

Spin Out

By Kees Kapteyn

The headlights of Derek's Toyota Tercel violate the cold late November darkness outside, illuminating a curving road and harvested shaven cornfields. The trees that we can see are skeletal, stripped of mystery with our tungsten bleach. Because of a recent icestorm, they all look like they are made of metal, gleaming with a thin gloss of ice for those minute moments when our lights hit them. I'm sitting in the backseat, searching for anonymous things beyond the reach of our light, though these things don't want disclosure. Guilty secrets, they retreat into deeper, safer sanctuaries of night. I hate November and I have every reason to. It's when daylight leaves and night comes to rule. Light, warmth and everything comforting and happy leaves with it. I fucking hate November.

Marie came up with the idea of going to the site of a recent murder. A goth slum exercise. There is Dark Wave music coming off soundtrack from the car radio: Heathen (A Thousand Thoughts) by Android Lust. We aren't Goth. The contents of this car, Marie, Derek, Hab and I aren't Goth. There are no covens and foggy heaths, no wampyre jewellery, no pagan dabblings. We're real, normal with a touch of shoegazer and a smattering of art student or whatever. It's 11:53 pm. Derek is driving and Marie is steering verbally. Hab and I are in the backseat, asking Marie questions. Her blue moon face turns to us occasionally, lit up aquamarine by the dashboard lights. Her eyelashes are long and thick and there is a liquid gleam in her big eyes. Her nose is flattened slightly by a fracture when she was younger, and its diamond stud glistens once in a while when the light hits it just right. I can see Derek's fibrous goatee and sideburns; his loose longish hippie hair sticking out every which way as an extension for his tousled mind. In the rearview mirror, there's Hab's sculpted coif and my own shaven scalp, just silhouettes against a lesser black. The red star of Marie's joint glows as she takes a

drag and exhales little wisps of ghost into the air. I've just finished mine, its pungent smoke lingers. I envision Marie's breath and mine stirring into each other like consummation.

Marie explains the fresh legend as we go along. She's read up on this. It had just happened days ago, countable hours ago. Apparently it was a murder/suicide. The murder was a girl that had gone to school with Marie's older sister. The suicide was a male friend of the murder through their work with a courier company in the city. Mr. Suicide lived where the incident happened, in a house in the rural shorthills that had been converted into apartments.

"Rural apartments?" interjects Hab.

Marie stops talking for a few prolific seconds before she answers.

"Just shut up and I can tell you- fuck, are you going to pick this story apart for bad grammar too or something? Yes, rural apartments! Fucking leave that Lit U. shit in your cranium for once! Fuck! Life is not fiction! Drop your fucking illusions! Jeezis!"

There's something about Marie's way of swearing that makes me want to laugh in applause. She really does put the 'ing' articulately at the end of it. F stop. F with a sudden stop (burp excuse me). Her sweet female voice streams off her tongue at colloquial speed with the same rhythm as her poetry, like weather, like tidal surge, like planetary spin.

"Okay, okay sorry! Go ahead."

"You're such a dick sometimes, man!"

Derek laughs on reflex at this (burp tee hee). He loves stuff like this.

"I'm sorry, okay!? Fuck! Tell the story and I'll shut up!" says Hab.

"Yeah, can we hear the rest of the story, please?" I say, though I feel as though my request is muddled in the heat of their exchange.

Apparently, Mr. Suicide had made friends with Ms. Murder at work, though everything

seemed entirely platonic. They just got along well in a crowd of employees that all got along. There was a social that night and they were going to go. No one knew of any plan that they were going together, nothing was ever known of any connection between the two through anything other than work. Neither ended up going to the social that night. This is what the other employees were saying to the papers.

“I remember that.” I say. “It happened last week, right?”

