

THE GUARDIANS

Andrew Pyper



DOUBLEDAY CANADA

ALSO BY ANDREW PYPER

Kiss Me {Stories}

Lost Girls

The Trade Mission

The Wildfire Season

The Killing Circle

ANDREW PYPER
THE GUARDIANS
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DOUBLEDAY CANADA

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Pyper, Andrew, 1968-
The guardians / Andrew Pyper.

eISBN: 978-0-385-66977-1

I. Title.

PS8581.Y64G83 2011 C813'.54 C2010-905129-7

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Published in Canada by Doubleday Canada,
a division of Random House of Canada Limited

Visit Random House of Canada Limited's website: www.randomhouse.ca

v3.1

For my Guardians then—

Jeff, Larry, Mike, Robin, Alan

And for my Guardians now—

Heidi, Maude and Ford

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Acknowledgements

We watched them come.

A lone police cruiser at first. The officer's shirt straining against the bulge around his waist. A look of practised boredom on his face, a pantomime of seen-it-all masculinity performed without an audience. We were the only ones who saw him walk, pigeon-toed, into the house. The only ones who knew he wouldn't be bored for long.

When he came out he wasn't wearing his cap anymore. His thin hair, grey but darkened with sweat, was a greasy sculpture of indecision, pointing in several directions at once. (Later, we wondered about the cap. Had it fallen off in the first jolt of shock? Had he removed it himself in a reflex of some sort? A show of respect?)

He tumbled into the car and radioed in. We tried to read his lips, but couldn't really see his face through the willow boughs, swaying reflections over the windshield. Was there a numbered code for this? Or was he forced to describe what he'd seen? Did he recognize, even in the shadows that must have left him blind after entering from the bright outside, who they were? However he put it, it would have been hard for anyone to believe. We weren't wholly convinced ourselves. And we knew it was true.

Soon, two more cruisers pulled up. An ambulance. A fire truck, though there was no fire. Some of the men went inside, but most did not. A scene of grimly loitering uniforms, sipping coffee from the Styrofoam cups they brought with them. The last of history's union-protected on-the-job smokers flicking their butts into the street in undeclared competition.

There was nothing for most of them to do, but they stayed anyway. An only partly hidden excitement in the way they scuffed their shoes over the cracked sidewalk and rested their hands on their belts, knuckling the handles of holstered guns. It was a small town. You didn't get this sort of thing too often. You didn't get it ever.

We stood together, watching. Unseen behind the curtains in the front room of the McAuliffe house across the way. Our noses grazing the diaphanous material that smelled of recently burned bacon and, deeper still, a succession of dinners scooped out of the deep fryer. When the paramedics and bearded man in a suit who must have been the coroner finally emerged from the house with the black bags laid out on gurneys—one, and then the smaller other—we held our breaths. A gulp of french fry, onion ring and chicken finger that, to this day, is the taste of loss.

We remember all this, though still not everything.

And some of the things we remember may not have happened at all.

THE CALL COMES in the middle of the night, as the worst sort do.

The phone so close I can read the numbers on its green-glowing face, see the swirl of my fingerprint I'd left on its message window. A simple matter of reaching and grabbing. Yet I lie still. It is my motor-facility impairment (as one of my fussily unhelpful physicians calls it) that pins me for eighteen rings before I manage to hook the receiver onto my chest.

"I don't even know what time it is. But it's *late*, isn't it?" A familiar voice, faintly slurred, helium-pitched between laughter and sobs. Randy Toller. A friend since high school—a time that even Randy, on the phone, calls "a million years ago." And though it was only twenty-four years, his estimate feels more accurate.

As Randy apologizes for waking me, and blathers on about how strange he feels "doing this," I am trying to think of an understanding but firm way of saying no when he finally gets around to asking for money. He has done it before, following the unfairly lost auditions, the furniture-stealing girlfriends, the vodka-smoothed rough patches of his past tough-luck decade. But in the end Randy surprises me when he takes a rattling, effortful breath and says "Ben's dead, Trev."

Trev?

This is my first, not-quite-awake thought. Nobody's called me that since high school *including* Randy.

"How?"

"A rope," Randy says.

"Rope?"

"Hanging. I mean, he hung himself. In his mom's house."

"He never went outside. Where else could he have done it?"

"I'm saying he did it in his *room*. Up in the attic where he'd sit by the window, you know, watching."

"Did his mom find him?"

"It was a kid walking by on the street. Looked up to see if that weird McAuliffe guy was looking out the window as usual, and saw him swinging there."

I'm quiet for a while after this. We both are. But there is our breath being traded back and forth down the line. Reminders that we aren't alone in recalling the details of Ben's room, the place we'd spent a quarter of our youth wasting our time in. Of how it would have looked with the grown-up Ben in it, attached to the oak beam that ran the length of the ceiling.

