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## News from the Front

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NEWS FROM THE FRONT

by

Jeff Pardy

A Creative Writing Project Submitted  
to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing  
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the  
University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2011

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## Abstract

*News from the Front* chronicles the experiences of narrator/protagonist Griffin Keeping, a former soldier and veteran of the Afghanistan War, following his return home to Newfoundland after his release from active duty. Keeping suffers from a fractured psyche as a result of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and struggles to reintegrate himself into society, alienated from his family and environment. The work includes elements of epistolary fiction, as letters from Keeping's great grandfather, a soldier of the First World War, are interspersed throughout. The use of narrative disjunction reflects Keeping's psychic fragmentation.

## Dedication

This novel is dedicated to my mother, Anne Blanche Pardy (nee Griffin), who believes there is something of the artist in me. During Sunday evening phone calls throughout the semester, she would, unfailingly, inquire about my progress, thus keeping me honest and focused. Thanks mom.

I would also like to dedicate this novel to the brave men and women who are serving, and have served, with the Canadian Forces during the Afghanistan conflict, especially to those who are fighting the war after the war.

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And finally, to my family and friends for their patient acceptance and financial support of my artistic endeavors.

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## Chapter 1: Fall

The wave crashed up from my guts. There were three knocks at the door.

“Griffin?” It was my mother. “Are you alright in there?” I had just thrown up. My vision was blurred.

“I’m fine.”

I imagined my muffled voice coming to her ears from beyond the door to the tiny church bathroom, walls and ceiling painted baby blue, flecks of it on the mirror and toilet tank evidence of errant brush strokes from an amateur hand.

I got to my feet. My nose clogged, I unraveled some toilet paper from the spool and blew. Turning the taps, I splashed cold water on my face.

At the front of the church, just down from the altar, people were milling around the coffin. Aunts and uncles and cousins had all taken their turn paying respects to the body. Now there were people from the community, second and third cousins and distant relatives related to me by the thinnest of blood ties. A man, his eyes faintly reminiscent of my father's, approached me.

“Sorry fer yer loss. Soldier on, my son, soldier on. Y'er the man o' da house now, aren't ya?” Faint memories surfaced of this same face, a face I had seen at a kitchen party in my grandmother's house years ago. A woman came up to me and gave me a hug, drowning my senses with rosewater perfume.

“We used to go out, your father and I. Oh, I mean that was ages ago, we were just kids.” Her voice was thick and rough, evidence of thousands of smoked cigarettes. She



dabbed a Kleenex at the corner of her eyes. "But he was... he was some man. You're just the spittin' image of him, you are. My dear, come here I gives you a kiss." Her breath was heavy and her teeth were stained yellow and black. The kiss was on my cheek, but close to my lips.

October 30, 2006. My father was dead.

The service was conducted by Reverend Brown. He was a man of God I was more than casually acquainted with from days long gone when my family actually went to church, Gower Street United in St. John's. I watched his lips move but the words were not processed.

We sang hymns. We read passages from the Bible. We said Amen. I stood up when everyone else stood up, sat when they did, kneeled obediently and moved my mouth when people sang. Then it was over.

My body felt heavy, my father's coffin heavier. There were six of us carrying him: Percy and Harold, my uncles, a guy my dad knew from work named Kevin, two of his childhood buddies, Michael and Joel, and me.

The funeral director gave me a pair of white gloves before I touched the polished brass handles of the casket. The gloves reminded me of the ones that a cartoon character, or an old, refined lady out for tea, might wear. He was wearing a pink and black tie, the colors striped like a barber pole, his hair gelled and parted in the middle. When he talked it sounded as though his mouth was full of the letter 'S'. He rested his hand on my shoulder, softly, when he gave me the gloves.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he said. I had heard that a lot in the days leading up to

the ceremony. I began to think of it as a mantra people repeated so death wouldn't happen to them.

I kissed my father on the cheek before they closed the casket. My mother had instructed me to do so. His face was cold and hard. Afterwards my lips tasted salty, as if I had taken some of the waxy residue of death with me. I felt nauseous again.

The afternoon before the funeral my family had been sitting around my grandmother's kitchen table, drinking tea. I was looking out the window, watching kids riding bikes down the street, working up a head of steam before skidding through dirt and pebbles collected along the edge of the road. There were no sidewalks here in Burnt Woods. The asphalt simply stopped and the dirt picked up where it left off. You forgot those kinds of things in the city, what the ground might look like under the asphalt. Potholes after the winter, maybe, were the only sign that it was anything but blacktop all the way down.

The reasons why my father wanted his funeral in Burnt Woods, why he wanted to be buried in the little plot outside this outport village, instead of in the city, were a mystery to me. There was nothing in Burnt Woods but empty houses, broken boats and wharves too rotten to be useful. It was a place even ghosts no longer found inviting.

I had been sitting next to my sister during the drive to the graveyard. Our car was the first one after the hearse. My uncle Percy drove. My sister's skirt clung to her legs as she got out of the car. She smoothed her hand over the spot where it was stuck. I noticed the pallbearers gathering around the hearse. The sun broke free from lounging clouds. There was a tap at the window.

“Coming? They're waiting for you.” It was my sister's voice, distorted by the glass of the car window. From the instant we left the church to that moment, it was like the world had been frozen, as if for everyone and everything time had stopped. Time moved on only for me. Maybe it was vice versa – I was the one snared, not the world, the residue of my father's cheek still on my lips, cracking asunder the door between this world and the next. The sound of my sister's knuckles on glass awoke automated responses – neurons firing, messages passed along synapses. I pulled on the handle. It was cool to the touch. The sun hurt my eyes.

We returned to St. John's the next day. We hadn't put up any Halloween decorations as we were scarcely conscious of the season, despite reminders strewn about drug stores across the city. We hadn't bought any candy for that night either, though I'd had ample opportunity to do so. I spent hours the following week hosing egg particles from the side of our house. Pranksters.

In the months before my father's death, I sat with him in the hospital for hours each day. Well, that's not entirely true. There were days when I could not bring myself to go into the hospital, to walk past the smokers outside the main doors, to make it through the central hall lit by skylight, flanked with potted plants strategically placed to remind people of hope or life or some such bullshit. I dreaded the anemic elevators, always filled with nurses, the sick and elderly in wheelchairs, the smell of piss. My stomach churned once I was out of the doors and onto the fourth floor, taking two lefts and a right to my father's room, past the buzz of TV sets and voices suffocating from forced cheeriness. Every time I saw my father in his bed he looked more drained, more pale, more dead than

the last time. I had seen people dying of cancer in movies, I had never personally known anyone who had actually died of the illness.

Some days were bad. I remember him once, rolling back and forth in his hospital bed, eyes wild and lost somewhere deep in his past, veins filled with morphine, body like a man on a ship in the midst of a storm, unsure which side of the boat to cling to.

“I'm here dad. It's okay,” I said. He looked me in the eyes.

“Don't tell me it's going to be okay, you stupid son of a bitch.” I wanted to cry or belt him in the face. I couldn't do either. I knew he didn't have a fucking clue who he was talking to.

There were a lot of days like that near the end.

Other days were better. I remember a Thursday about a month before he died. We were watching our favorite hockey team, the Toronto Maple Leafs. They were getting torched by the Philadelphia Flyers and we were participating in the great Keeping family tradition of bashing the Leafs' goaltending situation.

“Tellqvist couldn't stop a beach ball,” my father said. “They should put Belfour in.”

“Belfour? He's just as brutal. The guy is washed up. What they need is some new blood. They should call up that guy Aubin from the Marlies.”

The broadcast switched to a car commercial showing a mid-sized sedan zipping around mountain corners, symphonic music playing in the background.

“These commercials are so annoying,” I said. “How many people actually take their car to a place like that, let alone outside the city.”

My father placed his hand on my shoulder. He had built his own company from nothing, starting with a single summer job offering minimum wage pay. From there, he grew his skills and reputation until he could start his own business, forging decades long relationships with his clients. Hands that had torn the earth to pieces, skin worn leather tough by thousands of sun drenched days, were now drained of color.

“Take it,” he said, offering me his lighter. It was a silver Zippo. On one side was a pin-up girl, the kind that air force pilots painted on B17 and B24 bombers during World War II. Betty Paige-esque, she had long, black hair and was wearing a red corset with tassels and a hoop dress revealing black panties and silk stockings. My father had gotten the lighter from my grandfather, who had won it from an American Air Force Pilot during a poker game. Etched on the side opposite the pin-up girl was my grandfather's name, James Griffin Keeping, and a date, May 8, 1945. My grandfather had been part of the 166th Newfoundland Field Artillery Regiment, had swept across Italy during WWII.

“Thanks,” was all I could think to say.

More items appeared in the following months. There were the cuff links that he had bought the day before he married my mother, engraved with his initials, *LK*. There was a pair of Ray Ban aviator sunglasses I'd seen him wear for years, glasses, he was well aware, I'd always coveted. There was his necklace with the boxing glove trinket, a reminder of his short, ill fated boxing career. The hardest thing to take from him was the keys to his truck, an extended cab, 2003 Ford F150. It was only three years old.

“You're going to need these keys again,” I told him. He started cackling and then hacking, spitting a wad of blood into a tissue.

The last thing my father gave me was from his grandfather Levi Reginald Keeping, the man he had been named after. Levi had fought in World War I. I'd heard tales of how he'd killed three Germans with one bullet and captured an entire enemy regiment by himself. As a child I'd believed every word of these yarns.

My father knew how badly I wanted my great grandfather's diary and war letters, having read some of the entries to me when I was a kid. Hearing those chronicles got me into reading every book on war I could get my hands on, and influenced my decision to take history as my major in university.

One day, about two weeks before the end, I showed up at the hospital to find my father drowsing. There, sitting in a pile on his night stand, were the letters, stacked neatly in plastic sleeves, set on top of the small, leather bound diary. He sensed my presence and turned over. "I asked your mother to bring them by, she's working today, but you'll see her later, I'm sure. I wanted to give these to you personally."

I picked them up.

"They're yours," he said, raising himself on his pillow. "I don't need to tell you to be careful with them." He turned and drifted back to sleep. As he rested I began to read.

*Burnt Woods, Newfoundland*

*July 9<sup>th</sup>, 1916*

*Dear Percy,*

*Thought I'd scribble a few lines to let you know that I am well. There is an urgent call out for more men, and I have been thinking about tossing my hat into the ring. I know that you've said there's no need, as one brother from the Keeping clan is more than enough to keep the Hun at bay. Still, there is word here of the "Great Push," and the growing need to replenish the ranks in order to relieve Europe of its suffering as expediently as possible.*

*Two days ago I was in Fortune. There was a Captain there giving a speech, so of course I had to go down and hear him for myself. He said that the men at the front are as happy as can be. After reading your letters, I know that the life of a soldier can't be as bad as some say it is. I'm convinced that the most horrific tales of the battles in Gallipoli and France come from the cowards who have never stepped foot on the front lines.*

*Anyway, the Captain in Fortune made a long speech and told us about the jolly good time you soldiers are having. He says that once the rout is on the Kaiser will raise the white flag, and that we'd better hurry to get a piece of the action. The minister echoed as much during his sermon today, lamenting that more of us haven't taken the trip down to St. John's when it's plain and clear to most that there's work to be done.*

*I can no longer simply stand idly by while my brother risks his life for King and Country. You must see by now that my mind is made up and it's no use to try to convince me otherwise. I've booked passage on a schooner to St. John's and have a room waiting*

*for me at 21 Spencer Street at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Blandford. You no doubt remember them well from your time there, before you were shipped off to the war. They asked about you and I let them know you are in nothing but high spirits.*

*I suppose by the time you receive this I'll be on my way, or at least well into drilling in St. John's before we leave for England. If luck will have it, the Keeping brothers will be fighting side by side by fall. Then the Hun will, no doubt, have nowhere to run and hide.*

*Until then, brother,*

*Levi*

I continued to read the letters until well after midnight. My father remained sound asleep. I thumbed my way through the dossier of paper, shoving the leather bound diary aside for now, pausing for a moment and having another look at the clock before turning to another letter.

*Russell St. School*

*Ayr, Scotland*

*October 29, 1916*

*Dear mother,*

*I just returned from church in the Y.M.C.A tent. I received your letter yesterday and was very pleased indeed to hear from you. It was dated a month ago, so you see it takes quite a long time for letters to get here.*



*The weather in Ayr is starting to get colder, much colder, I think, than we have it back home this time of year.*

*A couple of the boys from the regiment just brought Sable Chief into the tent for a visit. A Newfoundland dog, he's the regiment mascot, given to us by the Mayor of Ayr. Many of the boys have joked about bringing him to the front so he can have a proper go at the Germans. You can bet Fritz would be scared to see the beast lumbering after us during an advance! Though you and father never possessed the desire to own a dog, I must say that I'm also quite taken by Sable Chief and have resolved to get a Newfoundland pup once I make it back home.*

*I've been told that, at first, the locals here had taken us Newfoundlanders for Canadians. You can guarantee that, right away, our boys straightened things out. Now we get on very well with the locals. Just yesterday I was invited into a complete stranger's house for a cup of tea!*

*Another draft of 50 Newfoundlanders arrived here a few days ago. They are putting the drill to them as I write this letter. I heard yesterday I'll likely be heading to France in two or three month's time. I'm not sure how much truth there is to the rumors, but I hope they are true. Sometimes I think the war will be over before we get to have a go at Fritz.*

*Oh, I have got a new uniform now and it is a good one too. I am going to get my shots taken shortly, so you'll know what I look like as a real soldier. I ran into some men from a Canadian regiment, the Princess Patricia's Light Infantry, while I was picking up my new uniform. Even though the Newfoundland Regiment hasn't worn blue leggings*

*since the first five hundred men were shipped over here, they started calling me a "Blue Puttee" after they found out that I was from Newfoundland.*

*We're put through all kinds of tests here. There is a test for physical training, for bombing, for musketry and one for bayonet fighting. The test for gas is quite challenging. There are two kinds of gas respirators we use for it. We have to go into a dug-out with one of our respirators on, and stay there a certain amount of time. Then we have to take it off and put on the other one before the gas can do any harm. It is quite a dangerous test if one should happen to breathe while changing masks. Tomorrow we have to do the test for long range shooting up to 600 yards. I think I will fare quite well.*

*As we were nearing the town on Friday after training, the officer in charge told us to sing as hard as we were able. All the townspeople ran out of their houses to see what was happening. We made it through "Pack All Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag" and "Keep the Home Fires Burning" before we arrived at camp. Some of the boys from the town followed us the whole way there.*

*Could you or father send me some Edgeworth tobacco and some good chew as well? You can get plenty of cigarettes here but they are downright awful compared to what we get at home, and chewing tobacco comes in fine when route marching. They gave us about 100 cigarettes of Imperial Tobacco when we arrived but those are gone now, so I'd be very thankful if you'd send me a couple of pounds of Edgeworth, Beacon Hill or Mayo, and as many pounds of chew as you'd like. I know chew isn't clean, but I'm a soldier now, and I'll drop that nasty habit once I return home.*

*By the way, the cake and cookies you sent were lovely. Unfortunately, they got a*

*bit mashed up on the way over here. I opened the package in one of the company tents amongst some officers and other men, and felt obliged to divvy out what I had. I guess, in the end, I got the sailor's part, but it was a lovely cake. If at any time you send me anything else, be sure to put it in something very secure, such as a tin box. It would even be advisable to have it soldered, for many a chap has received a tin box with practically nothing left in it. And worry not, I'll be sure to open it somewhere private next time and spoil myself rotten!*

*Also, I will try to get down to Mailly Malliet to visit Percy's grave, but I suppose that will depend on where they send us, as well as troop movements. Regardless, I will make time to visit him and verify that he's been given a proper burial. His death will not be in vain, and we will finish the job that he started.*

*I remain your son,*

*Levi*

*Write # 7099*

*Pte. Levi Keeping*

*"D" company*

*1<sup>st</sup> Newfoundland Regiment*

*Ayr, Scotland*

*France*

*April 6, 1917*

*My Dear Old Girl,*

*I can't tell you exactly where we are at the moment as the censors would have a fit. Rest assured I'm most definitely in France. We are back with our billets for another six days. Those will be followed by six days at the front, and six days in the reserve trenches before the whole cycle starts again. It's getting to be nasty weather here now. It rains about half the time which makes things unpleasant.*

*I have tried to write more letters since I have been in France, but somehow they have always seemed so unsatisfactory to me on account of the censor having to read them. No doubt you've taken note of the green envelopes, inscribed with an oath to the effect that the writer is disclosing no military secrets, as though a man has nothing else to write to his wife about. Though I am awfully shy about anybody else reading my love letters, I feel it important to let you know I am just as much in love with you as I ever was.*

*I've sure been in luck this week getting a letter from you and one from mother and father as well. The one I got from you was dated February 5, so I guess it had been all over the country trying to find me, judging from the erased addresses on it. It was the one I had been waiting on for ages, informing me Molly's birthday present had finally shown up. I imagine she was a happy girl when it did arrive. I hope Les was not too jealous when the package came. Please let him know that I'm getting him something just as special for his birthday. I can always imagine the two of them without much effort of mind. I know they miss their father.*

*No doubt I've told you before about the constant threat of gas. There are signs posted in the reserve trenches with the reminder "HAVE YOU GOT IT? / YOUR BOX*

*RESPIRATOR / IN THE ALERT POSITION?" and we've been ordered to travel and sleep with our gas respirators within reach at all times. On top of that, sometimes there are as many as three gas alarms in a single night. It doesn't matter if these are false alarms or not. There is a general stand-to following each, typically lasting an hour or so. During that time we have to continue wearing our masks. I don't mind telling you they are something of a discomfort, but the lads here carry on as best they can given the circumstances. Once I get home I shall have many good nights of sleep to make up for what I have lost in France, I can tell you that much.*

*Most of the time I've been holding up well, so there's no need to worry about, as you say, the Hun taking me away from you. But I suppose I should tell you about a little scrape I was in the last time we were at the front. A few nights before leaving the front, I was sent into No Man's Land to dig a trench. It rained the whole time and was so dark I could barely see the shape of the two other men sent with me. About a half hour before we finished, I discovered I had left my gas mask in the camp. I was never so frightened in all my life. There I was, three to four miles from camp in a strange part of the line, and the enemy could send a creeping cloud over and I'd have no protection from it. I did not mention it to the other men, for fear of them reporting it. I certainly didn't feel safe until I was back beside my mask. Absent minded as ever, I suppose, and I know you'll no doubt give me an earful for it the next letter I get from you.*

*Well, these six days in reserves have been well earned and will pass far too fast, though the state of the village, compared to what must have been, would make your heart break. We are in what once was a colliery district, and the little model villages, company*

*houses I suppose you'd call them, have all been smashed to bits by German bombs. Trenches litter the streets and their schools are filled not with eager students but exhausted soldiers. The water for consumption here, and all over, is supposed to be purified, but this is not always done. When it is, the Chloride of Lime gives the water a horrible medicinal taste and does not quench the thirst in the slightest.*

*In our last billet we had tables, chairs, a writing desk and a few old beds, all belonging to the former tenants. Just imagine if it was Burnt Woods, our tables and chairs and stove all used haphazard by troops from halfway around the world. No doubt it's a shame, but given the state of everything else nobody ever notices, let alone comments on it.*

*I just had to pause for a spell to laugh at two of our men. They wanted something to write their letters on, so they went to the schoolhouse. There they found two desks. You know the kind, the ones with holes for inkwells. They also had to use a couple of kiddie chairs. It almost brought tears to my eyes, imagining the poor little buggers. We have to do lots of foraging like that. It's catch as catch can on the line and off of it.*

*Oh, I can't believe I almost forgot to tell you! No doubt you'll be pleased to hear I've been promoted to Lance Corporal. I'm a Non-Commissioned Officer, or NCO, now. Lance Corporal Keeping has a good ring to it, doesn't it?*

*Well, old girl, I must sign off now. I'm on my way to a card game with some of the lads, with the promise of some vin blanc or rouge to boot. Most swear they can't tell the difference between wine and the water over here, but no doubt they'll be telling a different story by night's end. Kiss the kids for dad, and save a few for yourself.*

*Always thinking about you,*

*Levi*

I had spent the entire night reading. By the time I'd finished, the morning nurse had come on duty. It was time for me to go.

