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Sperm King

Tina said, “I can’t believe how good it is to see you.” She meant my wife. A week ago when I’d answered the phone and told her I was coming to Vancouver with Ruth, she said, “Are you two joined at the asshole? Roger, just send Ruth. Ruth can come alone.

“Don’t think I’ve forgiven you,” she added, but there was a strange catch in her voice.

Later on Ruth said, “Of course you can come with me. Tina’s completely forgiven you.”

Tina used to be my girlfriend, till I fooled around on her with her best buddy, with Ruth.

Tina’s baby arrived swung in an infant carrier by the new man, Eric, the cop. He had ham-steak hands, a beefy head--hell, he was big all over. Even his nose was big, and red with popped blood vessels. He scanned me like a bar code. I didn’t know what he knew or didn’t know about my history with Tina. Ruth made the requisite noises over the baby, who was pasty and plump-cheeked.

Tina and Eric worked up in Cape Smash, Nunavut, where he was the only cop in town and she was the only doctor. She had office hours, but also on-call emergency hours. She did a lot of peculiar medicine, as when someone came in with an abscess threatening to pull his own tooth. There were no dentists. The guy was going to pull it out using string and a doorknob if she didn’t assist, and it didn’t matter that she hadn’t done a similar thing before.

There was pain, blood, relief, gratitude. Sometimes it didn’t go as well. One time Tina thought she was about to deliver one baby and there were three. One time there was a stalker who killed a nurse--hunting knife. Occasionally Tina tried to save the life of a sled dog after a mauling by a polar bear, or a kid after a mauling by a sled dog. Sometimes there were corpses. One time a Native woman in a body bag woke up.

But these days, she said, life sucked. They were on leave. “Mat and Pat leave,” Tina called this, telling us Eric was the only RCMP in his detachment to ever take it.

Big whoop, I thought. Like I wouldn’t take one.

The condo was Tina’s; she’d put her money in it before she’d met Eric but after me. She’d taken the contract up north to get rid of her medical school debt--go up far enough, and a third was forgiven off the bat. The money was great, if you could stand the weather. Stand the isolation. Stand not seeing daylight for four months a year. Stand the only cop in town.

The dog Tina and I had gotten when we were together was at the door to meet us, but instead of being a puppy she was now old and fat. Stiff, a beer keg on legs. I knew how she felt. My back plagued me endlessly and lately my knuckles were swelling up. Her paws didn’t seem big enough to support her weight. Her butt wiggled; she picked up a slipper and carried it across the room.

“Hello Miss Dog,” said Tina affectionately. Tina looked at me. “See? Roger? She remembers you from back before you were a jerk.”

The dog looked like she ate chocolate cake for dinner every night, and when Tina took off her car coat, I saw she pretty well looked the same. Her hair was still the strange colour of carrots as when we were living together.

The cop moved inside like a cop, long, strong, vaguely threatening strides, pausing before he moved around corners. Tina had always liked her men big--it was why she was attracted to me. Only this guy had me by 40 pounds, easy. Maybe fifty pounds. Concrete muscle.

The condo was pretty bland. I thought it was maybe going to be in an old warehouse in Gastown, but it was in a new building on the water, only not with a view. Two bedrooms across the living room from each other, a soaker tub in the master bathroom, a heat exchanger in the gas fireplace, a garburator. Everything fresh, you know? The way new places are? But sterile as the autoclave at work. Looked like a hotel. The only picture on the walls was above the master bed--a painting of a bloody moose. The furniture was basic, new, not expensive. Tina had been

going to put us on an air mattress in the living room, but the woman who looked after the place while they were away agreed to go stay with a friend and surrender her room.

It wasn't even cold outside. It was January; it was Vancouver; Eric had pointed out actual cherry blossoms in trees lining the streets. He said in January up north the glasses inside their cupboards wore overcoats of ice.

I said I could identify. I said in Edmonton cows in the fields were freezing from the hoof up. "Leather statues."

"I can beat that," said Eric and passed his hand over his butcher block jaw. "Our cat's tail snapped off in the door."

I frowned. It seemed important to one-up him. "Once, Ruth got frost-bite on her boobs."

Eric said, "No way." He looked at my wife--assessingly. He dropped his gaze to her breasts.

"He's shitting you," said Ruth and shot me a look. Why couldn't I talk about this? My wife had exceptional breasts. She was an underwear model for a department store. She was the most beautiful woman in any room, and she was in this one. She had it all over Tina. Except Tina had the baby.

