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Proof

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THE FIRST THING I SAW WHEN I AWOKE WAS THE NURSE'S FACE, ONLY INCHES ABOVE MINE. SHE WAS YOUNG AND HER DARK HAIR WAS GATHERED TIGHTLY BENEATH A CAP. I SAW HER FOR only a second before she was gone.

The left side of my head throbbed. I tried to lift my arm, but it was weighted down. There was terrible pain throughout my body. I emitted a groan and lost consciousness.

I awoke again. I didn't know how much time had passed. I was lying in a bed beneath a white ceiling. There was light behind me, but I couldn't move my head to locate its source. I fought the pain, which seemed to fill my body like liquid filling a vessel. After a few moments I recognized that it was more severe in my left leg and arm, and in my head, than elsewhere. The next thing I noticed was that the left side of my head was bandaged. The bandages covered my eye. I could not seem to move any of

my limbs. The room stank. Food odours mingled with the stench of disinfectant. I tried to cry out.

I must have lost consciousness again because I seemed to awaken. Someone was aiming a penlight into my eye. He withdrew it and dropped it into the pocket of his lab coat.

"You're a lucky man," he said while he jotted something on a paper attached to a clipboard. "There's no brain damage. You won't lose your eye. And you have no broken bones. There's no reason why you should not be up and about in a week or two."

Even though he was standing still, he wavered in and out of focus. He was thin and seemed to be young. He wore a tie and there was a stethoscope draped around his neck.

"What happened?" I asked. As I spoke a new pain shot up the side of my face. My voice sounded strange and garbled, as if I were trying to talk through a mouth full of food.

"The trauma will have affected your memory. You were brought in a week ago. At that point we didn't know if you were going to live. But your improvement has been very encouraging. Now that you're conscious I have no doubt you'll make a full recovery. There will be some scarring."

I was going to nod but the pain in my head stopped me.

He placed his hands on my neck at the base of my jaw and gently swivelled my head from side to side.

"Mobility is good," he remarked, as if to another person I couldn't see. Then he was gone.

I slept.

I was eating my first meal of solid food. Pureéd chicken, mushy peas, green jello, and pale tea. A tube running from a bag of clear liquid suspended from a pole was attached to my right arm. I had not yet left the bed, but a physiotherapist had come and examined my injured arm and leg, and told me it would be at least a couple of days before I could stand unaided. I was disappointed to learn I had to wait this long because the catheter was very uncomfortable. But this was nothing compared to the pain I suffered all through the left side of my body. My headaches came on so suddenly and were so violent that

they inserted a needle into my drip that fed another medicine into my bloodstream, a medicine so strong it carried me off into a world of swirling dream visions.

When the woman came to collect my tray I said, "I can chew, you know. Maybe you could tell them I'm not sucking everything through a straw."

Businesslike, she took the tray and fed it into a slot in her cart. She glanced at me but didn't say anything.

I shared a room with three other patients. The walls were bare and the lighting harsh, but it didn't matter because the curtains around our beds were drawn most of the time. I had glimpsed the old man in the bed next to mine, who, with his grey skin and tawny lips, seemed on the verge of death. I couldn't hear him breathe. I only knew he was alive because he mumbled in his sleep. As far as I had seen, the others, like me, had not had any visitors. Sometimes I felt like I'd been put in a ward for hopeless cases. I enjoyed it when the nurses came in. They were always making jokes and trying to sound cheerful. Except for the meal-cart lady, the hospital workers were friendly and talkative.

I awoke from a doze one afternoon to see a policeman sitting in the chair next to my bed. A nurse was with him, but the moment she saw I was awake she smiled at both of us and left.

He stood and held out his hand. He was broad-shouldered and bulky with a shaved head and a thick neck. "Constable Serge Druon," he said. When we shook, his grip was too strong. I gasped at the pain.

"Oh, sorry," he said. He withdrew his hand and then appeared unsure what to do next.

