

SCOTT MCINTYRE

*NO TRACE CAMPING*

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The game has started when we enter the arena. The hometown Barrie Bassett Hounds are banging hard on the Scarborough Shopsey's Burgers. This native guy playing for the Hounds – I think I read he's Ojibwa – is dancing past the opposing players. The ball safe in his stick, he holds it close then shifts wide, swinging his body around, pivoting – and when he switches his stick between hands everybody's thrown off, even up in the stands. By the time we've each visited the concession stand for more beer the Burgers have gotten pretty sick of Mr. Dancing-Right-By-Them, so this solid white guy steps in front of him, plants his feet, and crosschecks him. Mid-stride. The native guy's helmet flips off. Then another player checks him into the boards. One shot, two shot: he's a pinball off bumpers. His nose explodes against the glass and an arrow of blood smears down to where he falls. He's back up pretty quick, though. Violence pops through the crowd like electricity. The white guy explodes after the referee blows his whistle, calls him for excessive roughing. Busy with anger, he hurls his stick at the thick glass. All the while screaming how he's going to skull-fuck the referee's entire family. This makes the referee laugh. He yells back, "Go ahead and fucking try it. See what happens, tough guy."

I hear someone behind me say the referee's cousin is the 350 pound biker drinking beer behind Barrie's bench. Practically the entire stadium has turned and is looking at him. He fakes like he's going to stand and wave. Instead, he just sits and drinks, pointing and laughing at Scarborough's angry player.

It's all too much. I tell my buddy Craig not to leave without me. I'm going over.

"Oh no," he says. "Oh no."

I strip efficiently, pulling my pants off inside-out so my shoes stay on. I cry, "Guard my clothes" and run down the concrete stairs toward the glass partition. I hoist myself up. Scrambling over, I hesitate for an instant and hang there.

Later, Craig tells me my penis and testicles squished right up against the glass. Like a fetus in a jar. He also tells me that my red pubes aren't doing me any favours, and that I need a lot more upper-body work.

I let go and drop to the ground. Immediately a Shopsey's Burger knocks my feet out. I scramble to my feet and run, waving my arms above my head and yelling bloody murder. A quick wrist snap and someone wings the ball at my head. It hits. Down I go, and stay there. Dazed. My laughter's all mixed up with everybody else's. I look back. Alexa, one of the girls with us, is awkwardly trying to climb over the glass. She's clothed and one of the rink's security monsters has her pant leg, trying to pull her down. She's wearing a bulky red Christmas sweater and she looks like a big piece of fruit, poised precariously atop the glass. She kicks out with her white tennis shoe at his head. He lets her go and she jumps down. She runs to me and we're both arrested.

Unlike other seasons, winter forces you to make your own fun. Nature's not giving out any favours. Sex is popular. Binge drinking becomes more elaborate, starts earlier. Now I'm in jail. Every winter we come up north, watch lacrosse. Stay at the same cottage. What I don't understand is how it ended up like this. I mean, I know, the getting naked, the charging onto the game. The drinking. It's the deeper forces at work which make the interaction between cause and effect a mystery. Like watching a religious festival you know nothing about. That and the Barrie cops were really rude when they booked us. They called us Asshole Toronto Pricks. Which we're not. I grew up in Oakville. Alexa is a girl. Right now she's scraping a cup against the bars of her cell, singing what she must think are spirituals. I looked over Jordan ... She's not a good singer, but I don't say anything because I don't want her to start calling me 'willie' like she did in the police car. Eventually a cop approaches our cells. I'm wrapped in a blanket.

"Cut it out," he says to Alexa.

"Sorry," she replies.

(Alexa is no hard case).

"Mr Dewey," the cop calls out.

I pull my blanket tighter and answer. "That's me!"

I move away from the guy beside me, in jail because he took acid and then went and got himself beaten up. The cop tells me I've made the Friday night sports highlights. Prime Time. Friends living in Europe will e-mail me. I don't believe him, but they do. "There's a camera in that aisle," he explains. "You probably noticed it. They couldn't have got a better shot if they'd paid you. Everybody who was at that game is talking about your penis."

"Nobody paid anybody."

He's dubious, but lets it slide.

"Right," the cop says. "I got good news, I got bad news."

From her cell Alexa shrieks, "Good news first!"

"Your friends are here."

"What's the bad news?"

"They're locked up down the corridor."

What?

After the cops carted Alexa and me away, Craig and the others came to get us. Our rescue team. They finished watching the game first. Craig's girlfriend Lynn drove. She wasn't as drunk as Craig. They've dated since grade ten. Guy, Alexa's younger brother, sat in the back seat. He thought it would be fun to open the car door and swing it wide while they drove to the police station. Lynn told me later that he arched his back exactly like he was trapezing from a catamaran. Like he was skimming atop the waters of an inland lake. The other thing he was doing was hooting like a siren. Hooting like a siren is illegal in Barrie because the hooting confuses people. At the cop shop Lynn double-parked in a spot marked visitor. Before she'd even stopped the car Craig jumped

out and started peeing his name into a snow bank. The officers outside having a smoke weren't impressed. Their hands leapt to their holsters. This meant Craig had to put everything away while still peeing.