Neither came to work the following day, nor any after that. The concerned were alerted and eventually the police were sent to Suicide’s apartment. They had both been shot. There was no naked rape victim, but there was a suicide note saying that he had killed her and willed his own death, though the media is barred from the actual gist of the letter. There was an admission of guilt and that’s all we know. We talk about our theories of what may have happened. Hab thinks they were having a relationship and were keeping it a secret from everyone else. Something had brought Ms. Murder to Mr. Suicide’s house. She hadn’t been forced as far as we know. There had to be a connection, she had died in his house to his hands. There had been emotion, there had been violence. Something had happened that was large enough to have death as a result. Marie imagined a rejection. Ms. Murder had gone to Mr. Suicide’s house, considering maybe, then deciding not to carry through. Maybe there had been a collision of expectations. I wonder what the last minutes of Ms. Murder’s life was like. Was there that piss-your-pants kind of fear, facing down the gun of someone she thought she could trust? Was there any moment of surrender or valiant defiance? For Suicide, was there an unrequited love happening? Was there a deep seated psychosis manifested in deluded connections to the victim?

There were so many canyons between the facts. It’s titillating to fill the blanks with innuendo. The nun’s pantyline.

So this is the foundation of this night. Everything is set up, this mood, this

contemplation of 'Death as Spectacle'. This is the premise of David Cronenberg's 'Crash' and America's Greatest Snuff Films. Forehead to scythe. Derek's radio is playing some strange hebephrenic Yoko-clone wailing to percussive brick rhythms on reverb. We're getting good and weirded out as he steers the car into such deep centrifugal curves that we can't settle into our seats. The terrain is getting hilly too. We can see more trees out the window, and the hollows now are deeper, so the odometer never goes over 70 k no matter how Derek pushes it, provoking occasional yelps of mortality from the tires. Derek likes to drive fast, as if acceleration is more his natural speed. We like it too, when he tries little stunts to make the drive more entertaining. When we had the ice storm just a week ago, we threw traffic advisories to the wind, went out to the pubs and all got lightly toasted. The ride home was the most fun though, when we found an empty parking lot and Derek used it to take the car through fantastic donuts and spinouts on its sheer icy plane, throwing us around the car with centrifugal force, making us howl with laughter. It was like the Tilt-A-Whirl ride we had all ridden at the Lion's Club carnivals we had all gone to when we were still kids in our respective hometowns; the artificial gravity pressing us against the backs and the sides, whipping us around as a threat to the natural laws. Now, we are more subdued and couldn't care less about his crazy driving. Marie is perfectly quiet and I want to insult her just to hear her voice again.

"Why do I feel like we should have brought a Great Dane along?"

Derek laughs a dopey horse laugh.

"Zoinks!" he says.

Marie stays quiet, looking so intensely out the window she can't be disturbed. The sooner we find her haunted house, the sooner we can have a beer and some wings. This is just one of those little extra-curricular experiences we get from each other in our friendship. I've only known these guys for the last short little while since the beginning of the school year. I met Marie first, in our DRAM3F10 Shakespeare class and she amazed me in her criticisms of our necrophiliac instructor, who seems so hung up on the Bard, he seems to neglect any literary progress past the 1600's. Habjan and Derek came in from other peripheries, maybe likely

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probably because they were as attracted to Marie as I was, and we became the quintet we are today. We soon began meeting in corridors, sitting together in the cafeteria, hanging out in each other's dorm rooms. We are still getting to know each other gradually and these little psychological field trips beat swapping autobiographies over diner booths any day. We are happy in our relations with each other, especially since we don't seem to be able to gel with any other group on campus. I don't know what it is, but we all seem to isolate ourselves from the rest of the world by merit of our own introversion, and our own weirdness. There is weirdness that is funny and intriguing, then there is our weird; which is distasteful and grotesque. All four of us are too flawed to be considered cool, too shy to be considered interesting. But we all gel for some reason, maybe because we are all interested in Marie, who has taken us in as friends. In our isolation, we all share that.

Derek's idea for a biographical field trip was to play us his favourite vinyl longplayers on his old Realistic record player. He laid all the sleeves for Yessongs out over his rez floor like a mandala while we listened to "Siberian Khatru" (Vol I, Side I, Track II). It looked like the back cover of Ummagumma to me. He said he has 500 albums at home, but he only brought the ones with the best covers along with him to school. We then watched 2001: A Space Odyssey from his old VHS machine. Derek would offer commentary on scenes that came up, and I commented too, having read the short fiction that inspired it. Having never seen the movie before and Derek not even knowing that it was inspired by an Arthur C. Clarke story, it was exciting to watch. Hab and Marie didn't mind out talking throughout the movie. At one point, Marie, who sat on the couch next to me, but her feet on my lap. I took off her socks, then held her feet in my hands. She didn't find it unusual or forward at all.

