

YOGURT AND MAYONAISE

His slate blue eyes, glassy from the drive, focussed on the road ahead beneath an opaque winter sky. She'd sensed his unease when he picked her up at the halfway house. His thinning hair shone in the receding winter light like fossilized silverfish. His gnarled hands clenched the steering wheel. He turned, gazed at his wife through oversized glasses, the lines in his face deeper than the furrows in the bark of a Douglas fir, and shrugged apologetically. Mark had, as he habitually did, taken the first turn into town. It was easier when they took the second. He drove towards the centre of town as Delores, trying to calm her anxiety, massaged her palm with her thumb and slouch deep into the seat as though trying to hide. He reassured her with a pat of his right hand.

"It's going to be all right," he said, his hand cold.

She stared at his knuckles and fingers, chipped and calloused from years felling trees, the same hands that held hers through the daily walk from the courthouse through a gamut of jostling cameramen, photographers, and reporters, bloodhounds sniffing for their daily quota.

Worst were the hostile glares, the downcast stares, sneers and jeers, the averted looks of neighbours and former friends, the angry voices on the phone calling her a baby killer. Didn't they know? Delores was a grandmother who sold homes for a living.

She lifted his hand, pressed it against her cheek, kissed it in a quiet show of love and gratitude, a gesture so foreign, she couldn't remember when she had last offered an act so simple yet so intimate. As he returned his hand to the wheel, she gently guided it across her chest. She'd known as a teenager that her breasts were special. When she was young, and her father's drinking buddies or her brother's friends spoke to her, their eyes always drifted to her chest. It made her feel good.

Their separation, while she was in provincial jail followed by her release into a halfway house, left them unsure as to what lay ahead. She hoped they could stitch back together what remained of their marriage. Yet, Delores also accepted the uncertainty of the humiliation of living with small town guilt. She had long wondered if time really did heal wounds. The signs were there. Mark had gained back the weight he'd lost. He was smiling and seemed content building birdhouses in his woodworking shop in the basement. He'd even joked that he'd learned how to iron.

He turned onto Main Street, past the community park, the car dealerships, and fast food outlets, heading towards the centre of town, each block closer to the requisite detour before going home. To the left, defying the cutting wind from the bay, plastic wreaths, laid during Remembrance Day Ceremonies, stood erect on the municipal cenotaph. They had been presented with small town sobriety, made even more poignant as the Island had lost two of their own in Afghanistan. The son of a Campbell River fisherman was killed early in the war outside Kabul. This past March, a local's daughter was shot in the back as she handed candy out to children. There is no tolerance for peaceniks when local sons and daughters are murdered by the Taliban.

As they neared the speed bump where she had lost control of her car and her life, Delores took a deep breath.

The boy's impromptu memorial, once overflowing with flowers, cards and toys, was now reduced to a plastic bouquet, a kindergarten picture and his favourite teddy bear taped to the hydro pole, all wrapped in cellophane to protect it from the weather. Neither British Columbia Hydro nor the municipal workers dared touch the shrine. The wound of losing a five-year old boy in this small town remained a raw memory.

Mark parked outside the Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment. As she opened the front door, Delores turned. Mark, hunched over the steering wheel, stared into his cell phone. He looked up, blinked a blank stare and offered her a reassuring thumb's up.

The constable at the desk recognized Delores as she walked through the door. She had not expected to see him. Young constables usually view postings to small towns as whistle stops on the way to Vancouver and Victoria rather than a place to settle and raise a family. Constable Martin was first on the scene, the first to try breathing life into the dying boy, the first to interview Delores and lead her to his cruiser for the obligatory breathalyzer test. He'd been the first to testify against her in court.

She signed the registry and left.

Mark turned the truck in the direction of home. Passing the elementary school, Delores smirked a cold smile in dry recognition of the photograph of a smiling Ted Green on the bus bench: *Ted Green Your #1 Up Island Realtor Integrity Honesty Trust*. What bullshit, she thought. Commission. Commission. Commission. Nothing more. Nothing less. Ted Green had monopolized the same bench for more than twenty years. He reasoned that purchasing a house and searching for a school went together. The picture, streaked with rain, was a youthful Ted, before his second divorce, and after his skin cancer scare. He'd sewn his wild oats at Queen's University before dropping out to work radio in small towns in Ontario. He soon realized real money was in sales. He'd returned to the Island and, with a leg up from family connections, had slipped seamlessly into selling real estate and making easy money in a small town.

