

PART ONE

Three years from now



CHAPTER

I

Fred Forester was sitting on a public toilet four thousand miles from home when the lights first went out. No warning, no announcement, not so much as a cautionary flicker from the fluorescent lights lining the ceiling. Everything just went black. Ink black.

The seat had been lower than he expected and, although he convinced himself otherwise, still warm when he sat down. Under normal circumstances, he would have whiled away the time tracing cracks in the floor with his toe or staring at the wall, wondering if Ivan really did love Cynthia forever. But a high gap between the stall's metal partition and the floor drew his attention to his fellow restroom mates. Convention dictated that he not look too closely, but the remarkable nature of their footwear aroused a voyeuristic curiosity that he couldn't suppress. To his left sat two enormous, thick-soled boots laced up like ice skates and spattered with lumps of melting ice. To his right stood legs in running shoes encased in thick socks and trailing sodden laces onto the floor. A tiny pair of rubber boots swung down in between, kicking the bowl.

Now thrown into darkness, he flinched as the owners of the feet on either side began to shout.

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“Christ almighty, not again!”
“Dad!”
“Johnny, don’t move.”
“Where’s the goddamn handle?”
“Ouch, John, you’re standing on my foot.”
“Darnit!”
“Hold my hand, buddy.”
“Dad!”

Fred sat silent, unwillingly squeezed inside the conversations, yet at the same time outside of them. He straightened his back and took a deep breath, smelling a noseful of foreign disinfectant that settled menthol onto his tongue. He stood up and began to feel, feel for the waistband of his jeans, feel for the cold steel of his zipper, feel for the door handle. Dead space met his fingers as he passed through the doorway, shuffling forward with outstretched arms, weight shifting from foot to foot. Enamel banged painfully into his hip and he stopped to explore the sink, running his fingertips into the bowl, retracting from the dampness of the drain, and lingering over the slimy mouth of the soap dispenser.

Then, with dark-sharpened senses, he grew busy: discovering the inside of the faucet, listening to the quiver of a little boy’s voice, and smelling the rotten fruitiness of freshly applied aftershave. So busy that he was unprepared when the ceiling lights flicked back on.

A boyish face blinked back at him from the mirror, its skin blanched by jet lag, the chin still raw from its first shave. He flinched, balking at his bloodshot eyes, then prodded the bags hanging beneath them, checking if they were as big as they looked. Beside him stood a man, blinking as well. Fred could not help but gawp at the adjacent figure, huge and bear-like and encased in a massive winter parka. Wet beads clung to the

top of his eyebrows and drips of sweat ran down his cheeks before trickling through the fur of his collar, leaving dark blots across the front of his coat.

“Idiots,” said the man.

“Pardon?” replied Fred.

“The Hydro.”

“Who?”

“He means the power company.” A third face had appeared in the mirror. Tired eyes matched a tired mouth.

“Second time this month,” growled the bear man.

“It’s only temporary,” replied the tired man. “They’ll sort it out.”

“Bloody better,” said Bear. “Anyways, I’m out of here.”

The tired man smiled, then turned his attention to a small boy who was stretching up to reach into the sink. Reminded of his thirst, Fred turned on the tap, rinsed his hands, and leaned forward, cupping a mouthful of water in his palm.

“Ugh!” he said, spitting into the sink.

“You okay?” asked the tired man.

“Yes, thanks. The water was a bit of shock. It tastes as if it comes from a farm or something.”

Fred stopped. He had spoken his first sentence. His first conversation with a citizen of his new country was happening in a washroom, and he had been rude already. “Sorry, that’s not what I meant. It just tastes different.”

The man laughed. “You’re not from round here, are you?”

“How do you know?”

The man laughed again. “The accent’s a giveaway. Where are you from?”

“England. I just got here. Thirty seconds ago.”

“Awesome.”

“I come fr — ”

But the sentence was never finished. Their conversation

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came to an abrupt end as the little boy's cuffs dipped perilously close to the taps, distracting the tired man.

