

Chapter 1

One day watching blue jays, sparrows, and a bunch of other birds I don't know the names of, I thought: 'Where the fuck did they all come from?' My dad has a lot of bird feeders. This isn't odd I suppose, many people have bird feeders in their backyards.

In this day and age it's almost impossible not to have a rudimentary understanding of ecology. That's what I'm talking about: this ecosystem right outside my garage where dozens of birds are fluttering around. Squirrels and chipmunks cluster around the base of the bird feeders and it's like they're fighting over the remains of a king's feast. Further back is a salt lick that gets smaller and smaller and eventually it's replaced, despite the fact that I never see a deer in my backyard.

That blue brick of salt, specially bought with awareness of some dietary need for deer: that's what my dad's into. In our basement are ten plastic buckets full of seeds. Each bucket holds something different than the others. It's like my dad has come up with the perfect cocktail for all the birds. And there's a feeder periodically filled with sugar and water for the hummingbirds. I don't get why he does it. I never will.

I look at the woods in our neighborhood: they are thicker and more complex in some areas than others. What I see is exactly what we learned in high school science. The project I worked on in grade nine – that mini-ecosystem, full of dirt and worms – that was meant to give us an understanding of a balanced and thriving ecosystem. That's what I see in the forest. These thoughts, I suppose, were reinforced by Simba and Mustafa's singing journey through the Serengeti when I was a teen.

As I see it, no matter what I do the forest absorbs my actions. When we were kids, the boys and I would run through the forest playing a modified game of tackle and tag. We called this game Ninja and even spent time on our own practicing the art of moving silently through the forest. At least I did.

So, you step on a branch and it pops, the dry leaves surrounding it crackle and the flower growing out from beneath the forest floor, creeping up each day to receive what little light filters down is crushed. What happens then? Well, Max comes barreling through the foliage; as his shoulder connects with your chest, the air in your lungs explodes while his arms wrap around you and

the both of you crash to the ground crushing everything beneath you. When you finally catch your breath and roll over to sit up, what's left is an imprint of the whole affair. At some point you get hungry and go home and the imprints remain for as long as it takes for organisms to make use of the mess you left behind. Of course if you burn down the forest it will take more than your lifetime for it to shrug off your actions. But based on the lineage of life on this world it's less than a hiccup from a tsetse fly.

This is how I see the world around me: it's the vine that grows up the wall of your neighbour's house, so slowly that each time you look at it the memories associated with it almost invariably include that vine at that amount of coverage regardless of whether it existed there in that way in fact.

You can see the same thing happening with the organism known as homo-sapien-sapien. Try to imagine the friend you've known since you were in grade school. Without the help of picture day, your mind seems intent to supply an image overlay of your friend as you perceive them currently. Remembering yourself as you were then seems more improbable. Trying to remember the farmer's field as it was before that highway you're driving on existed or the high rise that was once a parking lot is almost futile. Driving through the town you grew up in and haven't been to in years can be baffling when you pass several big box mini malls surrounded by grey pavement that was once a field of green grass that slowly turned brown by the end of August.

My dad, through the application of energy, has created this twisting avian vine. When I'm home to visit, my mind at first sees the backyard as I last saw it and then slowly what I once viewed is as if it never existed. The energy applied in the beginning was a physical effort and a monetary infusion that then supplied a cocktail of joules to the birds.

But I look upon these dozens of fluttering creatures and I think this is what they mean by unsustainable. When my dad passes away not one person I know is going to continue this venture. I personally have no interest in participating in that carefully arranged orchestra of a multiplex of bird seed constantly refilled into feeders even if it means that I can see this variety of feathers. And while other members of my family might try to continue this as a kind of tradition, they won't put in nearly the same effort.

What will happen? It will be a reversal of fortunes: these birds suddenly had it good; they have been able to expend very little energy to acquire a constant source of food: this means they can have more chicks; more chicks eat more food, but there's more than enough to go around because that's what my dad wants. When the feeders get low, he fills them again, like clockwork. The limit on the population, then, is probably only held in check by the time it takes to lay eggs, not by the food supply.

When he passes on, that food supply will either disappear or diminish to such a negligible amount that it will essentially revert to roughly the same amount as before he came along: this probably means that birds will die. When he goes, he's taking a dozen or more birds with him, maybe even one hundred. Some birds will search for other sources of food, but will have to expend much more energy to do so. But, for the generation of birds whose only knowledge of how to get food is to go to the feeder, they will suddenly have to compete over a more limited and harder to acquire source of energy. They've been used to a constant source even in the middle of February. I am certain most will starve and

die in the winter or they'll have to migrate.

This is what I think about in the here and now: it becomes an allegory for what will happen in our lives in the future. Right now, I'm having the time of my life; I've got my folk, and they've got me. We have this intricate network of friendships and more limited connections and the priority seems to be fun. Fun is the new food, and the fuel for this seems to be our words, our actions, booze, sex and the occasional drug; cigarettes mark the time between seasons. The networks will eventually drift further apart and the food we rely on will change: its source and value will change over time and when that happens we'll have to migrate.