"I'm all right." I flexed my fingers to show him they were all right. "You have some questions?"

He cleared his throat and flipped open a notebook. "The night you were brought in. The twenty-third." He looked at me.

"I suppose," I said. "I don't remember."

"It says here you were brought in on the twenty-third."

"I'm not questioning that," I said. "I just can't tell

you if you're right or wrong."

He looked puzzled and stared at me for a few seconds longer than seemed necessary.

"Regarding the night of the twenty-third then," he went on finally. "What can you tell me about that night?"

"I don't remember that night," I said.

He looked at me like he didn't believe me. "You don't recall anything?"

"No," I said. "I've gone over it a hundred times, but the last thing I remember is talking to someone from one of my classes. Class was finished and we were walking out. His name is Robert. Then the next thing I remember is waking up here."

After writing down what I'd said he asked, "Did you go anywhere with this Robert after your class?"

"I don't think so. I don't know him very well. We're in one class together, but I've never seen him outside of class."

He nodded as he wrote. "What time did this class end?"

"About five-thirty."

"And what do you do after this class, under normal conditions?"

"Depending how I feel, I sometimes go straight home, or to the library to study, or to the Student Union for a beer."

"Did you go to the Student Union for a beer on the night of the twenty-third?"

"I don't know," I said. "I can't remember."

His face betrayed no emotion. He flipped over the page in the notebook and studied what was written there. "The university is downtown, in the centre of the city."

"Yes."

"You specialize in—" He paused. "Indo-European languages."

"Yes, that's right."

"You live in the Anglewood apartment building on Renfrew Street?"

"Yes."

"You were found at the corner of Wilson and Firth in the north end of the city."

He looked at me, possibly for confirmation.

"I'll have to take your word for it."

"It says here that at approximately 2:45am, a vehicle operated by a Mr. Joseph Orton pulled to the side of Firth Street near Wilson. Mr. Orton stated he noticed something on the sidewalk that looked like a pile of garbage or a bundle of clothes. When he pulled over he saw it was a body and immediately called the emergency number."

He glanced at me before continuing.

"The body was that of a Caucasian male, late-twenties. The injuries were consistent with being struck by a vehicle: lacerations and extensive bruising to the left side of the body. Significant loss of blood from a head wound. The individual was stabilized at the scene and brought to the Trauma Unit at 3:15am."

"So it looks like I was hit by a car."

"Looks like it," he said. "Do you have any idea how you got to the corner of Wilson and Firth?"

"None."

"Do you know why you would be in that part of the city? Do you frequent any clubs or know anybody who lives there?"

I shook my head. "No."

"This Robert from your class doesn't live there?"

"I have no idea where he lives."

"Have you ever had any dealings with Joseph Orton?"

"No."

He leafed through a few more pages of the notebook.

"Did you have significant amounts of money with you that night?"

"No."

"You weren't going somewhere to buy drugs? There are known drug dealers who operate in the neighbourhood around Wilson and Firth. It's notorious, actually."

"I don't do that sort of thing."

He nodded and studied the notebook again.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No."

He leafed slowly through the final few pages of the notebook before flipping it shut.

"Our investigation will be kept open, but I doubt we'll find who did this." He picked up his cap, which I now noticed had been resting on the bed at my feet. "We suspect the attack was random or the person was drunk. You were crossing the street and someone ran you down. There were no skid marks. It might have been accidental, but because you can't remember what happened our investigation can't really proceed. Random assaults are just about the most difficult crimes to solve because there's no motive. In a case like this witness testimony is crucial, but no other witnesses have come forward."

My face was still bandaged and my vision had grown cloudy, so I could not read his expression. But I got the feeling he wanted more from me than I'd been able to provide.

"I'm sorry," I said.

He ignored this. "If you remember anything else you can contact us. Any detail can help. Even if you think it's not important, it could be enough for us to get a fix on what happened."

