deal. Which meant he would not only be around at least once a week for the rest of the summer, he'd be there in the fall, too. Jan felt himself dissolve and soak into the ground underneath him (slowly, of course—after all, the dirt here was full of clay).

Tuesday, June 28

Slots

Jan had chickened out. He had wanted to ask Opa about the garden when his grandfather got home last night, but had not had the heart. Opa had walked in with stooped shoulders and shadowed eyes, exhausted, and had responded to Oma's questions with single word answers. Jan gave him space, because it was obvious that Opa had had One of Those Days, where he missed his workshop and his fine woodworking so much it stole his fire.

Jan had also not been able to confront Oma about Joe. Almost as soon as Opa had taken off his work boots, she had gushed to him about Joe's politeness and independence and his fabulous rates. Even an exhausted Opa had shared her enthusiasm, leaving no room for Jan's plan to uncover Joe's bullying and deviousness as the reason they should not trust him. In truth, he had no way to prove anything. Every kid knew that feeling: the horrible things that happened but left no marks or evidence of any kind, the loneliness of one's word against another.

Jan had eaten his dinner in silence, somehow made it through the DD without sparking a formal investigation about why he had Suddenly Had A Case Of The Grumpies, then whittled until bedtime, a tiny thundercloud following him around the house.

He felt a little better this morning, though.

Opa looked better, too. He smiled at Oma when he came down, giving her a peck on the cheek and a nice side-squeeze as she worked on her laptop, and sat next to Jan at the table. Jan waited for whatever show of affection Opa would lay on him (kisses on the top of his head, like he was a toddler, were THE WORST), but Opa just patted him on the shoulder then poured himself a bowl of Shreddies. He tucked in with gusto. The two guys ate quietly for a few minutes.

Finally, Opa leaned back and stretched. "So what's on tap for today, Jan?"

"No big plans, Opa."

Opa chuckled. "Ah, summer, I miss thee."

"And you?"

"Same old, same old. Though I might go to the garden centre after work to pick up some seeds for the garden. Want to come?"

"Yeah!"

Well, how about that? Jan thought, floored by surprise. All his worry and wondering about the right time to ask had been for nothing. Turned out that Opa was going to provide an opening all along, making it just so easy for Jan to jump right in.

"I thought you might," Opa said.

"You did?"

"Your Oma saw you and Emma out in the garden yesterday. She said you looked like you had some ideas."

So Opa's keen perception was not purely of his own making after all. "When did she tell you?"

"We do have a life after you go to bed, you know."

"Right."

"So is there something you want to ask me?"

Feeling very much like yet another aspect of his summer was out of his control, Jan took a deep breath and explained about the end-of-summer fair, the largest vegetable contest, and how it all fit into Mr. Smith's

assignment. When he got to the part about the garden, Opa shaved down his expectations (well, Emma's, really), explaining that he too had vegetable plans, and offered an even smaller portion of the garden than Jan expected. It was still way better than nothing, though. Just as he was about to ask Opa's advice about what he and Emma might grow, Oma looked up from her screen.

"Actually, Geoff, speaking of plans," she said, "tonight won't work."

"Why not, my love?"

Oma did not reply, she just closed her laptop and brought her coffee cup to the sink, her back to the room. Opa watched her with his head tilted, trying to work out what she had been getting at. She turned and came back, untying her long hair and heaping it on top of her head in a bun, and leaned in to whisper in Opa's ear as she secured it with an elastic. Their two heads remained close for a few long moments. Opa's eyes brightened and he smiled.

He turned to Jan and shrugged. "Sorry, kiddo, but I have to take a rain check. I totally forgot about Date Night."

Jan groaned. "Can't you guys just do it another—"

"Nope," Opa said. "It's a Slot."

Slots were the word Oma and Opa used when they planned Quality Time, whether a DM, DD, or a family picnic. And they were sacred. When something got set as a Slot, everything got scheduled around it. Date Night Slots, though less frequent than, say, DDs, came by often enough and were immovable enough that Jan let his objection drop. (Slots being sacred did not mean, however, that he ever got to set them.)

"Fine," Jan said with a sigh. "In or out?"

"In tonight," Oma said. "I borrowed a DVD from the library. We'll get an upstairs pizza for you."

When he was younger, they would bring in a babysitter (a neighbourhood teen who spent all her time on her phone and popped her gum a lot) but now they just

disappeared into the basement TV room and closed the door, telling Jan that he was to feed and entertain himself and put himself to bed and never, ever to interrupt unless the House Was On Fire or the Sky Threatened To Fall. Hence, the “upstairs pizza.”

Jan sighed again (maybe adding a tiny bit of extra volume for effect), took his last bite of cereal, and rose to bring his dishes to the sink.

“Hold on a moment, grumpy-pants,” Opa said between bites. “How about you pick up the seeds for me from the garden centre? It would save me a trip.”

“How would I do that?”

“Hmm. I heard a rumour, something about a city full of buses and trains...?”

“Ha, ha.”

“No, really. I think you could handle a mission like this. Especially if Emma goes, too. What do you think, Jen?”

“Emmaline,” Oma said. “Don’t let her hear you say Emma.”

“Oh. Right.”

Oma and Opa had met Emma for the first time slightly more than two years earlier, on Jan’s birthday. Oma had taken a half day off, and they had walked over to the school to surprise Jan at the bell so they could take him out to celebrate. Emma had been new to the school, and she and Jan had been paired together for a science project and became fast friends. When he introduced her to Oma and Opa, he had called her Emma, and Oma had held out a hand. Nice to meet you, Emma, she said. Emma had tilted her head. I’m sure Some Girls would be all right with shortening their names, Mrs. Shirley, but I prefer Emmaline, where -line rhymes with fine,” she said, with the emphasis on line, please.

“Taking the bus could work,” Oma said. “But only if Emmaline goes along.”

Opa smiled and looked at Jan. “What do you say? Up for the challenge?”

“I think so...?”

“Oh, I know you can. I’ll give you a list of seeds. And you can pick out a good pair of gardening gloves for yourself.”

“And for Emma? Her dad doesn’t garden.”

“Sure.”

“Don’t forget your phone this time, Jan,” Oma said.

He groaned. His was an old school flip phone given to him for emergencies, with no data or anything remotely resembling what a phone was supposed to do. Even texting Emma was a chore, with multiple taps on each number key to accomplish a single letter. Took forever.

“Can I bring yours? It has Maps and transit info.”

Oma hesitated for an instant, then nodded. She walked over to the shelf at the side of the kitchen where her and Opa’s phones rested on the charging mat. The tablet Jan used for homework assignments was there, too, ready for use (although maybe not for a couple of months, now that it was summer) but sitting cold and dark. Oma called the spot Charging Central, and all devices were to be kept there overnight, part of her quest to keep blue light from their bedrooms and ruining their sleep.

“Call the landline if things get too crazy,” she said.

“You mean if things go bad.”

“You’ll be fine. Be careful with it. Oh, and don’t answer any calls—let them go right to voicemail, okay?”

“Fine.”

Opa picked up his own phone, which was clad in a massive black rubber bumper, and checked the time. He groaned and said that it was time to hit the salt mines. Before he went out to get changed and load his tools into the van (he brought them inside every night to keep them safe from window-smashing thieves) he grabbed a small

pad of paper and jotted down a few items, then handed Jan the list.

Jan looked down. Basil, cilantro, kale, lettuce, green beans... "Uh, zucchini?"

Opa smiled. "All of those things can be planted now and will grow quickly enough to give us a harvest.

"Sure, but zucchini?"

"I have a story to tell you about that..."

Jan's eyes widened hopefully.

"...but not now. Right now Opa's gotta go make the bacon."

Oma threatened to throw her pencil at him. "You know I hate that saying. And everything it implies."

"Whoops. Sorry."

"I forgive you. This time."

Opa laughed and went over for a kiss. Oma smiled and gave him an extra long hug. They could act so weird. On his way out, Opa gave Jan a hug, too, but not quite as hard as Oma's.

"A word of Life Advice, Mr. Jan: keep the women in your life happy."

"Right. You were going to tell me about the zucchini...?"

"Nope. Wasn't."

"Opa...!"

"Further advice: patience is a virtue."

"Ha, ha."

"Love you, kiddo."

"Love you too."

Beeswax

Leaving GP was, in a word, delicious. The day was warm and pleasant, people smiled a lot, and the grass and trees were that curiously intense green you can only see when you embark on an adventure. When Jan had called Emma and told her about the plan, she had gotten dressed and appeared on his doorstep almost before he disconnected the call. (Which was no small thing: Emma had still been in her PJs, deciding whether to get dressed at all for the day.)

The potential for getting away had made everything easier, even Oma's lengthy list of Safety Tips and Things To Remember, which he had to repeat back to her like a toddler:

- deep-dive instructions on picking up transit tap-cards at the drug store and how to use them;
- reminders about sunscreen and skin cancer, then getting slathered in white SPF60, which always made him look a little like a zombie;
- making him promise about thirty times to call if they got in even the tiniest bit of trouble;
- the biggest indignity of all, Oma entering Jan's fingerprint into her phone so he could unlock it, but then watching her set up a fortress of parental controls. He could open two apps: map and phone, and that was it.

Emma had arrived in the middle of Oma's list, and had even put on a layer of sunscreen herself, which smudged white on the navy blue collar of today's t-shirt, which read,

I
WILL
OPEN
MY
OWN
DOORS

As they walked away from the house, Emma laughed about the Granny Lock on the phone. "Too bad. There are a few things I was dying to order online." Her voice as sarcastic as the eye-roll she delivered on cue. "Why do adults think all we want to do as soon as they turn their backs is get in trouble?"

"Because we do? A lot?"

"Only statistically. You and I are obviously the exception."

Jan shrugged. "She's never let me use her phone before...well, she has, but only if she was looking over my shoulder."

"See? Zero trust."

He rolled his own eyes this time. "Sure, Em."

She made an exasperated sound, somewhere between a growl and a groan. "Can't you just play along? We're out and free, so we're supposed to be all Parents Suck and rebellious and whatnot."

"But I don't have parents..."

That stopped her in mid-step, and she brought a hand to her mouth, horrified. "Ach, Emmaline, way to put your foot in it. I'm so sorry, Jan, I—"

Then she saw his smirk, closed her mouth, and glared at him with her hands on her hips.

“Gotcha,” he said.

Sure, the truth of her comment had stung for a millisecond, but after that, the opportunity to mess with her had been too great to pass up.

“That was cooold, Jan Shirley. Yet very well delivered.”

“Thank you.”

“Impressive, even. As such, I’ve decided to be only half-angry with you.”

“I can live with that.”

The pharmacy was air-conditioned to Arctic temperatures, raising the gooseflesh on their arms and legs. They shivered their way to the cash area and asked for two transit cards. The older woman behind the counter was visibly pleased to be helping two young people out on their own. She wore a blaze-red uniform t-shirt, awkwardly emblazoned with SAVE TODAY ONLY! She narrated every step, her voice rising up and down in that dramatic way you reserve for babies. After Jan paid, she actually came out of her cash station to hand them their tap-cards and receipt. “There you go, kids. Have fun, you two!”

Emma, visibly irked at the treatment, lifted her chin at the lady’s shirt. “Ma’am, why should we only save today? Aren’t all the others worth saving?”

“The other what?”

“The other days, of course.”

The woman glanced down and her grin faded. “Very funny, young lady.”

“I thought so,” Ema said.

Outside, as the day’s warmth soaked back into their bones, they walked to the bus stop.

“That was weird,” Jan said.

“I know, right? Who talks like that?”

In the shelter, they sat down on the uncomfortable seats and watched for the bus through the filthy glass. The maps app said it was late but should be arriving in seven minutes, the numbers angry and red. Jan and Emma fell

into a mesmerized silence as they watched distant traffic form itself into car and truck shapes.

Movement at the nearby intersection caught Jan's eye, as a kid on a BMX raced through on a yellow, making a few impatient motorists stomp on their brakes and honk their horns. The kid laughed his way through and, as he drew closer, Jan's heart sank as he recognized the daredevil who had been flirting with a very unpleasant end.

It was Joe. He skidded to a stop in front of the shelter. "What's up, ladies?"

"What do you want?" Emma asked.

"My printer ran out of ink for my flyers, so I was on my way to the store. But then I saw you standing over here and I thought, why not ruin their party? And here I am!"

"Lucky us."

"I know, right?!"

"Go away, please," Jan said.

"Aw, thanks for saying please, girly, but I think I'll stay."

There was no way to force the issue, so they really had no choice but to see how this played out. Besides the cars and drivers flashing past, they were the only people around so there was no reasonable expectation that anyone would intervene. Besides, they would have just looked normal: three kids hanging out. Jan itched for the bus to arrive; there was no way Joe would try to block them and risk the bus driver's response. He lifted the phone and unlocked it. One minute left, still in red.

With the speed of a mantis snatching its prey, Joe noticed the phone and snatched it from Jan's hand. "Yoink."

"Hey! Give that back!"

"No, thank you. See how polite I can be?" Joe chuckled to himself and thumbed around on the screen. His eyebrow raised when he saw their destination. "A garden centre? What are you up to, Shirley?"

"Nothing that concerns you, Joe," Emma said.

“Maybe I should just keep this. Might mess with your plans a bit, eh?”

“It’s my Oma’s. She’ll kill you if she finds out.”

“Nope. I can handle her.”

Jan was sickened by Joe’s confidence. The arrogance of knowing you can charm everyone to your side, every time. He was not wrong, too. Oma’s voice from last night came back in a nauseating rush. You can’t argue with his prices. He’s so confident! And entrepreneurial! Ugh, Jan thought. But Emma, glaring at Joe with the furious intensity of a thousand suns, had clearly already decided she had had enough. She hooked a thumb over her shoulder. “Fine. Jan, let’s go tell her right now. We’ll take our chances.”

Her voice was as confident as Joe’s had been. If it was a bluff, Emma was calling it. After Emma spoke, Jan was surprised (and not a tiny bit pleased) to glimpse uncertainty on Joe’s face.

“Fine,” he said, and handed back the phone.

Whatever else Joe was, no one could accuse him of being dumb. He had quickly done the math, weighing the risk to his summer ambitions against their story. Even if he did convince Oma he was innocent, seeds of doubt might be planted, which she might talk about with her neighbours, which might jeopardize their absolute loyalty.

Finally, the bus came into view. Just as it started to slow, Jan caught a sliver of frustration glinting in Joe’s eyes. As quickly as he had grabbed the phone, his fist shot out and clipped Jan in precisely the same painful spot Emma had chosen, but on the other shoulder. Joe laughed a wicked laugh as he spun away on his BMX, leaving Jan quieted by a brief but absolute humiliation. The driver asked if he was okay, if there was anything he could do for him, but Jan just shook his head. They took their seats, with Emma vowing revenge (No one does Angry like a Ginger!) and Jan holding his arm, which would remain bright with pain almost for the entire outing.

What Grows Best

Opa was pleased with their purchases. The garden centre had been a sprawling place out in the east end, and busier than Jan could have imagined. Enough to forget his arm and Joe and how so many things seemed to go wrong so easily. Outside the store, there were rows upon rows of shrubs, trees flowers, paving stones, and garden ornaments. There were bays of mulches and gravels built with huge concrete blocks. Inside the garden centre itself, there were more plants, tropicals and creepers, as well as more gardening things than could be described. And what seemed like a hundred people and workers bustling around and talking really loud.

Jan had had no idea where to start, but Emma actually grabbed a worker in mid-bustle, startling him into laughter when he stopped and saw them standing there like garden gnomes. He had been a kind and patient grade twelver named Abdullah, working to save money for university, and he took them under his wing. (There had been dozens of brands and styles, enough to make anyone panic.) On the bus ride home, they had been pleased to discover two tiny planters, each with a miniature globe cactus, slipped by Abdullah into their shopping bag.

Emma had stayed for dinner at Oma's insistence (to celebrate Jan and Emmaline's Big Day Out!), and now they spread the contents of the bags on the table.

"Nice work, you two," Opa said. "The way you tell it makes me wish I'd been there."

Emma and Jan unclipped their gloves from their packaging and slid them on their hands, explaining Abdullah's explanations about fit and comfort and wear. They accomplished the complex storytelling with dog-show voices and exaggerated gloved gestures, like they were hand models. Oma watched, amused, while Opa organized the seed packets into lines on the table, according to their position in the garden.

Jan pointed at the single green sachet, set off to the side. On its face was a photo of three perfect zucchinis and the word SQUASH slashed diagonally across the photo. "I didn't know zucchini was a kind of squash."

"I do not like squash," Emma said. "Real Gingers avoid orange foods, for obvious reasons."

"Good thing we're not eating it, then," Jan replied.

She made a face and stuck out her tongue at him.

"Good impression," he said.

"Of what?"

"I'd say squash, but maybe more like a pumpkin..."

"Hi-lar-i-ous, J."

"So, Opa, why zucchini?"

His grandfather, distracted by the microscopic text on the back of the green bean packet did not hear the question.

"Earth to Geoffrey..." Oma called, her voice a sarcastic song.

"Hmm?"

"Kids're waiting for you, my love."

"For what?"

"This morning you said you'd tell us why zucchini..." Jan began.

“I did? That doesn’t sound like me...”

“Opa...!”

“Kidding, kidding. I grew them when I was about your age,” Opa said.

“Really? For a contest?”

Opa smiled and lifted the zucchini pack, turning it over and over in his hands. “Not for a contest, no. Just to grow them. My dad let me plant some things in the garden, though a single zucchini plant was the only thing that actually came up. The soil was wrong, you see.”

“And they got big?” Emma asked.

“Did they ever. For whatever reason, only three zucchinis sprouted, so the plant could dedicate all its energy to them. Two got to be about a foot-and-a-half long, but the third almost made it to three feet.”

“Why didn’t they all get so big?”

“I’m not sure. Plants have their own personalities.”

“Could ours get that big?”

“Absolutely. The world record is over seven feet long.”

Jan’s eyes widened. “But that must take a lot of room. How many plants could we grow?”

Opa winked. “I think we can grow them vertically to save space. Three plants, maybe?”

“That would be awesome, Opa!”

Then Opa spent some time explaining about climbing plants, that the variety of zucchini they had selected quite by chance was a climbing variety. There were lots of details about trellises and spacing and trimming and pruning, and about how the leaves on the trellis would catch all the sunlight, feeding the vegetables.

“We probably shouldn’t let any zucchinis grow off the ground—they might get too heavy,” Jan said.

“And maybe only let each plant only grow one zucchini,” Emma offered.

Jan and Emma found Oma, who had retired to the comfy chair in the living room to read a new novel she had

picked up at the library. Library books were a new sight in their household; before the move, Oma and Opa had always bought their books, adding to their sagging shelves. The old house had books in every room, Oma and Opa loving nothing more than buying new bookshelves to house their Most Precious Possessions. Jan and Emma climbed all over each other to share their ideas with her, a happy tangle of garden-talk and timelines and plans.

“Sounds like you’ll grow the biggest zuke Graham Park has ever seen,” Oma said.

Emma and Jan looked at each other, their faces brightening like they had just been handed the keys to the city.

“Zuke...”

They spoke the new and perfect word in unison, each savouring its brevity but at the same time drawing it out to three or four times its normal length. You did that with the best words, even when they were short. They became more than just the sum of their letters, becoming codes and passwords, entire libraries of summer knowledge. With no bookcase needed.

Wednesday, June 29

Trellises and Treasures

Opa and Jan pushed the lumber cart out of the store and to the van. They had arrived right when the store opened to avoid the crowds and so Opa could still get to work on time. He handed Jan the checklist and asked him to double check that they had gotten everything. Opa loaded the long lengths of lumber while Jan moved his finger down each item, written in pencil on a slightly damp, wrinkled length of memo paper. He knew that Opa was reaching a bit in asking him to check the list again—they had checked all the items before going through the checkout—but he loved that Opa was excited. He was, too.

“Eight 2x2x8s, pressure-treated?” Opa asked.

“Check,” Jan replied.

“Eight 1X2x8s?”

“Check.”

“Big box of 2.5” deck screws?”

“Check.”

“Small garden trowels?”

“Times two (one each for me and Emma): check.”

“Hoe?”

“Check.”

“Soil aerator?”

“That wicked-looking thing with sharp fingery claws, that Oma is going to freak out when she sees me using...?”

“Jan...”

“Check, and for the record, awesome.”

“Kneeling pad?”

“Which you said was for Oma, but we know it’s really for your ancient knees? Check.”

“Wise guy.”

“Wisdom is a virtue.”

“Mostly.” Opa closed the rear doors. “Okay, we’re set. Hop in and I’ll bring the cart back.”

Jan opened the door and stepped high to lift himself into the van’s passenger seat, and closed the door. The sharp sounds of the lumber cart faded as Opa brought it to the corral, leaving only the muted swish of passing cars to bleed through the van’s sides. Opa kept his work van clean and tidy—everything has its place!—and was proud of his good habits: Clean enough to eat off the floor, if you don’t mind a few splinters, ha ha. The van was tall, its ceiling high enough that Opa could stand upright, and long enough for full pieces of plywood. It was painted in a light grey, light enough not to stand out too much when it sat in the driveway or to annoy the neighbours, but distinct enough to look more refined than your standard white van. On its side was Opa’s company logo, which was composed of stylized knots above and below the company name and the contact info.

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Opa loved the surprise on potential customer’s faces when they realized that he was the Shirley in question, not minding at all the gender confusion that so perplexed Jan. It’s always something to talk about, and something for them to remember, he said. He joked about adding a

tagline like, Go ahead, call me Shirley! but a look from Oma always ended that conversation.

Jan breathed in. The van smelled like sawdust with a little added machine oil from his tools. It was so different than riding in Oma's small electric car. He could see the world from a lot higher up, and the motion was a gentle creaking sway, the sound of things moving around in the back louder than the van's tires on the road and its quiet electric motor.

It took Jan a few long moments to register the delay in Opa's return. Taking a lumber cart back to the corral should not take this long. He looked through the windows at the parking lot and in the mirrors, but saw nothing, so he opened his door and stepped down, and walked to the rear of the van.

Opa was sitting on the van's rear bumper, which was wide and flat for loading and unloading, looking down at the asphalt, his hands on his knees. He had removed his ball cap and held it scrunched in one hand, the rigid bill sticking out, awkward. His bald crown reflected the morning light, and his fine hair stuck out all over.

"Opa? Are you okay?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, Jan, I just, uh..."

When Opa looked up, Jan saw a new puffiness in his cheeks and red wetness in his eyes. He had obviously been crying. Jan sat beside Opa on the bumper (it seemed like the perfect place to sit for these kinds of essential pauses). "What's wrong?"

Opa put his hat back on, kind of crooked this time. "I guess everything just kind of hit me all at once, kiddo."

"Everything...?"

"One minute I was happily loading wood into the van, thinking about our morning in the garden, then I realized how much your mom would've loved to be here with you and me, and..." His eyes filled again, so he looked up, like the warmth of the bright sky could evaporate his tears.

“She liked to garden?”

Opa sniffed and laughed, low and sad. “She wouldn’t go near our garden, actually. She loved the outdoors, but not getting her hands dirty. Isn’t that funny?”

“I guess.”

“But she would’ve loved doing things with you, I know it, even if it meant... well, anyhow, then I thought of the past few months and Oma losing her job but how strong she’s been, and how this is a fun project but it isn’t Adams Lake. And before I knew it—”

“The waterworks started.”

“That’s about the sum of it, yeah.”

“It’s okay to cry.”

“Thanks, Jan, I know it is. But sometimes the emotions that come first are hard to deal with.”

“You really miss them, don’t you?”

Opa nodded and talked for a few moments about holes that will never get filled even though they’re supposed to get filled with love and memories and how legacies can get broken and it’s hard to figure that out in the middle of remembering. Jan just listened. Talking about it seemed to settle Opa down and by the end he was smiling, even as he talked about his dead daughter and what she might be doing if she had been alive.

Finally, he stood and took an incredibly deep breath, one Oma would call Cleansing And Restorative. “What do you say we get home and start building?”

“Okay.”

They got into the van and drove home. Opa chatted about this and that, his sadness having evaporated, and Jan tried to respond as best he could. But truthfully, now he was thinking about his mom and how different a life would look if pieces had not been removed from it before the right time.

Pressure Treatment and Wet Grass

When Jan and Opa pulled in, Emma and Oma were sitting on the front step, talking. Oma sipped from a travel mug, undoubtedly containing some rich blend she had selected for the weather and time of day. The tea would also, of course, have various medicinal properties to address her mood and health, both current and potential. She waved when Opa put the van into park, and went inside.

Emma looked exactly like you would expect her to look for a day of gardening. She was dressed in her summer shorts and flip-flops, but had replaced the plain t-shirt with a flowy, long-sleeved sun shirt. She had found a wide-brimmed hat that looked a cross between a cowboy hat and one of those garden-party deals you see in movies, and large sunglasses that covered half her face and made her look like a dragonfly.

She walked over and handed Jan a large squeeze-bottle of sunscreen and an old baseball cap.

“By order of your grandmother,” she said. “Cute hat, by the way.”

He cringed as he put the hat on. It was undersized, and featured an embarrassing elastic at the back to keep it fixed to the crazy heads of little kids. No team crests or cool outdoors logos here; no, this faded specimen was decorated

with two cartoonish bees with smiley faces (the kind that could only be found on kiddie-wear). He squeezed a large dollop of sunscreen onto his hand and offered the bottle to her.

“Already done, J.”

“Cute glasses, by the—”

“Shhh. I recognize that you’re just trying to get me back for the hat comment, but it’s pointless to try. These,” she pointed at the glasses and hat, “are chic and effective. Ginger knows sun.”

Jan briefly entertained the idea of saying something about Emma already reaching her lifetime limit of free freckles, but wisely sensed that such a quip would only get him in trouble. He remained quiet, and began working the sunscreen into every inch of exposed skin.

“Sunscreen for you too, Mr. Shirley,” she said. “Mrs. Shirley was very clear about that.”

“Thank you, Emmaline, I’m sure she was,” Opa said, taking the bottle from Jan. “You and Oma have a nice talk?”

“Yep.”

“Did she offer you some tea?”

“Yeah, but I politely declined. It smelled like wet grass.”

Opa laughed. “It certainly can.”

The threesome fell silent while Jan and Opa finished applying their sunscreen. It was a beautiful day, warm and bright. There were distant clouds near the horizon, but other than that the sky was pure blue, crisscrossed only by the dissolving contrails of passing airliners.

“So what’s the plan, gentlemen?”

“How about getting started?” Jan asked.

“Sounds good to me,” Opa said.

They donned their gloves and got to work, their footprints making traffic patterns in the dewey grass, wide at the van and around the garden, pinched through the gate. The lumber was stacked against the inside of the

fence and the tools readied for work. Opa used small stakes to mark off and divide rows, and laid a seed packet against each stake. He gave extra space for the zucchini, about four feet wide for the entire eight-foot depth of the garden. Next, he explained how he would build an A-shaped trellis for the zucchini, with 2x2s for the frame and 1x2s for the crossbeams, which would act like rungs on a ladder for the eager plant. He said that allowing the zukes to grow up saved space, enough so that they could put three plants in, which would increase the chance of growing a monster.

“Well, you have a better chance in theory, of course,” he said. “There are no guarantees in this business.”

Emma said, “Like life, my dad says.”

“Yep. Death and taxes,” Opa said.

“Hey! That’s what he says, too! How did you know?”

“Adults have a common pool of handy things to say at the perfect moment.”

“Opa...”

“No, really! There’s an app for that. And a website.”

“Funny guy,” Jan said.

“Ginger does not like sarcasm,” Emma said.

Both Opa and Jan looked at her, waiting for the punchline (Emma could savour sarcasm like the finest chocolate milk), but it never came. Opa gave a funny, puzzled little grin, glanced at Jan and shrugged with the tiniest lift of his shoulders, then said he was going inside for his tools. Emma did not notice any of this; she grabbed the aerator and started digging at the soil between the zucchini stakes. Jan grabbed the hoe and began breaking up chunks of soil beside her.

After the ground had been broken up enough for planting, they started working on the trellis. Opa outlined the project then told them they could take turns screwing the pieces of lumber together, as long as they listened to his instructions. He showed them how, using one of his impact drivers (which instantly became Jan’s new favourite thing

on earth, mostly because of its awesome name) to drive the screws.

“Who first?”

Jan really wanted to, but did not speak quickly enough. Emma stepped forward, hand out. Opa gave her the tool and watched her closely as she sat and, without hesitation, placed the screw on the driver bit, placed it in the precise centre of two pieces of wood, and pulled the trigger. There was a loud buzz as the screw twisted in, the screw’s head seating itself just below the surface.

She sat back and nodded. “Torque’s good.”

“Excellent,” Opa said. “Don’t want to split the ends.”

“Naturally.”

“Why would the wood split?” Jan asked.

Emma leaned over and showed him the clay-coloured screw she was about to drive in. “Self-tapping.”

“And that means...”

She pointed at the notches on the thread near the tip. “See those? They dig right in, so there’s no need to drill pilot holes. Good choice, Mr. Shirley.”

“Glad you approve, Emmaline.”

“Plus, the finish is resistant to weather and the chemicals they use in PT lumber.”

“Uh, PT what?”

“Pressure-treated, J.” Her voice was that of a patient mom.

“Oh, right. Of course.”

But there was no Of Course about it. He stared at her as she placed the next screw on the driver and lined up the pieces of wood, sending the screw in again without hesitation. How had she acquired this super specific (and super impressive) set of knowledge? Jan had the briefest sense—and he would have these often, all the way through life—that there were universes of knowledge he had no idea about, and might never understand. And that his best

friend might carry some of it. He felt more than a little in awe of her.

She noticed, of course, because that was what best friends did. And she stopped and smiled at him to put him at ease, her eyes saying Dude, the things we'll learn, am I right? and her voice talking about helping her dad fix their old deck just after they moved in and how she and Jan hadn't been friends yet but how cool was it that she could help him and his Opa out? It was cool, but nothing compared to what happened next: she simply handed him the driver to do the next screw.

"Now you," she said.

And he held the wood and screwed the screw, and the neighbourhood echoed with what he just did.

"Awesome," he said.

"Nice job, J."

"Thanks."

Do Not Remove

Later, Oma brought out a tray of cold drinks to help them celebrate the successful completion of the garden. The ice clinked in the glasses as she moved, and beads of condensation ran down their sides. They each took a glass, icy water squeezing between their fingers and streaking the dirt on their hands.

“Looks good, crew,” Oma said, raising her glass.

“Cheers,” Jan, Emma, and Opa said in unison, raising their glasses and drinking deeply. Oma had concocted a lemon-green-tea of her own creation that Jan had never tasted before. It was tart and sweet and delicious and caffeinated; by the end of the glass, his brain was buzzing with energy and the alien temptation to build something big, right now, maybe that garden shed Opa had talked about or maybe a house or a shopping mall or even one of those massive cruise ships that can barely fit on the brochures that appeared in their mailbox. He noticed his hands shaking, so he tucked them under his armpits and wished he had his whittling kit to keep them busy.

“So now what?” he asked.

“Now we wait,” Opa said.

Emma groaned. “Ginger is so NOT good at waiting.”

“That’s it? No trimming or maintenance or detail work?”

Opa shook his head. “Zukes pretty much grow themselves. You’ll have to watch the weeds, of course.”

“Oh.”

“Sounds like our research is done,” Emma said, laughing. “Not much to fill a logbook with, eh?”

“Logbook?” Opa asked.

Emma filled Opa in on what Jan had been hoping for. He patted Jan’s shoulder in sympathy but his eyes were twinkling, like he too thought that maybe, just maybe, a formal summer project was a bit ridiculous. Jan sighed long and deep, and felt his project expectations begin to fade. Still, the garden was, he had to admit, beautiful even in its simple, non-recordable demands. They had hoed and aerated until there were no dirt chunks bigger than a chickpea. Opa had used his cordless circular saw (which quickly became Jan’s second favourite thing in the universe) to make a bunch of short stakes from one of the 1x2s to use as row markers and pounded them into the ground.

Everything else had been left to Jan and Emma. They read the instructions on each seed packet, excavated holes and furrows of the appropriate depths, and planted rows and half rows of vegetables. The row markers had been labelled with a Sharpie. The new seeds had been gently watered with a brand new watering can. Lots of learning for both of them, but at best enough for a brief report. He sighed again, and the few tendrils of his remaining expectations wisped away.

After a few minutes, Opa offered to carry the tray inside, then looked at Jan and Emma. “Can you tidy up? I’ll bring out a storage tote for the smaller stuff.”

“Can do, Mr. Shirley.”

“For sure, Opa.”

Opa held out the tray to collect their muddy glasses, and turned to follow Oma into the house.

“Oh, and Opa?”

Opa stopped. “What’s up?”

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“All of this.”

His eyebrows raised, and he smiled. “You’re welcome. But this was fun—I should almost be thanking you.”

After Opa left, the yard was quiet. Jan and Emma sat for another few moments, basking in the warm afternoon sunshine. Neighbourhood sounds, cars and kids laughing and a single distant lawnmower, seemed to leap over the fence and skip through the gate. They had always been there, of course, but the three of them had been working so hard it was as though the rest of the neighbourhood had stopped. Which was ridiculous: the world does not stop spinning just so a garden can get built. Still, it was a nice idea.

Opa popped out a few minutes later before leaving for work with a large blue storage tote, and Jan and Emma got up to clean the yard. They raked back into the garden a few escaped clumps of dirt, leaned the long tools against the fence at the far end of the garden, and placed the hand tools and gloves and knee pads in the tote. The lid closed with a satisfying click, and Emma lifted and carried it over to where the tools stood against the fence.

Jan moved next to the zucchini trellis and stood for a long moment, admiring their work. Emma stood beside him.

“Nice,” she said.

“Very.”

A gust of wind dipped into the yard, cooling the sweat-damp of Jan’s shirt and giving him a chill. Like the neighbourhood sounds, he had not noticed that he had been sweating, though it made perfect sense. Warm day + hard work = sweaty humans. The wind brushed along the grass and through the trellis, moving their hair and raising dust from the ground. A hearty gust rattled the leaning tools, shifting the hoe’s gravity, and it fell with a clatter, bouncing off the tote and into the edge of the garden near

the trellis. The pole clipped the first of Opa's sharpened stakes, levering it free in a spray of topsoil. Jan had just enough time to see the word ZUKES (Emma had, of course, labelled that particular stake with trademark cheekiness) before the stake fell face down in the dirt.

"That was annoying," Emma said.

"You're mad at the wind?"

"So inconvenient."

She bent, lifted the hoe, and again leaned it against the fence, muttering about the inefficiency of doing things twice. As Jan knelt, intending to replace the stake at the end of its row, a dull shine in the middle of the upset ground caught his eye. He reached out and pinched the object free from the soil.

"What'd you find?" Emma asked, kneeling beside him.

"Dunno yet."

Jan thumbed the dirt away and looked closer. It was a small rectangle of thin metal the size of a wheat thin, hung on a length of bathtub chain. It looked like it had been in the ground a long time; though there was no rust, both the rectangle and chain were tarnished and dull. The shape was strange, two rounded rectangles joined by a pinched midsection. The chain was threaded through two holes sat wide at one end, and two other oblong holes, one in the middle and the other opposite the chain, were punched through the object. The upper half had been engraved as follows:

CB4 235 864
A GALLANT
NRE O/RH/POS
CDN FORCES CDN

The lower half was almost identical.

C84 235 864
A GALLANT
NRE
CDN FORCES CDN

“They’re dog tags,” Emma said.

“Like, for soldiers?”

“For everyone in the military. My dad wears them, too. Well, he has them—I think they stay in his pocket most of the time.”

Jan rubbed his finger across the engraved name. “A. Gallant. I wonder who it is.”

“Do you know anyone named Gallant?”

“I don’t know anyone around here except you.”

“Lucky me.”

“Yep. Luckiest girl in the world, obviously.”

Emma delivered an epic eye roll that was impressive, even by her standards. “Obviously.”

