

Heart with No Companion

Our family had a minimalist consumption philosophy. My father was the author of this philosophy 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 throw away or donate an earlier gift. I received exactly two birthday presents and five Christmas gifts every year. We could pack our entire house in the time between breakfast and lunch and within an hour of arriving at a new house, my parents had stacked the empty moving boxes in closets, ready for the next move. I got one box for my toys and books and another for my clothes.

When we arrived in Mackinaw I’d just turned twelve and was going into grade seven. My parents signed leases that ended in the summer when sunshine and warmth help to preserve our tattered cardboard boxes. I wished we could arrive mid-year; by February kids are bored with their friends and enemies and my arrival—the new kid in town—might have stoked their egos and generosity, but in July they’d already sorted themselves into summer packs.

For the first two weeks in July I sat alone on our front porch.

“Why are you sitting there doing nothing?”, my mother asked me. “Don’t you know anyone yet?”

She made daily trips to the COOP grocery store to buy brown iceberg lettuce, over-ripe fruit, and day-old pastry.

“There’s no one to play with. This town is boring.” I chastised all our towns.

“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 hug me.

“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 took her dime and slotted it between my front teeth.

“And don’t choke on it,” she said.

I walked fifteen minutes to the convenience store, careful to cross the road where the town’s one traffic light failed to moderate pickup trucks driven by impatient men. I rifled through an ice chest at the back of the store, looking for a blue popsicle and watched a boy in the hardware and canned foods aisle stuffing spools of fishing line under his sweatshirt.

“Hey,” he said to me. “Go up the aisle with me. Pretend we’re friends.”

We walked alongside each other in the narrow aisle. I bumped into a shelf, knocking a can of spaghetti onto the floor.

At the register the boy asked the cashier to add five pieces of gum to my popsicle.

“I’ll wait outside for you,” he said.

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

“I hope you’re going to share the gum,” he said.

I gave him three pieces.

“That’s fair.” He stuffed all three into his mouth.

“My name is Dirk, so you won’t be giving it to a stranger.”

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

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

I’d never fished and told him I didn’t eat fish.

“Me neither. I’m just having some fun.”

“One thing I have to ask,” he said. “What’s wrong with your teeth?”

My two top canine teeth were wonky. One was a short peg and the other looked like a sliced almond. 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.

For the rest of the summer, I was Dirk’s lookout when he stole. He shoplifted from six different stores, the limit of 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.”

He showed me how to pop metal slugs out of the electrical boxes in the new homes being built for an influx of loggers and their families. 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 woke up surly, spent the day flipping pinball paddles and laughing at Dirk's jokes, then 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 I will be friends forever," I said.

On the last weekend of the summer Dirk decided that he'd pay for things, even comic books.

"Where did you get the money?" I asked.

"Took it from my old man's wallet. A fiver at a time so he won't notice."

Dirk had fifty dollars in his pocket.

"I like Marvel comic books," he said. "Especially Spiderman. I'd just rather not steal them."

"Then they sort of feel like you own them," I said.

"Yeah. Spiderman ends up killing his true love Gwen Stacey by accident. Wait 'til you meet Mr. Webb, our grade seven teacher. Mr. Webb is like Spiderman. He tries to be a good, but he'll end up killing us. I heard that from last year's class."

"Spiderman. Good name for him," I said.

At the end of the first week of school, Spiderman had put Dirk at the back of the class and me at the front. Beside me sat The Res Kid. Everyone knew him as The Res Kid because he lived on the Martin Lake Indian 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 often arrived late and sometimes The Res Kid didn't get to class until ten in the morning. Spiderman hated tardiness, especially when a kid interrupted music or reading.

“The Res Kid’s head 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. He kept to himself and in group work he was silent and invisible.

Our school district didn’t have money for much of anything beyond salaries and workbooks; in gym we used paint cans filled with frozen water as curling stones and in music Spiderman gave us two-by-four lumber cut into three-foot lengths on which we drew a fret board and strings using black markers.

“I’ll play my guitar and you’ll use your boards to chord along with me,” he said.

Spiderman taught us the four chords to play Leonard Cohen’s song, Suzanne. He showed us each chord on his six-string guitar and then walked around the room to see us stretch our fingers around our 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 and sang Suzanne while we played along on our lumber.

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 a movie character offering to defuse a bomb.

“Really, Chief? O.K., good luck with that.” Spiderman passed his guitar 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. When he finished, we clapped until Spiderman waved us to stop.

“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.

Dirk stole a Batman costume at The Bay and wore it to school for our class Halloween party. I didn't have a costume, even though Dirk offered to steal one for me. Spiderman wore a red wig, dressed like Raggedy Ann.