"I'll try," I said.

He nodded and left. We did not shake hands again. I rested my head on the pillow. His questions had exhausted me. In a minute I was asleep.

My face was covered with scrapes and purple with bruises. My eye was still swollen shut. I walked with difficulty, labouring up the hall with the aid of a tubular metal walker and attended by a nurse who pushed my I.V. pole on wheels. She was the nurse whose face I had seen when I first woke up. Her name was Elizabeth Piper. She kept her hand on my elbow the whole time, as if afraid I might fall. Her concern seemed sincere. Every few minutes she asked if I wanted to stop or if there was anything she could get for me.

"No," I said. "There's nothing."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No. I was an only child."

"What about your parents?"

"They're dead."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's nothing to be sorry about. They've been dead for a long time."

"Do you keep in touch with anyone back home?"

"For a while I wrote letters to friends. But right after I left I was moving around so much that if they wrote back the letters never reached me. Now I've been away for so long I don't know if any of them are still there. I could write again. I still have their addresses."

"Why were you moving around so much?"

"I had to go where I could find work. Sometimes the jobs I had didn't last very long. Two weeks or a month. It was years before I was able to get a job that lasted for more than three months. Everywhere I went I was a foreigner. It made things very difficult. You have to be prepared to take jobs that nobody else wants, even if it means packing up and leaving after only a couple of weeks."

She shook her head. "I don't know how people can stand to live like that, always moving from place to place—never having a chance to settle. As soon as you arrive in one place you have to start thinking about leaving to go to the next. It would drive me crazy."

"My country is very poor and the people have always been forced to leave home to find work. Whole families do it. It's like a tradition. It's how we survive. When I left, I knew what was going to happen and I knew how I was going to be treated. I knew I would be expected to work for lower wages because I was foreign. It's not legal, but it's the system. If I complained, they would have me deported. One phone call would be the end of me. So I did twice the work for half the wage and smiled the whole time. Not everyone I worked for was like that. But because I was foreign it took a while to build trust. When I look back it wasn't so bad."

"It sounds awful."

"It always sounds worse than it is. I didn't like some of the things I had to do, but I met some wonderful people."

"Do you ever think about going back?"

"All the time."

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to be so nosy."

"I don't mind," I said. "Most of my memories are good ones."

"I'm sorry about what happened to you."

We walked in silence for a minute.

"Did you live near the water?" she asked. "I love the ocean."

"Yes. When I was a child our house wasn't far from a lake that was twenty-five miles long. I remember you could smell the water and hear the birds."

"It must be beautiful, where you're from."

"It used to be beautiful," I said. "But the government was corrupt and incompetent and there were no regulations. They let lumber companies cut down trees in the national parks, and factories dumped their waste into the lakes and the ocean. Then when the government fell everyone started fighting everyone else. It's going to take years for the countryside to recover."

For a moment she didn't say anything. The phone at the nurse's station rang and someone answered it.

"I've been to Italy."

"I've never been there," I said.

"We went to Rome, and then took a bus to Capri. We stopped here and there to visit museums and cathedrals. There were lots of little towns along the way. I remember it rained a lot. But the flowers were lovely."

I nodded.

"Everywhere we went the children were selling flowers. I had to buy them. I couldn't resist. Everyone was so friendly. But you have to watch out for pickpockets."

"In my country," I said, "the children collect and sell anything they can find. It can mean the difference between eating and starving. The most popular activity is collecting scrap metal, because the dealers will pay a good price for it.

Especially shell casings. But the problem is that the children searching for scrap metal sometimes come across unexploded bombs and land mines."

"That's terrible. Why do their parents let them do it?"

I looked at her. "The parents have no choice. They depend on the income. You have no idea what it's like. There are no jobs and there's no government assistance. People will do anything to make money because they don't want to starve. In my country when it rains, people get wet."