"Big warm hands." she said.

"Your feet are so small you can wear my hands."

"They should make socks like your hands."

I only half tried to hide my erection against Marie's feet, but she never seemed to show that she noticed. We settled in the couch and sloppily ate the popcorn that Derek had made us. The puffs looked like shooting stars when they escaped the bowl and fell to bounce onto the blue moon surface of Derek's carpet, the ever changing cathode light from the TV making the room shift and change with minute shadows and textures. There is a part of the movie wherein HAL, the rogue computer uses a small remote controlled pod to attack an astronaut during his spacewalk. The scene is so surreal, with the amplified sounds of the astronaut's breathing, the silent encroachment of the pod, the implied but obvious violence of the scene. As the astronaut is shown being flung out into the empty vacuum of space without a tether and without oxygen, I seized up, suddenly forgetting how to breathe. A moving object without friction will move unhindered until there is something to stop it. I watched as the writhing man was sent out to the empty and endless nothingness. I couldn't handle that kind of enormity, that much realization of eternity. I couldn't breathe, my heart racing a thousand times a minute, free, reaching unattainable numbers. I couldn't reel it in. The scene moved on for an uncertain amount of minutes while the surviving astronaut retrieved his dead colleague, still in eerie silence, and I eventually regained my senses. No one else in the room seemed to have noticed my panic attack, though Marie moved her feet from my lap suddenly.

"Your hands are all clammy, ew." she said.

For his field trip, Hab took us for another kind of slumming- actually, the one that most people know. Hab comes from a well-to-do South Asian family that had immigrated two generations ago to Toronto. He was tall, dark and handsome, with an angular Persian face, deep intense eyes and a glorious coif of combed and shiny black hair. He always dressed in a collared shirt and ironed pants, always crisp and clean, which always made me wonder what he was doing with us, as we were always the rumpled tee-shirt and faded jeans. But I knew he fit in with us when he talked, always offering something funny and clever, augmenting our

conversations in such great ways. I also knew that his family, though twice removed from India, still exerted their culture on him. He hadn't a trace of an accent, but you could see he was keeping up appearances in order to seem like he had come from his family. But he was in our family now, where he was most happy. He was also with us because he was attracted to Marie. I could see it in the way he looked at her, lent his attentions to her. Marie would reciprocate with good humour and both Derek and I knew that there was chemistry. Though it bothered me, I stood back, in my passive/aggressive way. We had known each other for almost three months now, and one would think that if there was a romance blossoming, it would have by now. Both seemed to be taking their time, if that were the case. We all held back.

We went to St. Catharines' downtown where Hab scored some weed and led us behind the Leonard Hotel where we rolled it into cigarette paper on a parking barrier in the amber streetlight.

"Good shit," said Derek as he grimaced and exhaled his first drag. Marie had to laugh at that, though she was nervous, as she had heard of stabbings in the very parking lot we were rolling joints in. It was late into the witching hour and the sense of anything dangerous happening was real and palpable. Once we were done, she urged us out into the light of St. Paul Street once again. It didn't take us long before we met a dirty old schizophrenic who was panhandling on the main drag. We sat nearby and watched him as he held out his brow-soiled cap and talked to himself, emerging from his delusion only to beg for spare change from passersby. Gradually though, his attentions began to zero in on Marie, who listened to him as he spoke to her in the context of his delusion, as if she were an old intimate friend of his. Hab stood and smirked, nodding and looking at us to gauge our appraisal of this toothless, raving invalid he'd found us.

"Prague! Prague! Now," said the madman to Marie, his finger erect and carving the air like a sword. "Do you remember that art exhibit we went to, dear? The Topic?"

"I do.", said Marie, quietly and in a voice I'd never heard her use before.

"We drank the worst wine I'd ever tasted! Do you remember that?"

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"Yes, I do. You spat it right out onto the floor and all over your shoes.

Ha! Haha! A gritty, sooty laugh.