"Maybe it's for the best," Randy says finally.

"Take that back."

"I didn't—it's just—"

"Take that stupid bullshit *back*."

"Fine. Sorry."

Randy has led the kind of life that has made him used to apologizing for saying the wrong thing, and the contrite tone he uses now is one I've heard after dozens of defaulted IOUs and nights spent sleeping on my sofa between stints in rented rooms. But then, in little more than a whisper, he says something else.

“You know it’s sort of true, Trev.”

He’s right. It is sort of true that with the news of Ben McAuliffe’s suicide there came among a hundred other reactions, a shameful twinge of relief.

Ben was a friend of mine. Of ours. A best friend, though I hadn’t seen him in years, and I spoke to him only slightly more often. It’s because he stayed behind, I suppose. In Grimshaw, our hometown, from which all of us but Ben had escaped the first chance we had. Or maybe it’s because he was sick. Mentally ill, as even he called himself, though sarcastically, as if his mind was the *last* thing wrong with him. This would be over the phone, on the rare occasion I called. (Each time I did his mother would answer, and when I told her it was me calling her voice would rise an octave in the false hope that a good chat with an old friend might lift the dark spell that had been cast on her son.) When we spoke, neither Ben nor I pretended we would ever see each other again. We might as well have been separated by an ocean, or an even greater barrier, as impossible to cross as the chasm between planets, as death. I had made a promise to never go back to Grimshaw, and Ben could never leave it. A pair of traps we had set for ourselves.

Despite this, we were still close. There was a love between us too. A sexless, stillborn love yet just as fierce as the other kinds. The common but largely undocumented love between men who forged their friendship in late childhood.

But this wasn’t the thing that bridged the long absence that lay between our adult lives. What connected Ben and me was a secret. A whole inbred family of secrets. Some of them so wilfully forgotten they were unknown even to ourselves.

Only after I’ve hung up do I notice that, for the entire time I was on the phone with Rand, my hands were still. I didn’t even have to concentrate on it, play the increasingly unwinnable game of Mind Over Muscles.

Don’t move.

It’s like hypnosis. And like hypnosis, it usually doesn’t work.

Everything’s okay. Just stay where you are. Relax. Be still.

Now, in the orange dust of city light that sneaks through the blinds, I watch as the tremor returns to my limbs. Delicate flutterings at first. Nervous and quick as a sparrow dunking its head in a puddle. An index finger that abruptly stiffens, points with alarm at the chair in the corner—and then collapses, asleep. A thumb standing in a Fonzie salute before turtling back inside a fist.

You know what I need? A week in Bermuda.

These were the sort of thoughts I had when the twitches showed up.

I need to eat more whole grains.

I need a drink.

The hand-jerks and finger-flicks were just the normal flaws, the software glitches the body has to work through when first booting up after a certain age. I had just turned *forty*, after all. There was a price to be paid—a small, concealable impediment to be endured for all the fun I’d had up until now. But it was nothing to worry about. It wasn’t a real problem of the kind suffered by the wheelchair souls you wish away from your line of sight in restaurants, your appetite spoiled.

But then, a few months ago, the acceptable irregularities of the body inched into something less acceptable. Something *wrong*.

I went to the doctor. Who sent me to another doctor. Who confirmed her diagnosis after conversation with a third doctor. And then, once the doctors had that straightened out, all of them said there was next to nothing they could do, wished me well and buggered off.

What I have, after all, is one of those inoperable, medically unsexy conditions. It has all the worst qualities of the non-fatal disease: chronic, progressive, cruelly erosive of one's "quality of life." It can go fast or slow. What's certain is that it will get worse. I could name it now but I'm not in the mood. I hate its falsely personal surnamed quality, the possessive aspect of the capital *P*. And I hate the way it doesn't kill you. Until it does.

I spoke to a therapist about it. Once.

She was nice—*seemed* nice, though this may have been only performance, an obligation included in her lawyer-like hourly fee—and was ready to see me "all the way through what's coming." But I couldn't go back. I just sat in her pleasant, fern-filled room and caught a whiff of the coconut exfoliant she'd used that morning to scrub at the liver spots on her arms and knew I would never return. She was the sort of woman in the sort of office giving off the sort of scent designed to provoke confessions. I could have trusted her. And trusting a stranger against the rules.

(There was something else I didn't like. I didn't like how, when she asked if I had entertained any suicidal thoughts since the diagnosis and I, after a blubbery moment, admitted that I had, she offered nothing more than a businesslike smile and a tidy check mark in her notepad.)

One useful suggestion came out of our meeting, nevertheless. For the purposes of recording my thoughts so that they might be figured out later, she recommended I keep a diary chronicling the progress of my disease. Not that she used that word. Instead, she referred to the unstoppable damage being done to me as an "experience," as if it were a trip to Paraguay or sex with twins. And it wasn't a journal of sickness I was to keep, but a "Life Diary," her affirmative nods meant to show that I wasn't dying. *Yet*. That was there too. Remember Trevor: You're not quite dead *yet*.

