

The Den

Shane Stedingk had been at the bay for a week visiting his father. He didn't know very much about his father. He lived in another country. It was a non-likelihood that he would know much of something. He had not spent enough time with the man to be apprised of the lake, the birch trees, or the rest of Ontario. These things were foreign.

Shane's accent was also different. It was enough to know that he had an accent. He wore track pants and liked hurling. No one else did. Viktor, the dad, lectured at a college in the US, liked folk music and Leonard Cohen, wore linen, and acted like a fanatic in the kitchen. Shane didn't care much for the kitchen because the dad yammered about being a 'raw-food vegan,' 'healthy eating,' and wheat grass, whenever he was inside it. They spent two hours preparing breakfast in the morning because Viktor insisted that Shane watch so that he 'might learn.' 'Sprout the bread there, Shane.' 'No sugar in the tea, Shane...no dairy.' He was really annoying. No surprise the mother left him.

Viktor liked all the things that Shane thought were naff. Chickpeas, ballet, poetry, old-people red wine, none of it mattered to him. And he didn't look like the dad, whose curly blonde hair, bulky height and dark eyes loomed over him with big big glasses. Shane's hair had always been ginger, he kept it short, his sight was good, and his body was lean and low to the ground. He'd always liked GAA, twitter, sausage with his egg in the morning, the *Waterford Whisper*, Chelsea tumblr. Why he'd agreed to go to the bay was beyond him. The dad spent a week preparing meals and Shane could not watch television; they sat on the lakeside lawn not using the internet because the dad 'wanted to talk and get to know one another.'

For excitement, Viktor cooked decidedly bland rice pasta on Wednesday. It was awful. Shane told him the 'penny was chewy and dreadful...that it had no taste.' He said this in front of Viktor's female partner. The woman introduced herself before dinner as Paula, the 'colleague.' He knew sure, that she had only just moved out temporarily for Shane's visit.

'Well Vicky ruined the meal when he tried to cook it. When I make the dinners, Shane, the only thing I cook are potatoes! Do you like potatoes?'

This had been too much for him. If they spent two hours cooking the dinner they were spending three hours eating it. He didn't know who Chohum Nomsky was. He excused his getting up, and he left 'to go to the toilet.'

The only bathroom in the house faced west and was located on the main floor at the backside of the living room opposite the kitchen and dining area. All the bedrooms were on this opposite side. A pink one for girls – long dead or moved away – a blue one for boys, now, succeeded to Shane, that had once been his father's, it faced the lake. The main hall under these rooms was long and narrow. Black and white photos covered the walls. Some were crooked and smudged now. The dad took some of them down a day or two before and brought them into the living room to show Shane. He didn't recognize any of the relations –

he didn't look like them. He didn't really want to look at them. Viktor brought out a snack tray – ants on a log with organic almond butter – Shane refused, waving it off, 'I've never much cared for celery.'

Two doors faced each other at the end of the long narrow hall. The one on the left led to the bathroom, Shane knew that, but the door on the right led to his father's reading room, Shane knew this too; Viktor spent a few hours in there after breakfast every morning and during that time left Shane free to his own devices. He didn't need to pee.

Very full bookcases, degrees and certificates from colleges hung in some places; but others were leaning against stacks of books piled on the bureau or in front of books on the shelves. Shane didn't care much for his father's books or papers or degrees; but hidden along the closet wall was a wedding picture of his father, in a baby blue tuxedo, taken with his young-looking Mother, pink skinned and pregnant but smiling happy, in front of his gran's church in Blackrock. He stared at it for awhile. Her hair had been much redder before he was born but, then again, the photo had faded with years of sun.

There was a closed jar of figs and an empty nalgene on the desk. The tablet was plugged into the same outlet as the router and had been left lying on the chair. 'The fucker,' Shane muttered to the armchair. Viktor had been in there every morning supposedly reading sonnets. He'd really been reading *The Globe and Mail* /home page, a Viagra pop-up, Alfred Lichtenstein Gedichte, *Healthy Planet* /supplements, a Wikipedia entry for "hurling" – that caught Shane unawares – he laughed, the dad had to look up the rules of the game. He minimized the page knowing better than to close anything Viktor was reading. Underneath the app, he found a 'doc. Scan' titled, plainly, 'granddad':

I'd been inside his bedroom once before to have a look around but never in his den. A dingy room with wall-to-wall carpeting, stale tobacco, musty vinyl, papers, and the quality of damp you can only find at the cottage. On the desk beside the pipe rack and large brass ashtray: a glass of well water. In the bookcase: a file divider, large financial reference volumes, an old silver stereo (cassette and radio), some glass dog figurines, and, in the pewter mug on the upper shelf, a hundred dollars American (in fifties).

I spent the money on a large chunk of hash last month – dark brown rock hash, some kids call it 'Moroccan blonde.' It couldn't be rolled up like the black sticky stuff; but it could be heated up with a lighter, broken apart, and smoked with tobacco. I used too much batch the first time. I felt sick and had to lie down on my bed after.

Tuesday. I smoked a hash joint in the alley after school today with Jax. Used too much tobacco again. Haven't been that sick since mid-October. The sky flashed swimmingly as I was coming down. Jax wins because he didn't puke. He says this is the only way to conquer the monotony of Fall. Slumped on my bed. I'm struggling hard to breathe normally still, it's hard to come down this time. He says sometimes you can get 'motor oil hash.' Trippy. Wind blows the blinds against the sill: counting down – the scrape of the leaves on the walkway down below. *Waves* all of them.

Went into the room again. I found a picture of Leonard – granddad’s older brother who died in 1935 – he was killed by a streetcar riding his bicycle down Bond St., age fifteen. Nana says, it’s a family secret, but granny Blanche always talks about him. He was *too good to die* or *God took the wrong son*; both statements are less realistic versions of the actual story, I think. He did not get to live to be very old.