I kept thinking how Eric could pull my record, find out if I had warrants. Not that I did. Why would I? I managed a dental office. But if I did, the man could find them.

"I think the baby looks like you," Ruth said to Tina.

The baby didn't look like anyone; he looked like a baby. He looked like a blob. It was supposed to be a compliment to say he looked like his mother, but in fact Tina herself didn't look so hot. I felt a stirring of old worry. She'd had the c-section and the premature baby and then to top it off, the baby had been sick earlier in the month with a respiratory illness that Tina had seen kill some of her patients. She had circles under her eyes down to the bottom of her nose and her skin had a kind of otherworldly pallor. I hated to remember I'd always kind of liked that about Tina--how she seemed like she needed someone.

Tina looked down at herself. "I thought I'd just get skinny again. I don't know, magically."

"You're skinny," said Ruth, although it was a lie. It was the way women lied to other women they liked. "I'm so happy we could come to meet the squirt. I think he has Eric's eyes."

I looked at the baby--how could she tell that? Here's what I saw: Eyes, nose, mouth, ears, fat little fingers that didn't stop sawing the air. When I looked at Eric I saw a man, a cop, a huge guy--someone with stubbles of black hair crawling across his scalp like miniature flagpoles. Was that supposed to be the same?

Tina shook her head. "I always tell new moms to be patient. It took nine months to gain that weight and it'll take another nine to lose it." She lifted the baby who was limp with sleep, supported his wobbling head, and put him to her shoulder. "Huh, huh, Peanut," she crooned. She paced and jiggled him.

I said, "So, Eric, how long have you been with the force?"

He was getting us drinks. He carried in glasses of red wine for the women; whiskey neat for us. I was surprised Tina was drinking, but when Eric put a baby bottle in the microwave I guessed she was through with the breast thing. Maybe she didn't want her breasts to sag. She didn't have terrific boobs to start with, not compared to Ruth, anyhow. She wasn't very sentimental--she wouldn't be one of those mothers who feed until their kid is five.

The drink went down, way down, and made my cock warm.

Tina sat down and rested the baby on his back on the tabletop with one hand under his head as a pillow; the baby screamed and tried to get at the bottle's nipple. I knew what the kid was feeling. For guys, it was one long story from cradle to grave re: nipples. You know how easy it was to leave Tina for Ruth? I snapped my fingers and when I looked back I was already gone. The baby was wearing a blue getup with feet. Tina squeezed his diaper in the vicinity of his wiener, then she laughed. She said maybe it looked like molestation but she was actually just checking to see if he was wet.

Ruth launched into a thing about did diapers stay dry now, because back when she was a babysitting teenager babies got soaked from chin to toe. Her day, like she was old. She had a few years on Tina, sure, but she had plenty of fertile years left. Ten maybe. And I was only 39-- didn't I have 40 more? Tina said how the pee expanded gel crystals and formed a lump at the front of the diaper, keeping the baby dry. For a minute Tina's baby sucked and the girls talked about improvements in baby stuff. Car seats that could actually save lives. Cribs with bars placed so kids couldn't get their heads stuck. New things medicine had learned, for instance that babies had to sleep on their backs.

"Don't they startle?" said Ruth.

Tina moved her palm in a circle on the baby's middle. "I swaddle this guy."

I was getting bored. Apparently babies survived infancy just so their parents' friends could have an excuse to go to bed early.

Tina honked the kid again and said this time he was wet. She went into the bedroom. The rest of us weren't really comfortable without her. Eric walked around. I kept feeling like he was marking his territory. *I pee here*, he was saying. Well, put a frigging picture on the wall then, bub. We didn't know what to tell each other. Was I supposed to ask how Tina was actually doing? I thought I could see for myself. She was having a hard time. Plus she'd told Ruth she was almost sorry she'd ever gotten pregnant. She was due back at work and didn't have a nanny lined up--any nanny around was a woman whose crotch she stared into on a regular basis. She was thinking she had to cut her hours. She'd only been a GP for four years and already she felt like she was on her way out of practice.

I smelled my hands. There was a scent to them, a diaper smell, although I hadn't been that near to the baby.

Eric said, "There's an ice hotel in Quebec that just opened up." He talked about it--the ice slab mattresses, the icicle candle holders, the bureaus carved out of ice with real drawers that opened and shut, although who would want to put his clothes in them?

Ruth said, "I wouldn't stay in an ice hotel unless they had hot tubs."

I looked around. This place could have been an ice hotel. Nobody lived here. Nobody had set down roots. I said, "I wouldn't go near an ice hotel even if a hooker came with each room."