"Your Life Diary is more than a document of events," she explained. "It can, for some of my clients, turn out to be your best friend."

But I already have best friends. And they don't live in my present life so much as in the past. So that's what I've ended up writing down. A recollection of the winter everything changed for us. A pocket-sized journal containing horrors that surprised even me as I returned to them. And then, after the pen refused to stand still in my hand, it has become a story I typed into a Dictaphone. My voice. Sounding weaker than it does in my own ears, someone else's voice altogether.

I call it my "Memory Diary."

Randy offered to call Carl, but we both knew I would do it. Informing a friend that someone they've known all their life has died was more naturally a Trevor kind of task. Randy would

be the one to score dope for a bachelor party, or scratch his key along the side of a Porsche because he took it personally, and hard, that his own odds of ever owning one were fading fast. But I was definitely better suited to be the bearer of bad tidings.

I try Carl at the last number I have for him, but the cracked voice that answers tells me he hasn't lived there for a while. When I ask to have Carl call if he stops by, there is a pause or what might be silent acceptance before the line goes dead. Randy has a couple of earlier numbers, and I try those too, though Carl's former roommates don't seem to know where he is now either (and refuse to give me their own names when I ask).

"Not much more we can do," Randy says when I call him back. "The guy is *gone*, Trev."

There it is again: *Trev*. A name not addressed to me in over twenty years, and then I get it twice within the last half-hour.

I had an idea, as soon as Randy told me Ben had died, that the past was about to spend an unwelcome visit in my present. Going from Trevor to Trev is something I don't like, but a nostalgic name change is going to be the least of it. Because if I'm getting on a train for Grimshaw in the morning, it's all coming back.

Heather.

The coach.

The boy.

The house.

The last of these most of all because it alone is waiting for us. Ready to see us stand on the presumed safety of weed-cracked sidewalk as we had as schoolchildren, daring each other to see who could look longest through its windows without blinking or running away.

For twenty-four years this had been Ben's job. Now it would be ours.

There were four of us.

Ben, Carl, Randy and me. Grimshaw Guardians all. Hockey players on the high-school squad that travelled the county's gravel roads to do battle against the villainous Cougars of Milverton, cheating Rams of Listowel, cowardly Sugar Kings of Elmira. We were just sixteen years old the one and only season we played with the seniors, but we were decent enough—and the school small enough—to make the team. The only boys among just-turned men.

Randy:

A featherweight winger looping skilfully—if a little pointlessly—in front of the other team's net. It always seemed that he liked to skate more than score. Sometimes, Randy would forget that there were others playing *against* him. Kids who wished to see him fail, to crumple to his knees and never get up again. It was usually a look of puzzled disappointment, not pain, that I would read on his face when he limped to the bench following these punishments.

Why? his eyes would ask as he took his place at the end of the bench, rubbing the charley horse out of his thigh.

Why would someone do that? I was just having fun.

Carl:

Short, but solid as an elm stump. Hair he left long so that it waved, black as a pirate flag, as he skated. Carl was the Guardians' unpredictable pugilist, a rarely played fourth-liner who would skate up to a kid who had nothing to do with the play at hand—and, often, against whom no grudge was held—and commence a windmilling of fists into the poor fellow's face.

Who knew if Carl would have been the fighter he was without the dark eyes and drooping smile that conveyed unintended menace? How less inclined to serve up knuckle sandwiches—and, later, less susceptible to needle and pill—if his dad had been another kind of man, or who didn't leave and never return?

Sometime late in the third period of the first game of the Guardians' season there was a bench-clearing brawl. It was an away game against the Exeter Bobcats, a team whose only real talent was for medieval hand-to-hand combat. We knew things were about to get nasty when their coach started tapping the shoulders of players on his bench and pointing at us. Then, with a collective whoop, they stormed over the boards and set upon us, their fans sending a volley of scalding coffee cups over our heads.

I mention this because, in my experience, who you first go to help in a riot is as sure a test of true allegiance as any I know.

So who did I rush to that night to prevent a Bobcat from pounding his face into the ice? I went to Randy, because he was my friend. And because he was squealing for help.

"Trev! Carl! Ben!"

And all of us came.

Once we'd thrown Randy's attacker off him we were able to form a circle and hold our own. In fact, we ended up faring better than many of our older teammates, who left Exeter that night with split cheeks and teeth in their pockets.

On the bus ride home we, the youngest Guardians, were permitted to sit at the back, a acknowledgment of our success on the battlefield. I recall us looking at each other as we rolled out of the parking lot, unable to hold the giddy smiles off our faces. Which started the laughing. We laughed three-quarters of an hour through a snowstorm, and though we expected someone to tell us to shut our mouths or they'd shut them for us at any second, they never did.