\* \* \* \* \*

September 25, 2006. I was in Newfoundland History class, listening to a lecture on the Smallwood Era. I had my phone turned off. When I checked it at the end of the lecture, I saw I had missed three calls from my mother. I knew what she would say. I cut across campus from the Arts and Administration building, walking towards the Breezeway. I needed a drink before I could call her back. A man in a military uniform stopped me on my way.

“I'll give you ten dollars for your hair.” He was a recruiting officer. I had a heaping mess of curly hair. He had a clipboard in his hand.

“Make it twenty and you've got a deal,” I said. I wrote down my name and number. One year and a fresh haircut later, I was on my way to Kandahar.

\* \* \* \* \*

I didn't want to go to the Pale Horse, but I had to keep my word.

11 pm, Friday, October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2008. I had been back from the war for three months, and had been in Newfoundland for one. The wind picked up as I was walking down Water Street on my way to watch Janey's band, “The Chained Daisies.” I stuffed my chin under the lip of my coat.

A few days earlier I'd met Janey for a chat at Hava Java. It was the third or fourth time that month she'd tried to drag me out of the house. I'm not sure why I said yes. Perhaps it was the rising sense of guilt I felt for turning her down on a regular basis. She'd asked me, previously, why I never wanted to hang out with her. She wondered if I was tired or lazy. She asked if I didn't want to be around people, or if I just didn't want to be around her. My sister didn't understand, couldn't understand, when I didn't have an answer for her. What I did have was a lurking sense of dread, as if any given step would drop me through a hole in the world.

She was late. She was always late. I was having a cup of orange pekoe tea, no cream or sugar, watching people shuffle up and down Water Street. I used to like the mix of people at Hava Java, as well as its vibe. The bleary eyed lawyers and businessmen that filled the place in the morning, crusted with sleep, digging through pockets for change before handing over plastic to pay for a two dollar cup of coffee. The jobless filing in around lunchtime, mulling over crossword puzzles, pretending to cruise the want ads. The swell of university students and young, professional twenty-somethings in the late afternoon, immersed in the invisible yaw of online social networking, filling the cafe with the chatter of fingers on keyboards. Even the regulars, the fast-talking, musical hipsters jawing sex and politics over games of chess to the soundtrack of endless indie records. I used to find all of them strange, yet endearing. No longer. The smell of these people and the noise of their vapid conversations and overwrought gestures filled me with some thick emotion I could not define, something I could only express by grinding my teeth together. I drank my tea while I waited, picking and chewing my nails and flipping



through a copy of the weekly freebie paper, *The Scope*.

I began thinking of my life since I'd returned from Afghanistan. Though I'd finished active duty in late July, I did not arrive in Newfoundland until September 1, 2008. After touching down in Toronto and making my way out of Pearson International Airport, I'd hitchhiked home, carrying only a small backpack full of clothes.

The time I'd spent hitchhiking was a buffer, a way to decompress after spending three quarters of a year in a war zone. As I stepped foot in Port of Basque, by way of the ferry that crosses the Gulf of St. Lawrence, I found a patch of earth where I could dig my fingers into the nutrient starved soil. I choked with emotion, eyes flooded with tears.

Janey showed up at Hava Java bearing gifts.

“What is it?”

“Our demo.”

“Our demo?” I felt a quick cramp in my gut. Had she discovered some kind of audio recording of an awkward family get-together lost in time, recaptured, to be relived on compact disc?

“The Chained Daises.”

“Who?”

“My band?” She had begun playing bass guitar not long before I had left. I remember wiring her money so she could buy a pack of strings, some picks and an *Alice in Chains* album for her birthday. I turned the CD over in my hands and began to read the track listing.

“War is Raw? What's that one about?” I asked, tapping on the case.

“I don't really write the lyrics or anything so I'm not the best one to ask. Talk to Jana. She's awesome. She's our lead singer, this chick with, like, ten inch liberty spikes, dyed green, super political and totally sounds like Joan Jett, but don't tell her the Joan Jett part or she'll definitely kick you in the junk.”

“Sounds like a real sweetheart.”

“She is, once you get to know her.” Janey took a sip from her coffee. She looked out the window at a guy in a three piece suit and an unbuttoned pea coat, making his way across Water Street in a jaywalking jog. “Fuck, I hate suits.” I looked at her and sighed. “Come on, look at the guy!” she exclaimed, as if that were explanation enough. “It's not even winter and he's already breaking out the pea coat. Ridiculous.”

“It's cold.” On the cover of “The Chained Daisies” CD was an image of Marilyn Monroe's disembodied head. Blood coagulated in a pool from a neck fraught with pulsing purple veins. A vision flashed in my mind. The smell of singed flesh and dark cloth. The CD slipped from my hands and fell to the floor.

“Hey, watch it with that!” Janey said, picking up the CD and inspecting it before giving giving it back to me. “That costs, like, ten bucks for most people. Jerk.”

“Sorry.”

“What are you doing on the weekend?”

“...”

“Like, say, Saturday?”

“...”

“Like, say, elevenish-twelvish?”

“ ...”

“If you're a dickhead, say nothing.”

“I'm not doing anything.”

“Come see my band.”

“I don't know, Janey.”

“Come on, you know you want to.”

“It's just that I'm not sure that's the best idea because there'll be so many young people there and –”

“Young people? So you're old man Keeping all of a sudden?”

I knew it was a mistake. I knew I would regret going to her show, that things would somehow go horribly wrong.

\* \* \* \* \*

Returning to Newfoundland was not at all how I had imagined it was going to be. I had visions of family and friends greeting me with open arms, clearly aware of the conflict, of the shit we were going through to fight for people still stuck in some kind of feudal system. I saw myself going for burgers and ice cream with Janey. I anticipated long chats with my mom about nothing in particular. I planned on finishing my university degree. I wanted all these pieces to return to where they belonged.

Instead, I felt like a visitor in my mother's home. I could barely string more than a dozen words together in any attempt at conversation with her. Her eyes were empty, had been that way from the moment dad died. Janey tried. I couldn't articulate how painful it was that she pitied me. To her I was some wounded animal, her brainwashed brother who

had to be reintegrated into society after being fucked up by the man. Still, it was easier to talk to her than anyone else.

Something had fundamentally changed with my friends as well. The guys wanted to talk about how awesome it must have been to kill someone, how badass they would have been on the battlefield, just mowing Taliban down left and right. They never thought about what it was like to have someone shooting at you, never knowing if the next step would blow your fucking leg off, or worse.

There was no such thing as “normal” anymore, no returning to the way things were previous to the war. I felt as if I had fallen asleep on a punt for a long time. The tiny boat had become unmoored and now I was awake. I found myself adrift at sea and I was moving further from everyone and everything I loved, all of it becoming a vanishing point on a shore that evaporated in the distance.

The wind picked up as I walked down George Street. Strains of “Dirty Old Town” and drunken voices lingered in the air. “The Chained Daisies” were playing at The Pale Horse. I hadn't been there in years, not since before I'd left for the war. Memories of the place crowded together in my mind. The Pale Horse was tiny for a live venue. There wasn't really a dance floor *per se*, just a place to stand or shuffle or bob or collapse, depending on how much you'd had that night. It was perpetually littered with fragments of empty beer bottles, fornicating with dust bunnies. Jammed up against the walls was a collection of small, round tables decorated with graffiti advertising the best blow jobs and lays in the city. Mixed in with these ads were cryptic street poems, curses in bold text and a litany of insults hurled at names which conjured ghosts I had seen passed out in George

Street bathroom stalls during nights long lost to the void. You could get bottles of India and Black Horse and Blue Star beer, but nothing on tap. And, the counter was too large, taking up a third of the floor space. Lean too far over the side of it and you were French kissed by a vague odor of spilled Jagr and tepid dishwater. The entire place was dark and dank, and on weekends, filled to the teeth with hipsters tripping balls, high on whatever, street punks with musks as disturbing as their exhausted gazes, and other rejects or loners with nowhere else to go. It was a place I loved very much, once.

I passed through the front door, a chunk of metal with an opaque plastic window covered in bits of rotten tape. Inside, I found myself in a short line-up waiting to pay the cover charge. There was a young couple ahead of me, both wearing pea coats, ones like the jaywalking businessmen had been wearing when I met Janey at Hava Java.

My old pal, Daniel, was sitting at a table at the front of the line, stamping hands and collecting five bucks a head that would go to the bands playing that night, just like he had done when I had been a regular years earlier. He had a slight lisp and dragged his right leg somewhat when he walked. He was awkward in conversation and in posture, holding his body like a man in a perpetual state of mild embarrassment. Regulars and band members could get in without paying on any night of the week simply by nodding to him. Some didn't even extend him that courtesy.

The couple was polite, thanking Daniel after he had marked "X"s on their hands. I wondered if they knew exactly what the fuck they were walking into. I didn't have to wonder long. As the young man took off his coat, a dark brown highball liquid tumbled over his shoulder and onto his black and gray wool sweater. He flinched and cursed,

pulling the sweater off in order to survey the damage. The drunk stumbled towards the stage, half empty glass still in hand.

“Griffin?” Daniel was wearing Frankenstein face paint and an old sweater littered with holes. It took me a few seconds before it registered that this was normal, seeing as it was Halloween. How hadn't I noticed other costumes on the way to the bar? Daniel's lisp, oddly enough, seemed costume appropriate. I shook his hand. “You're back. You went off to war, didn't you?” Daniel's gaze ducked from my face to my shoes before our eyes could meet.

“I did.”

“How was it? Crazy? Or, I mean, dangerous, right? What was it like?”

I shrugged, reaching for my back pocket.

He smiled, “Oh, it's okay. You get in free tonight.”

“Free? How is the band going to make any money if you let people in for free?”

“I don't do it for everyone.” His arm passed over his brow, wiping away drops of sweat and smearing his makeup. “It's just, you're Janey's brother and I think maybe you're on the guest list, or something.” He lifted the cash box and sifted through the papers underneath. I placed a five dollar bill on the table.

“Forget it; it's a band donation then.”

“So what are you doing now that you're home? You're working, maybe?”

I smiled before cutting past him towards the bar. It was clustered with people. I didn't want to wait for a drink and had to use the can, so I turned around and went up the stairs, two at a time, to the second floor where the bathrooms were.

It was exactly as I had remembered it. The second floor was mostly unused, consisting of the two bathrooms and an empty room scattered with round tables like the ones downstairs. The room was free to whoever, to chill, drink and roll joints. It was always dark in there and the overhead lights, busted for years, had yet to be replaced. It had a creepy feel if you were too sober. I acknowledged a desire to sit in the dark and feel the music rising through the floor. I cut a right to the men's room down the hall.

Just as raunchy as ever, the room's walls were decorated with hastily applied green paint the tone of shamrocks and littered with satanic symbols, band names, and samples of undefinable substances. As I pissed, I stuck my hand through a fist-broken hole in the gyprock. A splinter sunk itself below the skin on my index finger. I sucked the wound before zipping up, contemplating the hole and the space next to it. I punched the wall once, twice, three times before the gyprock shattered and swallowed my fist. I stared at the fresh hole, my fist sprinkled with a coat of white dust.

Downstairs, the place was beginning to fill up. I found an empty seat at the bar and ordered a rum and coke. I downed the drink and ordered another before making my way out the door. Standing on the large wooden deck out front, I lit up a cigarette and raised my face to the night sky. I sucked in the bitter, clean October air and searched for stars. A moment of dizziness passed over me. Taking another drag from my cigarette and looking around the deck, I saw Janey kissing a girl I had never seen before. I walked up to them.

“Hi,” I said. Janey's cheeks were flushed from the cold. She was dressed up like the Queen of Hearts, the girl she'd been making out with like a street-punk with vampire

teeth.

“Griffin! Hi! I'd like you to meet my friend Samantha. Samantha, my brother Griffin.” I extended my hand. Samantha didn't take it.

“Where's your costume?” she asked.

“Where's yours?”

She growled, lunging forward. Heat spiked inside my head.

“Griffin,” my sister said, “she's just messing around.”

“So you're her brother. Afghanistan, hey? Must have been pretty fucked up.” I took a drink, the glass slow to touch my lips, slow to come down. I lit a cigarette and stared into the black nothing above. “I'll see you inside Janey,” she said, kissing my sister once more before she left.

“Friends, eh?”

“Yeah, Griffin-”

“What do you think dad would say?”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“What do you think it means?”

“I don't really care what he'd say. I don't think he'd say much of anything anyways, seeing as he's pretty fucking dead.” She crossed her arms, her lips in a pout, the same look she gave me when we were children, when I told her she could not hang out with me when my friends came over. I scuffed my foot on the deck. “I'm going inside, Griffin. I don't really care if you stay or not.” She turned to go. I grabbed her arm, cigarette still in my hand.



“No, listen, I don't care.”

“What do you mean, 'you don't care'?”

“I... was being a dick.” I offered her a cigarette. “Sorry.” She took it. I flicked my lighter, the flame engulfing the tip of the cylinder, calling forth red embers. “Have you talked to mom?”

“I don't see how it's any of her business, or yours for that matter.”

“It's not, I guess” I inhaled, breathing deep so the smoke filled my lungs before releasing a plume of white.

“I've got to go back inside and tune up.”

“Talk later?”

“Sure,” she said, crushing what remained of her cigarette under foot.

I couldn't remember Janey ever having a boyfriend, or a girlfriend for that matter. She was always just my little sister, my innocent, sweet, happy little sister. And now? Now what the fuck did I know about her? How much had she changed since dad had died? Since I had left? I had changed her diapers, for fuck's sake. She'd followed me around like a shadow when we were kids, repeating everything I'd said until it drove me up the wall and I'd locked her in mom and dad's room. She was the one I'd practiced ridiculous wrestling moves on, the one I'd teased relentlessly, the one I'd walked to school hand in hand with, had promised, to my father, to protect for ever and ever. I pondered whether or not she needed protecting.

“Got a light?”

I flinched, seeing a man with a camera dangling around his neck, a camera that

rested against his protruding belly. I passed him my lighter. He lit his cigarette, looking at my Zippo. "Nice. This lighter's a classic. I like the design. Must be an antique. Mind if I keep it?" I took the lighter from him. He was wearing a salt and pepper cap that would have looked ridiculous on most people, but somehow suited him. "Where's your costume?"

"Where's yours?"

"*Touché*. But you see, this is my costume. I'm a band photographer dressed up as a band photographer. So, I'll ask again. Where's your costume?" I shrugged.

"Not much of a talker, eh? So who are you here to see?"

"The Chained Daisies."

"Hot. I loves me some lesbo photo action."

"*What the fuck did you say?*"

"That they're hot. And they're lesbians." I dropped my cigarette and turned away. Trying to ignore the fire rising again in my head, I pushed through a group of people. I needed to get back into the bar. "It's not a bad thing," he yelled after me as I opened the door.

I ordered another rum and coke. Janey was tuning her bass. She had been a band geek since she was a child. I had never learned how to play a single instrument. There were a number of reasons why. One of those reasons was because I couldn't sing. During a May 24<sup>th</sup> weekend party in high school, at the drunken campfire sing-along, a red-headed freshman drinking vodka coolers told me I was tone deaf. That wasn't so bad until another girl, one I was actually interested in, told me that when I sang I sounded like a cat

in a bag being beaten with a baseball bat. I pretty much dropped any musical ambition soon after.