Theirs was the only house with a for sale sign in front. A neighbour stared at the truck through her picture window; the feather duster in her hand frozen like a conductor's baton raised in a pregnant pause before the symphony orchestra strikes the first chord. No, I'm not a monster, Delores said to herself. There's no need to hide your grandchildren from me. The neighbour turned away, stabbing the feather duster at imaginary clouds of dust.

Mark parked in front of the garage. Grunting with effort, he hauled the suitcase from the truck and pulled it through the front door.

She paused inside, breathing in the welcoming atmosphere of her home of twenty-seven years. The house held deep pools of memories; the elation of the initial purchase; raising children; welcoming

their first grandchild; the ceremonial burning of the mortgage. Small town hopes and dreams that collapsed in one ruinous moment.

The house was cold. Mark turned down the thermostat whenever he left the house. She turned it up, counting to three, waiting for the familiar click of the thermostat's response followed by the whirl of hot air rushing through the vents. In Delores' absence, Mark had hired a cleaning lady to come once a week so that the realtor, Margaret Lampson, could show the house on short notice. Delores had gone to school with her. Margaret knew of the need for a quick sale. She understood there wouldn't be much left for Mark and Delores after the sale so she offered to sell it for less than the standard commission.

Delores recalled the lawyer telling them, his voice factual, professional, how fortunate they were that it had been the son and not the mother that had died. The quantum damages – as if there was any physics to the value in death and injury – would have been insurmountable had it been the mother. A son was dependent upon his mother to nurture him and ensure he had a stable environment. Tending to his wounds and telling him about the birds and the bees. The monetary value of the loss of a pre-school was far less than for a loving mother.

The litigation was mired in a combination of details of the final settlement and the lawyers feuding over costs and fees. Delores and Mark were resigned to losing the house. Their only consolation being that the lawyers couldn't touch their pensions. They would have money to live on, with maybe enough left over to buy a double wide in the trailer park near the river.

Mark went into the bedroom, the suitcases following behind like dogs on a leash. Delores, in need of a cup of tea, inhaled the familiar kitchen air as she filled the kettle and placed it on the stove. Life seemed to be returning to normal, she thought, the familiar routine that comes from being married for over a quarter century unfolding as it should. She felt right at home in her kitchen as she flipped open the cupboard doors, making mental notes of things she needed to pick up at the grocery store, glancing at the changes in the refrigerator; the yogurt, the generic brand of mayonnaise. The yogurt perplexed her. No logger in his right mind would be found in the woods with yogurt in his lunch box. Mark jokingly referred to it socialist girlie health food, a symbol of tree huggers and hippie food co-ops. She stared at the mayonnaise jar. They had always been a Hellman's family. *Bring out the Hellman's and bring out the best.*

Mark pulled a beer from the refrigerator. Asked her how she was doing. Okay, she replied. Without a further word, he continued into the living room, slumped into his Lazy boy chair and clicked on the television. Delores warmed up over the stove watching the kettle come to a boil. The tea soothed if only temporarily, her weariness. She made them a simple dinner, cheese omelette with a side of brown toast and marmalade. She sat alone in the empty dining room table while Mark ate in front of the TV.

While living at the halfway house, Delores had quickly learned to keep her misery to herself. They too were victims with misery a common denominator. Innocence varied only by degree. Everyone agreed that Delores was one of the luckier ones. She had Mark and his dedication to her which made