Ben:

Our Zen mascot of a backup goalie. Because Vince Sproule, our starter, was eighteen and the best stopper in the county, Ben almost never saw ice time, which was fine with him. His proper place was at the end of the bench anyway. Mask off, hands resting in his lap, offering contemplative nods as we came and went from our shifts, as though the blessings of a vow-of-silence monk.

Ben was the sort of gentle-featured, unpimpled kid (he made you think *pretty* before pushing the thought away) who would normally have invited the torment of bullies, especially on a team composed of boys old enough to coax actual beards from their chins. But they left Ben alone.

I think he was spared because he was so plainly *odd*. It was the authenticity of his strangeness that worked as a shield when, in another who was merely different, it would have attracted the worst kind of attention. They liked Ben for this. But they kept their distance from him because of it too.

Trevor (Me):

A junk-goal god. Something of a floater, admittedly. A dipsy-doodling centre known for his soft hands (hands that now have trouble pouring milk).

There was, at sixteen, the whisperings of scouts knowing who I was. Early in the season the coach had a talk with my parents, urging them to consider the benefits of a college scholarship in the States. Who knows? Maybe Trev had a chance of going straight to pro.

Of course, this sort of thing was said about more than it ever happened to. Me included. Not that I wasn't good enough—we'll never know if I was or wasn't. Because after the abrupt end of my one and only season as a Guardian, I never skated again.

I had known Randy since kindergarten, when I approached him and, offering to share my Play-Doh, asked, "Do you want to be in my gang?" I remember that: *gang*. And even though I was alone, Randy accepted.

Ben joined us in early grade school, Carl a year later. That was grade three.

My father, not known for his wisdom (though he took runs at it on the nights he hit the sauce harder than usual), once told me something that has proven consistent with me

experience: while a man can accumulate any number of acquaintances over his life, his only true friends are the ones he makes in youth.

Yet why Randy, Ben and Carl and no others? I could say it was the way we saw ourselves in each other. The recognition of my own foolishness in Randy's clowning, my imagination in Ben's trippy dreams, my rage in Carl's fisticuffs. How we had a better chance of knowing who we were together than we ever would have on our own.

What we shared made us friends. But here's the truth of the thing: our loyalty had little to do with friendship. For that, you'd have to look elsewhere.

You'd have to look in the house.

We were in Ben's backyard, out behind his garden shed, the four of us passing around a set of *Charlie's Angels* bubble-gum cards. I remember the hushed intensity we brought to studying Farrah Fawcett. The wide Californian smile. The astonishing nipples piercing their bikini veils.

We were eight years old.

And then there's Mrs. McAuliffe's voice, calling Ben inside.

"I'm not hungry," he shouted back.

"This isn't about dinner, honey."

She was trying not to cry. We could hear that from the other end of the McAuliffes' lot. We could hear it through the garden shed's walls.

Ben crossed the yard and stood before his mother, listening to her as she wrung her hands on her Kiss Me, I'm Scottish! apron. He waited a moment after she finished. Then, as though at the pop of a starter's pistol, he ran.

And we followed. Even as he crossed Caledonia Street and onto the Thurman property, we stayed after him. Ben scooted around the side of the house and we came around the corner. The time to see the back door swing closed. Our feet had never touched this ground before. It was the one place we never even dared each other to go. Yet now we were running into the house, each of us fighting to be first, all calling Ben's name.

We found him in the living room. He was leaning against the wall between the two side windows. His crumpled form looked smaller than it should have, as though the house had stolen part of him upon entry.

"My dad's dead," he said when we gathered to stand over him. "She said it was an accident. But it wasn't."

Randy frowned. It was the same face he made when asked to come to the blackboard to work through a long-division equation. "What do you mean?"

"It *wasn't* an accident!"

He was angry more than anything else. His father was gone and it was his weakness that had taken him. A coward. Ben had been shown to have come from shoddy stock, and it was the revelation of bad luck that held him, not grief.

So we grieved for him.

Without a look between us, we knelt and took Ben in our arms. Four booger-nosed yapping apes with little in our heads but Wayne Gretzky and, now, Farrah daydreams. Yet we held our friend—and each other—in a spontaneous show of comradeship and love. We were

experiencing a rare thing (rarer still for boys): we were feeling someone else's pain as acute as if it were our own. Ben wasn't crying, but we were.

More than this, the moment stopped time. No, not stopped: it stole the meaning from time. For however long we crouched together against the cracked walls of the Thurman house living room we weren't growing older, we weren't eight, we weren't attempting another of the million awkward steps toward adulthood and its presumed freedoms. We were who we were and nothing else. A kind of revelation, as well as a promise. Ben had been the first of us to take a punch from the grown-up world. And we would be there when the other blow came our way.