"Nice get up Dirk," he said. "Batman huh?"

"Yes sir. My favourite superhero."

"Not mine," Spiderman stared at Dirk for a long minute. "I like the Joker."

Spiderman sat on his desk and read aloud to us from the novel Carrie but skipped so many pages that the story didn't scare anyone. At ten a.m. the yellow school bus pulled up. None of the kids getting off the bus wore a costume.

"Late again Chief," Spiderman said to the Res Kid. "And I'm reading to the class."

"My name is Thomas," the Res Kid said, "not Chief, and I'll get a copy and read it on the bus."

Spiderman threw Carrie on the floor.

"What are you doing?" he asked The Res Kid.

"Looking for my desk. It's not in the spot."

Spiderman walked to the front of the room, grabbed a desk and pushed it into the hallway. The metal legs sliding in the puddles of melting snow sounded like ice skates carving through slush. Spiderman hurled a chair out into the hallway.

"Out! Now!"

The Res Kid walked out of the classroom, 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 from Monday to Wednesday.

"Chief's not here again," Spiderman announced each morning.

"I think we should call him Thomas," I said.

“Yeah, thanks for the advice,” Spiderman said. “You can call him whatever you want, but I do attendance and I’ve got him in the class list as Chief. Helps me learn names.”

Once a month on Sunday night my mother cut my hair. She sat me on the kitchen stool, combed my hair 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?”

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 a boxer, but she managed to whack 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 leukemia.

“That’s sad. Your only friend is a criminal.”

She smiled and cut another inch from my bangs.

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

“Salad bowl special last night, Ross?” Spiderman grabbed the toque from my head and dropped it on my desk.

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

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

“No, I’m good.”

“I’m joking Ross! Maybe smile once in a while, huh? Show us those pearly whites.”

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 because Spiderman had to catch up on math. He handed out worksheets each day and we filled the blank spaces beneath questions about fractions or decimals. Thomas finished his worksheets faster than me or Dirk and we asked him if we could check our answers against his, but because he missed every second day of school we messed up answers on half the problems.

When the last worksheet was finished, Spiderman brought out his guitar and threw a few chords around on his fretboard. The yellow bus pulled close to the school’s front doors. I saw Thomas get out and heard him in the hallway, stomping snow off his boots. Thomas didn’t have extra shoes at school and wore his winter boots all day.

Thomas came into the classroom, got his wood, sat at his desk, and started singing. Spiderman stopped playing.

“Hey Chief. Stop making noises while I’m up here.” Spiderman gently laid his guitar in its case, slammed the lid shut, and walked to Thomas’s desk. Thomas kept singing.

“Did you hear me Chief?”

Thomas’s left hand, chording on his pretend strings, streaked the wood red with each strum. I saw a long splinter in the flesh between his thumb and forefinger and blood oozing from his palm.

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

“Go to the office Ross,” Spiderman commanded. “For Christ’s sake, get someone here.”

I knelt beside Thomas on the floor, hating Spiderman, and thinking what might happen if I took the wood and hit him.

Dirk bolted to the main office to get the principal.

Thomas stood up and smiled at me. I couldn't help myself and smiled back.

"Your teeth are crooked," he said. "Did someone hit you?"

"A long time ago. But I can fix it."

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.

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

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

That night I told my mother what happened.

"That boy needs to learn his place," she said. "Injuring someone with a piece of wood is unacceptable."

"What if it wasn't with wood? What if he just punched him?" I asked her.

"He still needs to know his place."

On Saturday morning, the day after Thomas broke Spiderman's kneecap, Dirk and I sat on a bench in the mall, outside the COOP, and watched 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?" Dirk slapped my shoulder.

"Something small," he suggested. "A chocolate bar, or a pair of socks."

"How about an orange?" I said. "I can roll it into my sweatshirt sleeve."

I walked into the grocery store, past the cashier who was pulling tins of waxed beans and bruised bananas along a rolling black belt, 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. My mother pushing an empty grocery cart, pulling tins from shelves and replacing them in a different spot.

That morning she said that I should get the two boxes from my closet and start packing. I'd heard her and my father had talking about debts and rent, and a town called Smithers.

"Ross hasn't made any real friends, so he won't mind moving," she said to him.

"Just make sure he gets everything into two boxes. I'm not paying for a bigger U-Haul," my father said.

I palmed the orange, squeezing 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 cashier.

Dirk slapped me on the back.

"Holy! Your mom is going to ground you forever."

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."

I looked at the spindly pine trees behind the mall. Maybe Thomas had found a way to disappear, and we wouldn't find him, but I knew this was my last chance to smile before my parents took me away from Mackinaw, before I had to learn a different song in a strange town.