Chapter 2

It was late summer when I first met Cecile.

Terry and I had been dating since the winter and Cecile would occasionally come up in conversation. Walking down Robert Street, we turned on College and she appeared before us. We hadn't even seen her smile and wave at us by the time Eric had checked her out.

Eric and I grew up on the same street. One day while I was holding a shovel, busy with the fervor of treasure hunting in my own yard, this skinny kid rode his bike onto my lawn and declared: "I found a newt!"

I dropped my shovel and squinted at his fist. "Yeah?"

He shrugged and opened it. "But it's dead now." An orange lizard slipped to the ground.

"Hmmm."

His eyes lit up and he chucked a thumb over his shoulder. "But there were lots more back there: wanna come see?"

I nodded. "Sure!"

"Get your bike."

We never forgot this day.

As we came up to stand beside Cecile, she twirled Terry around and exclaimed: "You look hot!" Then she picked up a greasy old wine bottle from the curb and pitched it at the wall of the bank we were standing beside.

There was a crisp explosion as it shattered in the coarse, crusty alley, and she placed her hands on her hips. "What do you think of that?"

"No shit!" I said.

Even if I hadn't been captivated by her independently of Terry's hero worship, I was already tuned into accepting her crazy appearance as if watching Copperfield make the entire city disappear.

Eric, being more tuned in to beautiful girls who appear as if from his imagination, picked her up; his arm was clutched around her waist when he kissed her, before he set her down and ran off.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yelled after him.

“Get your bike!” He whooped and threw a fist in the air, still running away from us.

Cecile entered conversations as if she were a focal point for Terry’s view of the world.

Sometimes, Terry and I would wake up early on a Sunday to catch a play. On that day, we’d be smoking outside the theatre under a soggy wooden overhang during intermission. Others would mill about, their faces alight with some perceived cleverness within the scenes just absorbed of which they were sharing with a friend who was now their audience. While rain drizzled down the tresses to our right Terry emulated those around us except that her focus was on the technical. The gesticulations in and around us were their own kind of dance. Once she had foisted on me her appreciation for the lighting and set design, she then pointed out that her friend Cecile should design costumes. This kind of talk would lead into all the various modifications they had made to their own clothing when in high school. A lady with grey bee-comb hair will light another cigarette off a butt whose filter is slathered in orange lipstick; once finished, she’ll manage to complete her sentence under a puff of smoke.

Now, walking down College Street towards the bar, I let myself be introduced to Cecile and then the two girls escaped into a near-hysterical chatter of questions and answers.

Street lamps poured a yellowish haze on the gum-pocked pavement. Cars trudged by in the thick traffic of dusk on a strip of road parenthesized with bars. A girl with her short skirt bunched around the seat of her bicycle grasped a boy’s hand as he held it out beside her and the two of them weaved themselves through the night. A man in a brown fedora and leather duster looked over his shoulder at them and smiled before walking away. We passed by several line-ups and as people were admitted, music blasted its way out onto the street drowning out the honking horns and grumble of rubber on pavement.

Last week, Terry and I were sitting on stools with peeling red leather in a dimly lit bar. She was sipping on the house wine, and my hand was wrapped around a pint of Ricard’s. Raising the glass to my lips reminded her to reminisce about the first time she and Cecile got drunk. The deeply grooved bar was matted with shellac and underneath those small patches the wood was a deep, rich brown. But the swath of bar – bereft of its resin – that my fingers drummed on had since faded to a motley grey. She and Cecile had been in Quebec on a class trip and they were staying in a hotel that was a collection of cabins in the woods. My eyes strayed to the rusty tip on the end of one of the draft taps and then to Terry’s eyes, which were glassy under her lashes as she giggled. Since they had been alone in the cabin, and left mostly to themselves at night, they decided to swipe a bottle of Southern Comfort from the hotel bar. As I listened to her, my eyes wandered further around the dim room and, when my eyes finally returned to her, I noticed that most of the lighting of the room was supplied by halogens built into the metal frame under the bar giving her an appropriately melodramatic glow. She and Cecile had returned to their deserted cabin and proceeded to pour the Southern Comfort into pint glasses: the biggest glasses they could find in the cupboards. Terry mimicked the pouring with an exaggerated flare, and then pitched back an invisible glass, downing its contents.

She tilted her head forward and looked at me through droopy eyelids.

“And do you know what happened?”

“You threw up?”

She snickered and nodded. “We threw up.”

I’d heard this story before.

These were the kinds of things I’d learned about Cecile before I met her. She came up in stories about Terry’s life, not incessantly, but consistently. Cecile did that, Cecile did this: she was in Spain for a year, she wanted to backpack through Europe. But in the last couple of weeks this kind of talk had increased exponentially. Terry was excited that Cecile was back from Spain. And as much as I wouldn’t admit it to myself, so was I.

Eric was already seated and drinking when we entered the bar. He raised a bottle and we sat down at his table. Then Phil came to the table and set down a pitcher with a stack of five glasses.

“Hi Phil: this is my friend Cecile.” Terry motioned with her hands.