Or She

An hour or so later, a sudden knock on the fence post at the edge of the yard startled them both enough to make sounds neither was proud of and would forevermore deny making. But Emma's eyes lit up when she turned, and all embarrassment was forgotten.

"Dad!"

Her father stood there in his mottled green camouflage uniform. He was tall and thin, with painfully blonde hair and blue eyes that almost perfectly matched the air force beret mashed at an angle to his head. He had the deepest laugh-lines Jan had ever seen on someone without grey hair. Mr. Bonner grinned and dropped to one knee, both arms out. "How's my favourite kid?"

"Only kid!" Emma squealed and ran for him, practically knocking him over with her embrace. "What are you doing here so early?"

"I took the afternoon off."

"They just let you go?"

"Ha! Never. But my CO knows how I love to surprise you."

"Cool!"

Jan was always amazed at how easily and thoroughly Emma dropped her can't-touch-me attitude around her dad. Jan might occupy a special place in her universe, but her dad held the absolute top spot. With her mom severing her relationship so completely (Emma told Jan that it was

sometimes months between her emails or phone calls) it was Emma and her dad against the world. They were tight, and fiercely loyal. Emma would stand in front of an army for her dad.

He met Jan's eyes and gave a little nod. Though he had never offered to let Jan call him by his first name, Emma's dad was the only person in the world who made Jan feel older than he was. Mr. Bonner never spoke down to him, a rare honour in a world full of gushy adults.

"Hi, Mr. Bonner."

"Jan," he said. "What's going on?"

"We've been—"

"We built a trellis, Dad! Come see!"

Emma rose and grabbed Mr. Bonner by the hand and led him over to the garden, and proceeded to outline their day in exceptional detail. When she got to the dog tags, he asked to see them. Jan handed them over.

"Someone had a tough conversation," Mr. Bonner said.

"What do you mean?" Jan asked.

"Well, we're not supposed to lose anything the military issues to us, of course, but dog tags—the proper term is ID disks—are kind of special. Asking for replacements can be, uh, a bit humbling."

Jan watched Mr. Bonner turn the ID disks over in his hand, examining them like he was seeing them for the first time. His face grew serious, and he sighed deeply, running a calloused finger over the engraved words on the back's top half.

DO NOT REMOVE
NE PAS ENLEVER

"That seems obvious—why would you remove them if you have to wear them?" Jan asked.

Mr. Bonner shook his head. "It's not for the wearer. It's for everyone else, to make sure the dog tags stay with the soldier when he's wounded or killed."

"Oh."

Emma made an impatient huffing noise. "Or she, Dad."

Mr. Bonner made an embarrassed face, and tried to smile at his daughter, who had folded her arms and was looking at him like he had belched in church. "Sorry, sweetheart. Or she. You're right, of course."

Emma always called boys out when they neglected to include girls or women in what they were saying, a habit from her mom. It was maybe the only thing Emma would admit admiring her mom for. He knew there were lots of other things, but she pushed them down as deep as she needed to make this new life work out. She even let the Sweetheart go, something she would never stand for from anyone else. They were quite a team, Emma and her dad, but it was obvious that the family was incomplete. Like her mom had amputated herself, and everyone knows that human limbs never grow back.

Mr. Bonner wrapped the chain around the ID disks. "I'll give these to our QM at work tomorrow. He'll know what to do with them."

"Actually, could we—" Jan paused. "Could we have them back? I kind of feel like we should figure this out."

"Our first legit summer mystery! Cool!" Emma said. "Can we, Dad?"

"Are you sure? I don't mind taking care of it."

"We found them, right?" Emma said. "It makes sense."

Mr. Bonner nodded and held the tags out by the chain, the afternoon light reflecting dully from the weathered metal. Jan said thanks and accepted the disks with both hands, the metal cool on his skin.

Mr. Bonner put his hands in his pockets. "Hey, Jan, may I borrow my daughter for a while?"

"Uh, sure, I guess—"

“Borrow?! What am I, a pair of shoes?”

Jan laughed. “Shoes are useful, Em.”

“So are poop-scoops. I’m not a thing.”

“You’re something...”

“Ha ha.”

Mr. Bonner smiled. “I was thinking we could go grab some cheesecake at Dunn’s.”

Emma’s face lost her played-up expression of indignation and grew serious. She looked for an instant as though she wanted to ask her dad what the big deal was (maybe cheesecake was to her and her dad what hot chocolate was to Oma and Opa), but instead smiled and told him sure, that would be great, and told Jan she would see him tomorrow. Then they walked out towards their car, leaving Jan standing there like a stump in the grass. On the way, she reached for her Dad’s hand, something Jan had never seen her do before.

Thursday, June 30

Safety in Numbers

Apart from the rare occasion he was allowed to use his school-issued iPad or her phone, Oma had instituted a firm No Technology rule for the summer, but when Jan explained about the ID disks over breakfast, she had relented, admitting that his quest seemed like an acceptable exception. So Jan unlocked his iPad and he had spent a couple hours researching what he might do to reunite the disks to their owner. In the end, he discovered that:

1. Military websites were impenetrable fortresses when it came to personnel's information;
2. That a wider Google search revealed that the A stood for Allison;
3. That Allison Gallant was a legitimate war hero, a combat medic who had distinguished herself in Afghanistan.

Emma came over just before lunch. She was in a quiet mood, serious, and sat down across the table without commenting on the unlocked tablet in front of him. She did not even comment on his bed-head, which he had not thought about until he saw her. She was in fresh, unwrinkled clothes, and she had obviously showered, the smell of soap wafting across the table. Her hair was still wet and a shade darker than usual, loosely resting on her shoulders and leaving damp spots there.

“Are you okay?” Jan asked.

“Of course I am!” She delivered the line too quickly, too sharply, and realized it as soon as the words left her mouth. She cringed, as though she was chastising herself for the lapse. “Uh, why?”

“You look, I don’t know, like you had liver for breakfast.”

“Ew.”

But that was all she said, so to fill the moment Jan used a finger to scroll the tablet screen, to keep it from locking up. He wanted her to speak first, but she was very good at staying silent when she wanted to, and after what felt like a decade, he took a chance. “How was your cheesecake?”

“Fine. Tasty.”

More silence. Jan felt like growling at her, but tried another tack. “Must’ve been quite a surprise...”

“Yeah. Well, no. He does that sometimes. He’ll show up unannounced for some Daddy-daughter time. I assumed it was because of Mom. He gets that way sometimes, when he misses her.”

“He did look sad,” Jan offered.

“Seeing the dog tags didn’t help.”

“Why?”

“He doesn’t talk about it, but he lost friends in the war. At some airbase somewhere.”

“Kandahar?”

She looked at him, her head tilted and her eyes narrowed. “How did you know that?”

So he explained that his research had taken him to Afghanistan, and that much of Canada’s activities had been centred around the massive Kandahar airfield, that it was easy to guess that Mr. Bonner had been connected to the air base. Emma listened quietly and nodded, seeming to enjoy Jan’s journey down the rabbit hole, but her eyes really sparked when he revealed that A. Gallant was female and a medic and clearly amazing, and even more when he began

to talk about Gallant's decorations and how people spoke about her online.

"See? I knew it!" she said.

"Knew what?"

"That she was a girl, of course! What did she do?"

"Apparently there was an ambush and she dragged some soldiers to safety while getting shot at. She's in a bunch of articles. A book, even."

"Awesome. Does she have red hair?"

Jan turned the tablet to show her one of the few photos he had found online. "Nope. Blonde."

"Ah, too bad. But I won't hold that against her."

"You're very generous."

"Yes, I am. So what next?"

Jan shrugged and wondered aloud if it would be best to start at the public archives at the War Museum.

Emma looked skeptical. "You mean just walk in and ask if they can tell us where she is? I don't think they'll do that."

He shrugged. "Me, neither, but the last information I could find is over ten years old, even on social media."

"You're on social media?"

"No way. Oma would kill me. But some of the posts are public."

"Nice work, J. I approve of your methods."

He smiled and blushed a tiny bit, not knowing what to do with her nice words. Compliments were hard. Emma leaned over the tablet and started scrolling the last page he had been working on, and began peppering him with more questions, clearly pleased about his progress. And him. He fidgeted, wishing he had brought out his whittling so he would have something to do with his hands. And the sudden scrutiny made him desperately want to turn the conversation around.

"So, uh, your dad talked about your mom?" he asked.

“Hmm? Oh, that. A little. Mostly he wanted to talk about something else.”

“About what?”

Emma looked at him, pausing to consider, like he had made some lofty request, but then simply shook her head. “I don’t want to talk about it. Now how about you make us some sandwiches, Mr. Researcher? I’m starving.”

Emma dipped her head again towards the tablet, leaving Jan to assemble peanut butter and jam sandwiches accompanied only by his own thoughts. By the time he laid the sandwiches out, along with some cut-up cucumber (if Oma saw no green in the meal, she would of course lose it) and an apple for each of them, they found other things to talk about.

Just to Mess with You

After finishing lunch and making a run to the corner store for a popsicle (a cool treat and sugar-fix all in one), Jan and Emma found themselves sitting in the grass and simply staring at the garden. He fidgeted, itching for something to do, but there was nothing. Waiting was hard.

“I thought there would be weeding, or something,” Jan said.

“I don’t mind.”

“I’m going to get my wh—”

“If you say whittling, I’m going home.”

“I could teach you how.”

Emma groaned. “I know how, J. It’s not rocket science.”

“Hey, now. It takes skill.”

“Sitting still takes skill. Have you ever tried it?”

“No.”

“You are a sad, strange little man and you have my pity.”

“Huh?”

Emma lay back, laced her fingers behind her head. “Nothing. Here, lie back like this, ponder the clouds, and ahhhhhhhhhhhh—”

Her voice dissolved in a satisfied sigh that could have lasted for the rest of the month if it were not for a sudden clunk of metal in the parking lot. Next, there was the coughing sound of a gas engine trying to catch, once, twice,

and then the growl of ignition followed by a stuttering idle. Emma and Jan sat up to find Joe striding into the yard, hands wide on handles of the gas trimmer slung over his shoulder, and wearing a hard hat that incorporated eye and ear protection all in one. And big orange lumberjack boots. When he saw them, he frowned, revved the engine once, and made straight for them. For a long and terrifying instant, Jan thought Joe had gone crazy and they would be massacred in a flurry of slashing and whirling.

But then Joe laughed and cut the engine, lifting his face shield and earmuffs. “Hello, chicas!”

“You’re crazy, Donski,” Emma said, getting up. “You could’ve—”

“Nah, no worries,” Joe said. “Safety first. Plus, I have my reputation to protect. Killing losers like you isn’t good business.”

“Shouldn’t you mow first, then trim?” Jan asked.

“You’re adorable, Shirley. Trim first, most of the trimmings get mulched. Easier cleanup. Hey, look at this...!”

Joe shifted the trimmer and moved it around his back, and walked to the edge of the garden, scanning the trellis and neat rows, still damp from Opa’s morning watering. His eyes finally rested on the small placard beside the trellis and the three round patches of wet soil where the zucchini seeds waited to sprout. Jan tried not to notice that Joe was noticing, hoping the moment would fade like the smell of exhaust and gasoline Joe had carried with him into the yard.

Unsuccessfully, it turned out. Joe smirked when he saw Jan’s efforts. “That’s a lot of zucchini for one small house, wouldn’t you say?”

Emma folded her arms. “What do you know about it?”

“Oh, I know a lot about green things, sister. I also know that unless you’re planning to go into business selling

zukes, three plants will bury Shirley and his lame grandparents.”

Jan felt his face go red at Joe’s offhanded use of the word zuke, like it was an offence that Joe knew it at all, much less used it so casually. It made him even more angry than Joe’s equally casual insult towards Oma and Opa.

Joe sneered. “I also know that we got a funny little pamphlet in the mail a couple weeks ago. Something about a summer fair, and a certain contest to grow the biggest vegetables?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Jan said.

“Oh, please. It’s as obvious as the crush you have on girlie here.”

“The what?”

Joe made kissing sounds with his lips.

“You’re an idiot,” Emma said.

“Maybe, maybe not. Maybe I got it exactly right. Maybe I’ll grow my own, just to mess with you. Maybe I’ll come by sometime to, uh, eliminate my competition, if you know what I mean.”

Emma and Jan opened their mouths at the same time in reply, as though they were thinking about exactly the same caustic reply for Joe’s threatening words. But before they could speak, Joe slung the trimmer back and pulled the starter cord in one smooth, practiced motion. He pressed the trigger as soon as the engine caught, gunning it repeatedly every time they tried to yell at him, until finally they gave up and stalked out of the yard. As they left, Joe freed his hands to replace his face shield and earmuffs, the engine sound diminishing just long enough for Jan and Emma to hear him laughing. At them, of course.

Friday, July 1

Too Early

On Canada Day, Jan woke up early with the dread feeling that overnight Joe had made his move against the garden. He leaped from his bed and dashed out of his bedroom before even looking at the clock, realizing as he stepped outside that although the sun was up, it was low and the shadows were long and it could have been five in the morning, which would mean that he could be in epic trouble. Oma and Opa had made it very clear that they would not be setting alarms this morning and that Jan was on his own for breakfast. If he woke them up early on a holiday...

He shuddered (you have to act out certain reactions to certain kinds of trouble) then stopped at the edge of the grass.

There were footprints in the dew.

Joe.

“Oh, come on!” Jan hissed, keeping his voice low.

He followed the path of crushed grass and dull patches in the bright dew, ignoring the wet chill soaking into his bare feet. He imagined torn up soil, row markers strewn all about, and a zuke trellis reduced to splinters. They had left the tools out and leaning against the fence, after all, within easy reach of Joe’s criminal paws.

But the garden had not been touched, and the tools were right where he and Emma had left them a couple days

before. All was fine. His brief relief was so complete and deep it could have been measured on the Richter Scale. And yet, after taking a moment to command his heart to slow back down to a reasonable BPM, as he tiptoed back inside, there remained in his stomach the tiniest worry. It felt like the first stages of stomach flu.

Thankfully, the kitchen was still quiet, dim and overnight cool. The stove clock shone green into the kitchen. 5:13 a.m. He winced. Way too early. Still, he had not woken anyone up, a minor miracle. You should go back to bed, he told himself, but remained right where he was. He was far too wound up, a guitar string stretched to breaking. Too much to worry about. What would he and Emma do about Joe?

Jan grabbed his whittling kit and his wood block, scarfed a banana, and began carving, using finer movements to make up for the fact that his hands were still a little shaky from the shock of seeing Joe's footprints in the grass.

That Bad?

“Are you sure...?” Opa asked a couple hours later.
“Absolutely,” Jan said, and began to tidy up his whittling gear.

The wood had begun to take shape, enough so that a person, if they squinted, moved their head, and looked from just the right angle, could see a duck in its future. He had gotten in a couple solid hours of work before Oma and Opa woke up, his hands occupied, freeing his mind to come up with a strategy for dealing with Joe.

Or try, anyhow. The only (depressing) certainty was that if Joe really decided to do something, there was very little anyone could do to stop him. Joe flew around the neighbourhood on angel wings, beyond suspicion, all smiles and waves and encouraging comments from every adoring adult. No one would think twice about seeing him step into a certain yard at the end of a certain row of townhomes, or step out, his hands dripping with the life-juices of certain doomed zucchinis. Good for you, Joe! they'd say. And, Can you tend my garden, too?

Yet, despite the uncertainty, Jan had come up with an imperfect plan. But putting it into action would require delicacy; getting Oma and Opa to agree was the tricky part.

He took a deep breath, stood, and stretched. “It’s no big deal, really, but it just feels a little weird to be celebrating

Canada Day with all those strangers, when it's just us at Adam's Lake."

What he left unsaid—thus avoiding an outright untruth—but that still hung behind his words was the connection between Adam's Lake to his mom and dad's memory. Better to let Opa and Oma make their own connection and assume he was Expressing His Grief, which would make staying home and tending (guarding) the garden seem reasonable. It was a tiny emotional card Jan was playing, and a tiny risk. But he had to do something.

Opa, who had come downstairs dressed in a bright red t-shirt, cut-off jean shorts, and a maple-leaf hat that made his head look like it was sprouting a new variety of starfish, looked over at Oma. "What do you think, my love?"

"I'm fine with it," she said. "Truthfully, I don't mind avoiding the crowds, either."

Excellent progress, Jan thought. Now to seal the deal. He tilted his head, making his eyes wide. "Are you sure?"

Oma smiled. "Absolutely. It'll be fun. Geoff?"

"Fine with me. I have a garden shed to plan. You can help, Jan."

"A whole day together—imagine that," Oma said.

"Been awhile, that's for sure," Opa said.

"Can I invite Emma over?"

"Of course you can," Oma said. "But won't she and her dad have plans?"

"I don't know."

"Why don't you invite both of them over? We could do a barbecue, and decide later if we all want to go to the fireworks."

"Great! Thanks, guys. Now—"

Oma held up a hand, cutting Jan off. "First things first, kiddo. When was the last time you had a shower?"

"Why?"

Oma just looked at him. Opa pinched his nose and made a face.

“Really?” Jan asked. “That bad?”

Opa nodded. “Big time.”

“So are we talking a week? A month?” Oma asked.

“Ew! No way.”

“When, then?”

“I’m not sure...” (Another vague answer, thus avoiding another untruth, this one the knowledge that it had been more than a few days, and Jan was beginning to feel like he could grow a separate garden in the dirt he was accumulating.)

Oma pointed in the direction of the bathroom. “You. Shower. Now. And clean clothes afterwards. Then you can go ask the Bonners over.”

Though he had been impatient to get outside, Jan smiled, said thanks again and told them how excited he was and moved away to stash his whittling gear, resolving to take the quickest, most basic shower ever. That way, he reasoned, he could claim back some time but still honestly say he followed Oma’s instructions. But when he stripped down to his own basics, he had to admit that maybe, just maybe, getting clean was not the worst idea in the world. (He could actually smell himself getting riper as he stood on the bathroom’s cold tile.) Amazing how a few extra minutes with the soap and steam and heat of a good shower could make a guy feel like new...or at least less stinky.

Christmas Red

Emma and her dad arrived in the early afternoon. Emma carried their lawn chairs in bags over her shoulders and her dad had a long wrapped present under one arm (the wrapping paper featuring a horrid collage of Santas, reindeer, and evergreen trees) and lugging a huge wheeled cooler with the other. Mr. Bonner wore khaki shorts and a white t-shirt with a red fighter jet banking hard across its front, showing off its stylized maple leaf. Emma was wearing ripped jean shorts, her now-trademark flip-flops, and a bright red t-shirt.

PROUD
WOM*N.
(ALSO
CANADIAN.)

They both wore red baseball hats, stiff and unformed, like they had been purchased just for the occasion. Oma and Opa welcomed them into the side yard, where they had set up their own chairs and a long folding table full of food and drink. The men shook hands, but Oma opened her arms wide and drew Mr. Bonner in for a vigorous hug, clearly surprising him.

“Uh, nice to see you again, Jennifer.”

She released him and held him at arm’s length. “You look tired, Mason.”

“Oma—!”

“Well, he does,” she said, still looking at Mr. Bonner.

“Working too hard, I guess...?”

“Clearly. Are you hungry?”

“Thanks for inviting us. Oh, this is for you.”

He held out the wrapped gift and everyone stared at it for a long moment. Everyone except Emma; she groaned and rolled her eyes, the wrapping paper clearly a source of considerable discomfort for her. Christmas in July on full, painful display.

“Sorry about the wrapping,” she said.

Mr. Bonner glared at her. “I was surprised to find any at all. We, uh, don’t do much gift-wrapping these days.”

“Canada Day red,” Opa said.

“With a few extras,” Mr. Bonner said, and everyone laughed.

Everyone but Emma. She was watching her dad’s eyes, which Jan now realized were not laughing, separate from the rest of his face. It was a laugh you did not want to give but still did, because everyone else was, because there was an expectation that laughter was the appropriate emotion to display.

“It was Mom’s,” she said. “From, like, three Christmases ago. She did all the wrapping.”

There was a lowness to her voice Jan did not hear very often. Mr. Bonner’s put-on smile faded when he saw his daughter’s expression, and he laid a hand on her shoulder. He looked like the only thing he wanted in the world was to apologize to his daughter for forgetting that there were things that you did not laugh about.

“Well, thank you, Mason,” Oma said. “I think it’s lovely. So colourful. May I?”

“Of course,” Mr. Bonner said, looking at Emma with a raised eyebrow. Looking for permission to move forward. When she nodded ever so slightly, he released a long breath, relieved. “I know you’re not technically new to the

neighbourhood anymore, but we thought you might be able to use this.”

Oma began to unwrap the gift, carefully lifting the tape to preserve the paper, as though the past few moments had made her realize how important it was not to tear it. Like just one rip would give their memories a chance to escape. It was a watering wand, strapped to a long, flat length of green cardboard. The image on the package was of a woman holding the wand over a flower garden with a huge fixed smile, looking far too happy to be watering her plants. Giddy, almost.

“Emma said you could use it for the new garden,” Mr. Bonner said.

“She was 100% correct,” Opa said, taking the wand from Oma and inspecting it. “I’ve been watering by putting my thumb over the nozzle. Thank you.”

“Oh, it was nothing,” Mr. Bonner said.

“Nothing Is Ever Nothing,” Oma said. “Welcome to our home.”

Then Happy Canada Days were exchanged all around, and the Bonner’s chairs were set up, and their cooler plundered. There was pop for Jan and Emma, chips, veggies & dip. It took awhile for Emma to relax, but eventually she and Jan were back to normal. Jan did not say anything about the sad moment they had endured. Sometimes it was better to let things settle on their own, especially those times when the holes in life got bigger.

Plans

No one felt like going anywhere, not even for the massive fireworks display on Parliament Hill. The afternoon had turned into dinner which had turned into tea and dessert. The adults seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves, comfortable even though they had only just met. Jan and Emma wandered off and ended up near the school, making plans. He told her about Joe's alleged overnight visit, and admitted that staying home and the last minute invitation for her and her dad had been part of his ploy to stay near the garden.

She stopped and looked at him with narrowed eyes. The look felt almost hard enough to strip the skin from him. "Sneaky J."

"Yeah. Sorry about that."

"From now on, you bring me into your plans. Capische?"

"Absolutely."

"Ginger does not like being deceived. Or having her dad deceived."

"I'm so—"

"On the other hand, she has to admit that your execution was Class A devious. I'm almost proud of you."

"Uh, thanks...?"

"Which means no further apologies are necessary. But how are we going to keep Joe (she said his name like it had

been written in sewage ink) from wrecking things? I mean, it's not like we can stay with the garden all summer..."

"Yeah, about that..."

So he outlined Phase Two of his plan. She nodded with the addition of every detail (a pleasant surprise, because he had expected to fight for every one) and by the time he finished was vibrating with enough excitement to shake the pavement under their feet. Jan was even rewarded with a high-five-fist-bump (they are not supposed to be done at the same time so it was super awkward: as the athlete in the relationship, she had had WAY more practice with such things) after he explained the final piece of the plan.

"No almost about it now," she said. "I am officially proud of you."

Pleased (and to hide the tiny blush that had crept up from his collar), he took a small bow in acceptance of the compliment.

She, of course, rolled her eyes. "Easy, now, let's not go too far. What did your Opa say when you asked him?"

"I haven't. Yet. Part One took all my energy this morning."

She looked at the sky, shading her eyes with her hand. "The sun'll set soon. We need to remedy that. Now."

"Okay, let's—"

But she had already spun on her heel and dashed away. Emma could walk really, really fast, Jan had discovered, but when she ran, it was game over. If they had been born into a cartoon world, her departures would have left only puffs of smoke.

When he finally arrived, red-faced and (more than) slightly out of breath, she had been there long enough to:

- 1) scoop another hot dog from the covered dish on the table;
- 2) dress it with all the fixings;
- 3) sit in her lawn chair and take her first bite;

4) swallow it and wipe her face with the napkin she had also grabbed; and

5) start a whole new conversation with the adults that had nothing to do with Joe or gardens.

Her dad was saying, "...so you've decided what to do with them?"

"Yep. Ginger and J got a plan."

"Decided to do with (huff) what? And what (puff) plan?"

"The dog tags you and Emmaline found in the garden," Opa said.

"How long have you been here?!" Jan asked Emma, eyes wide.

"Have a seat, J. I don't like that shade of red on your cheeks."

"Ha ha."

The adults watched the exchange with amused expressions for a moment, then went back to a previous conversation, something to do with politics and polarization and the abandonment of principles. Jan caught his breath as he helped himself to a hot dog, too, and sat down, hopefully to eat and just let the conversation wash over him. But before he could take a bite, Emma was waving to catch his attention and mouthing words at him. Tell. Them. Then she took a huge bite and mouthed something else, which looked like, If you don't, I will, so get to it, J. (Though, due to all that chewed food she was working around, it could have been I love this organic dog! So delicious!)

He nodded at her, sighed, and laid his dog on his plate, giving it a longing look before speaking. "Opa, do you still have Mom and Dad's old camping gear?"

Well. That stopped the conversation as abruptly as a belch in church. Oma and Opa's mouths hung open, mid-word, for an instant, before they glanced at each other. They traded an identical expression, one that looked like

the facial equivalent of a shrug. What do you think? Mr. Bonner studied his can of pop, just opened, which in the heat had developed a nice hazy coat of condensation.

Finally, Oma and Opa nodded at each other, and Opa smiled at him. “Sure we do. Somewhere in the basement, I think. Why?”

Jan took a deep breath and, for the second time that day, began to explain his idea for Phase Two (although he did not use that term for it). The highlights:

- The summer was going really well;
- they were excited about the garden and all the outdoor time;
- they thought a camp-out would be cool;
- two tents would be used;
- they could set up next to the garden;
- no meals would be missed;
- bedtimes would be adhered to; and
- a regular shower schedule would be observed.

By the end, Jan and Emma were all over each other’s sentences, encouraged by all the nodding and glancing going on between the adults. Then there were a few questions, which Jan and Emma answered, and a long moment of silence while the adults pondered the proposal, followed by a cautious discussion of All The Pros And Cons, the adults measuring their words so carefully Jan knew they were going to give a firm yes really soon. (Grown-ups needed to have those moments, because although they did not want their charges to do anything remotely bold or dangerous—or generally leave their immediate line of vision—they also needed to say yes once in a while, because they wanted to Foster A Sense Of Independence.)

“Okay, Jan,” Oma said. “We’ll dig out the old gear.”

Emma looked at her father. “Dad?”

Mr. Bonner scratched his head, knocking his new red hat forward. “Uh, we aren’t really a camping family, so we don’t have a tent—”

“We have an extra,” Opa said. “Remember, my love? Jan insisting on separate tents until they were married?”

Oma laughed. “He was so old-fashioned.”

“He even asked for my blessing before asking Amber to...” Opa’s voice trailed off, and he coughed away a little creep of emotion. “Anyhow, we have two, Mason, and Emma is welcome to use one of them”

“You wouldn’t mind?”

“Not at all,” Oma said. “In fact, it’s good for the gear to get used once in a while. It’s been a really long time.”

“Ten years,” Opa said, shaking his head.

Oma sighed. “Goodness, it feels like yesterday.”

“I think mom and dad would’ve wanted us to use the stuff,” Jan said.

“I think you’re right, kiddo,” Opa said.

Oma just nodded.

“Oh, right,” Mr. Bonner said. “This is the tenth—oof!”

His voice was cut off by a certain jabbed elbow by a certain daughter into a certain clueless dad’s ribs, followed by a certain Emma-expression Jan knew really well. Roughly translated: *WhatareyoudoingITOLDYOU-ABOUTTHISIcan’tbelieveyou’d do this to me!*

“Why don’t we get the gear and help the kids set up?” Oma asked, stepping into all that awkwardness like a pro.

“What about the fireworks?” Opa asked.

Oma looked at Mr. Bonner. “Mason?”

He nodded. “This’ll be more fun. I don’t do crowds very well anyhow.”

Oma smiled at him and laughed. “You and me both, my friend.”

“It’s settled, then,” Opa said.

“Really?” Jan asked.

“For realz?” Emma asked.

All three adults nodded.

“YES!!” Emma and Jan exclaimed.

Next, there was what Jan might describe as a Happy Dance if it was not so horrible, with him and Emma making stuttery, unconsciously spastic moves all over the grass while the adults did their best to applaud.

Canada Zuke Day

As the sun dipped below the horizon and the evening cool settled in, Jan and Emma sat outside the newly-erected tents on lawn chairs, sipping lemonade (handmade by Oma, and organic, of course) from camping water bottles. In the end, Emma had been forced to borrow more than just the tent; she and her father returned home to discover that her mother had taken the only sleeping bag in the house.

Oma and Opa had dug out the gear and the five of them had spent a fun hour setting up tents and chairs and self-inflating air mattresses and lightweight summer sleeping bags and even a tiny, packable table, everything built of space-age nylons and aluminum and carbon fibre. Both had wiped tears away, making jokes about dust and allergies and barbecue smoke, even though the barbecue had long been closed and covered. All the gear had a heady smell of mustiness and earth and the faintest hint of campfire. As Jan unpacked his mother's sleeping bag in his own tent—a blaze-orange monstrosity she had been super proud of, according to Oma—he caught a whiff of something else, even more faint and just beyond the smoke. He was pretty sure that he was smelling his mother, or at least a camping version of her, and he, too, felt his eyes go all blurry.

After set-up, the adults said good night. Oma made the lemonade then she and Opa had retired into the house, and

Mr. Bonner wheeled the cooler and their chairs home all by himself, looking pleased with the day, with everything, which Emma thought was pretty cool.

As Jan and Emma sat and sipped, the crickets kept them company. The air had gone perfectly still, too. Somewhere in the distance, the muffled crump-crump-crump of fireworks echoed across the city.

“This was a good Canada Day,” Emma said.

“Zuke Day, maybe.”

“Ginger is confused.”

Jan shrugged. “Just for this year. To mark the occasion.”

“Oh. Okay. Good.”

A short while later, they yawned and went into their respective tents, and talked through the thin walls until Jan fell asleep listening to Emma’s stories. And Jan would realize only the following morning, when he woke up deliciously cold and stiff from a night on a thin camping mattress (being outside had somehow made the discomfort absolutely perfect, becoming, in Oma’s words, One Of Life’s Great Mysteries), that he had forgotten the real reason (Joe) there were two bright nylon domes in the yard for the entire night.

Friday, July 8

Weeds, Maybe

Emma came into the yard around mid-morning. She yawned. Her hair was askew, half in and half out of its ponytail, and her eyes were pink around the edges.

“You’re back!”

“Didja miss me, J?”

“You look like cr—”

“Stop. Ginger will dismantle you if you finish that word.”

“It’s true, though.”

“What’d you expect? We got a late hop out of High Level and the redeye from YEG to YOW.”

“I don’t understand a word you just said. Speak English.”

She rolled her eyes. “We. Flew. All. Night.”

“Airplanes don’t have mirrors?”

Emma stuck her tongue out at him and demanded to see the garden.

Everything had been put on hold for the week she was away with her dad. The trip had been a surprise, with Mr. Bonner receiving some kind of news the day after Canada Day and both of them taking off that evening. Literally. On an airplane. Emma had not been able to say exactly where they went, but had known it was somewhere in Alberta, as

far north as you could go before flirting with the Northwest Territories.

Jan had slept alone in his tent all week, becoming much more aware of all the night sounds he had not heard the first night. But he still camped out because he worried about what Joe might do; he could not have faced Emma if the garden got ransacked because he chickened out. He found himself wanting a shower every day, which was weird.

During the days, he had tried to keep himself occupied, reading and whittling and helping Opa around the house and in the garden, which had begun to sprout. Though he saw green shoots beginning to grow beneath the zucchini trellis, he did not touch that side of the garden so that he and Emma could work it together when she returned. Opa tut-tutted about it, saying that some of the shoots were likely weeds, and wouldn't it be a shame if they choked the zukes out before they even had a chance to grow?

It might have been the longest week Jan had ever known. He missed his friend.

She knelt next to the near end of the trellis and inspected one of the tiny plants. "They all look the same to me."

"Me, too."

"So how do you know which ones are weeds?"

"I have no idea."

"The knowledge you have gained in my absence is impressive, my friend."

"Ha ha."

"Let's go ask your Opa."

"He's working. It's Friday."

"Oh, right," she said, yawning again. "I kind of lost track of, well, everything."

"How was the trip?"

Emma paused a long moment before answering. "Fine."

"That's it?"

“Yep.”

“That’s all I get? Fine? You were gone a week, Em.”

She stepped towards him, putting a finger into his chest, her eyes suddenly blazing. “I know how long I was gone! Stop asking!”

“Ow!” Jan stepped back to ease the pain from the pressure point she had found on his sternum.

Her hand fell to her side and she sighed. “It’s just that it was a long, boring week, and I’m really tired.”

“And grumpy. Jeez.”

“Sorry, J.”

Well. He was glad she had apologized, but it was not a satisfying result. Something was seriously wrong. Ordinarily, when a person apologized sincerely, as Emma had, the other person accepted the apology and made it clear that the apology had been enough. But Jan was distracted by the storm clouds moving just beyond Emma’s words enough that he did not say the words he knew he was supposed to say. I accept your apology. I forgive you. Or even the simple classic, That’s okay.

What came out instead: “Have you had breakfast?”

Jan could actually feel Oma being channeled through his own voice as he spoke, telling him to make sure he ate first thing (Calories Are Brain Fuel!). He brought a hand to his mouth, surprised and embarrassed that he could not find a more supportive, sensitive arrangement of words. Emma saw it, too, and brought her own hand to her mouth. She was not embarrassed, however, but clearly amused, and the hand was to stifle a snort of laughter, slow it down a bit so it did not spray right into Jan’s face.

“Wait,” he said. “That came out wrong.”

“Breakfast?”

“I know, I know. I—”

Emma giggled. “Actually, I’m starving. We had a bagel at the airport when we got in, but that was hours ago.”

When Oma came in to the kitchen a short time later, she looked as surprised to see Emma as Jan had been out in the yard. Then Oma did a strange thing: she came around the breakfast nook and gave Emma a side hug, one of those one-armed squeezes you give when you stand next to someone. Oma gave Emma a long look as she released her. A knowing look. More surprises, Jan thought.

“So how was the trip?” Oma asked, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl.

Emma shrugged. “Fine.”

She fell into a familiar silence and focused on buttering her third and fourth pieces of wholegrain toast before slathering them in (low-sugar, organic) raspberry jam. She and Jan shared a glance and grinned at each other.

Oma waited for more, of course, but when none was forthcoming, she tried to brighten up. “Glad to hear it, Emmaline. Welcome home.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Shirley.”

Oma stepped away, back to the office and her laptop and the job search. Jan watched her go. The hug? Odd. But that look she had given Emma? Well, that itched like a wood shaving inside Jan’s brain. He made a mental note to ask her about it later.

Missions

Bringing the dog tags downtown had seemed like such a simple thing. Get the bus and then the train downtown, walk in, get the info, go out for lunch with the money Oma had slipped into Jan's hand as they were leaving. (Make sure it's something I would eat, she had said, but Jan had his sights set on a massive slice of greasy pizza, and had recruited Emma to his vision.)

However, when they got off the train at Rideau and ascended to street level, carried along by a crowd of tourists heading to the Byward Market, they quickly realized that downtown was a different animal. Emerging into the bustling daylight was a disorienting blur. The cars were too fast, the buses too loud, the people moving in every direction all at once too focused on their own destinations to notice the two kids standing on the sidewalk with their mouths open.

Thankfully, a police officer on foot patrol noticed their confusion. "You guys okay?"

Jan and Emma just stared. They needed a moment. The officer was a tall woman, smiling kindly, with her thumbs disarmingly hooked onto her bulletproof vest. But her height, wraparound sunglasses, dark uniform, and bulk of carried things, radio and handgun and ammo and a bunch of mysterious pouches, made them feel like they were

staring down an entire army packaged into one intimidating woman.

Emma recovered first. "Oh. Totally fine. Perfect, in fact."

The officer tilted her head. "Apart from your utter and total confusion."

"Apart from that, yeah."