Delores the envy of the house. Deemed a low-risk offender, as her parole officer put it “unlikely to fly the coop”, she came and went as she pleased - as long as she was back by curfew. Most of the girls that passed through were young, yet in many respects, old. Delores wasn’t tough like the institutionalized lesbians transitioning from federal prison to civilian life after doing ten or fifteen years for murder and manslaughter or comparable to the twenty-year old drug addicted prostitutes trying to straighten their lives while anxious to get back to their johns and their jobs. She stared in disbelief as they shared their stories, the events as imprecise as wrinkled sheets pulled from the laundry. When she shared her story the girl's reactions varied from a dismissive shit happens response to an incredulous look of how-could-you-do-such-a-thing. She had no answer. They all had tragedies in their lives; Belinda, deaf in the one ear punctured by a punch from her boyfriend; Lucy who’d stabbed her abusive husband while he slept; the middle-aged bookkeeper who tried to help the girls find God after being found guilty of stealing money from the non-profit charity; Jane who tried to use her good looks to smuggle fifty pounds of marijuana across the border in the trunk of a car. Their suffering varied merely by degree, and with it, the trepidation of not knowing what waited beyond their release date. One thing she had over the other girls was a loving husband to take her home. He was her stability and strength. They knew Mark stood beside her like an old growth fir.

Dinner finished, Delores went into the bedroom and began to unpack, separating dirty clothes from the clean ones. She glanced over her shoulder as she pulled a brown paper bag from the bottom of the suitcase. She slipped the package into her dresser drawer and walked back into the living room.

Mark told Delores that Margaret had phoned to say that Ted Green had a couple who wanted to see the house. The mention of his name made her blood boil. The gall, she silently railed. First, you testify against me and then try to get your molly grubs on a commission. Delores lingered with the passivity of an old cat, waiting for a single word, a signal to stay. They’d built their marriage on a quiet resolution. He’d never been one for small talk, preferring to take things into his own hands, get it done and move on. She suppressed the urge to come between him and the hockey game, to tell him what they both knew, that he’s still angry, had always been angry. He was angry before the accident and had been angry since, for what she did to him and what she put him through. His anger wouldn’t go away. He gazed at her, opened his mouth as if to speak, but instead reached for his beer, his eyes intent on young men fighting over a puck. Delores wanted, needed, to smooth over the resentment that tethered him. She’d do what she could to rid him of his humiliation, mend his broken pride, and make peace or something as close as possible to it.

The game over, Mark joined her in the bedroom. He undressed and climbed into bed and turned away. She knew that their intimacy if it was ever to return, would take time. They had pushed their intimacy into the background, like memories of warm holidays. What remained of any sex life was limited to what some called maintenance sex, with maintenance maintaining maintenance and nothing more. Delores lay on her side of the bed, her teeth clenched in feigned sleep, staring at the clock, the wall, anywhere but at him, her eyes finally settling on a cobweb hanging in the ceiling. In the morning she’d remind herself to sweep it away before the Albertans inspected the house.

When one of the girls at the halfway house offered her the use of her device with a “who needs a man when you have one of these,” chirp in her voice, Delores showed nothing but contempt for the battery operated remedy that some of her former friends at home hid in their dresser drawers, behind panties and bras where no man would ever go, bringing them out when their husbands were away in logging camps or out fishing. On the second week-end after Mark had decided to finish a birdhouse rather than visit, Delores found the nerve to retrieve it. She’d tried to set aside her disappointment and her building resentment, knowing how much Mark had put up with, how he had endured being the husband of *that* woman. His trips to the halfway house had become less frequent. She reasoned couples need time apart as much as together.

It was by far the largest thing of a sexual nature she had ever seen, never mind touch. She was amazed at how it looked and wondered if they had made it from the mold from a black man. She wrapped her fingers around it, stroked it, jittery of its girth. She’d grown accustomed to one size. Pressing a button, she watched, fascinated by the rotating head. Pressing the second button, she watched with childlike amusement as the butterfly thing-a-ma-jig excitedly vibrated. Her own excitement grew as she wondered if it would really give her the mind-blowing orgasm the girl had guaranteed it would. Her small town purity surfaced at the idea of inserting something so foreign into an area so private. Men had their pornography. Women had their men. Still, she felt a bit dirty – like borrowing her sister’s used underwear. But the resentment inside her rose; Mark’s priority to build goddamn birdhouses in the basement rather than salvage their marriage, the boredom of living in a halfway house, combined with enough curiosity, led her to the single room in the house she could lock.

She filled the bathtub and stepped in. The girl had assured her the vibrator was waterproof. Delores allowed the warm water to lap her breasts. She nervously fumbled with the cylinder as she slipped it down between her legs, pressed the button and closed her eyes. She moaned and began to quiver as sensations she had rarely experienced before overwhelmed her from her head to toes with a sudden, maddening euphoria the like of which she’d barely dreamed. It was, as the woman had said it would be, mind-blowing.