Saturday. There are always little voices and waves in this cottage at nighttime. I’ve been good. Nothing for over a month now and I feel edgy. All the grandkids are here. I don’t want the whispers to be about me.

Sunday. Granddad told everyone that he has *cancer* at dinner. He says he’s *in pain*. All of us are sad and kept quiet the whole meal. Nana made us all pray after that St. Stanislaus would protect us. He’ll die silently, begrudgingly, I think. Later on, Granny Blanche told the older kids that my grandfather deserved to die for his self-murder of years of cigarette smoke. She smokes, too, but blames him for Nana’s cancer because she never smoked.

Inside. My sandy feet left prints on his carpet. I tried to wipe them away with me heel. There was torment in his waves through the open window, birds, piercing rhythm of the younger kids searching the house for me, a chirping anxiety; the clock on the shelf is drawing me mechanically forward from my room now. I have to go back down. I stepped on the arm of the easy chair and felt inside the pewter mug there (I was looking for more money). Peter and Clare weren’t going to look in the den. I wasn’t in there for long. I just wanted to know what was he has – I found some money and took it. Underneath the mug I found a stiff cardboard picture of Leonard unframed. On the back of it:

Leonard with Shem
1115 Backhaus straÙe
September, 1936

This is in my hand when I hear him at the door. The jump down: the image of him tired and disheveled so near death through the crack in the door: the green dressing gown, the breathing, the knock and rattle of his hand against the doorknob. I stayed behind the fold of the door and tucked-in for the instant he took to open it. Saint Leonard. He stood there in the slit in the hallway: the right side of his blotchy, dirty unshaven face, the greasy grey sweaty hair. He looks horrible and my brain kept pounding: I’m being caught. I’m being caught. I’m being caught, caught, caught, caught. The crash of the waves, the door, torment of his clock, the birds, the alarm!

Monday. He confronted me before breakfast. These soft talks give me no reason to fear him any less. The first time I’d been in his car parked outside a gas station. I had a package of Century Sam cigars stuffed with dope tucked in the side pocket of my cargo shorts. He slapped my leg as he does in a kind of affectionate sort of way. I saw the expression in his eyes change. I saw that gruesome countenance come onto

him. He became completely different, dark: “cigars.” He did nothing to me. Much like this second time, he produced a stylish wooden pipe from the pocket of his dressing gown – I smoked hash out of it a few months ago in the bathroom at Granny Blanche’s cottage two doors down from her bedroom and absentmindedly placed it in a drawer underneath some folded towels. He did nothing. I think he knows how tortuous it is for me to know *that he knows*. He could have done whatever he wanted about it. The pipe came from his den. I don’t remember when I lifted it from his rack. I only needed the pipe the once and forgot about it after. He wasn’t using it. He was forced to quit smoking because of the cancer I guess. I caught him once this July underneath the tree on the beach by the well during fireworks. He said, “it’s for light.” He probably has one or two a day.

I put the picture back. I endured the agony of the alarm again. The wind-up clock finishes and resumes its ticking around eleven every morning but I didn’t mean to catch it twice. When he was in the doorway the whole time last time I nearly peed: he stood there through the sound of it. He muttered something to himself then stepped inside and grabbed the glass of water off his desk. He leaves before eleven to go on walks but he shuts the door to the den tight behind him before he leaves. We can all hear him pulling it hard with a bang. I can’t sleep thinking about those heart collapsing moments in the den, the rhythm of the waves, birds, the deep mechanical tick of the clock.

February. He died not long after that last entry. I remember being on the phone with him – a rare occurrence. There was an old black rotary phone in an alcove upstairs at their cottage. He always said it was one of the first old rotary phones at the beach. Nana bought several more phones when they moved up there to stay permanently. There were so many on the main floor ringing off the hook during the week of the wake. Nana must be slowly going deaf. The convenience of those phones probably helps. On the other end of the line the gruffness in his voice was trying to sound so polite. I made up a phony school project to get from more polite questions to Leonard, and boats and the navy, and then the war. There is so much I want ask that I only realize now I will never get to. He understood me I think. No fighting and no immense loving kindness but he was always purposeful like the lake. God we never did get into to it. Never got to talk to him about how we’re different. The pain of knowing that stands with me now, makes me cry, it’s no greater giving up, and writing about it is no more purposeful than pulling weeds by their well in the summer like he always made me do.

Arrived in August. I sweep the front ‘footpath’ with ‘my Da’ sometimes. He stands at the counter and says nothing and everything. Two pints. School soon. I have a small wind-up clock on the bookshelf in my room. It was made in Japan sixty years ago. Two moveable brass shutters cover the face of it. There are moments when I wind it up, the alarm too. It’s inefficient and no good at telling time. The seconds start to lag as it winds down, and they get slower and run more behind minute by minute by minute by the time it’s ready to wind again. Did Leonard ever sleep with a girl? Or drink a little too much? Did he ever act like an asshole? Ah, the extent to

which I have wondered these terrible things. The long hours I have spent with distractions; the family and time suppress it all. I am left with images – a picture of him at twelve in front of the family home. He's put his hat and dark sunglasses on the dog. He's smiling.

Before granddad died I remember visiting that room. I walked down the long hall with the photos and old heavy brown light switches which were always too difficult to flick up. I can feel the smooth dark oak paneling but maybe it was never like that. He kept pictures of all of us in the den. I have them now.

Shane had been reading for some time. It was nearly dark inside the office. The twilight was passing and fading into darkness outside. The window beside the chair had been left open by his father that morning but he just now began to hear the waves.