

# THE FIRETOWER

A Novel by

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For Chris

## CHAPTER 1

It was Halloween. It was late. It was cold. Too cold for people to linger out front of the Maple Leaf as they left the annual party in the hotel's ballroom. The air so brittle that every time someone pushed open the front door, the silence of cleared streets was shattered by hurried voices and shouted good-byes. They scurried from the front steps to their cars. No lingering that night, no stopping for a cigarette to replay the evening's excesses before heading home. Or at least not until whenever it was, sometime well after midnight, when the stragglers had their path impeded by the sprawled body of someone they all quickly recognized, even face down: Jacques Pire. The Jacques Pire whose recent arrival in Magnon had unsettled the town's order. He was wearing nothing but a silk pajama top, whose colors offset and highlighted the stain of blood that spread across his back from no one knew where, or cared to investigate. His naked legs were splayed across the front verandah, his torso draped down the first couple of steps, his buttocks shading towards blue. One arm was twisted at an angle arms don't normally reach. He was dead, very dead, having apparently fallen head-first from his hotel-room balcony right above the front steps. His skull left a dent, still visible to this day, near the top step of the wooden verandah.

I know all this because everyone knows it. Even though it was many years back. It's part of what makes Magnon Magnon - though I suppose every town has its stories. Its carpets that haven't been vacuumed underneath. I was too young at the time to understand its significance, but I remember Mama and Dad talking about it. In the same harsh whispering as when they talked - late at night at the kitchen table, or back when Dad used to smoke, out on the back porch - about *any* happenings on *her* side of the marriage.

Pire was someone who chanced on Magnon and mistook it for a place where no one really knew or cared who ran the show. Figured he'd like to take that on, and in the process stepped on more toes than a drunken square-dancer. It appears he stepped especially hard on my Uncle Victor's. Victor's a Magnon but not in the business way, or not officially anyway. Victor chose politics: the town's mayor, later - and still - the local Member of Parliament. Liberal party, through years when Liberals more often than not ran things in Ottawa and dispensed government funds accordingly, ensuring that what was remained so. And then along came Pire, trumpeting the conflicts of interest and other unsavories that seemed to follow Victor around. Pire financed candidates to run against Victor or his cronies for local openings, even went after his business connections, his lifeblood. Challenging the monopoly status that Victor-related enterprises seem to inherit at birth. That sort of thing. So when Pire began to chatter and then to rattle, there'd have been caucuses called - by Victor, and others affected. Doing for the Whistle Stop - that's the lounge at the Maple Leaf - what subsequent events did for Doug's and other local establishments. Concerned citizens, congregating over threats posed to the cultivated order. A quiet panic, a subtle call for action. Of all this there's no doubt. And what of it.

Well, autumn went away and so did the problem. Sure, people talked about it for a while after, but that doesn't mean there were consequences. Not even suspects, as far as I'm aware, even though there must have been. Too many too obviously so. Most of them probably cavorting that night in the Maple Leaf's ballroom, hidden behind costumes,

fueling their motives with alcohol. But it was an accident. Someone pointed to the daiquiri Pire left in his first-floor hotel room as proof ... Who drinks daiquiris but someone dumb enough to lean too far off a balcony? Especially someone wearing only a pajama top. The coroner wasn't quite that brazen in his report but the general theme was along those lines. It was inebriation, a slippery surface, a bit of bad luck, and the detectives who came in from Sudbury saw no need for competing hypotheses. Life went on as if the Maple Leaf's Halloween party hadn't happened that year.

This comes to me now in a mindless moment, looking out a train window with nothing to look at. Though not for want of things to think about. Things that jostle for attention like cats at feeding time. I'm thinking about Pire, turning up out of nowhere all the way from Montreal. I'm thinking about Pire versus Magnon when Magnon won. I'm thinking about things about Magnon that Pire's story tells. Magnon, always Magnon, always intruding, even when I'm somewhere else. Maybe I haven't lived there for a while but still it's my frame of reference, my way of looking at the world. And not just for little things. Like a couple of years ago when I was down in Florida, escaping Toronto for a few days. Told Laura it was work-related which it sort of was. I was cutting across the middle of the state when my rented car started to act up in some wooded country in rolling hills to the north. I pulled over and got out. And across the road and straight away in the distance, gazing out at me across a plane of tree-tops, was a firetower. I stood there and stared back. It was like standing on Main, outside the front door of Doug's, nothing but noise and light behind me, and looking off to the south-east. Off beyond the edge of town and out into darkness. Darkness guarded then and still now by the Magnon firetower.

## CHAPTER 2

The last time I went back home, I missed the bottom step getting down off the train and announced my arrival by tumbling onto the platform. I jarred my shoulder, my bag popped open. There was a wind and I chased socks and underwear through the Magnon crowd there to meet the train. Including Mama who waited at the back of the platform, patient and bemused. The visit didn't get much better from there, as I think back on it. My father, my brother - I had arguments with both of them. Though I can't say I remember exactly what we were arguing about, or how things were left.

Now I'm heading back there again. But things are different from last time, or from any of my other return visits in the years since I moved away. For starters, it's not just a long weekend in and out. I'm not sure how much longer than that - not too much, I hope - but whatever it is I'm going to pretend I planned it. They'll want to know what I'm doing, how come I'm back, back on a one-way. But I'm just going to jump in and head them off. "Back for my dad," I'll say, shrugging that hey, it's one of those things. "Bad heart, ya know." And why not. Half the dads around there have heart problems, the other half are only a couple of Burger Shack cheeseburger specials away. Served with poutine unless you tell them not to. And Dad, he can eat and drink like they all can. And smoke, too, until he got pneumonia a few winters back and almost died of coughing. Doctor Perkins apparently had to read his blood pressure three times because he didn't believe it could

get that high. All of which is why Dad's now at home on some serious heart medication and workmen's comp. He decided curling was too stressful and so, except for his bowling league when it's in season, he mostly burns off calories working the remote. Yeah, he's got heart problems, and not too many of his buddies surprised enough to come around visit much, so Mama tells me.