"Yes! I don't know why you stayed with me that night."

"I was quite angry with you."

"Yes. Yes dear, you were. I'm sorry."

The madman reached out and touched Marie on the knee and for a moment, I thought Marie was going to break into happy tears. In awe, I watched this exchange between the second year drama student and the madman, hardly noticing Hab as he turned away and walked alone down the street.

My field trip was early last month, when I took everyone up to my family's home in Wilberforce, a little town in the Haliburtons in Ontario. We had a lakefront property that my great grandfather had bought almost a hundred years ago, that we all keep up today, at least as well as we can after my father passed away just over a year ago from cancer. I wanted them to see this side of me, the place where I came from, my foundation, hoping it might enlighten them to the person I am. To know me, this was required viewing. I wanted them to see the lake, I wanted them to see the water, the rocks and the trees, and I wanted them to meet my family. My family would explain the most to them.

When we got to the property, I didn't bring them directly to the house, as my mother was at work and being a Friday, my sister Ellie was still at school. I took them straight to the boathouse and had Hab and Derek pull out our two canoes so we could go straight out onto the lake, but before we could go, Marie needed to pee. I suggested she use the outhouse by the barn, but she balked.

"Are there spiders in there?"

"Yeah- huge lake spiders."

She gave me a look like she was going to suggest I take her straight home.

I found the spare keys to the house where they had always been in the boathouse hanging from a nail in stud, and let her into the house to use the bathroom.

When we got out on the water, with Derek and I in one canoe, Marie and Hab in the other, I felt so happy having them out on the lake I had paddled upon a thousand times, in different contexts. I knew every inch of shoreline on that lake and probably have a story to tell about each one. The water was smooth and the wind was kind and still summer-soft. Derek was a strong paddler. He told me he'd paddled before at summer camps he'd been to, so we would have to slow down when the city slickers, Hab and Marie would lag behind in their relative inexperience. Marie, I knew, was nervous on the water. She paddled along with Hab, but I saw her jump every time the craft would tip even slightly, and her face looked full of worry. I was sorry that I had forgotten to have them put on life jackets, but it was never a custom practice in my family to do so, and hadn't even thought. I had to put them out of my mind as Derek and I powered our way across the lake. As we went along, I started to act as tour guide, showing them places I had been and what I had done when I was there. No one seemed generally interested though, making no comments at all, just giving obligatory glances in the direction I was pointing. I didn't care. I was just so happy to have my three favourite people in the world here in my hometown, canoeing on my home lake, seeing things that meant so much for me. I knew they might not appreciate it all like I do, coming from such different backgrounds, but I was just glad to have them there, in this context. It was something I had wanted to do ever since we'd started on the idea of field trips. Just ahead of us, a huge trout leapt out of the water to snap at a fly. You could see its whole length, its iridescent rainbow flashing in the spray of water as it gyrated as if trying to swim through the lighter resistance of air. It hung above the lake for what seems a full second before it dropped back down, landing in the lake with a spectacular splash.

"Whoa, looka dat!" said Derek as he witnessed that triumphant leap. "Damn, I should have remembered to bring my gear here, I'd go after that monster."

"Maybe we can later, you can borrow mine." I said.

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I looked back at Hab and Marie and they had stopped paddling far behind us, splashing each other with their paddles, laughing as they soaked each other, their canoe swirling in a slow circle with their efforts. They had missed the whole thing.

Later we saw a bear on the shore, feeding on something on the rocks. It looked like an adolescent, small and looking thin compared to the robust girth we usually expect to see on a bear. It was unusual to see a bear in autumn so young and yet so thin.

"Mangy looking thing," said Hab. I was wondering if he was a loner; cast out for some reason, because of some defect that had alienated itself from its family. Maybe it was in ill health and exiled for that reason. As we approached we then saw it was tearing pink, bloody strips of flesh off a fish, which had likely been as big as the one we had seen breaching just minutes before. As we approached, it stopped its feeding and stared at us, frozen. When it decided we were close enough, it suddenly took the remains of its meal in its jaws and crashed into the bush, abruptly enough to make Marie yelp in fright. Soon the foliage it had displaced in its swift departure stopped its swaying and we were left again with the silent rocky shoreline and gentle lapping water.