Janey stood at the far end of the stage, her black bass and silver pickups catching the dim light surrounding her. She stood below one of the huge speakers. There was one on each side of the room, both balanced on flimsy stands with spindly legs. The photographer with the salt and pepper cap was back, standing near the front of the stage. I watched his mouth move, the formation of vowels and consonants strung together with a smug little grin. I hadn't noticed it outside, but he was obviously drunk. One of Janey's bandmates stepped up to a microphone.

“Alright, fuck it, close enough for rock and roll. We're 'The Chained Daisies.’” The crowd responded by hollering and clapping and the drummer bashed her high hats four times. “The Chained Daisies” broke into song, something reminiscent of early “Ramones” and “Stiff Little Fingers.”

*“Gimmie, gimmie, gimme the war. Gimmie, gimmie, gimmie the war. My subject is war, and the pity of war. The poetry is in the pity. I watch, watch, watch their sufferings, as well as a pleader can. I watch, watch, watch that I may speak of them, as well as a pleader can,”* the girl at the microphone sang. This had to be Jana. Janey was right, her voice was pure Joan Jett: adrenaline, violence, and power. Janey jumped on the bass drum and jumped off again, almost falling into the crowd, a crowd which had gone from stagnant to blender in seconds. The photographer was caught in the middle, the smile wiped from his face, arms out and searching for a safe port in the chaos.

The song was over two minutes after it began. The animals on the dance floor

clapped and yelled. With the end of the song, the photographer was given a chance to regain his balance, and took the opportunity to inspect his camera.

“Thank you, that one was called 'War is Raw,' this one is '9/11 was a Joke,’” Jana said. Once again, the drummer laid into her hats for four beats and the band began. I knew nothing about chord progressions, but I knew the melody for “Sheena is a Punk Rocker” when I heard it, which was, pretty much, exactly what they were playing. The photographer stumbled over to me.

“They're good, but they need to stop stealing Ramones songs,” he said, snorting. The music was drowning him out to the degree that I could pretend to ignore him. “So what don't you like about lesbians?” he asked. I shoved him into the mosh pit. He stumbled and tripped into the whirl of bodies tossed in dance before falling backward, landing on the base of the stand holding the speaking towering above Janey. I was out of my chair as the speaker began to topple, driving my shoulder through the sweaty, speeding bodies in my way.

I felt the crush of the thing as its full weight started to bear down on me. A vision crossed my mind of being killed right then and there. It made me feel strangely calm and happy.

Arms from the crowd joined together in pulling the speaker up and off of me, causing the thing to tilt precariously in the other direction. The momentum petered out and its full weight returned to the skinny pillar and its spider-like legs. The band, which had kept on playing through the chaos, finished up their song.

“Looks like its gonna be one of those nights at The Pale Horse!” Jana yelled into

the microphone. I looked down to see the photographer laughing. I grabbed him with both hands and hauled him to his feet, punching his face once, twice, three times in rapid succession before my arm was held back. It was Jana. She twisted my shirt in her hand.

*“Get the fuck out of my bar you fascist pig!”* She dug the microphone into my chest as she shoved me. It made a popping sound. I felt an arm on shoulder, grabbing me from behind. I yanked the arm forward, coming face to face with the young man who had been wearing a pea coat.

“No offense, but you should get out of here. This bar is ready to tear you apart.” I took a look around at the faces, some contorted in anger, others too drunk to know what was going on. On my way out, I took one last look at the stage before exiting, catching a glimpse of the photographer, bloody-faced, giving me the finger, and Janey, her back turned to me, downing a bottle of beer.

**Chapter 2: Winter**

It had been a driving cold winter, but this was normal for St. John's. It was a Friday in late February. I wasn't sure of the date. The streetlights seemed particularly bright as the snow tumbled down, limbs of corrugated steel casting beams of light from their yellow eyes, illuminating the dance of impossibly chubby flakes of snow before they came to rest on the world.

My head was full of rum. I froze for a moment in mid step before I wheeled around recklessly, ready to fight.

A car idled behind me at the intersection of Bonaventure and Empire Avenue. A man crossed the street in the distance. I watched his progress until he slipped out of view. I continued, but not before another chill passed through me, an iceberg slipping past the narrows in the dead of night. I picked my steps more carefully, stepping over cracks in the pavement half disguised under snow. I stopped again, spinning around with a swinging fist this time and a yell for nobody, nothing, just the faint echo of cars passing somewhere in the distance, on their way to the East End of the city.

Every few houses I caught a glimpse of a blue strobe emitted from a television screen, fugitive light escaping from living room windows. Sometimes I saw the shadow of a head behind thin curtains.

I don't know what time I had started walking back to my mother's house. I was still living at her place on Maxse Street; I'd been there since I'd arrived in September. She'd bought the house not long after I left for the war. My father's life insurance policy

helped her with the cost of the place. It was a positive thing that came out of his death. After selling the old house, she had enough to get out of Rabbittown and buy a decent home.

I'd woken up from a nap at 8:48 p.m. with the urge to punch someone. Failing that, I felt like screaming my lungs out until my breath tasted of metal. When my head cleared, I decided against all of that. Leaving the house, I walked up Hayward Avenue, then McDougall before lighting a smoke. The streets were wet and I sneezed as I turned onto Bonaventure. It looked like snow was coming.

There weren't many cars out for a Saturday evening. The rich families from the suburbs scutter into downtown on weekends. The parents arrive in SUVs, vehicles that spend most of their existences in garages, and eat at overpriced restaurants on Water and Duckworth Street before catching a movie. Their kids show up later and get slammed on George Street. At three in morning when the bars let out, they stumble through downtown in drunken cacophony, buying greasy pizza or street meat slathered in ketchup, mayo and bacon bits before stumbling into cabs on their way back to beautiful homes with perfectly manicured lawns and gardens.

I gathered a wad of phlegm in my mouth and spit it on an SUV sitting in the parking lot of Holy Heart of Mary High School. I stopped for a moment, watching my saliva leave a trail down the driver's side window.

There were a few people milling around the liquor store on Merrymeeting Road. At one time, most of the liquor stores in Newfoundland were separate entities, places where one did not have to think of cabbages and vodka in consecutive moments, let alone

have them share a single shopping list. By the time I'd returned, most of the NLC stores had been paired with grocery stores like this one, presumably in an attempt to connect eating and drinking booze as codependent activities in the minds of the citizens of the province. The jury was still out with regards to how well that plan was going.

Still, the proximity of the liquor store to the grocery store meant that I could pick up a bottle of cola to go with the flask of Old Sam rum I was intending to purchase. There was only one clerk working at the liquor store checkout terminals. She wore a wine colored uniform and a black hijab. I looked at the bottle in my hand. It would only take a minute to buy the booze. Or I could put the bottle back and walk out. The next closest liquor store was the one in the old Memorial Stadium, at least a thirty minute walk away. I paced down the wine aisle, turning the bottle over in my hand.

“Can I help you, sir?” A clerk in the same kind of wine colored uniform approached me.

“No. Leave me alone.”

“Okay... are you alright, sir?”

“What the fuck do you mean? Alright? Of course I'm alright. I'm just minding my own fucking business.” He stepped back.

“Sir, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave.”

“No, look, I've... had a hard day. You see, my father just died and I really feel out of sorts. Honestly, all I want to do is buy some booze. Old Sam was his favorite type of rum. I used to sit down and drink it with him often. It would mean a lot to me if I could buy this.” I was shaking. My armpits were swamps. I tamped my brow with my sleeve.



He stood silent for a long moment before sighing.

“The checkout line is over there.”

“Yes, but it's quite long. Can't I just give you the bottle? Here's twenty dollars.” I crammed both the bottle and my money into his hand.

With change in my pocket and the bottle in a brown bag, I stepped back outside and lit a cigarette. I removed the cap from the bottle of rum and took a drink. An old couple tottered past, staring at me. The man silently began shaking his head back and forth.

“What *the fuck* are you looking at!?” I yelled, screwing the cap back on the bottle. The couple quickened their pace.

I didn't really have anywhere to go, and there was nobody that I wanted to call, so I wandered down to Bannerman Park. It was home to a lot of firsts for me and the location of a bunch of great childhood memories. My dad had taught me how to throw a baseball there when I was seven years old. I'd played little league games on the diamond at the far end of the park near Circular Road. I swear to God I saw a couple having sex out on the hill just past right field during the third inning of a semi-final playoff game.

My family had gone on a bunch of picnics in that park. I could remember eating ham and cheese sandwiches on whole wheat bread with mayo and mustard and drinking tea poured out of a thermos into white Styrofoam cups, while dad talked about the brutal job the city of St. John's landscapers did with the grass in the park.

Later, as a teenager, it was the place where I'd smoked my first joint and the scene of my first fight when a guy named Darryl Hamlyn broke my nose. I'd had my first real

kiss in that park as well with a girl named Tracey Pennel. She was the same reason I'd gotten into that fight in the first place. For me, it was filled with ghosts that I longed to see again.

I was lucky. The park was almost empty when I got there. Most of the people typically around on a Saturday night – evening joggers, bored teenage kids looking for trouble, and middle aged professionals walking their German Shepherds and Labrador Retrievers and ridiculous looking Shih Tzus – were kept inside by the threat of snow, which was just beginning to come down. I headed for the shelter of the gazebo at the center of the park.

I had been snatching nips from the flask of Old Sam all this time. Under the cover of the gazebo, I held the bottle up to the light cast by one of the few street lamps in the park and discovered it was still two thirds full. I hadn't touched the cola yet. I took the plastic stoppers off both bottles and alternated between one and the other, becoming warmer with each shot of rum and chilled with each mouthful of soda. I started on another cigarette and began thinking about the war, and about Pink.

I can barely remember the day I arrived in Kandahar. The plane had touched down in the late afternoon and I'd been so exhausted from the flight that I was ready for bed by the time I was shown my quarters.

At breakfast the next day I'd been told that not only was another Newfoundlander a part of my unit, but that we'd likely be working together quite a bit as we were both attached to the First Canadian Combat Logistics Battalion. He was from Grand Falls, a place I knew a bit about as I had family living out there, family he probably knew more

about than I did.

After breakfast, I was on my way back to my quarters when I heard a commotion beyond the gates of the air base. I arrived on the scene to find a pair of soldiers carrying a stretcher holding a man with his left arm blown off. Up ahead, a burning Bison MRV armored personnel carrier contained a soldier stuck in the driver's compartment. Though he wasn't screaming, it was obvious he was in pain as his eyes were wide open and sweat was pouring down his face. Black smoke billowed from the hood, evidence of the burning engine in the neighbouring cowling.

“Don't just stand there like a dicksmack, help me out!” Another soldier, standing on top of the vehicle, was yelling at me. He extended his hand, pulling me up. Both of us got a good grip on the back of the jammed soldier's body armor. We strained and cursed but could not get him free. It felt as if something in my head was about to pop. My body began to quiver. We heard a snap as the trapped soldier came loose. It was as if the fire had killed the vehicle, forcing it to release its clenched jaws.

There were now others on the scene to help us, to take the injured soldier stretcher bound, via a Mercedes G-Wagon, to the military hospital. We jumped off the MRV to let a fire truck take care of the burning engine.

“Goddam! I told them the engine in that Bison was about to go!” It was the soldier who had helped me rescue the man. He spit, mumbling obscenities to himself before launching into a coughing fit. He put his head down, hands on his knees. I saluted him.

“Lance Corporal Griffin Keeping”

“Sergeant Ryan Pinkerton,” he replied. “Fucking electrical fires in these Bisons. We're killing our own men.”

\* \* \* \* \*

About a quarter of the flask was left when two teenagers entered the gazebo. Dressed in black, hooded sweatshirts and jeans too big for them, they walked directly towards me. One of them tapped my foot with the toe of his sneaker.

“Nice shoes, dude. Airwalks? I got the same pair. Look.” They were the same make and coloring. “Where'd you get them?” I cleared my throat but didn't speak. “It's rude not to talk when someone asks you a question, man.” He crouched down and attempted to look me in the eyes. “Hellllllloo?” He returned to a standing position.

“You should go,” I said. His friend sat down on the edge of the gazebo, near the entrance. I took another drink from the bottle.

“Go? We just got here. Hey man, is that whiskey? I love whiskey.”

“It's rum. And I told you to leave.”

“It's a free country. Hey, save me bottoms, would ya?” He tilted his head to the side, expectant. “Hey man, seriously, save me bottoms, I could really use a drink.” He kicked my foot. “Hey man, save me bottoms, save me bottoms, save me bottoms, save me....” I put the bottle down and grabbed him by the sweater, crossing the gazebo in two strides and launching him out the way he came. He cleared the stairs and landed on the asphalt path in a heap. His friend jumped over the edge of the gazebo and bolted for about twenty yards, coming to a stop when he realized I wasn't in pursuit.

“You're going to pay for this, you fucking psycho!” the injured one yelled. Both

ran towards the colonial building. I drank down the rest of the bottle of Old Sam. It was time to go. I lit a cigarette.

I walked for a while after that, down by Quidi Vidi and King George V Soccer Field, scaling Kennas Hill through the graveyard and making my way to Elizabeth Avenue where I could loop back around towards my mother's house. I thought about Pink, about Bannerman Park, about my childhood, but mostly I thought about my father and the feeling of being cold and dead in the grave and away from all the bullshit that being alive entails.

I don't know when I made it back to my mother's place. I fumbled with the keys trying to get in and nearly fell over, using the door to hold myself upright. A light came on inside the house. The door opened. She was in her bath robe, thick lines under her eyes. Her hair used to be a thick and vibrant mess of curls. Now it seemed covered in a sheen of ash, and was devil snared from sleep, or lack thereof. She opened the door wider so I could enter.

At first we stood in the porch in silence. She must have been struck dumb by the dual urge to chastise me for being out in the snow so long and for being so drunk, unsure of which one to start with. After a few moments, she found her tongue. "Another late one tonight, Griffin? Lord, give me the strength." I wasn't sure if she was being ironic or sincere. In the last month she'd gotten back into the habit of going to church. A week previous I'd found a Bible on the kitchen table "What am I going to do with you, my child?"

I cackled.

“No worries at all, mudder.” I was laying it on thick, a dig at the baygirl still locked inside her. “Just 'avin a bit of fun, missus. Just a few laughs, wa? Don't worry about me, no sir. I'm just dandy. Just gettin' the divil outta me, is all.” She was long gone by the time I finished my saucy tirade. I took off my shoes and walked into the living room, flopping on the couch. The television was on, broadcasting some CBC documentary about girls kidnapped from old Soviet bloc states to work as prostitutes in Western Europe and North America.

“Yes, and what do you think you're doing?”

“Watching TV.”

“I'll bet you are. Upstairs. Now. And don't come back down until you've had a shower and you're wearing some clean clothes!”

I was up and gone before she'd finished screeching at me. The stairs creaked, the wood cold on my bare feet as I'd abandoned my socks in the process of kicking off my shoes. I wondered for a moment why I had bothered to come back to this God-forsaken island instead of setting up a shack on some remote tropical paradise.

Opening the door to my room, the knob fell off in my hand. I jammed it back in, knocking out the piece of knob on the other side. The door itself was in bad need of a new paint job. Tiny white flakes littered the floor below. I tried to shut the thing a couple times after stepping into my room, but it kept coming open. It was so old that the wood had warped decades ago, and nothing but a swift bodycheck could get it to close properly. I was ready to kick the crap out of it but didn't. Even in the drunken state I was in, I knew I'd probably knock it off its hinges. I feared the range of fury and tears my mother would

reach in reaction. I moved my clothes hamper from its spot at the bottom of my bed, wedging the door shut.

I started to strip. It felt like getting naked in someone else's house. There were no missed ghosts here, no walls that manifested happy memories. When awake late at night, victim of the thieves of sleep and disembodied voices caught in my head, the ancient ceilings and crown mouldings only amplified my loneliness. I sat on the edge of the bed wearing only my jeans. I stared at the bundle of letters and the leather-bound diary my father had left me, and decided to read.