Fred gazed back at his reflection, silently inserting the stopper into the story of his old life, which he had hoped to uncork. He washed his hands, noticing the tap was threaded the opposite way, jogging his memory about the teasing he had received back home. "The water goes round the other way over there," his mates had decreed. But it was not so easy chasing a swirl of water with a tired pair of eyes, so he turned his attention to the soap dispenser. Its workings were obscure, but a little experimentation roused some invisible mechanism and he felt warm satisfaction when a huge ball of foam ballooned onto his palm as if controlled by some mischievous imp hidden in the plumbing. Drying his hands was less successful, and he spent a humiliating few seconds pressing plastic handles, trying to drag paper from the reluctant clutches of the holder. Several attempts later, he abandoned the array of levers and resorted to drying his hands on shreds of paper. While dabbing and rubbing, he turned back to the tired man, who was ripping out paper towels with an expert flick of his wrist.

"Do the lights often go out here?" Fred asked.

"Now and then. It's just a glitch in the system. Anyways, I must go and find Johnny's mom. She'll be crawling up the walls if we're not back soon. See you and, yeah, welcome to Canada."

"Oh ..." said Fred. "Thanks."

Left alone in the room, Fred glanced at his watch and sighed. Nine in the evening meant the middle of the night in his time – in real time. Everyone at home in London would be asleep by now, their bedside clocks ticking loudly, marking the seconds with a rhythm that he was no longer part of. With the spin of the earth, he had fallen behind. His old life would always be ahead of him, his friends packing up

the parcel of their day just as he was opening his. He would never catch up.

He picked up his rucksack and left the room, heading towards the pack of luggage hunters swarming round the conveyor belt. Celebratory hand signals from the tallest person in the throng reassured him that his parents were near.

“Fred, we’ve got them,” came a shout from his father across the arrivals hall.

As he walked towards them, he looked up. A large sign swung on invisible threads, high up on the ceiling. WELCOME TO WINNIPEG.

He wanted to go home.

CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later, a bell was ringing. Flashing lights signalled the approach of the train, and the barrier lowered to its horizontal, keep-out position. Tutting to herself, Poppy Forester shifted the car into park and leaned back in her seat. She rubbed her eyes, blocking out the sunshine that blazed through her window, and tried to focus on the listless lineup of morning traffic ahead. The cars and trucks were steaming. December roads had layered them with grimy ice, and only fragments of people could be glimpsed through the portholes rubbed into the windows. “Clean me,” begged the window of a nearby Volkswagen, its glass smeared with fingerprints. She switched off her engine, took off her gloves, and sat back in her seat, ready to be bored.

To kill time she studied the occupants of the surrounding vehicles. Each contained a private world, and she could inspect her fellow drivers without being inspected herself. The usual range of characters was on display: the elderly gent unfurling

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the lid of his coffee cup with his teeth; the woman dabbing mascara on her eyelashes; and the young boy squashing his face against a window, his mouth opening up an eel-like hole, flattening and bulging with every turn of his head.

During her second scan, she spotted a man sitting beside a yellow dog. He was frowning, pressing his map over the steering wheel, moulding contours into a flat city. Shoving a wet nose off his lap, he turned to face her and opened his window, indicating that she should do the same with a peculiar double shake of his fingers. She wound down her window, just a couple of inches, reluctant to let in the cold air or burst her bubble of privacy.

“Hey, ma’am,” he said. “Do you know the way to Alberto’s Market? Geez, I’ve never seen a place with so many train tracks.” The last words were hard to catch. The dog had jumped onto his lap, flicking a tail into the man’s mouth, giving the fleeting impression that it was in control of the vehicle.

“I’m sorry. I have no idea where that is,” she called back.

“All right, see you.”

His window was almost up when a couple of extra words squeezed through the crack. “Nice hair.”