Ruth looked at me with her mouth downturned. She looked exactly like she did every month when she discovered she had her period.

The dog whined to go out.

I said, "Honey, I didn't mean anything."

Ruth shook her head. "You never do mean anything, Roger, that's the trouble."

Don't air that, I thought. Don't let them know we have our problems.

The dog whined, then scratched the door.

Ruth stood up, stretched--a pretty sight. "Why don't I take her? I could use the fresh air."

Eric looked at me. I thought he was waiting for me to say I'd go with my wife, but I didn't, so he said he would. How did I feel about that? I asked myself the question.

Ruth picked up the dog's leash and whispered to me. "You say such stupid shit."

"What?" I said.

But they went out. I was supposed to stay where I was, but I knocked on the door jamb in the master bedroom. Tina was bent over the baby. She looked up with a lock of hair over her cheek and said to come in. I watched Tina with the baby. His balls were the size of baseballs, but you could mistake his penis for a pencil eraser. She lifted him by his ankles to wipe him. I wondered if he'd someday remember that.

"So," I said. The bedroom was definitely occupied. Suitcases were disgorging clothes like pulled teeth. We'd always fought about this, Tina and me. I liked my habitat neat.

Tina looked at me.

"So, you okay?" I said.

"Who's asking?"

I didn't reply.

"Why did you come?"

Oh, for pity's sake. I heard tears. She was going to start up. I had always hated it when Tina cried. I'd do anything--anything--to make her stop. Except originally I wouldn't drop Ruth. I'd refused to drop Ruth when it mattered. I married Ruth instead.

"I don't know why you came here when I asked you not to."

I just shrugged.

"I didn't want you to see this. Everything's falling apart. Sometimes I can't get through a day, Roger." She stared down at the baby waving his feet in the air like he was riding an exercycle upside down. "This is how I ended up and I don't want to be here. We should've stuck it out, you and me. I never got pregnant with you."

"Hey," I said. I guessed Ruth had been talking to her about my sperm count.

She began to sob. I glanced at the door then gathered her into my arms. She gave a little cry and put her arms around my neck and hung on tight. "Hey," I said again and smelled her up close, her hair, a scent like the blooming jasmine Ruth grew in our kitchen greenhouse window.

"He doesn't understand," she said. "It's my body that went through all this. Guys don't get it."

I knew she was right. I was getting an erection. I twisted so she wouldn't realize.

"We should've made it work," she said. She pulled away and searched my eyes.

Jesus, I thought.

"We were good, right?"

We were good, but after that we weren't good. I got Ruth and later she got Eric. Good? What did good have to do with it? It was over. We went on with our lives. I still loved her, but I went on lying in the bed I'd made. I wasn't that uncomfortable, even though my back usually hurt.

"I miss you, you know," she said softly. She stroked my cheek with one fingernail.

Her guy and my wife were about to come back in. I thought I should get out of there. I didn't know where the circumstance was going.

She said, "Roger?"

“I should--uh.” I couldn’t think what I should do. Not this. I wanted to be decent. But decency didn’t come organically. It was like a pesticide, chemical and unfamiliar. The baby’s legs churned below us while we stood in the fume of his bodily odours.

She took my hand and slipped it under her stretch pants and pushed it down to her genitals. She held her hand over top of it, pressing mine up. She was still looking at me. I didn’t move my hand. I didn’t move it at all. On the bed, the baby jabbed out his feet.

There was a long set of moments where nothing changed. We stayed like that. I could feel the heat of Tina through her panties.

“Huh,” I finally said, a noise. I wanted to say something about being hard. We could just do it, the two of us, and let Ruth and Eric walk in on us.

There were tears running down Tina’s cheeks. I took my free thumb and wiped one away. She nodded and released the pressure on my hand but didn’t pull away.

I raised my eyebrows.

“Things are the pits with Eric,” she said. “Well. only sort of. I love the big lunk. I do, but I’m all over the place.” She opened her legs slightly.

I knew I shouldn’t, but I moved her underwear aside and went inside her so she gasped and grabbed my arm, going up on her toes, holding me in place.

I don’t know if either of us heard the door, but Miss Dog bounded into the bedroom and we jumped apart.

Quickly, Tina slipped a fresh diaper under the baby, applied the tabs and clapped the baby’s feet together in a game of patty cake. She didn’t look anywhere near me. She fondled the dog’s big head and said, “Miss Dog, Miss Dog.”