Back for my dad, I remind myself, as I lean back on the stiff plastic coach seat. I sit dead still, head angled toward the window, legs stretched out rigid, feet scrunched under the seat ahead of me. No reason to move, break the spell I'm trying so hard to create. There's a lot of track between Toronto and Magnon and not much else. Outside it's bleak to match my mood. Bleak like February except it's still only November and I'm staring out at it blankly as the train heading north and west slices through the desolate wilderness of Northern Ontario like it's sawdust. Christ, it looks like it's gonna snow. I keep my head still and let my eyes flick as they latch momentarily to a telephone pole or a half-fallen tree. Something picked from the blur. But instantly it's gone, sucked behind, gone like things I've done and can't go back and fix. I sit here wishing the jumble of images and noise and emotions that has reshaped my life in such a short time-span could be so easily put behind me. Like switching the channel and it's not my problem any more.

Yeah, back for Dad. It'll be easy. Things held back, sure, but not what I'd call lying exactly. It's more like pretending and that's different. Maybe Mama would call it the same thing, and the guy, the self-righteous asshole who taught that ethics class they made us take in journalism school. But most people wouldn't look at things the way *they* do. Most people, once they start to learn the story behind, they'll see why I'm charading. That's really the problem, isn't it. They'll see it all right, they'll see right through it, let's face it. And probably pretty fast. Maybe even while I'm still sitting here on the train, the way news travels.

I'll get back, I'll be out walking down Main towards the Lumiere Bridge in the center of town, there'll be people hanging outside Doug's and they'll pass knowing glances. "There's Josh. Ya hear what happened to him!" I'll be standing in a line-up in the post office, or in Anderson's, the grocery store, my head in a magazine so I won't have to look around and see someone I know who's not sure what they're supposed to know. "Hey, Josh, good to see ya. Whatcha been up to?" They'll be taking prejudices and rumors, throw them together and out come conclusions. All too easy, like making a cake from mix. Magnon is way too small for juicy stories to lie dormant in the shade.

Laura and me? Oh yeah, I'll tell them, all quiet back in Toronto, just taking a little break to come give Mama a helping hand. They'll nod and commiserate. But in Magnon everyone knows Laura and sometimes everyone knows everyone. They'll find out about her and me. I'd just rather not be the one having to tell them, having to explain it all. It's not like I really understand it all that well myself. I was married and now who knows.

And then there's the writing thing. The assignment that I've gone and got myself. Created, really. Saving face. But with as positive a reaction from my boss at the newspaper as I could have hoped for, under the circumstances. It's an idea germinated from a chance conversation years back, an idea since picked at in idle moments. Moments like this, staring vacantly out a train window, Magnon still hidden over the horizon but galloping toward me. And now and then I've thought about jumping into it, but

not seriously. Not until it suddenly became a life-saver to grasp onto when I found myself in rough waters with the wind picking up.

Magnon, you see, is a jig-saw of a town where the pieces got scrambled and sometimes it seems they weren't all put back together exactly right. Pieces missing, pieces forced into the wrong place. All reassembled just well enough that if you stand back and squint, it all looks okay until you get closer. Jacques Pire kinds of pieces. Things you might look at a few times and they linger. Things that caused a fuss - would have done so anywhere but especially in a fishpond like Magnon - but then they went away. An accident? Things happen. A death? People die. Were there things covered up? The police said no one was to blame so I guess it must be. Maybe, but still.

And the worst of them things in my own family, broadly defined. Like Joseph, my uncle a few times removed and now completely so. Other uncles, and great-uncles before them. Victor's still around, but most of them were unknown to me, except for stories. In some cases maybe nothing more than stories. Of exits theatrical enough to make up for lifetimes of often only meager accomplishments. Or so the stories go. I only know what Mama's told me, and what others like to reconstruct and inflate.

The Magnon family tree, oh it snakes and ensnares. You're a cousin of a cousin but before you know it you're on the mailing list. Privy to things before they're gossip. Because there's a blood connection everyone expects you to know, and to be able to explain and sometimes to apologize and if you can't then just lie because they won't believe you don't know and so they'll figure whatever you say must be true.

Things happened, uncles became ex-uncles, but even with the messiest of them sufficient answers were provided, people with things to do went back to doing them, and life returned to as normal as it could for a place with cracks and gullies that had been filled in and paved over. The carefully couched stories in the local paper would soon slow and then stop, as did the oblique references in Reverend Parker's sermons. At my house comments were made, things the relatives had done or done again, insinuations. But not for neighbors' ears, and sometimes not even mine.

Out in the street, memories and connections float around like spores. You breathe them in and maybe, some day, you get infected, start to wonder. Like me, now, with a pressing need for diversion from the harsh realities of a life up-ended. Not to mention a bank account badly depleted. I need a project and this can be it. To look and listen, to learn. Some of it, the right stuff - but how will I know? - to mold into the written word, to work around a story of a small town not so different, to a casual visitor, from small town anywhere. History to be aired selectively, to add color to the drabness of the geography. And the things not to be written about are things just to know about. I've lived just fine so far without this knowledge, but as I come now to step into this, questions flutter. I'd like to know more, but I have no plans on how to pry this knowledge from those who've locked up the details and collected the keys. Whoever they are. I don't really know where to start, but that's okay because I'm not even at the start-line yet.

The train begins to shudder as it slows down coming into Bourque's Landing. It comes to a stop after several attempts. There's not much evidence of landing to be done here. A stream you can wade across, except in the spring run-off and then it tumbles and gushes and you wouldn't want to be anywhere near it. November rains have stirred the stream a little bit here recently, and I can see a couple of kids wading and splashing at

the edge. The rain's falling again now, or more of a drizzle really, coming down in thin fine lines angled by a wind strong enough to set the station sign swinging.

But I need to stretch my legs a little, work out the stiffness, and so I pry myself from my seat to venture out onto the platform. The wind makes the rain seem harder, pinging my cheeks. I stride across to an overhang next to the waiting lounge and fumble for a cigarette. I see a guy I recognize from further back in my car step down and run across to where I'm standing. He looks like a factory worker. Same idea as the guys at the mill except running shoes instead of work boots and instead of a plaid shirt he's got a sweatshirt from some car show with women on the hoods and beer company sponsorship. He pulls out a cigarette, then gropes in his pocket for a light. I pass him mine.