"Are there a lot of those around here?" Marie asked.

"Ya." I said "A few. They come around once in a while looking for food in the garbage bins."

"Ugh," Marie said finally. "I could never live here."

It was at that moment that I realized: City Girl. She could never be mine.

Things got better when I led them to a rocky cliff where my siblings and friends and I

would always go to swim. The rock went straight down to a depth I had never plumbed so it was perfect for diving and jumping off. It was exhilarating for all of us, to climb up that sheer granite face 15 feet above the surface of the lake, then throw ourselves to gravity and hit that water with all our weight and baggage. We stripped to our underwear and took to it with zeal, hurling ourselves off the cliff any way we could think of, laughing and shouting the whole time. I couldn't keep my eyes off of Marie, her panties and tee-shirt clinging to her body, every contour, every curve obvious. I had never really seen Marie's body before, as it was usually buried under layers of clothing. She had never looked so vulnerable and human to me before. I couldn't look away. Derek and Hab noticed too, I could see them stealing glances at her, wanting to see the same things I did. We all watched as she would climb up out of the lake, water streaming down her body and her legs as she hoisted herself back up the rocks. Hab is the only one of us that flirted with her though, and she reciprocated with him. He was succeeding. The cycle of their relationship seemed to turn and roll forward as they joked with each other and showed off their best jumps to each other. Suddenly, Derek yelled out in the water as if something was attacking him and we all turned to see him being lifted up, some large mossy thing coming up underneath him to almost hoisting him out of the water. When I swam over, I saw that it was a dead tree; just a trunk with decayed limbs that must have been dislodged from the underwater rocks with our horseplay. Shaken, Derek swam to the rocks and got out, looking back at the sea monster that had narrowly eaten him. I was shaken too, to think how near tragedy we might have come, this large solid invisible thing we easily could have fallen onto, that I had led them to.

We had supper at my house after we paddled back in near silence. My mother quietly made us a pizza from the freezer but did not sit with us in the rec room in the basement while we ate. My 12 year old sister Ellie sat with us for a little bit, but we soon bored her with our communal speechless distraction with the tv and she left us.

We went to bed early, with nothing else to do. Derek, Hab on mattresses on the recroom floor, myself on the couch in the living room on the main floor, against the window in the moonlight coming through, and Marie in my old bedroom down the hall. I couldn't sleep that night, thinking of Marie in my bedroom, wondering if Hab would sneak upstairs to be with her. Would he do that? It seems like something he would do. I lay watching the hallway much of the night, but fell asleep looking at the moon, marking its movement; its orbit and the rotation on the earth I was laying on. The next morning, after we all woke up and had a quick breakfast of toast and coffee, Marie pulled me by the sleeve of my tee shirt off to the side where no one could see us.

"Get me out of here right now!" she hissed. "Your mom creeps me out! I didn't want to get out of bed until I heard you guys moving around! I thought I was going to piss the bed!"

"Here it is! Here it is!" Marie is saying now, slapping Derek's arm. We slow down and watch the headlights illuminate the house where the deaths had happened, a building with faded barnboard siding. It looks like a shack from Little House on the Prairie. Lights are on inside. Someone is alive in the house of Death. I look at the other dark windows and wonder, which was Suicide's. Everything is left to the imagination. Nothing indicates anything. As slow as Derek goes, the house still eventually disappears as our lights move on in accordance to the road. I'm disappointed, but Marie is in the midsts of some kind of reverential silence. I want to say 'is that it?' just to snap her out of it, but don't. She feels some kind of connection.

Pornography and the rube is all I see.

"Weird." declares Derek.

The goth music seems overplayed and inappropriate now.