Ruth came in red-cheeked from the cold. She looked at Tina and Tina didn’t look back. She looked at me.

“Can I hold the little dude?” I said. Tina passed the baby to me. He was unexpectedly heavy. Ruth came over, frowning, and kissed the top of his head. She said something about softness and baby powder.

We moved into the living room where Eric told us the dog had the runs, bad. Every time they'd thought Miss Dog was finished doing her business, she had to start up again.

The girls talked about Tina's pregnancy, which was full of extra water or something and high blood pressure and ended up with the section. Eric brought out photographs which he displayed proudly, laying them out on the table like playing cards. He showed us Tina being wheeled to her room; Tina in bed, a baby monitor strapped across her middle; Tina having an internal; Tina in the operating room. I thought he'd stop there, but he continued. Tina behind a green sheet. The surgeon swabbing. The surgeon cutting. The surgeon reaching in for a foot. The baby caught in a bright shaft of light while below him, a gaping red hole was exposed-- Tina's insides. I held that photograph in my hands and stared hard. I felt something, maybe pissed off at Eric. I knew it was just something accidental that had happened, but when I looked at her guts hanging out and Eric's transparent pride I was pissed off. The baby was covered over with white junk with a blue tinge to his skin. He was lifted in a nurse's arms over the divider so Tina could kiss his toe. There were more pictures: The clamped umbilicus. The baby in a bassinet being suctioned. The baby being weighed. He was a month early, but bigger than most full term babies.

Why was this stuff interesting? While Eric showed the photos, Tina leaned into him looking for all the world like a loving wife.

I tried to change the subject. We talked for a while about people we knew--divorces, dead parents, promotions, relocations, illnesses, but there was a brittleness.

"Did you hear Gary Bounds was in detox?" This from Tina.

"What a nimrod that guy was," said Ruth and reached for some pretzels.

The baby was done drinking and Tina burped him over her shoulder. I was at the right angle to see him barf curdled milk.

"Did you know Caroline Freemont has breast cancer?" Caroline was someone the women had once worked with back when Tina was a photographer. "She's having a bilateral mastectomy." Tina looked at her watch and sniffled. She sounded sad, scared. "Omigod,

tomorrow. At two p.m. I'd rather die. You always think, okay, no breasts, big deal, you look like you looked as a little girl, but it's not like that, it's an indent, it's a cave, it's gross."

If a woman has breast cancer, she can undress in the closet as far as I'm concerned. I brushed off my shirt like I had a sudden case of crumbs.

Tina started telling Ruth how getting pregnant was an accident. She and Eric were engaged, she said, but Eric had this vasectomy they tried to get reversed. They shouldn't have been able to get pregnant for a year.

Eric said, "She's right. I was separated from my wife for, like, five minutes when we got pregnant."

"We." Like he was some sort of major stud, new-age dad rolled into one. Like the baby had been inside him too. Give me a break.

Eric drew Tina to him and ensconced her in a bear hug. I still couldn't figure out if the way they seemed affectionate was just for my sake or genuine. Eric was maybe just marking his territory.

"Sperm King," said Ruth and looked at me. Yeah, right at me. Me with the insufficient tadpoles. For a second I didn't know whether she was going to laugh or bawl, but she laughed. She was on her third glass of wine and I for one was grateful. Otherwise she might have been a bitch.

Eric already had kids, twin girls, with his wife who'd moved them to Toronto and simultaneously got serious about being a Baptist. When she heard he'd put a sandwich in someone else's toaster oven, she told the kids their father was going to Hell.

"Pass go," said Tina ruefully. "Collect child support. Every second paycheque Eric gets goes straight to that cow. I'd be happy if she was the one freezing up from the ground hoofs first."

"I don't mind the child support," said Eric, shaking his head. "I want to support my kids."

Sperm King. Where the fuck was his crown? I could give him a crown: King Big Guy. King-Not-Making-My-Ex-Happy despite his fucking prolific spermatozoa. King Loser.

“We have no say where the money goes,” said Tina. “They show up at the airport with holes in their clothes and shoes that are too small. She’s not spending it on them, that’s for sure. You know where she went for Christmas, our dime? Jamaica.” The baby was fussing. She got up, disgusted, and walked him back and forth. “Huh, huh, Peanut,” she said. “Huh, huh, Peanut. Huh, huh, Peanut.”

Ruth asked if the baby was sleeping through, and Tina said he was, till five.

I thought: Fuck, piss, damn. When does Tina get any shut-eye?

Ruth wouldn’t acknowledge me. Something was bugging her--suspicions about me and Ruth, I figured. She gave a moué and angled her chair to face Tina.