"A lot of people come up here looking just like you two. Where're you headed?"

"NDHQ," Jan said, finally finding his voice. "National Defence Headquarters."

A smirk. "I may have heard of it. Plan on enlisting?"

"What? No. Maybe someday. I think we're too young, and... ow! Hey!"

Emma's elbow had found a rib. "She's pulling your leg."

Jan felt that red warmth rising from his collar again. "Uh, yeah. I knew that."

"Of course you did, J."

The officer chuckled and turned to point at a set of doors a short ways down the sidewalk, telling them that if they went through the mall, kept moving in roughly the same direction and went up a couple of escalators, they would find themselves on the McKenzie-King bridge, and NDHQ would be right in front of them. They thanked her and set out, zig-zagging by shops and cafés by the dozen, at one point getting turned around and descending into a blazing food court. Finally (after detouring into an upscale delicatessen for some free bread and meat samples), they found themselves on a long bridge with a bunch of buses rumbling by, and a huge building opposite, with Canada emblazoned on the western-facing wall.

"Big," Emma said.

"Very big," Jan agreed.

But the lobby did not feel very big, with low ceilings and dark colours all around, like the architect had been instructed to design the least grand of all possible entrances. Personnel in every shade of uniform moved in

and out of the building in ones and twos at marching speed, every pair of eyes fixed on unseen destinations. There was the occasional brief pause and salute, backdropped by the sound of boots and shoes made to be heard on hard floors. Everyone was tall. Jan found that he could not move from his spot. However, when he glanced at Emma, it was obvious she had stopped only because he had, and was looking around the lobby with purpose, unintimidated by all the officialness. She was familiar with this parade.

Before Jan could take a deep breath and regain a small sense of control, Emma grabbed his arm and lifted her chin across the space. "Over there. Information."

"Urk," he said as she yanked him over to the desk.

There was a small squad of elderly Commissionaires behind the desk, two men and one woman, all dressed in crisp white uniform shirts, looking simultaneously ready to answer all questions and disappointed that no one had any. Their faces brightened as Jan and Emma drew near, that hopeful beam older people get when they see children in surprising places.

"Are you all veterans?" Emma asked by way of greeting.

"We are," said the woman. Her name tag read Lefebvre.

"You're air force," Emma said to her with no hesitation.

"I am indeed. These two are army. How did you know?"

"You spoke first."

"What if McGowan here," Lefebvre hooked a thumb over her shoulder at the grinning guy with no hair seated on the other side of the booth, "had spoken first?"

"He wouldn't have; Ginger knows officers. You're in charge. You remind me of my dad."

The two men made a few halfhearted objections, which Lefebvre silenced with a halfhearted glare. "Your dad's air force?"

"Yep."

“Well, then, I automatically like him, and therefore you, young lady. How can we help?”

Emma introduced herself and Jan (although it was clear that Emma had charmed the woman enough to barely register Jan’s presence) and explained about the ID disks from the garden. All three Commissionaires leaned forward at the word garden, and fired a barrage of questions at her. When she got to the contest, all three gave loud and enthusiastic approval of their zucchini choice. A passing naval officer in a blinding white uniform glanced at the group with a raised eyebrow as words like garden and zucchini and fertilizer bounced off all that military concrete.

At the end, Lefebvre nodded and handed Emma and Jan a pair of visitors’ passes while McGowan entered their names in the computer log. Jan and Emma traded a look (How cool is this?!) as they clipped the passes to their shirts.

“You’ll want Human Resources,” McGowan said. “Eighth floor.”

Emma reached her hand across the desk. “Thank you.”

Lefebvre took the offered hand. “Good luck with your mission, ma’am.”

Emma giggled. “Never been called that before.”

“Well, don’t get used to it,” Jan said. “Ha, ha.”

His attempt at humour was so weak it did not even echo. Four faces looked blankly at him.

“Awkward...” Emma sang with a forced trill (her voice definitely echoed), making him want to shrink back to his previously anonymous dimensions.

Lefebvre chuckled and sat back down at her station. McGowan stepped out from behind the desk and walked them to a bank of elevators, telling them about his grandson who was also named Jon. Jan did not correct him, which would only lead to more questions and delay them even further. He was a little annoyed that they

needed an escort even though the elevators were in plain sight. McGowan even pushed the button for them.

As they disembarked at the eighth floor, they stopped. If the lobby had felt too small for its purpose, this floor went in the opposite direction. There were no walls as far as they could see, only dozens and dozens of low cubicles staffed by military types from every branch, all with their heads down and working on their computers. Offices with open doors lined the three walls. Jan had imagined Human Resources as a stuffy corridor with a handful of doors and offices. But the scale of the space was unexpected, even though it made sense that an organization of tens of thousands of members would require serious person-power to keep organized.

There was no reception desk, but a young corporal in a tight crew cut working at the nearest cubicle glanced up at them over his reading glasses, then looked around, like someone else should be handling the intrusion. No one stepped forward, so he sighed and leaned back in his chair. His name tag read Stout. "Help you?"

Jan spoke first, hoping to have some control over the narrative, and delivered a much-abbreviated version of the dog-tag tale. Stout listened and frowned, not displeased but in a thinking, problem-solving way. Afterwards, he reached for the phone on his desk, punched a single button and said a few deferential words to someone obviously higher in the rank structure. A moment later, an army officer stepped out of one of the offices. She might have been the tallest woman Jan had ever seen. Was everyone who worked here tall?

"Hello, kids. I'm Lieutenant Poirier, and I'm in charge of this section."

Poirier spoke with a thick Quebec accent, with ghosted H's and rounded R's and the syllables emphasized in odd places. Emma and Jan said hello quietly (even Emma seemed intimidated by Poirier's height).

Poirier looked at the corporal. "Report, Stout."

"Well, ma'am..."

He relayed an even shorter version of the story to Poirier who, at the end, folded her arms and asked how she could help. The information thus delivered, Stout returned to whatever task he had been working on and promptly forgot about the two children standing out of place right next to his desk.

Jan brought out the dog tags and handed them to the officer. "We were hoping to find him, and..."

"Or her, J."

"Right. Or her. We wanted to give them back in person."

Poirier shook her head. "Sorry, guys, but I can't just give you this service member's information."

"We're not psycho, or anything," Emma said.

"Bien, I'm sure that's true," Poirier said, chuckling. "But rules are rules."

"You sound like my dad," Emma said, sighing. "He's air force."

"We take privacy very seriously. I'm sorry."

"So, what do we do now?"

"Well, your job is done. Leave the ID disks with me, and —"

"Wait, no!" Jan said. "We found them, and we'd like to see this through."

"What you're doing is admirable, but these are *propriété militaire*. I have to keep them and return them through channels."

Emma grumped, "Through channels. Geez, that sounds like my dad, too."

"I'm sorry," Poirier said again. "Is there anything else?"

"I guess not," Jan said, unable to keep the pout from his voice.

"Right, then."

Poirier wrapped the tarnished chain around the ID disks and slid them into a small beige envelope that Stout had placed in her hand, conjuring it like magic from the depths of his desk drawer without looking away from his screen. Jan stared at the envelope, which was covered in all sorts of official numbers and words. Stamped at the top and bottom were the words PROTECTED C. She took a pen from her pocket and made a few cryptic notations in the various spaces at the top of the envelope and asked for contact information to use if they had any further inquiries. Jan heard himself rattle off his address and phone number. Poirier thanked them over her shoulder as she disappeared back to her office.

Stout asked if they needed an escort off the floor, his hands a blur and his eyes glued to the images and words flashing across his computer. He was, of course, not really asking, but merely fulfilling some deeply buried sense of courtesy, so they declined. They rode down the elevators and returned their passes to the Commissionaires, who saw the expression on their faces and did not ask if their mission had been a success. They found their way back to Graham Park, their mood and voices subdued the entire way, like they had missed out on something, although they could not have explained precisely what that might have been.

Monday, July 11

All Quiet on the Garden Front

Early thunder woke them up at the same time. “Raining yet?” Emma asked, her voice thick from interrupted sleep, yawning and stretching so vigorously Jan could hear her tent poles flexing.

Jan unzipped his own door just enough to stick a hand out. “Nope.”

“Good. Make some room. Ginger’s coming over.”

And she did, so quickly Jan had barely enough time to slide his sleeping bag out of the way and throw on his hoodie against the chill. She had the door unzipped and open and closed behind her in a flash, then sat cross-legged at the end of his air mattress, blinking against the sleep still gumming up her eyes. She wore grey sleep-shorts and a pink long-sleeve t-shirt which read:

**STRONG
IS
THE NEW
PRETTY
EVERYTHING**

Her hair was wild, and she had pillow-creases on her face. She blinked and smacked her lips and tongue as though to free them from the glue that saliva could become

overnight. It was, in a word, a very different Emmaline than the daytime version he had so far known.

She saw him looking and grinned. “Morning, sunshine.”
“Hi.”

That was all he let himself say. Although they were at opposite ends of the mattress, she was close enough that Jan could smell her morning breath, which of course made him keenly aware of his own. They had been sleeping in the tents for the past two nights and had exhausted the usual pleasantries, such as asking each other how they had slept. They both now know how the other person slept in their respective tent. Fantastic. Like rocks. The dead. Et cetera. In fact, Jan did not believe that he had ever slept so well. However, the reality of morning breath was a shock.

“The garden’s fine, by the way,” Emma said.

“Roger that. Another successful night of overwatch.” Jan looked away as he spoke, directing his dragon-breath to the side of the tent.

“Speaking of which, how long do you think we can keep this up?”

Jan stretched and smiled. “I might never sleep in my bed again.”

“Seriously, J...”

Before he could answer, a flash of lighting strobed the dome of the tent, startling them. They sounded the seconds together until the thunder arrived, this one louder than the first, and not too far away.

“It’s not like we can do this for the rest of the summer,” Emma said.

“Why not?”

She made a face. “We have homes, you know. And beds. And your Oma and Opa can just peek out the window to check on you.”

“But Joe could come back any time.”

“I’m not sure we’d wake up if he did anyhow.”

She had a point, Jan had to admit. Joe could use a rototiller and they might not hear him.

“And I’m worried about my dad.”

“Why?”

“I’m all he’s got. He’s a worrier.”

“We have our phones.”

“It’s not that.”

“What is it, then?”

“It’s just that the time is—”

She cut herself off mid-sentence, audibly closing her mouth, which would have been amusingly dramatic if Jan had not seen her eyes when she spoke. He was about to ask about it when the rain arrived, announced by a few pat-pat-pats on the tent fly. He and Emma looked up at the roof as the rain intensified, individual drops merging into a low roar.

“Should we go in?” Emma asked.

“These are good tents.”

“After a decade in storage...?”

“Opa said Mom and Dad always bought the best equipment. We’ll be fine. Anyhow, what were you going to say?”

“Huh?”

“Before the rain. Something about time...?”

“Oh, that. Well, when Dad and I—”

And right then, as though someone had pointed a remote at the sky and hit the red power button, the heavens opened. There was another blinding flash of lightning and an almost-simultaneous explosion of thunder, and sheets of heavy rain immediately began lashing the tent. The rain fell so hard and fast that it generated its own wind, bowing and twisting the aluminum frame poles.

At the height of it, as the lighting and thunder and wind crashed and boomed and howled around them, Jan noticed that Emma had not stopped talking and was now shouting what appeared to be an entire story which was completely

lost to the storm. He tried to yell back to tell her it was pointless, cupping his ear and shaking his head in an exaggerated fashion so she would understand, but it soon became clear that she was choosing to yell, almost daring the storm to eclipse her words. They remained like that for a few long moments, shouting at each other and not being heard. Then, as quickly as it had begun, the rain and lightning and thunder began to fade.

Emma, eyes now closed and hands over her ears, continued her tirade, which rose in direct opposition to the lessening storm sound. "...and I told him that Ginger didn't want to go but it didn't matter because he said that the decision had already been made..."

"Go where?"

"...and then he talked about service and pay grades and answering the call, and that it wouldn't be forever..."

Jan leaned over, not caring about his dragon-breath, and lightly tapped her on the knee. I'm still here. Talk to me. "Emma!"

That reached her. As her eyes opened, the last of the storm departed, leaving a hush of silence so perfect it was almost deafening. Emma lowered her hands and looked around, stunned, like the tent was a new world she had just discovered. Next, she looked at Jan and her eyes filled, which was really unlike her, and he started to worry. When families went through what their two families had, worst-case scenarios were within easy reach. All the time.

"Emma? What is it?"

"I'm leaving, J."

"But the storm's done, and we can just..." But he heard his words, a pathetic attempt to steer things away from the inevitable, and his voice trailed away. This was more than a right-now thing. "When?"

"August. The 20th, I think."

"Where?"

“Northern Alberta. Middle of nowhere. That’s where Dad and I went the other day.”

“Your dad’s job.”

Emma nodded. “To work at a secret place I’m not supposed to know about and definitely not supposed to tell you about. And now Ginger has to kill you...”

Jan watched her try a new smile on, one that was meant to be playful, but her eyes were still full and red and her voice had lost most of its spark, and he knew that she had heard the lie in her own voice, too. The kind of lie that hides the most painful truth: that she was leaving for good, and that he would be left friendless (again) in this messed-up neighbourhood and at school and in life probably forever. He got up and opened the tent door so hard it would have ripped a zipper of lesser quality and stepped out. Emma, framed in the door and bathed in a sickly nylon glow, did not follow him across the soaked lawn and into the house. Oma had gotten up early and was sitting at the kitchen table reading the news and was startled by his unannounced appearance. She got halfway out of her chair but sat back down as he passed and then stomped up the stairs, obviously having seen his face, and did not scold him for all the grass clippings his wet feet had tracked in.

Thursday, July 14

Whatever

After supper, Jan sat cross-legged next to the garden, a merganser in one hand, knife in the other. Not whittling. Initially, he had made a few desultory cuts but now just stared at the garden almost in a trance, not really seeing anything. He idly picked at the few shavings on his legs and, without looking, flicked them into the garden.

“They won’t grow, you know,” Opa said from the far side of the garden, where he was weeding one of his rows.

“Mmm?”

“The wood shavings. The soil is too acidic.”

“Sure, yeah. Wait, what?”

“Just checking to see if you’re listening.”

“Very funny.”

Opa stood and stretched, his back cracking, and winked at Jan. “Ah, that’s the stuff.”

“Getting old is the stuff?”

“Decidedly not. But a good stretch is like heaven.”

Opa stepped over the low chicken wire fence he had erected after discovering that a rabbit had breakfasted on some of the new shoots, and sat next to Jan on the grass. He took a deep, contented breath, like that patch of grass was the most perfect spot in the world at that moment. Jan could not look at him. Opa had made a nightly habit of

coming out to putter in the garden after the table was cleared and the dishwasher loaded.

Jan had joined him tonight mostly to get out of the house and avoid Oma's bad mood. Her job search had not been going well, and she had taken to pulling out her laptop in the evenings, hoping to find new leads she might have missed during the day. She and Opa had argued about it tonight (again) with Opa saying she should do something fun to clear her head, that she was acting obsessive. The comment had not landed well (even Jan could have predicted that), and they had argued hard for a few minutes that felt like hours. Jan hated to see his grandparents at odds like this; they rarely fought.

"Thought maybe it was time for the DD, kiddo," Opa said.

"You make it sound like we've been having them at all."

"You're right; we've been a bit distracted, haven't we? How about a DD, then?"

"Whatever."

"Whoa," Opa said, looking around. "Who stole our Jan and replaced him with this unbelievably moody teenager?"

Jan shrugged.

"You haven't been sleeping in the tent. What's up?"

Jan did not respond right away, fighting every urge to tell Opa what had been going on. Opa just waited, letting the crickets and evening birds fill the space. Before long, Jan was itching to tell him everything—his grandparents would outwait a CSIS spy if they knew he had something on his mind. Then Opa did the strangest thing: he put his arm around Jan's shoulders and drew him in. Initially, Jan went rigid but quickly realized that he did not want to resist at all. He actually wanted (needed) to be right where Opa brought him, onto his shoulder, where the smells of dirt and sunset mingled with the distant smells of woodworking from his grandfather's long day. Those smells conspired to unlock the last of his resistance.

“It’s Emma,” he said.

“Are you two fighting?”

“Yes. No. Not really. She’s leaving.”

Opa sighed again, this time with a knowing heaviness to it. “Ah. So it’s really happening, is it?”

Jan shifted away and looked at Opa hard. “You knew? And you didn’t tell me?!”

“We didn’t know specifics. Her dad talked about it in a general way, about how easy it was to be transferred and how hard it was on Emma. I guess he was doing more than just Processing Out Loud.”

“You sound like Oma.”

“As often as I can, my friend: your Oma is the wisest person I know. When does Emma leave?”

Jan told him, and the closeness of the date caused actual, visible pain on Opa’s face. Like he was feeling the time slip away and anticipating all the grief to come as deeply as Jan was. It was horrible to see. There was never enough time, was there?

“I’m sorry, Jan. That’s unbelievably crappy.”

Opa did not say anything further. He simply sat there while Jan wrestled with the emotions that had decided to use his stomach as their gymnastics apparatus. Neither spoke. They just sat together. Jan could not have explained it at the time, but Opa’s willingness to leave that quietness just as it was and not fill it with soothing chatter or encouragement or advice was just right.

Competition

Later, in the evening's low, warm light, as Opa was using his tape measure to show Jan where the new garden shed was going to go, there was a now-familiar knock on wood from the edge of the yard. Jan raised his head, hoping against hope that it was Emma. He was still looking for the right opportunity to apologize for storming out of the tent the other night. They had still hung out over the past couple of days but the mood was cool. (Ginger is super mad at you, she had said, but does NOT believe in the silent treatment.)

Joe stood there, smiling. "Hello, gentlemen."

"Hello, Joe," Opa said.

Jan just frowned and folded his arms, earning a slight jab in the ribs from his grandfather's elbow and a whispered reminder about manners and guests. But just as he was about to say a few words to meet the basic requirements of politeness, Joe laughed and came into the yard. He was wearing a pair of clean khaki shorts, a dark green golf shirt, and a messenger bag slung across his chest.

"Sorry to disturb your evening, Mr. Shirley," he said, "but unfortunately it's time for your first lawn care invoice."

Jan snorted. "Lawn care? Really?"

“Jan Jan Shirley,” Opa said sharply, glaring at him. “That was out of line. Apologize to Joe.”

Though Jan would have loved nothing more than to argue the point (Joe’s abrasive personality providing plenty of just cause), he knew better than to try. Apologies were another sacred principle in Oma’s and Opa’s household (Saying Sorry Separates Us From The Animals). When you committed a wrong, you always made it right. He mumbled an apology, forcing his tone so flat you could walk on it.

Opa gave him another look but did not make him start over, which he might have done when Jan was younger. “Time to pay the piper, eh Joe?”

Joe laughed, a sound so fake it disappeared almost before it came out. “Good one, Mr. Shirley.”

He handed a small sheet of paper over to Opa, a proper invoice with JOE’S SUPER LAWN CARE emblazoned in red across the top. Joe had inserted a photo of himself, smiling and giving a thumbs-up, in the upper right corner. Seeing the details made Opa nod with approval. Jan wanted to stick his tongue out at it.

“My apologies for getting them out late this year,” Joe said. “I’ll email them from now on (and of course I accept e-transfers) but I like to hand-deliver the first one and say thank you for the business in person.”

“I admire the personal touch, Joe,” Opa said. “Well done.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welc—”

“Hey, check out your zucchini, Jan! I can see sprouts from here!”

Opa’s expression flickered briefly to annoyance at being interrupted (Listening Is Honouring), making Jan’s heart soar. Maybe this would make him realize that Joe was not perfect all the time. But then Joe moved next to the garden and began reciting a few key zucchini facts and figures that were now familiar to Jan and Emma. He and Opa had a

brief exchange, with Joe adding some new approaches to weeds and natural fertilizer and securing the vines, which Opa accepted like gold nuggets of garden wisdom. Jan looked below the trellises at the sprouts, which had begun to reach upwards in their forever journey towards sunlight. He was distracted by how he had not noticed how green they were until Joe began to talk about the summer fair contest's organic requirements (I'm really excited to try bone meal!), Jan interrupted him.

"What did you say?"

"Oh. Bone meal is supposed to be really good for the roots, and—"

"No, before that."

"I'm entering my zukes, too! How cool is that?"

Ugh. Joe had used Jan and Emma's special word again. "Your own—"

"Now, don't act all surprised. I told you about it a couple weeks ago, remember?"

"I didn't think you were serious."

"Yep. Got four plants on the go. You and Emmaline inspired me, what can I say?"

Of course he had four plants, Jan thought. One more, one better.

"That should make for an interesting competition, eh Jan?" Opa asked.

"Great. Fantastic."

"That's what I thought, too," Joe said. "Gonna be fun!"

Jan grimaced. Fun? Not likely. He studied the ground as Opa and Joe launched into another round of technical garden talk (with Opa even wishing Joe luck). Joe's involvement in the contest was a fresh insult to the most unpredictable summer ever. He wanted to phone Emma about it.

Eventually, Joe and Opa ran out of things to say and traded farewells. As Opa got back to puttering, Joe stepped across the grass, his fake, painted-on smile faded. Jan

marvelled at the grown-up world's inability to recognize Joe's facade, that the muscles that controlled his fake smiles were separate from the ones that controlled his eyes, which had maintained their fishy deadness throughout. As Joe left, he drew his index finger across his throat like a blade.

Jan channeled Emma and rolled his eyes as mightily as he could. "A bit dramatic, don't you think?"

Only Jan heard Joe's low, growled reply. "We'll see, girlie."

Tuesday, July 26

Stuck Zippers

Jan guessed that it had to be past midnight, although he had no way to be sure. The tent was dark and quiet, and the only sounds were the occasional passing car or city bus and Emma's snoring, which she refused to acknowledge as resolutely as Oma did when Opa ribbed her about it in the morning. Jan had learned to avoid saying any of the following:

- SAWING LOGS
- SNORKING
- TRAPPED CHAINSAWS
- CALLING HOGS
- WAKING THE NEIGHBOURS
- RUMBLEQUAKES
- GINGERTHUNDER, and
- (his personal fave) SNORECHESTRA

Jan put his hands behind his head and stared at the tent ceiling, which glowed red from the parking lot light passing through the fabric.

Almost two weeks had passed, and Jan and Emma had not seen much of Joe, aside from his weekly visits for lawn care. (Yes, Jan had come around to calling it Lawn Care: he had begun to notice how careful Joe was with mowing and trimming and raking, and reluctantly acknowledged the sense in the name.) They had assumed Joe was spending the remaining time in his own garden. A bittersweet reality, to be sure: an absent Joe was a good thing for

neighbourhood morale, but it also meant he was serious about his zucchinis.

Emma and Jan had mended fences. The news about Joe's involvement in the fair contest had fired Emma up enough to banish her remaining grumpiness. Okay, enough of that, she had said the next day. I forgive you. We have bigger fish to fry...and bigger zukes to grow, ha ha. (Jan had made sure to laugh. When Ginger made a joke, a guy did his best to honour the effort.)

They did not, however, talk about August 20. That particular weed was too big to try and dig up and dispose of. Instead, they hung out and planned and worked the garden and did all the normal summer things that could happen when the zucchini did not need their attention. Exploration. Errands for Oma and Opa. Hours of precisely nothing at all.

At night they were back in their tents, although the novelty had begun to wear off. Jan had not been sleeping as well as he had before. He heard every sound, felt every bump in the yard, and dreamed every weird dream that could be dreamed outdoors. Maybe people were not meant to sleep indefinitely in tents or on paper-thin air mattresses.

Right at the moment Jan had almost convinced himself to pack up and head inside (just almost, of course, because there was no way he was leaving Emma alone), there were new sounds outside. Low rustling. Heavy steps moving through dewy grass. Human steps. They passed his tent and stopped when Emma began murmuring a few indistinct sleep-words. Jan held his breath, his brain wondering if he should make some noise but his fear keeping him quiet. Emma's voice faded and was soon replaced by the regular in and out of her heavy breaths. Jan would swear up and down that the next sound he heard was laughter, low and sinister, but in truth all he really heard was stomping and heavy breathing and the unmistakable Plock! of a zucchini being stepped on.

That sound broke through. “Hey! Stop it!”

Jan’s sudden outburst took the assailant by surprise, and there was a sudden intake of breath, followed by a few hasty steps, a metallic twang, and a heavy thud on the ground. A long groan—definitely a boy’s groan—cut through the tent walls, making Jan’s heart pound. Opa’s chicken wire had tripped him up! Now was his chance!

“I know it’s you, Joe! I—oh, come on!”

There were other things he wanted to say. I got you now! You won’t get away with this! Wait till I get my hands on you! But wanting to say them and actually saying them are very different things, and Jan instead found himself fighting with the zipper on his sleeping bag, which had (of course) gotten snagged. Outside, he could hear Joe getting to his feet and shuffling out of the yard.

“Emma! Wake up!”

There was a snorfling sound and mumbled words, only a few of which Jan could make out. Jan. Trouble. Ginger. Beauty sleep. Go whittle your merganser. Then the nesting rustles of a kid putting herself back to sleep, and silence. Joe’s footsteps had long receded by then, but Jan renewed his efforts to unzip his bag (making a distant note of her remarkable, half-asleep use of the word merganser) and finally freed himself. Thankfully, the tent zipper worked better than the sleeping bag’s, and he was quickly out on the wet, cold grass. He slapped at the nylon fabric of Emma’s tent, which made a weak thrushing rather than the pounding he had hoped for.

“Emma!” This, he actually yelled.

“Grrrrrggghhh, okay, okay, I’m up. What’s the big—”

“Joe was here!”

“What? Really? Why?”

He did not wait to answer, but instead went back to his tent and reached inside for the headlamp he stashed next to the door. By the time he slung it around his head and switched it on, Emma had emerged and was standing there

in her pyjama shorts and long t-shirt. The red sparkles in her shirt graphic caught the headlamp's glow.

I
WILL
NOT
BE
CONTAINED

“Uh...”

“Yeah, yeah, my PJ shirt's awesome, I know. What happened?”

Jan gave her the five-second version as they stepped next to the garden. The footsteps, the stomping and squishing noises, Joe falling. But he fell silent as the headlamp's beam played across the trellis and the plants that had climbed halfway up it.

“I can't believe it,” Emma said, stepping over the chicken wire and kneeling next to the first plant. “That unbelievable jerk!”

Jan and Emma had been diligent in their watering and (natural) fertilizing efforts, and the results had been encouraging. The plants had grown quickly. After the first flower became a tiny fingerlike zucchini, every time a new bloom appeared, they pinched it off, allowing the plants to focus their energies. Jan had named the three zucchinis #1, #2, and #3, but Emma overruled him so now they were known as Alex, Blain, and Charlie. (Jan had, of course, grumbled, but like most things Emma, the names—all gender-neutral power names, suitable for lawyers and doctors and YouTube stars alike—had an elegant organization, and Jan was privately impressed.) All three zukes had grown to more than a foot long and three inches wide, resting their swelling weight on the soil beneath the trellises.

But Alex had been destroyed, stomped into a mess of mush and chunks of green. Blain and Charlie, thankfully, had survived. Jan had yelled at Joe just in time: he no doubt would have squashed all three.

Jan stepped into the garden as well and laid his hand on Charlie. “Two more chances, that’s it.”

“And they’re the smaller ones, too,” Emma said. “I had high hopes for Alex.”

“Now what?”

“Call the police, of course! This is a crime, J.”

“Maybe, but I don’t think they’d care too much about this. I meant what do we do about the contest? If Joe’s been growing his own—”

“They’re probably bigger than ours.”

“Yeah.”

They fell silent for a few long moments, just staring at their remaining zucchinis, willing them, perhaps, to step up and grow even faster from then on. Then they heard the front door opening.

“Kids...?”

It was Oma, dressed in a thin bathrobe, wearing flip flops, and holding a large emergency flashlight. She walked into the side yard, wrapping the robe tighter against herself. Her greying hair (Dye Just Hides The Truth) was disheveled and her eyes were bleary.

“I woke up to the sound of your voices. Is everything okay?”

“We’re fine, Oma.”

But when she saw the carnage in the garden, she tut-tutted under her breath and shone the flashlight around and out towards the street, as though she could capture the vandal with light alone. “What happened?”

Before Jan could spill everything (which he certainly would have, because Families Should Have No Secrets), Emma jumped in with her own version of the story, giving

every detail save the most important one, in Jan's opinion. She did not name Joe.

"I'm so sorry, you two. Do you know who it was?"

Jan opened his mouth to tell Oma but was silenced by a look and the tiniest of head shakes from Emma. Trust me, the look said. She shrugged. "We heard the sounds, but whoever it was got away before we could get out of the tents."

"Opa's going to be so pissed," Jan said.

Oma shook her head. "He'll just be glad you're okay."

Then Oma offered to make them breakfast, not even chastising Jan for saying pissed. Neither he nor Emma were hungry, of course, but Oma still hustled them inside, where they discovered that it was not only past midnight, but almost five in the morning. Oma made them eggs, beans, and toast, which was unusual because she generally insisted they eat oatmeal or sugarless cereal. The sounds and smells woke Opa up, who came into the kitchen grumbling about the injustices of being forced to get up before his alarm. He stopped grumbling when Oma told him what happened and, sure enough, came over to look Jan up and down like he was checking for battle damage, hugged him before Jan could squirm away, and said he was glad everyone was still in one piece.

Wednesday, July 27

What Can Be Known Just By Looking

The hard glare of daylight confirmed it: Alex was finished. Jan and Emma went out to the garden after breakfast to find that nature was already reclaiming their doomed vegetable. The stomped-on leaves were wilting, the pieces of shattered flesh were drying up, the edges browned and curling. There was a brief moment of excitement when Jan found a new flowering bud on Alex's host plant, but it was short-lived—there was no way that single sprout could catch up in time for the contest.

“Almost makes me want to cheat and use some of that nuclear fertilizer they sell at the gardening centre,” Emma said.

“Cheaters always get found out.”

“That is so untrue— all sorts of rich, unbusted cheaters out there.”

“Might not be enough anyhow.”

“Yeah.”

Jan stepped out of the garden and stopped next to his tent. He laid a hand on the rain fly. “It was fun while it lasted.”

She frowned. “Until it wasn't.”

“You're a ray of sunshine.”

“Not feeling very sunny, J.”

He was about to make a quip about being dramatic, but stopped himself when he saw her expression. Instead, he said, “Should we break camp?”

“Might as well.”

Although they had both known at a gut level that their camping adventure had to end after the attack, Oma and Opa had confirmed it even before the last forkful of eggs had been eaten. No more tenting out, Oma had said. It’s not safe any more. Opa had offered to call Mr. Bonner to break the news, but Emma convinced him to let her do it. Gotta keep my dad whole, she said. I have special ways, you know.

Jan kicked off his muddy sandals, ducked into his tent, and began to pack up, losing himself in the rush and rustle of breaking camp, rolling the sleeping bag and air mattress into their pouches. He heard Emma doing the same. But by the time he zipped open the door and threw everything out onto the still-damp grass, he discovered that Emma was already outside, her gear neatly piled by the gate.

“Wow, that was fast,” he said. “How did you—”

“Focus, friend.”

“I’m focused.”

“As a snail, maybe.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Try to keep up, will you?”

She moved around her tent, pulling the stakes out by hand. Her hair was brushed and tied back into a tidy ponytail, and she wore a clean t-shirt in brilliant lime green, which read,

**NEVERTHELESS,
SHE
PERSISTED.**

“I don’t get it,” he said, nodding at the shirt.

“I could explain it to you, but I won’t.”

“Why not?”

“That would kind of defeat the point, wouldn’t it?”

“I am so confused.”

Then she started pulling out Jan’s stakes, too, which told him he should get moving rather than continuing to stand there wondering about her shirt. They worked for the next while in silence, pulling down and folding the two flies and withdrawing the long, bendy poles that gave the tents their beetle-like profiles. They began to fold Emma’s tent, but the bottom was too wet, so Jan stood and said he was going to ask Oma for an old towel.

But as he walked out of the side yard, he saw a woman standing at the end of the short path that led to the front door, just staring at their house. She was tall and pale and her blonde hair was so short you could almost call her bald. Despite the warmth of the morning, she wore jeans and hiking boots and a khaki jacket, as well as a white scarf with small black checks that looked straight out of a desert movie. Her sunglasses were the only summer feature, large and round, outsized against her narrow face. She did not turn or give any indication she had seen him, so he scooted inside for the towels.

She was still there when he emerged a few minutes later. Her sunglasses had been lifted to rest on top of her head, and she had a hand up against the sun, not squinting but looking at him with narrowed eyes. He had the sense that she did not need to squint, that her eyes—which were sea ice blue—had seen through ten thousand bright mornings, and in places brighter than this.

She had taken a few steps closer to the house, which triggered Jan’s hospitality instinct. He tucked the towels under one arm. “May I help you?”

“I hope so,” she said. “You must be Jan.”

Her voice was clear and betrayed zero hesitation. There are few feelings more unsettling than when a stranger knows your name, especially one as striking as this.

Although she was really pale and there were deep, exhausted shadows under her eyes, she carried herself high, back straight, shoulders square. Her legs were tightly muscled even through her fitted jeans, and he could tell from the lean cut of her jacket that there was no wasted anything on her. From the corner of his eye, he could see Emma still working in the side yard, fiddling with the zipper on her collapsed tent. He wanted to call her over for backup.

But before he could, the woman exhaled through her nose, hard, and folded her arms. “Well? Are you Jan or not?”

Her voice had gained an edge and a notch of upward volume. Impatient. Not used to people not responding right away. (Which of course made Jan even more hesitant, assertive strangers barking at him to answer being one of life’s other more unsettling realities.)

This time, though, Emma heard the woman’s voice and came out in a hurry. She stopped in the fence gate and put her hands on her hips, her feet planted shoulder width apart. She locked the full force of her green eyes on the newcomer. “You first, lady. Who are you?”

“I was talking to Jan.”

“No, you were barking at him, which is not okay.”

“Barking? I don’t think so, sister.”

Emma’s head tilted. “Sister? ”

For an instant, the woman’s expression hardened, making the little hairs on the back of Jan’s neck bristle (she was, as Opa would say, a Serious Customer), but then she sighed and shook her head hard, as if to fling the hostility away before it could fully take hold. Her eyes softened, moving back and forth between Jan and Emma, betraying a slight uncertainty for the first time.

Emma stepped forward. “Well? Who are you?”

“This was a bad idea. I’m sorry.” The woman turned to go.

“Where is it?”

Emma’s voice was low but held enough weight to make it to the woman, who stopped but did not turn. “Where’s what?”

“The cancer,” Emma said.

The woman’s shoulders lifted and fell with the deepness of a long breath. She remained where she was, but turned her head slightly, like she was trying to catch the slightest sound behind her.

Emma spoke again. “My mom said losing her hair was the worst.”

Another long breath from the woman. Emma folded her arms and watched her, not in her usual challenge-the-world kind of way, but softer, like she was holding something delicate against herself. Jan was stunned by this new information. Emma had never mentioned anything about her mom having the C-word. He thought about how fragile parents could be, and wanted badly to ask Emma all about it right then, but wisely sensed that this was not the moment.

The woman turned. “Both lungs. But hopefully gone now.”

Emma nodded. “Mom’s was in her right breast. She beat it, too.”

“I can’t quite say that yet.”

“Bummer. Ginger says SCREW CANCER.”

Jan’s mouth fell open. Emma had not actually said Screw but had employed its terrible and obscene cousin. He had never heard her use the actual word before, even whispered in private. First the news about her mom and now this. The ground might not have been as firm as he had always known it to be.

But the woman simply smiled, bright and real and utterly disarmed by Emma’s brashness. Not offended. Not horrified like he obviously was. “Allison feels the same way.”

“I thought she might.”

“You’re Allison, then,” Jan said, feeling even as he spoke that he might just have made the world’s dumbest (or at least most painfully obvious) statement.

“I am. And you’re Jan.”

“Yes. Hi.”

Emma closed the distance and stuck out a hand. “I’m Emmaline.”