"Can we change the station at all?" I know I'm ruining Marie's mood. I sound annoyed. Derek changes the station and Aerosmith's crotch rock comes in, as generic as fluorescent lighting. We ascend out of the hollow and up an escarpment. Now this road could be anywhere,

one of the thousands I've driven on in my lifetime. The road is now straighter and flatter and we are now passing houses lit up with Christmas lights flickering with each other to form a luminous neighbourhood. Of course, it's the middle of November, so these lights aren't unusual. Did we see any of these kinds of lights on the way here? We must have missed them. Derek celebrates the passing of hindrance by opening the throttle like a champagne bottle. Over the horizon, I can see wasted light from the city, caught in the vapour of a cloudy sky. Between that glow, and myself there is only blackness, the dark expanse of the country. This expanse surrounds every city, like a sea around an archipelago. I shuffle lower in my seat and put my knees up against the back of Marie's, jostling her. She doesn't protest, just looks out into that same space I'd been looking into. That's good enough for me. I drift into an ecstatic half-sleep until I'm startled into wakefulness by Marie's scream and I am suddenly thrown against the door. Derek is swerving to miss a possum that we've caught crossing the road. I can see it screaming at us with its jaws agape, then it disappears underneath us; I can hear the thud and feel the bump displacing our tires. Those tires then squeal in obeisance to gravity as the car descends to the gods of momentum. There is a flash of light and suddenly the entire world is an Armageddon between the immovable and unstoppable.

I don't know how I got outside, but here I am, walking in a grassy field. Lights are spinning around me like sandflies. My equilibrium is chaotic and I don't know where I'm going. Just fall down and get your shit together- just right here, the grass is soft enough.

There.

There are voices and there are lights and there is someone touching me.

What is he saying? Why is he shouting?

Yeah, I'm fine. Can't you see? Oh shit, I'm leaving you now.

Let go of me. Just let go.

Like I had said before, I hate the month of November. It's the month of All Souls, the

month of death. It starts with a memorial for all those who have been untangled from their mortal coil, then for all those redeemed and sanctified. I remember my dearly departed in the venue of the falling leaves and the plunge of the thermometer. It's as if in November, all fails, all ends. All that makes the world beautiful and even just habitable falls in November. We become deprived of colour, warmth and brightness. I feel the sense of loss with the collapse of the season, that I had lost my father to cancer last year. He announced it to us September the 1st, but the prescience didn't help. His fall was sudden and quick and by November the 7th he was gone. So I feel the sense of loss in leaves leaving the limbs of trees bare to the cold as I, a son, am left without a father. I stand on my own, still alive, but bereft, left without colour or even the ability to breathe air.

The doctors at the hospital told me that Derek and Marie died almost instantly when we hit that truck head on. Hab had his seatbelt on and went for the ride when the Tercel rolled and bounced five times. They had to use the Jaws of Life, but he got out- he got out of it- with bruises and a concussion. Myself, I was thrown a good twenty feet from the car. The grassy field I landed in had cushioned me. I passed out seconds later from shock, never noticing that I had broken my hand (my fucking right hand, my pencil- pushing, mouse-clicking, chicken-choking right hand). I had no idea of the violence of the accident. I feel so outside of it all. It still boggles my mind that it killed two people. Were those two actually friends of mine? Was I involved? I survived? What had I survived? Hab and I don't even talk about it. In fact, we don't talk at all. After the hospital and the funerals, it was as if we never even knew each other at all.

He means nothing to me.

I've decided that I was in love with Marie. I still think of her, I still hear her voice. I sometimes think of her using my bedroom when she stayed over at my family's house. I

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imagine how she felt waking up in unfamiliar surroundings, waiting to hear a familiar voice in the hallway outside. I should have gone to see her. I sometimes fantasize about her in compromising positions when I masturbate, feeling shame only after the act. I then think of her sitting in the corner of my room, watching my sadly sinister spirit, softly laughing sympathetically at me.