Nice hair. She felt a girlish glow inside. Forty-two years old, mother of a fifteen-year-old boy, and a stranger in a truck said she had nice hair. Pulling down the visor, she flipped up the tiny mirror inside. She had forgotten to brush it that morning but yes, it looked all right, thick as a squirrel’s tail and even holding its natural colour. Maybe slightly thin around the parting, but only she noticed that.

Not daring to look directly at the yellow dog man, Poppy felt flattered that he was watching her as she gazed down the track looking for the train. A double flash of light on metal signalled its arrival, emerging from behind a low, cardboard-coloured building flanking the railway. It crept forward, dragging a mile

of steel containers behind it. Giant labels plastered the walls and she caught herself mouthing the words as CHINA SHIPPING followed CHINA SHIPPING, again and again and again.

She stretched her neck to catch sight of the end of the train. But it had no end. It stretched away along the track, through the edge of the city, disappearing into the blue haze of the prairie.

She pulled out her notebook, small and black with a trailing ribbon – her usual remedy against the tedium of the crossing wait. Feeling the pencil for sharpness, she began to sketch. The outline of the train took shape, box after box piling onto the page, pressed beneath the weight of an immense blue sky. She slowed the pace to write the words, curling the Cs of China into perfect semi-circles and bending the Ss into a snake-twisted typeface. Finally she traced a line of cars crammed together and driven by dogs: a poodle in the first, a clever Labrador in the second, and, in the third, a hapless dachshund, hardly able to reach the wheel. Pausing, she stared down the track, hoping to catch sight of that last container, always rushing to keep up, always late. It was then that she noticed a flicker of red on the second to last one. It jarred, breaking the monotony of the line, disturbing the sequence of brown ochres and hammer greys trundling across the horizon. She stared. A mere spot in the distance at first, it sharpened to a human form as it moved closer, its shoulders tucked tight against steel corners. Seconds passed – the figure grew bigger, the image sharpened. She adjusted her glasses on her nose and stared.

It was a man. A man in red clung to the train. Red coat, red hood, and a black hat. His boots were half hidden but rigid knees stuck out sideways, jolting with the rhythm. Not struck so much by the oddness of the scene but more by the fortitude of the unorthodox traveller, Poppy could think of nothing but numb fingertips and frozen toes, both of which hardly squared with the demeanour of the figure passing her eyes.

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With his head thrown back, he laughed, he admired the sky, he whooped in delight. Then he jumped. In front of her eyes he actually jumped, gyrating round and up like a discarded sycamore seed. The train rolled on, uncaring, as she leaned forward to catch sight of him. He re-emerged suddenly, pulling himself out of a bush and brushing snow off his jacket with unbroken arms. Then he strode away in the direction of what looked like, from her perspective anyway, nothing.

The train had passed. Only her breathing disturbed the calm of her rapidly cooling car. She opened her purse and, with half an eye on the cars revving up their impatience, rummaged through her pencils. Vermillion red. Perfect. She drew quickly and a moment later a band of colour streaked off the back of the train and skidded into the margin.

The bell rang – same tone, new message. The barrier rose, drawing the traffic into a slow sequence of stop and start. Then the work of getting going began in earnest, and clouds of exhaust, made viscous by cold, popped into the air. She drove across the once dangerous, but now domesticated track, and the railway disappeared from sight.

Strip malls soon replaced the wild swathes of land surrounding the track, each gigantic box store pleading its individuality with neon enticements, their tubes daringly suffused with colour. A cubic church loomed ahead, its shape revealing no clue to its purpose. She saw no spire, no windows stained with colour, only billboard messages calling out to the faithful. “Mud thrown is ground lost” remained in her thoughts as she drove across the river. It looked magical at that moment. Ice-bound oxbows carved a wide and sinuous white road through the centre of the city. She glimpsed clusters of skaters down on the ice, some skimming at high speed, others staggering on stiff legs.