When he passes my clothes into my cell I notice a damp stain has spread from his crotch to his knee. The cops make us all spend Friday night in jail, and for the rest of the weekend I call Craig stinky pants. Other than the fines, everything is cool. Our audacity gets us off lightly; cops like that in young people. Also, Lynn and Guy both cry while being lectured. Even Craig manages to appear somewhat sorry as he scuffs his hiking boots along the floor, eyes focused on the floor to hide his smirk. Saturday morning we're released and ordered out of Barrie.

"Go back to Toronto," the cops warn us.

Too bad, suckers. We arrive at the cottage late Saturday morning and sleep through to the afternoon to recover from our incarceration.

The cottage is more like a farm. Off one of those rural routes which pattern the area around Creemore like a grid. There's a barn with holes from missing planks on one side and the other is totally blown with snow. The house is made from faded red bricks and has a yellow-painted trim. Planted in the middle of winter fields, it's a postcard for loneliness.

The cottage is warm enough for Lynn to wear a tightly cropped T-shirt while she tours the first floor, putting serviettes over the family's pictures. It's part of the cottage ritual. Her pants look ironed-on. I haven't been laid in a while. Watching her walk in and out of the room, daintily placing serviettes over the family's pictures, I can see her nipples. I remind myself she's one of my oldest friends and Craig's girlfriend. We all go way back. Her and Craig are the last ones up from our nap.

To save on cleaning we've only brought things to eat that come in bags. As well as beers. I'm up first, then the siblings.

The cottage has central heating. Turning the TV's volume low, we listen through a vent to Craig and Lynn having sex. I try not to imagine them doing it.

The sex noises stop.

"6.35 minutes exactly," Guy says. He's lying upside down on an over-stuffed chesterfield, trying to drink beer. Spilling it. "Same as always," he says.

Alexa tightens her sweater around her body and makes a face. "What are you bragging about? Didn't What's-her-face dump you?"

He sits up. "Johanna?"

"Yeah, Johanna: the extra-young one – all pinkie and blonde. She looked straight out of a public service announcement about having sex with teenagers."

"Pro or con?" I say, and Alexa glares at me. I shut up.

Guy whines his reply. "She was 19."

"She was a lollipop."

Guy rolls his eyes at me.

“And why didn’t that work out, eh Brother?” Alexa asks. “You guys looked so cute together, eh? All smiley and shit. You went to her formal, didn’t you?”

Guy looks at me like his puppy is drowning. I smile.

Eventually he responds. “She wouldn’t give me reciprocity.”

“And why, dear brother, was that?”

Again, the help-my-puppy look.

“It smelled,” he says.

“And?”

“Okay! She had an allergy attack. It was this powder I used.”

I laugh.

He glares at me. “At least I’m circumcised. Fuck.”

I silently thank God, Buddha, the Lion of Zion and Allah for black censorship strips and digital obscuration techniques, intoning Jah Rastafari in thanks.

The parents of the guy Alexa used to date own this cottage. He died. This is our little ritual of remembrance. Us coming up here for a weekend every winter. He died more than a few years ago, but Alexa’s still pretty sensitive about things when we’re here. We all are. That’s why – brother or not – Guy is dumb to insinuate that he’s heard his sister always reciprocates. He says her reciprocity is spontaneous. That it comes from nowhere. Says she’s overboard pre-emptive. When he claims her reciprocity is without origin, like some travelling kung fu hero with a mysterious past and a life dedicated to righting wrongs, she lunges at him, pulls his head back by his hair and chops him in the neck. She chops him like that several times. Guy chokes these funny noises and I notice Lynn and Craig standing at the entrance of the room. The farmhouse is open concept.

“Ahh, hey guys,” Craig says.

Guy squeaks, “My asophagus.”

“Hey stinky pants,” I say to Craig. “Hey Lynn.”

“Hey.”

Craig taps Lynn on the back and steps forward. “Everyone, Lynn has an announcement she’d like to make.”

He half-turns so he faces both her and us.

Lynn blushes. I notice with disappointment that she’s changed into formless track pants. “I’m pregnant,” she says.

Alexa chops her brother once more in the neck because she can, releases him, and rushes forward. Hugs Lynn. “That’s great honey, why didn’t you say anything sooner?”

Lynn blushes a deeper shade. “It just happened now. We just now got pregnant; I can feel it working. You know, inside.” She hesitates before saying, “I wasn’t sure it would be appropriate, you know, for the weekend.”

I’m pretty sure this conversation topic isn’t appropriate.

“Oh sweetie, that’s fine,” Alexa looks at me as if she can read my thoughts. “It’s just fine,” she repeats.

“Yeah,” Guy pants, massaging his neck. “Awesome. Kids.”