Allison gripped the offered hand and shook it firmly. “You sure are. I like your shirt, Emma.”

“Yeah, it’s awesome. And it’s Emmaline, with the emphasis on line.”

Allison laughed and said she would try to do better, and the tension evaporated as easily as kettle steam in a warm kitchen. As Emma and Allison traded a few basic pleasantries, smiling back and forth at each other with the warmth of all sorts of inside knowledge, like siblings reunited after a lifetime apart, Jan watched his friend. Wondering hard. Emma caught the look and gave Jan his own tiny smile, that contained in a millisecond a reassurance that, yes, they could talk later about her bombshell Cancer reveal and casual dropping of a certain forbidden word.

“You’re probably wondering why I’m here.” As she spoke, Allison clasped her hands behind her, drawing her shoulders back and making her seem even taller.

“Big time,” Jan and Emma said in unison, then looked at each other and laughed. When had that ever happened before?

“So I get this phone call...”

And she told the story about her cell phone ringing late one afternoon, and an officer named Poirier on the other end of the line. Poirier talked about a couple of kids who had been so keen on getting a set of ID disks back to one AG Gallant (A for Allison! Jan blurted out, unable to help himself but once again immediately feeling like a heel for

spouting the obvious) that they had trooped into the intimidating halls of NDHQ all by themselves, but who had been clearly shattered by Poirier's inability to help them finish their mission. Allison laughed when she relayed the part about the officer getting all emotional when she talked about how charming these two kids were, about how rather than just forwarding the disks on, Poirier had brought up the service record and discovered who AG Gallant was.

"Then she contacted me to come and pick up the tags," Allison said.

Emma pumped her fist. "Yes! I knew you were a girl! Didn't I tell you, J?"

"Yeah, yeah, Ginger got skillz," Jan said.

"Okay, Mister A is for Allison!"

Jan winced. "Anyhow, what changed Poirier's mind? She didn't budge for us."

"Google changed her mind," Allison said.

"How?" Jan asked.

"Yeah," Emma said. "And why Google?"

Allison considered their questions for a moment, like she was wrestling with how much to say, and grew somber. She folded her arms and looked at the ground, breathing deep and long. Emma and Jan glanced at each other, shrugged, and waited, sensing that there are moments to speak and push, and there are moments when waiting is most important. Looking at this tall, striking veteran as she struggled definitely put this moment into the second category.

Finally, Allison sighed and shook her head. "Nope. Not today."

"Why not?" Emma asked.

"I have to go."

"Wait," Jan said. "That's not fair. We—"

He cut himself off from finishing that statement when he saw her looking at him. His eyes found hers, and her look told him with absolute clarity that he could not

remotely understand what fair meant. Emma must have seen what he had, because she remained uncharacteristically quiet as Allison quietly said goodbye and walked away. They returned the farewell (because that was polite, and Politeness Is Next To Godliness) and watched her go, feeling very much like they had been led to a water fountain on a scorching hot day, but had not been allowed to drink.

Motion Sensors and Strangers

Opa arrived home from work later than usual that evening, carrying a heavy shopping bag in one hand and an extra large pizza box in the other. Jan was sitting on the step, just as he had been for the last half hour or so, just staring at his neglected merganser, his roll of whittling tools unused and tightly bound. He and Emma had spent the rest of the day completing the camp takedown and cleaning up the garden, scooping up the pieces of squashed zucchini and clipping back any damaged leaves. Talking about Allison's unusual appearance. And goofing off, on Emma's orders (it was summer, after all).

Jan got up and started to open the front door for Opa.

"Change in plans," Opa said. "Picnic dinner in the side yard tonight. Can you take the pizza? My arm is getting tired."

"Sure," Jan said, "even though there's no way your arm is tired."

"Okay, how about this: Jan, take the pizza because I want you to stop staring into nowhere, get off your keister, and get involved in the family meal."

Jan snickered and took the box, his mouth immediately watering at the smell of the pizza. Opa had picked it up from The Colonnade, their favourite place, which used extra salty toppings and more cheese than seemed reasonable, but in combinations so delicious they slipped

with ease even through Oma's considerable defences. Still, some things were sacrosanct, and while Jan and Opa set up chairs and the camp table, Oma appeared with a tray loaded with a plate of steaming green beans and a bowl of tossed salad, biodegradable plates and cutlery, and water for everyone. Opa must have called ahead—one did not surprise Oma with takeout and not give her the proper chance to Green Up The Meal.

She looked around. "I assumed Emmaline would be joining us."

"She would have if she'd known about the pizza," Jan said.

"Give her a call, then. Invite her dad, too. There's plenty of food—Lord knows how filling this stuff is."

"I offered, but she went home to talk to her dad about..." Jan stopped, realizing that he had not figured out what to say to his grandparents about Allison's sudden and strange appearance. Or whether to say anything at all. Emma had not had his reservations, and in fact had been visibly excited about telling her dad. Admittedly, Jan's offer for dinner had been just as much about buying time for himself as for her company, which she sensed as soon as he offered to let her use the house phone after dinner. Oh, J, she had said, her voice thirty years older and thirty times more condescending, some things you need to talk about in person.

Opa sat with a groan and, after a well-loved tirade against his old bones, looked at Jan. "Talk to her dad about what?"

"That pizza smells delicious!" he said, leaning over the box and desperately avoiding eye contact. "Right, guys?"

This was an obvious dodge, and promptly earned a No Secrets In This Household look from Oma. She began spooning greens onto plates. "Sounds like DD subject matter to me."

Jan groaned. "Now? Before we eat?"

She handed out the plates and the cutlery. “Well...what about doing the DD over dinner?”

Opa looked away and smirked. The reason for the suggested change in routine was steaming away in that greasy box and getting cold. Pizza was powerful stuff, of course, but its power changed as it cooled. So they ate and talked. Jan told them about Allison and the dog tag connection, and about how Emma had known about Allison’s cancer just by looking at her, because of her mom’s sickness. Opa and Oma did not know about the cancer, and asked a few questions, quieted by yet another challenge Emma’s family had been forced to confront. Jan felt it, too, and did not really notice that he had only gotten a couple of bites in before his pizza grew cold.

After the meal, Opa pulled open the bag he had brought home. Inside was a battery-operated motion light he planned to mount over the garden, and a smoked mirror bubble with a white ring base.

Oma’s eyebrow raised. “A security camera? Are you sure we can afford this?”

Opa chuckled and pried open the bubble. There was nothing inside.

“It’s fake!” Jan exclaimed.

“Not fake, but a dummy camera,” Opa said. “The guy at the store told me they’re effective because everyone these days knows what security cameras look like.”

“That’s pretty clever,” Jan said. “You behave because you never know if you’re being watched.”

“Exactly.”

“And the light?” Oma asked.

“100% real,” Opa replied. “It’ll turn on if there’s any movement in the garden. An ounce of prevention...”

“Equals an ounce of cure,” Oma said.

“But we can’t stay outside anyhow,” Jan said. “So why ___”

“No one messes with my garden,” Opa said, his voice dropping to match his serious expression. “Or my grandson’s.”

“Geoff, I’m not sure I like this escalation,” Oma said.

“My love, this is also about our own security. I don’t like that whoever did this figured we were an easy target.”

“Joe already does. He—” Jan physically clapped a hand to his mouth to keep from saying more.

“What about Joe?” Opa asked. “Was he involved?”

Jan remained silent, thinking about loose lips and how mad Emma would be that Joe’s involvement had come out.

Oma looked at him. Hard. “We don’t keep secrets from each other, Jan.”

There was something in the look, irked and impatient yet so full of trust that he would do the right thing, that he told them everything about the night in question. He would have to tell Emma he had spilled the beans. She would not be pleased.

“You heard but didn’t see him?” Opa said.

Jan shook his head.

“That’s pretty thin,” Oma said.

“It was Joe, Oma, I know it.”

“Okay, we believe you,” Opa said. “But be careful. You don’t have proof of Joe’s involvement—”

“Alleged involvement,” Oma corrected him.

“Right. Just watch what you say to him, okay? Accusations without proof can bring more trouble than the original offence.”

“Okay, Opa.”

“I don’t like any of this,” Oma said. “And now we have a camera?”

“A dummy camera,” Jan said.

“Still...”

She fell silent and looked around, like she was worried about what the neighbours would say if they saw the new precautions.

Opa noticed the look, and laid a hand on her arm. “Don’t worry, I’ll mount them out of sight. And low, so the light only shines on the garden. Deal?”

Opa watched her for a long moment. Finally, she nodded, and he leaned back in his lawn chair and sighed, clearly relieved that this had not become A Mountain To Die On. She smiled, got up from her chair, and walked behind him, leaning in to whisper something into his ear, too low for Jan to hear. With a laugh, he turned and reached an arm around her waist, bringing her to his front and into his lap in one clean (and, Jan thought, impressive for their age) motion. Next was more laughter and even some tickling (which was also impressive and perhaps a bit concerning), and a long, lingering kiss at the end, which Jan had to look away from because it lasted so long. When they finally came up for air, even in his peripheral vision he could see the redness in their grinning faces as they looked at each other with an alarming amount of eye contact.

“Gross,” he said.

“Oh, just you wait,” Oma said, standing and readjusting her clothing, which had gotten half turned around in the commotion. Opa just smiled, reached up, and gave her behind a light smack, growling low like a playfighting puppy, and she halfheartedly slapped his hand away and blew him a kiss.

In a word, horrifying. “Super gross.”

They just laughed at his discomfort. Opa got up to help Oma collect the dishes and trays, leaving Jan alone in the yard when they carried everything inside. Except for the pizza. He slipped his hand into the box and pulled out a slice and enjoyed a few minutes of cold-pizza solitude.

Opa reappeared a few minutes later, toolbox in hand, and Jan helped him install the dummy camera and motion

light. Opa even let him work the impact driver this time, the screws fixing the dummy camera's mounting plate to the fence post with a buzz. They had a good laugh while testing the motion light, with Opa and Jan alternating playing the thief: every time the new unit's built-in timer switched off the light after a minute of inactivity, Opa or Jan would sneak into the yard to see if they could fool the sensor. They never did.

Later, when Jan called Emma to tell her about their evening, he found her serious and withdrawn, and not willing to say much about her own dinner. Jan imagined that telling her dad about Alison and her cancer had to have dimmed the mood. He wanted to ask Emma more about her mom, but did not. It was hard to dig up some memories, much less talk about them. He then found himself thinking about his own parents and the upcoming anniversary for the first time in quite some time, which made him feel guilty, and he grew serious and quiet.

But when Oma and Opa's exchange about the dummy camera and light sensor entered the conversation, and then a play-by-play of the PDA shenanigans that followed, he and Emma lightened up, and had a good time expounding on just how gross it all really was (and dangerous, given Oma and Opa's advanced ages). They agreed that there were some things old people should probably never do, for safety's sake.

Saturday, July 30

That Merganser has a Temper

Jan sat on the step, holding his merganser and trying to whittle. Not very successfully. He had managed only a few cuts, the progress on the bird frustratingly slow.

He could not blame the weather: sunny and gorgeous, a reminder of the best of summer. Nor could he blame the day: Saturdays were supposed to be wide open, full of possibility but open to the idea of doing nothing at all. Kids could just treat them like any other summer day, and adults could reclaim a bit of the week for themselves in a relaxed way. Graham Park seemed to get it. People were out, walking around, gardening, chasing dogs and kids on various grass surfaces, doing all sorts of things in that easy weekend way.

Other people, anyhow. For Oma and Opa, this summer's Saturdays were the crown jewels of the week, and guarded with as much precision. They set their alarms, even. Jan would yawn and morning-scratch his way into the kitchen to find them bustling around and getting ready for whatever they had planned for themselves. Summer activities at Adam's Lake, where everyone was on vacation, had been undertaken with the goal of Quality Family Time (which Oma had naturally christened QFT), and the assumption that they would be done together. This summer, though, they guarded Saturdays for themselves and largely

left Jan to his own devices, apart from a loose rule that he had to be within earshot of a trusted adult at all times.

This morning had begun no differently. Emma had called to tell him that her dad was taking her out for the day. Oma and Opa had already made and packed a picnic lunch into a pair of battered backpacks (that had been his mom and dad's) and were already showered and dressed. The plan: a bike ride west along the city's many bike paths to a park along the Ottawa river, where they would spend the day reading and eating and exploring.

"Okay," Jan had said. "Have fun."

"Thanks!" Opa had said. "Been a long time since we went for a good long ride."

"Oh, and don't forget about the barbecue tonight," Oma said. "If we don't see you, make your way over by five or five thirty, okay?"

"Barbecue?"

"At Hog's Back, remember? The Donski's are hosting all of Joe's customers."

Jan had groaned. "Oh, come on."

The idea of the barbecue felt like the perfect miserable storm. More adults lapping up Joe's (fake) charms, cementing his neighbourhood image as the perfect young entrepreneur. He pictured Joe in host mode, gracious to the grown-ups but obviously still making time to torment him and Emma in new ways. Maybe even arranging things so they would have to make small talk with the adults or something equally horrifying.

But Oma did not catch Jan's disbelief. "The flyer called it Customer Appreciation Night. Isn't that nice?"

"Nice? Joe? Have you forgotten what he did—"

"Allegedly did."

"Ugh, Oma, would you please stop saying that? It's insulting."

She had been so surprised by his use of the word insulting that she did not speak, but just stood there with her mouth open.

“Hey, now,” Opa said. “Joe’s parents invited us weeks ago, and we said we’d attend. They invited all his customers.”

“So cancel!”

“Not gonna happen, kiddo. They’re our friends—”

“What? Since when? How could you—”

“Jan Jan Geoff Shirley, that’s enough!” Oma’s outburst had been delivered in a tone that was a whisker shy of a full shout. “We’re going, end of story. Whatever may have happened, Joe’s parents weren’t part of it. Besides, not every decision has to be about you, you know.”

“But—”

“Stop, just stop. I don’t need your attitude right now. And another thing...”

In this case, Oma’s use of Jan’s full name had not felt fond or affectionate; no, her tone had been full-on exasperation, and she had let fly with a long stream of reasons why she needed this barbecue. It was hard enough to be out of work. Chained to that stupid computer. Constantly at home. Looking forward to social time with grown ups, for a change. And so on. It was a flood, in a word, and muddy with a dozen pent-up frustrations.

By the end, she had been literally out of breath. They all had been. Even Opa had gone still, both hands resting on the counter and staring at the surface like he was searching for microscopic crumbs. Jan, still fuming, had looked to him for support, but he was clearly in Oma’s corner, as always, which was consistent and infuriating all at once. Jan had stomped out of the kitchen and up to his room, slamming his door hard enough to knock a family photograph from the hallway wall. Through his door, he heard the crunch of glass as the frame hit the stairs, but ignored it.

An hour ago, he had emerged to find the house silent and empty. Which was unsettling, not because he could not be on his own, but because his grandparents had left without saying goodbye. They always said goodbye. It was a family rule. You never knew what might happen, and if something really bad did happen, and you never got a chance to... Great, he had thought. Now I'm just going to worry about them all day. First the argument, and now this?

He took his knife and tried to groove the bird's wing, which had begun to take shape, but the blade hung on a small knot then released with a jerk, passing mere millimetres from the base of his thumb.

"Arrrrrggggh!"

He dropped the knife into the kit, growling as much from his own pent-up frustration as the near-injury. Maybe using razor-sharp tools on unpredictable wood was not the best idea right now. But, still, the cut remained unfinished, a splinter jutting out from where the knife had let go. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, then opened them again, hoping to have calmed himself enough to finish what he had started, even if it was just one groove on one stupid wing. He hated leaving things unfinished.

But it was not to be. If his grumpiness had made it difficult to whittle successfully or safely, the sight of Joe Donski wheeling his cart across the parking lot (now decorated with gaudy, custom JOE'S LAWN CARE stickers) made it impossible. (It is highly inadvisable to attempt precision cutting maneuvers when all you can see is red.)

"I heard you all the way across the neighbourhood," Joe said. "Is girlie frustrated about something?"

"You're unbelievable."

"Thank you! I think so."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"Says you. It's all in how you take it."

Joe chuckled and leaned down to unstrap his gear from the cart. He used ratcheting cinch-straps to keep things tied down properly between lawns. Jan found himself annoyed that someone like Joe would think about safety: after all, how could he hurt himself if he was so darn careful? Joe put on his lumberjack helmet, lowered the face shield, and slung his trimmer over his shoulder. He moved across the lawn and stood right next to Jan.

“Gotta trim, sister. Watch your eyes.”

“I don’t suppose you’d be willing to go away right now.”

“Nope, same as always. A contract is a contract, and you already know about my stellar reputation.”

“Whatever.”

“You must be pumped about the barbecue.”

“Not even a little.”

“I am. All those grownups, eating out of my hand...”

Jan shook his head and began rolling up his whittling gear.

“But do you know what I’m most excited about?” Joe asked, flipping up his face shield for a moment and leaning in, looking around like he was worried about being overheard. He lowered his voice.

“Yeah, I don’t care—”

“Seeing Emma.”

“What?!”

“She’s growing on me, Jannie-girl. That red hair, that fiery personality. Yum.”

Jan stood, his whittling roll under one arm, merganser in the other, knowing he had to get inside, STAT.

“I bet she kisses like a—”

Jan did not let Joe finish whatever he was about to say, which could only have taken a step (a flying leap, perhaps) too far. Actually, it would be more accurate to say that the hand holding the merganser did not let Joe finish. It took over all of Jan’s synapses and muscles, completely bypassing the part of the brain responsible for caution and

reason, and swung the unfinished duck right into the middle of Joe's leering face before he could finish whatever disgusting thing he was about to say. The crack of wood on nose was sharp and loud (enough to be heard, ironically, across the neighbourhood) and there was an instant spray of epic nosebleed. (Some of which ended up on Jan's shirt, which he would only find later.)

Now, he would never have wished such a nosebleed on anyone, not even someone like Joe, but in this case it might have saved him. Joe started bleeding so much, so fast, that he had no choice but to use one of his hands to pinch the nose closed, which meant that he had one less hand to deliver the brutal unpleasantness he surely would have if it were not for all that blood. Every time he took the hand away and made a fist, his nose would start up again, and drip, drip, drip over his mouth, down his chin, and onto his JOE'S LAWN CARE golf shirt.

There was enough blood that after a few minutes Jan actually began to feel bad for him.

"Joe, sit. It'll slow down the bleeding."

"If you think this'll—"

"Just sit."

Joe moved to the step and sat down, and Jan ran inside for a clean cloth from Oma's cleaning closet. He brought it outside, handing it to Joe from as far away as he could. Out of punching reach, he hoped. After a few more long minutes, the bleeding slowed then stopped enough for Joe to remove the cloth without freeing another torrent. A thin trickle was now all that came out, although Jan noticed that Joe's nose was starting to swell around the red mark where the merganser had struck. He did not say anything about that, though.

"You ruined my shirt." Joe stood and tried to look hard at Jan, but the cloth was still clamped to his nose. His words came out sounding more like You rooided by sherp.

"You smashed our zucchini."

“Prove it, dummy.” (Proob id, dubby.)

“Really? I was right there!”

“This isn’t over.” (Dis iddn’t ober.)

“Obviously.”

Then there was a bunch of other words probably meant to intimidate or threaten, but so many of them were muffled by the cloth and pitch-changed by Joe’s swelling nose (a sound Jan would later describe to Emma as Thnain, which made perfect sense to him but would make her roll her eyes), they were hard to understand. (Plus, the sounds were kind of funny, but Jan wisely decided to bite back his laughter.) From what he could tell, Joe was saying he had to go home for a clean shirt and that Jan better not be here when he got back to finish the lawn. Then he left, cloth held tight against his dribbling nose.

Jan looked down at the constellation of blood spatters on the sidewalk, then went inside to get a pail of water and sponge to scrub them away. There were some things you had to wash; they were entirely too visible. He did not think that it would be a problem to make himself scarce in the short term, but he did worry about a certain barbecue, and what a certain cretin—who had been whacked by a certain unfinished duck—might do to get revenge.

(Did not) Run into a Tree

Though Jan had sent wishes to the heavens for torrential rain all afternoon, the evening weather remained as cloudless as the rest of the day had been. He delayed heading to the park as long as he could, but by 5:20 he knew he could put it off no longer. Ten minutes of walking, then hours of misery.

Joe's parents had booked a pavilion at the park's western edge, a scenic spot overlooking Hog's Back Falls. Dozens of adults stood in small groups socializing, while kids of every age dashed around in packs. The grownups sipped beverages and nibbled on the dozens of finger food varieties spread across the tables. There were even tablecloths on every table: red and white checked, brightening the gloomy pavilion. The kids were distracted by all the space, only occasionally darting into the pavilion to grab a handful of chips or cookies. Everyone seemed to be having a good time.

There was, Jan decided, entirely too much happiness on display.

Emma, sitting by herself on a park bench, arms folded and scowling at all the festivities, saw him and waved. He was relieved to see her not having a good time—not

because she was miserable, but because at least he had an ally.

“Hey,” she said when he arrived

He sat down on the bench. “Hey, yourself.”

“Pop quiz: name the last place Ginger wants to be right now.”

He grinned. “Ooh, I think I know this one. Gimme a second. Uh...”

“Time’s up. No prize for you.”

“For either of us.”

She just grunted in response.

“Nice shirt.”

Emma looked down. “Thanks.”

The shirt was citrus yellow, with lime green writing.

**RALLY
FOR
BLAIN
&
CHARLIE**

“When did you—”

“Today, at the mall,” she said. “My dad had it made.”

“Your dad?”

“It’s a thing he does, especially when he’s missing Mom.”

“So that’s where you get them...”

“Yep. I choose the shirt, he pays for it and the screen printing.”

“That’s pretty cool.”

A shrug. “Usually, he gives me some warning, so I can find something memorable to write, but he didn’t tell me we were going to the mall until we were in the car. This was all I could come up with.”

“People will think you’re fundraising for something.”

“Bullying, obviously.”

“It’s a worthy cause.”

She smiled. “We can split the proceeds.”

“Obviously,” he said, nodding.

Solidarity was good, yet it was depressing, too, that Joe had affected her so much. Jan started telling her about his day, but just as he was about to tell her about his loss of control, Joe sauntered over with a plastic tray in hand, as though he could read minds from across the park. He was as clean and scrubbed as a showroom car, though the red mark on his nose and the swelling which had spread across both cheeks were unmistakable. Jan saw that plum bruises had begun to form in the inside corners of both eyes, which was horrifying. And, he admitted to himself, a little impressive. Who knew Jan—or his merganser—had had it in him?

Joe gave a mock bow when he arrived, holding out the tray, which was filled with tiny shrimpy things, with little pink tails sticking out of greasy breading. “Appetizer, ladies?”

He sounded almost normal, apart from the slightest nasal twang.

“Go away,” Jan said.

“Now, Jannie, is that any way to apologize?”

“Apologize for what?” Emma asked.

“Oh, he didn’t tell you?” Joe pointed at his face. “How do you think I got the shiner?”

“Oh, come on...”

“No, really. Prince Charming here might not be so charming.”

Emma made a dismissive sound, but Jan saw her checking out Joe’s wounds. Jan wanted to crawl under the bench just to avoid the inevitable moment when she turned that dissecting gaze on him.

Joe chuckled. "Quite a temper. A good match for a redhead, eh? Anyhow, since you don't want any of these goodies, I have other guests to attend to. 'Bye!"

Jan and Emma watched him walk over to the nearest group of adults. Jan was sickened by how they moved apart to give him space, how they leaned in to hear every twisted word.

"You punched him?"

"Yeah," he said. "Well, no. I hit him with the merganser."

"You might've broken his nose."

"Hopefully."

There was silence from Emma. Jan watched Joe continue his deceptive dance between the grown-ups

"I'm not okay with this, Jan."

"Mmm? Yeah, yeah, violence solves nothing, I know."

Another long moment. Jan became aware that Emma was not watching Joe, but was staring, hard, at the side of Jan's head. Then her use of his whole first name hit him. Ginger did not say Jan.

"Wait, you're serious?"

"As a tooth cavity. Why'd you do it?"

Jan opened his mouth, then closed it. Of course she would not like that he had reacted in that way; this was not a shock. However, he was stymied by how much to say next, if anything at all. He could not tell her the real reason...could he? That the wood duck had been used as a blunt instrument of violence because Joe had done what, exactly? Used a few sneering words? Jan began to be disappointed in himself. He should be able to handle words, of all things, not lose it the moment an idiot like Joe attacked Jan's best friend's...honour? As if it was his to defend!

He shrugged. "Lost my cool, that's all. He can really get under a guy's skin."

"Understatement of the year, maybe?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry, Emma."

“Apology accepted. All is right with the world.”

“Thank goodness. One mortal enemy is quite enough, thank you very much.”

“Right?!”

As though on cue, their mortal enemy’s (nasal) voice rose high above the crowd to call everyone together. The various groups moved closer to him, like small galaxies being sucked into a black hole. Voices paused in mid-conversation. Drinks were held suspended. Children moved next to parents. And Jan and Emma found themselves getting up and following. She found her dad. Jan found Oma and Opa, speaking with a couple about their age he had never seen before.

A guy in a gaudy chef’s hat and stained apron stepped forward and raised a set of barbecue tongs. A woman stood beside him, smiling at the crowd. Joe’s parents. Younger-looking than Jan would have guessed. The family resemblance was more than uncanny, it was uncomfortable: when the dad motioned Joe over and he stood between his folks, it was like a complete collector’s set of suburban collectible figures had been reassembled. Joe’s dad delivered a brief speech—none of which Jan heard over the rushing of anger and embarrassment in his ears—and put his arm around Joe, who smiled like a kid about to receive a new car for his birthday.

The crowd ate it up. When Joe’s dad turned the floor over to his son for his own moment, one of the moms put two fingers in her mouth and whistled. A dad cupped his hands around his mouth, yelling “Speech! Speech!”

Which Joe delivered perfectly, a prepared round of thanks and gracious acknowledgements that had every adult and child nodding along. Oma and Opa, too, of course. (Jan could practically see Oma’s thoughts written bold across her face: *Now This Is How To Show Gratitude.*)

Then one of the kids yelled something, and everyone laughed. Joe did not catch the comment and asked for the

speaker—a young, pigtailed girl in a summer dress—to repeat it.

Which she did, her tiny voice rising thin above the crowd. “I asked what happened to your face, Joe!”

More laughter.

“Oh, it was nothing, really,” he said once everyone quieted down, hung on his every word. “I ran into a tree, can you imagine?”

An appreciative gasp rose from his adoring fans, followed by more laughter and even a round of applause as he made a quip about the sacrifices that needed to be made in the service of Good Lawn Care. But as he delivered the final few words, he looked around and found Jan; though he was smiling, there was a dangerous flatness in his eyes. Then there was another round of applause when Joe announced that the food was ready, and for everyone to dig in. The herd, as if on cue, moved en masse towards the pavilion, where steaming trays of burgers, hot dogs, and sausages waited. There was salad and potato chips in massive bowls, and paper plates and cutlery that had been molded in grass green. Jan was surprised to feel his stomach turning over and growling at the smell.

Opa lingered a moment. “That was quite a look he gave you.”

“You saw that?”

“Sure did. I’m worried about—”

Opa stopped himself, his eyes resting on the front of Jan’s shirt. Jan looked, too. The spray of blood droplets had darkened to a deep maroon, and was even more visible now. His heart fell into his stomach, killing his appetite. In the stress and worry of coming here, he had completely forgotten to change. And Emma had not noticed because she had been sidelong to him on the bench.

Opa sighed, his face now stern. “It wasn’t a tree, was it?”

Jan could only shake his head and look at the ground.

“Go home. We’ll discuss this later.”

“But—”

“Now, Jan.”

Opa did not wait for a response. Instead, he turned towards the food and the conversation (which had of course again risen to epically cheerful levels) and left Jan standing alone in the stepped-down patch of grass where Joe had delivered his speech. Jan stepped away from the celebration, its cheer burning his back as he left, and slowly walked home, counting every shuffling step on the way.

Tuesday, August 2

Blight

Emma knelt next to Blain and leaned in. “I see it.”
Jan nodded. “I noticed yesterday. I think it’s worse today.”

“What is it?”

“Dunno.”

“Let’s ask your Opa.”

Jan did not reply. Instead, he leaned over and plucked a vivacious weed that had literally sprouted overnight next to Charlie. Every day seemed to bring at least one new parasite plant. How could the darn things grow so fast? He noticed Emma watching him but he did not know what to say about it. Asking Opa about the strange yellowish colour that had appeared on Blain the day before had, of course, been his instinct, too, but...

“Well?” Emma asked.

“Can you ask him?”

“Me? Why? What’s going on?”

“We’re not saying much to each other right now.”

“You mean you’re not speaking to him. I don’t see your Opa as being the silent-treatment type.”

She was not wrong. Opa was his normal self. Jan, on the other hand, was not: he had not yet apologized to Joe, which Opa and Oma had ordered him to do. They, of course, had left it to him to do in his own time, which was their way. But he had not been able to do the deed, partly

because he was worried what Joe would do but mostly because Jan still did not feel that he had done much of anything wrong. Why should he say sorry? Joe had been tormenting him all summer. Was he not permitted to defend himself? (Yes, he recognized that he had not been strictly acting in his own defence, but Joe had crossed a line when he had taunted Jan about Emma.)

“Which means you haven’t apologized to Joe,” Emma said, reading his mind.

“Nope.”

“Just get it done, J. Ginger wants her friend back, and Joe isn’t worth the trouble.”

“I’m here, Em.”

“Physically, maybe. Mentally, though...”

She had let her voice trail off, mysterious, just so Jan would look over (which, naturally, he did) then mouthed the word *Zombie* at him. He had to smile at that, and he heard himself tell her that he would take care of it, and not to worry, that her *Zombie* friend would be just fine.

A Handbook for Heroes

Later, Oma delivered a lunch of cucumber and cream cheese sandwiches, veggie sticks, and some deep red vegetable drink that looked like tomato juice but tasted more like celery (Brain Food to keep their minds from withering over the summer, obviously). She did not say much but was as kind and gracious as ever, which of course made Jan feel even worse about his lack of apology to Joe: nothing burned worse than normal when a guy felt anything but. There was, of course, far too much food. Emma and Jan sat on the step and ate, trying to figure out what to do with themselves for the rest of the afternoon.

“We could just hang out here,” Jan said.

“And do what?”

“Well, I have some work to do on the merganser—”

“Nope.”

“It’s just that I’m behind schedule.”

“What schedule?”

“Completion by end of summer.”

Emma rolled her eyes. “Uh huh. What happens if you don’t finish by then?”

“You think I won’t finish?”

“I have absolutely zero interest in whether that duck gets done on time or not, J. It doesn’t have to happen by a certain date on the calendar.”

He frowned. Schedules should be followed.

“Besides,” Emma said. “What would I do?”

“Up to you. You could read or something.”

“Ooooooooh, that sounds fabulous. I could be, like, J’s whittling fangirl!”

“Not what I meant.”

“Ginger does not sit and watch boys do what they want. Especially if it’s as boring as whittling.”

She stood and brushed the crumbs from her shorts, black fitted sporty things for a change, and started to say goodbye, that she had soccer that evening and that she should practice some long-neglected skills.

“You could do that here,” Jan said.

“Ginger prefers a back yard where no one can see how rusty she has become.”

“I could bring my whittling to your—”

“Hey, she’s back,” Emma said, nodding at the parking lot.

Jan followed the look. Striding across the pavement, still wearing jeans and jacket and scarf, was Allison, her eyes fixed on Jan’s home. Halfway there, she stopped, her eyes widening when they rested on Jan and Emma, like the two kids had been invisible until just that instant. Her hesitation was radiated through her every sinew, and she stood in the middle of the parking lot, visibly trembling, like a bowstring drawn back and held just before release. Then she took a deep breath and resumed her walking, and was soon at the foot of the sidewalk, where she stopped just like last time, like an invisible line had been drawn across the cement in a warning colour only she could see.

“Why do you care?” Allison asked.

It was, to be sure, a strange way to open a conversation, and Jan and Emma glanced at each other, not really knowing how to respond. There were protocols and polite rituals to observe when you saw someone after awhile. Hellos. Howareyous. Small talk about weather and sports and the thousand tiny things people used to connect with

one another. Allison's directness was an unsettling spotlight; Jan was a small animal pinned down ten feet from the safety of its dark, underground home.

Thank goodness for Emma's inner Ginger, though, who took over. "Care about what, Allison?"

"About me. About getting my dog tags back to me."

"No one likes losing things," Emma said. "And they are pretty special."

"We all had them."

"Can I ask why you threw them away?"

Allison paused to consider Emma's question. "I don't really remember doing it, to be honest."

"Really?"

"I have these gaps where the meds—" She looked at the sky. "Uh, let's just say I can't always predict what I'll need to get rid of."

As she spoke, her eyes began to water, some buried emotion brought close to the surface too soon. But instead of wiping them away, she stuffed her hands into her jeans pockets, like she might have decided that she would let the tears come, but her hands often had other ideas. As though someone had almost convinced her that it was all right to cry, but her whole history fought the idea with everything it had. Maybe Jan was not the only one who felt strange, and that a person could be pinned down by daylight, too.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, standing and holding out the plate of sandwiches. "It's cucumber and cream cheese. It's really good."

Allison's eyes grew wide, surprised, as though no one had ever offered her a sandwich before. Which, if so, was heartbreaking—what would a life be like without someone nice offering food?

"And we have lots," Emma said.

"Way too much, to be honest," Jan said.

Allison stood unmoving for a long moment, before finally chuckling and nodding. She freed her hands, which

immediately went to her eyes to clear them, then stepped towards them, selecting half a sandwich from the offered plate.

“I was going to refuse on principle,” she said. “But then I realized that I’m really flipping hungry.”

Except she did not say Flipping. She used another version of the terrible word Emma had dropped the last time Allison was here. Not for emphasis, like Emma had, but like a regular word in a regular sentence on a regular day. And yet something in the moment caused her to pause just before her first bite, understanding.

“Whoops,” she said. “Not appropriate language. Sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Emma said. “We don’t care.”

Oma sure would, Jan thought. Me, too, to be honest.

He watched Allison take her first bite and give a tiny smile as she chewed. The smile was fleeting, like when you were out biking at night and for the hundredth time you passed that dark house where no one seemed to live but this time a light brightened the side window and you flashed by, not really knowing if you saw the light at all and not turning back because it was almost better not knowing. She chewed in silence.

Too quiet for Emma, obviously. “I googled you.”

Allison swallowed. “Is that so?”

“You’re kind of a big deal.”

Allison shook her head. “Not really. I just did my job, and it got noticed. We all did.”

“Isn’t that something heroes are supposed to say?”

“Yep.”

Emma’s eyes widened. “Seriously?”

“Absolutely. There’s a handbook and everything. Can’t have the dumb troopers talking to the media without first telling them what to say.”

“That’s not very empowering...”

“Maybe. Good thing for me it also happens to be 100% true.”

Jan asked, "That's not always the case?"

Allison paused to consider. "You can be selfish even when you're doing the right—or brave—thing."

Emma snorted. "You don't hear that in the news."

"Amen, sister."

This time Emma did not bristle at the word, as though she had reached a kind of peace about this strange woman standing in front of them finishing her sandwich. After the last bite, Allison's brow knitted tight like she was processing a tough bit of news, her eyes moving back and forth between them.

"I still don't get it," she said.

"Get what?" Jan asked.

"And a flipping cucumber sandwich, too."

Emma giggled, but Allison did not notice. She had dropped the f-bomb again, but this time did not apologize. Instead, she unwrapped the scarf from her neck, fiddled with it, and wrapped it around again, tighter this time, and walked away. The movement had been so quick and well-practiced that her throat was only exposed for an instant. But long enough for Jan to see rough, parallel scars there, pink and thinly ragged, like a bear blaze on a tree. Then she left. Another abrupt departure that still seemed to leave an almost physical impression in the space she had occupied. But you could not call it rudeness, like Oma would have; it felt more necessary than that.