The city felt bigger today, and calmer. The multitude of leafless elms suggested a transparency that she had failed to notice when they had arrived two weeks earlier. Hundreds of trees framed her view up the long road ahead. She loved those trees. She loved their deliciously splayed canopies arching across every street, wooden fingertips touching in the middle. She had never lived in a city with so many trees and could only imagine the green blanket that would be thrown down following the spring thaw. And she had never lived in a city that steamed so. Steaming cars, steaming manholes, steaming houses.

She drove the long way home, weaving through a laborious sequence of stop signs, slowing to admire a shoulder of snow cantilevered from the edge of a roof. She even stopped to buy a loaf of bread she did not need. But she could not postpone the moment indefinitely, that part of the day she dreaded, and she could not help crossing her fingers on the steering wheel as she approached the gas station, chanting in her thoughts. *Three dollars, three dollars, three dollars ...*

A new ritual had marked their arrival in the city and life had changed, not just for her small family, but for everyone. Gas prices were rising. Not just a bit, a few cents here, a quarter there, but in great, unforgiving leaps that scared the life out of her and caused a brick of tension to form right in the centre of her shoulders. Every single day she passed the gas station and checked the length of the lineup. Every single day she looked up at the prices high on the steel pole and every single day she jotted a larger number down in her notebook. No amount of hoping could restrain the black numbers that hovered above the street. She could see them now.

Three and a half dollars for a litre of gas.

Fifteen minutes later, Poppy pulled into her driveway. She removed her glasses and pushed their spidery and unwilling

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arms into their case. It snapped shut. A hunt to find keys followed, then she entered the house, slinging her coat on the nearest hook.

“Charlie, are you back?” she called.

A voice whistling through crumbs replied. Her husband was eating as he walked around the kitchen; the strong smell of oranges hung in the air.

Charlie Forester enjoyed grazing, often rummaging through the fridge and hunting down ingredients for new combinations with a passion. Fish fingers dipped in peanut butter were his latest experiment, and memories of chocolate-sprinkled salmon were fresh in Poppy’s mind. He was wearing his customary “after work” clothes as he came towards her — the much-loved fleece, washed almost to death, and baggy trousers held up by a pair of braces, salvaged from a student jumble sale and still comical after twenty years. The fact that they fit him at all was a testament to his enduring fitness. He moved through space in a different way when clothed in this loose-fitting outfit. The slippered shuffle was slower than his natural rate of movement, and the failure to notice food particles seeding the front of his fleece during grazing sessions would have rendered him unrecognizable to his work colleagues should they have visited the house unexpectedly. This split of work and home personae extended to his hair, pressed down with an invisible slick of something in the mornings then revved up again in the evenings, giving the impression of a man who had just escaped the fingers of a ruthless head masseur.

“Are you all right, Poppy? You look tired.” The smell of oranges grew stronger.

“I’m all right but I need to talk to you. Let’s go to my study. Is Fred home?”

“Pretending to do his homework,” he said, following her upstairs.

The study was her sanctuary, the burrow that held her things. She adored it here. Sketches of clouds covered an entire wall. Dotting the drawings were tiny pins, tucking in corners and stretching out creases. The prairie sky had become her obsession, its breathtaking scale and swatches of colour defying her attempts to capture it as she drew it again and again, without coming close. Here is where she would continue her business — if the commissions came in. “Illustrator to the Gentry,” Charlie had called her as he flicked through her drawings, published in Lady Faulkner’s *Flora and Fauna of Whistable Bay* two days before they left London. Now she must start again. Dragging her hard-earned reputation four thousand miles, she could only hope it would stand up to scrutiny beneath the intense Winnipeg light. But the signs were good. “Can you draw snow?” she’d already been asked. “And hummingbirds?”

She pushed a pile of papers off the sofa onto the floor. They sat down. For some reason she did not tell Charlie about the man jumping off the train.

But she told him about the new price of gas.