Tina asked Eric to make some Pabulum. Tina said she wasn’t supposed to feed a baby this young solids, but he was growing at an astonishing clip: He was the size of a Butterball turkey. So she was giving it to him despite what the books said. A minute later, Tina shoveled Pabulum into the baby’s mouth. Half of it came right back out.

Eric talked about a big drug bust he’d just been involved in. He talked about how there could be guns behind the door or how a battering ram could get stuck in a door instead of taking it off its hinges the way it was supposed to.

Ruth said, “God, I’d die.”

“You take it out, start again and hope you don’t get shot now the morons inside have had plenty of warning.”

Tina said, “You pace the floor with a screaming baby and wait for him to call home to say he’s okay.”

I wanted to take her hand, then, but I resisted.

“M’ere, hon,” said Eric and pulled her onto his lap before resting his head on her shoulder. Miss Dog waddled over and did the same to one of her knees.

Poor Tina, I thought. Everyone from here to Cape Smash was laying their scent on her.

Finally Eric backed off and laid down on the couch and flipped through the TV stations. He was tired, but I guess he didn't want to go off to bed and leave me with Ruth and Tina, not alone, because of our history. My history, which was about Tina's formerly tiny white ass under my big palms. When he had never had his paws on Ruth's.

Ruth said we didn't have those kinds of stresses. "Not those particular ones," she said dryly.

Eric fell asleep on the couch. I went to bed around midnight. Periodically, I came to and heard the girls up talking. When Ruth came to bed, she huddled to the edge of the mattress, as far away from me as she could get. I thought about pulling her in for a cuddle, but I was afraid she was going to say something. Not that there was any way for her to know anything, but I was afraid she did anyhow. I thought she might tell me Tina was just trying to get back at her for stealing me in the first place, and then I'd get caught out saying that what had happened this afternoon between Tina and me had nothing to do with revenge. It was something else, something that involved just the two of us and a love we still shared. Which would be boneheaded to the max.

In the morning Ruth apologized to Eric for her and Tina being so loud--not to me, I noticed--and asked if they'd kept him up. "No," he said, "it doesn't matter. It was good to hear Tina laugh again."

Ruth held her hand over her heart as if he'd recited the national anthem. Why couldn't I think of things like that to say? Ruth and I hadn't spoken; she was still pretending not to know me.

Tina came out of the laundry room with a basket of clothes. She said did Miss Dog want a bone? Miss Dog cocked her head and thumped her tail. Tina went into the bedroom. She came out holding a box of Milk Bones. "Did you give these to the dog?" she asked Eric.

He said no.

“Look,” Tina said. She showed the empty box, which was bowed open. She looked closer and showed us a patch of glue that had caught some of Miss Dog’s hair.

The day was stretching like tar. Which beat mine at home, at least, where I managed a dental office but my days stretched like plastic wrap or old condoms. Forty, fuck, and no good job, no good relationship and crap for sperm. All day nothing went on. Nothing happened except the dog needing to shit. Tina and Eric went to Wal-Mart to buy some diapers and secateurs to cut back a dying ficus. As soon as they were out the door hand in hand and we were in charge, the baby went cross-eyed trying to focus on his fist, then clobbered himself in the nose and started wailing.

“What the fuck did I do?” I said to Ruth. “Aren’t you ever going to talk to me?”

She picked up the baby and jiggled him. If he’d been hiding change, it would have fallen on the floor.

She said, “Did I walk in on something?”

“What?” I said and heard the guilty rise in my voice. “What did you walk in on?”

“Don’t act like I’m stupid. I’m not totally stupid.”

“How come you’re on *my* case but you went for a walk with Eric, just the two of you?”

“I didn’t used to fuck him.”

“If you thought something happened, you wouldn’t have been so ya-da-da-da friendly with Tina all night. You would have been mad at Tina.”

She looked skeptically at me. “Ya-da-da-da friendly’? Jesus, something did happen!”

“Nothing happened. I’m just saying if it had, it would be half Tina’s fault, but you seem to like her fine.”

She jiggled her leg. “Are you going to tell me whether or not something happened?”

I flicked the TV on. Maybe there was a game I could hide behind.

The baby was really starting to shriek. Ruth gave a sound of digest and took him off to the other end of the condo. That’s what was good about the place; when she shut the door, I could barely hear him.