I'm convalescing in my family's house right now, December the 27th, two days post-Christmas. I'm not going back to school for the time being. I've already missed too much school, so I figure my year is already washed up. I want to go down to St. Catharines to get my things, but Mum wants me to get better first. Whatever 'better' is. Maybe better is when I get out of this stupid, cumbersome cast I wear over my wrist. The only people who have signed it are my sister Ellie and her pubescent friends. One of them wrote "1D Rocks!" in red greasy marker on it, contaminating any possibility of saving this cast as a memento. Oh well, if that's all there is, then fuck it. I don't have anyone else to sign it anyway. It's attached to me yet I feel it no longer belongs to me anymore. It means nothing to me now. Fuck it. I spend all my time sitting here downstairs in my recroom, watching satellite images of music videos because I can't decide which book I want to start reading. Kerouac or Jarman? I'm getting sick of these sugary dance videos. I want to hear some Headstones. I want to hear some old Genesis, maybe Stagnation or something. It would make me all moony and ponderous. I want to hear that new Vain Avengers cd I'd heard about. I'd love a copy of Exclaim magazine here with me but Wilberforce, flung far to the north of everything I need, has never even heard of Exclaim, nor does it have any stores that would even consider carrying it. I wish Matthew Firth would put out a new Front and Center, with its visceral morsels of fiction. I want to rent a movie like Eraserhead or Taxi Driver or something. Anything my sister would hate would be just what I need. Is 'I'm 14 and I Hate the World' on DVD at all? Gawd.

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My mother is upstairs now. I can hear the clanking of pots and the creak of floorboards above my head. She has the radio on loud. It's Adele singing now. Mom used to listen to singers like Neil Diamond or Gordon Lightfoot, but now it's the new bohemian sound. She's become part of the cast of Desperate Housewives. I can hear Mom cooking upstairs to Gen X coffeehouse blues, the television showing me Selena Gomez in front of me, but I'm more aware of the silence between these sounds. I'm aware of the fact that there is a silence beneath them. I listen for that silence like I'm hunting for it, because it's elusive and it feels good to notice it.

The wood stove is starting to fail from lack of fuel and the room is getting colder. Its fan is shut off already. I could take a chance and try to light up another log but I've never been able to get a fire lit before. I look at that stove in the corner of the room and think of all the times I spent laying on this same couch, listening to the wood pop and break inside that stove. When the fire would take and the heat was enough, the fan would turn on and billow warmth across the room to me. I would then sleep deeper than I've ever slept before or since. It was my late father's job to boss the fire to life. He seemed to have the knack for provoking flames from the wood, sparking the relationship between the two elements. As he became sicker, he became tired of being the one to cut the wood into digestible sizes for the stove, being the one to truck the wood into heavy bushels. Quickly, the whole chore of keeping the house warm lost its meaning to him. After my father died, my mother, who took it as an added inconvenience and would only do it if the cold was serious outside, inherited the chore. Ellie was too little to do it and, like I said before, I just can't get it right. My older sister Giselle had already moved out of the house and started university. So after my father's death, the house went cold more often than not. Keeping the house warm no longer meant anything to us either.

This Christmas was a disaster. I hate Christmas too, really. It does nothing to lift you out of the annual descent that November sends us on. Its syrup gets into everything. There's the expectation to go out and buy, as obliged, the thought that counts. I didn't buy anything for anyone though. What thought could I have given that could be held in hand? A wreath of thorns? There is no Christ in Christmas anymore. I kept thinking of a wreath of thorns. Giselle brought over her boyfriend Ted for Christmas Eve. They came loaded with baggage and boxes and overtures of a potential wedding engagement, I suppose. We may never know. As soon as they walked in, I knew it was not going to be good; the way Giselle grabbed Ted's arm as she introduced him, in my mother's unhappy but polite greeting. So when Giselle left Ted alone with me in the living room to put her things in the kitchen with Mom, I knew exactly what to do. I walked out of the room. In the hallway, I passed Giselle, who met me with a look of wounded anger in her eyes. She rushed into the living room to sit with Ted until my Mum would come in to entertain.

At supper, it was Ted and Giselle carrying the weight of conversation, mostly with each other. Occasionally, my mother would remind Ellie to sit up and El would whine in protest, but mostly the rest of us quietly ignored the happy couple. When the main course was out of the way, Giselle brought out the apple pie she had baked as a favour for the meal. She began serving, with pieces of cooked apple oozing off the spatula back home to the plate. Mother tried to coach her, but neither could hide their agitation, neither would relent. Giselle raised her voice, telling Mum she had it under control while Mum ignored her, telling her she could show her how to do it. Mum then stood up and took hold of the spatula, trying to wrest it from Giselle's grip while Giselle pulled back.

"God damn it, Mom, will you just let me do it?"

