Heart with No Companion

The first time my mother hit me she saved my life.

Every Tuesday morning the ice cream truck sang its way onto our street. Kids ran to it like Pavlovian dogs to the dinner bowl and lined up single file at the curb to pay for a treat. I ordered the same thing every week, an ice cream cup with a coral-blue ball of bubblegum in the bottom that cost ten cents. My mother gave me a dime on Monday evening after dinner and I'd place it under my pillow. The tooth fairy had never left me more than a nickel so I'd come to appreciate inflation since my last molar had dropped.

"Don't lose the dime, Ross," she'd remind me. "Money doesn't grow on trees."

My mother had a laundry list of instructions for me: make your bed before you go to school, wash your cereal bowl in the morning, turn the thermostat up to sixty-eight when you watch cartoons on Saturday morning, don't drink milk or orange juice from the carton, wash your hands before and after using the washroom.

"Don't put things in your mouth. You're ten years old, not four." Specifically she meant I shouldn't clasp the dime in my teeth while tying my shoes.

On the day she hit me I'd either forgotten her advice and the dime, vice-gripped between my top and bottom canine teeth, catapulted into my throat as I tripped on the basement stairs. My mother had just finished doing laundry and saw me gasping and sucking for air. I was knifing the air around me, fending off an invisible monster.

"Ross. Are you choking?"

The monster tightened its grip around my throat. I jumped up and down, trying to could cough the dime out.

"For God's sake Ross. Stop moving."

She punched me hard on my back, three times, before the coin shot onto the floor. I'd swallowed enough air to fill a birthday balloon, filling the space in my lungs that had been empty for as long as the time I could hold my breath underwater.

"Ten Ross! Not four."

She smacked my ear as I picked up the slick coin and pushed me up the stairs with the laundry basket.

"Go get your ice cream and stay out of my way."

I walked to the truck and got in line behind three boys my age who played together on the street. I'd seen them from my front porch chasing each other across lawns, pretending to be Nazis or Indians, carrying broom sticks repurposed as rifles or machine guns. The boys never invited me to join and I never asked if they needed a cowboy or another soldier. At the ice cream truck they ordered chocolate cones and sat together on the curb, eating their ice cream fast to stay ahead of the summer sun.

"I don't have anymore bubble-gum cups," the server said. "Do you want what they've got?" He pointed to the three boys.

“Yeah, I sure do,” I agreed.

The boys left the curb and I took up their place to eat my cone. A blob of chocolate fell off the cantilevered swirl and landed on my lap. I ate my cone slowly, waiting for the blob to melt and for my pants to dry, enjoying the cool ice cream as a balm for the hot flush in my cheeks.

Coming across our front lawn on my way home I saw my mother looking out the living room window, smoking a cigarette. She opened the door for me.

“You’re kidding Ross. Your pants? I just did laundry.”

She slapped the back of my head (“a cuff” she told my father when he got home from work and they sat drinking martinis), the third time that day she hit me. For the next three weeks, until we moved out of town, she supplemented her lectures with slaps and light punches.

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Our family had a minimalist consumption philosophy. My father was it’s author and constantly reminded us of it. “If something new comes into the house, then something old goes out.” Any gifts I got at Christmas or for my birthday required me to choose something for disposal or donation. There was no way to accumulate toys or clothes. My parents never deviated from giving two birthday presents and five Christmas gifts and so established a steady-state equilibrium for my personal possessions by the time I was six years old. Whenever we moved, yearly, we could pack our entire house up in the time between breakfast and lunch and within an hour of

arriving at our new house, the moving boxes were stacked in closets and ready for the next move. I got one box for my toys and books and another box for clothes.

My itinerant life was aptly imaged by an episode of a Bugs Bunny cartoon in which one character chases another around the world, their journey shown as a cartoon plane swooshing across the globe, marking its flight from New York to Berlin to Moscow with a thick black line. I thought of our moving van, a silver metal box, swooshing across the country, speeding down highways from Sudbury to The Pas to Mackinaw. Inside the truck my two boxes slid side-to-side, banging into the truck's walls, smashing whatever few things I had.