Immediately I regretted saying this, because I liked her and I knew she would find these things alarming. She made no further comment and we walked on in silence. My leg was very weak and the pain had crept into my spine, but I made myself walk all the way to the television room.

On our way back I said, "I think I'd like to get into bed now."

She helped me into the bed, drew the curtain, and went away. I had grown drowsy and when I closed my eyes I saw myself getting into the back of a taxi. It was night. I was not alone. The person next to me spoke to the driver and told him where we were going. I tried to look at who was with me, but it was like my head was locked in a vice. I couldn't turn.

I thought that if I didn't force my thoughts in that direction, something about why I had gone to the corner of Wilson and Firth Streets would come back to me. But weeks later I still remembered nothing about that night. The last thing I could recall was speaking to Robert while we were leaving class. Everything after that was a blank. I could not even remember what Robert and I had talked about.

One night I awoke while it was still dark. There was wind and I think it was raining. I didn't know why I had woken up until I realized that my head was filled with memories. They had nothing to do with the night I was injured. Instead, my mind had taken me back almost thirty years. I was a child, and I was walking down the hallway in

a house, the house where I had lived with my parents. I stopped outside the door to a room. The door was closed, but not locked. I twisted the doorknob and pushed. Inside, the light was dim, but against the closed curtains I could see the outline of someone lying in a bed. I seemed to have no fear. I went closer. The person in the bed was murmuring or moaning, and I knew without thinking about it that it was my grandmother and that she was dying. I understood in a childish way that she would soon be going on a long journey all by herself, and even though I was sad about this I had been told that I would see her again some day. Now that I was in the room, which had been forbidden to me, I didn't know what to do. I became conscious of a sharp and oily smell that got in my nose and nearly made me sneeze. I decided to examine the things on the dresser, the little bottles and vials that had always seemed so precious and mysterious. I had never been allowed to touch them, but now that Grandmother was going away it would be safe to look at these things. I grabbed a blue crystal bottle and brought it to my nose, removing the decorative stopper as I did this so I could smell the dark liquid. There was no odour. I shook the bottle, but the liquid didn't move and I realized that it had become solid. I was returning the bottle to its place on the dresser when I heard a sound, and I turned to see my grandmother looking at me from the bed. She seemed agitated and was making a sound like a cough or a grunt. She reached out toward me and opened her mouth. I was suddenly scared, because she was not dead yet and she had caught me in her room. Somehow the bottle was on the floor between my feet, smashed. I had not heard a thing. Then my mother was in the doorway, her hands on either side of her head. The room echoed with moaning and wailing.

I didn't know if this was a memory or something my mind had manufactured. True or not, it was vivid and frightening and filled with enough detail to bring back my childish fear of being discovered where I did not belong.

In the days that followed, my childhood returned to

me in a series of dreams or visions, complete with the smells and sounds of the house and town where I had spent my earliest years. I concluded that the injury had unlocked something in my head, broken open some conduit to my past and unloosed a torrent of memory, though as each vision unfolded it seemed more than just memory. The people in these dreams lived and breathed. I felt the heat of the sun and the cool of the rain. My father and mother moved and spoke as they had in life. Old people trudged along, leading a goat or a sow to market. When I ventured down a street the dirt and dust got into my hair and my eyes. Each sensation touched me beneath my skin and left a mark.

I recalled a spring day when my father took me with him to a musical showcase at his school, the same school I would attend when I was older. He was a music teacher, and his students were to give a demonstration of their skills. The school was only a single building, whitewashed, crumbling, but he was proud of his position there. He played the violin and we were sometimes treated to evening recitals at home. At the school, he taught whatever instrument the student wanted to play, even if he knew nothing about it. He even taught piano, though the piano at the school had suffered damage from being moved from one building to another and he had to tune it himself. We walked to school together that spring day. It was warm and had lately rained. The dirt road had turned to mud and the air was so damp it left a residue on the skin. We entered the schoolroom. He had told me it was his room and that he was the only person allowed to teach there. The children cheered at the sight of him. I never thought students could love their teacher so much. He put me in a chair at the head of the class so I could see everything that was going on. He cleared a space at the front and invited his music students to take their places. Ten students performed that day, four in one group and another six by themselves. While the students played their pieces, I realized that my father must teach subjects other than music. There was a map of the world on the wall and the chalkboard was covered with