"Thanks." He lights it, then tips his head back behind us, away from the tracks, as he exhales. "Shit-hole of a place, eh?"

"Yeah. And the competition's tough around here," I add, and he snorts in agreement.

"Not that Thunder Bay is *the* place to be," he says. "That's where I get off."

He's right about Thunder Bay. I spent a couple of nights there a few years back. Someone was paying Jeff - that's my brother, he lives in Sudbury now - to drive a car back from Vancouver and I went along to keep him company. It was January and I'd just finished up the journalism program at Ryerson a semester early. And because it was January, we were in and out of snow-storms all the way, one of which slowed us down as we crossed into Ontario, eventually bringing us to a halt in Thunder Bay. It was two days before they reopened the Trans-Canada. I've not been back and have no plans to.

"Yeah, I've been there," I say.

"That's Northern Ontario. Shit-hole capital." He's scowling like it's personal, like he's talking about an ex-girlfriend. He continues: "There's a place coming up, can't remember the name, I was talking to a guy one time I took the train a few years back, he was from there. Place looks even worse than this. Run-down station, parking lot's nothing but pot-holes. Beat-up houses on dirt roads. And it's got a firetower up on the hill behind it. You know the place I mean?"

"Magnon." I squint as I say it. The wind is swerving around the corner of the building and roaring down the platform, finding dirt to pick up and throwing it around. I've had nicer smokes.

"Yeah, yeah, that's it."

He doesn't ask how I know it and that's fine. Myself, I don't think of Magnon as being as bad as all that, or no more so than any of the other shit-holes he could find out here between Toronto and Winnipeg. Not that there are a hell of a lot of points of civilization to compare against. Not a lot of dots on the map and hardly any of them in color. But it's the place, I remind myself, that I come from. And that I'm heading back to shelter in. And to chronicle. I shift from one foot to the other a few times, grabbing some last quick puffs on my cigarette. Platform activity is subsiding, almost time to run back across. My companion picks at his teeth, then continues.

“This guy was telling me how this Magnon place, it’s like a medieval town and there’s some old guy who’s like the lord of the place and everybody works for him. He goes up on the firetower and looks down on them all. This guy was saying how this town, they’re all fuckin’ in-breds there. Half the place is related to each other. Well –“ he clucks, taking a last drag and flicking his cigarette away - “I guess those winter nights are pretty long and cold around here. And why would anyone stay in a place like that except for family?” He shakes his head, clearly impervious to the fact that someone could actually come from Magnon. He holds his hand out from the shelter of the overhang to test the rain. “Guess I better get goin’.”

Fuckin’ in-breds. Yup, I could see how someone from outside could get that impression. When you live on an island, maybe people do sometimes get a little too friendly with each other. And unfriendly, at other times. Especially to unwelcome visitors. I watch him leave, finish my cigarette, toss one last glance at Bourque’s Landing, then sprint across the platform myself and clamber back on the train.

Only a couple of hours to go now. As we draw closer, dread begins to creep. Dread of navigating through all the how come you’re back stuff. Dread of how long it might take to get the getting-back part behind me and then finding myself a track to get onto. But I guess that’s where the lying and pretending comes in, just to bridge over things. I can do it. Spin some stories to provide cover, at least temporarily. In fact, when I think about it I know a lot about this kind of thing. I’ve spent enough time the last few years listening to others bullshit their way through life, then figuring out what they were really saying and writing it down while avoiding lawsuits. It was liars and pretenders I had to deal with. That was me, the intrepid reporter, carefully screening. Poking around, asking and re-asking questions. Scratching, shoveling, groveling. Working my ass off - even if my supportive wife thought otherwise - to find exactly the kinds of garbage pit that I’ve now gone and dug for myself. I worked so hard at getting stories, maybe I got a distorted sense of what it is - the story - and how you get to become one. And what it means when you do.

And so I went and fell right into one of the messes I would happily find others in. Like the sleazy politicians I used to write about. People like them, people of stature and status, they’re not really all that different from you or me because if you wait long enough and watch them hard enough, they fuck up like we all do. Like I did. Yup, I fucked up, as sure as I’m sitting here now, trying to get comfortable in the coach seats when what I really need is one of those sleepers. I watch streaks of rain snake across the window like hairline fractures. I sink lower and tilt over further. And think of how many times I’ve pressed my face against the glass like this, running away from Magnon, or running back. But this time ... this time there’s more. More reasons and excuses, more stories to tie them together. The main story, I guess it is, I’d rather leave untold. But for all I know, *The Magnonite’s* already getting ready to run a feature article on it. “Prominent Local Citizen Caught *in Flagrante* in Montreal”. Good old Jackie - she’s the editor - she’d find a way to make this look like news. Oh shit. I sink still lower.

Pressing my eyes shut, I squeeze myself into a warm, dark closet. I’m struck by how precious it is, this void between the disaster of what I’ve left behind in Toronto and whatever it is that awaits me in Magnon. It’s a time to decompress and recompose, to view both worlds from a bit of distance, or better still to shut them out. And if I sit still enough, long enough, hard enough, I can. There’s a tranquility, padded by the rhythm of

train on tracks, clicking softly, swaying. Up here, the frost heaves the track faster than they can get crews out to work on it, and the train periodically rolls like an old roller-coaster, but in a comforting kind of way. I can feel the muscles that go down from my neck into my shoulders and my back loosening a little ... I'm starting to crowd out the clutter.

But then a woman two or three seats up ahead of me laughs a little too loud and cracks my cocoon and everything comes rushing back in like a hole in a diving suit. And with it the feeling I always get, the closer to home I get, that screwed up as things may be elsewhere, don't count on it being better in Magnon. Or so your average Magnonite, enveloped in the talk of a town that likes to talk, would have you believe. My story will get caught in their radar, bounce around for a while like popcorn in a popper. Until something newer and better comes along.