Phil stuck out his hand and muttered: “Sorry, that’s a little beery.” He wiped his hand on a pant-leg before presenting it to Cecile again. “That’s better; nice to meet ya”

Cecile smiled and shook his hand.

When Cecile smiles at someone, it’s almost as if her whole self has wrapped around that person. Even from a sitting position she can project her warmth of character and you can’t help but feel surrounded by her. All eyes rivet to her and the background fades to motley. It begins with the right side of her mouth creeping crookedly upwards as a pert French nose crinkles and the tiny flecks of gold in her deep brown eyes seem to dance and sparkle; her lips will then widen across her face, with both ends curled slightly and then a thin fissure opens between. This smile cannot be defeated: you can either give in to it or try to forget it.

Why am I describing Cecile’s smile and not Terry’s? I think you know that I’m getting to that. This is one of those stories that takes time to tell, because it refuses to end up where you want it to.

Phil was the type of guy who could appreciate a good smile, but redheads weren’t his thing: petite Mediterranean types with chaotic curls were and she was coming over to the table now.

Phil had been dating Cathy for years and she was nearly as excitable as Cecile but in a possessive way that he liked.

“Cathy, this is Cecile. Cecile: Cathy.” I circled my right hand in between the two girls.

They shook hands and Cecile said: “I think Terry spoke of you; you throw some wild parties, right?”

Cathy nodded, and then her chin came to rest on her clasped hands. “Well, they’re called Slut School, but they’re not as wild as the name suggests.”

“I’d like to come out some time.”

“I’ll send you an e-vite.”

“Thanks.” Cecile leaned forward and gestured around the table as glasses were filled. “So how do you all know each other?”

After a gulp from his frothing, frosty glass, Eric pointed at me. “Well,

Jude ‘Carlos’, here, grew up down the street from me and we’d played doctor with all the girls around by the time we were ten.”

She snorted through a crooked grin. “Really...”

He nodded, eyes wide. “We’re really good doctors.”

“I bet.”

Cathy threw a napkin at him. “You never played doctor with me!”

I nodded toward her. “Cathy grew up on the street over the bridge and she never sought out medical advice: if you ask her, she’s perfect.”

“Damn right I am!” She nestled a shoulder into Phil’s chest. “Right, honey?”

He slammed the table with a clenched fist, and with a raspy voice declared: “I don’t want her seeing no damned doctors!”

She giggled. “I won’t. Promise.” And their swift kiss sealed the deal.

Eric raised his glass. “Live forever!”

Everyone raised their glasses and drank. I swept my hand forward in Phil’s direction. “Now this guy, we met him when Cathy insisted we check out this cool new band with an awesome sound...”

Cecile raised an eyebrow. “Did they have an awesome sound?”

Phil’s head sunk. “We sucked.”

Eric laughed. “But... He had dreamy eyes.”

Cathy’s hand caressed Phil’s cheek. “He *did* have dreamy eyes.” They kissed again. She pouted at Eric. “And he still does.”

Eric raised his glass again. “Dreaming is free!” And we all drank.

In fact, Phil had worked his way thoroughly into our lives almost from the moment we met him. Eric had dumped Cathy at the end of high school when Phil came along; her need to forget Eric, and Phil’s need to be needed had thrown them together so completely that it was suddenly hard to tell where one began and the other ended. This confused Eric who, until then, had become used to a flock of girls who continually pined for him.

As the night marched forward, glasses and minds became cloudier. Once Cathy was satisfied that there was no amour between Phil and Cecile, her exclamations declared that Cecile was one of us. “Soooo, Tell us about Spain!” would have become a non-starter as Cecile vacillated, if I hadn’t weighed in with: “What was the first day like?” And when, “Where did you get that amazing outfit?” brought a bout of shrugs, I smiled, winked and asked: “You Frankensteined it, didn’t you?” Cecile’s beautiful blush and secreted smile were followed by stories of Terry and herself that usually included a large pair of scissors as the protagonist, with a needle and thread in support roles.

While the conversation buzzed around the table, Cecile leaned forward. Her conspiratorial whisper forced me to do the same. “Terry tells me you’re a writer.”

I nodded. “I write. Fiction mostly. But, I’ve only had articles in college rags so far.”

“You think you can show me a thing or two?”

“Yeah, I’m not sure what I can teach you, but we can brainstorm. What do you want to write?”

“Doesn’t everyone want to write the great American novel?”

I nodded.

It had become apparent to me, that with Terry so proliferate in talking about her, Cecile had rarely needed to do so, and I wondered if she had ever been so inclined. What I noticed she did like doing was making others feel nigh-omnipotent. This was her power, and it was never held over others, although we allowed ourselves to drown in it. She would display this ability often enough that it was washed away by universal minutia, and therefore, would go largely unnoticed on a conscious level. I myself would be captured in this spell, and even though it would be years before I understood what it was, this was the reason I fell in love with her, and why I never had a chance to escape that fate. She was an event horizon, beyond which was every point in time and you could be anything you wanted to be.