sums, and sentences with blanks in them. The room smelled of mould and damp. My father smiled all during the recital. He didn't seem to care if the students made mistakes. Since they were not likely to find joy and freedom in other aspects of their lives, he wanted them to experience the joy and freedom of making music. Later, if they kept up with their studies, they could worry about perfection. On the way home he took me to a friend's house for ice cream. When he laughed my father seemed very young, hardly more than a teenager.

I remembered walking in the hills outside of town with my mother and some of her friends, young women like her who were married to farmers or carpenters or whose husbands had left town in search of work. All of the women had brought children and even babies. My mother had packed a basket with our lunch, and at the top of a high hill we sat in the grass and shared the food we had brought. Everyone had brought something different. There was cake and fruit and dried meat sausage and jars of yoghurt with honey, nuts, traditional sweetened bread, cheese, and fresh water from the well. My mother told stories and listened to the stories of her friends. Everyone laughed and not a word was said about the work they were neglecting. I listened for a while and then along with some other boys decided to explore the hill and the surrounding forest. We had finished eating and set off running and yelling. My mother called to me not to go far and to come back in twenty minutes because we would soon be going home. I followed the others, but was easily outpaced because they were all older than me. I remembered the scent that filled the air, a wild musky aroma, medicinal but invigorating. The afternoon was hot, and the sun hung directly overhead in the hazy sky. The field buzzed with the heat. Everything seemed suspended. It was cooler in the forest. The boys organized a war game, naming themselves after the famous generals who fought in the wars and were feared by our enemies. I would be the king, they said, which sounded wonderful because I would tell them what to do. But in real life they told me the king stayed by himself

in the palace while the generals went out to defend the country, so I sat on a stump and watched as they took their sticks and set about defending the little patch of cleared territory against imaginary invaders. I soon grew bored with this and left them to their game. Nobody noticed I was gone. I wandered back out to the grassy field, where I saw a raven circling in the sky, high up. I stood and watched him. He was alone. I wondered where his friends were and I was sad for him because he was alone, flying in circles up in the sky. I lay down in the grass to watch him, to keep him company, and that was where my mother found me more than a hour later, lying in the grass asleep, keeping a raven company.

The memories came at any time of the day or night. I could be walking in the hall or eating lunch, and a scene from my past would play in my head like a movie. Elizabeth was often present because she was coming in on her days off to be with me, and she grew accustomed to the way I suddenly stopped talking or listening and grew vague and remote, as if my brain had switched itself off. When the memories came they took possession of me. I couldn't do anything to stop them. Afterward, she would ask, "What was it this time?"

I left the hospital, walking with the help of a cane. The sight had returned to my left eye and the pain was gone, except for headaches that could come upon me so quickly and unexpectedly I always had to have pills with me. Elizabeth brought her car to the hospital and drove me home to my apartment, which she had already cleaned because I had let her take the key. I had been so busy recovering from my injuries that I had not thought to ask why she was doing these things for me. At some point during my convalescence I realized that I was seeing her face more often than I should have. It was unimaginable that anyone could work such long hours. But I never questioned her solicitude and was grateful for her constant presence. Without my noticing, we had become friends.

Elizabeth had taken me shopping and we were driving back to the apartment. After less than a year I did not know

the city well, and the drive home was taking so much longer than the drive to the mall I thought she might be lost.