When we arrived in Mackinaw I turned twelve and was going into grade seven. My parents signed leases that ended in the summer because they thought it was easier to move when sunshine and warmth preserved our cardboard boxes. I wished we could arrive in October, when a new kid has tabula rasa status, when the other kids were bored with the same five friends and enemies. A mid-fall arrival in Mackinaw might have stoked their egos and generosity, but in July they'd already sorted themselves into summer packs. Some of them hung out at the arcade playing air hockey and pinball, others cartwheeled on the beach at Monroe Lake, and a few sat with pals in their basements watching reruns of Gilligan's Island and the Partridge Family or listening to BTO and April Wine records.

For the first two weeks in July I sat on our front porch and waited for something to happen.

"Why are you on the porch?", my mother asked me. "Don't you know anyone yet?"

Every afternoon I'd sit out front and she'd make her daily trip to the COOP grocery store where she bought brown iceberg lettuce, ripe fruit, and stale pastry from "day-old" racks.

"There's no one to play with. This town is boring." I chastised very town we lived in.

"Only boring people are bored," she said.

"I'm not boring. We keep moving and I can't make real friends."

She came closer, as if she might give me a hug.

"Most children would love a chance to live in different places and be adventurous."

"This isn't adventure. It's hell."

I shimmied my backside along the concrete porch, anticipating a sharp smack as she passed on her way to the car. She kicked my leg instead.

"You better not be sitting here when I get back Ross. I'll give you a dime to get something at the convenience store."

I slipped the coin into my pocket.

"And don't choke on it. I can't save you every time."

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I took her dime and walked fifteen minutes to the convenience store, all the while holding the dime in my mouth. In the back of the store I rifled through the ice

chest, looking for a blue popsicle. Just off to my left I saw a kid my age stuffing spools of fishing line under his sweatshirt.

"Hey," he said to me. "Go up the aisle with me. Pretend we're friends."

He walked alongside each me in the narrow aisle. I bumped into a shelf, knocking a can of Chef Boyardee spaghetti onto the floor.

"Hey! You better not break anything," the cashier yelled at us.

At the register the shoplifter commanded the cashier to add five Double Bubbles to my popsicle.

"I'll wait outside for you," he said.

I paid ten cents and walked out. The shoplifter shouted at me from the side of the store.

"I hope you're going to share the gum," he said. "My name is Dirk, so you won't be giving it to a stranger."

I gave him three pieces.

"That's fair." He stuffed all three into his mouth.

We walked slowly across the parking lot, away from the store.

"Never run from a job," Dirk instructed.

I asked Dirk what he was going to do with the fishing line.

"Steal a fishing rod of course. Want to help me?"

I agreed to meet him the next day outside the Hudson's Bay store at noon. I'd keep an eye out for trouble while he got the rod.

"One thing I have to ask," he said. "What's wrong with your teeth?"

My two top canine teeth hadn't come in properly. One was a short peg and the other looked like a sliced almond. People thought I was miserable, or smirking, because I never smiled and kept my lips tightly pursed. My mother told my father that I'd eventually need new teeth once I stopped growing.

"I doubt Ross is going to grow anymore," my father said. "And if two teeth come out, then two teeth can go in."

"It's a congenital thing," I told Dirk. "From my mom. She has bad teeth too."

"Too bad I can't steal some for you." Dirk smiled and punched my arm.

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For the rest of July and August I acted as Dirk's lookout when he stole. He shoplifted from six different stores, the limit of the retail opportunities in Mackinaw.

"When I'm older I'll buy a car and drive to Prince George and spend all day doing it," Dirk said. "They have twenty times more stores than we do."

When he'd exhausted the shelves in Mackinaw at the end of August, he showed me how to pop metal slugs out of electrical boxes installed in the new homes being built for an influx of loggers and their families. The slugs perfectly matched the size of a quarter and we used them in the arcade to play pinball.

My mother was happy that I was out of the house and had a friend. I left the house after breakfast and didn't come back until dinner. I woke up surly, spent the day flipping pinball paddles, and silently ate dinner with my slightly drunk parents.

“Now there’s a boy who hangs his fiddle at the door,” my mother said when I came home.

“How’s your new friend, Ross?” my father asked.

I told him that Dirk knew a lot about fishing and electricity and that he might be the best friend I ever had.

“Don’t get used to it, Ross. Nothing lasts forever,” he said.