We were pulling Ben to his feet when we heard the girl.

A moan from upstairs. A gasp, and then an exhaled cry.

I remember the three versions of the same expression on the faces of my friends. The shame that comes not from something we'd done but from something we didn't yet understand.

We'd heard that older kids sometimes came to the Thurman house to do stuff, and that some of this stuff concerned boys and girls and the things they could do with each other with their clothes off. Though we didn't really know our way around the mechanics, we knew that this was what was going on up there in one of the empty bedrooms.

I'm uncertain of many details from that afternoon, but I know this: we all heard it. Not the moaning, but how it turned into something else.

What we heard as Carl pulled the back door of the Thurman house closed was not the voice of a living thing. Human in its origin but no longer. A voice that should not have been possible, because it belonged to the dead.

The moaning from the girl upstairs changed. A new sound that showed what we took first to be her pleasure wasn't that at all but a whimper of fear. We knew this without comprehending it, just stupid children at least half a decade shy of tracing the perimeters of what *sex* or *consent* or *hurt* could mean between women and men. It was the sound the dead girl made upstairs that instantly taught us. For in the gasp of time before we stepped outside and the closed door left the backyard and the trees and the house in a vacuum of silence, we heard the beginnings of a scream.

THERE'S A TRAIN to Grimshaw leaving Union Station at noon, which gives me three hours to pack an overnight bag, hail a cab and buy a ticket. An everyday sequence of actions. Yet for me such tasks—pack a bag, hail a cab—have become cuss-laced battles against my mutinous hands and legs, so that this morning, elbowing out of bed after a night of terrible news, I look to the hours ahead as a list of Herculean trials.

Shave Face without Lopping Off Nose.

Tie Shoelaces.

Zip Up Fly.

Among the fun facts shared by my doctors at the time I was diagnosed with Parkinson was that I could end up living for the same number of years I would have had coming if I hadn't acquired the disease. So, I asked, over this potentially long stretch, what else could I look forward to? Some worse versions of stuff I was already experiencing—the involuntary kicks and punches—along with a slew of new symptoms that sounded like the doctor was making them up as he went along, a shaggy-dog story designed to scare the bejesus out of me before he clapped me on the shoulder with a “Hey! Just kidding, Trevor. Nothing's *that* bad!” But he never got around to the punchline, because there wasn't one.

Let's try to remember what I do my best to forget:

A face that loss of muscle control will render incapable of expression. Difficulties with problem solving, attention, memory. The sensation of feeling suffocatingly hot and clammy, cold *at the same time*. (This one has already made a few appearances, leading to the performance of silent-movie routines worthy of Chaplin, where I desperately dial up the thermostat while opening windows to stick my head out into the twenty-below air.) Vision impairment. Depression. Mild to fierce hallucinations, often involving insects (the one before bed last night: a fresh loaf of bread seething with cockroaches). Violent REM sleep that jolted you out of bed onto the floor.

For now, though, I'm mostly just slow.

This morning, when my eyes opened after dreams of Ben calling for help from behind his locked bedroom door, the clock radio glowed 7:24. By the time my feet touched carpet it was 7:38. Every day now begins with me lying on my back, waiting for my brain to send out the commands that were once automatic.

Sit up.

Throw legs over side of bed.

Stand.

Another ten minutes and this is as far as I've got. On my feet, but no closer to Grimshaw than the bathroom, where I'm working a shaky blade over my skin. Little tongues of blood trickling through the lather.

And, over my shoulder, a woman.

A reflection as real as my own. More real, if anything, as her wounds lend her swollen skin the drama of a mask. There is the dirt too. Caked in her hair, darkening her lashes. The bit of earth that refused to shake off when she rose from it.

That I'm alone in my apartment is certain, as I haven't had a guest since the diagnosis. And

because I recognize who stands behind me in the mirror's steam. A frozen portrait of violence that, until now, has visited me only as I slept. The face at once wide-eyed and lifeless, still the mounting readiness of all dead things.

Except this time she moves.

Parts her lips with the sound of a tissue pulled from the box. Dried flakes falling from her chin like black icing.

To pull away would be to back into her touch. To go forward would be to join her in the mirror's depth. So I stay where I am.

A blue tongue that clacks to purpose within her mouth. To whisper, to lick. To tell me her name.

I throw my arm against the glass. Wipe her away. The mirror bending against my weight but not breaking. When she's gone I'm left in a new clarity, stunned and ancient, before the mist eases me back into vagueness so that I am as much a ghost as she.

Impotence. Did I fail to mention that this is coming down the pike too? Though I could still do the deed if called upon (as far as I know), I have gone untested since the Bad News. I think I realized that part of my life was over even as the doc worked his lips around the word. *No more ladies for this ladies' man.*

Is *that* what I was? If the shoe fits.