Later, she sobbed quietly as she dried herself, carefully cleansing the instrument like a mother bathes a newborn baby, reminding herself this was a one-time experiment, like an online affair.

She hadn’t been wildly in love when she married Mark. Her unconditional wild love she would reserve for her grandchildren. She’d done what most girls’ intent on staying in small towns did. Following her mother’s advice, she found a man who loved her more than she loved him. Her mother said it would be enough to keep him from straying. She followed a pattern established by her mother and her mother’s mother. Her role in life was set and she had no need for certificates or degrees beyond a high school diploma. Early in their marriage, misunderstandings were overcome, power struggles smoothed over. As the vanity of their newlywed status dissipated, a pattern of predictable small town matrimony evolved. They raised a family and sustained their marriage more by what was left unsaid rather than said. They always reckoned there was another time, another year, and another occasion. Delores assumed the role of the dutiful, custodial, wife with their two girls, Beth and Barbara. She held several part-time jobs; waitress, cashier, the front desk of the local resorts, each designed so she could

walk the girls to school, to girl guides, to soccer and music lessons. The money she earned she used as she pleased, usually reserved for pet projects like re-decorating, painting bedrooms, and buying new carpets to celebrate their twentieth anniversary. They lived a dull predictable life in a dull predictable town.

The oldest daughter, Barbara got herself pregnant and had Jennifer when she was seventeen. The father was an itinerant logger and an enthusiastic amateur hockey player, who worked just long enough to collect unemployment insurance as hockey season rolled around. Her daughter's sometimes desperate situation, combined with the boom in construction, prompted Delores to go into real estate. After years as an anonymous housewife limited to service work and its rituals- the synthetic smiles, the "how are you today" and "thank you" responses to the blank stares of neighbours and strangers, she suddenly felt like she was a somebody, a realtor with her own park bench sign, a new car, and new sense of herself.

She quickly realized that everything she'd heard about realtors was true. The first thing and the last thing that comes out of every realtor's mouth is a lie. Their goal was making money and nothing else. They each left the office with a knife for backstabbing, a pen for writing the deals, and a cell phone for arranging affairs, flings, and whatever else. Delores was a quick learner. She quickly assumed the same role as her colleagues, accepted that she, like any self-employed sales commission person was no more than a mannequin with a well-rehearsed sales pitch. They weren't curing cancer or writing the great Canadian novel. They were mere warm bodies in cold seats with the choice of selling or starving. Everyone was seen through the lens of her next meal ticket. Whatever rolled off her tongue was a temporary truth. She learned how much cleavage to bare for male clients and how little to expose for the women. After her first sale, she drove to Nanaimo for a day of shopping. Much to Mark's chagrin, trips to Vancouver soon became the norm.

Sitting in the kitchen in the wintry light, sipping her morning coffee, Delores was startled by lights shining through the sheer curtains into the living room. Only when she heard cars doors opening and closing did she realize it was Ted Green's car. Glancing through the window, she watched Ted and the Albertans huddle near the car before approaching the door and knocking.

Ted presented himself with an enamel smile and a well-honed perfected pretense of someone who sells his soul for a living. As the couple hovered close behind, Delores sized them up. Small town. Conservative. Traditional. They lived near the Saskatchewan border, oozed oil money and were looking to buy a house or two on the Island as an investment to rent out until they retired. The bowlegged husband's pot belly hung over his Wrangler jeans. He wheezed from the ocean air. The wife dressed like a fashion-savvy Hutterite, her muffin top rolling over her jeans like leavened dough.

The greetings between Ted and Delores, the usual hellos and you're looking good's, followed by a light hug, was meant to fill up space rather than convey genuine meaning. Ted scanned the room before urging the Albertans to look around. As they wandered, Mark came in and exchanged pleasant vagaries of small-town life with Ted; soothing chitchat, rumours, and news of people neither of them cared for but inevitably ran into at the grocery store. The lint in Ted's voice confirmed the couple's

return. His tone switched from radio salesman to real estate pitchman, consonants sweet like honey as he spoke knowingly of markets and volumes and prices for a three bedroom detached home.