I caught glimpses of her ability that night, but never recognized it as her soul: I dismissed it as a superficial surface, as simple flirtation. Her hand would pat the crook of Eric’s arm and he would raise his pint glass and declare some goofy toast. She would wink at Terry, who in the middle of telling a story, would find ever more dramatic reasons to energize her gesticulations. When Cecile went to the bar with Cathy and Phil to get shots, I watched her rub Cathy’s shoulder. She eyed Phil’s arm around his girlfriend’s waist and then slowly drew it down the small of Cathy’s back until it rested, cupping the top of her ass. Phil didn’t seem to notice, even when his hand reflexively squeezed. Cathy’s face resembled a Furby doll. Cecile raised an eyebrow – her eyes slit – and she nodded, grinning crookedly.

The night continued, and while she was not the girl who was the centre of attention, she was the centre of our enjoyment.

Phil and Cathy eventually fell victim to rampant passion and abandoned us. The house I rented with Eric was close by. It was a warm night, so we walked home with the girls: ambled is more accurate, but it was one of those walks that everyone thoroughly enjoys in memory.

When we slowed down at the alley that lead to our house, Cecile peered at a faded poster that was affixed to the metal frame on the wall. “Cheerleader.” She looked back at us. “Ever see this band play?” After everyone shook their heads, we continued down the alleyway. “I wonder if they’re any good.” She said as she looked back over her shoulder.

Eric proclaimed to Cecile, when we got home, that he had the greatest record collection in the history of mankind.

She looked at me and asked, “Does he?”

I nodded. “I’d say it’s worth taking a listen to.”

Terry placed her fingers on my chest and applied a little pressure; as I backed up into my bedroom, she looked over her shoulder at Cecile and smiled. “We’ll just be in here.”

And so, well after Terry and I were falling asleep, curled on opposite sides of the futon, the new couple upstairs were still entwining, fucking and then unwinding. A week later, Terry became distant: the week following that she dumped me and then I didn’t see her for a long while.

Chapter 3

The world was an ash-tray as far as I was concerned: at least I could smoke more. I also needed to drink much more. The little grey cloud over my shoulder was growing chubbier daily and it was my only real companion. The cheerful, sensual interplay at home was a constant source of annoyance. At least Cecile knew enough to pretend that she and Eric were just old war buddies while I was around: he was just oblivious.

I guess it was around this time that I realized he'd never been dumped. He'd broken up with girls, or they'd drifted apart. The latter would occur with Cecile in a few weeks. She was not the kind of girl to pine over the boyish qualities Eric possessed in spades. Based on what I knew of her history, she was one of those rare people for whom sex did not have an emotional deadlock on life. Even Eric was unable to make this boast; he sought it out as much or more than anyone else: to him sex was a windmill. From what I'd learned from Terry, and later Cecile herself about her past and future sexuality, she was a free spirit with a remarkable ability to side-step regret.

I won't treat you to the exquisite torture I felt at the time, because there will be much more of that later.

I realized I needed to get out of that house. Two types of people pop into existence when someone is dumped (different people emerge when one is the dumpee): there's the wallower and the extrovert. I was determined not to be the former. When Cecile or Eric invited me out, even if I was sure I'd have a horrible time, I flew at their offer like a dehydrated man finding a sweaty plant. They would even spend some of their evening trying to help me meet new girls. Of course, the same mimicked enthusiasm that had brought me out would manifest itself in reality, and so, I only managed to exacerbate the situation. I've seen or heard the same sentiment in books and movies, it always goes like this: "Chicks can smell desperation, man." and I reeked of it.

When my self-worth was at an all-time low, Terry came to the club with her new boyfriend. Now for the sake of saving my dear readers from a complete belly flop into the pity pool I've moved forward rather quickly, but not that quickly. It went from summer to grey. The city was grey and it was complimented by the grey sky; it was beautiful if you were a Gollum, but I wasn't and it sucked. I even tried to escape the self-reinforcing monochrome by

taking a trip up north and became even more depressed during that week as I watched a panoply of colours leap to their death, leaving behind the pale skeletons of trees. The little grey cloud that followed me wherever I went now had a permanent sneer.

So, while I have jumped forward in time, Terry's boyfriend was new to me and most of the people she knew. I noticed the moment they walked in that Cecile, with her back to me, had shrugged her shoulders. I hadn't bothered to ask her if Terry was seeing anyone, and she had never volunteered the information.

Suddenly Terry and Parker were standing over me. She was teasing her hair with her fingers, clutching a wool knit hat in her other hand and Parker was shaking Eric's. If only the daggers streaming from my eyes could really sever a limb, I thought I'd be happy. I was ready to vomit into my lap.

This was the moment Terry cocked her head and looked anywhere but in my eyes. "Hi Jude."

I managed to grunt out a greeting.

She sat down and finally looked into my eyes. I wish she hadn't. I tried to avoid hers. "How have you been?"

You know that girl from grade five? She was the girl you never had the courage to talk to and might also have been the one who thought some kid named Troy was the cutest because every girl in school thought the same damned thing. Yeah, that girl could Vader you when her hair swept over her shoulders in art class, but that was nothing compared to the sucker punch I was recovering from. How have I been? I was just trying to decide whether I'd fallen in love with her before or after she dumped me. I hoped to god it was neither. I prayed silently that I was temporarily inflicted with the kind of neuroses that made someone have the stupidest emotions imaginable.