And let's face it, the shoe fit pretty well for a while: an unmarried, all-night-party-hosting nightclub owner. Trevor, of Retox. Girlfriends all beautiful insomniacs with plans to move to L.A. I don't know if any of them could be said to have gotten to know me, nor did they try. I was *Trevor, of Retox*. Always up for a good time, fuelled by some decent drugs up in the VIP lounge of the place with the longest lineups on Friday nights. I *fit*. Though never for long. I hold the dubious distinction of having been in no relationship since high school that made it past the four-month mark. (I was more often the dumped than the dumper, I should add. The women I saw over my Retox years occupied the same world I did, a world where people were expected to want something other than what they had, to be elsewhere than across the restaurant table or in the bed they were in at any given time. It was a world of motion, and romance requires at least the *idea* of permanence.)

Who else was there with me in Retox-land? My business partners, though they were something less than friends, all work-hard—play-hard demons, the kind of guys who were great to share a couple nights in Vegas with but who, in quieter moments, had little to say beyond tales of how they got the upper hand in a real estate flip or gleaned their “philosophies” from a billionaire's memoir. On the family side, there was only my brother left, and I spoke to him long-distance on a quarterly basis, asking after the wife and athletic brood he seemed to be constantly shuttling around to rinks and ballet classes out in Edmonton. My parents were gone. Both of major cardiac events (what heart attacks are now apparently) and both within a year of moving out of Grimshaw and into a retirement bungalow with a partial view of Lake Huron. That's about it. I've been alone, but well entertained.

And then the doctors stepped in to poop on the party. Within three weeks of the Bad News I sold Retox and retreated into the corners of my underfurnished condo to manage the mutu-

funds that will, I hope, pay for the nurses when the time comes for them to wheel, wipe and spoon. Until then, I do my best to keep my condition a secret. With full concentration I am able to punch an elevator button, hold a menu, write my signature on the credit card slip—always without giving away my status as a Man with a Serious Disease. In a way, it's only a different take on the "normal act" I've been keeping up since high school. It's likely that only my best friends from that time, my fellow Guardians, know the effort it takes.

Then, in a small town a hundred miles away, one of them ties one end of a rope to a ceiling beam and the other around his neck and the normal act has fallen away. There is only room for the lost now. To let the dead back in.

That's it, Trev. Keep moving. Keep it simple.

Button Shirt.

Find Seat on Train.

And when the call for Grimshaw comes, do what every shaking, betraying part of you will fight doing and get off.

When I remember Grimshaw now, a collage of places comes to mind. The Old Grove Cemetery. The rail line that snaked through town, straightening only in front of the station. The sky: low, cottony and grey. The trail that followed the river right out of town and could, it was said, lead a runaway all the way to Lake Huron. The sort of things everyone who has grown up in a small town has their own version of.

And like every small town, Grimshaw had a haunted house.

321 Caledonia Street. Once the Thurman place, though who the Thurmans were, and when it was theirs, we didn't know. Although it was red-bricked and wide-porched like most of Grimshaw's older homes, it was distinct in our minds, broader and higher, set farther back from the street. We saw foreboding significance in its broken weather vane, a decapitated rooster spinning around in the most mild breezes as though panicked, a literal chicken with its head cut off. Yet other than this, it was its sameness that left it open to stories we could dream taking place in our own kitchens and bedrooms. It was a dark fixture of our imaginations precisely because it appeared as normal as the houses we lived in.

The house was occupied only for brief stretches. Outsiders who'd been recruited to be the new bank manager or Crown attorney and thought a place of such character was worth an attempt at restoration. The money pit it inevitably turned out to be chased such dreamers away. Or, if you went with the versions we told each other, they were sent out screaming into the night by furious spirits and bleeding walls.

Ben McAuliffe lived across from the place. It allowed us to look out from his attic bedroom and through the maples that darkened its double lot, trying to catch a flash of movement—otherwise, a toothily grinning ghoul—in one of its windows. It spooked us. But no more than the werewolf and vampire comics we traded among ourselves that delivered brief, dismissible chills. Even then, we didn't think there was such a thing as a real haunted house.

Of all the things we ended up being wrong about, that was the first.

All of us had families. Parents, from the long-gone to the present-but-only-in-body to the feeble (all moms) who tried hard to make contact but didn't know, when it came to teenage boys where to start. There were siblings too. My older brother had already left for college in Kitchener. Ben was an only child of the kind given miles of his own space by his mom, who rarely left the house after Ben's dad died. Randy, on the other hand, came from a big, red-haired Catholic brood, five kids who, viewed together throwing dinner rolls at each other or administering Indian sunburns in their rumpus room, seemed to number closer to a dozen. But with the possible exception of one, none of the other familial players in our lives figured in what was to turn out to be Our Story.

