

Back in the fall Andy Kronk escaped north to this cottage on Broad Lake. At the time of purchase he'd brimmed with renovation plans and enthusiasm, levelling the foundation, painting, and calling a local contractor to come by and quote on installing a new septic tank. He had been in no hurry for this last expense. The trudge to the outhouse was onerous, not unbearable. Rustic charm. He'd planned on doing it in another year. But then, in the winter, his needs abruptly changed.

When can you begin work? he'd asked the man on the phone.

Good few more weeks yet, said the contractor. The ground's frozen pretty deep out by you. Lots of rock too. Be hard going if we don't wait.

To Andy, the gruff man sounded bearlike, not yet willing to emerge from hibernation. Please, said Andy, as soon as you can.

Freezin' yer arse off, eh? said the contractor. Andy let the weak joke stand.

And while the long nights still assuredly fell below zero, last week he opened the side door of his cottage after lunch and in the air there was a change. The sky was light blue, the sun fragile but warm. There was no wind. He stood still enjoying the

peace. Then faintly, he heard a sound. He waited. There, again. And again. He walked toward it. From the corner of his cottage, through a small hole in the eavestrough, a single drop of water slowly bulged then dripped. The temperature was above freezing. Soon the contractor could begin work.

Were he still in Toronto, weather like this would be cause for celebration. After months of truculent winter, this advance taste of spring would prompt him, along with several other lawyers, to go in search of a restaurant with a patio. There they would join the swell of rapt Torontonians heading outdoors. They would loosen their ties, roll the cuffs of their white dress shirts a turn or two, put on sunglasses, sit under gas-powered heaters, and sip at tall glasses of blond beer. They would not speak much. Instead they would drink, watch the streetcars rumble past, and, occasionally, one of them would angle a pale face directly at the sun, grin broadly, and say, Oh, right fuckin' on.

The backhoes and workmen were at it within the week — their first job of the season. Over several days they dug the primary hole and trenches. They laid pipes, installed a toilet, sink, and shower stall, replaced plumbing underneath the cottage, and debated where to put the drain field. The huge concrete tank had been ordered, Andy was told, from a reliable supplier, and would be delivered and lowered into place tomorrow, next Tuesday at the latest.

You'll have yourself a flush toilet in days there guy, the contractor had said yesterday with a slap on Andy's back.

Pushing his hands up under his armpits Andy countered with, Cold enough for you?

They were quiet for a time.

Be able to do away with that outhouse soon for good, said the man. No more putting on your Kodiaks when you need to go to the shitter, eh?

Andy smiled.

Need the name of a honey wagon?

I will, I suppose. Yes, said Andy. The man took out his wallet and gave Andy a business card.

That's my brother-in-law. Knows how to take shit alright — married my sister, didn't he?

The man revealed his generous, gap-toothed smile before walking off. Andy watched for a bit after his truck had pulled away.

At first Andy's dreams had come at night spawning horrors. He woke gasping for fresh air. Then, bolder, the dreams broke through during the day, creeping into the bathroom mirror, the lid of a pot, a knife's blade as his thumb passed over it rinsing off suds under warm running water. The images took over, vivid and loud. They ran together making complex stories. Andy believed he was inside them, experiencing a kind of authentic life so tangible that it was difficult to be unable, upon awaking, to discuss it in concrete, sane terms — especially with those who had appeared in them alongside him.

Most often he was with Colin in the dreams. When they were young, together out on the lake in a boat, then years later in New York City in an elevator, and then in a park where Colin hovered a foot off the ground, a spectre wearing a cape. The dreams were fantastical, intimate, absolutely true.

Colin, he whispered into the air. What should I tell her?

Soon it would be spring. The biographer would arrive.

Were it not for the dreams, Andy might have been able to tell the biographer that he had left the Aspinals and Huntington House long behind. Those years were like the thrum of his own inner ear, the pulling of the ropes of blood that guaranteed him no silence, even when he was most alone. Without Colin, Andy had been alone. Huntington House was his only home, and Colin was whom he meant by the two words — full of pride and loyalty — best friend.

Drip. Drip. As a teenage boy, Colin Aspinall had long and tanned legs and a fine line of blond hair tracking a path up his flat stomach to his chest, where it fanned out in lighter, golden swirls.