I shift my weight from one cheek to the other and squirm a little, muscles complaining. There's a scratching nearby - I'm listening but my eyes are still closed. I open them just enough to see that it's the little girl in the seat ahead, reaching back for something that's fallen between the seats. I straighten up and lean forward to help her and her eyes fix on mine a little suspiciously. I guess I've looked better.

"Hi," I say. I don't really feel talkative - too much of that these days, and more to come - but can a four- or five-year-old be that dangerous?

"Hi," she replies cautiously, leaning sideways to grope under the seat but keeping her eyes on me. She retrieves a plastic purse stuffed with bits of paper.

"That looks important," I suggest, and she looks at it for a moment.

"Nah, it's just money. Well - " she leans towards me and drops her voice " - it's just paper really, but so's money."

I can't argue with that. I slump back in my seat. It's just money. How many times I offered that to Laura - explaining, imploring, always on my heels, always looking for counter-examples. And Ellie, sweet pliable Ellie, not so much older than my visitor from the seat ahead here, she'd jump in on cue with complaints of deprivation and want - all those things that *all* her friends had. And now she's gone from me, stolen like loose change from a hotel dresser. I turned away, I lost concentration. I set myself up and Laura swooped. Like playing chess with someone who thinks more than a move ahead: the unfairness of it. Memories, festering like dog shit on a hot sidewalk, well up from somewhere intestinal, overwhelming reason. I raise myself to go find a coffee.

"Good-bye, mister," the child chimes as I lurch by her seat. "Hey, you spilled something on yourself."

She's pointing at my crotch. I look down at a big grease stain from where I rested the pizza I brought onto the train with me in Toronto this morning. Her mother glances up, then down, then pulls her daughter back straight in her seat.

"You want some of my money?" the girl asks.

I mutter something lost under the convenient roar of a tunnel. Little girls shouldn't talk to strangers. Ellie wouldn't. I don't think. I stop and minister to my pants in the men's room, turning a greasy blob into merely a wet one, then continue through into the

restaurant car, a section of retrieved newspaper held strategically in front of me to ward off further crotch-related conversations. I'd change except I can't be bothered.

It's quiet except for a table down at the far end. They look like saw-mill workers - which I could so easily myself have been - talking as if they're competing with giant circular saws rather than the metallic patter of train wheels. They're trading insults and swear words like someone's keeping score. I pick a table safely distanced. It's a smoking car and the air's getting thick. The waiter glides over, rolling with the train.

"Morning, sir."

"Just a coffee."

"Cream, sugar?"

"Yeah."

But as he turns to go, I call him back. "Can I make that a beer instead?"

"Sure. Blue? Export?"

"Make it a Blue."

"Yes, sir."

It's earlier than I'd normally have my first beer, but it's not a normal day. Normality in fact deserted me a while back. Me the one with the perfect wife and the marriage they all envied. Me the one who got away, escaped the pull of the woods and the drudgery of Magnon. To college, which might as well have been the circus or the rodeo circuit, as far as most of those I left behind were concerned. College degrees in Magnon, precious few, were mostly imported. Like my Uncle George, originally from Halifax, via Toronto, the closest Magnon has to a real lawyer. But he's not a real uncle, just a friend of the family - Mama's, really - who saw something in me other than chain saw or hockey stick. Maybe because Jeff seemed to have grabbed the requisite genes there. It was George who teamed with Mama to nudge me to reading and studying and other less physical activities than you'll find in the Magnon play-book. Mama the librarian, always quick to back up George's message even if college was almost as alien to her upbringing as it is to the guys tossing playing cards between bottles of beer and packs of cigarettes at the table down the car from me. Guys who talk, or used to, about what they're going to do when they move to Toronto. Maybe they tried but you can tell how successful it was. They don't realize there's magnets sewn into their jackets; they get too far out of town, there's a tugging and then, hey, just like that they're back home. Their dreams were mosquitoes on a bug zapper.

But look at *me* now. Here I am, Mr. Horatio Fucking Alger. What the hell am I doing here? Horatio Alger without a job, or nothing you could take to the bank, and no more possessions than would fill the trunk of a car. Pulled what I had out of a savings account to get me through however long I end up staying. Got a daughter somewhere. A wife who seems to wish she wasn't. That'll get them smirking. Give them something to throw at the guy who's still the guidance counselor at my old high school who used to figment people like me till we actually came along. Hey, look at Josh here, graduated from right where you're sitting, Sir John A. High School, made it all the way to a big-city

newspaper! Whoa, look at him now. Christ, this can't be what the manual had in mind. Or Mama.

She'll be at the station. I'm praying that the details of my recent past and the humiliations it's brought won't yet have reached her. It's not that she's a prude, just that she has so much faith in me and I can't let her down. Laura's departure with Ellie, she'll know about that. Laura has one or two friends she'll likely have confided in already, and so it'll have seeped into the water system pretty quickly. But will whoever told Mama about it also know about the events that led up to it? Can a story such as this begin and end at the end-point? No, they'll be digging away until the full sequence has been revealed, all the guilt distributed, the pain reconstructed. They're probably well on the way there already. But not Mama. She won't judge. Telling her about it won't be easy but she's someone I'd rather tell myself.

She'll be at the station. There early in case the train is. I'm sitting up near the front, so I'll pass her standing there before the train comes to a stop. She'll have an anxious look but that won't mean anything because she usually does. We tease her about it and maybe she'll smile. But it will be a sad, sagging smile that softens the lines only temporarily until the worries come seeping back like her face is in a flood zone. And if she's suffered for all the family's - the extended family's - deeds and misdeeds, then I'm bringing back a few more to throw in the pot.