"What part of town is this?" I asked. We'd passed a cemetery and some old brick buildings that appeared to be vacant, then an empty parking lot surrounded by a wire fence. Among the garbage strewn on the sidewalk and blowing in the gutter were advertising flyers, fast-food containers, plastic bags, and pop cans. A group of teenagers or young men wearing loose-fitting clothes huddled in a dark knot at a street corner. She stopped at a red light.

"I was wondering if you would find any of this familiar. We're on Firth Street. The next block down is the intersection with Wilson."

I nodded and glanced around. The cross street where we waited extended as far as I could see. It was lined on both sides with parked cars. The houses were old and run down. The windows of some were covered with plywood.

She smiled at me and took my hand. "Are you all right?"

"None of this looks familiar," I said.

The light changed and she resumed driving.

"We can go straight home if you want. I thought it might jog your memory to see where it happened. I hope you don't mind."

"Were you talking to anyone at the hospital about me?"

"You mean did I ask if I should do this?"

I nodded.

"No. I just thought, since we're out in the car." She paused. "I'm sorry. It's a stupid idea."

"Is this the corner?"

The intersection was just ahead of us. Elizabeth didn't answer. The light turned red and she stopped.

"I'm not angry. I just wasn't expecting it. Can we get out and look around?"

She smiled again, which pleased me because I thought that maybe I'd made her feel bad with my question about the hospital. When the light changed she drove through the intersection and pulled the car over to the curb.

My leg was stiff after sitting, but I was able to lift myself out of the seat before she got around to my side to

help me.

"You don't learn, do you?" she laughed. She took my arm as we walked.

I didn't recognize anything. The street, the houses, the busy convenience store with the name Nasmi's above the window in shiny red letters—everything was new to me. Firth Street descended in a lazy incline toward the city and for a few moments we stood at the top of the hill looking down. It was a clear day and from this vantage point we could see how the city sprawled in every direction, as if, lacking both design and reason, it was helpless to stop itself. In the distance stood the majestic high-rise office towers that had so impressed me when I first arrived. Beside these were tall, cantilevered cranes and the skeletons of new construction. It was both monstrous and beautiful.

We crossed the street.

"This is where they found you," Elizabeth said, indicating a portion of sidewalk beneath some overgrown shrubs that had burst through a low iron fence in front of a small apartment building. The fence was set upon a brick wall, about a foot in height.

"You were lying right here, I think," she said, looking down and touching a spot close to the wall with her foot.

"You know this for sure?"

"I wanted to see for myself," she said. "When they brought you in I could hardly believe how badly off you were. You looked like you'd been through a train wreck or a boxing match. Of course, I'm a nurse, so I did my job and treated the injuries without thinking about how you might have got them. Then the police came and I heard that you'd been found beaten up and left to die. I thought how terrible it was that someone could come to this country and end up hurt so badly and that it was deliberate."

"But you didn't know anything about me. I might have been out drinking and got into a fight, or tried to cheat some drug dealer. It could have been my fault."

She shook her head. "I didn't believe that for a minute." She looked at me. "I drove out here because the

better I got to know you the more confusing it became. I thought I might find an answer. But when I got here, there was just the yellow police tape and blood all over the sidewalk. There was so much blood."

"Here?"

I knelt down to examine the spot where Mr. Orton had found me. Elizabeth kept her hand on my shoulder to steady me. I pushed aside the branches of the shrub to get a better look, but there was nothing new to be seen or discovered. The tape was gone and all traces of blood had been washed away.

With the cane I pushed myself up from the kneeling position. Elizabeth took my hand.

"It doesn't really matter any more, does it? I mean, what if you had all the answers? It wouldn't change what happened."

I looked around. From this spot, where I had almost died, I saw nothing that I could recall ever having seen before. None of the people walking by looked familiar. Even the air I was breathing seemed strange. Even Elizabeth, with her long dark hair trailing down her back, her sweet oval face that reminded me of the peasant girls back home—even she was a stranger. I didn't know anything about her.

We turned and walked back to the car.

@las