Back at their boarding school, Lord Simcoe College, they'd once cut last class and headed down through the woods to the lakeshore on a similarly warm, late winter's day. At dusk they kicked at preserved crabapple husks frozen during their autumnal rot. Aiming away at the distant lighthouse blinks, they thought not much beyond the moment itself. They were young men on the shore of a large, lead-grey lake. They were confined at boarding school but that day Colin Aspinall had felt urgently alive.

Kick. Laugh. Kick. They were young and arrogant. Laugh. Kick. They were beautiful and naive. All thoughts were original and right; their lives were as vital as heat from the sun. Other people — the ones they ignored in shops or movie theatres — must have looked back at them with awe and envy. Even when he and Colin became adolescently philosophical, or grave, they remained convinced of themselves. Regardless of their moods, Colin would tell Andy whatever flashed through his impulsive mind.

Hey, he'd said motioning across the darkening lake, that light comes from America. Kick. Laugh. Kick. Colin's voice, high and roused, had the effect of dressing up his youthful words as insightful. Just over there, he continued, now pointing at the probable haze of New York State, I am *nobody*. My last name counts for nothing. Live free or die. That's what they believe.

How was the moment recovered? Did he remember or did he dream that day they'd kicked crabapples at the faraway lighthouse? January in the mid-1980s and the weather was severe about them, toques pulled down over their ears, loosened ties

and fashionable Sun Ice ski jackets were zipped over their tweed sports coats. Colin had spoken then to Andy so quietly it was almost lost to the wind. At fifteen years old, on the dark winter shoreline of the lake, Colin had mouthed to Andy the words I love you.

Andy had looked down at his penny loafers, and back up. The lighthouse blinked away the moments in awkward measures. Colin had uttered the obvious, gripping bond that passed electrically and, until then, silently, between them. But tucked up inside three quavering words there was more than simple tenderness, honesty, and heartache. Why can't I be normal like you, Andy? Why can't *you* be different, like me? Andy could hear this subtle counterpoint in Colin's voice now, but not then. Years and disappointments would have to mount before he was burdened with nuance.

Andy would come to wonder why, right then and there, he hadn't just punched Colin in the face and called him a cruel name he could never take back. Or else thumped Colin hard on the shoulder, and laughed, flipping the declaration into a playful joke. Either response, though false and ignorant, would have made everything that was to come so much easier. But Andy stood reliable and firm and with a fierce reluctance to exhale unless he disturb the moment before it set hard. Out of loyalty, out of a kind of fraternity, he had said nothing.

How could he speak to the Aspinalls' biographer, of all times now? He mustn't. The Aspinalls were his only family. Yet, when the biographer contacted Andy, she had put an idea in his mind. By explaining it all, telling what he knew of the Aspinalls — Mr. and Mrs. Aspinall, Colin, his older sister Fiona, and his own years spent at Huntington House — he might finally, publicly, sever himself. Was this not what he wanted?

But what right did he have to speak out? His claim was only the memory of a friend, the sound of a word. Colin. A name

that called to everything else and explained it all as far as he knew it. The five letters of another's name contained a whole story, his story.

When the three labourers and the contractor returned several days later, they were too busy with their morning coffees and donuts, and lighting cigarettes without removing their work gloves, with keeping themselves warm, to notice much of anything. Soon enough the crane lowered the pre-formed concrete tank into the hole, the heartbreaking weight of it settling and pressing downward.

Yep, yep, yelled the contractor to the other man operating the crane. Give 'er. Yep, Yep. Easy now. He raised his hand. The chains slackened.

Nice fit, said Andy, forcing himself to talk.

The rest of the day was spent hooking up, laying gravel, filling in, and spreading out top soil. By sunset, the rakes were packed up in the truck and the job was complete.

Just the inspector, who'll be by any day to check our hook-up at the house, promised the contractor. He's a friend of mine so you're golden. Here's your invoice.

Alone again, Andy looked out across Broad Lake. The biographer would arrive with her questions. He pushed air out his nostrils. This was over now. Completed. And before long, spring would open out and the world would be renewed: leaves on the birch trees, large-mouth bass jumping in the lake at fishermen's twitching, shiny lures, trillium flowering over the forest floor behind his cottage. Winter, and its necessary confidences, was gone.