“Dirk and me will be friends forever,” I said.

“No, you won’t. Eventually it’s out with the old and in with the new. You’ll see.”

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Dirk and I ended up in the same class in September. Our teacher Mr. Webb put Dirk at the back of the class and me at the front. Mr. Webb had taught Dirk in grade six.

“He hates me,” Dirk explained. “I stole his stapler last year and he knows I nicknamed him ‘Spiderman’.”

The class was arranged in five rows of four desks each. I sat at the front of the second row and beside me, in the first row closest to the door, sat The Res Kid. Dirk called the boy The Res Kid because the boy was an Indian from the Martin Lake Reservation. Twenty kids from the reservation, grades one to seven, travelled on a yellow school bus from Martin Lake to Mackinaw, an hour each way, to attend school. The bus almost always arrived late, more so when the snow started in early October, and sometimes The Res Kid didn’t get to class until ten in the morning. Spiderman hated tardiness, especially when a late kid interrupted music or reading.

“The Res Kid is pretty tall. He almost hits the door frame,” I said to Dirk.

“I bet he’s older than us. Probably failed a few times,” Dirk suggested.

By the fifth day of class The Res Kid had been late five times.

“If I can get here on time, so can you,” Spiderman yelled at him. “It’s not like we live in a city with traffic.”

The Res Kid barely spoke, or reacted to Spiderman’s anger. He kept to himself and if we worked in groups, he remained silent and invisible to us.

Spiderman loved two things: the sound of his voice and full attention from the class. Our school district didn’t have money for much of anything beyond salaries and workbooks; in gym we learned to curl using paint cans filled with frozen water as curling stones and in music Spiderman taught us to play guitar on wood. He used two-by-four lumber cut into three foot lengths on which we drew the fret board and strings using black markers.

“I’ll play my guitar and you’ll use your boards to practise chording with me.”

Spiderman taught us the four chords to play Leonard Cohen’s song, Suzanne. He showed us each chord on his Fender six-string and walked around the room to see us stretch our fingers around the two-by-fours. The Res Kid’s wide hands effortlessly bounced from chord to chord. “Slow down Chief,” Spiderman told him. “You’ll get a splinter.”

Once we’d mastered the chords Spiderman sat on top of his desk and played Suzanne while we played along on our lumber. When he was satisfied that we didn’t need attention, he sang out loud. Normally his voice fluttered, like he was undergoing

puberty, especially if he got mad, but he'd lower his voice a few octaves while singing, an affectation he did to emulate Leonard Cohen.

Spiderman finished playing and asked if anyone in the class wanted to try his guitar or sing.

"I'll do it."

I turned to my left where The Res Kid sat. I'd so rarely heard his voice that he sounded like he was offering to defuse a bomb, or volunteering to set outside into a dark forest to defend us.

"Really, Chief? O.K., good luck with that." Spiderman passed his guitar to The Res Kid and sat down.

The Res Kid stood up beside his desk, slung the guitar strap around his neck, and started playing and singing. He sang about tea and oranges from China and a river and drowning men able to see Jesus walking on water. The class stopped strumming so they could watch.

When he finished, all of us clapped.

"That was O.K," Spiderman noted. "Maybe a bit too deep. Next time we'll get a girl to sing it."

For the next week Spiderman made The Res Kid do a push up for every minute he arrived late.

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Dirk quit stealing until Halloween. He thought it was best to let the stores lie fallow for a few weeks.

“I’m thinking of getting a cassette and a Halloween costume,” he said.

“Could you get the Leonard Cohen tape for me?” I asked him.

“Sure, but I don’t get why you like that song. We’ve played it every week in school. Tea and oranges? Who eats that?”

After school we’d go to Dirk’s house to eat melted cheese slices on Wonderbread and look at his dad’s Playboy magazines. Dirk’s parents both worked in the sawmill and went to the Mackinaw Hotel bar after their shift, getting home at seven, and then stayed up watching television They’d see ads for K-Tel kitchen gadgets and records and immediately order them. Their house was disorganized and cluttered, filled with ignored clothes, magazines, throw cushions, macrame hanging baskets, and ashtrays.

“I don’t know why you steal Dirk. Your parents seem to buy a lot of stuff. Aren’t you afraid of getting caught?"