"I don't know." I squinted and stopped avoiding her eyes.

She looked away, quickly.

I gave her two thumbs up: brevity keeps me from feeling like shit.

She got up quickly and turned to Parker, patting his hand. "Let's go get a drink, hun."

He nodded and bounded after her.

Later on, as I was enveloped in a plush leather chair near the entrance to the club, Cecile came up beside me and whispered in my ear. "I want to sit on your lap, but do you think Terry might get mad at me?"

"Probably." I shrugged.

She nodded and squeezed into the seat beside me. "Well, we can talk."

"I guess."

She placed my arm around her shoulders and getting comfortable, rested her neck in between my shoulder and chest. "You know, she's pretty messed up these days." Her legs hung over the arm of the chair; she swung them back and forth lightly.

I grunted.

She sighed. There was a prolonged silence and then she twisted her body so that she could look at me. "You know, I always had the feeling that you were too good for her anyways."

I blinked. “She would have said it was the other way around.”

“Well, she’s not very mature. I don’t think she can handle a real relationship, she’s never been in one.”

“What about that Parker?”

She shook her head. “That doesn’t look like much of a commitment is involved. You’re a great guy; you would have made her very happy. She just doesn’t get it.”

I nodded. “No, she doesn’t.”

She looked over her shoulder. “Oh, she’s glaring at me.”

“You better go then.”

She nodded and twisted her body, then kissed me on the cheek. “Yeah.” As she climbed out of the seat, she looked me over. “You look hot tonight. Go find someone worth wasting your time on.”

I smiled as much as I could. “Maybe.”

She retreated to our previous booth.

“Hey, buddy, how are you doing?” Phil sat down in front of me.

I shrugged.

He looked back, over his shoulder. “Cathy and I are gonna head. You wanna catch a cab with us?”

“Sure.”

I grabbed my jacket and said goodbye to Cecile and Eric.

Cecile placed her hand lightly on my arm. “Remember what I said.”

I nodded.

Eric jutted his chin at Terry who was twirling on the dance floor, Parker behind her. “She’s a newt anyway.”

“Yeah. Later.”

“Later.”

That night, my head hit the pillow and I was instantly having sex dreams about Cecile. The next morning, at work, I walked into an uncomfortable atmosphere. I discovered this was my boss’ inability to hide the fact that she was going to fire me at the end of the day.

We’d had a talk last week about my lack of enthusiasm and general funk, and I thought I’d managed to hide it. The work was getting done with minimum expectations but I guess it seemed like I hated the job. I was never the type to want people who weren’t my friends to know why I was living in an emotional dystopia, so there was little I could say except that I was feeling under the weather. She thought it best we terminate my employment so someone more focused and grateful could have the job.

Before I’d gone to sleep the night before, a winter gale had descended upon the city; when I had walked to work in the morning, the grey was submerged under a glaring white blanket. By the end of the day, when I was walking home, I trudged through tiny ice rivers that rushed around my soaking tennis shoes and dirty grey slush was piled on the edge of every sidewalk.

Chapter 4

Snow was cleared away as more and more snow was dumped down on the city. This went on for more than a week, and even though it didn't snow on a daily basis for the remainder of the winter it still became a never ending battle.

I started working at a parking lot and because they had private snow clearing, parking lots were increasingly becoming the only option for most cars. This was a boon for the owners, but meant a great deal more work. On every side street there were cars buried under heaps of snow. The main streets were little better: getting in and out of a space now meant a car might as well be climbing a mountain. So it seemed as if the city had become the territory of soccer moms and their hardy sport-utility vehicles.

It was in the middle of winter that Max came for a visit. Back in high school, in one of those rare times when gym class was in an actual classroom and we were learning – uh, something that I couldn't recall no matter how hard I tried – Mr. Samson showed us the basic general shapes of women and men. Apparently the “best” shapes were the hourglass for women and the triangle for men. All the boys in class immediately looked at Max, who was the only one among us – Samson included – who resembled the ideal male shape. Up until that point the only inspiration that his body type engendered in us was to nickname him ‘The Thug’. This new revelation didn't change that; maybe it would have if we were in Ancient Rome, but we weren't. After that day we referred to him as ‘Thugius Maximus’ or Max.

A loud banging invaded my senses as I sat on the edge of a cliff, surrounded by a field of rye. The scene drifted away and I blinked at the lamplight invading my eyes. My cheek was pressed into a small pool of drool and I rolled off the couch. Wiping the dried flecks along the corner of my mouth, I trudged to the door and ripped it open.

Max's hand was a raised fist that shot forward and then slumped to his side. “So are you gonna invite me in or what?”

I eyed him. “I dunno. Are you aligned with the forces of evil or god?”

He grinned. “Always neutral: you know that.”

I nodded slowly. “Well, there's no such thing as a neutral Nosferatu, so I guess you can come in Max.”

Throwing his duffel bag on the bench beside the door, he slugged me in the arm. “So, are you gonna show me the place?”