Where's my beer, I wonder. I turn around to look for the waiter but as I do there's a sudden, jarring roar as the train plunges into a tunnel. We're hitting a stretch of five or six of them. Blasted through ridges where the glaciers grooved rather than paved. A couple of them detective-story long where who knows what bad thing might happen while it's pitch black and deafening. I remember when I was a kid, I'd sit and imagine what sight might greet me when we were suddenly excreted out the other end. I'd fixate on the last face I looked at in the car before things went dark. What could possibly have made him or her a more likely victim than some other randomly chosen person in the car. I'd stare straight at where I remembered them sitting, holding that spot but nothing to anchor it to in the blackness. And the noise that seemed to grow, the deeper the train went, more of it and louder. Then suddenly, slicing through the roar, firm yet calm, Mama's voice, coming from nowhere: "We'll be out the other end in a moment, honey. No point closing your book." Out the window it would turn to one shade short of black, then another and another, faster now and the track noise climbing an octave and then another before the train exploded back into daylight. And there was the intended victim, still sitting just where they'd been sitting. And I'd scan for other empty seats where before there might have been someone, disappointed not to find anyone unaccounted for. Mama would pat my knee and I'd return to my book.

The waiter's returned with my beer. "Anything to eat, sir?"

The question jolts me. Not to this morning's greasy pizza but back to the night before last. My last real meal, though only in the sense of food being present. It's a blur already. We were in a Toronto restaurant - Bertolucci's, I'd always wanted to go, what a night to choose, what a waste of money. Far too civilized for the venomous mood that Laura was in. Accusing, blaming, haranguing. Telling and retelling sordid details they could have heard several tables away. Maybe even over at the table where I recognized a couple of people from my Ryerson days. I looked into Laura's eyes and saw whitecaps.

It was me who caused the whole mess, she pointed out triumphantly. Me who slept with her friend when I was off in Montreal at a seminar. Not just some nameless hooker but someone she knew, someone with a face and a voice. But she wasn't your friend, I pointed out, you hardly *knew* her. Just because she was from Scotland and so are your grandparents, you figured you had some stupid connection with her. Well, she worked in my building and I had lunch with her and you met her last year at our Christmas party and remarked that she was nice. But, but ... And I'm at home with Ellie waiting for you to call and you're in bed with a friend of mine. How *could* you? I tried to calm her but it only stoked her indignation.

It was supposed to be a reconciliation that night. My idea. Sit down over a glass of wine, speak calmly, regain perspective. Yeah, right. She was in a mood to begin with and got more worked up from there. Summoning even more anger when I dared to point out the convenient coincidence of her new living arrangements and how quickly they materialized. I matched her decibel for decibel and then, as waiters circled like chaperones at a junior high dance, I chose to walk out. Before she did. Some victory. I staggered home thinking how the hell did this happen - when what I really should have been thinking was what the hell do I do next. But clear thought had deserted me.

"A menu, sir?"

"Oh. No, thanks." Mama will have a feast prepared. She always does, but especially when comforting is in order.

"You want to run a tab?"

"Sure."

The waiter pours some beer into a glass and drifts off. I empty it, wipe foam from my nose, then pour in the rest of the bottle and light a cigarette. I lean back. The noise from the card table seems to recede, losing out to the rumble of the train. But as the lumberjacks and then the train gradually tune away, my troubles come tiptoeing back out of the trees, dancing and taunting. There was the surprising turn of events on the heels of the offending Montreal night. A few days before the offending Toronto restaurant. I can't believe it was less than a week ago. It was as I packed my bag the next day, getting ready to head home to Toronto. Emerging from the acrid aftertaste of the previous night's activities was a shot of faith - radiant, almost - in myself, in marriage, in the future. A catharsis ... a resurrection! I returned home from that trip with missionary zeal, confessing my transgression to Laura before I'd even unpacked, spelling out the unsavory chain of events as if they'd happened to someone else, the words tumbling out uncensored. Spirit and conscience, both cleansed. We'd start all over, she and I, clean slate and do it right. Marriage, family, finances, priorities ... I bubbled over like I'd just popped my cork.

But Laura saw things differently. Very differently. Her face is now frozen in my memory, how she turned, and so quickly, from disbelief to anger to the hatred that now consumes her. And when I came, breathless, to the end of my cameo statement, she just stared, her eyes slitted, her breathing audible. She was a guard-dog, poised to pounce and I was pinned against a fence too high to climb. *Uh-oh, what have I done.* There was a cannonading silence - I stood there feeling my world deflate - and then: "This you'll regret." That's all she said. No shouting or crying or arguing. She just got up and walked away. Her icy calmness was much worse than any other reaction I could imagine. And

when, soon after, I caught her face as she moved around the apartment, she looked energized and strangely elated. That was supposed to be me feeling like that, but I might as well have flushed all that down the toilet.

The next day no more words had been uttered, but it was quite clear that my message of repentance and hope had had pretty much the opposite effect. Which she confirmed by announcing, tersely, that she and Ellie were leaving. Just like that. I was flabbergasted. Me, one misstep along life's tortuous path, one wrong choice when there are so many to be made, and she chooses to walk away from marriage and family and past and future. Me who came clean ... didn't I do the right thing? Yet I look around and see guys who've behaved much worse but with nothing to pay. Guys who cheated and then lied - what about them? How come they're now sitting at home, their wives happily oblivious, and me the one with my life stuffed into a suitcase?

Hell, I hardly knew the goddamn woman! A face in a bar, barely recognized. A body in a bed. Oh Christ, I can't believe this happened. Like everything sacred between Laura and me, back to when we were in high school, back to when we started planning a life together, has no meaning any more. Like it was just a phase and now it's done. I finish my beer and call to the waiter for another one.

Then they were gone. I don't know when she packed, or how she got so much out of there so quickly. Friday. It took several hours for the shock to hit me in full, then a couple of days to realize that it was for real. There was no contact. Then I heard that they'd moved in with a salesman at the electronics distributor where she worked part-time. That was the icing. I know which guy it is. Reggie, that's his name. He looks like a Reggie. It all happened so fast. That really got me flustered. Was this something waiting to happen that I unwittingly helped to happen? Sure, our marriage had been flagging, but had that become her mission? Did my confession of guilt - forget the redemption - present her exactly the opportunity she was looking for? The day-to-day of life ... that was the trap? Set it and wait. She a trapper with traps all over the place and I the animal that stepped in one and then dragged itself all the way to her door? Is this what I saw on her face after the initial pain and anger were dispensed with? Was she all rehearsed and ready to go? Did I just throw myself on her sword? This possibility torments me. I poked around for answers or even just clues, but the lack of evidence only fanned my suspicions.