*August 1, 1917*

*Bed # 709, Ward N*

*Duchess of Westminster Hospital, Paris Place*

*London, England*

*Dearest Ethel,*

*No doubt from the above address you can tell I'm in Blighty. I'll tell you right off, I haven't been wounded badly at all and they'll have me sent back to the front lines soon. I suppose you'd like to know how I ended up here.*

*I was on the point of climbing out of a trench when a shell landed on the parapet not thirty feet from me and burst with a dull pop. I held my breath, sort of stunned for a moment, standing there without moving. It was a close call for sure, and I figured it to be a dud. Before I could continue with the advance, however, I realized it had to be a gas shell, as I noticed the polluted air around me. I was quick to put my SBR on after that,*

*mind you, hauling the clumsy thing on over my face as fast as I could.*

*Not fast enough, apparently. I fell back into the trench, feeling a bit dizzy and weak. I came face to face with the Sergeant-Major and I was sure he'd let me have it, but instead he found a couple of stretcher bearers. They carried me to an ambulance car, which drove me to a field hospital. After being treated in the field hospital, I was put in another ambulance. I awoke as they were carrying me into a hospital which looked like a school. A couple of lads from the Regiment were there. They had been hit with shrapnel in Fleurbaix a few days before, and were hobbling about with their legs full of fragments.*

*After about a week or two at the school hospital they figured it was just as well I be sent to Blighty to recuperate. It was all well and good with me, as I was due a couple of weeks leave and was planning on visiting London anyway.*

*So here I am in this lovely place, English nurses doting on me as if I were their own flesh and blood. The beds by the walls are equipped with iron railings about eight feet high, and can be screened off into separate compartments. In all, I feel quite privileged lying in this box stall with a music cabinet on either side and five pillows for comfort! I have a fine view of the main drive and pass many an hour watching hearses galloping by, followed always by long processions of mourners.*

*My only complaint is the food. It is quite a state and what I wouldn't give for a plate of your homemade fish and brewis.*

*I guess I'll close now, dearest Ethel. As I said, don't worry about me as I'm safe and cozy here in Blighty. Kiss the kids for me. As always, save a few kisses for yourself.*

*Yours,*



*Levi*

*France*

*December 25, 1917*

*Dear old sweetheart,*

*I haven't the heart to write to anyone but you. I've been badly out of sorts this last week or so. I believe that I'm getting worn out with it all. I haven't the stamina I thought I had. Guess I'll carry on 'til I drop, and even then they'll probably just send me back after a couple days at the field hospital.*

*How's Les doing? I'm glad the doctor from Fortune fixed up his nose after he got in a scrape with young Billy Hamlyn. And how's my little girl Molly getting along? I'm anxious to get back home and spend time with the three of you. Sometimes I wish I would get a real good Blighty wound and be done with this war for good. Though of course I don't really mean that as the censors, and everyone else, would have my head if I did.*

*This being Christmas and all, the officers decided to make as good a time for the men as they could under the circumstances, but the circumstances were adverse to a merry time. First, suitable places for the men to eat had to be found, as we are all billeted in barns, stables, lofts or any other old place where they can squeeze a platoon. It's small wonder the smell from us reeks to high heaven! Of course it doesn't matter all the other meals, but we couldn't eat a Christmas dinner under those conditions! The provisions were also a great source of worry to the powers that be. Remarkably, they put together not only turkey for the men, but also a feed of jiggs dinner and figgy duff to boot! There*

*was just enough for each man to get a good meal.*

*We had two platoons at our place, so one had to wait until the second sitting. When it was made known that our platoon had to wait, there arose from us a terrible cry of disgust. After a while the disgust was amplified by pangs of hunger, which in turn gave way to exhaustion, the men becoming so hungry they were too weak even to swear.*

*At last the word passed to fall in, the other platoon having finished their meal. Joyous we did, not with the reluctance of a drill parade but with the abandon displayed by a bunch of young pigs when they smell a pail of their favorite food.*

*I had judiciously placed myself at the head of the line so I could get served quicker when the order of "fall out all NCOs" was heard. Fall out we did and had to distribute the grub. The sergeant giving out the meat was feeling a little exhilarated. It seemed he was under the influence of the Christmas Spirit, trying to make up for every awful bully-beef, apple-pear jam on bread, trench water tea meal we've suffered through since coming to France. I feared there'd be no meat left by the time our turn came round. Luck was with us, however, and when the NCOs lined up to eat we were all offered a generous helping.*

*Halfway through the meal the captain came along and told each man to get a glass. He then passed around bottles of champagne. This time fortune was smiling on me. I had a beer glass! No sooner had I drunk her down when the captain came up to me and asked, "did you have a drink lance corporal?" "Yes, sir," I said in my best military manner. "Well, have another," he said. On top of that, our machine gun corporal, Barbour, had bought quart bottles for his men, and insisted on including me in his crew. I*

*was certainly “well away” by the time the figgy duff came around.*

*As good as it is to have a proper Christmas, or as proper a Christmas as I can have without being home, nights like these are a rare commodity. Despite all the enjoyment I felt, underneath it all there was such homesickness like you would not believe. When I got up out of my musty blanket in the old loft this morning, my first thoughts were of you and the kiddies.*

*Peculiar thing, I couldn't picture Les or Molly in any other fashion than the way they looked the Christmas before I left. Les wearing his cowboy hat and shooting his toy gun, chasing Molly around the tree. She had those Indian feathers in her hair and was riding Les's toy horse.*

*I'll close now. Don't worry about me at all. I think I'll be safe here, at least for the time being. Give my kind regards to all of the folks back home and love to the family. And believe me when I write that I am yours always and forever, my sweetheart.*

*I remain your loving husband,*

*Levi*

I collapsed on the bed, rolled under the covers and immediately fell asleep. My brain was plagued with the nightmare I'd been having since I returned from Afghanistan.

It is dusk. The air is hot but there is a slight, cooling breeze. It is springtime and I am in a small village just outside of Kandahar City. I can taste dust, ash, and sweat. There are dogs barking in the distance. In full military gear, driving an RG 31, I pull up to the side of a mud brick structure. I know I am on a dangerous mission but, for some reason, I

am alone. The air is filled with burning pieces of paper. The doors of a nearby hut slam open and shut. It sounds like fists pounding on a wooden kitchen table. In the dying light, I can see the outline of dozens of poles, each one about six feet high. I approach one and see my own disembodied head, impaled.

There is an explosion.

For a moment everything goes black, then white. I cannot hear, cannot see, cannot taste, but I can feel pain. I look down. I am lying on the ground. The bottom half of my body has been blown away. My ears ring horribly. Sparks of light pop in my eyes. Everything begins to fade further and further into nothing.

Awaking from the dream, I found myself on the floor, covered in sweat. It was morning. I felt like I hadn't slept at all. I tossed a yellow towel around myself, one that, for some reason, reminded me of ancient trips to Burnt Woods, to the few summer days I could lounge on the heated beach rocks on the tiny shore down from my grandparent's house. I moved my clothes basket back to its place near the foot of my bed and lumbered down the hall to the bathroom.

I came downstairs in an old red shirt dabbled with paint splotches and a pair of jeans with the knees ripped out of them. My mother looked like she'd been up for hours.

“Planning on doing some painting today, or just too lazy to put on a decent set of clothes?” She was on her laptop computer, checking her email. “I made breakfast. It's in the microwave.”

I opened the door to the microwave to find a plate with two slices of brown bread, some hash browns – crispy cubes of potato, not the crappy shredded wisps – and a ham

and cheese omelette. I sat down to the table. Halfway through my first forkful of omelette I stopped chewing.

“Everything alright?” my mother asked, continuing to read the paper. I nodded.

The omelette was fine. But the cheese was the individually wrapped, processed stuff, the same kind they served us at Kandahar Air Base Mess Hall. The smell of diesel exhaust mixed with mess hall food seemed to linger in the air. My mind jumped to a vision, cradling Pink's mutilated half-body in my arms, my hands covered with blood.

“Griffin?” My mother tilted her head slightly, the word soft in her mouth, the way she used to say it when I was a child.

I ran to the bathroom, clutching my guts. Moments later I was on my knees, head in the porcelain bowl. I could feel the coolness of the water without touching it. I wanted to release everything, gather all the noise inside and to have out with it, a vile mess rejected by my body, driven into the water to be flushed away. All I could manage was a little bit of barely digested egg and potato.

I flossed and brushed my teeth, rinsed my mouth and washed my hands before returning to the kitchen table. The unfinished omelette was there, waiting for me.

“Griffin?”

“Yeah mom.” I looked up. The morning light spilled through the kitchen window and across her face. “The omelet was good. Really. It's just that I'm feeling nauseous. A hangover, I suppose. I should have said something.” We stared at each other in silence for a moment before I picked up the newspaper, pretending to read. She pretended to tidy the kitchen.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was four months and three days after I had arrived, February 5, 2008. We were passing by the “golden arches,” a flat, pale green navigational landmark near the eastern lip of Kandahar city, vaguely reminiscent of the arches from the famous restaurant chain. It was a place that marked the western boundary of “IED Alley,” a haven for insurgents to plant improvised explosive devices.

A bus was stopped in what passed for a parking lot outside a local restaurant. Pink was sitting beside me picking his nails clean.

“Isn't that bus typically used to commute Afghans who work at the air base? What's with the kids?” I asked. I was driving. There were at least a dozen school children loitering outside the bus, stuffing their faces with naan bread.

“Sometimes kids ride on those buses as well. To school, home, whatever.”

A little girl clothed in purple waved to us. An image of Janey popped into my mind.

“Hey,” I said to Pink, nudging him. “Check it.” We waved back, smiling, as she got back on the bus with the rest of the children and commuters.

“Think she saw us?” I asked. The bus appeared in our rear view mirror as we drove past it and up the road.

My eardrums were pierced as a shower of debris and shrapnel peppered the side of the RG 31. Something hit the rear window, breaking it but not shattering it. I looked back, seeing a ball of yellow and orange flame. There was a convoy headed this way. Pink got on the radio.

“Alpha 1, this is Sergeant Ryan Pinkerton. We're out by the golden arches. There's been an explosion. I think a commuter bus just went up.”

“Pinkerton, this is Sergeant Williams, Alpha One. Can you confirm?”

I wheeled the vehicle around. A blackened, burning something fell out of the molten flame that, moments before, had been a somewhat rusted, blue and silver 1972 GMC school bus. Driving closer, the still burning, blackened arms, legs and torso became evident. There was an empty space where the head was supposed to be.

“Affirmative. We're going to need a clean up crew.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Griffin...”

“What mom?”

“I think it's time you found your own place.” She was looking away from me. I traced her line of sight to the geometric patterns on the curtains.

“Say again?”

“You need to move out, Griffin. It's time you moved out.”

I cleared my throat and clenched my fist, the blood pounding in my head. I rapped my knuckles off the table.

“How long have I got?”

“I don't know. A month. Or two. You can have two.” I nodded. She took me in her arms and kissed my forehead. “I love you, my son. You know that, don't you?”

The next morning I awoke to the phone ringing at 10 a.m. My head was pounding. I'd had the nightmare again. I needed a drink of water and a painkiller.

“Yeah?”

“This is your wake-up call. Time for breakfast.”

It was Janey.

“Can't.”

“Don't dare go back on your word Griffin.”

I sighed.

“Okay. Meet you at Hava Java in half an hour.”

I hung up the phone and rubbed my eyes. A muscle in my thigh began to twitch. I punched it a half dozen times but was unable to coax it to stop.

Janey showed up about ten minutes late. She was wearing an army coat she must have picked up second hand, one with a patch of the German flag sewn onto the shoulder. Underneath that she had on a Johnny Cash t-shirt. She had also dyed her hair bright red. I ordered an orange pekoe tea and bought her a cup of fair trade Columbian roast. We climbed the stairs and sat in the back of the cafe in the mezzanine area. There was a group of local artists drawing comics and a young couple who looked like they were on their first date. A “Weakerthans” song droned over the PA system.

“Mom kicked me out,” I said.

“I heard. Maybe if you came home sober every now and then she'd have given you another few months.”

“Fuck you.”

“Sorry, but you need some truth.”

We sat in silence for a while.



“Any update on the big, scary, 'what are you going to do now' question?” She mimed a cartoon ghost, minus the sheet.

I asked her about “The Chained Daisies.” They were preparing to record their first full length album in a few weeks and were planning a tour for the summer. She wanted a new bass. Something classic, preferably a 1975 Rickenbacker 4001 with a fireglow finish. The ringing sustain on Rickenbackers was amazing, she said, as was their treble punch. However, the '75 4001 ran about four thousand bucks, so there was no way she'd be able to get it without selling a kidney. Instead, she was thinking about settling for a Danelectro DC 59 reissue in seafoam green, a guitar she could get from “The Hot Faucets” bassist for about three hundred bucks, a few grams of weed and a couple hits of acid. It wasn't a 1975 Rickenbacker 4001, but it was better than the piece of garbage she was currently playing.

I asked her if her band had forgiven me yet. She looked away, shaking her head back and forth.

“Jana still refers to you as 'that psycho asshole I almost kicked the shit out of.’”

We finished our drinks. She hugged me before walking down the steps and out of sight. I sat at the table a little while longer. The cartoonists had left but the couple was still there. The woman got up and headed upstairs to use the bathroom, leaving the man alone. I got up to leave.

I began walking east on Water Street towards the court houses, passing a long haired kid wearing a hooded sweatshirt with a logo of a smiling drop of water giving the thumbs up. I thought of the kids I'd met at the gazebo, and then about my time in Halifax

just before I had come home.

I didn't stay in Halifax long. I remember sitting in the cafe on the main floor of the hostel I was staying in on Gottigen Street. It was the end of August of 2008 and I'd been in the city for two days. The previous night had been a late one, and it was mid afternoon by the time I finally pulled myself out of bed to get a bagel and coffee.

My pack on my shoulder, I took a left after exiting the building, heading towards the heart of downtown. I was planning on picking up a chintzy souvenir, maybe a *Trailer Park Boys* t-shirt for Janey, when I found myself surrounded by four junior high school kids. They were locals who lived somewhere close to the hostel. I knew this because I had seen them twice before, once milling around the hostel cafe trying to hustle some free drinks, and another time hanging out in the parking lot of one of the run-down apartment complexes in the neighborhood.

“Hey bro,” one of them said, pulling out a length of pipe, “what the fuck you doing in this 'hood?” The others laughed and began talking about how they were going to beat the shit out of me. They didn't ask for my wallet, or my jacket, or my pack. I looked up and saw the police station, not a block away.

I remembered I had a pen in my pocket. I could stab the most dangerous one – the one with the length of pipe – in the neck or eye. This might send the others into a brief state of shock. Then I'd take out the tall one, driving my elbow into his throat. Chances were, the other two would then come at me simultaneously, one likely with a haymaker, allowing me to twist and break at just above the elbow. The last one would be easy to handle after that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pink was driving. It was April 16, 2008, six months and two weeks since I had arrived in Afghanistan. We passed a group of four Afghan women walking on the side of the road in the direction we were driving. They were dressed in wine colored robes, black veils draped over their heads preventing us from seeing their faces.

“Have you ever wondered what it would be like?” I asked Pink. The convoy slowed down, then stopped.

“What *what* would be like?” Pink asked.

The group of four Afghan women caught up to our vehicle and began to pass us. I could not make out even a hint of a curve under their ample robes.

I picked up the radio.

“One, this is Five. Everything okay up there, sir?”

“Five, one. Got a small white Toyota Hiace van stalled out in the middle of the road. Looks like it could be trouble. Going to investigate.”

“Roger,” I said. “Anything we can do to help?”

“Sit tight for now. We'll let you know.”

I released the switch on the microphone.

“You said, 'have you ever wondered what it would be like,'" Pink prodded me.

“Oh, yeah. To, you know, hook up with one of these women?”

“Hell no. I mean, a lot of the times you can't see their faces, or not their whole face at least, so you have no idea if they're butt ugly or absolutely gorgeous.”

“Yeah, but what if you could see? What if you did, and she was up for it?”

“Griffin, there's no concept of casual sex in this country. If there is one, it's not the same as it is back home”

“You mean, if you want casual sex here you have to pay for it.”

Pink sighed.

A flock of starlings was passing across the sky.

“Just like home,” I said, pointing up. We watched them flutter erratically overhead, then disappear behind a nearby building.

A blast of light nearly blinded us, coming from the direction of Alpha One, followed successively by three smaller blasts. My brain grappled with the fact that we had been hit. An airborne door from a Mercedes-Benz G Class ripped through the windshield of the vehicle in front of us, slicing through the two men in the front seat. A leg landed on the hood of our truck. The foot was still in the sandal.

A voice came over the radio.

“This is three, one and two have been hit! Requesting backup immediately!”

We burst out of the RG 31, setting up a security cordon in moments, catching a glimpse of figures fleeing across the open field to the north. To the south was a terraced village built into the side of a hill. Pink was in full battle mode, barking orders to a group of soldiers outside our vehicle as I caught a glimpse of the mutilated bodies in the Bison in front of us, arcs of blood painted across the wind-blown road.

Fragmented body parts lay scattered across the field, on the dirt road, and among the smoking, useless vehicles. My brain recognized the red of the blood but processed it more like paint, as if someone had tossed buckets of the stuff over everything. I tripped

and fell over, twisting my ankle. I turned to see what had caused me to fall. On the ground was an arm, partially cloaked in singed, wine colored cloth.

“Sir? Are you alright sir?” Petty Officer Rich Lemming stood looking down at me. I did not respond. “QRF has been called, sir. Medics are on their way.” There was a man lying on the ground next to one of the Bisons. Three soldiers were administering first aid.

“Is he going to make it?” I asked as I walked closer. The prone man's eyes were dull and, like his body, motionless. It was Private First Class Howard Snowden. A Calgary Highlander, Snowden was a die-hard Calgary Flames fan. There was a gaping hole in his chest.

“He told me he was cold, sir,” one of the soldiers said, looking up at me.

I looked inside the interior of the Bison. It was a carnage of bags of chips and pop cans and a boxes of cookies, spilled across the seats and the dashboard. The air permeated with the smell of singed flesh.

“Suicide bombers. No time to react, to do anything.” Lemming was talking to me. I looked down. There, on the side of the road, the hijab ripped away, was the exposed face of one of the four women in robes we had seen earlier.

\* \* \* \* \*

I found myself at the top of the steps next to the court house. Moving down Duckworth Street, I worked my way towards the East End of St. John's, taking a sudden left onto Cathedral. I found myself in the shadow of the Masonic Temple. There was nowhere I particularly wanted to be, nothing I needed to do besides find a job. I'd

forgotten to skim the want ads while waiting for Janey, and didn't want to head back to Hava Java to find her there.

I took a left at the top of Cathedral and found myself in front of the Gower Street United Church. Perhaps I was called by the naked maples planted opposite the church, rattling in chorus in the freezing late afternoon breeze. This was the place where I had been baptized and confirmed, but the intervening years had become a wall as high as the spire that crowned the building.

I remembered the day of my confirmation. It was warm and sunny. I wore black dress pants and an aqua green collared shirt with a skinny, black clip-on tie. Mom had spent about twenty minutes convincing my hair to part in an organized fashion on the left side of my head, bringing tears to my eyes as she worked the comb through tangle and snag. After pinning things in place with a handful of gel, she'd splashed my face with dad's aftershave. I still remember the burn.

“Now, aren't you quite the little man.” She wiped my cheeks with a towel before kissing me on top of the head.

Reverend Brown conducted both the confirmation lessons and the ceremony. He was still in decent shape, even though he was in his fifties by that time. His robes only modestly hinted at the frame of an ex-provincial rugby star who had played for Team Canada.

The lessons had been just short of torture. Upon seeing two or three heads nodding to sleep in the pews, Reverend Brown would punctuate his lectures with a thunderclap of his meaty hands.