When Tina and Eric got back, Ruth came out. The baby was making funny noises like he was trying to stop crying. Tina took him from Ruth's arms. She said, "Has my oogie-woogie had his hundred kisses today?" She kissed his cheek again and again. Then she and Ruth took the baby away to give him a bath.

Eric used the telephone in the kitchen. He left a message for his lawyer, then said the guy never returned his calls.

"Tell me about it," I said as if I had a lawyer. The only lawyer I needed was for bankruptcy court.

"Buddy, I will," he said and sat down and proceeded to do so. He'd been married eleven years. His marriage had been rocky almost since the day the girls were born--one of them had a club foot; one of them was learning disabled and so on. Not easy kids. Maybe his wife had had a little too much to drink during her pregnancy. One doctor said there was fetal alcohol syndrome involved in how the girls' eyes were far apart. But he loved them. "Man," he said and swiped his face, "not just love. I adore the hell out of them."

I thought about that. I wondered what it would be like to have kids you adored the hell out of. Or even a job you liked.

But still, he and his wife split up. She couldn't stand his posting up north. She wanted to go east where her parents lived. She took off in June, and in July, Eric started hanging out with Tina. At first that was all it was, hanging out. They didn't have a lot of peer options in a town the size of Cape Smash. One doctor, one cop, two social workers, one ambulance driver, two lawyers and pretty near everyone else was a patient, a client or a prisoner.

"I was a mess, Rog," he said. "I missed my little girls."

"I guess you did," I said. I didn't like him calling me Rog. Nobody called me Rog. I took some satisfaction from knowing I'd had my hand inside his woman just hours before, at her invitation.

Pretty soon he and Tina were an item. His wife came back to town in September to pack up. He cooled it with Tina while she was around; he didn't think any gossip got back. The

problem was, he gave her his computer. “I thought I’d cleaned it out, buddy, but she went to some geek and he got back the email between me and Tina.”

“Woeee,” I said and stretched my back.

He rubbed his eyes sleepily. “Something about a blow job.”

“Oh, man,” I said. I had a flash memory of Tina’s blow-jobs.

So even though they had a prior, signed agreement, his wife started renegeing on visitation and wanting more child support. She believed Tina had broken up her marriage; she believed Tina’s income as a doctor should up her payments. “It wasn’t made any easier when we got pregnant,” Eric said.

“King Sperm.”

“She won’t let me talk to the kids during the week at all,” Eric said. “Now she says she’s going to report Tina to the college for having an affair with a patient’s wife.”

“Your wife was Tina’s patient?”

“She wasn’t. Tina saw her once about two years ago. But geez, legally who knows? Not if she went to another doc after that. Maybe so if she didn’t.”

“That sucks,” I said. I’d give him that much--his life sucked lemons.

“You know what, Rog? All I want is a life like this here. Tina, the baby. She could give up work, you know? I could work double shifts and earn enough.”

The woman who stayed in the condo arrived to babysit and we all went out for dinner at Tony Roma’s. We parked our car in front of a Chinese restaurant called Tin Lung.

Tina said, “That’s for the people who can’t afford iron.”

I laughed but no one else did. I thought how I shouldn’t have fooled around on Tina with Ruth back when I had her; I thought how she was a doctor and funny. She hadn’t even wanted kids. But getting into Ruth had been like getting into a big bowl of candy behind your parents’ backs.

The rib joint was a big treat for me because at home our diet was heavy on broccoli, lentils, soy burgers. Our waitress had a booming voice and she kept using the royal “we.” She said, “And how are we finding our dinners?”

Tina rolled her eyes. “With our forks,” she told her.

The waitress said, “Are we finding our dinners well?”

“I don’t think the pigs feel very well,” remarked Tina.

“So, listen,” said Eric, wiping his hands on a moist towelette, “things okay with you guys? We’ve been monopolizing the weekend.”

Ruth was thinking about opening up her own modeling agency, which put the fear of god into me, financially speaking. I had an unpaid tax bill she didn’t know about from when I fiddled the books so the government took less out each pay cheque. My back wouldn’t stop spasming. Some days, Ruth barely spoke to me. “I could win the lottery,” I said.

“Rog,” said Eric, “you don’t know the half of it.” He shoveled curly fries into his mouth. “People think, fuck, you’re with a doctor, you must have some cash.”

That’s what I thought. Pity, though--Tina hadn’t been a doctor when I knew her, just a broke med student who’d given up a fairly lucrative career in fashion.

Tina swabbed her face. “I’m not used to this. I used to spend. Sure, I was in debt up to my eyeballs, but I paid everything off every month. Now I’ve got a running line of credit of \$10,000 every month and a maxed-out VISA. We’re deeper in the hole every day.”