And then, before I'd got around to calling up Uncle George to ask his advice, I hear she's hooked up with some hot-shot lawyer. A lawyer ///probably have to pay for, along with God knows what other expenses. Not just for Laura and Ellie but also, as far as I'm concerned, for Reggie. Why at least couldn't she have deserted me for someone who could write checks with her name on them? Instead it's Reggie, a semi-literate salesman whose style of dress suggests other income sources, the kind that don't fit into Revenue Canada job classifications. I stopped in at Regal Electronics' offices a few times to pick up Laura and there each time was Reggie, feet on desk, swiveled to face her, loafing like that was his job. If there was business to be done, it would come and find him. So would I now be happier if she'd run off with a doctor? ... Oh, Christ, how the hell should I know. I'm having trouble enough with reality - forget the hypotheticals.

This whole thing, it's one indignity piled on another. Here's this girl I rescue from Magnon and take to Toronto and I show her how much better life can be and what thanks

do I get. No, this can't be. It'll sort itself out, it has to. She'll wake up one morning and laugh at it, and then we'll sit down and sew things back together but a little differently. Which is exactly what I had in mind when I called her up the day before yesterday to get her to meet me for dinner. Why, she demanded. Some details, some Ellie matters, I lied, figuring that once we sat down and had a glass of wine, got to re-establishing ourselves, rebuilding connections, things would fall in place. Boy, was I wrong.

I'm collapsed back in my chair, exhausted just by the remembrance of it all. I take a long drag on my cigarette and then a slow exhale. Right now I wish this trip had days, not hours to go. Staying on to Vancouver. Not because I'm some crazy person obsessed with trains. I just don't want to get where I'm going. I try to pretend I got on the wrong train and I'm halfway to Halifax. I imagine getting a sleeper and turning it into my bedroom. But my reverie is snapped when the door at the end of the car scrapes open and I hear a voice. A voice I've not heard in maybe a year but which I'd recognize even if it'd been ten.

### CHAPTER 3

There's another reason I know it's Maury Robertson. I saw him out front of Union Station in Toronto this morning. He was with some older guy in a suit. We were walking in different channels of rush-hour crowds. Close enough to not seeing each other that we pretended we didn't. A quick look down at my train ticket like I suddenly forgot where I was going. And a quick prayer that they weren't heading the same place I was. A faint prayer, I suppose, given who we were and where. Maury's not someone I'd go out of my way to talk to on a *good* day. The kind of mood I was in this morning, I'd have chewed out my grandmother.

He's coming up the car, he gets closer and I know there's no escape. I swivel part-way round to my left and see him approaching, me right in his path, the older guy I saw him with still following behind him. I don't feel any more inclined to talk now than I did this morning.

"Josh - long time no see."

"Hey, Maury."

"How's it going?"

"Okay. Yourself?" He's looking at the empty chairs and I know I'm stuck. "Still hanging out at the Burger Shack?" I ask.

It comes out that way because the last time I ran into him, a few visits back, it was in the restroom at the Burger Shack and this sounds better than asking him if he's still hanging out in restrooms. With anyone else, my question would sound like the joke I'm sure I had in mind. But I've noticed with Maury that things seem to have a habit of sounding sarcastic, whatever the context.

"I'm good," he replies, cautiously. We shake hands like we're ex-business partners. Successfully ignoring the fact that we ignored each other, close enough almost

to touch, not so many hours back. Or maybe he just didn't see me. But can't say I really care much either way.

Maury Robertson triggers a flood of memories going even further back than life with Laura and almost as poignant. Like a cold shower on a cold morning. He was an asshole, even back when we were too young to care so much, and more so since. Or maybe I'm just less tolerant now. He was always there, in my class every year, always hanging around after school till you sort of got used to him. Trying to hit on Laura even after she was mine. Talking loudly like people are more likely to listen, laughing loudly at his own jokes. Hanging out sometimes with some of the south side toughs, back in eleventh or twelfth grade, being tough by association.

He's wearing a wool sweater and corduroy pants. Hair trimmer on the sides, a bit longer in the back. The sweater rides a little high and he's got the beginnings of a paunch pushing out over the top of his pants. Which I note smugly, then remember that I'm heading there too. I feel myself inhale. He turns towards his companion.

"This is Doctor England."

We shake hands. "Robert," he says, smiling a doctor's smile, open but not all the way. He's even fuller-bellied than Maury, the lower shirt buttons straining, but his face is handsome in an older guy way, square jaw, tanned in a non-Toronto way, dark brown eyes with a slight squint. Thinning hair is neatly combed back into curls at the neck.

"Hey," says Maury, turning to the doctor. "You know Josh's mom, right? It's Dorothy, right, Josh? Pops said you knew her from somewhere ... ?"

"Well, no, I would hardly say I *know* her," says Dr. England.

"Oh, well ... " Maury, rarely at a loss for words, starts to find others. "Josh is one of the ones who got away. Works for a newspaper in Toronto now. Going okay?"

I nod. So far so good. If he knows anything about my misadventure, he keeps it to himself. But if he knows anything, he's not the type to hold back. Maybe I'm worrying more than I should? ... I point to empty chairs around the table, though still hoping they were just passing through. They sit down. The waiter comes, beers appear. Maury, with lubrication, picks up steam.

"Doctor England's friends with the Legrands, looks after Alphonse. Now he comes up here to check on Pops too. You heard about Pops?" I shake my head. "Mill accident, a while back but he never really got over it. One of those Russian machines old man Magnon picked up cheap thirty years ago and never replaced." He pauses, glancing at the doctor. "And now it looks like he might have leukemia, or something like that."

"Wow. Sorry to hear that. How's he doing?" I ask. Growing up, Pops was more than just another dad. More of a dad, for some of us, than the one we'd been dealt.

"Better than he was. But he won't be going back to the mill, that's for sure. He's slowed down a lot. It was time anyway."

Doctor England nods solemnly.

"Jeez, that's too bad," I respond. "Old man Joseph, he always got away with things."