I stood next to Tracey Pannel during the ceremony. Her hand brushed mine more than once, sending blood rushing to my cheeks and forehead. By the end of the ceremony, when called to receive, sparks danced in my legs. My armpits were slick and my brow damp. I kneeled and waited. I tried to snatch a glance underneath Tracy's skirt as she got up. A shock ran through me from the hard gaze of Reverend Brown. I held my hands out to receive my first wafer, the first body of Christ I would ever taste. I placed it in my mouth and swallowed it. The wafer stuck in my throat. I pulled the chalice of wine toward me, almost knocking it out of Reverend Williams' hands. He was a friend and an understudy of Reverend Brown, a man much the likeness of Friar Tuck. The wine filled my mouth with a coppery taste, sliding down my throat and burning a hole in my belly. I looked at my hands, finding consecrated drops of Holy Blood on my fingertips. Standing and turning, I flinched at the flash of my mother's camera, momentarily stunned and dizzy, much to the delight of the crowd, which reverberated with a ripple of laughter.

After the ceremony, my father took the family out to dinner. The restaurant, in the heart of downtown, offered a fantastic view of St. John's harbor. A gray battleship passed through the narrows, inciting minor euphoria in a group of tourists huddled next to the picture window. My father put his glass of rum and coke aside and looked at me.

“Come outside with me for a minute. I want to have a talk, man to man.” Most of the time, when the phrase “man to man” had been spoken to me in a sentence uttered by an uncle or a teacher or a coach, it had been followed by a goofy grin to my mother, or sister, or some other nearby relative. My father, however, stared intently, straight faced, his eyes meeting mine.

The temperature had dropped. In the parking lot, we watched sailors load a freighter with a backhoe. My father lit a cigarette.

“Can I have one?”

“Don't tell your mother.” My father said, passing me his pack and lighter. “I'll tell you something *my* father told me when I was about your age.” He took a drag from his cigarette, the smoke immediately dissipated by the wind. “You'll be an adult soon. Being an adult is difficult.”

“Being a teenager is difficult.”

He paused for a moment, as if giving thought to what I had said.

“I want you to remember three things.” He scratched his upper lip with the nail from his index finger before continuing. “These three things I want you to do no matter how difficult they may be at any given time, in any given situation.” I nodded. I had a slight headache. My mouth tasted like ash. I didn't want the rest of the cigarette, but I kept smoking, letting it burn down as much as I could.

“First, always keep your word, even, and especially, when other people break theirs.” He took another drag from his cigarette, staring at me. “Say it.”

“Always keep my word.”

“Second, never turn your back on your family. Family is the most important thing you have in life. Friends come and go, but your family will always stick by you. Trust them, love them, protect them.”

“Never turn my back on my family” I said, before nodding.

“Finally, Griffin, do what scares you. Most people never do what scares them.



They have these plans, these *big* plans, and they waste their whole life because they're afraid something bad is going to happen if they do what they want. Don't let being scared ever stop you from doing something.”

“Do what scares me,” I said. I dropped the cigarette and crushed it under my foot.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was still standing outside the church when an old man came up and asked me if I was going inside. I wasn't sure how long I'd been standing there, lost in memories of my father. I opened the door and motioned for him to enter.

I smelled old hymnals and Bibles mixed with the odour of Pledge. Taking off my coat and placing it on a hanger in the porch, I noticed the church was empty save for a handful of old timers scattered here and there in the pews. The massive stained glass windows let in what little light remained left in the day. Flanked by yawning arches on either side, the crack of old bones was amplified by the two toned floor and vaulted ceilings. I walked down the center aisle to the front of the church, stopping short of the raised floor of the pulpit.

Had I been Catholic, I would have sought a confessional booth. I wanted to speak of everything trapped inside – my desire for the kind of numbness booze offered, the distance I felt from my family, and the godawful memories the war had left in my head. I wondered if confession could relieve the pressure building in my skull, or if only a bullet to the head could do the job sufficiently.

I stood for a moment, looking at a stained glass portrait of Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus above the words “And the word was made flesh and dwelt among us.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps what?” It was a lady sitting in the front row. She was probably in her mid-seventies, and wore a simple navy dress, brown pantyhose, and a broad rimmed hat with flowers tucked into the band. She put on her glasses, which had been dangling around her neck, and squinted at me.

“Nothing. I didn't say anything.”

Below windows smudged with thumb prints I could see a look of fear pass over her eyes. I managed a smile and stepped forward before I began to speak.

“I mean, perhaps I could sit there, next to you? If you don't mind, ma'am.”

“No, of course not. Have a seat right here.” Her face brightened as she patted a spot next to her on the pew. I swiveled, briefly, towards the door before sitting down.

“So you've come to hear the choir?” she asked. “They'll be on in a few minutes. You look a little like my grandson. He's in the choir.”

She asked me what I did. I told her I was between jobs. I began to sweat a little, as I did during those confirmation sessions. Mercifully, the choir appeared from a room at the back of the church. They weren't wearing white robes or anything, just their normal street clothes. Most of them were in hooded sweatshirts and jeans.

“That's my grandson right there.” She pointed to a boy with same curly hair as she had, though his was a dirty blond and hers had turned white years ago. I watched as he giggled and farted around with the guys on either side of him before the conductor brought the choir to attention.

I expected to be haunted by the hymns, to get chills down my spine, goosebumps,

or maybe even that misty eyed feeling that I usually get before the formation of tears. I not only expected it, I wanted it. I craved something in the ballpark of what all those jaded and fucked up misers experience at the end of feel-good, made-for-TV movies.

I felt nothing. In fact, it was worse than nothing. The longer I sat there, the more the sick heat grew inside of me. It wasn't that the choir was bad. They were just so fucking young and naïve. I sat quietly, pretending to listen.

\* \* \* \* \*

Not long after I arrived in Afghanistan, I introduced myself to a janitor at Kandahar Air Base. I wanted to make the facility feel a little more welcoming.

“I'm Lance Corporal Griffin Keeping,” I said to him, extending my hand. He had ears that were too big for his head, a crooked smile with an overbite, and he was skinny to the point of frailty. He smiled constantly. I'd seen him a number of times before, but we had never talked. He didn't look like a janitor.

“I am Mohammed Al-Ahmed. But most soldiers call me Al.”

“You speak English?”

“Yes. My English is good?”

“It's great.”

“My father spent his childhood here, but he was educated, as an adult, in America at Northwestern University.”

“That's a very good school,” I said.

“Yes, two years I spent there but I had to return to Afghanistan.”

“Oh really? Did something happen? Was it too expensive?” Al looked away and

was silent for a few moments. “Your father sounds like a very smart man.”

“Yes, brilliant man, he was. Math, science, history and English, he taught me, all by candlelight. Under Taliban, education was terrible. We learned lots about the Koran, to be sure, but they kept much from us. So much we were not allowed to learn. If they had known about my father, about the books he had they would have killed us.”

“Why didn't you leave the country? Move to America, or Canada?” He looked me in the eye.

“Mr. Griffin, if we are going to change the future of Afghanistan, then we need to be living in Afghanistan.”

One day I asked him how old he was. He seemed younger than me. I was starting to think of him as a little brother.

“Twenty eight years old, Mr. Griffin,” he said. He was five years older than me.

“Really?” I said. “You look young for twenty eight.”

“Thank you. I stay healthy. Exercise. Even as a boy, I loved to run. My friends and I would chase each other with sticks and pretend we were fighting the Russians. Like this.” He made the shape of a pistol with his thumb and forefinger. “Bang, bang. Go home communism!”

I burst into laughter, nearly dropping the papers I was carrying.

“What's so funny?”

I coughed and cleared my throat.

“We did the same thing back home. Although I think we called it ‘Cowboys and Indians’. Actually, my friends and I played a game called 'The A-Team.’”

“I know Cowboys and Indians, but not A-Team. What is this?”

“Hard to explain,” I said. “Originally, it was a television show that aired during the 1980's. Mr. T, a muscular black man with a Mohawk haircut, was the main character. In fact, Mr. T was one of my heroes. His catch phrase was, “I pitty da foo!””

“What?”

“I pitty da foo!”

“Is this English?” Al asked. He was serious. I began to laugh again.

“Why are you laughing, Mr. Griffin?”

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, it's funny.”

“What is funny?”

“Um, just, the memories I suppose.”

“One more time again please, the catch phrase.”

“I pitty da foo!”

“I pit da food! Right?”

Soon after, Al disappeared. Nobody had seen him for two weeks. He had not quit, nor notified the base that he would miss time. Pink and I were having coffee with Corporal Tom Ricketts at the Mess Hall. Ricketts barely ever had to shave even though he was almost thirty.

“I know his village,” Ricketts said. “It's not far from here. Al used to take the commuter bus to the base. I used to see him coming and going from the village when I was on patrols.”

“How many vehicles do you think we'd need?” I asked Pink.

“We won't be able to take many, not for something like this. Maybe four. An LAV III, couple of Bisons and maybe a G-Wagon. No more than that, for sure.”

“How many men?” Ricketts asked.

“Maybe a dozen. Again, I don't think anyone will be too happy with us if they find out what we're doing, going into a village outside the base just to find out what happened to one of our janitors. But, we can tell them it's reconnaissance.”

We were in a convoy of four vehicles, on our way to Al's village to find out what had happened to the smiling janitor who had been missing for weeks. It was May 27, 2008, seven months, three weeks and four days since I'd arrived in Afghanistan. The sun was going down on a scorching hot spring day and I was in a bitchy mood.

“This war is fucking crazy. I mean, remember the other day? In Kandahar? We passed a truck full of guys in civilian clothes with machine guns and RPGs. They looked shitbaked when they saw us. You *know* they were Taliban. But they never started shooting at us, so we just let them go. How insane is that?”

“You can't dwell on that stuff, Griffin.”

“And then they've got fucking suicide bombers. Those four women that just walked up to our convoy that day and blew two of the Bisons and a half dozen of our guys to hell? Not only that, remember when the Afghan Police showed up after the suicide bombing outside of that school in Kandahar City? Those guys never even had uniforms, they were just a bunch of Afghans running around with guns. Who knows what the fuck they were. Police? Man, they could have been Taliban, probably *were* Taliban. And we just smiled and they smiled, and we let them, we *let them*, drive on.”

I fell silent. Dust swirled along the edges of the road. Further off, in the distance, I followed the teeth of the mountains outside of Kandahar, cutting into the sky. A pair of men were making mud bricks for a small house they were building.

“It's not even *our* war, Pink. It's *their* war and *we're* the ones fighting it for them, dying for them. And they don't even give a fuck about us.”

I lit a cigarette before catching a glimpse of a rabbit darting through a farmer's field. The wind picked up, a hand brushing the tall grass. The breeze entered the cab, swirling the smoke I had exhaled.

I started in on Pink again. “Remember that time we were on patrol in Kandahar City, when that guy came up and stole your watch right out of your hand? You were winding it and the guy grabbed it from you. When you asked him what the hell he was doing, he simply said, 'You're from Canada. You have lots of money to buy another watch. I am poor. I need a watch and cannot afford one.' And, again, we just let him walk away.”

Pink sighed and rubbed his forehead.

“Griffin, if everything is so utterly fucked then why are we riding into this village *at dusk* to check on a janitor? A fucking janitor!”

I took one last draw from the cigarette before tossing it out the window.

“I know, I know. But haven't you ever asked yourself, 'do these people hate me, or are they just scared?’”

“No, I haven't. I haven't because I'll never know the answer to that question. But I do know that someone has to give a shit about them. Someone has to do this job.”

The door to one of the buildings slammed closed as we pulled into the village.

“One, this is four.” Ricketts' voice came over the radio. He was addressing us. “That's it over there. On the right.” It was a mud brick structure, entirely similar to hundreds like it in and around Kandahar city. Approaching it from the back, we pulled up to the side of the building. A piece of paper, flapping in the breeze, was tacked to one of the doors. In the dying light we could make out a small stray dog as it ran in front of our vehicle. I thought we'd kill it but it dodged our front wheels. I picked up the CB radio microphone.

“This is one. We're going to—”

Pink jumped out of the car without a word, bursting into a sprint. I dropped the microphone and tore after him.

A substance was splattered across the front of my uniform. My ears were numb and ringing. I couldn't hear anything and my mouth tasted like copper. I don't know how long I was unconscious; it could have been a few seconds, several minutes, maybe an hour. I staggered to my feet. Limping forward, I could make out two shapes in the half light. One was a pole with Al's disembodied head at the top. Below the pole, a crater torn in the earth. A uniformed torso lay below me. I jumped down and I turned it over.

“Pink?” I looked at my hands in the fading light. They were covered with his blood.

\* \* \* \* \*

I saw myself, five years previous, in the old lady's grandson. There I was, goofing around with friends. Now, I could barely force myself to give a shit about anyone.



The choral director announced a short break. I got up.

“Where are you going? They're not done yet,” the old lady put her hand on my arm.

“I'm sorry. I'm late. I was supposed to meet my mother for Sunday dinner.”

“Oh really? You'd better hurry, then.” She nodded, and acted as if it wasn't a big deal, but I felt as if I had torn a hole in her chest.

“Maybe see you next week,” I said. She brightened a little at those words, her skeletal fingers waving goodbye.

**Chapter 3: Spring**

It was mid-April and, as usual in St. John's, there was still a ton of snow on the ground. I had moved out of my mother's house three weeks earlier and was sitting on the couch in my own place, drinking a bottle of India beer and smoking a cigarette. An episode of Jerry Springer was on television. A black man had ripped the hood off a white supremacist in full Klu Klux Klan getup, and was pummeling him to the crowd's chant of "*Jer-rry! Jer-rry! Jer-rry!*" I turned off the TV. Stepping into a pair of sneakers and grabbing my backpack and a coat, I slammed the door behind me. I decided to walk in the direction of Water Street.

The cost of houses in St. John's had shot up in the years since my father's death. With news of numerous untapped oil deposits offshore, gaudy visions of wealth dangled before the province's populace, wealth like that enjoyed by their relatives who had escaped the island for the promise of jobs in Alberta. The spike in housing prices put a lot of places out of my price range, and I was seriously contemplating a little second floor flat on Water Street above a store that sold baby clothes.

About a week before I was supposed to move into the place on Water, Lesley, my realtor, called. She was a sweetheart with long black hair and a rotating wardrobe of three piece suits with business skirts. I periodically wondered if I should mention the heated dreams I'd been having about her, deciding against it despite the lack of a band on her ring finger.

A house in Rabbittown, my old neighborhood, had recently been put on the market. Lesley said that it was within my price range but I had to see it that day, and to

decide, preferably within the week, whether I wanted it or not. My father's F150 was in the shop, so she agreed to give me a ride to the place so I could check it out.

During the ten minute drive to Rabbittown, I worked on prying information out of her as to why such a deal had fallen into my lap. Somewhere around Holy Heart High School she revealed that the former occupants had been involved in illicit activities and were made to vacate the premises by the authorities. The on-scene investigation had wrapped up, and the city had taken care of the majority of the necessary clean-up on the premises, though some repairs would have to be made. The good news was that there was no major structural damage to the house, and the client was willing to deduct costs from the sale to cover the lion's share of whatever expenses I would incur once I found a suitable cleaning company and a contractor.

“What do you mean expenses incurred?” I asked.

“There's smoke damage, which is always a pain in the ass. You're going to need new carpeting in the living room. I'd take it out of the bedrooms as well, though they're not going to pay for that. And you should look into refinishing the bathroom. Apparently that place was a real mess.” I lit a cigarette. “No smoking in my car, please.” I rolled down a window.

I was the only client she had who was looking for a house in that area and, likely, would not be perturbed by the kind of activities that had taken place there. She paused before adding, “And I mean that in the nicest possible way.”

The former occupants needed cash immediately to deal with some impending legal fees and had chosen to liquidate their available marketable assets to cover those

fees, the most marketable of their assets being the house. The sooner they could sell the place the better.

When she swung the car into the driveway I began to cry. 73 Calver Avenue. My childhood home.

\* \* \* \* \*

The house needed work, but it was manageable. I did my best to make myself at home. Now, with a mortgage, the cash I had stored away from the war was going to dwindle quickly. I needed a job.

Scanning the want ads, I paused on each bold headline announcing positions for accountants, consultants, managers and the like. I read and reread the ensuing descriptions, checking off my applicable qualities, abilities and education, making a mental note to copy down the contact information but never doing so. Sometimes I went on the computer to check want-ads on the Internet, hours later finding that I had, instead, read dozens of news articles on the war. I never could gather the strength to start searching for jobs after such a realization, nor could I resist the urge to stumble down the hall and fall into bed for a nap.

I could have gone back to school, though that would not have alleviated my money situation. I was about a semester and a half short of an Arts degree in history. Still, I could not conceive of what I would do with such a piece of paper aside from tacking it to my wall. Additionally, I found it impossible to imagine myself in a uniform other than the one I had saved from the war, pressed and waiting on a wooden hanger on the far side of the closet in my bedroom.

I decided to drive to Hava Java. As I left, I glanced at the picture of me and my father after we'd returned from a fishing trip in central Newfoundland. Locking the front door, I began thinking about my meager options.

As I neared the bottom of Barter's Hill, I glanced at the limos idling outside the main lobby of the Delta Hotel. I could see their drivers smoking, knew they were trading stories in thick townie accents. Most of them were guys that had been born on the brow, Shea Heights, and had made their livings driving cabs. They'd graduated to limos once their stomachs rounded out and they'd finally become unable to chase down hammered college kids attempting to skip out on fares during the wee hours, after a Saturday night bender.

I pulled the truck into an empty parking spot on Water Street and fed the meter. Despite the cold, an old man sat on a deck chair outside the Rose and Thistle tavern, drinking stout from a paper cup while listening to Irish Newfoundland music on his portable radio. His eyes followed me as I made my way.