CHAPTER

3

Fred heard voices. As usual in brand-new houses, the walls were as thin as stretched canvas, but it was the subtlety rather than the volume that made him take notice. He was trying to do his homework, but the murmuring from the next room kept butting into his thoughts. Why were they whispering? It was not like them. His was a family that talked to each other. He put down his pencil and marked his place with a six-inch ruler, pleased to have found a distraction from the quadratic equations lining the page. He stood up, banging his knees on

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the underside of the desk, and left the room. He walked along the landing to the study and, squeezing himself between his father and the arm of the sofa, forced his feet beneath the coffee table. His father hugged him; he had taken to doing that a lot lately.

“So what’s happening in the big, bad world?” Fred said, thumping Charlie’s knee.

His parents looked at each other. He could see his mother twisting her wedding ring around her finger.

“Well ...” His father hesitated. He often did that, starting a sentence before drifting into another thought. Fred liked to count the intervening seconds in his head – seventeen was the record. Politeness usually held him in a fixed position, but sometimes he got the chance to start a bona fide alternative activity, chewing on a straw or snapping back the end of his pen, both great void fillers.

“Looks like you’ll be walking to school soon, Fred. Petrol’s going up again.”

His father made a half-smile, his lips stretching outwards before dropping back down again before the gesture was fully formed. Fred had read about those in a book once. It meant someone was covering something up, a bit like nose touching when lying but not quite so bad. When he tried it in the mirror he just looked stupid, not at all deceitful or conspiratorial. Then it sank in.

“Walk!?”

Forget half smiling. This was something serious. “Dad, you do realize it’s almost two miles.”

The wedding ring kept turning.

“I know, but petrol’s gone over three dollars a litre. We have to cut down. You understand that, don’t you, Fred?”

He thought for a moment. No one walked to school in this city. No one even walked to the store. Too cold, wasn’t it? Not

even Simon Stokes from his class, who lived three minutes from the school, walked.

Charlie shrugged. "I'm sorry, Fred, but we can't afford it at the moment. And the exercise will do you good."

"Oh, yes. At minus forty, that's really going to be fun."

Fred had been practising sarcasm. His father hated it — a cheapskate's way out of a decent answer, he'd said, but Fred liked to test it out. Even his teacher had changed his tone a little when he had tried it out at school.

"I know it's tough, but you just need to layer up," Charlie said. "You'll be all right."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't I get a lift with someone from your office? Mr. O'Neill lives close by, doesn't he?"

"He does. It's just that we're all going on this trip, all five of us. Don't you remember? The big cheese in London wants the whole team there to discuss a new strategy."

Fred sighed. Since moving to Canada, the climate had regulated their lives. Minus forty had sounded exciting from the warmth of his London living room. He had been thrilled at the thought of ice moustaches and shoes made of tennis racquets, and even though he was fifteen, he could imagine the local kids might need help with the odd snowman or two. He didn't realize back then that extreme cold was dangerous; how it could trick you, welding glasses to faces and thickening engine oil to a standstill. Who back home would believe it was colder in his garden than in his kitchen freezer? And as it turned out, there were no little kids on his street. Home was now a house in a half-built subdivision. He was not really sure what that meant, but he did know that something had been divided up and he was living in it.

Not one of his mates back home could place the city that

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was now the centre of his world. He had checked on the internet when his father had got the job that dragged them across an ocean as chief designer at Lombard Instruments.

Where is Winnipeg?

Winnipeg is located smack dab in the middle of Canada.

Is Winnipeg the coldest city on earth?

The lowest recorded temperature is minus forty-five degrees Celsius.

Is Winnipeg the friendliest place on earth?

A city so inviting that they stamp the word "friendly" on their licence plates.

So it was cold and friendly and in the middle of Canada, but the internet had not told him that gas prices would start rising as soon as he got there. It had not told him that the heart of his new city was kept pumping by gas, controlled by people in distant places who, if asked, would be unable to locate this city on a map. And it had not told him that foresight had yet to replace hindsight as the preferred mode of operation in the overheated corridors of City Hall. Within a short space of time he was watching a change and he was worried, worried that things were about to get worse.