“Yeah. We just met with a lawyer in Toronto. There’s some stuff involved.”

“With the Magnons, there usually is.”

We exchange quick smiles. I’m encouraged by the veneer of civility, even as I wonder how deep it is. It’s the way he talks to the doctor but keeps shooting glances at me, as if to gauge my reaction. But it’s mostly idle chatter from him, I throw in responses, so does the doctor, but I’m content to listen as he roams through explanations for the doctor and updates for me on who’s doing what, what happened to who. Not only is listening safer under the circumstances but it’s giving me a head-start on my project. While I’ve managed to pop back to Magnon for semi-regular visits over the years, those have mostly been for Mama. And Jeff when he’s around, and coherent. Dad too, I guess, though he doesn’t always seem to notice much that I’m back. And Sam. Of course Sam. I’d get tidbits from all of them, but it doesn’t hurt to have other sources as well.

I order another beer. Maury heads off to the restroom down the end of the car. We watch him lurch down the aisle. The doctor turns to me and says with a half smile: “Maury certainly likes to talk.”

I nod. “Yeah, some things don’t change.” A pause, a quick glance at him. “You know my mother?” I ask, curious as to the connection.

“Yes.” He nods slowly, takes a sip of his beer and then continues. “Yes. I *have* met your mother. Once or twice. Quite a while ago. Nice lady.” He talks vaguely and distractedly, staring across the table and out the window like there’s something going on out there other than just an unending blur of bark and rock. I’m a little concerned because I don’t want to get into discussion on this with the last guy in town - Maury - I want having inside knowledge of my family’s affairs.

“You’re a doctor where?” I ask, trying to nudge him along.

“I’m at the Toronto General. Been there thirty-five years now.”

“My mother hasn’t spent much time in Toronto. Or the General.” I throw this out at him to see if it sticks. Even though she might have, I suppose. But you have to be pretty ill to be all the way to Toronto ill. When that happens, it’s a big deal - Sudbury’s hospitals are much closer. But maybe it had nothing to do with hospitals and illnesses. Even for those who rarely go down to Toronto, or maybe never at all, life has Toronto connections. If they hadn’t invented places like Toronto, places like Magnon wouldn’t exist.

“Your mother - this was a long time ago - there were people we both knew ... “

He pauses. And suddenly I’m wondering if this was something completely different again. Something amorous? ... A jilted suitor? A chance encounter? Maybe what started with Dad didn’t after all? Doctor England’s manner is bedside calmness, carefully selecting words to deliver unwanted news, or so I assume. But now Maury is pushing open the men’s room door and making his way back up the car. The doctor sees him and, sentence unfinished, reaches for his beer and leans back.

Maury sits back down. He looks at me, then the doctor. He shows momentary puzzlement at our silence, as if the conversation stopped because he returned, which it

did. Then he leads us back into the safety of chit-chat - the mill, the weather, the hockey season. Then the doctor turns to me and asks:

“What brings you back here?”

Maury looks at me curiously, and again I wonder how much he knows. I answer cautiously, like I just got into a car accident and the police are asking me how it happened.

“My dad’s not been well either. Heart problems. I’m taking a bit of leave - coming back to help out my mother.”

As I speak, I’m grading myself. It sounded like a reasonable explanation - yet would I be coming back now like this for Dad if it wasn’t for other things? No, probably not. Acknowledging it, point-blank, makes me feel better. I may be pretending to others but I’m not fooling myself. I’m still not sure, though, what would be the number two answer to the doctor’s question if number one didn’t work.

The doctor is nodding as if with prior knowledge.

“That’s too bad. Staying for a while?” asks Maury.

I don’t know, not too long, I hope. But it’s pretty hard to tell from here. I woke up yesterday feeling the way I used to feel after one of my late night binges that Laura didn’t believe me were an integral part of the journalist’s information gathering process. But it wasn’t that kind of binge. It was the morning after the aborted reconciliation and all pretense of normality was abandoned. I stumbled into work, wild-eyed and tense. Getting my editor’s attention wasn’t hard. Evelyn Burr and I had butted from her arrival. It wasn’t just a male-female thing. Or that she was less qualified than me, anyone could tell you that. And obnoxious as hell. We weren’t meant to work together and found differences of opinion over even the mundane. And here I was offering myself up. Family leave? Take as long as you want. A story while you’re gone? Hmm. A small town with big characters story? Well, yes, that could be something we’d be interested in looking at. Send me along a draft when you get something.

I certainly wasn’t proposing something to her complete with plot and characters and themes - only the most raw of ingredients. The people and places I grew up with. The stories, mixing fiction with fact, that tie them all together. Small-town stories, the kind shared over tavern beers, or in check-out lines, or over back-yard fences, swatting away black flies. The kind people in the city like to read. I wonder if that’s true. I’ve been assuming so - part of making my whole situation plausible enough for me to proceed with it. Carrying the dignity I hope to salvage from my car accident of a life, as I now stand back and survey it. I hope it’s true, it must be. I’m thinking a three or four part piece, maybe some photos, or maybe illustrations. But stories, there are stories. I know enough about Magnon to know it’s a minefield of stories.

Stripped to its basics, this will be Magnon’s saga starring Joseph Magnon - its scion, its history, its paycheck - and his family. And the things that have befallen him and them, in the process wringing disruption, including the occasional dose of tragedy, to the town’s battered ecosystem. This will be a story with various facts, known or knowable, at its core, with the spaces between them to be bridged by whatever I might be able to infer or extrapolate. Wielding the tools of the trade as they were meant to be wielded, not wasted on the piss-pot town-hall meetings of eviscerated local governments that Evelyn

insisted I attend. I'm talking about Journalism. And Dignity. And maybe having something left over at the end of the month after writing cheques to Laura. A few articles isn't going to set me up for life, but done well who knows what might come of it. But first I've got to stop the spinning.