Ruth said, “Welcome to our world.” Though actually she made not bad cash, which kept us afloat.

Tina said, “I’ve never had fights like Eric and I have fights.”

Tina and I’d had a couple of fights ourselves, back when we were together.

Ruth said, “That’s not necessarily unhealthy.” I was going to remember that line so I could use it on her, later. She was sitting pressed up against the wall of the booth, keeping good distance. I put my hand on her leg but she pushed it off.

There was something fragile in Tina's voice, like glass falling. "Eric interrogates me. I just give in to get him off me. 'Leave me the fuck alone. Fine. You're right. You win. Whatever. Just leave me alone.' He thinks he won but I still the resent the hell out of him." She looked at Eric like she was mystified by his appearance in the booth beside her. "I used to be solvent. I used to travel all over the world. I know none of this is his fault. It really isn't his fault. It's his fucking ex-wife."

Eric mopped his plate with a piece of bread.

Tina's eyes were brimming. "Maybe I have a little postpartum depression, too."

"Oh, honey, it'll be okay," said Ruth, reaching for her hand.

"I don't think it will. What, his ex-wife's going to stop choking us? She's going to squeeze till we're broke and ruined. I'll get suspended and end up working at the local high school as a janitor."

The waitress stood over us and said, "Are we wanting dessert tonight?"

Tina coughed. "Are we wanting a tip?" she said, her voice wavering. Then, to us: "I'm really sorry, you guys. Like you came all the way to Vancouver to hear my woes. Besides, I'm wild about the big galoot when I'm not having a breakdown. This is the big one. This is the forever one."

Ruth said, "Don't feel bad. We all hit rough patches."

Rough patches? I could feel the gravel against my cheek. I said, "For instance, my boss is thinking about closing his practice."

My wife did not know this. "What?" she said. "Roger?"

"He wants to retire to Hawaii."

"Jesus," said Ruth.

I hadn't meant to tell her this way. I hadn't meant to tell her at all, unless I had to.

"When's this happening?" Tina said.

"It probably won't," I said. "It's still talk."

"*If* it happens," said Ruth.

“I don’t know. Next summer. Next winter. Two years. I don’t know.”

“Jesus,” repeated Ruth. She tapped her fingers against her lips like she was feeling them for puffiness. They were always puffy--she had regular collagen injections.

“Rog,” said Eric, “I’m sorry.”

Ruth said, “Life sucks. Doesn’t life so suck?”

The girls looked at each other and I saw it: They were both about to cry. Jiminy Cricket. The first drop fell down Tina’s cheek and hit a rib bone on her plate.

Eric said, “At least you’re not the goober who stole your wife’s smile.”

I thought about that. I could have claimed the honour, actually, and in more than just Ruth’s life. Tina’s, for another. Other lives too. Maybe I had Ruth’s smile in my pocket and I could reach in and touch it back onto her face. I thought about whether in a couple of years, Eric would start to resent Tina’s unhappiness, even though he’d caused it, whether he’d resent her for being someone he could wreck to that degree.

Ruth, her voice choked, said, “No, you’re not. Don’t say that. Tina loves you, Eric. She’s where she wants to be.” Ruth looked at me. “Tell him, Roger. Tina’s where she wants to be.”

“I don’t know,” I said. I thought she wanted to be with me. Sort of. Maybe with me.

“Am I, though?” said Tina. She looked at Eric. She swabbed her face with a napkin. “I don’t know. I’m a real douche bag to Eric sometimes. I think he’s responsible for the whole lousy sinkhole of my life.” She blew bubbles through her drink straw. She looked at me. “Shit. Maybe Roger’s the one responsible. If I’d never met Roger, things would be better.”

I looked at her and then at Eric. I didn’t know what he thought. He played his cards like a gambler’s deck, giving nothing away.

Finally Eric said, “Roger’s not involved in this.”

“Hear that?” my wife said and poked me. “You’re not involved. Tina and Eric don’t want you messed up in this.”