We were boys, so you're supposed to look first to our dads in having a hand in making the way we were, but for the most part, they were as absent as our teachers and the other elders advanced to us as "role model" candidates. My own father was an accountant at the town's utilities office. Compromised, mildly alcoholic. An essentially decent man possessed of faults some children might have chosen to be wounded by, but for me were just the mark

that living the better part of his life in Grimshaw had left on him, and therefore we forgivable.

But we had another father. One we shared between us. The coach. He had a name—David Evans—that struck us as too unutterably bland to belong to someone like him. For us he was always “the coach,” a designation spoken in a tone that somehow combined affection, iron and awe.

The coach wore wire-frame glasses, Hush Puppies, hid a receding hairline under a wool cap on game days. He looked more like an English teacher—which he in fact was between nine and three thirty, Monday to Friday—than a leader of anything more athletic than the chess club. But his rumpled-scholar appearance was both who he really was and a disguise. We always got him wrong at first, which was how he wanted it. We were always getting him wrong. And then, out of the blue, he would say or show something that struck us as so essential and unguarded and true we became his. We believed. We wanted more of *that*.

The league’s other coaches considered our success a freakish series of flukes. It wasn’t our tactics or motivation our coach brought to the dressing room that lifted us to the top of the standings. How could it be? He didn’t *look* like a hockey man. He didn’t even *swear*.

They got him wrong too.

But what was it to get him right?

We knew he was married. Childless. Moved to Grimshaw five years earlier from Toronto. There were questions we had about him. Not creepy suspicions (of the sort we had about Mr. Krueger, for instance, the knee-patting driver’s ed. instructor), just a handful of missing links in what we could gather about his story. Information that might explain why, beneath the coach’s calm surface, we could sense something being held down, a muffled second voice. It might have been anger. Or a sadness too unwieldy to be allowed free run within him. There was, we sensed, something he might be helped with.

But he was the one who helped us. Our guardian. It was hard to see how this could ever be the other way around.

Our school hired a new music teacher at the beginning of our grade eleven year. Mr. Asworth, the old music teacher, had left over the summer. (Yes, we had much obvious fun with his name, as in “Hey, what’s his *Assworth*?” whispered between us as we filed out at the end of class, an insult he seemed to think he deserved, given the way he pretended not to hear.)

Naturally, we’d tormented him. Makeout sessions in the drum-kit storage room, blowing cigarette smoke out of the tuba, snapping Melissa Conroy’s bra until a red line was blazing across her freckled back. And as for Asworth teaching us to *play music*? His attempts to coax melody out of Carl’s flatulent trombone or get Randy to stop ringing the triangle and hollering “Come ’n’ get it!” in the middle of “The Maple Leaf Forever” met with nothing but cacophonous failure.

Asworth’s replacement, Miss Langham, was a different story.

In her presence we called her only Miss, but between us (and in our dreams) she was always Heather. At twenty-three, the youngest teacher at Grimshaw Collegiate by a decade. Long, chestnut hair we imagined slipping a hand through to touch the solitary mole on her

throat. Green eyes, at once mirthful and encouraging. Tall but unstooped, unlike some of the senior basketball girls when they walked the halls, ashamed of their commanding physicality. Until Miss Langham arrived to teach us a surprisingly moving brass-band version of Pachelbel's Canon, we had witnessed only prettiness, tomboys, the promise of farmer's daughter curves. But Miss Langham exceeded any previous entry in our schoolboys' catalogue of feminine assets. We had no name for it then, and I hardly know what to call it now. Grace, I suppose.

I believe I can say as well that we were all instantly in love with her. Desire was part of it, yes. But what we really wanted was to rescue her one day. Show her our as yet unappreciated worth. Grow into gentlemen before her very eyes.

Sometimes, after school, we would head up to Ben's bedroom, gather at his window and wait to watch her go by. She was renting a room at the nurses' residence up the hill on the hospital grounds ("No Male Visitors After 8 P.M.," a sign at the door declared). Most days she would take Caledonia Street, advancing with long strides up its slope, a leather satchel bumping against her hip. Alone.

When I think of the Thurman house now, what comes to mind isn't a horrific image or state of guilt. Not at first. What I see before any of that is Miss Langham walking home along the sidewalk past its brooding facade. A juxtaposition of youth and poise against its clutching shadows. Her sure step, the hint of smile she wore even when no one was coming the other way to wish good day to. Heather Langham was all *future*. And the house possessed only the wet rot, the foul longing of the past.

This is how I try to hold her in place as long as I can, before the other pictures force their way through: Miss Langham clipping past Grimshaw's darkest place. It was, for all the moment's simplicity, an act of subtle defiance. We never saw her cross the street to pass it a safer distance, as we ourselves did. In fact, she seemed oblivious to the house altogether. Her refusal to acknowledge the rudeness of its stare.