"Now that is one strange chick," Emma said.

"She seems so sad."

She shrugged. "War and cancer, probably."

"Did you see the scars?"

"What scars?"

"On her neck."

"Nope."

"When did you google her?"

"After she came by the other day. I had to verify what you told me."

“You don’t trust me?”

“Sure I do. But a girl can always learn more.”

True, he thought. Guys, too. But nothing compared to what Allison had obviously had to learn. What she had been through. And seen. And somehow managed to survive.

Friday, August 5

Before the Sun

Jan woke up at 3:02, and the storm arrived at 3:03, the very instant his clock digits changed. He was sweaty from a strange dream he could now barely remember, apart from random and fading images of zucchini, dog tags, wood shavings, and, for some odd reason, bowls of puppy chow.

He could not recall the last time he had been awake for an overnight thunderstorm, and it was something. Daytime thunderstorms were cool, but they were patient, creeping up and grumbling in the distance, and gradually darkening the sky. But this one arrived all at once, crashing into the eastern side of the Shirley household with the suddenness of a locomotive.

What Jan observed:

- a flash of lightning so bright his curtains became irrelevant;
- an explosion of thunder so big it was like God had sledgehammered the ground;
- a roar of hail against the roof so voluminous it sounded like it would scour the skin from his body if he stepped outside;
- a heart-rate spike so sudden that Jan wondered if it was possible to live through it (until he realized that realizing was a pretty good sign he had).

And, of course, storm time moved on its own clock, which made the few raging minutes feel like an hour. It also woke everyone else up. Jan stepped out of his room into the deafening sounds of the hail and rain lashing the house to find Opa scurrying around to make sure all the windows had been closed the night before (they had not).

“You all right, Jan?” he yelled as he dashed past.

“I think so! I—”

But Opa was gone, leaving Jan’s shouts to trail off and disappear into the noise, and leaving him to stand there, mouth open, feeling silly. Then Oma appeared, loading Jan up with a pile of towels. He followed her and they soaked up the puddles that had formed beneath every open window. They moved quickly, room to room. There was no speaking (yelling) because there was simply no time. Or any point in trying because of the noise.

Then it was over as quickly as it had arrived. Jan and Oma finished the final window and went down to the kitchen, out of breath. Opa appeared a moment later, side hair sticking out every which way, looking like a crazed cornfield scarecrow that had braved a tornado.

“Wow,” he said, and sat down at the kitchen table.

“Any damage?” Oma asked.

“Not inside, as far as I can tell,” Opa replied. “I’ll go out and check the shingles and siding in a few minutes. Gotta catch my breath first.”

“That was something,” Oma said.

“Never seen anything like it. The thunder practically knocked me out of bed.”

“Me, too,” Jan said.

“You okay?” Oma asked him, moving to the cupboard, bringing down her box of teas and selecting a box of ginseng vanilla rooibos. She filled and set the kettle to boil, packed a tea ball and put it into her favourite pot, an electric-blue monster she picked up at a thrift store, and moved back to the table.

“I’m fine.”

“Good, good,” she said, then stopped and flicked one of Opa’s stray locks. “Nice hair.”

“Look who’s talking,” Opa said, smacking her lightly on her behind.

He wasn’t wrong—her hair was a mess of tangles—but Jan rolled his eyes at the bum-smack. “Gross.”

“Nope, quite the opposite,” Opa said. “You’ll get it s—”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll get it someday, I know.”

Oma leaned in and gave Opa a lingering kiss right on top of his head and squeezed the back of his neck before moving back to the kettle. He blushed, smiled, and blew a kiss at her, smacking his lips extra loud so she would hear it.

“So, so gross!”

Both grandparents chuckled at his discomfort.

After the kettle boiled, Oma counted to thirty (Never use water right after the boil, she would say. This stuff is Way Too Precious to Waste in too-hot water!) before filling the pot. She slid out a tray from beside the stove, took three matching mugs down from the cupboard and placed them on the tray, laying the pot on a trivet next to them, and brought everything over to the table. Jan and Opa watched her, knowing better than to say anything about her old habits, much less try to speed her along. This was a calming ritual, her very own tea ceremony.

When the tea was ready, they sipped in silence for a long time, which was a remarkable thing. His grandparents loved to talk over a good hot cup of something. But this felt different, like a middle-of-the-night vigil that did not need words. And just as remarkable was that Oma had simply placed a hot mug of her best tea in front of him, as though he had earned it just by being awake in the moment. They sipped and gradually relaxed. It was good QBT for sure (Quality Bonding Time).

It was past 4:30 by the time Jan tumbled back into bed, and was asleep precisely two seconds after his head hit the pillow. He never said it aloud, to anyone, but he had really enjoyed that tea. In fact, it had been the best he ever had. Which, in a home stocked with the finest of the stuff, was saying something.

Dress to Impress

Jan stopped in the middle of the front hallway and stared. “Whoa, Oma!”

“Okay, okay, kiddo,” Oma said, scowling at him halfheartedly, not ready for the compliment but still pleased to receive it.

“Granny looks gooooooooooooood,” Opa said, stopping next to her and planting a kiss on her cheek.

“No, Granny looks amazing,” Oma said. “Although if you ever call me that again, my love, you’re sleeping on the couch for a week. Capiche?”

Opa just smiled and whispered something in her ear.

She smiled at him. “Thanks, Geoff. I feel good about this.”

“You should. You’ve earned it.”

Oma went in front of the full-length mirror on the back of the front closet door and looked herself over. She was dressed in a blazer and knee-length skirt, both in a matching summer beige, with a white collared blouse underneath. She had taken the time that morning to do her hair like she had in the old days at the school board, and her makeup and lipstick was expertly applied. Opa gave her a thumbs-up before putting on his hat and sitting on the stairs behind her to lace up his work boots. She nodded at him in the reflection, satisfied, and picked up her briefcase,

an old, battered leather thing that somehow still looked classy, and moved to the door.

Jan asked, "What's the occasion?"

"Job interview," she said. "Always Dress to Impress, right?"

"That's great, Oma."

"She's going to crush it, as you kids say," Opa said.

"I better. I've been up since the storm finalizing my presentation."

Jan felt suddenly grubby in his sleep shorts and shirt and bird's-nest hair. "You didn't go back to bed?"

"Nope. Too wired."

Opa stood and took his keys from his pocket. "Need a ride?"

"And arrive smelling like woodstain and covered in sawdust? Thanks, but no thanks. I'll get the bus."

Opa smiled. "Okay, then. Knock 'em dead, Favourite Person."

"I plan to. And thanks." She kissed Opa, opened the door, said a farewell over her shoulder, and left.

"When was her last interview?" Jan asked. "Feels like a long time ago."

"Too long. I hope this is the one. She's been so—" Opa paused, his face shadowing over for an instant. But then he brightened up—even Jan could see that it took a lot of effort to do so—and lifted his toolbox. He turned to Jan. "Anyhow, help me load up?"

"Okay, Opa."

Jan grabbed one of the milk crates stacked up by the door and followed Opa, the weight bumping heavily against his thighs. Outside, the sun was shining and the air was warm. It had a scrubbed-clean feeling and smell, like the storm had thrown the neighbourhood into the tub and scoured it pink with old-school horse brushes and lye soap. Everything was still soaking wet, with puddles and beaten-

down vegetation everywhere Jan looked. A million water droplets caught the sun, making the view shimmer.

“Ah, shoot,” Opa said, sighing and thumping his toolbox onto the ground next to the van.

He had not said Shoot, but another sh-word Jan was definitely not supposed to say. What was with people getting foul around him all of a sudden? “Language, Opa.”

“Right, Jan. Sorry.”

But his words were halfhearted at best, and as he moved in front of the vehicle, he uttered another shoot-but-not-shoot, this one louder and harder than the first. Jan followed his eyes, and finally understood. Hail damage. There were three dimpled dents on the slanted hood, the paint popped out of each, perfectly round, exposing the white primer underneath. The driver’s side headlight had shattered, leaving a scattering of clear plastic on the driveway. A fourth hailstone had starred the windshield on the passenger side. Opa opened the rear doors and stood on a hinge to inspect the roof, exhaling with relief.

“The ladders and tubes up here took the brunt of it. No more dents.”

“That’s good.”

“The house was fine when I checked after the storm,” Opa said, “but I didn’t think to check the van. Stupid!”

“But you couldn’t—”

Jan stopped. Opa was not really speaking to anyone other than himself, so he decided to just listen. His grandfather was chastising himself for his lack of action after the storm, even though there was little he could have done in the middle of the night. After a few moments, Opa pulled out his phone to check the time, muttering to himself about if the service centre was open and if they would take him in right away, that the police would fine him for the windshield and headlight if they did not get fixed, and he tapped a number on the screen and walked

away to place the call, leaving Jan to stand there with nothing to do but wait and wonder.

And then, out of the bright morning sky, he remembered Blain and Charlie and felt like saying a shoot-but-not-shoot of his own. He ran into the side yard, slipping and sliding on the wet and pummelled grass, and stopped next to the garden.

Heartbreak.

The garden had been thrashed. All he could see were plants beaten into the soil, leaves and stems crush-darkened and muddied by the relentless hailstones. Opa's vegetables seemed a lost cause, from the tomatoes to the lettuce that had looked almost ready to harvest yesterday. The green bean plants had been flattened, looking like someone had poured a bowl of green spaghetti pasta on the ground. The kale beaten level, bruised and limp.

Opa's voice behind him: "Oh, come on! Everything?"

"Seems like it, Opa."

"I just...I just can't right now. I gotta go."

"Opa, can't you just—"

"Sorry, kiddo. This is too much. Plus, the dealership said they'd take me first thing."

And then Opa was off, giving Jan a distracted kiss on the head (Seeing the garden must have gotten to him really bad, for him to do that) and walking away without another word. The van started up and rolled away, its tires hissing faintly against the wet pavement.

Jan took a deep breath and moved over to the zucchini trellis. At least two of the trellis's horizontal rails had been broken, and the plants below looked as beaten down as the rest of the garden. Alex, Joe's victim, had long since been reduced to a kind of hazy slime, her leaves limp and already crushed. There were bugs all over, reminding him he should remove it from the garden. Blain had been pulped by the hail to a yellowing mash, which was a kind of mercy, given how rapidly the blight had spread.

However, when he stepped next to Charlie, Jan practically cried with relief. Their last zuke had been miraculously spared, and shone a glistening, defiant green. A few of its leaves looked crushed, and a couple of stems had also been smashed, but Charlie remained the (only) beauty of the patch.

Something bright caught his eye, and he stooped for a closer look. There, underneath a few of the leaves, nestled tight between foliage and soil were a few hail stones, each now about the size of a pea, and melting fast. They must've been huge when they fell, Jan thought, fingering a stone out of its insulated nook, the ice melting to nothing but water by the time he brought it up for inspection.

"Okay, Charlie, you're our last hope for this thing," Jan whispered, laying a hand on the zucchini's cool shell. "No pressure, okay?"

He got up and headed back toward the front door, deciding that the storm and the amazing bit of grace he had just discovered was reason enough to call Emma. (She did not enjoy early phone calls, he had discovered. Ginger doesn't need beauty rest, but she sure enjoys a good long sleep. Don't mess with it.)

And who should be standing there, leaning against the fence post with a gargoyle sneer, but Joe. How long had he been watching? What had he heard? Jan felt instantly protective of Charlie—if Joe so much as twitched towards her, Jan would—

"I just had to come over right away. Wow, princess, what a mess!"

"Go away."

"My zukes are in the greenhouse. Some of the plexiglass panels are toast, but my bad boys are fine. Not yours, though. That sucks, hey?"

There was no sympathy in his voice, and no small measure of glee.

"Really, Joe? Now?"

“Yes, now, sister. I’m enjoying this.”

Jan made a growling sound that fell precisely between frustration and impatience. “You’re—”

“Brilliant? Yep.”

“No, just—”

“Devastatingly good-looking? Guilty as charged.”

“Ugh. No.”

“I guess this takes care of things, doesn’t it? More for me. Better luck next year.”

And he actually patted Jan on the shoulder, pleased as a baby who has just filled his diaper, not yet caring about the discomfort below. Plus, he was so caught up in his own self-propping that he was not even looking at Jan. Or the garden, for that matter. Jan realized that such was Joe’s arrogance that he simply assumed that everything had been lost. There was a small window of opportunity here, one where Joe did not need to know that he still had competition. If he was not aware...

Okay, Jan, he said to himself. Sell it.

“Yeah, next year,” he said, trying to sound glum enough to signal defeat.

“Of course, I’ll win next year, too.”

“Over my dead body!”

Maybe that was a bit much, Jan thought. But it worked. Joe smirked his ugly smirk and departed, laughing as he went. An ugly laugh, of course.

Saturday, August 6

Indiscriminate Cutting

Emma was furious. “Not again! Should Ginger just do it herself?”
“Take it easy. I got it.”

Jan ducked back down, reaching towards Blain’s wilted remnants with the small pruning shears, hoping to clip a tendril that had wormed its way into Charlie’s plant. But just as he placed the cutting blades around the stray creeper, his vision blurred and he ended up nicking the adjacent one, which might have belonged to Charlie. He hoped Emma had not seen it, but of course she had, and the exasperated sound that came out of her mouth was half groan, half shout.

“Just stop, J! You’re going to kill Charlie, too.”

“I can do it. I—”

“Give me the shears and walk away, or I swear I’ll—”

“Fine.”

He knelt back, handed over the cutting tool, stood, and let Emma take his place next to the tangled plants. It had been a busy morning. First, they had debated whether or not to remove the extra zucchini plants, leaving them as camouflage for Charlie, their last hope for the contest. However, Blain was so interwoven with both Alex and Charlie’s plants that they worried the blight would spread. In the end, they had decided to remove everything, both to keep Charlie healthy but also so the other plants did not

steal resources from the nearby soil. The next conversation about sourcing fresh fertilizer had been awkward and hilarious, and had prompted Oma to poke her head out the side window to scold them about the colourful variety of synonyms for Manure they had loudly employed.

Emma snipped and clipped with the delicacy of a surgeon, the tip of her tongue poking out in grim concentration. Jan was reduced to Garbage Boy, taking the cuttings to the extra yard waste bin Oma had placed next to the garden. After a few minutes, Emma sat back to take a breath and wiped the sweat from her forehead, leaving an earth smear that somehow suited her. Today she wore a black t-shirt with white lettering, specially ordered yesterday after Jan called her about the hail damage and Joe's visit, and picked up just before the mall closed at 9pm by her dad, who had apparently grumbled but still did it, because, well, Emma. It was a line from an old movie, apparently, and an odd choice. I had to come up with something, she had said when she arrived this morning. It works if you see it in super abstract terms.

**CHARLIE
DON'T
SURF**

She handed Jan a long green tendril. "What's with you, kid? You're so klutzy today."

"I dunno."

"Nice try. Give Ginger the goods."

"What are you, my shrink?"

"Obviously. Remember, your feelings matter. It's okay to cry. Feel what you feel, young man..."

She had taken on the tone and volume of a hypnotist. He had to laugh.

Emma grinned at him (well, at herself, really, a kind of self-congratulations for her ability to make him smile),

reached in, and resumed her delicate excision of the stubborn tendrils. “So, what’s up?”

What he wanted to say could fill Opa’s work van. Frustration about the zucchinis. Fear and loathing of a certain tormenting Lawn Care Specialist. The lingering fog of a crappy night’s sleep, courtesy of:

- sweaty tossing and turning due to Opa insisting on a minimum overnight temperature before turning on the AC, which had nothing to do with how stifling the upstairs could get;
- a long, heated argument between Oma and Opa that started off as a debrief on her job interview (which had not gone well, apparently) but ended up covering the entire spectrum of summer frustrations; and
- the inability to fall asleep afterwards because the argument got him thinking about the summer and what had not been, which had led to him thinking about his parents and the memorial, which had made him start missing them hard, which had been confusing because he did not usually do that.

But what he said was, “Nothing.”

Emma was having none of it. “Nice try, J. You can tell me.”

“Seriously. I’m good.”

“Ginger can tell when you’re lying.”

“Ginger can back off once in a while, too.”

Even he heard the sharpness in his tone. The edge on the words. Dangerous. But once risky words are out there, they are impossible to coax back into their lockbox. As he pondered an apology, as ineffective as it would clearly be, there were no words from the garden, but merely an increasingly intentional clipping of the shears.

Snip.

Snip!

SNIP!

But he still said nothing, even as his brain screamed at him to make it right with his best friend, who had not deserved the sharp end of his careless words. Emma stood, gathering the pile of clippings that had materialized by her feet, and stepped out of the garden. She pressed them into the bin and moved back to Charlie, kneeling to retrieve the pruning shears. Carefully, she took the hem of her shirt and cleaned the earth from the blades, then held out the shears, handle first, safe and polite and proper. He began to reach out for them, but without warning, she turned them around, lifted them high, and then drove the point into the ground, precisely five centimetres from his right big toe.

He jumped. “Whoa! What was that for?”

“Please don’t speak to me like that.”

Despite the dramatic violence of her movement (it was crazy, ninja precise), the calm in her voice was perfectly still and measured. It was chilling.

“Hey, there’s no—”

“No, J. No. I’m here for you whenever you need me, but it’s clear you need some time.”

“Emma, come on. Let’s—”

“Call me when you get your manure together, okay?”

(She, of course, had not said Manure.)

Part II: Finding The Grain

Monday, August 8

Not a Total Loss

All was not lost after all. Despite the carnage wrought by the sudden storm a few days before, a good number of Opa's garden plants had survived. He had carefully trimmed back leaves and pruned damaged stalks, and the result was a small, ragged army of vegetables ready to take up their limping but steady march towards harvest once again.

Opa had taken the day off to putter in the garden. He had not been able to get to the storm damage over the weekend, as he had scrambled to finish a portion of the current woodworking job for his impatient client. Oma had called this rare free Monday a Mental Health Day, but Opa just shrugged and said there was nothing mental about it, just a tired old man who needed to get his hands in the ground. Even Jan knew they had meant the same thing, but did not say so; he just weeded around Charlie (again) and enjoyed Opa's company.

It was cloudy and cool this morning, with a faint mist Jan could almost call a drizzle, but not dense enough to get wet, and certainly not enough to use as an excuse not to work outside. The soil was wetter than usual, too, but not muddy, just extra sticky. In minutes, they were both sporting dark smudges on faces and arms and hands and knees.

"Where's Emmaline? You usually do this stuff together."

“She’s, uh, not talking to me right now.”

“Of course she isn’t. What’d you do?”

“Hey, why do you assume it was me?”

A snort. “Because I know boys. I was one, you know.”

Jan fell silent, considering. In truth, his sleep for the past couple nights had continued to be poor, but because of his own mental wanderings rather than stress from downstairs. More parent thoughts and worries. More fears that he was not doing enough to mark the upcoming anniversary. So he told Opa all about it, that his testiness had driven Emma away and that he did not know how to make it better.

“Simple,” Opa said, “apologize for being an ass, and hope she accepts it.”

“Opa!”

“Pardon my French, but you were wrong. Own it.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It really is that easy. Only our silly guy-brains and hearts get in the way.”

“But—”

“What’s more important, your friendship with her, or your wounded pride?”

Jan groaned. “Why can’t you just take my side?”

Opa smiled. “Oh, I am. All my tough love is yours.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I know. I’m still right, though.”

“Do you think that—”

Opa held up a dirty hand. “Shhh. Less talk and more pleasant silence. You can stew about it and eventually realize I’m right while I enjoy my mental health time.”

“Oh, so now you use Oma’s—” Jan did not finish the sentence. Ah.

“See what I did there...?”

“Yeah.”

“...I worked through my stubbornness and saw that Oma was right (like always), then delivered a perfectly-timed example of how you can, too.”

“Yeah, yeah. I got that.”

“Well done me, then!”

Opa actually reached around and patted himself on the back before turning his attention back to his battered plants. They worked in silence awhile and, just as Jan was about to call it quits (having resolved to call Emma and apologize then work on his merganser for the rest of the morning), there was a knock on the fence post. Jan tensed up, thinking it was Joe arriving to work on the yard and ruin Jan’s day just by being himself (again).

But it was Allison, looking uncomfortable, as though the act of knocking had used up all her energy. She was still in jeans, khaki jacket, and scarf, but had added a frayed grey ball cap to her ensemble, with ARMY in bold, black letters across the front.

Before Jan could greet her or Allison could say anything, Opa stood and shook his head. “I’m not interested, miss.”

Allison looked confused. “Sorry?”

“In whatever you’re selling.”

“I’m not—”

“I don’t want to waste your time, is all.”

“Oh, you mean this.” She hooked a thumb over her shoulder. Behind her was an old red Radio Flyer wagon Jan had not noticed before. Weighing down the back was a bright orange bucket with a dirty white lid. “I’m not selling anything.”

Opa exhaled, impatient. “I know you have to say that, but—”

Jan stepped out of the garden. “No, Opa, I know her. She’s okay. Opa, this is Allison. Allison, this is my Opa.”

Allison nodded. “Hello, sir.”

“Oh, uh, hello to you too,” Opa said, “but I feel a bit at a loss.”

“Do you remember the ID disks Emma and I found in the garden?”

“Oh, the dog tags. Sure I do.”

“Well, this is her. The soldier. AG, I mean. AG is Allison Gallant.”

“All right. But how—”

“It’s a really cool story, actually,” Jan said, and gave Opa the quick version of how AG had been reunited with her dog tags and how she had found him and Emma and how it turned out that she was a for-real war hero. As he began to go into some of the Google details he had uncovered, Allison, who had just been standing there looking uncomfortable, held up a hand.

“Okay, okay, Jan. Your Opa gets the picture.”

Opa wiped his hand on his jeans and extended it to Allison. “Geoff Shirley.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Shirley.”

“Just Geoff, please.”

Jan watched as they traded a few pleasantries, attempting to find commonality like unlike people do, feeling this tiny blaze of pride at having brought them together.

“So, what brings you by?”

“Well,” Allison began, drawing out the word and wincing, “I didn’t leave very well last time. I’m not that great at meeting people who don’t want to take—” She paused, searching for the right next thing to say. “Anyhow, I wanted to say thanks to Jan and Emma for their kindness. They didn’t have to go so far out of their way.”

Jan felt himself blushing, but although his nervous brain urged him to utter a meaningless response like Oh, it was nothing, Oma’s voice would not let him. (Nothing Is Ever Nothing, she would say. You have to learn how to accept a person’s thanks.)

“You’re welcome,” he said.

“Cool. I brought something for your garden,” Allison said, turning and wheeling the wagon around her legs. She removed the lid and tilted the bucket towards them. It was filled almost to the brim with a dark mass of swollen coffee grounds. Immediately, the air filled with the sour smell of old coffee.

“You drink a lot of coffee,” Jan said.

“Yep. I’m not supposed to (“I have cancer,” she said as an aside to Opa so matter-of-factly it caused him visible pain to hear it), but it’s better than a lot of alternatives.”

“Thank you,” Opa managed to say, obviously rattled. “I have some mulch I can mix it in with.”

Allison smiled. “I could just dump it in the soil for you, too—”

“Well, too much can cause problems, but it’ll help with bugs.”

“Really?”

“It’s acidic, so if you use too much...”

“I didn’t know that.”

Opa smiled. “And this way you can keep some for your own garden.”

This time it was Allison who looked pained. “Oh, I never seem to find the time to get the garden in.”

“Oh?” Opa said.

“With the cancer and my other, uh, stuff, I just...” She took a deep breath. “You have to get out of bed to garden.”

“Well, thank you.” Opa reached out his hand again in thanks, and she took it. He held it for a long moment, long enough for Allison to find his eyes. Jan knew that trick. It was one of Oma and Opa’s ways of getting truth out of that stubborn tree. “And you’re out of bed now, aren’t you?”

“I guess I am.”

“And thank you for your service.”

With those words, Allison’s face bloomed brighter than Jan had yet seen, and her eyes filled, but not in that painful

way that can make others uncomfortable, but in a way that said You're welcome so perfectly that Oma would be proud.

Allison just nodded, released his hand, and wiped her eyes. "Thanks for saying that."

Opa smiled right back at her. "Can I offer you something? Tea? Juice?"

"No, I'm good."

"Uh, coffee?"

"Ha, ha. No, I've already reached my target heart rate for the day."

Opa laughed.

Jan asked, "Would you like to help mix the coffee into the mulch?"

A brief pause, a look at the gate and maybe the world beyond, as though she could not get there quick enough, but then she turned back and said she would love to help, and thanked Jan for the invitation. He found himself blushing.

As she wheeled the wagon deeper into the yard, she turned to Opa. "I noticed the dings on your van. Hailstorm?"

"Yep."

"Do you have someone to fix them?"

Opa nodded. "Got the windshield done, but—"

Jan jumped in, feeling left out. "The dealership wanted a little more than Opa can spare right now."

"I know a guy," she said. "He manages a body shop out in Orleans. He'll hook you up."

"Uh, thanks Allison, but—"

"No, really. He's a vet, too. Tell him I sent you. He'll probably charge you for the paint, but I suspect he'll pop those dents out for free."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. In fact, I'll tell him to."

"That's very generous. Thank you."

“People need to look out for each other, right?”

“I can’t think of a truer statement.”

Allison grinned, pleased, and began to ask questions about the garden. Jan watched her and his Opa chatting away, and could not imagine a more different pairing of humans. He pulled a bag of mulch away from the fence and dumped it into a wheelbarrow, and he used a hoe to mix the coffee grounds in before spreading some around Charlie. She noted aloud that there was nowhere to store the tools and soil, and Opa admitted he had not gotten around to buying a shed. Allison told him not to get one, just yet, that she knew another guy who managed a lumber place just outside of town. Opa thanked her again, clearly charmed, and the three of them set to spreading coffee-charged mulch around the other surviving vegetables.

Then she turned to Jan. “Where’s Emmaline? I wanted to thank her, too.”

Opa answered for him. “Oh, they’re not talking right now.”

“Uh oh,” she said, giving him a look. “What did you do?”

Jan groaned. “Oh, come on. Not you, too.”

She and Opa shared a good laugh that was mostly at his expense, which he did not enjoy, but also to laugh a little just for laughter’s sake, which he did. It was better when people could laugh.

Tuesday, August 9

Charmed

The next morning, Jan found himself whittling on the step. He was starting to like this spot, with the sun warming the concrete under him, and the neighbourhood yawning its way to life for the day. An older woman with a tiny human in a stroller walked by, and waved.

Graham Park had changed. Not literally—it was still the same collection of people and places it had always been—but its light had changed. Even after they moved here, he had first seen the neighbourhood through the same dingy yellow lenses he had brought with him. The colour of poverty and aimlessness, of people who had nowhere else to go, like he had imagined himself, Oma, and Opa now to be. But in fact, it was a neighbourhood with as much life as any other, and maybe more. Sure, the cars were older and the people did not have the latest clothes and phones, but their lives were the same. Work. Love. Home. And the people themselves? Just people. Men. Women. Other. Dads, moms, kids. People who often smiled and waved and said good morning, even to the strange kid hacking away at a wood block on his front step and staring at them like they were moving wax figures in a museum.

He had begun to feel bad about his early assumptions. But you could not apologize to a whole neighbourhood.

Maybe simply waving back would serve the purpose. So he did.

Emma, of course, came around the opposite building just as he raised his hand.

“You don’t have to wave every time,” she said when she sat down. “Ginger knows you see her. How could you miss all of this (she held her hands up under her chin, sunshine-style), right?”

“You are a goddess among women, of course.”

“Sarcasm will get you nowhere, J.”

“Neither will saying dumb things.”

She sighed. “Truth is hard for some people.”

“Uh huh.”

“Even boys who are always wrong.”

She grinned at him. He tried to grin back.

He had been almost disappointed with how easy the apology had been. After dinner last night, he had walked over to Emma’s place, knowing what he had to say but agonizing the entire way about how to do it. He even role-played a number of conversations, but all of them ended badly, with Emma slamming the door in his face and/or vowing never to speak to him again. By the time he walked up to her door, he was a nervous mess and had fallen silent, with nothing left to imagine, realizing that no amount of pretend exchanges would really prepare a guy for saying sorry. Some things you had to just do, and hope they landed well.

When she had opened the door, her initial reception could have brought on a snowstorm. She stood there, arms folded and glaring at him, still dressed in her soccer clothes, fitted black shorts and a running shirt in neon yellow, that said,

**YES,
YOU ARE
AN ASS.**

But then he blinked, and realized that his worried brain had changed the words, which had nothing to do with him but were, in fact, merely a tagline for the brand of her shirt.

YES,
YOU
CAN.

A long, awkward moment had then ensued, both of them waiting for the other to speak. He had drawn a deep (and potentially final) breath and started talking. Miraculously, when he finally managed to stammer his way to those two simple words, she had at first rolled her eyes (making him feel small as a mouse but still somehow able to hold a lead cannonball in his stomach) but then shook her head and shoulders like she was flinging off a mantle of snow, grinned, called him silly, and grabbed him for a hug. Ginger forgives you, she had said. Thank goodness you came over. Holding this grudge was starting to make her feel old. Then they had sat on her step for a change, and he laid out everything that had been bugging him when they had last spoken, and about what had been happening, and just like that, they were good again. It was enough to make his head spin dizzy on his shoulders. A good dizzy. Still disorienting, though.

“Uh, nice shirt,” he said, making a shallow cut somewhere near the merganser’s tail.

“I know.”

Jan wanted to ask, but was again afraid of letting her see he had no idea what it meant. He focused on the next cut of his knife. She was back in her summer uniform today, flip-flops, cut-offs, and hair tied back in a ponytail. Her trademark t-shirt was the colour of sky, the words a dark navy.

YOU
OWE ME
21
CENTS

“And speaking of truth, Ginger’s going to be honest with you. She’s not sure a duck is gonna come out of that block of wood.”

“It takes time, you know.”

“Uh, sure, but shouldn’t the shape start to look, you know, like a duck at some point?”

“It does! Look here’s the head, the tail...”

“You just pointed at two identical bumps.”

“Whatever.”

“Whatever right backatcha,” she said, grinning, leaning back and facing the sun.

So normal. It felt right. And a little weird.

After a while, Emma sat up and stretched, cat-like in the sun. “I can definitely smell coffee.”

“And we only used a tiny bit of what she brought, too.”

“So who charmed who?”

“Huh?”

“Did your Opa charm her, or was it the other way around?”

“Oh. Hard to say. Both, maybe?”

“I bet it was your Opa. That guy has nice coming out of his pores.”

“Most of the time.”

“No, always. You probably think he took the day off for himself, too.”

“He did!”

She patted his shoulder. “Oh, J. Sad, clueless J.”

“Why would you say that?”

“It was to spend time with you, dummy!”

She was, of course, right. Huh. Whittle, whittle, whittle. “He, uh, almost took today off, too, but said it might be pushing it.”

“He works pretty hard.”

”Yep. But he said we could—”

Emma held up a hand. “Easy, J. I can’t hang for long.”

“Oh.”

“I want to, but my dad needs to take me shopping. We need to buy winter gear for me. Apparently it gets wicked cold up there. The air force supplies him, but not me.”

“This is Ottawa. It gets cold.”

“Dad says there’s cold, and then there’s cold. I get to wear a parka, the real deal, with a fur fringe and everything. And snow pants. Gross.” She shuddered theatrically.

“Just think of it as containing the goddess.”

“Not possible.”

“Of course not.”

Then Mr. Bonner arrived in their car to pick Emma up and she was gone in a swirl of engine exhaust. Jan whittled for a few more minutes, then went inside. The thought of the spot on the step where Emma had been sitting never getting sat on by her again had killed his motivation. Missing someone was one thing, but trying to imagine what it would feel like even before they left was entirely another.

You Want Good Goodbyes

An hour or so later, Oma came up to his room and knocked. She looked exactly like she had when he had come down for breakfast, still dressed in her night shorts and t-shirt, and a light robe that looked like it could use a washing. She had not combed her hair, and there were dark smudges under her eyes.

He looked up from his book. "Are you okay, Oma?"

"I'm fine, love..." She paused. "No, that's not entirely true. I feel a bit low, to be honest."

"The job interview?"

"That, and a thousand other things. But I think I'll be fine."

"I wish I knew how to help."

"You are."

"What? How?"

"You living a normal summer is a huge help."

He wondered, A normal summer? Seriously? How could she say that?

"Anyhow, you have a visitor," she said.

"Really?"

"Allison."

"Oh. Did you talk to her?"

"Yep. Plus, your Opa told me the dog tag story last night. She's really something."

“True. But what’s really—”

“She’s still waiting, Jan.”

“Oh! Right!”

He jumped up from his bed and bounded down the stairs, two at a time, feeling suddenly conscious of leaving Allison stranded on the step all alone. Which was a weird thing to worry about: she did not seem like the type to get rattled by waiting. Still...

He opened the front door. Allison had sat down on the step, and had turned her face towards the warmth, just like Emma.

“Hey, Jan,” she said when she heard the door open. She did not turn as she spoke.

Her ARMY hat and her scarf were on the step beside her. There was no jacket today, just a tank top that displayed her arms. One arm was sleeved in an intricate tattoo of a long snake wrapping itself around bicep and forearm, and ending just shy of her wrist. The other had a series of scars that were as striking as the ones on her neck, but there were more of them, and less regular. He found himself just staring.

She noticed the silence, and saw the look. She smiled and stood, holding both arms forward for him to see. “The tattoo is the staff of Aeschylus, the symbol for medicine, which is, for obvious reasons, awesome. The scars are just as obvious, but less awesome.”

He finally found his voice. “Do they hurt?”

“Only when I think about them.”

He cringed. “Oh. Sorry. I just—”

“Ah, don’t worry about it. They are what they are. I just don’t display them very often.”

He stepped out and closed the door behind him. “So what’s up?”

“I brought something for your Opa’s garden.” She stepped down and walked into the side yard, where her now-familiar red wagon waited. It was loaded down by a

dozen green rebar stakes, a large roll of silver wire, a shopping bag filled with assorted tools, and two rolls of tight, rigid wire fencing. “Storm did the chicken wire fencing in. Needs fixing.”

“Oh, did Opa ask you—”

“Nope. I just wanted to help.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I know.”

“Really, Opa could have—”

“Anyhow,” she said, clearly having made up her mind, “this rolled stuff is hardware cloth. Weird name, I know, but my buddy at Lowe’s says it’s better for everything.”

“Let me guess: he hooked you up.”

“We’re all over the place, us vets,” she said, chuckling.

“You walked here? Pulling all of that? Why didn’t you drive?”

A deep breath. “I don’t drive any more.”

“Why not?”

She paused, considering. “A lot of things move too fast.”

“Too fast? Did something happen—” He stopped himself this time, fearing another insensitive question was about to burst out of him.

“I don’t do war stories,” she replied. “But yes, things happened, especially when we moved fast. Speed and violence and the worst things people can do to each other.”

“But you’re here. You came back.”

“True,” she said, chuckling. “In my case I get to be survivor and victim all in one.”

Jan did not know how to respond; such a full but vague statement. She sensed his discomfort again, and talked a little about her Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which he knew almost nothing about. Not about the how of her struggles, what she had seen or done, but about symptoms and treatment, and about PTSD as a living thing that needed constant attention and adjustment and time. And how the cancer treatment and drugs messed with her

chemistry, and certain things that had seemed stable became more like the surface of a stormy ocean.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I'm not. Well, most of the time. Here, help me unload."

So he did, and they did not talk for a while. When everything was ready, she reached into her bag and pulled out four pairs of work gloves, saying that when they started working with the cut wire, they would need them to protect their hands, that his garden gloves just would not be up to the task.

"You bought four pairs?"

"At a discount."

"Okay, but for who?"

She looked a bit sheepish as she replied. "Well, I didn't know who'd be here."

"You, me, Opa..."

"And Emmaline."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. Did you two make up?"

He nodded and told her the story, including the new details about today's shopping trip, and how Emma and her dad were preparing for a big move to someplace cold and alone.

"That sucks," she said. "I get it. The army sent me all over the place, too."

"Yeah."

"I'm glad you two are good, though. When do they leave?"