What could be worse than walking to school?

CHAPTER

4

Poppy loved the smell of ironing; nothing could beat the comfort of that gently baked aroma. She hummed a tune as the iron swivelled back and forth across the arm of an outstretched shirt. Then a competing tune came into her head, and she reached across the ironing board to turn up the radio as the

news started. Pressing down hard on an awkward armpit, she was concentrating on a particularly stubborn crease when a change in pitch interrupted the monotony of the reporter's voice. She stopped to listen.

"Gas prices across Canada look set to break the four dollars per litre mark in the next few days ..."

Steam hissed up from underneath the iron. She released a hot sleeve and re-arranged the shirt, stretching its back across the end of the board, and tuned her ears back to the news.

"...been seen in many countries after the cost of crude oil on global markets rose to its highest level on record. Gulf Coast crude rose to three hundred dollars per barrel yesterday, up more than five dollars on the day and ten dollars more than last month's all-time record of two hundred and ninety dollars."

A hint of smoke dragged her attention back to the board, and she flapped a hand across the smarting shirt before inspecting a hot triangle of glazed threads. The tone of the radio voice went up a notch, pulling her attention back.

"...been compounded as unforeseen and serious start-up difficulties are coming to light at the new refinery at St. François. And technical problems continue to plague the main regional refinery at North Walton. The provincial government is holding an emergency meeting tomorrow to discuss the situation, and they are confident that the crisis will soon be under control. However, sources close to the premier have revealed that the possibility of rationing has not been ruled out...."

A shout from another room cut into the stream of words.

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“Poppy, dinner’s ready.”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

She picked up the shirt, sniffed its shoulders, and laid it on the back of a chair. Then she bent over behind the ironing board and pulled out the plug.

CHAPTER

5

The temperature dropped fifteen degrees during the night. The cold crawled over Fred’s skin as he left the house and jogged down the road, half-digested breakfast sluicing the insides of his stomach. Even a bowl of hot porridge had not tempered his irritable mood, and his thoughts kept returning to the conversation at supper the evening before. His mother had rushed to the table with mouthfuls of calamitous warnings, gas prices, share prices, prices, prices, prices. A fresh feeling of unease lingered at the back of his mind when he woke up that morning.

The street was empty. “Just needs a bit of finishing off,” the realtor had reassured them when they had bought the house long distance. His father had retained absolute faith in the man’s words, cajoling enthusiasm back into his dubious family, but even Charlie’s smile had drooped a little as they turned into their new neighbourhood on that first day in the country.

Some houses were mere skeletons, their wooden bones braced against the wind that teased bolts from young holes. Others were more complete, with finished walls and weather-proof roofs, yet they were forced into anonymity with thick coverings of plywood revealing no clue to their interiors. Red striped paper wrapped the final category of house, and he

could almost sense a shiver in their frames as they awaited their final skin. The word *pioneer* had taken on fresh meaning as they crossed the threshold and stared at the collection of half-finished houses through the kitchen window.

The problem was that, during his first few days in the neighbourhood, he had been unable to suppress the urge to compare – with home, that is. At first he had marvelled at the length and straightness of the roads, scrunching up his eyes in an attempt to see the end where street melted into sky. But soon the impact of the city grid on his movements began to annoy him. He walked west to east or north to south, itching for the pleasures of a diagonal or a teasing bend leading who knows where. What he would not give for a spontaneous shortcut, a hole in the fence inviting a scrambled diversion or a gap in the railings, pulled apart by ill-gotten muscle.

The sky disturbed him, too. Here, the sky was everywhere. It stretched above him, behind him, in front of him, all of the time. The clouds were not like the ones he knew. French loaves were the most common: thousands of them, lining up, moving silently into the distance. He saw them now as he squinted skyward, dotted with what looked like black spiders.