I entered Hava Java. The barista was adamant about selling me a cup of fair trade coffee. "It's way better than the other junk you'll find in town. And you know the people who grow this stuff are actually getting paid a decent wage, making what they deserve to make instead of getting ripped off by greedy corporations." I nodded and asked for a cup of orange pekoe tea, digging a handful of change from my pocket as payment. I waited at the end of the counter for my tea, eyeing the water-stained, metal, Purity tin next to the honey. Wet clumps of sugar stuck to the spoon protruding from the tin.

It was Monday and the place was empty. I thumbed through the latest copy of *The*

*Scope*, turning to a page with an article about “The Chained Daisies.” There was a picture of the band with Janey, bass slung over her shoulder, standing in front. She was sneering. In all the photographs taken during our childhood I could not recall even one of Janey with a sneer. There was no cartography to map the distance Janey had traveled from the little girl I had known to this jaded punk, nor was there a map of my own journey from childhood to the place where I now stood.

I took a sip from my teacup, then moved it aside for the moment. I picked my knapsack up off the floor and laid it on the chair next to me. Sorting through the contents of the bag, I carefully pulled out my great grandfather's leather bound war diary. I began to read.

*February 21, 1917*

*Exciting day! “Fish Tails” were being sent over from afternoon until late evening. “Fish Tails” are about 5 feet long, 8 to 10 inches in diameter, and have fins, hence the name. When they launch them the gun pops, which sounds something like pulling a cork. You can hear the shell as it gets to its height and begins to come down. At night, you have to rely on the pops to tell you where the “Fish Tails” are coming from, and you can see the fuse burning to tell where the shell is going. If it is coming your way, watch out! Typically, you have to run to the right, as those kinds of shells have a tendency to pull to the right.*

*Weather: Snowing and very cold.*

*February 30, 1917*

*Lance Corporal Curtis Forsey got hit in the thigh by a spent bullet as we were advancing. As we did not have a stretcher with us, after we had reached our trench I took the stretcher-bearers back to where he lay. The strongest of the two stretcher-bearers helped me take him to the nearest field hospital which was, fortunately, only a half mile away.*

*Weather: Cold, but fine.*

*March 1, 1917*

*The Germans sent a shell through "B" Company's cookhouse today. A number of us went over to investigate and found a man named Moulant very seriously wounded in the side of the face, the left arm, and the right hand, which had several fingers blown off. There was also shrapnel in his right leg. While his wounds were being temporarily dressed we found another man, Pennel, under the debris, clearly dead and very much cut up. At that point in time we heard another shell coming. I was frightened, having seen the damage wrought by the first, as everything was leveled to the ground and coal and burnt wood ash covered everything. Luck was with us, however, as the second shell got no one, though I can't understand how, as it landed only a few yards from us as we were scattering for shelter.*

*Weather: Cold.*

*March 14, 1917*

*I've been in France for about a month now. The German lines are approximately five hundred yards away, with nothing in between but churned up ground and lots of barbed wire entanglements. Their rifles have been quiet lately, but shelling is plentiful. We've had narrow escapes from "Jack Johnsons," "Coal Boxes" and other high explosives.*

*I'm still getting used to the routine of "picking shirts," which involves removing the day's accumulation of lice from my uniform. I think I prefer the bombs to the vermin.*

*Ethel and the kids weren't far from my mind at any point during the day. I'll have to remember to write a letter next time we move back to the billets.*

*Weather: Light snow.*

*March 24, 1917*

*Back with the billets again, and thank God for that. There was more than one night when I woke up with trench rats crawling all over me. Brazen little buggers.*

*There was a football match at 10:30 this morning between "A" and "D" companies. "A" company won 1-0. I must say, I don't find football terribly entertaining, and have been thinking about trying to organize a boxing match.*

*I wrote Ethel today and must remember to write my parents tomorrow. I haven't wrote them in ages and know they've been expecting a letter from me. I just haven't had the motivation to write anyone aside from my sweetheart.*

*Tonight I'm heading out with Lance Corporal Forsey, who has just returned after*



*being wounded. We're planning to scrounge up a few bottles of vin blanc or rouge to enjoy over a game of cards.*

*Weather: Fine but cool.*

*April 14, 1917*

*I fell asleep waiting in the line for supper tonight. I don't know how I could have fallen asleep, as back home I could never get to sleep anywhere besides my own bed. I certainly woke up quick enough after I found myself on the ground. Apparently I'd been leaning on the fellow in front of me, and fell when he moved forward in the line. "No shame in it, lad," one of the cooks said as it came my turn. "You're not the only soul who's fallen asleep in line while waiting for his grub."*

*I suppose I should write a few words about the meals themselves. At meal time we typically wade through slime to the door of a long dirty hut. Inside the entrance, a trio of characters as filthy as we are break up loaves of bread and toss a chunk to each man, the size of the chunk depending on how luck is smiling on you that day. Another pair pour cold, greasy, tea in your tin, and you get a piece of stringy meat of some sort or another. After finding a place to sit at the long tables, you have to eat the food with your fingers. Absolutely everything is dirty. An officer and sergeant walk, quick as they can, between the tables without meeting the gaze of a man in the place. At the rear door they shout, "Any complaints?" and are gone before anyone has time to reply.*

*I need to write a letter to Ethel and the kids tonight, and one to mom and dad tomorrow. Otherwise I'm sure they'll all have me shot.*

*Weather: Rain.*

*April 24, 1917*

*Monchy is hell. I thought it was all over for us, or at least for me. There were Germans everywhere and we suffered some heavy casualties, likely losing at least half the regiment. I am very surprised to be alive, especially after the enemy line advanced past my trench. I picked out the best place I could find, which happened to contain a fellow from "A" company with half his body blown off. Unfortunately, I didn't get his disc. There was no time. It goes without saying that I've had nothing to eat today. I laid low and pretended I was dead until nightfall, when I made my way back to our lines. Everything had been torn to pieces by shells.*

*Just after I got back I saw two men coming from No-Man's Land. I halted them once, twice, and, as it was too dark to recognize them and they did not stop, I threw a Mills bomb at them. Thankfully it did not go off once it lodged itself in the mud, as the men were ours. Like me, they had laid low until it was dark.*

*Weather: Scattered showers.*

The fair trade guy came around and poured some hot water in my teapot without asking. I gazed out the window. A sun shower was coming down. I watched a stray dog picking through some garbage. Startled by the noise of a car horn, it bolted across the street, narrowly avoiding a passing truck. I thought it would be killed but it dodged the wheels and ran down an alleyway. I sipped some tea and returned to the diary.

*May 8, 1917*

*Shelling has been terrible for the last few days. Looks like it'll be really heavy again tonight as we're starting to get the "Whiz-Bangs" – high-velocity field artillery shells, in proper terms. Boy does Fritz send them in fast, their field shells being lighter than ours. Chances are we'll see the enemy make a drive in the morning. Last time it was like this the shelling never let up from 2 am until daybreak, when we had to beat them back with everything we had.*

*I've run out of cigarettes again. What we get from the army never seems to last long, and care packages from home take ages to arrive, if they arrive at all. Still, I will have to remember to ask mom and dad to send me a few pounds of cigarettes and chew next time I write to them.*

*Weather: Fine and warm all day.*

*May 11, 1917*

*I kept low all day and spent all night on burial detail, which consisted of putting to rest those we lost in the front-line trenches. Must have laid more than a dozen, half-rotten men underground. The smell was awful. Some we had to dig out of the trench or pull them out. One poor fellow's leg fell off while I was trying to get him free.*

*We were supposed to dig a hole three feet deep and put their rifle up for a mark, as well as get their identification discs, but it was pitch dark. We laid them two or three to a shell hole. It was too dangerous a place to get the job done right. Still, I feel I have failed them terribly.*

*Weather: Dull but warm.*

*May 27, 1917*

*I was awakened last night by a hideous row made by Klaxon Horns, bells and gongs, as well as men calling out "gas!" Of course, we all had to get up and pull our SBRs on. I reached for mine only to find it gone, most likely snatched by some lad in the battalion who'd misplaced his. If I were to venture a guess, I would say it was Parfrey. Must remember to return the favour. It was, in the end, a false alarm, and good thing at that as I would surely have been dead or maimed by the bloody gas by the time I found a replacement mask. I never slept another wink afterwards.*

*It's among the German refinements of this war that we can never lie down within a mile of the line, save under a protection of a guard, lest we be gassed in our sleep. Naturally, everyone hates gas. When the wind is with the Germans, as it nearly always is when the weather is good, you'll often hear some officer sound the warning down the line to be vigilant as the bloody Hun might try to gas us.*

*Though fumbling to get the SBR on is bad enough, I've heard the older models were a travesty. The lenses fogged up twice as bad, which made it damn near impossible to properly fire a rifle once you had the bloody thing on. On top of that, if you were being shelled at the time, the explosions would often rip the old respirators out of your teeth. I've even heard stories that if an explosion was particularly bad, it'd likely blow the whole contraption completely off your face. At least the SBR stays on, for the most part.*

*I've been meaning to write a letter to mom and dad, and should get a chance to do*

*so the next time I am at the billets.*

*Weather: Rain.*

I closed the diary and sat for a while. I brought the mug to my mouth but it was empty. I hadn't realized that I'd drained my tea while I was reading. I watched as a man approached my table.

“You're Griffin Keeping, aren't you?” I didn't recognize him. A fuzz of short salt and pepper hair, curled at the edges, ringed his scalp. His gold framed rectangular glasses reminded me of the ones my father used to wear, aside from the fact that these were stamped with a brand name most would recognize. At around 6'2”, he was about as tall as I was. He wore a blue dress shirt with a white collar and cuffs, as well as a pair of khakis. He was the type of guy who bought his coffee with plastic.

“Who are you?”

“William Steele. I knew your father Levi. He took care of the landscaping at my business for years. Your father was a hell of a man. I'm very sorry about his passing.”

“It's okay. I mean, it's been a while...”

“Still, it must have been hard on you.” I didn't answer, just nodded.

“Anyway, I didn't mean to bother you, but I was wondering if you've taken over your father's business. I mean, I remember seeing you helping him out years ago when you were just a young fella. We're in desperate need of someone to do a decent job with our landscaping. The crowd we had in last year shagged things up something awful.”

Again, I nodded. “Well... here's my card. Let me know if you're interested.” I couldn't

remember if he had been at my father's funeral or not. He tapped his fingers on the table top before walking away.

“Mr. Steele.”

He paused and turned around.

“Yes?”

“Thanks very much for considering us. It shouldn't be a problem to fit you in. I'll give you a call in a couple of weeks, say mid May? We'll probably start with an aeration, some fertilizer and perhaps a cut and trim depending on what things look like at that time.”

“Sounds great. I'm excited to have another Keeping handling our grounds.” A bell jingled as he stepped out the door.

My mother had put all of my father's equipment in storage after he passed. Maybe she felt that throwing it away or selling it off would be akin to betraying him. Perhaps she needed to hold on to these pieces of my father, tools that were almost as much a part of him as flesh and bone. Or maybe my mother understood what would happen after I returned. Not the booze and anger, but somehow knew that I might want to, or need to, resuscitate the family business. Maybe she knew that I would have no other choice.

Most of the equipment was in pretty good shape. I took the mower, aerator, and weed trimmer down to Hiscock's Rentals to have them checked out. The blades on the mower needed to be sharpened. They took a power washer to the underside of the machine as well, peeling away all the mold and petrified grass that had been around since the last time my father had used it. The aerator was fine, aside from a loose wire on the

clutch. And the weed trimmer needed new spark plugs. By late May, Keeping's Landscaping was up and running again.

Storing the gear wouldn't be a problem. The aging shed my father had built next to the old house was still there. He'd put it together the summer we'd moved into the place, the same summer I'd turned seven years old and almost sliced my right leg off at the kneecap. In typical rambunctious fashion, I'd vaulted out the back door over a pair of concrete slabs two feet high, slabs that served a purpose before the deck was built. I fell through the glass portion of the rear storm door, which my father had laid on the thick summer grass so he could oil it and bend the hinges back into shape. Time had eradicated my memories of the event, my mother was shocked when, as a teenager, I asked her how I got the long, hooked scar on my leg.

I remember that I asked my father why he had to repair the door, why it was beaten so badly in the first place, to the point where it would not close properly. He shrugged. I later learned it was from a combination of years of winter storms, garbage bags meant to exit the house but denied by the door's potent springs, and legs from visiting friends and neighbors; these legs had battered the door in a bloody rush to flip burning barbecued burgers and hot dogs, or out of drunken necessity on journeys to piss in the ample, maple lined back yard.

I was nervous the first day back to work. Most of the chill had been let out of the city by that time, but it was still bitterly cold in the mornings. After loading the truck, I jotted down the three jobs I had to do in my notepad – my mother's house, Mr. Steele's business on Lemarchant Road, and my uncle Percy's place on Stirling Crescent in the

East End. It wasn't much to start with, but they were all paying customers.

I watched a flock of starlings fly erratically overhead. They disappeared behind a nearby building.

I wasn't sure which job I'd do first. "Always do the commercial jobs before the residential ones," my father's voice echoed in my head. I could see him, see us, sitting in the cab of his truck, years ago, his arm resting on the open window and the breeze rippling the sleeve of his shirt. The smell of cut grass, wet boots and stale cigarette smoke lingered in the air. "Those kinds of men are impressed if you deal with them first, at the start of your workday. They get up early, and they'll respect you if you do the same. They're your bread and butter. Get in good with one, and they'll introduce you to two more." I pulled out of the driveway, heading to Lemarchant Road. Having only driven by Mr. Steele's offices, I wasn't sure how long that particular job would take.

A red Hyundai Sonata was the only car in the parking lot when I arrived. Songbirds were making a racket in the variety of deciduous trees. Those trees would lend welcome shade to the lot in summertime. I decided to assess the grounds before hauling any of the gear out of the truck.

Mr. Steele was paying me quite well to take care of what amounted to two small patches of grass flanking a former residential building. The crab grass had bounced back quickly from the winter, the numerous patches of it giving the impression that a once-over from the mower was necessary. Both the front and the back needed aeration, fertilizer, and a go-round with weed killer, though the last was out of the question. Most of St. John's, this office included, had joined the revolt against any kind of killing



chemical lawn agent. There were times when I had wondered if that stuff had led to my fathers' cancer.

In the seventies and eighties, when my father began in the business, there were next to no regulations on commercial herbicides. They were potent, but to an extent that had not been fully acknowledged by any regulatory body. Nobody really cared if you used them on windy days, or if children were around. Get a dose of it thrown back at you from an unruly breeze and it was something to laugh about. By the time I was learning the family business, there had been enough reports on the hazards of the stuff to fill up the shed outside our house.

Finishing my sweep of the grounds, I took the tailgate down. It folded out into a steel ramp. I then rolled the aerator off the ramp, letting its momentum carry me to where the parking lot met grass. I pumped the gas bubble a few times and hauled on the pull cord, a vague soreness coming to life in the muscles of my arm. On the third try it choked and started. I set the speed gauge to full and squeezed the accelerator attached to the handle. It jumped to life. Covering the area of grass lining the fence and the edge of the building, I swung the machine around to start my next pass. I caught a whiff of expelled fumes.

My hands unclenched and I released the accelerator, letting the aerator sputter and stall. I took a pack of cigarettes out of my breast pocket, cursing as it tumbled to the ground. A few sticks lay scattered on the dewy grass. Staring into the ground beneath the ruined cigarettes, I imagined the soil peeling back to reveal a spring loaded explosive made from splintered planks pilfered from a shipping pallet. I took a deep breath and

coughed, passing the sleeve of my sweater across my forehead, seeing a streak of dark in the gray.

“Griffin, working up a sweat already? Just like your father.” It was Mr. Steele. I put the pack into my breast pocket and picked up the loose cigarettes, afterwards wiping my hand in my jeans. He took me around the grounds, detailing what he wanted done, suggesting I pull out a pad and pencil so he wouldn't have to go over anything twice. I doodled on the pad as he spoke, unable to focus on most of his words, nausea building in my gut with each step I took. I could feel my socks getting soggy inside my boots from the wet grass. I nodded as Steele gestured to the different areas of the yard, periodically throwing in an affirmative “yes” or “yep” when he looked at me. Steele slapped me twice on the shoulder, reassuring me there was no reason to be nervous, and that the job was in my blood. I smiled.

“Oh, I also have a few friends that are shopping around for a quality landscaper at a decent price. I know it's your first day and all, but if you work out half as well as your father did, you'll have a few more clients before spring is out.” He walked away, passing around the corner and out of sight.

Standing in the parking lot, I massaged my temples. The wind picked up and the air became moist. It would probably rain before the afternoon was out. I watched the thickening clouds tread across the heavens. I wanted to pull those clouds inside of me. I needed the rain they would bring to wash the sick and bleak and heat out of my head, rinse off scents that lingered, and scour images I could not gouge free.

Opening the door to the F150, I found a disposable paper mask in the

compartment at the bottom of the driver's side door. I snapped it over my nose and mouth. I planted black buds in my ears and set my mp3 player to blast before pumping the aerator three times. It started on the first pull. I arced the machine around to follow the line where the ground was littered with holes I had previously punched, trying to ignore the pull to stare deep into those holes in perpetual search for something I knew was not there.

\* \* \* \* \*

I managed to get through my first day on the job. I returned home to fix myself some supper.

Later, I watched the sun set from the room at the end of the hall on the second floor of my house. When I was growing up, my father had used that room as an office. It always seemed bright there, even during the dark months in spring and fall when rain, drizzle and fog set up shop in the city. Suicide rates always spike during those times of year. If anyone would have bothered to track the stats, they would have found that dates of conception cluster around that time period as well, creating an appropriate symmetry befitting a people born with a dark sense of humour about life and death.

Hues of red, orange and gold stretched out across the city, in the distance giving way to darkening sky. The rain had petered out an hour or so earlier. I watched one of the neighborhood kids below, weaving across the pavement on his bike, leaving tracks across the continent-like dry spots sketched out over the road.