“Way to go Craig,” I say. “Congrats man. That’s great.” I reach over toward Craig to give him a high five but he leaves me hanging and walks toward the fridge. Craig sighs. He grabs a beer from the fridge and cracks it open. “Thanks guys.”

Now that that’s over, Lynn and Craig eat Cheetos until their teeth are orange. Craig gargles his beer and complains how today’s music doesn’t do anything for him. Lynn starts off sober, but that doesn’t last long. Her period was supposedly on the way, and when she begins to feel the cramped tightness which signals its approach she decides to pour herself a big glass of white wine. She’s going to party, since for sure, now, she’s not pregnant. I find it creepy how she’s always screwing around like that – announcing things she wishes were true. Like how she’s always saying I’m after Alexa. That I’ve always been. Which is really not true. I’m not. Her dead ex and I grew up together in Oakville. He was a best friend. Lynn’s imaginings won’t change that. I’ve told Lynn many times that Alexa and I would be uncomfortable, weird, and she always argues the past is the past and now is now. They should stay separate, discrete. Compartmentalized. Nice words, but I know what she really thinks is that Alexa needs sex. Mine, to be precise. The thing is: I want the past to matter. I want it to be important. Then Craig’s opinion about music prompts a free-ranging conversation where everything we have now is compared unfavourably to what we had before.

I defend a cable show where they swear a lot and the others shout me down.

Alexa mouths willie at me.

I grab the TV controller and surf for cartoons, finding none.

Then the acid really kicks in. I got it for free off my cellmate. We’ve all taken some, washing it down with beers. It’s only average and instead of being really psychedelic everything just glistens. The wallpaper starts to hiss at me when I stare at it. So I don’t. A fine, smooth gloss coats everything. A glimmering gloss like reality is having the shakes. This is the strangest acid I’ve ever taken. It’s all surface. Usually acid gives a feeling of oneness, that hippy universal love thing. This is the opposite. It occurs to me that all the world’s connections are superficial, nothing really connects. We all exist as if hermetically sealed off from each other, as if inside glass jars. Self-interest, I think. That’s what connects us, our separateness. The need to propagate, sex, it forces us to create connections. From which we create meaning. In this flux. The past. The present. How one influences the other is a game without solid boundaries. They can mean whatever I want them to mean. In whatever way I want. Everything is all about me. I go to tell Alexa this and instead come across Lynn and Craig. Tripping in light-bulb flashes, they’ve erected an old tent they

found in storage. They climb in with a flashlight and cross legs in the lotus position as if they're Buddhists. Except a rugby thing long ago wrecked Craig's left knee so he stretches that leg out in front of him. I walk around the tent, slapping it with my palm. This makes them scream. They try to hit my hand with their flashlight's beam but are always too late. Craig threatens to come out of the tent if I don't stop. But I don't. I chant "stinky pants" to cheer myself on while I beat the tent's sides with both hands like I'm banging bongos. They flick the flashlight off and on, trying to time its light to my slaps. But I'm way too fast for them. When Craig launches into this big, boring lecture on responsibility I leave and walk into the other room where the siblings are both jumping up and down. Watching the real estate network. They are responding aggressively whenever they see a place they know. Alexa howls directions for this lakeside place north of Gravenhurst she recognizes. It has an elevator. Guy sees me and leaps behind a big stripped sofa.

"Sorry," he says. "I thought it was someone else."

"Who?" I ask. "Your sister's dead boyfriend?"

Alexa runs to me. She laughs so hard she starts crying. She sobs with her head buried in my shoulder. Powerful woman sobs. I'm tripping pretty hard, but it feels nice.

I wake up feeling like I've drunk 30 beers. Probably true. Alexa's beside me. This time my clothes are on. So are hers. I can hear Craig and Guy in the next room discussing stuff in low tones. Craig is correcting Guy. "No," he says. "I disagree. It is absolutely not like we conquered Barrie. The opposite. We did what we went there to do. That's all."

We clean up. Struggling through next-morning-fog, I feel backward. Jangley. Like the acid is still misfiring my synapses and experience is hustling me forward to strange conclusions, day-after fucked-upness. It's like I'm inside that tent with Lynn and Craig, flicking a flashlight on and off to catch slaps on a canvas wall. Perpetually behind. The tent refuses to be re-packed. Craig catches his hand in a clasp and hurls the entire apparatus across the den and into the kitchen. The tent's old. We burn it out back behind a snow drift to avoid looking like jerks for not storing it properly. Off property, of course.

We clean the cottage, leaving no trace of having been there. Part of the ritual. I can barely remember what it was like before he died. Cleaning up always went faster when he was here though. That's for sure.

We almost forget to take the serviettes off the pictures but then Lynn remembers. Each time she lifts a serviette, she sighs. Previously we had tried to leave the pictures uncovered, but then all we did was talk about death. Death makes me anxious.

I tell Lynn to hurry. All my friends are big sports fans; they'll laugh at me for being naked on TV. But when Alexa smiles at me nearly the whole ride back to Toronto, I stop caring.