"Can you do it without destroying it?"

As they shouted these things, I looked across the table at Ted, watching the waves of

fear on his face as he beheld the wild look in my mother's eyes. He even jumped, startled when Giselle shouted. I then began to feel a wave of nausea seize me, the room shifting and spinning. My sister let the spatula go, throwing her arms in the air. The pie no longer mattered. The clank of the spatula hitting the pan was what echoed in my head just before I passed out. That was my Christmas holiday.

It's awfully cold in this room right now. I pull the blanket covering the couch over my shoulders. I notice the basement window aglow with daylight, so I get up with the blanket still wrapped around me and take a look through it. The snow on the ground outside is fresh and white in the bright midday sun. The sky is blue. The sparse trees around my family's wooded lot are dark and young against that brightness. I think I'll go outside. I drop the blanket, go up the stairs, put on my jacket and my father's boots and am soon out in the full winter light. White, blue and black. The air is cold, but there is no breeze, so I can feel the softness of the sun. I walk into the woods and see some golden leaves clinging to a young sapling. White blue, black and gold. I notice then that my footprints are the only ones in the wood. The snow is flat and smooth, uninterrupted except for my own footprints. My footprints in my father's boots. I go into the trails that had been cut into the property by my great grandfather who originally owned this land. The trail is all covered in snow but not so deep that I can't get through. The trees have done their part in keeping the snow out, even in their compromised, leafless predicament. I can see where the trail is, even with the snow, from the space that my great granddad blazed through and I can move through easily. I've been on this trail hundreds of times, with my father and my siblings. I regret now that I didn't take Marie and the others along here, but somehow know it wouldn't have made much difference towards the outcome. They were as they were. Deeper into the woods, I can see evidence of deer that had passed through, their cleaved hoofprints crossing the trail, those lovely quotation marks. "I was here..." Some trees have strips of bark missing from them, where the deer had taken them as food through

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the sparse poverty of winter. Still later, in my reverie, I find myself in a part of the woods I don't recognize. I am sure I didn't turn onto any other trails that I know of. I am sure I am still on our property. How could any of my fathers, great, grand or otherwise cut onto someone else's land? Is this trail new? The answer is buried under snow. I have no idea how I had gotten there, but I can see the trail plainly. If there had been leaves in the trees, or fallen on the ground, maybe I would not have found it. The sparse wood and settled snow seems to illustrate it. I follow the trail a short way to find that it stops at the edge of a large snow covered pond. The trail is cut wide enough, just so that a view of its whole body could be seen. The pond's fringes are shallow with rushes, but there is a flat expanse on it large enough that you could tell it was deep and permanent. I stand watching this scene as a bull moose comes out of a thicket about 50 yards away to start crossing the frozen pond. It is massive, with a robust rack of antlers on its head. It must be 7 feet tall at the shoulder. I had seen moose often in the area but had never seen one so large and so healthy. It walks out onto the frozen pond, not even looking around or even concerned that it is out in the open. It probably comes here a lot, probably to drink and feed on the marsh plants. It's probably very familiar with this place, walking through it in an almost proprietary way. As it moves on, I think of following it to watch where it goes. I then think against it, as I would be exposed on the pond and don't know how it would react if it sees me. I am safe here, watching unseen on the shore. When it disappears back onto the wood, I think to myself how I want to commemorate this place. My father had once mentioned how he wanted a park bench along the water somewhere and I thought he might have meant the lake by the house. Perhaps he meant here. There is enough bush cleared for a bench for sure, with its unobstructed view. I turn around. I know where I am, even though I'd never been here before. I can't get lost. I can follow my footprints, my father's boot prints back to the house. On my way back, I will find how this trail connects and make that connection. I start to head back.

The End

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Kees Kapteyn bio: Kees Kapteyn has been published in such magazines as In My Bed, blue skies, ditch, Novella, Corvid Revue and Revolution 21 as well as several CAA Niagara poetry anthologies such as The Saving Bannister, Woven Words and Symbols, in which he received an honourable mention. He has also received an honourable mention in the 2008 Ten Stories High contest for the CAA Niagara short story anthology. He was raised in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, and now lives in Ottawa, Ontario.