I swept my arm around in a one-eighty arc. “This is the hallway. Or as we like to call it ‘The Hall’ You can’t put duffel bags there.” I indicated the bench with my eyes. “That’s strictly used for lacing shoes and passing out drunk.”

He chuckled and slugged me again. “You slay me. You really do. I wish I could say you’re the funniest guy I know, but I can’t for the life of me recall you ever saying something that was more funny than it was dumb. Where do I put my stuff then?”

I threw my head back and his eyes followed upstairs. “That’s where I poop and Eric sleeps. If you wanna spoon with him, then throw your gear in his room.”

He winced. “Is that guy gonna be here all weekend?”

Eric and Max were sexual rivals. It was like an unstoppable force pulling an immovable object. I know that the saying is supposed to be the other way around, but there were never fireworks: it was more like one thing after another but that one thing was the same as any other, and it seemed like more effort than it was worth.

“He was going on a skiing weekend, but it got canceled.”

Max frowned.

When we were fourteen Max fell hard for Katie Albini when a bunch of us went camping at the beach. It seemed only natural to him because he filled out a bathing suit almost as well as she filled out a bikini. His attempts to impress her were, however, doomed to failure because Eric’s reaction to the calling of ‘Dibs’ meant that he completely ignored Katie which, it turns out, was the quickest way to her heart. And the quickest way to make Eric forget all about honour was to place a set of pouting lips directly below his chin and a soft body firmly pressed into his chest. Max was crushed.

“He’s not gonna act like an idiot all weekend is he? He can’t pull it off for that long as I recall.”

When we were fifteen Eric had a lot of girlfriends, but the girl he really wanted was the one who he’d been told he could never have. This was probably why he and Katie hadn’t lasted that long. He’d heard that Max’s girl Amy had said she found him creepy. And as always happens, when he set about to prove how un-creepy he was, he came off as extremely creepy.

I shrugged. “Eric is Eric: Max is Max. One day the twain shall meet.”

He sighed. “Just wanted a relaxing weekend...”

When we were sixteen we rented a ski lodge for winter break. Max and Eric tried to settle old scores (there were many by this point, mostly involving girls) by having a competition to see who could score with the most girls. For the first couple of days it appeared things were going well for both, but inevitably the cat was out of the bag and all three of us spent the rest of the week ostracized. It took me a long while to forgive them for causing such fallout as to involve me.

I shook my head. “You don’t even know how to relax: you’re A.D.D. remember?”

“I still got these, jackass.” He reached into his bag and rattled something

inside.

We moved into the living room and he slumped the bag beside the couch. The room was filled with three cushioned chairs, a sofa, an old TV on a stand, and a coffee table covered in empty beer bottles.

Max sat on the couch and pointed at the bottles. “My house’s centre-piece is overflowing by now.”

I shrugged. “Well, you have the rest of the boys living with you and Wallace is our Hagman.”

He snorted. “Yeah.”

“How’s school?” I asked.

“It’s going. Weird-O professors wearing dusters, smoking pipes. All of them with make-believe accents. How about offering me a beer?” He waved his hand.

I narrowed one eye and my lips puckered to the right. “It’s eleven in the morning.”

He threw his arms in the air. “You see? I thought this city was supposed to be more liberal than the back-assed university town the boys and I moved to.”

“I don’t get it...”

“Haven’t you ever heard the term, ‘apply liberal amounts of booze’?”

“I suppose –”

“Then go son! Get us some beer!”

I shrugged and went into the kitchen and then looked into the shining white refrigerator for several moments wondering what we had planned for the rotting kiwis before we bought them. They looked so lonely on the middle shelf. They were ignored by the condiment shelf above them and empty beer box shelf below. I shook my head and closed the door. “Y’know, I don’t know how things work in your city, but here, if you want beer at eleven a.m. you’re unlikely to find any left-over from the night before.”

He called out from the living room. “Then let’s go to the frakkin’ beer store!”

“It’s cold out...”

“Then put some out-door pants on.”

I walked back into the living room and looked at my bare legs. “By that, you mean pants.”

He nodded emphatically. “Yeah, that’s it! I never wanted to learn that you own a pair of Hercules boxers. I didn’t even know they existed.”

I shrugged. “I think my mom got me them for Christmas last year. I used to watch the show in high school.”

“Xena: that I could accept. You could even go with the old seventies cartoon.” He cocked his head and after a moment pointed at me. “But nothing with Newt: don’t ever let me catch you with Newt on your crotch!”

“Fine.” I jugged my chin towards the chair on his left. “Toss me those.”

He threw my jeans at me.

At the time I lived among a group of houses built in the end of an alley that lead into Chinatown. I don’t know who came up with the wild concept that

alleys could be used for something other than dumpsters, deliveries and drunken pisses, but I was glad someone had: it was pretty cheap housing.

A neighbour from the house across from ours was walking in front of us. He slid through several clumps of greasy slush before ducking into a doorway at the end of the alley. Max rubbed his hands together and shoved them in his pockets. “What was that guy carrying?”

“A white bag.”

“I got that. What was he doing?”