"Eleven days."

She winced. "Not long."

"Way too soon."

"Make sure you keep things good, Jan, right until the moment they go. Take it from me: you want to make sure your goodbyes are good ones, okay?"

"Okay."

“Promise?”

“Seriously?”

Allison just gave him a hard look, and he saw in an instant how serious she was, a glimpse of all the goodbyes she never got to make, and so he promised this almost-stranger that he would keep the peace. Then they got to work, removing the deformed chicken wire, using pliers and snips and a lot of old-fashioned pulling. Next, they drove the new stakes and affixed the hardware cloth with baling wire.

It took the rest of the day. Oma brought out sandwiches and lemonade for lunch. She had showered and dressed, and said their hard work had inspired her to pull it together. Jan blushed when Oma and Allison talked about him like he was not standing right there, using words like reliable and hardworking and kind. He tried to return the compliments, but it was hard to find the words. Thankfully, they did not give him a hard time about it.

Allison was energetic until she was not, sitting heavily to the step after the last wire had been twisted to the last stake. Pale and trembling. She had a glass of Oma’s lemonade and apologized between every sip, saying how much she wished for her prewar mind and body. Jan offered to walk her home, which she resisted until she tried to stand and pull her wagon away. Even freed from most of its load, it was too much for her, so she reluctantly accepted his offer.

“Leave the wagon,” she said when he bent to pick up the handle.

“I can pull it for you.”

“No, keep it. Maybe you’ll find some use for it. I bought it the other day for the coffee grinds.”

“And now the fencing stuff.”

“Right.”

“Are you sure?”

She laughed tiredly. "100%. Now get me home, will you?"

They walked away slowly, not saying much. She even took his arm after a while, leaning on him like a senior citizen until he dropped her off at her place, a tidy townhome much like his own, but on the far end of Graham Park.

"Today was a good day," she said.

Then she closed her door, not quite in his face, but still too quickly for him to say goodbye.

Monday, August 15

Don't Ask, Just Go

Jan was dreaming about ducks when someone knocked on his bedroom door. Softly at first, then more insistently. His dream continued uninterrupted until the harder knocks began to insert themselves right into the fading images seen just before a dreamer opens his eyes.

Opa's voice: "Jan? You up?"

"I am now." Croaked out, like his voice box needed a good oiling.

But then, as happens when dreams are interrupted, he faded again, almost sinking back into sleep when Opa knocked even harder and yelled (well, it probably was not actual yelling, but it sure felt like it) to get out of bed. Jan cracked open one eye and looked at his clock. 5:30am. He groaned and tried to bury himself under his sheet. He heard the door crack open, saw the faint slash of hallway light through cloth, felt Opa's heavy footsteps crossing the floor.

"Big day ahead," Opa said.

"Sure. Later on."

"Nope, now. Up and at 'em."

"Opa, come on—"

"It'll be worth it. Promise."

Jan peeked out, squinting against his destroyed night vision. Opa was a blurry silhouette, but Jan could see the outline of a hat.

Jan sat up and yawned. "You're dressed."

"Yep. Set my alarm to get you up, so I thought I'd just get the day started."

"Why?"

"Because days have to start sometime. Alarms help."

Jan made a face. "No, I mean why so early?"

"Get dressed and find out."

With that, Opa turned and left, the smell of sawdust lingering on the disturbed air. Opa must be wearing his clothes for a second day in a row, which Opa liked for the softness of the clothing and Jan liked for the smell, but Oma did not like for any reason. (Then why do we even own a washing machine, Geoff?) Jan rose and stretched, pulled on a clean set of everything (he was not as strong as Opa against Oma's distaste for dirty clothing), and went downstairs.

All the kitchen lights were on, and there was a box of cereal on the counter. A bowl and spoon were set out next to it, along with a full glass of OJ. Opa was waiting. Oma was at the table, dressed and already working at her computer. They both looked so alert and eager for the day. Jan felt like he was about to jump on an already-moving treadmill. He was hungry, though.

He poured a bowl of cereal. "Okay, what's up?"

"Eat quick," Opa said. "Mr. Bonner will be here in a few minutes."

"Mr. Bonner? Why?"

"Emma, too."

Jan shovelled a spoonful of Shreddies into his mouth and spoke around it. "Again, why?"

"Are you sure about this, Geoff?" Oma asked, barely looking up from her screen.

"Absolutely," Opa replied. "It'll be great."

“What’s going on?” Jan asked.

“You just eat.”

Jan wanted to ask again, but he found himself entering the perpetual-motion mode of breakfast ingestion, where the stomach sends a signal to the brain to cancel out all activity not directly related to getting food into the mouth, chewing, and swallowing. The cereal was almost gone in record time. And sure enough, like everyone else had synced their clocks to a precision timer, there was a knock at the door just as he swallowed the final bite.

“That’ll be for you,” Opa said, taking the bowl and spoon to the sink. “Get moving.”

“But I haven’t even brushed my teeth or packed anything—”

“Go on, live dangerously,” Opa said.

Oma laughed, earning an exaggerated wink from her husband.

Jan laughed, too. “You two are so weird.”

“Gloriously so,” Opa said, shooing Jan towards the door.

Emma stood there smiling so hard it looked like her grin was the only thing containing the world’s largest and most exciting secret.

“Morning, sunshine!”

“Hi, Em. What’s—”

“Hush, now. Ginger doesn’t ruin surprises.”

Behind her, he could see the sky, grey blue and clear, and the neighbourhood becoming visible in the brightening blue light. Her shirt was either white or a very light blue. Or grey.

NEVER
INTERRUPT
SOMEONE
DOING

WHAT YOU SAID
COULDN'T
BE DONE.

She turned, leaving him standing and staring at the morning world. Mr. Bonner was in their car at the curb, and waved when Jan looked over. He waved back.

Emma had reached the car and gave him a searing look, hands on hips. “J! Move! Now!”

“Right. Sorry.”

He shouted a goodbye to his grandparents, closed the door, and walked to the car. Emma yelled Shotgun! at top voice, not caring a bit about who she might annoy at this hour, and slid into the passenger seat. As he got in the back (like he had a choice), Jan exchanged hellos with Mr. Bonner, who was as bright and cheery as everyone else seemed to be. Everyone running on treadmills, already in the middle of a high-impact training session he had not yet warmed up for.

Soar

Neither Emma nor Mr. Bonner gave up the secret for the entire ride, which was impressive because it took almost an hour to get to where they were going. Jan tried to crack them first with repeated inquiries at high speed, annoyingly persistent. Then he tried the silent treatment, hoping one of them would need to fill the space. But he got nothing.

He remained in the dark even as they turned off the highway and onto a dirt road marked by a tall pole topped with an orange and white windsock, even as they came upon a large clearing with a handful of small airplanes in a row, and even as they parked next to the single building, a dome of corrugated metal, with the words YOU LEARN, YOU FLY emblazoned above the door, he still had no idea.

Only when they got out of the car and Mr. Bonner retrieved a small nylon bag from the trunk, and a man in a greasy ball cap came out, hand extended, and said everything was ready, did understanding begin to creep in. And only when Emma asked the man if they had gotten to the fuel line yet, and the man laughed and said Everything's fixed and like new, little lady, and only when the man winced when Emma gave him a look that threatened his very life if he ever called her that again, did Jan finally understand.

"We're going flying?" he asked.

Emma pumped her fist. “Yes! He finally got it! And it only took, like—” she checked out an imaginary watch on her wrist. “— a decade.”

“Ha, ha. Mr. Bonner, you have a license?”

“Yep. And Emmaline’s well on her way, too.”

“Whaaaaaat? You fly?”

She held her thumb and forefinger a millimetre apart. “I’m about this close to getting my PPL. Best. Feeling. Ever.”

“That’s so cool.”

“Ginger knows this, of course.”

“Will you be the pilot?”

“Nope. Not quite there yet. But Dad will let me take over once we’re at altitude.”

“I didn’t hear that,” greasy ball-cap guy said. “Oh, and Mason, I found an extra headset. This is for you, young man.”

He handed Jan a mint green headset with a microphone sticking out and wrapped in a long coiled cord. And then they were walking across the grass towards the building and Mr. Bonner had to sign a bunch of things and take out his credit card to pay for the day. It was odd to think about all that time in the air getting paid for by such an ordinary thing like a chip-card on the ground. The guy in the ball cap tore off the receipt from the machine, then winked as he handed over a set of keys (airplanes had keys?!) and told everyone to have fun.

The plane was smaller than Jan would have guessed, white with red piping, a bubble windshield (Canopy, Emma corrected him), and a spindle tail (Vertical stabilizer, J.) that looked like it would snap off if anyone sneezed. Emma and her dad moved through the preflight checklist with the precision of, well, pilots. As they walked around the plane Emma explained a few things but was too focused to answer questions. This was serious stuff.

“Okay?” Mr. Bonner asked Emma.

She looked down the long list, and nodded. “Roger that, Captain.”

“I concur.”

Emma stood to awkward attention and saluted her dad, who returned the salute. They laughed and exchanged a quick hug. A favourite routine. Like Jan was not even there, but that was all right.

Stepping aboard was another learning curve, with feet and hands to be placed only on special, labelled places (STEP / NO STEP / HAND HOLD). Jan belted himself into the cramped rear seat while Emma and her dad strapped themselves into the front and donned headsets. Jan put his on, dropping into another preflight checklist where they actually read an item off, fiddled or tapped the appropriate instrument, and said Check! an awful lot. Their voices crackled, thinned out by the wires. Emma sounded about a thousand years older.

Finally, they put away the list and Emma turned towards the back. “Ready?”

The butterflies in Jan’s stomach threatened to answer for him, but he managed to push them down. “I think so?”

“Clear prop,” Mr Bonner said, and looked outside to make sure no one was around the plane’s propeller.

“Clear,” Emma replied.

“Contact!” Mr. Bonner said.

She laughed. “He doesn’t have to say that.”

“It’s a fine old tradition, though,” Mr. Bonner said, reaching forward and pushing a button.

The engine caught with a shudder and a roar then settled into a low, vibrating hum. The two of them went through yet another round of checks, pointing at dancing dials and the main flickering display. Mr. Bonner said something and looked towards the building, and received crackling clearance in reply, the ball cap guy’s disembodied voice saying something about windage and wishing them godspeed.

“Here comes the good part,” Emma said.

Getting ready to fly was a choreographed performance, and Jan felt like he had been invited on stage in the middle of someone else’s epic production. He had no words for it, not that his voice box was working anyhow. As Mr. Bonner pushed a control forward, the engine rose in intensity again, and the plane began to move forward across the grass, tentatively at first, every bump and dip making them sway and jolt, then more confidently as it picked up speed.

When they drew near the low fence next to the road they had driven in on, Mr. Bonner swung the plane around, and Jan found himself staring down a length of grass that could not have been nearly long enough for what they were about to attempt.

“Runway’s pretty short,” he croaked.

Even through the circuitry of his headset, he could hear the amusement in Emma’s voice. “Airstrip, you mean.”

“Okay, the airstrip is awfu—”

“Watch this,” she said.

She nodded at her dad, and any words Jan might have managed were eclipsed by the engine as it wound up to takeoff power. Mr. Bonner held the brakes an extra moment, and the plane shook and nudged against them, eager to get on with it. Then he released them, and the plane lunged forward, driving Jan back into his seat and the breath from his lungs.

The acceleration was incredible; the far end of the airstrip surged towards them as the plane gathered speed at a rate that could only be called insane. The fence line at the far end got closer and closer, rushing like it had an engine of its own, and just when Jan thought that this had all been one big miscalculation, that Emma and her dad had gotten everything wrong, the little plane leapt into the sky, leaving Jan’s heart, stomach, and every other internal organ on the ground. The horizon disappeared as Mr. Bonner aimed for altitude, and all Jan could see was sky.

Emma let loose with a tiger roar of joy. Just before her voice vanished in a mess of cut-outs and crackles in Jan's headset, overwhelming the communications system, he heard,

"I AM SO HAPPYYYYYYYYYYYYY—"

And just like that, the cranky butterflies disappeared (he had kept his stomach after all). He turned his head—his body was still too heavy against the climb to move—to find the earth disappearing beneath them. Fields and forests filled his vision like an infinite patchwork quilt, stretching to the horizon. It was incredible. He could never have imaged that the world could hold so much green.

He had never flown before. He and his grandparents drove to Adam's Lake every summer, a long push they would do over the course of four days, so he knew a variety of landscapes. But this was something so different he could barely begin to describe it. The scale of it. The amount of things that could be seen and observed from such a height. Jan's stomach told him when Mr. Bonner reached altitude, and the thrum of the engine was reduced as they settled into a cruising speed.

Emma turned "So? What do you think?"

"Wow. Just, wow."

She giggled. "Yep."

They flew on for a few minutes in silence, with only the hum of the engine and the incredible scenery to think about. Then Mr. Bonner banked the plane left, back towards the city.

"Can we fly over Graham Park?" Jan asked.

"Nope. Clearance over the city is hard to get," Emma said.

Jan wanted to ask more, but found himself distracted by trying to identify things on the ground. He knew generally what he was seeing, of course, as things like barns and houses and industrial buildings were clear. But imagining specifics was still fun. Maybe that one was an illegal llama

farm. Or, over there, the prime minister's country estate. Or the explosives factory too close to the housing development.

"What's that highway?" he asked, pointing down.

Mr. Bonner leaned over. "That's the 417...look, you can see where it narrows."

Emma looked, too. "Cool, right?"

"Sure," Jan said quietly.

He knew the spot well. Getting away from the city every summer had been a big production, packing and shopping and list-making and making sure the car was ready for the long drive. It was a relief to finally get on the road. When they arrived at the place where the four-lane highway narrowed to two lanes, they had always marked the occasion with a cheer. But now his heart felt heavy. Although being able to recognize the thin ribbon of road fading away into the hazy distance was interesting, it also made him sad. They had not gotten the chance to cheer that summer.

Emma noticed his sudden quiet. "Jan? Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just thinking about..."

He stopped himself. No sense in being a downer way up here in the amazing sky. Besides, he knew how Emma felt about dwelling on what had been lost that summer. Telling her and her dad would just steal some joy from the gift they had been so excited to give him.

"Thinking about what?" Emma asked.

"Nothing," he said, injecting some smile into his voice. "It's just so overwhelming, you know?"

"Oh, Ginger gets it."

So, for the rest of the flight, which of course passed way too quickly, he forced himself into Happy Jan Mode. He laughed and smiled and pointed things out, even sharing some of his crazy imagined stories, even though that ache still occasionally squeezed his heart. He did get the chance to cheer, though, when Mr. Bonner held his hands away

from the stick and let Emma take over for a few minutes. She crushed it, narrating every little decision and action like a pro. If she or her dad noticed the other quiet moments when he was fighting the sadness, they did not say anything. They just flew the plane, giving him the chance to get back to soaring when he was good and ready.

The landing, though, made him forget everything else. He watched the airstrip approach at a crazy speed: how small it looked, like a bookmark laid on a grassy, king-sized bedspread, and then came the ground rushing up at them, a terrifying bouncing, and a rapid deceleration, which threw him against the seatbelt as strongly as their takeoff had pushed him back into his seat. He heard himself yelling the word *Wow!* way too often, and heard Emma laughing, and enjoyed the breathlessness of it all right until the moment Mr. Bonner parked the plane in its spot and cut the engine. Emma filled the sudden silence with a barrage of questions for Jan, which he answered as best he could.

After moving through the final checklist with Emma, Mr. Bonner unplugged the three headsets from their jacks, wrapped the wires, and handed the bundle to her.

“Run those back, will you? Tell Joe thanks again for me.”

She tilted her head. “You aren’t saying goodbye?”

“I did that already.”

“Okay, dad.”

She opened the door on her side and stepped out. As she walked away, bouncing on the balls of her feet with happiness, Jan and Mr. Bonner levered themselves out of the cramped interior, stretched, and began walking to the car.

“Thanks a lot, Mr. Bonner. This was so cool.”

“You’re welcome, Jan. And I have to thank you, too.”

“Thank me? For what?”

Mr. Bonner looked off into the distance, a sadness coming over his face. “For being such a good friend to Emmaline.”

“Oh, uh, you’re welcome?”

“No, really. She puts on a brave face but it’s been really tough for her since her mom left. For both of us.”

“I know.”

“I know you do. You get her.” He sighed. “She’s going to miss you. I’m sorry to take her away.”

Jan did not know what to say to that. He just found a tuft of grass and worked it with his foot.

“Anyhow, I just wanted to say thanks. You can call any time, okay? The time difference is not so—”

“This isn’t goodbye just yet, Mr. Bonner.”

“True.”

“And just so you know, Emma’s awesome. You’re thanking me, but it goes both ways.”

“Thanks for saying that.”

Now Mr. Bonner fell silent. They watched Emma burst out of the flying office and run across the grass to the car. She handed some papers over to her dad and told him that Joe had repeated his invitation to come back any time. Mr. Bonner took the pages without response. She looked at him, then at Jan, and back at her dad.

“So, what have you two been talking about? Not me, I hope.”

Jan glanced at Mr. Bonner, who gave him a little wink, then looked back at Emma. “You’re gonna be a great pilot, Em.”

She brightened and nodded. “I know, right?”

Saturday, August 20

Too Real

Moving day. For a best friend. Jan was beginning to understand the unpredictability of grief, which could arrive at any time, without warning. Even before the thing that was causing it even happened.

He and Emma had hung out as much as possible for the past few days, mostly to get as much friend-time as possible, but also so Mr. Bonner had more space to pack up their life in boxes and get it ready to move. Jan had noticed waves of something low and achy in his stomach arriving every so often and had stayed quiet about it, figuring it was all the other stuff he was processing. Emma had from time to time fallen into uncharacteristically sombre silences, too.

The realization arrived for both of them after a particularly serious and lengthy bout, where the two of them had sat next to Charlie in the garden just staring at the mud. Finally, she had sighed (which was not a sound heard often from her) and said, Ginger thinks she'll miss you, J. Which had, of course, opened him up as neatly and cruelly as a scalpel. Sans anaesthetic.

This was real. And happening. And imminent.

Oma had shooed him out right after breakfast, telling him to go over to the Bonner's place as soon as he could, that he did not want to miss any time with Emma, that This Was Important Life Stuff and that You Don't Get Second

Chances At Goodbyes. However, stepping outside had been like walking into a wall of grossness, the early heat and high humidity like a wet slap across his face, and his mood soured even more. As soon as her house came into view, he had chickened out and wandered around Graham Park as though his brain had given control to his heart, which had in turn repurposed his feet as escape devices. His intended bee-line had turned into a sweaty, grumpy, meandering mess.

But he could only stay away for so long, and those same feet brought him back to the Bonner home, where a bright orange cube van was now parked out front, a long ramp sticking out of the back like a tongue. Mr. Bonner, sweaty as a work horse, smiled and waved at Jan as he emerged from the truck, then disappeared into the house for more stuff. Opa came out with a huge box and carried it into the van. He had come over even before Jan was awake to help out, and was as soaked through with perspiration as Mr. Bonner.

“Hey, Jan,” he said when he came out, removing his hat, bunching it up, and wiping his brow with it. “Had to be the hottest day of the year, didn’t it?”

“Hi, Opa.”

“Could be worse, I suppose.”

Well, that depends on how you see things, Jan thought, and sighed.

Opa winced and awkwardly patted him on the shoulder, now realizing that his sweatiness paled compared to the bigger reality of the day. They stood there for a few long seconds, with Jan enduring his grandfather’s awkwardness and Opa looking for the right thing to say.

Emma saved them both, appearing at the door with a large blue tote marked with the words MEMORIES / MOM’S STUFF in heavy black marker. Her shirt and shorts were smudged with moving grime and house dust.

“Yay! J’s here!”

Jan actually heard Opa's exhaled relief as he moved away in a swirl of humid air and went back inside. Emma walked across the grass and lowered the heavy tote to the ground.

"Hey," he said.

She wiped away a twirl of hair that had stuck to her forehead. "Hey, yourself."

"How's it going?"

"Beyond crappy, but thanks for asking."

"Yeah, sorry. Stupid question. Me, too."

She waved away his apology like a buzzing fly. "Meh. Don't worry about it."

"Uh, where's your car?"

"Dad sold it yesterday to a guy who looked like a drug dealer."

"I was expecting a moving van."

She shook her head. "The U-Haul was Dad's idea. The government would've paid for a company, but he liked the idea of a long drive. Family bonding, or something like that."

A barked instruction from Mr. Bonner to Watch out! caused them to jump. He and Opa were maneuvering a sofa through the front door at an odd angle, grunting with the exertion. Emma moved the tote out of the way as the men huffed past, heavy, bowing the ramp as they moved into the van. She added the tote to the pile of boxes and other assorted items stacked on the grass. Mr Bonner came out, stretching against the exertion, and picked through the pile, selecting a couple of boxes. Opa did the same, and they again went up the ramp.

"The smaller things fill gaps between the bigger things inside," Emma explained. "It's Ginger's job to bring the filler items out here, and Dad packs them in. Wanna help?"

"Okay."

They went inside to a home that was almost unrecognizable. Each room had been packed up, boxes

piled in the middle, waiting to go out, like when he and his grandparents moved months ago. But unlike that move, here most of the furniture still sat against walls or in the middle of bedrooms, unmoved. Emma explained that they had rented the house almost completely furnished, so they would only be taking a couple of things that her mom and dad had purchased.

“Like the couch?” Jan asked.

“Yeah. The one that was here was, like, a million years old and smelled like other people’s bums.”

“Gross.”

“Totally. Dad would’ve saved the money, but mom was...” Emma paused, a sad look crawling across her features. “Anyhow, the argument about colour and fabric was epic. Lasted days.”

It was the kind of comment that did not invite a reply, not that Jan would have known what to say, so he just pointed at a pile and asked if that was the place to start. Emma shook her head and said they were doing it room by room, and that right now it was the office. When they stepped into the spare room, which Mr. Bonner had turned into a workspace for himself and Emma, there was a new t-shirt draped over the back of a chair, a deep blue that was not quite navy, with white lettering.

**THERE
ARE
NO
GOODBYES**

Seeing those words dug something into Jan’s diaphragm, rough and almost sharp, like someone had broken off a spruce bough and jabbed him with the splintered end. He stopped for a second and closed his eyes, willing away the sudden emotion so he could focus on the job at hand.

She noticed his effort. “Yeah, that helps. You saw the box of Mom’s stuff—I must’ve stood over that one for an hour before I could move it.”

But closing his eyes did nothing against what he was feeling. He opened them and saw her not moving, just watching him. He sighed. “I really don’t want you to go.”

She glanced away and coughed, her eyes filling a little, which of course made his own throat tickle, and which of course threatened to unravel him thread by thread.

“Anyhooooow,” she said, wiping her eyes. She pointed at the shirt. “You like it?”

“Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“It’s blue.”

“I noticed.”

“No, it’s blue. Get it? As in—”

“I get it, Em,” he said quietly.

“Dad brought it home last night. I hadn’t even ordered it! Can you imagine?”

Jan could. He imagined Mr. Bonner buying it as much for himself as for his daughter.

“He just knew,” she said. “I was gonna wear it today, but for some reason I just couldn’t—”

“No, this is better. This way you can keep it clean for the drive...”

She looked at him and smiled, brilliant, like his common sense idea had just become the most important bit of wisdom in all of Ottawa. “True! I hadn’t thought of that. Nice one, J!”

He grinned back. “...if you can put it on, of course. Ginger is awfully emotional right now.”

She rolled her eyes—precisely the reaction he had been looking for—and reached out with a gently clenched fist, bumping his shoulder so lightly a mosquito would have survived the impact. Next, she launched into an enthusiastic defence of all things Emma, telling him that Real Gingers are tough and strong enough to know when

it's all right to cry, and that she and him should probably get to work so her dad didn't run out of things to pack, that the entire balance of the load depended on filling those small but essential spaces.

The loading was finished by lunchtime. Mr. Bonner had ordered pizza (apologizing that it wasn't from the Colonnade) and they moved inside when it arrived. Emma went over to the thermostat and jacked the AC, and the four of them ate and drank, their sweat drying and cooling as they sat at the lonely kitchen table. They talked about everything other than the reason they were sitting there, memories and small talk and the thousand things people talk about without really saying anything.

Oma came by just as Jan had tucked into his fourth slice. She had lugged over a cooler bag full of whole wheat sandwiches, veggie sticks, tangerines, and apple juice boxes. She glared at the greasy pizza boxes which sat yawning on the table, the few remaining pieces of pepperoni pizza sitting there like pointy, diseased tongues.

"I think someone forgot to tell you about the lunch I planned," she said, raising an eyebrow at Opa, who looked away.

Mr. Bonner stood to accept the food. "That's very kind of you, Jen. Thanks. Would it be okay if we took it with us?"

"Of course."

There was a long awkward silence.

But then Oma simply shrugged and reached towards the closest box, lifted the saggiest and greasiest remaining slice, and took a huge bite. Everyone watched with held breath as she chewed.

Finally, she closed her eyes. "Wow, that's good."

Everyone laughed.

That Thing You Don't Want to Say

Later, but far too soon, the time came. Oma and Opa gave Emma and Mr. Bonner great big hugs, wished them luck, and left to go home. They had both misted up when they stepped back and looked between Jan and Emma and Mr. Bonner, saying to keep in touch and thanks for everything and those things you say when you want to stretch out a goodbye.

"I have to do the final walk-through," Mr. Bonner said to Emma and Jan. "And we're only going as far as Sudbury tonight so we don't have to rush."

"That's okay, Dad. I'll join you."

"Are you sure, kiddo?"

"Absolutely. Ginger needs to see the place one more time. You too, J?"

"Sure."

Mr. Bonner had obviously been creating time and space for them to say their farewells, but this was better. Emma needed to move to keep from getting too emotional: Ginger, as she would say, would be the last person to drag out the moment.

The walkthrough was a subdued affair, with Mr. Bonner and Emma talking in low voices, pointing out favourite spots and some of the places where memories had been made. They did not mention Mrs. Bonner, but in doing so made her absence even more apparent. Emma picked up

her shirt and flung it over her shoulder. Jan just followed, trying not to intrude on the moment, and soon found himself lost in his own thoughts, worried about the inevitable moment they would walk out the door for the last time. And what it would bring.

But a person could no more push away such a goodbye than they could stop the clouds from moving across the sky, and before long they were standing on the front step and Mr. Bonner was digging into his pocket for the key to lock up one final time. The sound of the keys was loud in the stifling afternoon heat.

“Wait,” Emma said, rolling her shoulders quick and rough, as though she could shrug away her concerns. “Ginger needs a pit-stop.”

And she disappeared back inside, leaving Jan and her dad to shuffle their feet. When she appeared a few moments later, she had changed her shirt, deciding, apparently, that wearing the goodbye away from the house was appropriate after all. Her old shirt was scrunched up in her hand as she stepped to the driveway, opened the garbage can, and dropped it in.

“There,” she said. “Better.”

She walked to the van and got right in, closing the passenger door with a clunk. She did not roll down the window. Mr. Bonner turned and deadbolted the front door then walked down the path with Jan. At the bottom, he drew Jan into a crushing bear hug, saying a few words that were probably super important but that Jan forgot almost immediately. His eyes were on Emma, barely visible through the reflection in the window but who was carefully studying the van’s dashboard.

Mr. Bonner made an annoyed face and walked over to her door, opening it and leaning in to speak to her in a low voice. Jan knew he was telling her to make sure the goodbye got said, to make it count, that in a few minutes there would be no more chances. But she did not move.

Finally, Mr. Bonner closed the door, caught Jan's eye, and shrugged, but not apologetically (which Emma would have detested: Do NOT apologize for me, she would say). He moved around the front and got behind the wheel and started the van's big engine, which settled into a low rumble after a few seconds.

Jan waved as Mr. Bonner put the vehicle into drive and they began to roll forward, the tires crackling against the gravel stuck beside the curb. Jan lost both of them in the van's window glare as they passed, and he dropped his hand, which suddenly felt as though it weighed a hundred pounds.

The van stopped with a squeaking lurch, some of the contents in the back rattling around ominously before falling silent. Emma's window began to roll down. Jan moved beside her. (They had stopped about twenty-five feet away, but Jan would always feel like he made the distance in a single step, like defying gravity.)

"Hey," Emma said.

"Hey, yourself."

Emma reached forward and picked at a hole in the dashboard, probably worn through by a hundred other people who did not know how to say goodbye. She worried free a tiny piece of dark grey plastic and stared at it for a long moment. Mr. Bonner turned off the engine and removed the keys, taking the opportunity to slide the house key free from his own keyring and put it in an envelope marked with someone's name. The landlord, maybe.

"So, uh..." she began, then fell silent.

Jan waited.

"Take care of Charlie."

"I will."

"Okay, then."

Another long moment passed. Finally, she made a fist and reached it out her window. "You're my best friend, Jan Jan Geoffry Shirley."

He bumped it softly. “And Emmaline Reef Bonner is mine. Forever, probably.”

“If you’re lucky. Real Gingers are special.”

“I know, right?” he said, smiling, although the neighbourhood had gone suddenly blurry.

Then his best friend in the whole world drove away. Probably forever.

You'll Make More Friends (and Other Half Truths)

Jan wandered again. He did not want to go home to face the questions from Oma and Opa or, worse still, the silence and space they might let him have. So, like before he let his feet decide, carrying him all over, from one end of GP to the other. Like he was exploring it again. Looking for evidence that everything had changed, maybe.

Every home might as well be empty, every shop and store bankrupt, every public building shuttered. Even the places where he and Emma had hung out seemed sterile of every memory. Like she had never been there. Like she had never rescued him from his lonely self and given him someone to know.

After a long time, when his feet started to ache, he found himself in front of the home of the one other person he knew. He stopped at the foot of Allison's walkway and looked at her front door, but only for a moment. Almost like he was a drone filming himself, he saw him step up to the door and knock, his knuckles on the wood like gunshots. Which was ridiculous, because the neighbourhood was in constant motion, with traffic and people and animals and the rush of a nearby city supplying a steady soundtrack. One boy knocking on one door was as noticeable as whistling in a thunderstorm.

There was no movement from inside.

The polite thing to do would have been to walk away. Instead, he kept right on knocking with increasing intensity, all the while hearing Oma in his mind chastising him for the rudeness: Knock Once, and wait. Knock Twice if you need to. But Never Ever knock more than that. Respect Their Space. She would have grounded him for a week if she had seen what he did next.

He stepped back and cupped his hands around his mouth. "Allison! It's Jan!"

Nothing.

So he undertook another round of pounding and shouting, until finally, there was a muted shuffling from behind the door, as well as some grumbled words he would never dare to repeat. The door cracked open and Allison looked out, squinting against the day, her face puffy and her eyes red. She was dressed in a huge old t-shirt that left one shoulder bare, and dingy track pants that looked four sizes too large. She did not look pleased.

"What do you want?"

"I needed to see you."

"What? Why?"

"Emma left today."

"So...?"

"So?! My best friend is gone!"

Allison rubbed her eyes. "You'll make more friends."

"You make it sound like—"

She held up a hand. "Jan, I can't do this right now. Go away."

"But you opened the door."

"That shouldn't have happened. I'll see you later."

She began to close the door, but Jan put a foot out, blocking it. "But I want to talk about it."

As the door stopped abruptly, startling her and digging into his toe, the look she gave when she realized what he had done could strip paint from steel. But he did not see the look. Nor could he see his actions through her eyes,

that there were some things a guy did not do, like bar a woman's front door from closing when he was asked to leave. It was beyond the realm of impoliteness, and now crowded in on threatening.

Yet he just barrelled on. "I don't know what to do, Allison. She was my only friend, and now she's gone, and the contest is just a few days away, and Charlie is hers as much as mine, and your fencing worked so Joe hasn't seen Charlie, so I think we have a shot at winning—"

"Stop."

"Thank you again for your help, by the way, it—"

"Jan, you need to hear me very clearly. Move your foot. Now."

"But you're my friend."

"We hardly know each other."

Her words and the acidity in her voice were what finally reached him, and he felt shocked and hurt enough to pull his foot back. As soon as it was clear, the door slammed shut, hard and close enough that he could feel its angry wind on his face.

As he walked home, stunned and heartbroken, he became aware of the neighbourhood sounds again, like they were whooshing in to fill a kind of vacuum. Along with the noise, a creeping realization began to take hold, too—he still had to figure out what it meant to be alone, only now with one less ally to face it with. And it was definitely his fault.

Saturday, August 27

Wish You were Here

Charlie made it to contest day, thank goodness. And he was huge, thanks to a rush of late growth in the final two weeks, where it had rained almost daily. Jan felt cautiously optimistic about a solid finish. He was also thankful that Joe had been too busy to worry about their zucchini (well, his zucchini now): all the rain had been good for the zuke, but it had also made everyone's lawns grow at double speed. Joe had scrambled to meet the demand, and had even been to Jan's house twice this past week to cut the grass. Joe was as exhausted as a zombie running between movie sets and not getting paid for the overtime.

Opa had helped Jan cut Charlie away from his plant and lift him into Allison's wagon. Opa had offered to weigh the zuke, but Jan had declined, saying he wanted to be surprised. Charlie was definitely heavy, swollen with water, his dark green skin shining. They laid him gingerly in the wagon, where Jan had laid an old scrounged blanket for cushioning; swaddled up in the powder blue fleece made Charlie look like the world's ugliest and greenest baby.

"Nice of Allison to let us keep the wagon here," Opa said.

"Yeah."

"Have you seen her?"

"Nope."

Opa looked at him, like he was expecting him to say more. But even imagining how to tell Opa about what had happened a week ago was too much, so Jan just focused on tucking Charlie in, snuggling the blanket tighter than a newborn. Talking about it would mean that he would have to talk about how he had gotten to Allison's house in the first place, which would mean the topic of Emma leaving would come out, too (and be exponentially more painful). Oma and Opa had been sensitive to Jan's feelings, and had not pressed him to talk about it. Which was, of course, weird: Oma was a huge fan of Expressing All The Feelings.

"Ready to go?" Opa asked.

"Yep."

The park fair began at ten, and the contest was at four in the afternoon, giving the judges and everyone else almost an entire day to check out all the entries for the various awards. He grabbed the wagon handle and began to move out of the side yard.

"Hold up, kiddo."

"But we don't want to be late—"

Jan turned to find Opa fiddling with Oma's phone. He groaned, dropped the wagon handle, and went back to help Opa get into camera app, resisting the urge to give Opa (whose relationship with technology was tenuous at best) a hard time about it.

Everything set up, Opa shooed Jan to stand beside the wagon and snapped a series of pictures, which of course took forever, because he wanted close ups of Jan and the wagon and the baby zucchini and had to exit and re-enter the app with each photo.

"Last one," Opa said. "Now strike a silly pose."

"No, thanks."

"But it's tradition!"

Jan just shook his head. Opa lowered the phone and nodded, but he looked disappointed.

"I just don't feel very silly right now, Opa."

“Okay.”

Jan bent to retrieve the wagon’s handle and started walking out. Opa fell in beside him and they walked awhile in silence. The park where the festival was being held was on the far side of the neighbourhood. Oma was doing some job-hunting stuff online and would join them later.

When they were almost there, Opa stopped as they reached a four-way intersection even though the streets were empty.

“Opa?”

He laid a hand on Jan’s shoulder and looked at him for a long moment. “I’m—we’re—proud of you, Jan. So proud. You know that, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“I know Emmaline is, too.”

Jan sighed. “I wish she was here.”

“I know.”

Jan could not have imagined that a hole in a life could hurt so much. How could it feel as nauseating as a low punch to the gut, delivered at the precise moment that the previous swelling of pain had begun to subside? It was just a nothingness, right?

He and Emma had texted and done video calls whenever they could, but it was not the same. Those tiny screens could only transmit so much friendship. There were hours to fill in between their chats, too, and he had tried to fill the time as best he could, but there was just so much of it without Emma around. His merganser had been the beneficiary, and he had worked on it almost constantly, whittling and carving each day until his hands ached. It had really begun to take shape.

