

The Pact

My brother got arrested for killing a girl. He killed more but the cops don't know that.

A tree carved with our names exploded the day before he went to jail. The tree didn't have a chance. After being hit by a 50,000 volt stream of lightning, its sap innards boiled to temperatures hotter than the sun, and all the bark blew off in shrapnel chunks. I know because it was in the *Prince George Times*. Our little bit of bark shrapnel ended up on page five. Carl made page one. They used a mug shot from a couple years back, when he still had acne and his hair was in a ponytail. Carl was mad about that, and because there's a photo of our tree. He doesn't like anyone knowing personal stuff.

It must be ten years since we climbed high to the fork in the branches; I was nine and Carl was twelve. He had the hunting knife, I had a pen knife. His letters were deep and wide, mine light and thin, our body shapes matching the carvings.

When I was younger, Pa taught me stuff people like us need to know: how to shoot, fish, hunt, and survive a bear attack. He treated me like Carl, even though I'm a girl. Pa also taught me the history of Canada, about how all our problems are because of too many immigrants and foreigners, how it's our responsibility to stop letting people take our jobs and force them to go somewhere else, even if it's just back to Vancouver, or better yet, down East. Later, after Ma died, just Carl and me went hunting together. This was better. I didn't like being alone with Pa, especially when he was drunk.

Pa and me went down to the cop shop the day Carl was arrested; we didn't have a choice. Pa was real embarrassed because they made him take off his baseball cap. He wears it all the time out in the sun: from his eyebrows up, he's white as bone except for that half a brown circle. Looks like a tunnel in the middle of his forehead, because of wearing the

backwards cap. Me and Carl won't do that. When I was little, I always wondered what was on the other side of that tunnel. One day I found out.

I got interviewed first. Pa was with me because I was still 17. The cop asked me lots of questions about hunting, about me and Carl hunting, which I mostly answered. My Pa was interviewed by himself. He told me about it later.

"They esked me 'bout where Carl's been and hiz girlfriends. They esked me lots about people I ain't never heard of, foreign sluts, sounded like prozzies."

He didn't say much else. Soon after, he went north, to Whitehorse, to work in the mines. I saved all the newspaper articles, especially the one about the exploded tree. The same day we carved our initials in that tree, I pushed a girl at school. She'd stopped in the middle of the stairs to send an SMS. I was right behind her, along with other kids going to class. It was so easy; she didn't even know it was on purpose. I just put my hand out and waited for someone to bump into me. She didn't fall too far because of all those people coming up, but I saw her face and she was scared. Carl saw me do it. That was the day we made the pact.

"We is always gonna take care of each other," Carl said as we lay in the sharp angles of the trunk, our smooth faces hidden by the broad leaves. He had already carved his name. I was slower because of the pen knife.

"I miss Ma real bad. Don't ever die on me, Carl."

"Ya know I can't promise that Jackie. I is just sayin' we gotta stick together, if you need me fer anything I is always there, and vicey versa."

"What's that?"

"Ma tol' me it stands fer the other way round. So like if Pa thinks I drank his beer, you lie fer me, say it was Aunt Sheila. And when you ferget to put the toilet seat up, I ken say I did it, and he'll hit me instead of you. Vicey versa."

"So it just means lying. I can do that."

We had to wait two years for the trial to start. Me and Pa were interviewed more by the cops, but I never changed my story. Pa travelled down from Whitehorse a couple of times during the trial. He said once I looked ‘like one of them greyhounds.’ It took me a second and then I realized he meant the dog. I noticed that the tunnel hole in his forehead had faded, on account of being in the mines instead of the sun. I was glad when he left; glad he never came back.

I think Pa might have accidentally said something to the cops about Loren, or even one of the other girls, because things got worse for Carl. He kept his promise and didn’t tell anyone so I tried to think of a way to help, to give the jury what they call reasonable doubt. The TV show gave me the idea. If another girl was murdered in the same way while Carli is in jail, they’d have to let him go, or maybe there’d be a mistrial. I copied what we did with Loren, with the other girls. I thought about digging one of them up, but I’m pretty sure there’re tests to prove when a person died. I picked someone new.

It was a girl from school, Serena. She wasn’t Canadian; I think her parents were Pakis or Spicks or something. She was born in British Columbia so she didn’t have an accent, but she was brown and smelled funny, like how all those smells blend together when you walk through a food court at the mall. It was easy to get her to come with me; I just told her there was a party in the woods. She didn’t have many friends. We drove to the end of a logging trail. She talked a lot, about how her parents had already chosen a husband for her, about how all her brothers looked out for her, and that once a year they all had to give her money, even though it wasn’t her birthday. I thought about all those people smelling up one room, handing out money just because Serena is a girl, and wondered whose jobs they had stolen. I was glad I had more than just a pen knife with me, but it was still really difficult killing her without my brother.

I failed Carl. No one found Serena; everyone still thinks she ran away, on account of the arranged marriage and all. At least they never found the other girls neither. Carl said if they

found him guilty he would be locked up in Agassiz, which is at least nine hours away. I had to look it up on the map. The prison is outside a town called Hope. Seems mean to lock people up... just on the outside of Hope.

I figured this was the last thing I could do to help Carl, to keep our pact. If Carl went to prison, he'd be 50 by the time he got out.

I had to wait until it was dark, till no one else would come into the bathroom. I also wanted enough hot water to fill the bath. When I moved into the rooming house, they told me it took two hours for the tank to heat up.

I almost put bubbles in but I thought it might sting. My note was written; I put it in a plastic bag, along with two of the knives, to keep everything dry, so the police find my fingerprints and nobody else's.

There was enough hot water and I made myself clean, all over, even inside my ears.

I made the cuts the right way. Even on TV they do it the right way. It didn't really hurt and the water was hot.

"Hold out yer hand." Carl pulled himself up using a branch above our heads. "Come on, don't be a sissy. Gimme yer hand."

I didn't like it, but I let him cut me. He used the knife on himself and squeezed my finger to get the blood flowing.

"K, now rub it into both our names. It seals us fer life, we'll call it the vicey versa pact." Carl rubbed his blood into the exposed bark where I had just carved my name.

"Jackie, this means that we'll always protect each other. No matter what. Like today, when you pushed that girl. If you'd git caught, and if I had to, I'd say it were me."

"But I don't want you to git in trouble because of me. Pa'd beat you so bad, like Ma...like that time..."

“OK, so let’s never git caught.” Carl raised his hand. “With my blood, I promise to always protect you,” he grabbed my wrist, “to lie fer each other if we git caught. Now you, Jackie; it only works if we both say it.”

I took a breath and grabbed the hunting knife to widen the cut on my finger. I dripped more blood into the carvings and raised my arm. “I promise to always protect you, Carl. I swear, on the vicey versa pact.”

I opened my eyes to feel the lukewarm rose water lap against my thigh to stain the sides of the enamel tunnel.