“I have a theory –”

We walked by the door. Max pointed inside and his brows came crashing together. “Is that a pig hanging on a hook?”

“Yup.”

“What’s going on here?”

“There’s this massive fan above our oven, and there’s globs of solidified grease frozen in the act of dripping.” We stopped at the end of the alley.

“Is this connected?” He cocked his head.

I nodded. “That’s my guess. Most of our neighbours are Asian, and apparently there was a large family living in our place before we moved in. The place was also covered in cockroaches the first month we lived there.”

“Ugh!” He shuddered.

“The landlord had to exterminate several times and it’s mostly solved the problem. Anyway, I suspect that at least this restaurant – maybe more – is getting food cooked in these houses to avoid health inspectors or something.” I nodded in the front window of the restaurant whose open kitchen door we had passed. “Want to get a steam bun?”

“Not really...”

“You’re not hungry?”

“Yeah, but–”

“They’re pretty good.”

“What’s that?” He looked in the window.

“I think it’s a squid.”

“Why is it orange?”

I shrugged. “Dunno. We going in?”

“I guess.”

We’d finished our steam buns by the time we entered the liquor store. Max stuffed his paper bag in a receptacle. “Those were pretty good!”

I nodded.

Eric was inside, wearing sunglasses and holding an orange basket full of cheap imported beer in blue cans. He was in the act of adding another to his basket when Max pointed him out. Pressing a finger to his lips, he tip-toed behind Eric; he had the dramatic elegance of a circus-ninja.

Turning around slowly, Eric was suddenly staring into his rival’s grinning eyes. He dropped the basket. One can popped out onto the floor and flopped around spewing a thin hiss of spray onto the cream tiled floor. “Shit!” He bent down to retrieve the can but his grip was tenuous and it spun out of his

hand, across the floor and came to rest after it slid under a shelf of wine-coolers. “What the fuck?”

Max was silently chuckling to himself. “Oh, buddy...”

Slowly, raising himself from his knee, Eric turned to look at him. “Not cool—”

“From where I was standing...”

“What are you doing here?” I knelt down to grab at the spurting can.

An employee rushed forward, and we received a disgusted look seemingly designed for each of us individually. “I’ll take care of this.” She said as she waved over an old man with a mop. “What happened?”

Eric shrugged. “I was getting beer.”

Max nodded. “He was getting beer...” rubbing the back of his neck he continued: “Must’ve been shelved wrong.”

“That’s dangerous.” Eric sniffed.

“You’re damned right it is.”

The girl spun on her heel and huffed away, carrying the can in a plastic bag. A mop shot back and forth over the brew and the old fellow holding it whistled to himself.

We turned away. Eric leaned against a shelf. “I’m so hung-over. I’ll see you guys back at the house.” With that said, he made a bee-line for the cash register.

When we returned home, after we’d pulled our soaking shoes off then filled the refrigerator with beer, Max and I sat on the sofa and began drinking. As if we were deep in meditation, nothing was said as we gulped down several more. Eric came down the stairs in a bathrobe, his hair damp and grabbed each of us another beer.

The can hissed as he cracked it open, and after satisfying a deep longing, he looked at Max. “How long are you here for buddy?”

Shifting in his seat, Max propped his legs on the coffee table. “Well, buddy...” He looked around the room. “Can’t say: it’s reading week.”

“A week?” Eric cleared his throat.

A grin was all the answer he received.

I sat forward. “Where were you coming from?”

Max raised an eyebrow and frowned at me. “I think that’s pretty obvious: he fucked some chick.”

Eric sighed. “Come on, we gotta start this already?”

Max chuckled, his hands thrust, palms out. “I’m sorry: he made love to a lady—”

“Not that you need to know, but yes—”

“He wined her and dined her, that dear sweet lady. Then he got under her shift as a prize.”

“Huh?”

“And that dear sweet girl, the Lady Penelope, why she has the most exquisite cunt: like you wouldn’t believe. A tiny, ripened, plantain banana.”

“Jesus!”

I shook my head. “Seriously: where do you come up with this shit?”

Max guffawed, slapping his knee and spilling a little of his beer. “And mighty Eric did say unto sweet Lady Penelope: ‘I shall dock in thine harbour, and give you all my trade goods, by God!’ and she but sighed, contentedly, at the sight of his un-precedented manhood.”

Eric sniffed. “What the hell?”

I shrugged and raised my right hand. “Maybe she did.”

Max nodded sagely. “Contentedly.”

Chapter 5

By early evening we were drunk. We were too drunk to get more beer. We were too drunk to answer the door. Phil crashed through the door, almost as drunk, and he brought with him a case of beer. One of the bottles had slipped and crashed on the steps leading up to the house. When we heard this, we crowded into the hall to peer out the door into the dim twilight.

Eric opened a beer and held it aloft. "A cold and broken hallelujah!"

"Aye!" Max raised his own.

Phil and I followed suit.

We went back to the living room to contemplate our great good luck at the arrival of Phil. "You came in the—" I gulped more down. "knick of time."

"Timeliness is next to godliness." He said.

"It is!" Proclaimed Eric. "To God being one of us!"