He had never noticed the sky back home in London. The buildings crowded together there, blocking out views and throwing black shadows over the streets. In fact, back home, he had hardly ever looked up at all, his attention always focused at ground level as he elbowed his way through the congested streets, bumping shoulders with strangers, shimmying between strollers and weaving his way through straggly bus queues that spread across the pavements, thwarting all attempts to board the bus. Geography field trips were the only times he ever looked properly up, managing to distinguish stratus from nimbus but never realizing that skies were special to the place they sat above. The grey sky of home, patterned with mackerel

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and cauliflowers, had been replaced by something much bigger and bluer, and full of loaves.

Something else unsettled him: everything in his neighbourhood was new. Even old things seemed new. Every house was neat and perfectly looked after. And no one let things go. His street in London had been full of people who let things go. Overgrown hedges forced passersby into the road; moss lined the dark sides of garden walls and the end brick was always, always missing. Paint peeled, too. No one ever got around to all that sanding down and smoothing on layers of primer and undercoat, so the window frames split and corners buckled, letting in shots of damp air that sent even the hardest members of his family scurrying to the radiator, stroking hot metal like it was the perfect pet. But there were no more draughts in his life now; his home was new and sealed like a tin of sardines.

A couple of other houses in his new neighbourhood were already occupied, but he never saw anyone. He never caught a glimpse of who pulled those curtains every night, who dug neat paths in the snow, or who collected letters from those mailboxes. Yet the precision-packed dustbins appearing mysteriously once a week told him a story of lives happening – juice being drunk, coffee filtered, bananas peeled, and letters written. But he never witnessed any of it, not even a glimpse out of the corner of his eye. No litter blew around the gardens, no windscreens smashed, and no broken fridges dumped in the street. No unfathomable shouts in the middle of the night. The constant slam of doors was just a distant memory from his London street.

Except for the old lady, that is. “Grandma Knuckles,” he called her in his head. She lived on the corner of his block, always sitting at the window, always resting her chin on her knuckles, eyes always glazed. Sometimes she wore a red blouse,

sometimes a blue, and often a hat, but her position never changed. Retrieving forgotten sandwiches was the cause of their single encounter. He had stopped on his way to school and turned to find her eyes on him. A clumsy exchange followed: a smile from him, a step back from her, and the knit-covered head disappeared from view.

Approaching his school neighbourhood, Fred noticed the houses jogging up and down in his sightline. Normally oblivious to architecture, he suddenly became aware of something different about the buildings lining the street – not only the swirls of stucco decorating the walls, but the perplexing absence of a front door. He stood still, looking from house to house, searching for familiar textures and shapes, but as he struggled to locate himself in an alien world he imagined he could hear nothing but threats coming from the black mouths of the double garages that straddled the face of every home.

Spots of orange in the distance caught his eye, and he knew he was nearing the school. Children from the safety patrol, steeped in the pleasure of rarely held responsibility, were organizing the traffic with an air of earnest determination. Walking closer, he watched a young girl finish her routine with a twirl and a flourish of precision choreography.

“Hey.” She smiled at him, her face flushed pink.

“Hello.”

He walked on, backwards, bumping his shoulder into a SIDEWALK ENDS sign, then stood to watch as renegade newbies gathered behind the girl. Discovering the joys of mock sword fighting, they flashed and flicked with their pointed flags, distracting passing drivers. He felt an urge to join in, flip the flag over in a circle, even throw it across the road like a javelin. But he didn't. He merely gazed at a lone boy at the back, chipping at the edge of a snowbank with his toe.

The city felt smaller today. Overnight snow had changed the

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feel of it, houses an inch taller, the footpath an inch narrower, and every tree was marooned in mounds of snow pressed aside by the convoys of snowploughs that surged through the streets. Snow in November. How could that possibly be? He'd only had a white Christmas once in his life. A sheen of snow stretched across the garden like a cheap sheet. Gone by lunchtime.