When I fought in Afghanistan, I had meant to keep my own diary. Instead, I found myself unable to write anything aside from sparse emails riddled with questions about

home. During most of my downtime I slept, played video games, or simply sat in my room and listened to music that reminded me of home, letting the melodies settle my thoughts, staving off the feeling that I was collapsing like a house of cards.

I opened my great grandfather's diary once more and began to read its last entries.

*June 7, 1917*

*The Huns sent over a bunch of Lyddite shells today. Fierce stuff. Though not poisonous, even a bit of that gas is enough to make your eyes water and turn them as red as the blood of the Virgin. One of the lads, Private Parfrey, got a good dose of it and it ended up blinding him for a few hours. He was panic stricken, screeching that he'd never see his mother's face again. We plied him with a bit of rum from a PDR jar to calm him down, but were all on edge until his vision returned.*

*Weather: Moderately fine with a little bit of rain.*

*July 10, 1917*

*We left our tents at 6 a.m., marching to attention most of the day. The heat made it difficult to wear our steel helmets. Finally, we refused to wear them any longer and took them off. At 3 p.m. the whole company had to do pack drill for two hours without any rest. That's what we get for not obeying orders on the march.*

*We haven't seen much bread lately, and when we do it is twelve to fifteen men per loaf. Most of the time they give us hard tack. The men, of course, boil it in water and complain that there's no decent amount of cod around for a proper mug-up. We've only*

*had fish a handful of times since we arrived in France, and what we get isn't fit to eat. Like the song goes, "I don't want your maggoty fish." The lads are sure to sing it any time we do get a meal of the stuff.*

*I must remember to write a letter to Ethel and the kids sometime tomorrow.*

*Weather: Very hot.*

*July 15, 1917*

*I woke up to find myself half buried in. A shell had hit the parapet over my head and blown it to pieces.*

*Weather: Still very hot.*

*August 1, 1917*

*I've just written Ethel to let her know that I'm in hospital. I was honest enough in telling her about getting gassed, about the shell that came down on the parapet just as we were advancing, about meeting up with the sergeant-major and, as well, getting hauled away by stretcher. When I read the letter through I realize it's just a half truth, like everything else I've told her about this war. I suppose a half truth is better than no truth at all. The only way to sort out the half truths I've told her and the whole truth I've been through is to write out the whole truths here in this book. God forbid she ever reads it, that she would ever know how much I've left out in my letters. But I couldn't bear to let her know how easily her husband could be smacked clear from his earthly body in this Godforsaken war.*

*Usually, you hear the shells before you see them. Just listening to the sound of shells falling, to judge how far away they've hit and how long it'll be before one lands in your lap, is enough to drive a man mad. But the gas shell that got me seemed to drop from nowhere, as if it'd actually been spewed straight out of the ground. Before long I was gasping for air that, for the life of me, smelled every bit like pineapples. I breathed in more and more of the poisonous muck, fumbling to get my mask on, which I did, though I don't know how. My gullet burned, my ears sang as though there were gnats in them, and a bright, scarlet light shone over everything. I was ashamed when the sergeant-major came along the trench and found me on all fours, unable to stand up straight. By the time the stretcher bearers and the ambulance hauled me out of there I didn't think I was going to make it through the night. I spent hours on end just gasping for breath that never came.*

*Before they sent me to Blightly, I had a chance to chat with one of the stretcher bearers that carried me from the front lines. As luck would have it, he ended up in the same hospital in France that I was in, having gotten a thumb-sized piece of shrapnel lodged in his left leg. He told me how my fingers and lips turned blue after I'd been gassed, how I started vomiting mucus moments after they pulled the mask off, an awful green-yellow bile that you'd never know could come out of a man.*

*The very thought of a gas attack now makes me nauseous.*

*Weather: Fine in the morning, cool in the afternoon.*

*August 20, 1917*

*I've had nothing to eat again today. I've been back about a week now and have had at least three different days with no food. It's a bad sign as I'm still not back to 100% after getting gassed. The lads seem to have missed me, though, and gave me a hard time about Blighty nurses upon my return.*

*At about 10 a.m. an artillery officer showed up. There was some wire in front of the German trench we were guarding and he wanted to get closer to it in order to see what it was like. We told him we'd had nothing to eat all day. He promised to report this, and to have some bread sent up to us from his quarters. He asked for volunteers to go up to the German trench with him. Corporal Fillier and myself volunteered.*

*On the way up we went around a traverse, finding it full of German dead. We kept going but all we found was dead, dead, dead all the way up. I was thinking of taking a souvenir, as I saw a pistol next to a headless German officer, when the artillery officer who was in charge of our mission said, "We will just go a little bit farther and that will do me." At that time, a German plane flew overhead. We had not heard it previously. It flew very low and we could see the two men in the plane as clear as day. We crouched into the side of the trench and were afraid to fire. We were too near the Germans.*

*When we got back to our post the officer noted my name and Filler's name in his notebook. He said we'd get a strong recommendation for decoration, but we later found out he was killed by an artillery shell on the way back to the reserve trenches. I doubt anyone is going to hear about that recommendation now, and we still haven't been fed.*

*Weather: Hot during the day, fine at night.*

*September 14, 1917*

*Executed a man today. It happened down at the rifle range. They had a curtain, high enough that you could not see over, held up at the end of the range, about fifteen by fifteen yards in size. The whole battalion was lined up outside the range so they could hear the shots and, I suppose, learn a lesson about deserting. Rifles were loaded and left laying on the ground of the range.*

*We were ordered, ten of us, all NCO's from the Newfoundland Regiment, to get in position and were warned to fire straight, lest we suffer the same fate as the man to be executed. One of us had a blank, while the other nine had live rounds. At that point I noticed my hands were moist with sweat. The prisoner, guarded and with a black sack over his head, was taken out of a lorry and put on the other side of the curtain.*

*We were told that the prisoner refused communion, and that his only request was that we shoot straight and make a good job of it. Taking our positions, five kneeling and five standing behind, we were assured that if we did not kill him, an officer would do so with a shot to the head from point blank range.*

*The curtain dropped. The man was tied up from head to toe like a sausage and strapped to a post. The black sack was still draped over his head and I now noticed a square over his heart where we were to shoot him. The officer in charge barked the order to fire. We did so, our shots going off in unison. I did not have the blank.*

*As the curtain was pulled up we turned our backs to it and were ordered to quick march. Not a man gazed towards the end of the range as we filed out.*

*In the battalion orderly room, the ten of us were given a big tumbler of rum each.*



*I did not want to stay there long, finishing mine in about two swallows, but the officer in charge offered me a refill. I felt it impolite to refuse, wordlessly nodding in acceptance. After a bite to eat and a quick cigarette I came straight to bed, where I sit, now, writing this entry.*

*Weather: Fine in the morning, rain at night.*

*September 29, 1917*

*Apparently we're a "Royal" regiment now, the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. Our platoon celebrated with a couple of bottles of vin blanc and rouge. There was some artillery fire today, but it was mostly quiet. Still, one person in our platoon was wounded and Fillier was killed.*

*Weather: Fog and mist in the morning, clearing in the afternoon.*

*October 8, 1917*

*Today marked the worst rainstorm I've ever experienced. I was covered with mud and slipping everywhere. To make matters worse, we were on the march when it was pitch dark. The clay soil was so slippery I fell over a few times, as did a number of the other lads. It was a difficult march to say the least, and so long that we lost all track of time.*

*I must remember to write Ethel when I get a chance.*

*Weather: See above.*

*November 20, 1917*

*While "standing to" at dusk, a German came in and gave himself up to our portion of the firing line. He lay down by the barbed wire and was then beckoned to by our men. When he arrived he was immediately blindfolded and led to the rear, thereafter given a feed and taken to headquarters. As he was led straight past me, I had a chance to get a pretty good look at him. The poor bastard looked like he starving to death, the bones so pronounced on his face. Perhaps he gave himself up to get a decent meal. I'd heard word that Germany was starving. In fact, a hostess from a few months back told me of her husband who is being held in a prisoner of war camp in Germany. She has to send him food or else, as she expressed it, "him dead." It never really struck home until last night.*

*Weather: Rain fell last night and it was a bit showery today*

*December 10, 1917*

*As bad as I was gassed, I thank God that I did not get the mustard gas. Vile, so vile, it turns your lungs to fluid. Worst of it is, even if you get your SBR on in time, you can absorb it through the skin. If you've been hit with the stuff, you could end up burning yourself doing something as simple as rubbing your clothes with your hands. God help you if it touches the skin around your neck and throat.*

*Lately the order has come down that any time the Germans open up on us with artillery or trench mortar bombs we are to wear our masks. As bad as that is, I suppose it is a stitch better than getting a dose of mustard gas.*

*I heard a story the other day about a Canadian regiment down the line that had a rough go with it. Seems the Germans sent the gas over in the night but the air was cold enough to freeze it, sending it into mud of the trenches. Well, the next day the sun came out and, wouldn't you know it, thawed all the gas out again while the lads were sleeping. Off it went, on to the dugouts and sending the lot of them to hospital, most of them with their voices and sight gone. I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if the order came down for us to spend the rest of this horrid war with our masks on.*

*Weather: Snow.*

By the time I finished reading, the last of the light had vanished from the sky. It was a moonless night, difficult to see even the stars above the passing clouds. Leaving the light on in my father's office, I got up and made my way down the hall. I placed the diary on the night stand in my room, feeling a need to have it there in case I awoke long before I was supposed to, once again victimized by my nightmares.

Now that I had finished reading the diary entries, it felt as if the quiet of the house was pressing down on me. My thoughts amplified, I could feel the heat of unwanted visions on their way. Downstairs, I put on my coat and shoes and slipped out the door. Pulling the F150 out of the driveway, I turned the radio dial to the classic rock station and lit a cigarette, rolling down the window.

A chill filled the cab as I took Mayor Avenue to Freshwater, following it as it turned into Long's Hill and, from there, to Queen's Road. I drove by Bannerman Park, a cluster of kids outside of the Colonial Building. I wondered if the two I had met in the

gazebo that winter were among their number. At the intersection across from the Newfoundland Hotel, I took a right down Gower, passing rows of multicolored townhouses. At the end of Gower, just up from the LSPU hall, I saw a girl standing by herself, smoking. I had seen her there many times before, each time alone. I pulled to a stop just ahead of her.

“Need some company?” she asked, folding her cardigan tight around her body to guard herself against a gust of wind.

“Please.” I nodded.

She took one last drag from her cigarette before flicking it away. The wind, sweeping in again, teased her long skirt and hair. She bit her nails as she settled into the seat. I looked away and coughed as she turned the radio dial to a dance hit station. She ran down a list of what she was willing to do and for what price. I nodded periodically, turning through the maze of side streets until I had reached Freshwater Road.

“Where are we going?”

“My house.”

“We usually do this in the car. Or a hotel room. That's going to cost you extra.” I turned onto my street. “Had a lot of good times in this neighborhood. You a local?” She looked at me wide eyed as I pulled into the driveway. “So you're the one who bought Kavanaugh's old place.”

“Excuse me?” I asked. She shook her head, taking out a pack of gum and offering me a piece.

Inside, I turned on the television. A war movie from the sixties was on. It cut to a

shot of John Wayne, a grimace on his face, pointing somewhere into the distance off screen.

“I’ve seen this one before. John Wayne, right? I think it’s about Vietnam.” She had helped herself to a beer from the fridge.

“What’s your name?” I asked, taking the beer from her. I took a drink before handing it back.

“Does it matter?”

I shook my head slightly.

Upstairs, the light from the hall filtered into my bedroom through the crack between door and frame. She took off my shirt, my jeans and kissed my chest. I took her face in my hands to kiss her on the mouth.

“No, no kissing on the mouth.”

“Why?” She put a finger to my lips and, once again, began kissing my chest. I pulled off her shirt and tossed it onto the floor, and began to grapple with her bra. She took the band of my underwear in her hands, working her lips down my thighs, calves and feet as she pulled off the cotton fabric. She worked her way back slowly, from my toes, kissing and licking the skin on the way up before taking me into her mouth.

I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the sensation spiraling through me from the epicenter, spurred by her lips. In the darkness, behind my lids, a vision awoke of motionless eyes from a disembodied head, a woman, her skin smudged with a mix of sand, blood and ash.

“What? What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“Is this how you like it?” I nodded in wordless reply. “Then lie back down.”

I lost time in the darkness. It had been a very long while since I had felt the skin, the touch of another naked body on mine. At first it was simply shock, almost painful, my muscles wound tight. They began their gradual uncoiling until, one by one, they relaxed, my body settling into the sheets. Her skin was warm at the back of her neck where I fingered a scar.

“What happened?”

“I had an accident when I was a child, something I can barely remember. Pass me my purse. It's on the night table.” I did so. “Lie back.” I heard the sound of crinkling plastic. Illuminated by the light cast from window, filtering through the curtains, I watched her put the square in her mouth, tearing at it with her teeth before spitting a piece away. “Safety first.” She rolled it down. I entered her. Enveloped in her heat, I almost went right away. I held and we settled into a rhythm, pulling her hips to mine. I wanted to take the condom off, to feel the wetness, the touch of my skin inside of her.

“How do you like it?” she asked. I didn't reply. “You want me to smack you? Call you a bad boy?”

“What? No, just...”

“Or do you want to spank me? Is that how you like it? Don't hurt me daddy, I've been a *very* bad girl.” I threw her off of me. “What the hell is your problem?” she asked.

“Just shut up.” Moving on top of her, I pinned her legs up, the back of her calves on my shoulders. I held her hands down as I thrust myself deep, as deep as I could go,

sweat forming on my forehead.

Heat was swirling inside my brain. I saw the same vision over and over of singed flesh and fingers of blood creeping along the sand from a woman's head. Her breast laid alone, ripped open and absent of body, swatches of blood cut from road to vehicles to field like a wound opened by a weapon from some ancient god.

She moaned in rhythm as I thrust. My teeth gritted now, I growled, the softness of before drained from my body. I released as dizzy spots of light exploded in the dark. I tumbled off of her and laid on the bed, eyes closed. She was silent, motionless for a moment before wrapping her arm around me, her breath hot in my ear.

“Sorry, but I gotta go, being a working girl and all. You understand, yeah?” I nodded. “But this was fun. We'll do it again some time.” She flicked on the light. “Oh shit.”

“What?”

“I'm sorry. I knew it was coming. Fuck, I had the cramps today but I didn't think it would happen now. I'm early this week.”

I opened my eyes and pulled the condom off. My hands were flecked in blood. I saw Pink, his face white, standing there.

“Relax. It's just period blood. I swear I'm clean.” She got up, the door creaking as she opened it. I heard the taps turn on. Her voice came muffled through the wall. “I'm sorry. I should have said something. I'll cut my price. Okay?” She came back in the room and put her clothes on. “Can you give me a ride back to where you picked me up?” I shook my head. “Hey, that's a long walk. I at least need some cash for a cab.”

“I need you to leave now.” I looked into her eyes.

Wordlessly, she pulled some tissues from the box on the counter and stuffed them into her jeans. She removed a number of bills from my wallet, which was lying on the dresser, before leaving the room. I followed the sound of her steps down the stairs and across the kitchen and living room, the sound vanishing for a few moments before the door slammed.

A baseball bat was leaning against the wall next to my bed. I took it in my hands. It was a bat my father had used when we'd played knock-outs in Bannerman Park. The ball always seemed to go exactly where he wanted. Sometimes it was a pop fly deep into center field, just out of my reach. Other times it was a hopping line drive catching the infield dirt as I rushed in from the outfield.

I walked down the stairs, naked, with the bat in my hand, following the sound from the television. Light flashed from the rifles of a line a soldiers. The scene cut to bodies rushing across a battlefield, some tripping and falling as they were cut down. I wound up and swung through, the bat, connecting cleanly, exploding the television.



**Chapter 4: Summer**

I stood amongst the crowd lined along Water Street, our faces arced up the hill towards the war memorial. Two police officers placed wreaths at the bottom of the structure holding sculptures of four soldiers, frozen in battle ready positions and vigilantly on the lookout for the enemy. The police officers backed away from the monument and saluted, making room for a group of firefighters.

While the rest of the country was waking up to a day of flag waving, people had gathered here to remember the first day of the Battle of the Somme. On July 1, 1916, at 8:45 a.m., seven hundred and eighty men of the Newfoundland Regiment climbed out of a trench dug into the earth in Beaumont Hamel, France. The majority of those soldiers, men from a dominion not yet a part of Canada and still fiercely loyal to Britain, would become casualties that morning, effectively the only troops moving on the battlefield and clearly visible to the German defenders. One of those casualties was my great uncle, Percy Keeping. Only sixty-eight of the seven hundred and eighty would be able to return for roll call the next morning. The number of casualties suffered by the island was a drop in the bucket compared to the total number cut down by the First World War. All the same, the aftershocks of that day have not yet ceased reverberating for the people of the island.

“Thought I would find you here.” It was Janey. She was wearing slacks and a wool sweater.

“Who are you? Where's my punk sister who can't go out in anything but a ratty

pair of jeans and a band t-shirt?”

“Har har, very funny. Look who's talking. I get my fashion sense from you, don't you know?” A man turned around and shushed us.

“You're lucky. You haven't missed the best part. The soldiers up there'll fire their guns after the crowd gets finished piling up their wreaths.”

“By the way, where's your uniform?”

I shrugged.

\* \* \* \* \*

With the ceremony over, the crowd began to disperse, a multitude of light spring jackets and uniforms headed in all directions from the memorial, as if church had just let out. A ship was passing through the narrows. It was a small craft, probably a private fishing boat, or likely what used to be a private fishing boat now converted into a tourist vessel for small groups interested in whale and iceberg tours. Janey locked her arm with mine, my hands in the pockets of my windbreaker.

“Want to go to Hava?”

I shook my head. “I think it's closed today.” We were walking in the direction of my truck. “The weather's decent enough for a walk up on signal hill.” She nodded in agreement.

As we drove, we passed scattered groups of people that had been at the ceremony, most dressed in their Sunday best.