"Not sure," I answer Maury, in complete truthfulness. "A couple of weeks maybe. Could be longer, I suppose. Got some leave at work ... "

Maury nods. I guess back of my mind I was thinking in and out, pretty quick. No work plan with numbered steps, but I've got the basics in mind. Some digging at the library - but digging wide around Mama because she's the librarian. Hang out. Go fishing and see what I can reel in. Do it quickly, quietly, before guards go up. Do the stuff that people writing feature articles do. Then I'll collect it all and zip back to Toronto with it, write it up, and it shouldn't be that hard. But I need to do more thinking, I know that. More thinking but after another round of beers, the spinning's still there, a little faster even. I don't need any more to drink right now, not as I look ahead to Mama's questioning. Gentle questioning, maybe, but it's still questioning. I need to go prepare for it, rehearse, and so I say good-bye to the two of them and head back to my seat in the coach.

It's getting close now. It's still just trees and rocks but there'll be a slight bend in the track or a rocky outcrop or a big tree that fell and took down other trees with it. Tokens of familiarity. I've done this trip many times. And here's the old Indian settlement, what's left of it, where the train slows down but never stops. A few more miles and we cross Seven Mile Road. We rode out here a bunch of times on our bikes when we were kids and headed up the dirt road that slopes up and away from the tracks and waited for the train. Someone would stand down where the road crosses the tracks and they'd signal as soon as they saw the train come around a bend about a half mile back and we'd start to pedal. We had it timed from the top of the hill to get there, going hard, with maybe forty, fifty yards to spare. But sometimes it was closer, and sometimes we'd bail out. I don't why we did it. It was the kind of dumb thing that dumb kids do.

There were times I remember when I bailed or someone else did but Sam, we couldn't believe it, Sam who couldn't ride nearly as fast, one leg pedaling and the other, his bad one, flapping, he'd keep going and he'd always make it but sometimes so friggin' close we could hardly watch. I couldn't figure it out. He could be so dark, so paranoid, but on that hill he'd come sailing down on his CCM, staring straight ahead at the crossing, oblivious, it seemed, to the train bearing down from his right, coasting through like there was no doubt he'd make it, even if others who'd got there ahead of him had hit brakes and skidded out short. It was manic, it was stupid. How could he treat life like it was just a game? And what about his friends who'd have had front-row seats if his timing had been just a little off?

Sam. Among my smorgasbord of reasons for coming back to Magnon - up high on the list, in fact - is Sam. He's like a summer cottage in winter, something you've got to check up on from time to time, especially if it's a bad winter. Life for Sam has been a long string of bad winters, each one weighing him down further. When I think of him, I don't think of a daredevil show-off. That's not him, except with the occasional dose of adrenalin coursing through him and down to the pedals. No, Seven Mile Road wasn't the real Sam. I think instead of something out of Dickens. Not that I've read much Dickens, not since high school and there because we had to. But it's what the word Dickens conjures up for

me. It's the misery and suffering that Sam carries around, stumbling under their weight, and how he wears it like an overcoat on a January night so cold your car won't start.

The first thing you notice about him is the limp that's taken over the left side of his body. His mangled architecture. Maybe that makes it sound worse than it is. It's just that we, all of us, have always thought of his accident as something so pitiable, something that came so scarily from the sky and almost destroyed him when he was small and vulnerable. His body leans and warps like a snow-fence after a blizzard. His right leg has some unnatural angles. His right shoulder sags and the arm doesn't move quite the way it should. When you see him shirtless, which I'm sure few have, his arms mismatch like he was cobbled together from spare parts. The left arm fairly muscular from having to learn to carry things one-handed, like when he was growing up and his father took him to the mill and he had tasks just like everyone else. He's self-conscious about it, wears big clothes that hang off him like a coat-hanger. His hair is dark and straight and combed forward, dangling like a beaded curtain over deep-sunk eyes.

A lot has happened to Sam. I guess we could all say that, but it's relative. He's had more than his share, I'd say, or at least his share of the bad stuff. Right now, I figure I have too, but that's because there's been a slew of it the last while and I'm not dealing with it that well. Sam's had shit dumped on him for so long that he's used to it. Myself, I'm running away, but I don't think Sam views that as an option. Not with Magnon in his name.

Only a few miles to go now, and leaning closer to the window I can see up ahead the ridges that look down on the town. The mill sits tucked below them. And directly above the mill, perched on the first ridge, rising above most of the trees along the ridge, is the firetower. Joseph's famous firetower. From which he would survey the mill and beyond it the town like a lord on his ramparts. Like my platform companion back in Bourque's Landing told it. I can remember being at the mill and looking up and seeing Joseph, leaning on the railings, his coat and hair tossing in the wind like Captain Hook.

Although a ridge poking out of an ocean of trees may seem an obvious place to put a firetower, that's not quite true. That's because there's a still higher ridge right behind it that blocks forest views in several directions. This makes it a rather unusual, and impractical, firetower whose location in fact has nothing to do with trees and fires. Stories have even been told - as stories often are though not always with fact - of Joseph being up on the tower one day when fire broke out on timberland where his company had leased logging rights. It was only about twenty miles away, but because of the ridge in behind and the direction of the wind, he never saw the smoke and knew nothing about the fire till he descended later.

But all this will have to wait. So will Sam's accident. Out the window are the first signs of civilization, or Magnon's version of it. I'm assembling my stuff when the conductor comes through, directing me to the door at the rear of the car. As I lumber down the aisle, I see the guy from back in Bourque's Landing. Even from five or six rows away, even over the noise of the train, I can hear him snoring. But as I draw level with him, he suddenly opens his eyes and looks straight at me, unblinking. There's a flash of recognition, then a tinge of guilt, or maybe pity, that someone - me, his platform companion - would have to get off, maybe even live, in a place like this. Then he turns back to the window, tilts his head and just as quickly falls back asleep.

I get to the exit door as the train starts shuddering, the brakes squealing. Trees have given way to gravel streets and then a few paved ones. And here's the end of the platform and faces gazing up like goldfish in a pond, heads bobbing as they peer in a window and then back to the next one as the train slows further. And there's Mama. I'm standing in the open door, looking down. We lock eyes for a moment as the train, now going at barely a walking pace, passes her. I grin. She smiles and waves and starts walking with the train and is waiting for me as I step down, foot groping cautiously for the bottom step.