

Knife

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Nobody pays much attention to new people at our school. We have the highest turn-over rate of any high school in the city. Families move here, live in an apartment for a while, then move out to the burbs so they can have a carport and a lawn and a golden retriever. The kids learn English and figure out locker culture and then they're ready to move on as well. We're a kind of boot camp for the guerrilla warfare that is real high school. Mrs. Fitzgerald, who teaches urban geography, calls us a high-density transitional area.

In our graduating class there are only three people who have been here since grade eight. Hester Tsao, Don Apple, and me. Mrs. Fitzgerald calls us the core community. I call us stuck.

So, anyway, it wasn't much of a deal when the principal interrupted history last week to introduce a new student. Ron something-or-other with a lot of syllables.

Ron was big. Not tall so much as wide. A red baseball cap shaded his eyes. Mrs. Fitzgerald put him in the desk in front of me, recently vacated by Maddy Harris. Maddy with the clicking beads in her hair. The back of Ron's head was not going to be as interesting, especially when Mrs. Fitzgerald made him turn his baseball cap around.

"I have no objection to hats," she said, "but I need to check your eyes for vital signs." Mrs. F. has used this joke before, but in this school she gets a fresh audience frequently. Hester and Don and I don't mind.

Ron sat down without a word. He shifted uncomfortably, like maybe the desk was too small for him. Then the weirdest thing happened. I felt this damp chill, like when someone comes in from the cold in winter. But we're talking a sunny afternoon in May here. I thought I also caught a faint whiff of sea salt.

Mrs. F. came down the aisle to bring Ron his textbook. She was wearing a sleeveless dress. I didn't see any goose bumps. Meanwhile, I was beginning to shiver, and I pulled my hands up into my jacket sleeves.

Maybe I was getting sick. Maybe I was getting the flu. I leaned my forehead on my hand. Fever? I stuck out my tongue and rolled my eyes down to see if it was coated. I couldn't see my tongue, but my eyes were definitely starting to hurt. And what was that tingling in my right elbow? Wasn't that one of the first symptoms of the flesh-eating disease? That was it. I certainly couldn't go to my father's for dinner next week in that condition. Especially not with Stevie there. It would be completely irresponsible to expose a five-year-old boy to my rare, highly infectious virus.

To understand why I would rather have the flesh-eating disease than dinner with my father, you have to know that I haven't seen him in six years. He took off the summer I was eleven. For the longest time I was sure he was coming home again and that everything was going to be the same, that our family was just in some temporary alternate reality that we would flip out of at any minute. When the truth finally bored itself into my mind, I made the decision to hate him. I took good care of my hating. I watered it and weeded it and pruned it. I backed it up to disc. I carried it with me all the time. It was always there, handy, if I wanted to take it out. And now he was back. Of all the transitions in our transitional area, this is the one I never expected. I thought he was in the Middle East for good, around the curve of the world, out of the picture, part of a new family and nothing to do with me.

Mum says I have to go to visit him, even just once. "It's all water under the bridge, Curt. And he *has* been good about child support all these years, that's one thing. Who knows, maybe you'll get to know each other again."

Yeah. Right. How about not.

"Curtis?"

There was something anticipatory in Mrs. F.'s tone, a question in the air. I did a quick survey of the blackboard. William Lyon Mackenzie. The Family Compact. Not much help there. And then the bell rang.

Mrs. F. grinned. I knew she would say it. "Saved by the bell once again, Curtis. Have a pleasant weekend, ladies and gentlemen. Buy low, sell high, and don't forget the quiz on Monday."

Then it happened. In the dull roar of Friday-afternoon liberation, Ron turned around slowly. The desk shifted with him. And he looked at me. His eyes were dark brown like a beer bottle. Pale eyelashes. His eyes locked with mine and I couldn't look away. My breath stopped in my throat. It seemed like he was looking at me forever, but it couldn't have been because the desks were still closing, the chairs still scraping, far, far away. He put his hand on my desk. I tore my gaze away and looked down. His hand was closed into a fist. He spread out his fingers and I heard a small clunk. His hand was big and pale, and the webs between his fingers went halfway up to the first knuckle. I felt his eyes on me. When he lifted his hand, still spread out and tense, a knife lay on my desk. A red Swiss army knife. And the six years vaporized into nothing, and I was eleven years old again. I was in a rowboat and everything about that bad summer became enclosed in one moment, when I threw the knife. The summer of being eleven.