We responded to his raised beer with our own.

Max sat forward, bleary eyed. "Hey..." He burped. "Where did you come from anyway?"

Phil chucked a thumb in the direction of the door.

"Oh. Right."

Eric sniffed. "Jude called him a couple of hours ago."

I nodded. "Told him to bring more beer."

"Good call."

Phil raised his bottle in answer to Max.

"I've got weed." Max set his bottle down.

Eric blinked. "When did you get that?"

"What?"

"The weed?"

Max waved his hand and shook his head. "Got rollies?"

We shook our heads.

"Pipe?"

I rubbed my shoulder. "Nope."

“How ‘bout a coke bottle?”

“Check the recycling bin.”

“Okay then.” He rolled himself off of the sofa and dropped the baggie on the floor, spilling some of it. “Oh shit, oh shit.”

I sat up. “What?”

“This is worse than when Eric dropped that beer last week.”

Eric sniffed. “That was today.”

“It was?”

He nodded.

“Are you getting a cold or something?”

He nodded.

Then Max was crouching over the marijuana, frowning fiercely. “Crap!” He waved his arms. “Guys! Don’t let the dog get this!”

Phil burped. “They don’t have a dog.”

“They don’t?”

He shook his head.

“Oh, good. I’ll be right back.” Pushing himself off the ground, Max ambled into the kitchen.

“Do you think he needs weed?”

Eric opened his eyes. “I dunno Phil—”

I waved my hand and a finger came to rest on my lips. “Shhh. Shhh. Let’s see how it plays out.”

They nodded.

There came from the kitchen a great deal of crashing. A few bangs and a curse followed. There was silence and then we could hear Max pacing for a few moments. The tap in the kitchen sink began to flow and following that, there was a grating sound that elicited more curses. After the tap was turned off and the noise had stopped, there was another moment of silence before he cried out from the kitchen. “Hey, you guys got any weed?”

“I think so.” Phil replied.

“You’re a good man Phil; bring it in here.”

We shuffled into the kitchen. Max was hunched over the half filled sink, and inside it was the top three quarters of a plastic coke bottle bobbing like a buoy.

We finished smoking in the kitchen and threw ourselves again upon the sofas in the living room.

Max squinted at Phil. “Where did you come from anyway?”

Phil chuckled his thumb at the window that looked out into the night. A thin fog seeped from the sewer grate outside of our house and the light from a street lamp above poured into it, creating a pale yellow ghost.

“Oh, right...”

Eric sniffed. “He was probably at Cathy’s”

“You got a cold or something, buddy?”

Eric nodded.

“You poor guy. You need medicine – I got some!” He rifled through his bag and tossed a small white bottle at Eric. “There you go buddy!” He cocked his head at Phil. “You still seeing Cathy?”

“Yeah.”

Max smiled. “She’s nice.”

“Yeah.”

“Real nice.”

“Yeah.”

Max snapped his fingers, but they didn’t make a sound. “You know what I–”

Eric pointed at him. “No more banana talk!”

I nodded.

Max shrugged. “I was gonna say a nice ripe peach–”

Eric shook his head. “No!”

Max placed his hands in front of himself. “Okay. Okay.”

Phil grinned.

Eric sniffled and his eyelids drifted downwards.

Max leaned forward, a clenched fist covering his mouth.

I looked to my left, grabbed the dying geranium off the window sill, upended it onto the floor and passed the empty pot to Max who promptly refilled it from his stomach. “Good call.” He nodded then burped.

Eric rubbed his forehead. He slumped further into the arm of the sofa and tried to grab his empty beer unsuccessfully, then looked at me. “Who are you calling?”

“No one.” I replied.

He tried to focus and pointed in my general direction. “You know who you should call?”

“Who?”

“Terry.”

“Why?”

Max mumbled. “Don’t do it.”

Eric nodded. “Yeah, call her and tell her to go fuck herself.”

Max’s tongue lolled back and forth across his lips. “No.” He managed to mumble. “Don’t call her. Ever.”

I stood up and swayed.

Phil snored.

Eric hiccupped. “Where’re you going?”

“Bed.”

He nodded. “Tell her to go fuck herself.”

Max shook his head.

Phil snored.

I ambled to my bedroom, calling out behind me. “Night guys.”

When I got into my room I managed to get the top half of my body onto

the bed. I was kneeling on the floor and it was a long struggle before I managed to roll the rest of my body under the covers. My hand rummaged through my pockets until my cell phone flopped out. I raised it close to my face and squinted as I dialed then I placed it on my ear.

It rang. "Hello?"

"Hey..." I slurred.

"What's up?"

"Did I wake you?"

"No, I'm just getting ready to go out."

"At this ungodly hour?"

"Midnight is an ungodly hour? Huh, I had no idea. What are you doing? You sound drunk."

"I am really extremely drunk. It's only midnight? We're all passing out. I'm still awake, right?"

She giggled. "Yeah, you are: for now. You should pass out too though. You sound rough. When are you gonna teach me to write?"

"That's right! Whenever you want."

"I'll call you tomorrow?"

"Oui."

"Night"

"G'night."