There were fewer cars in the parking lot when he arrived at school. Normally chock-a-block with bored parents, their motors turning over, today it was half full. Fred went inside.

Being the new boy at school is always difficult, especially when you have crossed an ocean to get there. The teachers insist on creating a great hullabaloo, forcing you to stand at the front, reciting your name and describing your hobbies; if you had any, that is. If you didn't, you had to quickly cobble together an enthralling and worthy life from scraps of passive activity. Channel surfing, internet browsing, and twenty-four-hour gaming could be morphed into digital research or development of hand-eye coordination by the more alert fresher. After this ordeal would come placement next to a student whom the teacher had decided might like you. That is how he had met Johnno back home. That teacher had been right. Johnno liked him and he liked Johnno. "Peas in a pod," his grandmother had said. But then she never was one for original turns of phrase.

Kyle had been chatty on that first day, almost too chatty, happily explaining the rules of hockey. But soon the conversation drifted into "playoffs" and "pucks" and he lost the thread. What a horrible feeling to realize he had no idea what his new companion was talking about. He was used to hockey being played on frosty grass on winter mornings with everyone hurtling up and down the field, boots growing heavier with cakes of mud. He had never worn a pair of ice skates in his life. How was it possible to keep your balance and hit something with

a stick at the same time? It sounded vicious, too. “Best part,” Kyle said, describing the fights, how he shoved Big Larry into the side and got away with it, and how the cut on Joshua Cox’s ear would not stop bleeding.

To add to the confusion of that first day, someone called a counsellor arrived. Expecting a man with a pipe and white hair, like the one he had seen at the city hall near his father’s office in London, it was a surprise when a young man confronted him. His counsellor smiled a lot and had the air of an older brother, but he kept using strange words not normally heard coming from the mouths of male siblings. He liked his “counsellor” a lot but could not imagine ever fancying a “discussion” or “needing support.”

The Queen had unnerved him, too. While waiting in the school office later on that first day, he was startled by a large portrait of Elizabeth II looking down at him. Everything about her seemed familiar: the regal smile, the trademark perm styled to perfection, the string of pearls. But what was she doing in Winnipeg? For a second he thought his teacher had put her there especially for him, a personal welcome from Her Majesty. Then he remembered: Queen of Britain, Queen of Canada, the long-distance monarch.

His growing sense of disorientation had peaked with an unexpected ritual, which began without warning. Just as his counsellor had started deciphering the forest of acronyms littering his timetable, the national anthem burst out of the school loudspeaker, stopping the world in mid sentence while a loud and distorted *Oh, Canada* shot forth. Everyone in the room froze, some eyeing their abandoned work longingly while others mouthed the overfamiliar stanzas without realizing they were doing it. The power of the song had intrigued him, but he did not know the words and could not recognize the tune.

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SEAL
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RAINCOAT

Today he was late, having underestimated the time it takes to walk two miles. Frozen toes made walking awkward, and after sitting down beside Kyle, he started work on his hamstrings, rubbing and squeezing the life back into them.

"It's bloody freezing out there. I had to walk," he said.

"My dad's been threatening, but he's forgotten about it," replied Kyle.

"Don't remind him. I think I'm going to lose a toe or something." He wrenched off his boot and started massaging his feet. "Do you believe in all that stuff?"

"What stuff?"

"You know, all that global warming stuff, the funny weather and weird gas prices and all that."

"Well, yeah. Don't you?"

"Yes."

They both laughed.

"I heard they had monster hailstones down in Minneapolis last week," Kyle said.

"They did? What are you supposed to do?"

"Run!"

They laughed again, but not so loud.

CHAPTER 6

Poppy sat in the gas station lineup. She could not find the end at first, and only by circling around could she secure a spot. Subzero boredom had fixed the drivers into set positions, and she noticed a pattern of resigned body language repeated down the line: shoulders pulled up, elbows drawn in, alert pairs of eyes watching for signs of movement. Most cars had only one driver. They were mostly men, sitting still, waiting.