That summer we rented a cabin up the coast. It was going to be so good. There was a tree house and a rowboat and Dad would come up every weekend. I slept in a room with bunk beds and a door covered in glued-on seashells and driftwood. The first morning I woke up early. The birds were loud. I got up quietly and pulled on some clothes and went down to the beach. The rowboat was right there, waiting for me. I rowed around for a while, getting the feel of the oars. There was a thin mist on the surface of the water. And then, as I was lazily drifting in on the tide, there was the sound of a small splash, and a shiny black cannonball head

popped out of the mist. A seal. He stared right at me, friendly but quizzical, as if to say,

“What kind of a strange seal are you?” He had huge, shiny brown eyes and grandfather whiskers. He swam right around the boat once. Then he slipped under the glassy surface and disappeared. To let out a little happiness I rowed around the cove like a maniac, like it was some Rowboat Indy 500.

When I got back to the cabin Mum was just getting up. We had hot dogs for breakfast. That first week I saw the seal every morning. He glided past the boat underwater, on his side or even upside-down, fat and sleek. He started to come so close I could almost touch him. He liked to hide in the seaweed. I decided his name was Rollo, because he was so good at rolling over.

“My dad’s coming Friday after work,” I told Rollo. “And guess what? Friday is my birthday. I’m not going to tell him about you. On Saturday morning I’ll surprise him. We’ll come out in the boat. We’ll be pretty early. My dad is an early riser. So am I. I inherited it.”

Dad was late that Friday. We waited and waited. Mum walked up to the phone booth at the corner where the dirt road met the highway. When she came back, her face was like concrete. But then he came. He arrived at the door holding my cake with the candles already lit. He had parked the car around the curve of the road and snuck up to the house. “Happy birthday, birthday boy!”

The cake was chocolate with blue icing. The decoration in the middle was a little wooden dog on a stand. In the candlelight he looked like a miniature real dog who was all set to bark and jump up and give me a tiny lick. I made a wish. I don’t remember what it was. What did I wish for

before I started to wish for the same thing over and over? I blew out the candles and pulled the dog out of the icing. I pushed the button on the bottom of the stand and he collapsed. I let it go and he jumped back into shape. "Present time," said Dad, and he set something on the table beside my plate. It was a bright red Swiss army knife. I picked it up. It was smooth and solid and heavy. I pulled out one stiff shining blade.

"Jerry, don't you think that's a bit dangerous?" said Mum.

"He'll be careful, won't you, pal?" said Dad.

Dad and I looked at all the parts of the knife, the blades and scissors, the corkscrew and screwdriver, the tweezers and toothpick, the tool for taking stones out of horses' hooves.

Dad made jokes about me opening bottles of wine and learning to whittle and helping out horses in distress. He got louder and louder and jokier. Mum stopped talking.

When I went to bed I put the knife under my pillow. Later I woke up and heard Mum and Dad arguing. There was yelling and crying. Anger seeped through the wooden wall beside me. I grabbed the knife and put the pillow over my head.

I woke up early the next morning and jumped into my shorts. I put my knife in my pocket. I peeked into Mum and Dad's room. Mum was asleep, huddled in a ball. Dad wasn't there. I ran outside, up the road, around the curve. The car was gone. The dust was soft around my feet.

He didn't say goodbye. He didn't come out in the boat with me. He didn't meet Rollo. I spent most of that day in the treehouse thinking and gouging the wooden planks with the biggest blade of the knife. And I figured it out. They were

fighting about the knife. I would just hide it away and then they would forget about it and it would be okay again. Dad didn't come the next weekend or once again that summer. But still I kept my knife hidden in my pocket, next to the collapsing dog. Until the day I went out in the rowboat with Laurel.