“Why? What are they going to do to a twelve-year old? Jail? And my parents don’t care. I’m independent.”

Dirk stole a Spiderman costume at the Bay and wore it to school for our class Halloween party. I dressed as a hobo using old clothes my father had saved in a box that he kept in our basement. Mr. Webb wore a red wig, dressed like Raggedy Ann I guess. He’d moved all the desks to the side of the room and had us sit on the floor.

“Nice get up Dirk. Spiderman huh?”

“Yes sir. My favourite superhero.”

“Not mine,” Mr. Webb stared at Dirk for a long minute. “I like Batman.”

Mr. Webb sat on his desk and read aloud from the novel Carrie, but he skipped so many pages that the story made no sense and didn’t scare anyone. At ten a.m. the yellow school bus pulled up and the Indian kids got off. None of them had a costume.

“Late again Chief,” he said to the Res Kid. “And I’m reading to the class.”

Mr. Webb threw Carrie on the floor.

“What are you doing?” he asked The Res Kid.

“Just looking for my desk. It’s not in the spot.”

Mr. Webb walked to the front of the room, grabbed a desk and pushed it into the hallway. We could hear the metal legs sliding in the puddles of melting snow. Mr. Webb hurled a chair out after the desk.

“Out! Now!”

The Res Kid walked out of the room, righted the chair, pushed his desk to the wall, and sat down. He remained there until the bus returned at three o’clock.

The next week the Res Kid wasn’t in class. Spiderman took attendance five minutes after nine every morning that week, at lot earlier than normal, and yelled “Thomas Whitehorse” to the empty seat beside me.

“Chief’s not here again,” he announced.

“Probably drunk,” Dirk said to me. “Or his old man, or the bus driver.”

Dirk wasn’t entirely wrong, according to my mother. She’d seen men from the reservation drinking in the woods behind the Bay, staggering with bottles of wine or passed out at the edge of the parking lot. She told me to stay away from them, that

they could hurt me and that the RCMP were not doing their jobs and moving the men out of town.

"I think he might just be sick," I told Dirk.

"Sick of school," he said.

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Once a month on Sunday night my mother cut my hair. She sat me on the kitchen stool, combed my hair straight down the sides of my head and face and cut around the circumference of my head as if she had placed a bowl on it.

"I hate this," I said. "I'd like to go to a barber, like Dirk does."

"With what money? When you're old enough to get a job you can cut your own hair."

I closed my eyes as she clipped the hair on my forehead in a straight line.

"Mr. Webb is a dick. He's tormenting one of the kids from the reservation."

She closed the scissors and hit my forehead with the handle.

"Ross, do not use that language!"

"Fine. He's a penis."

I bobbed and weaved like Muhammad Ali but she whacked my ear.

"No allowance this week Ross. You get nothing."

"I don't need money. Dirk steals stuff for me."

She looked at me, genuinely concerned, as if I told her that Dirk had leukaemia.

"That's so sad. Your only friend is a criminal."

She smiled and threw the knockout punch.

“I’m sure you’ll do better when we move.”

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On Monday morning I wore a toque to hide my haircut and the small cut on my forehead.

“Oh oh. Salad bowl special last night Ross?” Mr. Webb grabbed the toque off my head and dropped it on my desk.

“I guess,” I replied. I cooled my hot face with the snow melting on my mitts.

“I’ll lend you my Annie wig if you want.”

“No, I’m good.”

“I’m joking Ross! Maybe smile once in a while, huh?”

Dirk walked into the class and raised his middle finger to Spiderman as he passed me on the way to his desk.

We’d spent two weeks without music lessons so Mr. Webb could catch up on math and science. He handed out worksheets each day and we filled the blank spaces beneath questions about fractions or decimals. When we’d finally caught up, Spiderman brought out his guitar and we got our two-by-fours from the back of the room. With his first downward stroke on the D chord we began our mimicry and silently strummed and sang Suzanne.

While we played the yellow bus pulled close to the school's front doors. I saw Thomas get out and heard him in the hallway, stomping the snow off his boots. Thomas didn't bring shoes or keep a pair at school and wore his boots all day.

Thomas got his wood guitar, sat at his desk, and started singing. His voice was a spot-on imitation of Cohen. Spiderman stopped playing.