A couple days ago, Oma had encouraged him to text a photo to Mr. Bonner’s phone. They had made it to Alberta, but were holed up in a strip motel near Fort McMurray until their own place was ready.

— whoa, Emma had replied. **Ginger is impressed.**

- tx
- it actually looks like a goose!!!
- merganser
- thats a loon, right?
- no
- swan?
- ...
- lol messing with you
- i know
- just to be sure, here's a pop quiz for me: merganser = fancy duck
- a+
- a++ you mean (nice work though, J. srsly)

Then Emma had sent a series of photos of trees, which all looked the same, telling him it was so he could really feel what it was like to be out in the middle of nowhere with her. He could tell that she had been reaching for funny to make them both feel better, but it had just left him feeling sad.

When Jan and Opa arrived at the park, the fair was coming to life. A small stage had been erected in the northeast corner and a pimply guy with a guitar was savouring his moment with an exaggerated sound check. (Mike check, mike check, one two three. <Giggles.> Sibilance. Sibilance. <Giggles.> I love you all! Thank you Ottawa! <Is pulled off stage by grumpy volunteer in mid-giggle.>)

The veggie-judging tables were all set up with bunting and signs and were staffed by a handful of grey-haired and incredibly enthusiastic volunteers. A handful of carnival games were already in full swing. A couple of bouncy castles were being raised but were still in that saggy phase that made you wonder how safe bouncy castles really were. A few food trucks had parked in the field, generators chugging away and chalkboard menus getting updated.

One specialized in falafel salads, the next advertised the best plant-based burgers in Canada, and the last seemed to be dedicated entirely to cream cheese, and Jan knew in that instant that there was literally no food that could not be sold from a truck.

He and Opa wandered around for awhile, just taking things in, until Oma found them. Oma and Opa held hands as they moved around, doing silly things and spending too much money, even bidding on useless things in the silent auction. Opa tried and lost every game with an alien intensity (Gotta help out the Carnies, he said, but Jan suspected he just wanted to carry a big stuffy home for the bragging rights) and even turned his hat backwards, which was lame and cool all at once.

Oma looked as relaxed as Jan had ever seen her, and never once spoke of Marking Every Moment or Making Memories or Being Intentional or The Best Time Of Our Lives. She even braved the long lineup that formed when a chip wagon arrived (and was mobbed by fairgoers desperate for normal food) and ordered an extra large poutine, which Opa called a Sign Of The Impending Apocalypse.

Jan tagged along, not really minding that he was being seen enjoying the company of his grandparents. He saw a few kids from school, and everyone smiled big at each other, knowing, like they all had been summer shipwrecked and lost in a sea of aimless boredom and only those who had lived through it would understand. He was surprised at how quickly time can pass when he was not grieving a moved-away friend.

It was, in a word, fun.

Winning at All Cost(?)

Later, feeling sunburned and perhaps fatigued by Oma and Opa's relentlessly loving attention, Jan excused himself and wandered over to the vegetable contest tables. A shade tent had been set up for the judges and volunteers, who sat on lawn chairs underneath, fanning themselves with local business pamphlets that had been thrust into hands all over the park. Who was judge and who was volunteer, Jan had no way of knowing. They waved and smiled, though.

The tables were sagging with entries to the various contest categories. It was all a bit mystifying. For the Best Looking category, there were tomatoes and beans and cucumbers and asparagus and a host of other summer veggies. Every entry looked, well, like that vegetable should look; how you judged how one bunch of kale looked better than the next must be a kind of psychic trick. There were other categories, too, but he skipped over those to get to the only one that mattered.

The Largest Veggie category was the only one that made clear sense. Three kinds of vegetables were represented. There was a single massive eggplant sitting in its own miniature lawn chair, like an overweight beachgoer that had fallen asleep in the sun (on a day with a UV rating of 12). Someone had entered an early pumpkin, although it was clearly a desperate effort: the poor veggie looked pale

as an astronaut after a year in space. There were six zukes, and he was dismayed to see a clear winner that was not Charlie. Laid right next to him was a beautiful specimen at least two inches longer and at least an inch wider.

Jan's heart fell as he pulled Oma's phone out and slowly tapped in the code and opened FaceTime. (Emma had made him promise to call.)

She answered almost before the first ring was completed, appearing with a squeal that overwhelmed the tiny speakers, making a few of the older folks scowl at the crackly feedback spoiling the air. Despite the clear second-place in their immediate future, seeing her—in all her ginger glory, hair out of its customary elastic and filling the screen—lifted his spirits.

He grinned. "Hey, Em."

"Hey, you! I thought you'd never call!"

"Oma and Opa were having far too much fun to let me get away. And you know how she feels about screen-time."

"Yeah, but this is important stuff. Oh, speaking of which, check it out."

She tipped the phone down to reveal her shirt, which was navy blue and featured a huge picture (fake-faded to make it look retro) of women with feathered hair and lip gloss and wearing impossible bellbottoms. The script was curvy and loopy.

*Charlie's
Angel's*

He made a face. "It's, uh..."

"Yeah, Ginger knows. Totally off brand. And off the rack at a thrift store (gross). I was lucky to find this one: this town is so stone age."

"No, it works, kind of."

"If you turn your head and squint, maybe."

"E for effort...?"

She rolled her eyes, which was, Jan thought, totally on brand. “Wise guy. But I’ll allow it only because E is the most righteous letter.”

He smiled. “So how’s your dad doing—”

“Stop! No time for small talk!” she practically screamed. More crackle. More scowls from the old folks.

“Oh. Right. Bad news, I’m afraid.”

“Ginger hates bad news.” A sigh. “Okay, lay it on me.”

He flipped the camera and moved close to the table, starting at the smallest zuke and working his way up, building the drama, which he knew would drive her a tiny bit crazy. (Man, he missed her.) When he narrated about the two biggest entries, Emma groaned and told him to stop, that it was too depressing.

“Promise me you’ll mail me the second-place ribbon, J.”

“If there is one.”

“There’s always a second-place ribbon. It’ll be green or red or purple and will probably say Thanks for Coming Out or something encouraging and uplifting.” (The final words were followed by a pantomime of a finger in a throat and an exaggerated gagging.)

“I promise.”

“I wonder who grew the biggest one—”

“I did, of course!”

The sudden voice from behind caused Jan to jump and drop the phone to the grass. He dropped to his knees to pick it up, worried about grass getting jammed in the charging port and fervently hoping he had not squealed at the surprise. When he stood he found himself face to face with Joe, who stood there, grinning like he’d just stolen and eaten all the prize cookies from the baking contest tables next door.

“Hi, girlie,” he said.

“How do you do that? Gave me a freaking heart attack.”

“Ambushes are an art form, my friend. And you make it so easy!”

When Emma's voice crackled up from the phone, protesting the indignity of being dropped, Joe snatched the phone, and began making kissy-kissy faces at the screen. "Aww, how sweet, the sisters are back together! Did you miss me? Didja? You can tell me..."

Jan was annoyed enough that he was able to grab the phone back before his cautious nature could kick in. Joe just laughed as Emma began to say less-than-pleasant things to him, things their parents and teachers would certainly have taken issue with.

Jan looked at the screen. "I'll call you back after—"

Joe crowded into the frame. "After I win this thing!"

Then he walked away, shaking his head and laughing.

Jan ended the call (after Emma made him promise for real to send the ribbon), slid the phone into his pocket, and left, looking for Oma and Opa.

A few minutes later, someone with a bullhorn announced that the results of the contests would be announced soon, and encouraged everyone to make their way to the stage. Which they did, he was amazed to see, moving towards the stage like a herd towards water. He found Oma and Opa already there, chatting with Joe's parents (gross) and laughing at the pimply guy, who had gotten behind the microphone again and was doing another giggly sound check performance and clearly enjoying his moment in the sun as much as he had the first time.

Joe arrived right after Jan and the adults had made a round of greetings and small-talk. As usual, Opa was quieter than the others but Jan hoped that this time it was because of the night attack. That he could not stand to look at the kid who trampled his garden. Joe had grabbed his zuke from the judging table like he was already on a victory lap, carrying it over his shoulder, smug as only a (jerk) predestined winner can be.

Then it was time for the announcements, delivered by the head judge, a round man with a green visor and a very

sunburned crown. First came the Best Looking category. The winner was a tomato, red and round and unblemished, as though it had been grown cushioned by velvet. The runner up was a bunch of radishes that looked straight out of a country-life photograph, banded by a plaid ribbon. The other categories (Most Symmetrical; Celebrity Lookalike; Oddities & Radical Shapes; etc.) flew past in a blur, as Jan started to feel anxious about the upcoming announcement, even though there was no mystery about who had won.

And then it was happening. The judge started with an Honourable Mention for the eggplant, and had the old lady who had entered it bring the veggie up to the stage (lawn chair and all) to receive a round of Awwwwwwwwww! Jan got the runner-up award and was called to the stage for an insulting round of polite applause that he tried not to hear, imagining the embarrassment as a wax plug in both ears. Oma was grinning to burst and Capturing The Magic Of The Moment by filming the ceremony on her phone (which of course made things worse: Jan's humiliation would live for eternity in the Cloud).

The judge patted Jan on the shoulder, and lifted the microphone again. "Now for the winning entry in this year's Graham Park Biggest Veggie contest! This year's winner has broken a number of records..."

The judge began to read out the (admittedly impressive) statistics for Joe's zucchini. He barked into the mic and stood right next to Jan and was so loud it was impossible to tune him out and thereby ignore the defeat. With each rising number and figure, Jan felt smaller and smaller and thought that maybe the stage collapsing and the ground opening up and swallowing everyone would not be such a horrible thing.

"And the clear winner...Joseph Donski!"

Joe lifted his winning zuke above his head (which was no small thing, given the vegetable's size; Jan had to admit that the summer work had made the jerk strong) and made his way to the stage, grinning to burst at all the applause,

which was no longer polite but actually enthusiastic. When he reached his spot, a voice called out from the crowd: “Speech! Speech! Speech!”

The judge laughed and handed the mic to Joe, which involved a complicated series of maneuvers so he could take the vegetable. Which of course made everyone laugh, because awkwardness on stage is always good comedy. Then Joe lifted the mic and the crowd quieted.

“Speech!” the voice called out again.

“Thanks, Dad,” Joe said, to more laughter from the crowd.

Joe began to talk, thanking everyone from his parents to the Graham Park fair organizers to the abundant rain over the past couple weeks. Jan imagined himself now the size of a marble, invisible next to Joe’s clear triumph, letting his tiny marble-sized mind wander away from here and back to the merganser, which was almost done, and...

A rough arm around his neck brought him back to his actual dimensions as Joe crushed Jan close. “Hey—!”

But Joe barreled on. “...but most of all I just gotta say that I couldn’t have done it without this guy here and our good friend Emmaline. Their zuke-growing pushed me to take extra good care of Charlie here...” He reached over and patted the zucchini in the judge’s arms much to the delight of the crowd, then gave a sly glance at Jan just to rub it in.

Oh, no you didn’t, Jan thought, beginning to see crimson creeping in around the edges of his vision. You did not just steal Emma’s (awesome) name, too.

“...although, sadly, Emmaline had to move out west a few days ago. I miss her so much already.”

The crowd gasped and gave another collective Awwwwwwwww!, not for the cuteness this time, but drenched in bittersweet sympathy for the kid who had won a contest but who had tragically lost a friend.

The redness now filled the entire picture as the realization that not only had Joe stolen Emma's name, he had stolen her and Jan's friendship to use as his own. This was the final straw, as they say, and Jan clenched his fists, thinking about sending one of them into Joe's dishonest mouth and maybe knocking out a lying tooth or two.

But he could not do it. Emma's voice flashed into his mind as clearly as if she had never left at all and was standing on that stage beside him. Don't do it, J. Ginger knows who her bestie really is. Oh, and PS: violence solves nothing. Miraculously, Jan's fists stayed locked to his side.

"Wait a minute..."

It was the judge. Jan's vision began to clear of rage and revealed that the man had turned his green visor around and was holding the zucchini close to his face, inspecting the end with the cut stem. The crowd quieted down. He pointed at a few grains of a yellow powdery substance that clung to the indentation between the stem and the zucchini's body, as bright as dandelions on a lawn. "What's this?"

Joe leaned in, and gave a low, nervous laugh. "Oh, that's just bone meal," he said into the mic. "Uh, for the soil."

The judge looked at Joe over the top of his glasses and shook his head. "That is not bone meal, young man; bone meal is a light beige and this powder is clearly a bright yellow. Were you aware that this is an organic contest, and that the rules prohibit any chemicals being used in the growing process?"

"Yeah, of course I was," Joe said, laughing nervously. "It's definitely bone meal. All-natural!"

"In that case, it should be no problem for me to do a taste test, yes?" The judge licked the end of his finger, stuck it into the powder, and lifted it up for Joe to inspect. A few grains had stuck to the saliva in a bright constellation. "Bone meal is slightly bitter, but safe to ingest."

He opened his mouth and stuck his tongue out and moved the finger closer and closer, until...

“STOP!” Joe said, grabbing the judge’s hand. “Please, stop!”

“But if it’s just—”

“It’s not bone meal, okay? Just don’t eat it, please.”

“Is it safe to assume that this is a non-organic chemical substance?”

Joe looked at his feet and nodded.

Then another whirlwind began, this time involving a very public disqualification of Joe’s zuke, the handing back of the 1st-place trophy (which was small and golden and topped by a bunch of something that might have been carrots), the highly visible display of anger and disappointment on his parents’s faces, and a very small Joe slinking away like the slime mould he was. Next, there was a suspenseful pause where one of the volunteers ran over to the judging tables to retrieve Jan and Emma’s zucchini so the judge could make a closer visual inspection, and a big, dramatic announcement that their vegetable was now the winner. There was a rush of applause and an embarrassing moment marked by the fire-engine reddening of Jan’s face but that was saved by Opa winking at him as he applauded but not yelling for him to make a speech (thank goodness). He handed back the runner-up ribbon (which was a hideous green) and accepted the trophy.

When the crowd dispersed, marking the end of the festivities, the food trucks left and the volunteers removed tables and other stands and the treacherous bouncy castles were deflated and packed in bags. Jan and his grandparents lugged Charlie home in Allison’s red wagon, and he called Emma on the way to tell her everything, which was amazing but also made him miss her even more. At home, Oma uploaded her video of the entire episode to the TV and they ordered Chinese food and watched the video as they ate.

The phone rang as Jan and Opa were cleaning up the dishes and takeout containers and talking about the day's crazy events, and Oma disappeared into the other room to take it.

Opa, elbow-deep in sink suds, went quiet for a moment, his face becoming serious as he scrubbed.

"Opa? Are you okay?"

A smile. "More than okay. I was just thinking about how proud your parents would be right now. I really wish they could see you growing up."

"Me, too."

"Can I confess something to you?"

"Uh, sure...?"

"The anniversary of their death is just a few days away and I have no idea what to do about it."

"I've been thinking about that, actually," Jan replied.

"Really?"

"Yeah. What about having a ceremony here? I know we can't be at the spot, but maybe we can still play the song and say a few things."

"I think we could make that happen."

"And I was thinking that I could bring the trophy and I think I can finish the merganser and make it a part of the—the— what's the word?"

"Tribute?"

"Yeah, tribute! What do you think, Opa?"

Opa grabbed Jan with a soapy arm and gave him a wet one-armed hug. "I think they'd have liked that just fine, kiddo."

Oma came in and saw Jan and Opa laughing and getting entirely too wet, and asked what she had missed. Opa let Jan tell her about the tribute. She nodded and smiled and echoed what Opa had said right down to the last word, which was pretty cool. They spent a couple minutes talking about the tribute and making plans, and then Jan remembered the phone call.

“Who was on the phone, Oma?”

“Oh, right! Sorry. I got all swept up in planning.”

“And...?”

“It was Joe’s parents.”

Opa tilted his head. “Calling you? How did they get the number?”

“From Joe’s lawn care records. I guess he’s pretty diligent.” She looked impressed at the accomplishment for a moment, but then frowned and shook her head. “Anyhow, I guess Joe really opened up after the contest fiasco, and admitted everything from smashing your other zucchinis to lying about how he came up with the name Charlie to how terrible he’s been to you and Emmaline. And a bunch of other stuff. I guess he’s not quite the prince everyone thinks he is.”

“He definitely isn’t,” Jan said. “But, wow, he said all that?”

“Yep.”

“That’s incredible. And surprising.”

“Anyhow, Mrs. Donski said that Joe will be grounded from now until the day he moves away for college. And that part of his consequence will be apologizing to you to make it right.”

Jan shrugged, thinking about how a few words could not possibly make up for everything that happened, but knowing that it might be a good place to start. Then he winced, remembering Joe’s bloody nose—Jan’s own poor choices had not been made right, had they?

Oma watched him closely. There was no hiding from her. “Have you apologized yet?”

“I will, Oma.”

“Don’t wait too long.”

“I won’t.”

He went to his room to get the merganser and sat down at the table to whittle, his pile of shavings growing quickly. Oma handed him her phone so he could send the contest

video to Emma, which was a great idea, even though she made him promise to tell her about Joe's confessions as soon as possible. Which he did when Emma called, her hair still big and her t-shirt still ugly, and then they talked for a long time. By the time they disconnected, it was way past sunset, which, as everyone knows, comes later in summer, making the days extra long, and extra awesome.

Part III: Clear Coat

Wednesday, August 31

Rain Would Be Perfect, Thanks

The day had started off hot and sunny and beautiful, but by the time the afternoon came around, thunderheads had filled the sky with their brooding grey columns. Jan and his grandparents had just gotten on their hiking boots and stepped outside when the heavens opened, drenching everything in a matter of seconds. They retreated into the front hall and watched the rain and wind lash the neighbourhood.

“Well, there goes that idea,” Oma said. “The trails will be a mess now.”

“We could drive out of town to see how things look,” Opa said.

“And a little mud never slowed us down before,” Jan said.

But there was zero resolve in his voice. No one looked particularly excited to go out. A summer of neighbourhood life rather than mountain adventure had softened them. Everyone’s hiking boots had been dusty and stiff when they dug them from the back of the closet. Their day packs, too, had looked extra brittle from their year in storage.

Oma sighed. “True...”

Her voice trailed off into the unenthusiastic wilderness. Of course it had to rain. First, everyone knew that when you made plans, nature always did its best to thwart them. And second, it just would not do to have bright sunny

weather on an afternoon set aside for a long hike into the woods to mark the death of two loved ones: rain equalled sadness, and tenth anniversaries of said passing were very sad.

“It’ll probably be a quick downpour and then the sun will come out to steam everything up,” Opa said. “That’s what always happens.”

“Not this time, my love,” Oma said, checking her phone. “Radar has downpours right across the screen.”

“Wait,” Opa said. “You didn’t check beforehand?”

“Whoa.” Jan shook his head, incredulous. “Are you all right, Oma?”

“Okay, okay, knock it off, boys,” she said, chuckling. “I’m just out of practice, I guess.”

Another sign of their shifting landscape. Oma had always been their unofficial weather checker, her enthusiasm on full display every summer morning when she would check the weather to help plan their day. She had a thing about the weather radar and its colour-coded, swirling readout, almost obsessively narrating changes in storm patterns to Jan and Opa throughout the day. For her to have forgotten to check was almost unthinkable.

They dropped their packs and removed their hikers and retreated to the kitchen, which was so dark from the storm that Opa had to switch on the overhead lights so they could see each other. Almost by instinct, Oma put on the kettle and retrieved her box of herbal teas, selecting three bags and putting them in mugs. The good stuff, Jan noted.

“So what now?”

“How about a super fancy meal?” Opa asked “I could pick up a roast or something—”

Oma gave him a look. “Are you planning on cooking it?”

“Uh...”

She held up her hand. “Let it be known by everyone present that Oma has zero desire to spend the rest of the day in the kitchen.”

“Sorry, my love,” Opa said.

“You should be, you caveman,” she said, but was smiling as she spoke.

She stood behind Opa and laid her hands on his shoulders, massaging them lightly. He reached up and took one of her hands and gave it a light kiss.

Gross.

“How about ordering pizza?” asked Jan hopefully.

Both Oma and Opa cringed as soon as the words were out.

Oma said, “I think we’ve eaten enough pizza lately, don’t you?”

“Only twice this summer, guys.”

“Two times too many,” Oma said.

“What she said,” Opa said, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder at Oma, who still stood there with her hands moving slowly across Opa’s knots and sinews.

Time to play a trump card. “How about the Colonnade?”

“No!” Oma and Opa said in unison.

He’d thought it would be the perfect solution: zero cooking, no dishes, minimal cleanup, maximum pizza. And he had thought that maybe Oma would still be in a pizza-positive mood, having eaten the greasy takeout stuff on the Bonner’s moving day with such gusto. But, no.

He had a thought: “What foods did Mom and Dad like? Did they have a favourite place?”

His grandparents both inhaled deeply when he spoke, his question moving in a new direction and taking them off guard. The silence stretched on for an extra moment or two. But the kettle clicked off and Oma moved towards it with almost thankful speed, and kept her hands busy with tea preparations. Opa removed his hiking cap (which was one of those embarrassing ones with sun flaps in the back that only old people wore) and rubbed the top of his head.

“Sorry, guys,” Jan said. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, it’s a good question” Opa said.

“Just unexpected,” Oma said, returning to the table and placing steaming mugs in front of them.

“It shouldn’t have been, though,” Opa said. “It should’ve been the first option we thought of.”

“And it would be Sakib’s, definitely,” Oma said.

“For sure,” Opa said.

Jan had been to Sakib’s, a place that focused on Mediterranean dishes, only once, and that had been years ago. That it was his parents’s favourite was no surprise—his father had been from that part of the world, carrying a lot of history with him to Canada but supplying few details. It felt right to think about having their tenth memorial anniversary there, and Jan had this feeling that his parents would be pleased.

“I like it,” Jan said.

So it was decided. He and his grandparents made their plans, built up as the discussion went on to include dressy clothes and showers and speeches, which Jan was not too excited about but knew it was not really about him anyhow.

To Our Good People

Opa had made the reservation for six o'clock, for five people. The manager was none too pleased to discover that their group only consisted of three, but relented when Jan told him who the extra two places were for. Still, the man sniffed and went to the back without another word, simultaneously managing to allow his customers their preference and conveying his displeasure.

Jan itched in his dress shirt and tie, purchased a little more than a year ago for a banquet recognizing Oma and a number of her colleagues for service to the community. (Just before she was laid off, too, the award providing no immunity from the cutting blade.) His shirt, worn just the once, was purple, and the tie was a woven black cloth. Both were too small—as were his black dress shoes—a year being an eternity in the constant process of outgrowing everything he owned. Oma wore a long, swishy dress in a summer floral pattern, and Opa wore his only suit, dusty and stretched at the seams.

The afternoon had felt what Jan imagined prom day must feel like, with the three of them dashing in and out of the shower, the single bathroom proving to be an unusual choke-point (they rarely had the need to coordinate their cleansing rituals). Oma had trimmed Opa's fringe, which had grown unruly over the summer months. She had spent

an extra thirty minutes behind the closed bathroom door, styling her hair and applying makeup while Jan and Opa fidgeted in the kitchen (both having completely mistimed their efforts to be ready at the same time as Oma).

At the table, Opa immediately removed his jacket and sat down, sighing audibly as though he had just been released from prison, earning a halfheartedly sharp look from Oma, who had commented on his visible discomfort a few times. The suit had been purchased for Jan's parents' funeral, and he had gained a few pounds in the intervening decade. He shrugged in a kind of apology, but did not rise. Jan half expected him to kick off his shoes and put his feet on the table.

Jan stood behind Oma and pulled out her chair. "After you."

"Thank you, sir," she replied. "Nice to know I have at least one gentleman in my life."

"I'm glad," Opa said. "Happy to hand Jan the crown if it means never wearing this suit ever again."

The server, a tall woman in a black half apron and long skirt, came over just then, and Oma ordered a bottle of red wine and a Coke for Jan. Jan put the plastic bag he had brought on his chair and opened it, first lifting two place cards (which Oma had engraved with surprisingly good calligraphy, a skill Jan had not known she possessed) and placing them in front of the remaining two seats.

AMBER DAWN SHIRLEY, 1992-2013
Mother, Daughter, Doctor, Hiker
Lover of Light

JAN ZAID MALOUF, 1991-2013
Father, Son, Physiotherapist, Hiker
Warrior Poet

“Whoa,” Opa said, nodding at Oma’s handiwork. “Those are really nice.”

Oma just nodded her thanks, and wiped away a tear that had escaped while Jan arranged the cards.

“Lover of Light?” Zak asked.

Opa chuckled. “That was from your mom’s last high school yearbook, signed by some guy who had a crush on her for four years but never told her.”

Jan winced. “Ouch.”

“Yep.”

“We bugged her about it for a long time,” Oma said, “but then it became one of those things we’d say to her on special occasions.”

“And Warrior Poet?”

“That was your mom’s nickname for your dad,” Opa said. “He told her more about his past than anyone else.”

“He didn’t like it much,” Oma said.

“Ha! He hated it,” Opa replied. “Well, at first, anyhow.”

Oma took a deep breath. “He said he’d tell us more someday... but never got to, of course.”

The server returned with their beverages and nodded at the place cards as she set out the carafe and glasses. “That’s beautiful work, and a lovely tribute. Sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you,” Oma and Opa said in unison.

The server stood straight and tucked her round tray under her arm. “I’m sorry about earlier, too. My manager is a great boss, but sometimes not so good at adjusting his expectations.”

“No worries,” Oma said.

“Great. I’ll be back in a few minutes for the rest of your order.”

They scanned the menu and ordered whatever they wanted, and a few items to share. Most of the meal passed in a blur of memories and laughter, tears, and long moments of silence, and with Jan mostly quiet and listening. He had been so young when his parents died that

his memories of them were wispy and fragmented, if they were real at all. He did not mind being an observer, though—watching Oma and Opa enjoy the moment brought him joy, too. (Plus, his grandparents were well occupied, which meant that he was able to eat as much as he wanted. He was a stuffed turkey by the time dessert arrived.)

There was always room for dessert, though, which in this case was baklava and pistachio ice cream. Even Oma and Opa paused long enough to have some.

“This is goooooooooood,” Jan said, wiping remnant flakes of baklava from his tie.

“The baklava was your mom’s favourite, and the ice cream your dad’s,” Opa said.

“I prefer the ice cream,” Oma said. “The pastry is too sweet for me.”

“More for us, then,” Opa said, and he and Jan dug in.

Then the meal was done.

“Time for a toast,” Oma said, pouring the last of the wine.

As though reading their minds, the tall server appeared with a fresh glass of Coke on ice and a wink for Jan, who blushed. She lingered a moment to collect the leftovers (there were a lot) saying she would have everything wrapped up for them, then vanished.

Oma held her wine just higher than eye level, and looked at Opa and Jan, which held theirs at the same height.

“To the best girl in the whole world, and the good man she found...” She paused, looking up, as though she could use gravity to keep back what had begun to fill her eyes again. When she resumed, her voice was thin and wavering. “And to a good couple, who made us the happiest parents and grandparents ever.”

Opa sniffed and coughed, and leaned forward to clink his glass against Oma’s. Jan did the same, and everyone had a sip. Then Oma looked at Opa, who studied his glass

for a long moment and gave a low cough, as though testing his voice, which may have departed. His eyes were red.

He lifted his glass slightly higher than Oma had done, and found the light behind it. And his voice. “To the memory of Amber and Jan, who filled our lives with all sorts of crazy adventures but who left us way, way too early.” A single tear escaped, and he let it run down his cheek as his eyes found Jan’s, who suddenly found that the table, the lights, and his grandparents had dissolved into a thousand starpoints of light. Opa coughed again, and smiled big enough for Jan to see through the blurriness. “And yet, whose unplanned departure left us everything as well. To Jan Jan Geoffrey Shirley, who reminds us of the best of them every single day.”

Well, that did Jan in, and he lost some time figuring out how to speak and respond through the emotions that lifted him from his seat and rushed him away like the cataract rapids out west they portaged around when they went canoeing. (He let himself feel All The Feelings, just trying to point his toes downstream, knowing Oma would approve.) He distantly heard his grandparents say Cheers! and felt their glasses clink against his, which was sweating and cold, and he focused on the ice against his teeth as he drank.

Then Opa’s voice somehow came through all of it. “Your turn, kiddo.”

“Oh. Ahem. Uh, okay.”

Jan found himself standing, which was strange because no one else had, and feeling the lightness of his glass, which he had emptied, leaving only ice. Oma and Opa laughed with him when he mentioned it, letting the ice tumble around, seemingly loud enough to fill the restaurant. Then he gave his speech, which went on longer than he thought it could have and wandered like a lost child, but still managed to hit some high points:

1. He wished he could remember more about his parents;
2. He admitted that he didn't think about them all that often, but promised to try harder to do so;
3. They must've been great, because Oma and Opa were great, and good people seemed to find each other;
4. He knew that they'd be proud of him, because Oma and Opa had raised him right (So far, Opa said, which made them laugh);
5. He dedicated his and Emma's trophy to their memory, saying that it must be important that they'd won it in the tenth year;
6. He promised to bring the merganser, which was mostly done, out west the next time they could go, and leave it at the memorial spot;
7. He wished they could be here tonight, which was weird because it wouldn't have happened if they hadn't died but the dinner still somehow felt incomplete; and
8. He probably missed them even when he wasn't thinking of them.

And they completed the toast by bringing their glasses together and Jan pretended to drink, which made Oma and Opa laugh again, which he thought was a good way to end things.

The server brought the manager over as they made to leave. The man—who was heavy and bearded and wore a lot of gold things—handed Opa the cheque and offered his condolences.

“The wine and Coke are on the house,” the server said, smiling. “We decided that this called for more than just free dessert.”

But the way she spoke, and the manager's slight wince, suggested that the We was not unanimous, and that the woman—a stranger—had fought for them. Which was

really nice, because Jan knew that people should look out for each other, especially when they were hurting.

Thursday, September 1

Four More Sleeps

And there went a summer. Arriving at September and the last few days before school started was like turning onto the street where that grumpy aunt and uncle—that you only met once, years ago—lived. You knew you had a minute or so before you would have to get out of the car and endure too-wet kisses and too-hard hugs and then, worst of all, hours of sitting on their ugly living room couch figuring out what to say. School was that visit, multiplied: a day of awkward and inappropriate reintroductions followed by ten months of torturous small talk.

A few moments ago, Oma had marked the occasion as soon as Jan came downstairs with a dramatic calendar change (yes, she still had a paper calendar on the wall) and a variation on her New Year, New Opportunities For Change! theme, as though Change was some kind of reward. Jan had tried and failed to match her enthusiasm as he moved into the kitchen.

He picked up his phone from the charging station. Emma often forgot about the difference in time zones and would text before bed, which was usually a couple hours after he had turned in. He usually slept like the newly dead, and heard nothing, but Oma had made it policy to put the phone on vibrate overnight, because they were the ones woken up by the arriving texts.

There was only one new message this morning.

— J! We found a place and get to move in tomorrow!!

He smiled, happy for her, and closed the phone. He resisted the urge, once again, to text her back immediately to see if she would wake up. He wanted to know more, but she and her dad shared the same motel room, so the sound would more likely disturb Mr. Bonner than his blissfully sleeping daughter.

“We should start setting your alarm,” Oma said, tapping her watch, “or you’re going to be a bear when Tuesday arrives.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Only four more sleeps, you know.”

He groaned. “Don’t remind me, Oma.”

“What, and take away one of my few joys in life?”

“You’re so weird.”

Oma grinned, a wicked little thing that was way out of place so early, and sat down at her laptop, sipping her tea as she refreshed a page. But then Jan saw the clock on the microwave, and his eyes widened. Not so early after all: he had slept until almost ten. Maybe Oma was not entirely wrong.

Her phone’s ringtone cut through the kitchen a few minutes later, startling him enough to splash an entire spoonful of cereal onto the table. Oma frowned and looked again at her watch before getting up to answer the call. Jan mopped up his mess as best he could with his spoon (which was not very well at all) and tried to look like he was not eavesdropping on her side of the conversation, which he was totally doing.

“Hello? Yes, this is she. Who’s speaking, please? Oh, hello! No, no, it’s no trouble at all. I was just— Mmm hmm I’m glad what I said had some Mmmm hhhhhmmmm”

She went silent for a long time, and Jan found his behind creeping to the edge of his seat as he leaned

forward, the final Mmmm hmmmmm almost too much to bear. Then her eyes went wider than he had ever seen, and she reached out to steady herself against the charging shelf, her face breaking into a grin that could have contained the entire city.

“Oh, my goodness! What fantastic— Yes, of course When would I like to—? No, I understand the urgency. Would Tuesday work? I can absolutely make that happen. It’s a new school year, after all, ha ha Yes, for sure, emailing the details would be fine, and I’ll have it back to you as soon as I can” She swallowed. “This is such wonderful news No, thank you! Yes, we’ll talk soon. ‘Bye, now.’”

Jan stood and moved beside her, and she reached her free arm around him and squeezed, the pressure not unlike what Joe had done on the fair stage, but with a far more pleasant vibe. He could feel her shaking, vibrating like a guitar string plucked by a toddler. Their eyes met, hers shining so brightly they could have been sea-glass catching the sun.

“I just can’t believe it,” she said, staring at the now-quiet phone in her hand. “Just when you think...”

“Oma?”

“‘Bye now? Who says that to a—”

She stopped, and he felt himself stretched to his absolute limit. “Oma! Tell me!”

“Shh. Let me just...”

She started tapping at the screen, and Opa’s photo appeared, his face awkward as only a contact photo can be, pleading Please Do Not Take That Picture. Oma tapped the “Speaker” button.

Opa answered on the second ring. “Hey, babe!”

“Geoff, you’re on speaker. I’m here with Jan.”

“Is everything okay?”

She laughed, shaking her head. “More than okay, actually.”

And she began to speak, her excitement again rising with every word. By the time she told Opa that the school board had finally made a decision (“Could they have waited any longer...?!”), and that she had been the successful candidate, she was shaking as thoroughly as she had been a few moments before. As she shared a few details, like that her new position would be management and come with a handsome pay raise, Opa whooped to the heavens (holding the phone away from his mouth, thank goodness, and thereby not deafening the two people who loved him most), pitch-matched to Oma’s own primal cheering. Next, Jan found himself being dragged around the kitchen with Oma, one-handed, as she and Opa virtually waltzed together, yelling and hollering and giggling like teenagers, and Jan decided that dancing through good news was an entirely appropriate response.

Why Do the Best Ones Always Leave?

Jan had the house to himself, but it was far too quiet. Oma had gone out to shop for new work clothes, taking the day for herself as a celebratory measure. She would be gone through dinner and had left some cash on the counter for him to order in for himself and Opa after work (finally, he would get that pizza!).

Emma was not available for FaceTime at all that day because of their move, so Jan was shiftless, wandering around the house with nothing to do. Whittling held no interest for him. He channel surfed the TV but clicked off after about five minutes, done in by the blaring commercials, which were a few decibels louder than the shows. He tried reading but the words were merely a blur on the page.

Sometime in mid-afternoon, just as he was about to give up and actually lie down for a nap like an old man, he remembered Charlie. He stepped outside to the garden, where he and Opa had left Charlie after the win. It was humid and overcast, the clouds keeping the mugginess close to the ground.

Charlie was starting to sag.

Prize-winning zucchinis, despite their impressive dimensions, were good for nothing other than compost. The overgrowth made them too bitter for eating, and all the stored-up water wanted what all water wanted, which

was to return to the earth, and had begun to seep out through Charlie's softening sides and into the soil.

Opa's composter was way at the back of the garden. Jan poked at Charlie's side, and his finger sank in to the second knuckle. He lifted the zuke's stem-end, but it only lifted about an inch before it began to fall apart. A rotten smell wafted up to his nostrils, sweetness and vomit rolled into one fetid stink. When he reflexively brought his hand up to his nose to block the smell, his stomach turned when he saw the rot-slime dripping from his finger.

"Ewww, that didn't take long," he told the zucchini. "Couldn't you have waited until next week to stink the place up?"