How did I end up in the rowboat with Laurel? It can't have been my idea. Mum must have arranged it. Laurel and her family had the next cabin but one. Mum spent a lot of time sitting on their deck, drinking coffee and smoking and talking to Laurel's mother. Mum said how nice it was that Laurel was just my age so that I could have a friend because it must be a bit lonely for me. It wasn't nice at all. I hated Laurel. She looked like a weasel and talked like a grown-up. Besides, I already had a friend, Rollo. I avoided Laurel. But I guess I got trapped that day. I don't remember why we were in the boat. But I remember absolutely clearly what happened. I can rerun that movie any time. We're floating around in the middle of the cove. I'm letting Laurel row because she has a way of getting what she wants. And I take out my knife and she grabs it. She pops the scissors in and out in a way I know is going to break them. She removes the tweezers and starts tweezing my leg with them and I lunge for them and she throws them back at me and they disappear over the side of the boat. I see them sinking, a little silver light, and then they disappear into the murk. I want to scream and cry and hurt Laurel. But I don't. I hold out my hand for the knife and she gives it to me, slapping it down on my palm. "Here's your stupid old knife." I run my thumb over the hole where the tweezers should be. I pull out the biggest blade and push its point into the side of

the rowboat, seeing how hard I can push before it starts to enter the wood. Laurel starts to row again, out towards the mouth of the cove. She doesn't look at me.

"I hear your father's got a new girlfriend." She acts like she's talking to air.

I don't say anything.

"I heard your mum talking to my mum. He's got a new girlfriend.

Her name's Carmelle. She's going to have a baby."

"That's not true." I knew it was true. Things added up. The little collapsing dog jumped into shape.

"Oh, grow up," said Laurel. "Just wait. They'll take you aside and say 'we've grown apart but this isn't your fault.'"

I stuck the knife into the gunwale of the boat.

"They read it in books, you know. How to tell your kids about divorce." She made her voice as deep as a dad's. "We can't live together but we both still love you." And then she laughed her weasel laugh. I didn't think about what I did next. I could not have stopped my hand that grabbed the knife and pitched it through the air toward Laurel. It missed her by a mile and then everything slowed right down. The knife turned in the blue air and Rollo raised his little cat face above the water. Why was he there? He was never there in the middle of the day. He was only there in the early morning. The knife flew toward that head, oh, so slowly. And then they joined. I saw the red knife sway once in the seal's head just before he dived.

I've told this part like a story. But as I sat at my desk staring at that knife, it didn't come back as a story, but as one moment of feeling, with blue sky and Laurel laughing and the obscenity of that red knife sticking out of the side of

that gentle seal head. The moment came and went as Ron looked at me. I picked up the knife and ran my thumb over where the tweezers would have been. It wasn't as heavy as I remembered. It wasn't as heavy as the memory of that moment. When I looked up, Ron had walked away. He was standing at the front of the room and everyone was jostling by him. Hester had Don in a hammerlock and was escorting him out the door. I started to stand up, but I seemed to have collapsing-dog legs. Ron turned back to look at me and slowly took off his cap. His hair was black, thick and very short. And just above his temple there was a white line. Some guys do that. They shave patterns into their hair. Then he smiled at me, friendly and quizzical as if to say, "What kind of weird seal are you?" And something inside me, something hard and heavy, went fuzzy at the edges and started to melt away. He turned and walked out the door. Ron wasn't in school on Monday. Or Tuesday. I asked Mrs. F. about him. She consulted her much-erased class register. "He transferred out," she said. "A single day's attendance. That's the record, the shortest stay I've ever had from a student. I guess he didn't like your face, Curtis." She smiled, and the members of the core community snorted and made rude noises. I thought about what it must be like to push through air on two legs, air heavy with gravity, when your body remembers sliding and diving and rolling through the slippery sea. The knife. I think I'll give it to Stevie when I see him tonight. Dad dropped by on the weekend. He has a beard now. We had a careful conversation. He talked about Stevie. He told me that the little guy is nervous about starting kindergarten. Apparently Carmelle asked him if he was looking forward to school and he said, "No, I'm looking

sideways.” Dad said Stevie talks about me all the time and really wants to meet me. So I’ll go. And I’ll give Stevie the knife. He could probably use a present, a heavy present to keep in his pocket. Sometimes it’s good to have something to hang onto. And sometimes it’s good to give things away.