Ted Green was the first to testify against her, his holier than thou voice posturing for full effect, as he summed up their lunch together and stretched the truth as wide as possible thus deflecting responsibility away. He had a small town reputation to protect.

Three years ago, life was good. Delores and Mark were nearing their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary a magical benchmark at a time when divorce and separation had become the norm. They owned their home. She was a grandmother twice over. Everyone was making money; the tradesmen, the hoteliers, the restaurant owners, but especially the realtors. Deep-pocketed JAJA's – Just Another F*g Albertan - as they were jokingly referred to, rolled into town. These prairie blue-eyed oil sheiks, with their king of the road, I-wannabe-a-Texan- when-I-grow-up attitude, came to town with open cheque books, buying condo and homes with the blink of an eye, sending prices skyrocketing to stratospheric levels. As prices rose so did local resentment

It was the day of her third sale in a month and the fourteenth of the year. Delores had scheduled a celebratory lunch with the selling realtor, Ted Green. He always bought lunch when they closed a deal, although she knew his true motivation was to try to chat her into bed. Even by realtor standards, he was a sleaze. Delores rarely drank, particularly at lunch. Today, however, she threw caution to the wind. After all, lunch was on Ted's dime. They shared a bottle of wine over real estate small talk about deals done and deals lost. When she left, she was a bit tizzy, but nothing she would consider over-the-limit. Besides, the office was less than two miles away. As she passed the car dealership, she glanced at the Cadillac Escalade on the lot.

Nothing but the best for me, she thought. Cranking the volume of the country tunes, she nailed the accelerator to the floor. She'd have just enough time to check into the office before heading to Toys R Us in Nanaimo to get a birthday present for her granddaughter's third birthday.

As Delores passed the cenotaph, her phone rang. She reached for the phone as the Lexus bounced over a speed bump. Her hand slipped off the wheel. The car veered to the right, skirting the rear fender of a red Toyota parked on the street, passing a young woman on the sidewalk, her face frozen in fear as metal on metal screeched like a nail on a chalkboard. The Lexus scraped along the side of the Ford Taurus, pushing it into the car parked behind it as the crack of the exploding airbag hurled Delores back into her seat. Lifting herself up, brushing herself off, Delores checked herself in the mirror making sure everything was still intact. No blood. Make-up fine. Just a fender bender, she thought. Am I over the limit she wondered, popping a mint into her mouth?

And then, the woman's piercing scream. *Someone help me. Someone help me, please.* For some reason, the picture of the student at Kent State standing over a dead boy killed by the National Guardsman during the Vietnam war protests, flashed through Delores mind.

The woman clutched a small bundle of boy wedged between the two cars. Stroking his hair, she whispered into his blood-soaked ear. *It's going to be alright Joey. Joey, Joey, hang in there. Mommy's right here. Mommy's here.* People gathered and stared. Sirens wailed. First responders arrived.

Delores and Mark had discussed moving, starting fresh, in maybe Nanaimo or Victoria where they'd blend into the anonymity of a larger city. Stoic in his Scottish stock, he was not inflexible. Yet given a choice of principle over practical he hesitated and bid his time reasoning they were from here and, had roots here. People would respect that Delores had done her time, had she'd paid the price for her lack of judgement. It was a place that forgave and forgot.

Margaret Lampson phoned the next morning. It was a clean, deal subject to an inspection. They met the news with ambivalent silence.

"I'm leaving you," he said over dinner.

His words were fraught with simple meaning, lacking any element of vindictive triumph. He was as if her were staring at a broken birdhouse, assessing the damage trying, to figure out what he needed to be done in order to repair everything that had gone wrong in their marriage. She knew he'd given for so long that he now had nothing left to give. In that cruel moment, in the instant the boy died, irretrievable parts of their lives had died too.

Delores thought of the mayo and the yogurt. She knew. Mark had found someone else, a woman who could take care of him. His heart was in need of mending the void she'd opened on that harrowing day that neither could close. He was banishing her, replacing her with someone whose past needed no cleansing.

Her panicked heart clenched his words like fists. She could say something. There was nothing more to say.

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