But in this, of course, was the suggestion that she knew she was being watched. She was a woman already well used to being looked at. Usually, this looking inspired admiration and yearning in the observer. But we could sense that the Thurman house—or the idea of whatever inhuman thing lived in it—instead felt only bitterness. A reminder of its place in death and hers so vividly in life.

THERE ARE MOMENTS when the tremors disappear all on their own. Whole chunks of time when my body and I are reunited, warring soldiers clinking tin mugs over a Christmas ceasefire. I'll be looking out the window, and the hands that had been squeaking against the glass will be calmed. Or now. Sitting on the milk run to Grimshaw, the train starting away from the platform with a lurch, my heart giving enlarging shape to Randy's announcement of the end of things: *Ben's dead, Trev*. As we pick up speed, I can feel the closing distance between myself and the past, an oncoming collision my newspaper-reading and text-messaging fellow passengers are unaware of. And yet, I am still. Silently weeping into the sleeve of my jacket but physically in control, my limbs awaiting their orders.

You can't help anyone, a voice suggests within me. You can't help yourself. Why not do what Ben did while you're still able?

Not my voice, though it's instantly familiar. A voice I haven't heard in twenty-four years.

The train rolls out from under the covered platform and the city is there, the glass tower firing off shards of sunlight in a farewell salute. All at once, I'm certain I will never come back. I escaped something in Grimshaw once. But it won't let me go a second time.

Ticket, please, the voice says, laughing.

"Ticket, please," the conductor tries again.

It was thought, when they built the four lanes running west between Toronto and the border at Detroit a couple years before I was born, that the highway's proximity to Grimshaw would lend new purpose to what was before then not much other than a service town for the county's farmers. But there was no more reason to take the Grimshaw exit than there had previously been to limp in its direction on the old, rutted two-lane. Like many of the communities its size on the broad arrowhead of farmland stuck between the Great Lakes, Grimshaw remained a forgotten place. Never industrial enough to be outright abandoned in the way of the ghost towns of Ohio, Pennsylvania and Upstate New York, but not alert enough to attempt re-invention. Grimshaw was content to merely hang on, to take a subdued pride in its century homes on tree-lined streets, the stained facades of its Victorian storefronts, its daughters or sons who met with success upon moving away. Now, entering it as a stranger, one might see a gothic charm in the wilful oldness of the place, its loyalty to the vine-covered, the paint-peeled. But for those who grew up here, it was only as it had always been.

There are times of the year when certain places seem to be themselves more than any other time. Springtime in Paris, Christmas in New York. Toronto frozen at Valentine's. Even before the bad things happened, I saw Grimshaw as a Halloween town. Sparsely streetlined, thickly treed. The houses never grand but large, built at a time that favoured rear staircases and widow's-peaked attics, so that they all had their own secret hiding places. Founded by Scottish Presbyterians and consistently conservative in the backbenchers it sent to Parliament, Grimshaw had little sympathy for the mystical. Any mention of the supernatural was considered nothing more than foolishness, the side effects of too many matinees indulged in at the Vogue. Ghosts? "Catholic voodoo," as my father put it.

Yet at the same time, it was its dour Protestant character that endeared its inhabitants to the everyday tragic, to the stories of broken lives and cruel, inexplicable fate. For the parents, the dead lived on, but only in dinner-table and church-tea tales of misfortune.

Grimshaw's adults could never see their home as haunted. Their children, on the other hand, had no choice.

The train slows as we approach the town limits. The hardened fields yield to weedy outskirts, the low-rent acres of half-hearted development: the trailer park, the go-kart track, the drive-in movie screen with "See U Next Summer!" on the marquee (a promise that, by the vandalized look of things, has not been kept for a dozen years or more). Then the more permanent claims. Shaggy backyards crisscrossed with laundry lines. A school with paper witches taped to the windows. Dumpsters left open-mouthed, choking on black plastic.

Within a minute, we are rolling into the old part of town at a walking pace. It gives us a chance to study the Inventory Blowout! offerings at what used to be Krazy Kevin's car lot where Randy's dad worked, to catch a whiff of the fumes rising from the Erie Burger exhaust. There is even a welcome party of sorts. Three kids smoking against the wall of the station, giving us the finger.

When the train stops I am alone in getting to my feet, hauling my bag off the rack and stepping down onto the platform. The cars already moving again, easing into the west end of town, where they will pass the high school, the courthouse before speeding out onto the tobacco flats. All places I'd rather view through double-paned glass. But now I'm here. The Grimshaw air. The midday moon staring down, bug-eyed and bored.

A gust blows a Big Gulp cup against my leg. Dust devils swirl over the platform, and with them, the laughing voice again.

Welcome home.

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