“Have you talked to mom lately?”

I shook my head.

“She asks me about you, Griffin. She worries about you. *We* worry about you.”

She waited for me to say something, but I wasn't prepared to speak. “You know, you can talk to us about things. I know you don't want to but—”

“It's not that I don't want to.”

“Well, what is it, then?” She looked at me. I rolled down my window to spit.

“Maybe you can't talk to us, but you have to talk to *someone*, Griffin.”

“I'm getting by just fine. Hell, I picked up three new customers in the last week. I got my hands full. If I get any more I'll have to hire some help.”

“I'm not talking about the job, Griffin, and you know it. Do want to be this way for the rest of your life?”

“Do you think I have a choice?” We were winding up the steep slope leading to the top of the hill. Dead Man's Pond was to our left. A thought flashed to haul the truck off the road, to roll us in, to end it there. No guarantees it would be over that way. I shook my head and lit a cigarette.

“Griffin, you don't have to go this alone.”

“No? What the fuck do you know about it, Janey? What do you think you know about me?”

“Griffin, I see things. Mom sees things. You're not the same brother I had years ago. Something in you changed.”

“So what? People change, Janey. You changed. I got used to it. Get used to me.”

“Griffin, it doesn't have to be like this.”

I pulled into a parking spot at the top of the hill. The city stretched out below us. I

started to cry.

“What the fuck do you know about this, Janey. I saw things, fucked up things, things I never want to tell you or mom about, ever. Okay?” She was silent for a minute.

“Have you ever heard of the Caribou Memorial Veteran's Pavilion?”

I shook my head.

“A lot of elderly veterans who fought in past wars live there. Most of them are Korean War vets, but they're kinda like grampa was. They know what it was like. My friend Nathan works there. He said you should go down some time and talk to the old soldiers. – What do you think?” I nodded and wiped my eyes.

“Maybe.”

“Want to go for a walk now?” Janey placed her hand on my arm. We exited the truck, making our way to the other side of the parking lot. In the distance, the ocean stretched far into the horizon, where it touched the sky.

## ARTIST'S STATEMENT:

**The War After the War: Narrative Disjunction and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in *News from the Front***

*I had a fiance. Had. I was over there. She didn't care. She left me. You call back to your friends and they would not have a fucking clue what was going on. Your buddies were dying over there and nobody cared. I remember calling home to my parents and they just didn't know... because you don't hear about what goes on over there. Like, I would say, "today sucked," and they'd be like, "geez, Ian, I got to get back to work." Time didn't stop for you because I went over there. Nobody cares, that's what I learned, that was the worst part.*

– Master Corporal Ian Dawe, Afghanistan War veteran

**Preamble: Why and How I Embarked on this Project in the First Place**

The original seed for this thesis came from a keen interest in Kevin Major's *No Man's Land*, which recounts the last few days the Newfoundland Regiment spent in Beaumont Hamel, France leading up to the beginning of the Battle of the Somme on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1916. Much has been written about Newfoundland's role in World War I from the beginning of the war to that particular day, including various documents on the Blue Puttees, the first soldiers to sign up for the Newfoundland Regiment. However, less has been said about the soldiers who followed from 1916 to the end of the First World War. Seeing a gap in this area of literary exploration, and having a natural interest in the subject, no doubt at least partially due to being born and raised in Newfoundland, I

originally wished to write a historical fiction chronicling the experiences of the Newfoundland Regiment *after* Beaumont Hamel and the Somme.

I am not sure of the exact moment when this work shifted from being a historical fiction about World War I to a part epistolary fiction, part anti-war novella regarding a Newfoundland soldier who has returned from Afghanistan. However, preliminary meetings with my advisor, Dr. Karl Jirgens, during the 2010 Winter semester played a significant role in hammering out a tentative structure for what would become the main focus of my thesis.

From the beginning, it was clear that an extensive amount of research was necessary to concisely depict the experiences of World War I soldiers of the Newfoundland Regiment, as well as those fighting in Afghanistan. Numerous resources deal with the Newfoundland Regiment's role in World War I, and an emerging body of work has been instrumental in creating a more thorough understanding of the Afghanistan War. However, few fictional endeavors cover the above points with reference to military and regional considerations from a post-war perspective. Fewer still blend the aforementioned factors with a fragmented narrative told from the point of view of a soldier with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Additionally, I wanted this work to contain, in one way or another, the city I grew up in: St. John's, Newfoundland. Indeed, in my original Statement of Intent upon applying to the University of Windsor, I discussed a plan for my thesis to be a coming-of-age piece set in modern day St. John's.

Hence, this novella is a response to the lack of fictional works that discuss the

post-war experiences of Newfoundlanders who have fought in Afghanistan.

Simultaneously, it offers a comparative historical context based on the experiences of the Newfoundland Regiment during World War I.

**Narrative Disjunction and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in *News from the Front*:**

Narrative disjunction serves a key role in the overall pattern of *News from the Front*, as it is used to explore and reflect the fractured psyche of a former soldier suffering from PTSD and the alienation he experiences as a result of returning home from the war in Afghanistan. By varying “the temporal coordinates of the literary image” (Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” 917), the extent to which the narrator/protagonist's psyche has fractured is made evident, as he struggles to adequately reintegrate himself into civilian life. This use of narrative disjunction is echoed particularly by the ruptured family relationships in the story. The disjointed narrative form becomes a stylistic representation not only of the narrator/protagonist's psychic fragmentation, but also indicates the degree to which he has been alienated and separated from his family and his community.

As a stylistic feature in *News from the Front*, narrative disjunction is used to evoke the sense of psychological trauma experienced by Griffin, the narrator/protagonist. Hence, the narrative features a variety of leaps in space and time, jumping through the first year he spent in Newfoundland after returning from the Afghanistan War. Splintered flashbacks of the war itself, as well as excerpts from his great grandfather's war letters and diary, are also included in the narrative. These jumps in time and space appear

without overt disclosure as to the exact reason why they happen, and help to demonstrate his ruptured and fragile psychological state, as well as his inability to sufficiently process and accept what he has experienced.

While the surface narrative is organized chronologically, as evidenced by the chapters being ordered according to successive seasons, the interjections of recalled events break that chronology, as is evident, for example, when Griffin recalls his father's funeral. In addition, the rhythm of the narrative is deliberately clipped, presented through a terse tone to suggest how close Griffin is to a psychological breakdown as a result of his PTSD. Given the unstable condition of Griffin's mind, reader speculation might arise regarding his reliability as a narrator. There is the suggestion that Griffin's recall might not exactly match his reality. The unreliability of the narrative point of view is integrated with the meaning of this novella.

As Michel Foucault has argued, truth is provisional. In "Truth and Power," Foucault states that "effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false" (118). Hence the story line here is, to a degree, dialogical, presenting an open ending with several possible outcomes and a range of possible reader interpretations. In *News from the Front*, the degree to which not only Griffin's narrative but also his great grandfather's diary and letters accurately depict the past is questionable.

The "truth" that Levi Griffin presents in his letters home is significantly different from the one that is chronicled in his personal journal. The reason for this discrepancy is obvious: he wishes to spare his wife and family the burden of knowing the true extent of his suffering. However, after analyzing both the letters and diary entries, the



discrepancies between the two remain problematic. While a general understanding of Levi's war experiences can be gained from both of these documents, they throw into question his reliability with regards to recounting events. While different sets of considerations are necessary when contemplating Levi and Griffin as characters, the parallels that exist between them with regards to the effects of war on trauma and memory disruption become apparent.

**Setting:**

*News from the Front* is mainly set in St. John's, the capital city of Newfoundland and Labrador and the largest city in the province. There are certain similarities that exist between Afghanistan and Newfoundland. Both have been posited as somewhat backward and isolated geographical regions. While there is a significant difference in terms of standard of living between the two, it can be argued that both are, in some sense, lost. To clarify, "Newfoundland is not just a province of Canada but, in poet and novelist Michael Crummey's words, a 'lost nation'" (Delisle 3). What Crummey refers to is the loss of cultural identity, spurred, at least in part, by the 1949 referendum which saw Newfoundland become a province of Canada. Conversely, Afghanistan is a nation that has been fraught with civil war since 1978. Not only has it had to deal with a certain loss of identity as a result of the factions warring over the state, but generations have suffered bloodshed as a result of the perils of armed conflict.

Aside from the aforementioned contemporary setting, the novella includes letters and diary entries that find a setting in the United Kingdom, France and regions of

Newfoundland during World War I. The juxtaposition of the geographical considerations of war-torn France with contemporary Afghanistan helps to emphasize the parallels of the experience of war. The climate and time period of these wars may vary, yet certain aspects stay constant. Being bombed, getting shot or losing a fellow soldier may not be exactly the same for those currently in Afghanistan, as it was for soldiers in 1916. But, at the same time, battlefield experiences of the past echo in the present, no matter where and how the fighting takes place (Dawe).

#### **The Ironic Narrator/Protagonist:**

As Northrop Frye has argued, irony is evident in works that present the suffering of a main character who is weak in comparison to his environment, as well as the rest of humanity (34). While Griffin, the narrator/protagonist in this novella, is not necessarily a weak character, he is undoubtedly damaged as a result of his experiences during the war. He has difficulty re-integrating himself into his native environment and struggles to maintain relationships with others. In this way, *News from the Front* functions as an ironic work.

This is further evidenced by the fact that the story has an open ending. Though there is the suggestion that Griffin will heed his sister's advice and take the first steps necessary in properly dealing with his PTSD, he is far from being someone who has dealt with his demons. This situation is revealed via his thoughts throughout the novella including the final chapter:

*We were winding up the steep slope leading to the top of the*

*hill. Dead Man's Pond was to our left. A thought flashed to haul the truck off the road, to roll us in, to end it there. No guarantees it would be over that way. I shook my head and lit a cigarette. (101)*

Though it could be argued that Griffin never truly had any real intention of enacting a combined murder/suicide of himself and his sister by crashing the truck, the fact that he considers these thoughts and has to physically shake them out of his head suggests that he has a long way to go before we can confidently feel he is, once again, in control of his life.

With regards to the narrator/protagonist's character development throughout the novella, Griffin's psyche is shaped not only by the experience of war, but also by his relationships with two deceased men: his father and his comrade in arms, Ryan Pinkerton ("Pink"). As Bakhtin has argued, "the dead are loved in a different way. They are removed from the sphere of contact, one can and indeed must speak of them in a different style" ("Epic and Novel," 921). *News from the Front* demonstrates how the living must not only speak of, but also interpret, the dead in a different style.

As the memory flashbacks, represented through a series of spatial and temporal leaps, indicate, Griffin's father had a significant impact on the narrator/protagonist's life. The degree to which his father has shaped Griffin's actions is ultimately unknown, but we can see that he has held to his father's three maxims – "keep your word," "never turn your back on your family," and "do what scares you" – even when such actions put him

in situations of peril or mental anguish (58). This is demonstrated both by Griffin's appearance at The Pale Horse tavern during one of his sister Janey's shows, as well as his refusal to give up landscaping even when that occupation begins to trigger flashbacks of the war in Afghanistan. As Griffin says, "I didn't want to go to the Pale Horse, but I had to keep my word" (16). Failing to keep his word by missing the gig would be to betray the first two promises he made to his father.

By looking at the character of Pink, we can see the extent to which human lives can be altered by war. Pink is revealed through four separate flashbacks interspersed throughout the novel. These flashbacks often precede or follow violent scenes, thus demonstrating that Griffin is far from having dealt with the war or Pink's death. His inability to adequately deal with the trauma of war, renders him an ironic anti-hero.

Griffin's haunted memories of the war are triggered by the simplest of images which recall a shape, smell, or token that brings these events immediately to life and, subsequently, alter his interaction with the actual world. One example of this is when Janey hands Griffin her band's demo album, which features a picture of Marilyn Monroe's disembodied head. Upon seeing the illustration on the CD cover, Griffin cannot help but remember the unveiled face of a dead suicide bomber on a Kandahar roadside.

These scenes reveal how Griffin has avoided confronting his past and has chosen to internalize his war-front experience. Due to PTSD, many of those who have returned from the conflict in Afghanistan avoid discussing the war with friends and family. Typical of main characters in ironic novels, Griffin has no fixed reference point or direction, and he finds himself incapable of dealing with his own identity crisis.

**Letters and Diary Entries:**

The majority of letters I read by World War I soldiers of the Newfoundland Regiment, namely *The Letters of Mayo Lind*, and *Grand Bank Soldier: The War Letters of Lance Corporal Curtis Forsey*, as well as *Lieutenant Owen William Steele of the Newfoundland Regiment: Diary and Letters*, plus the letters of Lester Barbour archived at the Queen Elizabeth II Library at Memorial University of Newfoundland, did not, typically, discuss the more horrendous details of the war, but always downplayed the scale of trauma experienced during conflict.

The diary entries I studied were often short and lacking the kind of detail I was seeking in terms of revealing the full scale of the conflict, and the impact it had on the average soldier. Thankfully, Dr. Rob Nelson directed me to *It Made You Think of Home: The Haunting Journal of Deward Barnes, Canadian Expeditionary Force: 1916-1919*, which was fundamental in helping me accurately capture the kind of presentation I was looking for in this regard. Dr. Nelson also suggested I study *No Place to Run: The Canadian Corps and Gas Warfare in the First World War* by Tim Cook in order to discuss the often overlooked role gas played in the war. As evidenced by both the letters and diary entries in *News from the Front*, Cook's text significantly altered my overall presentation of Levi Keeping's experiences during World War One.

The letters and diary entries in this novella are inspired by the aforementioned texts, as well as *Diary Kid* and *Kiss the Kids for Dad. Don't Forget to Write: The Wartime Letters of George Timmins, 1916-18*. In general, *News from the Front* uses a

combination of collaged excerpts from these historical accounts, mixed with my own wording, to simulate a sense of actual written accounts from the front during times of military action.

### **Literary and Linguistic Techniques:**

In addition to narrative disjunction, this novella employs a range of literary and linguistic techniques. There are a number of image networks functioning here that include notions sets drawn from the unformed world, the mineral world, the animal kingdom, and the human order. These image sets are integrated by virtue of an overriding pattern of chaos and disruption. Blood, vomit, explosions, faulty vehicles, animals barely avoiding death, as well as images of broken or damaged human bodies prevail throughout the novella. All of these are indicative of a sub-strata of imminent death arising from a larger and threatening condition of disorder.

Linguistic techniques in *News from the Front* depict an array of speech patterns which Bakhtin has identified as heteroglossic. In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Bakhtin explains that heteroglossia provides a range of utterances arising from a variety of socio-cultural groups and dialects (428). Accordingly, the novella includes diverse speech patterns that range from the heavy accent of the Afghani janitor, to the brogue of Newfoundland working class citizens. It also explores the punk attitudes of the narrator-protagonist's sister, Janey, the military language of men at the battlefield in Afghanistan, as well as the militaristic intonations included in the World War I letters and diaries, plus the St. John's dialectic of Griffin's father and mother, as well as the slightly more refined

speech patterns of Mr. Steel, who eventually hires Griffin. In addition, the general speech patterns of the Newfoundland populace, found in public parks, gazebos and bars, are scattered throughout the novella. The range of voices here helps reveal the diversity of social strata involved in the narrator-protagonist's life.

In "What is Literacy?" James Paul Gee argues that discourse is "a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network'" (29). Due to the trauma and psychic rupture caused by being immersed in violent battlefield experiences, Griffin later struggles to integrate himself into the social discourses upon his return to St. John's. This struggle is partly represented by the clashes in types of language in the novella.

Gee has argued that "discourse is an 'identity kit' which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize" (29). Because of his post-war trauma, Griffin feels alienated and is unwilling to adopt the both the literal and figurative "costume" of his environment. His speech patterns become minimalistic as his reticence contributes to a partial communication breakdown. In addition, his social behavioral patterns and dress-codes also stand outside of the accepted modes of social "discourse". For example, at the "The Chained Daisies" rock show taking place on Halloween, he abruptly leaves his conversation with his friend Daniel, who works as the doorman. He also refuses to wear a Halloween costume and initiates an act of violence. These factors become an affront to the ethics and acceptable range of actions in the social discourse in the tavern.

**Concluding Comments:**

*News from the Front* recounts the experiences of Griffin Keeping following his return from the Afghanistan war. An ex-soldier whose psyche has been fractured, he is an unreliable narrator. Through his travels in Canada and Afghanistan, the reader encounters a heteroglossic mix of language spoken by an array of characters. Griffin's actions are spurred not only by traumatic events of his past, but also largely determined by the influence of his father as well as Ryan Pinkerton, his comrade in arms.

As a whole, the novel is an ironic depiction of a lost soul. It uses the historical context of the First World War juxtaposed with the present day conflict in Afghanistan to delve into a common soldier's experience. Griffin is an "everyman" whose psychic isolation has left him in a marginalized and alienated state. While there is evidence to suggest he has begun to reintegrate himself into society, such progress is tenuous and occurs at a painfully slow pace. There remains the possibility that Griffin might grow worse, rather than better, and that he might "snap" unpredictably. Griffin's struggle becomes an internal drama which has yet to be resolved. He has the potential to succeed by taking steps to reintegrate himself into society, beginning with a reconnection with his sister. By a stroke of luck, he is able to purchase and move back into the house where he spent the majority of his childhood. Inspired by his promises to his father, he resumes work in his family landscaping business. However, the novella remains open ended and Griffin's future is uncertain. It is not clear whether he will be rehabilitated or whether he will succeed in a social re-integration, nor is it certain that he will retain his sanity. *News*



*from the Front* has no fixed conclusion and leaves Griffin Keeping at a crossroads. His fate remains to be determined. The conclusion to the novella is appropriately dialogical. The debate over the purpose and necessity of war and its after-effects remains unresolved. Griffin serves as a reminder that the casualties of war extend far beyond the grave into the daily lives of us all.

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VITA AUCTORIS

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