Charlie, of course, remained silent.

Feeling a little odd about talking to himself, he walked back inside, kicked off his flip-flops, and made for the kitchen sink, holding his offending finger away from himself like it had the plague. He thought about ways to dispose of Charlie that would not involve physical contact and, by the time he had completed his third soapy wash (yes, the smell was that bad), he had settled on chopping Charlie up with a spade and bringing it to the composter chunk by chunk.

He moved towards the door, slipping on a pair of Oma's yellow dish-gloves, wondering if afterwards he would have to throw them out, hazmat style, to keep the smell out of the house. He retrieved his scattered flip-flops and opened the front door without looking at it, an awkward ballet he was glad no one was around to see.

"Hey, those are some nice gloves!"

To say that Jan was startled by Allison's sudden appearance on the front step would not do justice to his reaction, full of new heights and new lows in the same mortifying instant. His lungs and throat and mouth conspired to make a sound he would have to forever deny, his heart actually jumped high enough to beat against his

Adam's apple, and his facial skin blazed a record-setting blush (which he would also, of course, deny). "Allison!"

"Wow," she said brightly. "That was something. For a second, you actually looked like you were about to swear."

Allison continued to laugh as Jan's heart rate began to settle enough for him to entertain the idea of living through this. He felt angry, but did not speak, knowing that the moment had been caused by timing and not any malicious intent on her part. Besides, she was laughing, which of course made her look so ordinary and happy it should have been hard to stay angry, even if it was at himself.

In theory. In practice, he scowled at her. "What are you doing here?"

"Are you okay? That was—"

"I'm fine. What do you want?"

Her face fell, but she nodded, as though piecing together that he might not be as amused as she was by the entire episode. "Oh. I, uh, came over to check on you, to see how—"

"I said I was fine, Allison. Peachy."

He stomped out, brushing by her on the way to the garden, seeking some space. But she followed a few feet behind.

"That came out wrong, Jan. I didn't mean that. You don't need me to check up on you."

"Duh."

The smell from Charlie's punctured shell permeated the yard. He heard Allison sniff and make a disgusted noise behind him as he picked up the spade.

"Boy, that stinks. And that zucchini looked a lot better at the fair. Congratulations, by the way."

He turned to look at her. "How did you—"

"I was there."

"I didn't see you."

She chuckled and pointed a thumb at her own chest. “Ex-army, remember? I can camouflage myself pretty well when I need to.”

“Okay.”

He brought the spade down three times, chopping Charlie into four roughly equal parts. The smell intensified, seeming to reach through his nostrils, down his esophagus, and right into his stomach, as though it could coax anything in there to come out in spectacular fashion. His eyes watered. Even Allison brought her hand to her nose.

“I thought you’d be used to terrible smells by now,” he said.

But as he spoke, he wondered where the comment, delivered with a frown, had come from. At best, insensitive; at worst, unkind. Even he knew there were things you were not flippant about with a former soldier who had been in places where the worst things imaginable had happened.

But she seemed to sense his discomfort, and nodded. “I am, or was. But I can’t talk about those things, remember?”

“I know. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“True.”

“Sorry.”

“Aren’t we a sorry pair, eh?”

“I guess.”

Jan levered the spade under Charlie’s near end, and lifted. The smell got even worse as a fetid fluid leaked out of the severed side, dripping onto the soil and grass as Jan carried it over to the compost. He repeated the process three more times as Allison watched without saying anything.

“Hold on,” she said just as he was about to replace the black lid on the composter, and came over. She held a hand out for the spade, and he gave it to her, watching as she moved to the garden again and shovelled free a mound of earth. She stepped next to the composter and spread the dirt over Charlie’s remains. The smell seemed to subside.

She handed the spade back and smiled at him. "A little soil helps break down the organic material. If we're lucky, I got an earthworm or two in there."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. You'll want to rinse that spade off, though."

"Right."

The sun peeked out as they walked together over to the hose, immediately raising the temperature in the yard. He held the sprayer while Allison turned on the spigot, and turned it off after he had sprayed the steel shovel clean, which afterwards gleamed wet in the sun. He replaced the tool in its spot and they walked out of the yard together. In the front yard and away from the fenced-in space, the breeze was more apparent, and they stood for a moment cooling down.

Allison coughed. "So you're probably wondering why I've called this meeting..."

He did not know how to respond to that, so he just waited.

"That was awkward," she said. "I'm just nervous. Let me try again."

"You're nervous?"

"As a recruit holding a rifle for the first time."

"Why?"

She folded her arms, bringing her arm muscles and tattoo into sunlit relief. The scars, too. She was wearing a navy blue tank top and no scarf at all, hiding nothing, and wore khaki shorts, revealing a pair of thin legs that were as pale as summer linen. And remarkably scar-free.

"I'm bad at apologies," she said. "Really bad."

"Me, too."

"No, you're not."

"I'm good at saying sorry?"

She laughed a little. "Not good at it, no, but you have integrity. I admire that."

“Thank you.” (He had almost hesitated to accept, but Oma’s voice was right there, reminding him to be Gracious In The Face Of Compliments.)

“I treated you badly the other day, when you came over to tell me Emmaline was moving.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“You and your family have been so good to let me come over and—” She paused. “I only thought about myself. It’s been a tough time.”

“You think?”

“But no excuses. I’m sorry, Jan; losing a friend is horrible. I know the feeling. Too well.”

“Thank you.”

“How is she, by the way?”

He spent a few minutes filling Allison in about the move, all the FaceTiming and texting, and dealing with the awkward time-zone difference. Allison seemed pleased to receive the news and brightened again, like hearing about Emma was a kind of fuel, an energy drink for her emotions.

“She’s a force, that one is. I miss her. Say hi for me, will you?”

“Sure, but I could give you her number or email address. She’d love to hear from you.”

Allison nodded but took a deep breath at the same instant, like the offer was welcome and a complication all at once. “Actually, there’s another reason I’m here. I’m leaving Ottawa, and I wanted to say goodbye and to thank you for everything.”

“Why are you leaving? Are you okay...?”

“I just get restless sometimes.”

“When will you be back?” But he saw her wince a little as he asked, and from that tiny flinch he knew the answer. “You’re moving away for good.”

“Not moving. Leaving. Grabbing my rucksack and going.”

“But what about your house and garden, and all your things?”

“A buddy is selling everything for me.”

“How will you get around?”

“Car, maybe—another buddy has offered to sell me a good one cheap—or maybe by train. Vets get a fantastic discount.”

“You have a lot of friends,” Jan said.

“Not a lot, no, but they’re good ones. The best, in fact. We take care of each other.”

“No matter where you end up.”

Allison smiled and nodded. “That’s the deal. When you go through what we did...”

“Right.”

“And occasionally, I add a name or two to the list. Like you and Emmaline.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

There was a long moment of silence.

He looked across the parking lot at the trees on the other side, which swayed gently in the breeze, and sighed. “When?”

“Soon.”

“Where will you go?”

She just shrugged. “I don’t know yet.”

“But we still have your wagon. I was going to—”

“Keep the wagon.”

“But it’s yours.”

“Not anymore.”

“So that’s all I get? Some dumb kiddie wagon while you get to leave, probably for good?”

“I can’t expect you to understand, but—”

He stood and pointed at her. “You’re right! I don’t understand! You’re not being fair!”

She stood, too, her hands suddenly busy, brushing her arms and clothes like she was sweeping away dirt that had not had the chance to accumulate, and said, "Life isn't fair. The sooner you get that, the better off you'll be."

He had been so pleased to be called her friend, but it was such a fleeting pleasure. Like five minutes of sunshine in the middle of a rainy day. And now it felt like that goodness was being replaced by a kind of betrayal he could not define, and it made him angry, so angry, at her and life and the universe for snatching another friend from him. In the same hot summer. He opened his mouth, intending to yell at her, to unload everything heavy from his mind and heart, but her eyes narrowed and she held up a hand. She was as tense as bridge cabling, reminding Jan of the strength she held, the power just contained. And the danger.

"Don't do it, Jan. You're thinking of yelling, but I won't be yelled at. Ever."

He saw that line again, the one you never crossed, cutting through the air between them, caution orange, splitting the world in two. That was frightening, too, for how much he could lose just by losing control.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking a step back. "But you don't have to go. I won't do that again, and—"

"No."

"I can do better."

Her eyes flared, and she shook her head. "This isn't about you! Don't you get it? I need this."

"But what about what I need?"

There was no answer to that question. And then she was saying goodbye and he was trying to say it, too, but the worst thing about those moments was that they never lasted long enough, and the farewells were almost always incomplete. Allison turned and walked away and he was left alone again. Somewhere in his rational brain he hoped it would not be forever, that life was not like that, but his

heart knew that it could be that final, that it was possible for a guy to never make another friend.

Thursday, September 6

(Am Having) the First Day of School

Jan had tried, and failed, to read too much into the fact that the first day back at school was cloudy. Not rainy, just grey and cool and the sky looking like it could only supply a bland, oatmeal cloudmass from that day onwards. Rain would have been better; at least that way you knew the outcome, that the wet and miserable might become the green and beautiful.

The school felt different. Looked different, too. The last day before the summer had been bright and warm and everyone had been launched into two months of gorgeous potential. The building's bricks had been warm and encouraging at their backs as they walked and bused and pedalled away. Especially the grade sevens. Next year you're the kings and queens of the school, everything seemed to say. Today, though, the uniform light from the clouds just made every blemish stand out, the chipped bricks, flaking paint, and cracked four-square courts.

Inside, the classroom was all industrial lighting, cold and impersonal, the world outside dark in the windows. What good was daylight if it did not stream into your classroom? Even Ms. Harker, his new homeroom teacher, looked dreary; her grey sweater and black skirt would have probably been invisible on any other day but today. She looked cold.

And Jan had done something he never would have thought of doing in the past. After snack time at second period (math, gross), he had snuck his phone to his desk, which was right behind a new kid who happened to be the size of a refrigerator. He texted Emma, hoping to catch her before her own first day back, maybe as she waited in the playground for the bell to ring. His messages tried to be light and witty. She did not respond.

Harker had caught him, too. She had taken the phone to her desk, telling him he could have it back at the end of the day and taking the opportunity to remind the entire class that phones were to stay in backpacks. The rest of the kids had looked at him like he had just ruined the entire year by drawing the teacher's attention to the texting they had hoped to get away with. Great start, J, he told himself as he tried to hunch down in his desk and make himself as small as the period on the end of a sentence, which he figured was just about the right size to escape notice for the rest of the school year.

At recess, he briefly cheered up when Mr. Smith, his grade seven teacher, came over to say hello and to see how he was doing. The guy was dressed in browns and greys, too. The weather must have gotten into all the teachers's psyches.

"Hi, Jan," he said, his voice amazingly bright for the weather and his ensemble. "Good summer?"

"It was fine, thanks."

"How was your trip out west?"

Jan groaned inside, recalling the enthusiasm with which he had talked about his summer plans on the last day. Then he briefly entertained the idea of dropping a wagonfull of truth on the guy, but he saw that his old teacher had a little spark in his eye, the only spark he could see anywhere, so he decided not to get into it.

"Like no other...?" Jan said, mustering up a grin he hoped looked genuine.

“Good, good. Congratulations on winning the zucchini contest, too!”

Mr. Smith was looking at him expectantly, oblivious to the contradiction he had just blundered through. (Trip out west ≠ time to grow zuke for summer fair.) Jan heard himself say thanks.

The teacher chuckled. “Nice to know my optional assignment inspired one of you, at least.”

“It wasn’t optional to me, sir.”

“Ha, ha.”

“No, really.”

“Gotcha, Jan. Not optional, wink, wink, nudge, nudge. Say, where’s Emmaline? I thought you two’d be running the show out here.”

“Uh, she moved away. To Alberta.”

Hearing this, Smith winced, looking genuinely sorry for Jan’s luck. “Oh, wow, tough news. You two were tight. You doing okay?”

“I suppose, though it’s been hard, with starting the new school year, and Ms. Harker has already...” His voice trailed off when he realized that the teacher’s attention had wandered, and he was looking at a nearby group of former students, probably mentally imposing a list of questions and small talk. Jan shook his head. “...or maybe it’s good Emma’s gone, you know, with how boring this year has been so far. I was thinking of maybe shaving my head, you know, in mourning...”

“Mmmm? Oh, yes, for sure. That’s just excellent.”

Jan rolled his eyes, channeling Emma as best he could. “Glad you approve, sir.”

“Of course, of course. Happy to help. Well, have a good year, Jan. Nice chatting with you.”

The teacher wandered off, towards the group, beginning his questions before he even got there. The small circle of students reluctantly parted to let him in.

Jan sighed and moved across the asphalt, dodging younger kids who seemed to have no idea how dreary the day was. Their excited squealing and best-friend-making just highlighted how low he was feeling. He saw some of his classmates, who nodded in that polite way that told him he had been seen but would not be invited to join in. It was, in other words, a less than auspicious beginning to the new school year, although it felt familiar, like before Emma had invited herself into his life.

He walked onto the grass, which had recovered over the summer and now stretched to the far fence in a carpet of green. He removed his shoes and socks and stood for a moment, letting the cool grass calm him down. He felt better. There was something almost magical about what cool grass between the toes could accomplish. It was against the rules, of course, but he figured the teachers would not do much about a single kid enjoying the grass on the first day.

At the far end of the field, right near where the corner post would be stuck in the ground for soccer games, the school property came to a point, the fence meeting in an almost-perfect 90-degree angle. A line of houses backed onto the property line. Vines and weeds twisted themselves in and through the fencing. Joe was there, back to the school, his fingers laced into the chainlink, face to the sky. Jan frowned. Leave it to Joe to ruin the day's single nice moment just by being present.

But then Jan noticed that Joe had removed his shoes and socks and was curling his toes again and again in the grass, which had grown even longer next to the fence. And he noticed also that although Joe's eyes were closed, he did not look relaxed. He looked like all he wanted was to find a little sunshine but had failed, the relentless cloud mass above denying him the chance. He looked sad. And lonely.

He looked, in other words, exactly like Jan felt.

Something broke inside. You should have someone to share cool grass with. Jan sighed again and began walking towards Joe, the playground sounds fading behind him.

“Hey,” he said when he was a few steps away. (Oma had always warned him to make sure people knew he was nearby, or he would Scare The Dickens Out Of Them.)

Joe’s eyes opened, and he turned. He groaned. “Oh, great, just great.”

“Nice to see you too, Joe.”

“Come to gloat, have you?”

“What? No.”

“Can you just go? I don’t know if I have it in me to deal with you today.”

“Deal with me? Have you forgotten your part in—”

“I’m grounded until forever. And no one wants to talk to the cheater today. It sucks. And now this—”

Jan tilted his head. “This being me walking over here?”

“Just go, okay?”

Joe turned back to the fence, and began worrying at a vine leaf that had grown large and lush on the school side. Jan looked closer. Just under the leaf, in its spreading shadow, was a small vegetable, dark green and about the length of his longest finger. Then he noticed that a number of the vines had sprouted on the school side of the fence. He knew the shape, that each sprout was about two weeks old, and would be ready for harvest in a couple more weeks. You wanted them small, to keep the bitterness at bay.

He smiled. “Zucchini.”

Joe rolled his eyes. (Emma would have awarded it a nine on her Ginger scale of ten.) “You want to do this now? Fine. I’m sorry about the contest.”

“No, I was talking about... wait, that’s it?”

“That’s what?”

“That was my apology?!”

“Yeah, and that’s all you’re getting, too...” Joe paused, and winced. “No, that’s not quite right. I also have to give your Opa a discount. Ugh.”

Joe closed his eyes and began to shake his head, clearly embarrassed about the whole thing. And in that instant, Jan understood something really important about people: everyone approached their weaknesses differently. Maybe Joe had delivered the only apology he was capable of, and although it was not great, it had been genuine. Genuinely uncomfortable, perhaps, but still real. And Jan began to laugh, all that understanding released as a moment of mirth, which might have been his only way to deal with it, too. In a second or two, his eyes had filled with laughter tears and he had to grab the fence to steady himself.

Joe certainly noticed. He turned, eyes narrowed, no doubt ready to find some new way to defend himself. However, when he noticed that Jan was not laughing in the way that cuts another person, his mouth twitched upwards and his features softened.

“What?” he asked. Twitch, twitch. “What’s so funny?”

Jan had trouble getting the next words out he was laughing so deeply, right down to his diaphragm. But somehow he managed a weak “I accept your apology, Joe,” before completely breaking down into giggles.

Moments could be so delicate, and few were more so than apologies and acceptances delivered in the midst of laughter. Feelings could so easily be hurt. But Joe got it, and in a second or two he was actually smiling. Good laughter is contagious.

“Well, good,” he said. “Because that’s all you’re getting.”

Jan wiped his eyes. “I know.”

“Okay, then.”

“But I was talking about those,” Jan said, pointing at the infant zukes.

“Oh. Right. You mean I didn’t have to apologize?”

“Not until you were ready to.”

“Oh, man, how embarrassing.”

“And, uh, speaking of apologies, I still owe you one, too.”

Joe looked confused. “For what?”

“For whacking you in the nose with my merganser.”

“Your what?”

“Carved duck. Sorry about that.”

“Oh. Okay. I shouldn’t have said what I said.”

“True.”

“Sucks that she moved away.”

“Yeah.” Jan lifted the nearest zucchini. “So these’re, what, two weeks old, would you say?”

Joe leaned down. “Yep. About that.”

They spent the rest of recess talking about gardens and the summer and about how nothing ever happened like it was supposed to. There were some rough spots in the conversation—it takes time for different species to learn each other’s language—but by the time the bell rang, it was clear that each boy had secured one more ally against whatever came next. Not friendship, exactly (Jan had this idea that he needed to clear it with Emma first, although he suspected she would be happy for him), but a few more steps towards it.

The Good Tea

The Colonnade pizza was, of course, delicious. As were the carrots from Opa's garden that they ate raw alongside, which said something about the power of fresh things, if they could make a kid reach for seconds. Still, by the time Jan sat back from the table, feeling very much like he should undo the top button of his pants, he suspected Oma's motives went beyond her stated desire not to cook that night. When she stood to gather the dinner plates and started assembling their (good) tea things, announcing that it was Time For The DD, Jan knew for sure.

"You bribed me with pizza," he said to his grandparents when Oma set the water to boil and sat down again.

"Sure did, kid," Opa said.

"Back to routine, Jan," Oma said. "The New School Year Has Begun!"

"How was your day?" Opa asked him.

"Fine."

Oma raised an eyebrow. "That's it? That's all we get?"

Jan shrugged, and studied his hands. He had not prepared himself to debrief and was still processing the day, which had taken a number of unexpected turns. Joe at lunch. Ms. Harker keeping him back after school to talk about the phone incident, which had turned into one of those psychological assessments teachers are so good at

sneaking into every interaction. Being released only to discover Joe at the fence again, almost as though he was waiting for Jan, which of course he denied. The walk home together, which was mostly silent apart from a mutual See you tomorrow when they got to Joe's place. Arriving home to find Opa working in the garden (obviously having taken the afternoon off so Jan would not arrive home to an empty house, which meant they were worried about him) and helping him work until Oma got home with dinner but not asking him any questions at all (which was weird).

What did a guy do with all that? With a constantly shifting planet?

"How's the merganser?" Opa asked. "I'm surprised you didn't dash upstairs to get your gear as soon as you heard Oma say DD."

"Uh, it's done, I think. The carving, anyway."

"Really?" Oma said. "That's wonderful!"

Opa nodded. "Will you paint it, or leave it unfinished?"

"I don't know. Half of me wants to paint it like a real duck, but the other half likes the natural wood look."

"Ah, yes, the woodworker's eternal dilemma," Opa said, chuckling.

It was hard to know what else to say, so Jan returned to his previously ponderous silence. Opa seemed to sense his need for retreat and turned to Oma to ask about her day. She lit up and began telling them everything in a rush, as though she had just been waiting for the chance. Her new position was way more work and responsibility than she had anticipated, but she said she would enjoy the challenge. There was a lot more detail (which ordinarily would have bored Jan to tears) but he found himself buoyed by her enthusiasm. The past months had been so hard on her. She talked a long time, and Opa and Jan listened and asked a few questions, and at some point they all realized at the same instant that the water had boiled long before but had been forgotten in all the excitement.

So she stood again, reboiled the water, and set up three mugs with expensive Bengal Spice herbal tea that made Jan wonder what oranges had to do with India. When the tea was ready, they sat and sipped as Opa shared about his day, which had been the same as the rest of his days, apart from a really nice afternoon spent working the ground with his grandson and getting to enjoy a few fruits of their labour alongside good pizza.

Warmed by the smiles and stories and strangely delicious tea, before he could help himself, Jan blurted out that he and Joe might be friends now. Which, of course, brought the conversation to a screeching halt, and Jan worried that he might have made a mistake, that Oma and Opa might still be upset about Joe's cheating and garden vandalism. That there might be such a thing as unforgivable sins.

"Is that okay?" he asked, looking back and forth between them gauging their reactions. "I mean, it happened by accident. There was a fence and a zucchini plant, and then he apologized (well, kind of, and you'll be getting a lawn-care discount, by the way), and it turns out we have a lot in common. We laughed. A lot."

There was no response from either grandparent, just a quick, serious look between them, so he barrelled on. "And after school he waited for me after I got my phone back from Ms. Harker and—"

Oma raised an eyebrow. "And why would Ms. Harker have your phone on the first day?"

"Oh, that. I texted Emma in class."

"Jan Jan Geoffrey Shirley," Oma began, her frown deepening. "Tell me you won't be doing that again."

"I won't. Harker was really—"

"Ms. Harker, you mean," Opa said.

"Right. Ms. Harker was really cool about it. She actually thanked me for messing up on the first day, that it helped her set the tone early."

“So you’re not in trouble?” Oma asked.

“Nope. This time. I wouldn’t want to test her again, though.”

“Good, good.”

“Joe likes her, too.”

There was another glance between his grandparents, and nods, and deep breaths like they had decided how to deal with him, and Oma said, “Oh, and about Joe—”

“He was really cool to me, guys. I just thought if anyone needed—well, if I needed—did I do something wrong?”

Opa’s eyes softened. “Oh, my goodness, no.”

“We think it’s great news, Jan,” Oma said, catching a nod from Opa before carrying on. “We were worried about how the two of you would do this year. About you, especially. You’ve been so down in the mouth since Emma and Allison left—”

Opa exhaled suddenly and smacked himself in the forehead. “Shoot! I forgot! Sorry for interrupting, my love —”

“That’s okay, Geoff, but—”

However, Opa was up and out of his seat before she could finish the thought. He came back a moment later holding an envelope in his hand, stamped and creased as though it had survived the wars. He handed it to Jan. “This came for you today. I almost didn’t get it, but this little voice told me I needed to check the mailbox.”

“This is for me?”

“I know, right? Snail mail, if you can imagine. And an actual letter, not a flyer or advertisement or a bill. It’s gotten to the point where we so rarely...”

Opa’s voice faded into the distant background as Jan looked at the front of the letter. His name and their address were written across the front in a bold, confident hand. Splashed across its front were neon codes and lines. In the upper left was the following:

AG

Toronto, ON

“It’s from Allison,” he said, turning the letter over a few times and inspecting every angle and seam, all of which had been reinforced with packing tape. “She must’ve made it to Toronto.”

The envelope bulged a little on one side. He held it up to the light, barely making out the outline of a sheet of paper full of blurry handwriting and a bulky mass of something hard but kind of flexible. Jan wondered what a single page could hold. Opa dug into his pocket and pulled out his pocket knife. He clicked it open and held it out to Jan, handle first, but Jan shook his head, hearing himself say that he would open it later, that he needed to call Emma, that it felt like she should be there when he discovered what Allison had written to him. To them.

Friendship in HD

Against her no-technology-in-bedroom rules, Oma let Jan take her iPhone up to his room for the call (And Only This One Time, Am I Clear?).

Emma smiled when she answered, her face filling the screen. Jan had to smile, too: it was great to see her. She looked relaxed and at peace, which was good, because he had worried about how her first day had gone. She had on one of her old shirts (and one of his favourites):

**STRONG
IS
THE NEW
PRETTY
EVERYTHING**

“You’re so clear!” Jan said.

“Yep. Ginger is in full HD now. We finally got internet.”

“Impressive, Em. I can see every pimple and booger.”

“Every gorgeous pimple and booger, you mean.”

“Obviously.”

“Hey, is that your bedroom?”

“Sure is.”

She feigned a startled expression, her curls shivering. “Has the world ended and it’s just the two of us left? Does Oma know about this tiny act of rebellion?”

Not your Oma; just Oma. And delivered without any self-consciousness. Jan felt a pang of missing around his heart, bleeding into the surrounding lobes of his left lung. He managed to respond in the affirmative.

“Well, it’s good to see you, J. I missed you today.”

“Me too, Em.”

“And...? How’s our (least) favourite puppy-mill?”

So he told her almost everything, from Harker taking the phone to Smith asking after her to Joe and his miraculous connection next to the zuke plant. He did not mention the letter, which sat on the desk. Emma talked about her new school, which she had to take a school bus to get to and was super small. Its halls were filled with alien creatures, boys in mullets and tank-tops and girls who talked about fishing a lot. She had decided to ignore the boys, but the girl-fishing was kind of awesome so she had begun the process of deciding which of them would get to be her friend.

Time kind of lost itself; if Jan had looked at the clock, he would have seen an hour disappear in a wink. There were stretch-breaks and a chugged water contest. Emma conducted a virtual tour of their new place, which was too big for all their stuff, and he showed her the almost-finished merganser (she looked suitably impressed). There was even a quick appearance by Mr. Bonner, who poked his head into the frame and gave Jan an awkward wave, telling him to pass along his best to his grandparents. Then he was gone before Jan had time to return the greeting.

At the end, they went quiet for a long moment. Not an uncomfortable silence, but the kind where friends give each other the time and space to figure out what should get said next.

Jan broke it. “So? What do you think?”

“Think about what?”

“About me and Joe. You didn’t say much about it.”

“Oh, that. Ginger refuses to be jealous.”

“That’s not what I meant. I just wanted to make sure you know, given everything that’s happened, that—”

“Dude, enough,” Emma said, rolling her eyes. “It’s fine.”

“Really?”

“Totally. I’m kind of glad, actually, and it makes a twisted kind of sense.”

“How so?”

“Don’t get me wrong: he’s obviously in need of serious social repair. But honestly? He gets you. And us.”

“He does, doesn’t he?”

“But you’ll keep him honest. And you will inform him on my behalf that I have forgiven him for his summer of stupidity.”

Jan laughed. “Will do.”

She leaned in so the screen was filled with one serious eye. “I’m serious. Verbatim. Word for word.”

“Not a chance. A paraphrase will have to do.”

She sat back with an exaggerated sigh. “Fine. You have Ginger’s blessing to explore this odd friendship, Mr. Shirley.”

Jan was lightheaded with relief. You never knew how old friends would respond to the news that new friends had been added to a shorthanded friend roster. Especially friends who had done what Joe had done, and who were filling an unfillable hole like the one Emma had left.

She glanced to the side and made a face. “I’m getting the stinkeye from my dad, J. Gotta go.”

“Just one more thing.” He held up the envelope.

“What’s that?”

He zoomed the camera in on the return address, and once it focused, there was an exasperated growl from Emma’s end. “It’s from Allison! You kept that back?”

"I'm all about the dramatic, Em."

"You've been holding out! Bad Ottawa friend! Bad, bad!"

"Easy now."

"So what does it say?"

"I haven't opened it yet. I was waiting for you."

She tapped her camera with her index finger three times. Thunk, thunk, thunk. "If you don't have that letter open in the next three seconds, J, Ginger is grabbing the next plane out of here..."

"Okay, hold on."

He grabbed his scissors and cut open the side of the envelope, the narrow end, not wanting to risk ripping whatever was inside. He tilted it, holding his hand beneath, and out slid Allison's ID disks in a tangle, cool from transit. He raised them for Emma to see.

"Wow. I'd almost forgotten about those," she said.

"Me, too."

"I wonder why she sent them."

Next he slid out the letter, which was, as he had suspected, exactly one page of white copy paper, double-sided, folded twice. Handwritten on both sides. The writing really stood out: Allison had a fantastic hand, with confident strokes and loops and whorls all marching across the page as straight as if they were guided by blue factory lines. His eyes scanned past the date and address and rested on the salutation.

Two words.

Two simple words you heard every day, in a thousand different versions of normal. Still, reading them was enough to make him need an extra moment, despite Emma's impatient protestations from her side of the country, before he could begin reading the letter.

Two Words

My Friend,

I hope you're doing okay. As you'll see from the return address, I've made it to Toronto. I've been here for a couple of days, and am ready to grab the next train out to BC (TO is an interesting place, but way too big, way too impersonal).

But before I do, I wanted to set things right and apologize for the other day. What started as a simple goodbye and thank-you turned awkward and weird, and I put my foot in it and said the wrong thing (again). Sorry.

Also, I was less than truthful when I said it wasn't about you.

I haven't been doing very well, you see. My place in Graham Park, rather than being a nice little place to call home, had become a kind of self-made prison. It was easier to lock myself away from the world than face the darkness I carried away from the war. There were some very, very dark times.

But then these two dynamo kids come along, and suddenly my world is getting brighter. I'm going out more. I'm calling old friends for favours. I'm gardening again. I'm back on my meds. I'm letting myself think about doing the things I'd always wanted to do, like this trip.

You did this, Jan. You and that firework Emmaline. While it's true that I've always had a restless spirit, your friendship

and desire for me to be okay have given this old soldier the strength to take her next steps. And maybe even think about brighter days ahead.

You two have literally saved my life. I'd pin hero medals on you any day.

A.

PS. Hold onto those dog tags. They're my extra reason to come back someday.

PPS. One of the things I'd like to do out west is to visit Adam's Lake, and that spot where your parents died. I'd like to thank them for having such an incredible kid. (Oma and Opa will be getting a letter soon thanking them for the raising part.) Would that be okay? Send a letter to the Post Restante in Kamloops and let me know. I look forward to hearing from you.

Perfect Words

After a long debrief of Allison's letter (Oma would be so proud), Jan and Emma finally signed off, with promises of regular FaceTime sessions and encouragement for the school year ahead and an overall sense of wonder about the unexpected. Emma had been particularly affected by the letter; he had raised his eyes from the page to find her wiping away a sudden rebellious wash of tears she blamed on the new Alberta air. (Real Gingers don't cry over letters, she had said. And what's with her not offering to come see me up here in the middle of nowhere, am I right?)

He got up from his desk, stretched, and wandered downstairs, replacing Oma's iPhone on its charging mat. Oma and Opa were lounging on the family room sofa, watching and humming along to *The Sound of Music*, their favourite movie (which Jan loved, too, but would never admit). Their hands dipped in and out of a huge bowl of popcorn and to their mouths and back again. A half-full bottle of wine sat open on the side table, along with two glasses.

Jan grabbed a handful of popcorn, earning a playful and halfhearted slap from Oma, and stuffed his mouth as he sat on the easy chair where Opa would normally have sat. His fingers felt greasy and granular as he chewed. He swallowed and looked at her. "Butter? And salt?"

“Only the best for the moment.” She absentmindedly handed over a napkin.

Opa pointed the remote at the TV, pausing the screen as Rolf and Liesl escaped the rain and ran into the rotunda.

“How’re you doing?”

“Fine. Good, actually. It was quite a letter.”

“And Emmaline? How was her first day at her new school?” Oma asked.

Jan smiled. “They’ll never know what hit them.”

Oma laughed. “I bet.”

“Everything okay with Allison?” Opa asked.

Jan nodded. “You can read the letter, if you like.”

“That would be great,” Opa said. “Whenever you’re ready.”

Oma lifted her chin at the screen. “Want to sit for a bit? Rolf’s just about to serenade Liesl with the creepiest song ever.”

Opa snorted and grabbed another handful of popcorn.

“Gee, that sounds wonderful, Mrs. Shirley,” Jan cooed in his best old-movie voice. “But I best be getting myself to bed now.”

Oma sat up. “Oh! I didn’t realize it was so late.”

“It’s not, Oma. I’m just tired. Long day, you know?”

“I do.”

They exchanged goodnights and Jan stepped out of the family room, then stopped. “Actually, I’m going to go outside for a bit, if that’s okay.”

“Don’t stay out too long,” Oma called. “It’s A New Day Tomorrow, and New Days Always Start Early.”

Now that was more like her, he thought, moving towards the front hall. Behind him, the movie started up again, the singing echoing through the rest of the house, bouncing around, slightly off-tune. He stepped outside and closed the door, the sound of music instantly replaced by crickets and the distant rush of traffic on the main road.

He moved into the side yard, the almost-full moon bathing everything in a bluish glow, the grass cool under his bare feet. The garden was mostly in moonshadow, too dark to see much, but he still tried, willing his night vision to work harder. Eventually, the outline of the zucchini trellis and a few of the biggest plants became clearer. But at some point in the dark, the eyes will reach their limits, adjusting only so much. Jan realized that he was seeing as much as he ever would, even if he stood there all night.

For a few quiet minutes, he tried to relive a few summer memories, but it felt odd without Opa or Emma or Allison there. When a hungry mosquito found him, droning madly in and out of his hearing and finally biting his shoulder through the thin fabric of his shirt, he decided to head back inside. The bite began itching as he retraced his steps and deadbolted the front door.

So much for a perfect reflective moment in the cool moonlight.

He went back into the kitchen for some after-bite cream from the first aid kit, forcing himself not to scratch. Absorbed once again in the film, neither grandparent noticed his return, nor the sounds he made as he retrieved the kit and applied the medicine. The itch immediately subsided. Better to treat what was wrong right away.

His phone buzzed and lit up from its place on the charger, a small envelope icon appearing on the small external screen. A text from Emma. He flipped open the phone.

— goodnight, friend!

He smiled, and tapped out an identical reply (which, at two words long, seemed so perfectly brief and to the point it demanded to be copied), closed the phone, and laid it in its spot. He poked his head into the family room and traded Goodnights and Love-yous with Oma and Opa, who were so relaxed they had practically melted into the sofa cushions.

Upstairs, after his bedtime routines, he folded Allison's letter and replaced it in the envelope, thinking about the snail-mail return letter where he would thank her for everything she had done, and that it would be great if she could visit the spot where his parents died. He hung her ID disks over his lamp, where they dangled and slowly spun, making lazy shadows on the desk.

He turned out the lights and lay back in bed, waiting for thoughts of the day to arrive and briefly move through his mind, as they always did, before unspooling into a pleasant nothingness that would carry him into the next day. But one of the truths about trying to sleep after big days following tumultuous summers is that the mind needed time to process. Sleep became secondary, and often hard to find. Jan felt like he was caught in a vortex of mental randomness, but rather than plunge into the hole when he neared the middle, each time he approached he was swung out again to keep rotating around and around and around. It was exhausting, disorienting, and depressing all at once.

How could a good day end in such an unsettled way?

However, at about midnight, just as he was milliseconds away from giving up on sleeping ever again, the rotations began to slow. When the spinning slowed enough, thoughts were able to tumble into their appropriate places. Ideas. Plans. Knowledge. Certainty. And Jan smiled to himself in the darkness.

There would be more than just a letter sent out west. If Allison was willing to hike to the memorial spot along that remote trail, he suspected she would be willing to do a little more.

Turns out that the merganser was not done after all. He would paint it with lacquer and mail it to Kamloops, and hopefully she would carry it into the mountains for him. The hard, clear finish would protect the soft basswood from the elements but still preserve its grain and natural beauty. Opa had cans and cans of the stuff and would be more than willing to share.

But first, there would be words. Just a few, but that was okay because it did not take many to matter. He thought about Allison's salutation and Emma's goodnight text, how four words had lifted him higher than he could have lifted himself. He would take his finest whittling knife and carve a handful of words into the merganser's stable, flat base. Words for his parents. Words that would be read only by him, Oma, Opa, Allison, or the rare hiker who stopped at the memorial and was curious enough to pick up the strange, carved duck.

Perfect words.

And Jan knew exactly what they would be.

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