"Hey Chief. Stop making noises while I'm up here." Spiderman gently laid his guitar in its case and walked to Thomas's desk. Thomas kept singing.

"Did you hear me Chief?"

Thomas continued to strum. His left hand, chording on the pretend strings, was dripping blood, streaking the wood red with each strum. I saw a long splinter in the flesh between his thumb and forefinger.

I'm not sure who moved first, Thomas or Spiderman, or who kicked the chair, but there was no doubt when Thomas swung the two-by-four like a baseball bat at Spiderman's leg. We heard the crack at contact and Mr. Webb fell to the floor, grabbing his knee and screaming, and Thomas swung the board again, landing the bloodied end of it on Mr. Webb's thigh. Both me and Dirk tackled Thomas before he could finish his task and seriously hurt Mr. Webb.

"Go to the office Ross," Mr. Webb commanded. "For Christs's sake, get someone here."

"I'll do it, Dirk said and he bolted out the door to the main office.

Thomas stood up. He smiled at me and I smiled back. He put on his jacket and hat and walked into the hallway and out of the school. I ran to the window and watched him cross the street over to the mall and into the woods.

By now the principal was attending to Spiderman, who kept calling Thomas a bastard.

“That kid has got balls for doing that,” Dirk said to me.

“I think he just got tired of it all,” I answered.

“I dunno. Maybe he just couldn’t hack it. He didn’t have any friends you know.”

That night I told my mother what happened.

“That Indian boy needs to learn his place,” she said. “Hitting someone with a piece of wood is unacceptable.”

“What if it wasn’t with wood? What if he punched him?” I asked her.

“He still needs to know his place.”

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Thomas never returned to school. His desk remained empty until Spiderman moved me into it and let Dirk sit in my old desk. “Just keep it down boys,” he said.

Dirk stopped shoplifting during the winter because he felt shoving loot under a winter jacket wasn’t fair. “Too easy. I like a challenge.” He’d even started paying for things, like Marvel comic books.

“Where did you get the money?” I asked.

“Took if from my old man’s wallet. A fiver at a time so he won’t notice.”

All year I had wondered why Dirk called Mr. Webb Spiderman.

“You like the Marvel comic books. Is that why you call him Spiderman?”

“Yeah. He’s like the real superhero, who killed his true love Gwen Stacey by accident. Mr. Webb is like that. He tries to be a good teacher but he ends up killing us.”

“You mean sort of?”

“Sure.”

We were in the mall wandering around after school, resting on the centre benches and watching a few drunks weave from the liquor store to the back exit and off into the woods.

“I’m going to steal something,” I said.

“You are. Nice! Let’s do it.” Dirk slapped my shoulder and hooted and gave instructions.

“Something small. A chocolate bar, or a pair of socks.”

“How about an orange?,” I said. “I can roll it into my sweatshirt sleeve.”

We stood at the entrance to the COOP grocery store. Dirk said he stay outside as a lookout and signal me if he noticed trouble.

I walked into the grocery store and past two women who were pulling tins of waxed beens, packages of hamburger, and bruised bananas along a rolling black belt. The store was nearly empty and I continued to the produce aisle where the oranges were piled in a pyramid. I plucked the top orange and turned it over in my hand, like a pitcher does before throwing to the batter. I looked to the front and saw Dirk doing jumping jacks and pointing to something behind me. When I turned I saw my mother pushing an empty grocery cart, pulling boxes from shelves and replacing them in a different spot.

She had told me the day before that I should get the two boxes from my closet and start packing a few things. She and my father had talked that evening about debts and rent and I heard them mention a town called Smithers.

I palmed the orange, squeezing it hard and softening the pulp. When my mother turned her cart into the next aisle I threw the orange at her leg and missed, hitting the cart's wheel. I grabbed another orange and walked past the cashiers, indifferent to their attention. Dirk slapped me on the back.

"Holy! Your mom is going to be pissed when she finds out you did that."

I tossed the orange into a garbage can at the exit.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"To the woods."

Dirk stopped.

"Why? He won't be there."

Maybe not, maybe Thomas had found a way to disappear, but I knew this was my last chance to smile before we left Mackinaw, before I had to learn another song in a new place.