“I’m not involved,” I repeated. I hoped Eric had left his firearm in Cape Smash. Why wasn’t I something interesting like a cop? I thought about all the women in my past and how they’d got there. Ruth and Tina and others, women I had made promises to, women I had broken promises to. Because I’d want them and then I’d stop wanting them, as if desire was something under pressure that finally blew its top and dissipated like steam. Maybe every couple’s desire was like that. Already Ruth felt like more my sister than someone I was intimate with. She felt like my maiden aunt I’d set up housekeeping with. I didn’t know how to stop that from happening. I didn’t know how to see any woman as still sexy and desirable after a couple years. I felt attracted to Tina again, but it was perverse, because I knew I hadn’t, once. My feelings rose up and fell off, not things I controlled. With Ruth I was supposed to be mature; I was supposed to understand this was it, this was what human relationships were like, fading away over time, going grey as clouds--and that was okay. Ruth said I had intimacy issues, but who didn’t have intimacy issues? Sometimes I couldn’t get it up. That was an intimacy issue, all right, needing Viagra. Sometimes, so what, it was up but I still didn’t want to do it with Ruth.

I did like Ruth, though. I loved her. I did want to be with her, more or less. If I could stop myself with other women, I would be with her a long time. All the time we had left in life. She had a lot of good characteristics, probably even more than Tina. I mean, she was no doctor, but she was generally kind, and not moody except around the baby stuff, and she liked my aging parents. She was great looking.

Tina lowered her voice. “Say for argument’s sake I fucked Roger again.”

“Don’t say that,” said Ruth. Her head sawed back and forth. “You did not fuck Roger. Roger, you didn’t fuck her, right?”

I said, “Shit.” I said Tina was just upset. I said no such thing had transpired.

Tina’s eyes blazed. “You patronizing bastard. All you ever care about is saving your own skin.” She chewed on her straw as if it was an extra-long cigarette.

Eric got up and walked out.

I didn't want to be there, either. I wanted to be anywhere else. I looked around the restaurant. I wanted the waitress to come over and interrupt, but for once she was nowhere to be seen. I wanted to get on a plane and fly back to two days ago. That was the problem with me. I didn't know how to stop when things were already bad enough. I had to make them worse. It was a compulsion.

Tina said, "Don't worry. I wouldn't have fucked him. I have someone better now." She barked a laugh.

"He's not so bad," said Ruth.

Thanks a lot, I thought. "Excuse me," I said and got up. I stood there for a minute. Tina leaned across and whispered something to Ruth that made Ruth cast a glance at me and laugh like a knife.

I found Eric outside smoking rollies. I accepted the butt he dug out of his Drum pouch.

He held a light for me. I could tell he was mad. The tips of his ears were red and his neck was huge, knotted with tendons. Why wouldn't he be mad?

I had a cop mad at me. Not a terrific situation. "Hey," I said, "I admire how much you care for her. She's something to put up with."

"She makes up for it," Eric said. "I'd know that more than you."

"She would've left me anyhow, eventually, you know. She needs someone like you."

He picked tobacco off his tongue.

"You got to treat her right," I said.

"I will. I am."

"You're nuts about each other now, sure, but it's not always going to be the honeymoon, you know."

He looked up as a plane flew overhead.

"That ex-wife crap is hard," I said.

Eric lowered his chin.

There was piss on the side of the building. That's what it looked like, even though there weren't any homeless people around. I said, "Tina's just trying to tick you off, saying that. She's just trying to get under your skin."

"Yeah," he said. "Why not?"

"She's just got PMS or something. Whatever happens when a baby is born," I said. "Her juices are all over the place." People came out and stepped past us, a man, a woman and a half-grown child. They flagged a passing taxi and drove away.

"That ice hotel," Eric said, and lifted his face to blow smoke rings. "You sleep wrapped in furs. Maybe you could freeze to death. Maybe you could have hypothermia in the morning. In Cape Smash, Tina resuscitated a baby who wandered outside in the snow with just her diaper on."

"That right?"

"The baby's core temperature was 16 degrees Celcius. When we brought him in, he was frozen stiff as a steak. Tina couldn't get a breathing tube in because his mouth had turned to ice. She couldn't put a needle in the kid's veins because they were frozen solid."

"That so?" What else should I say? I was feeling bad for what I'd done with Tina, all of a sudden.

"His heart didn't beat for at least two hours. But you know? That baby's fine now. He lost two toes to frostbite and one finger up to the first knuckle."

I wondered what he was trying to say.

He looked at me. Behind his head, I could make out the curved blue outlines of Vancouver's mountains, the white slash of a ski resort.

"You always fuck around on your women?"

"Do I always fuck around?" I ground out my cigarette under my heel.

He waited.

"I guess I do," I said, and nodded. "One way or another."

"Kind of figured," he said.

“I’m trying to change. I am changing.” I wasn’t changing so much as turning 40 with no prospects.

“You know what you learn on the force? Things can get pretty bad,” he said, “but still get better. People can turn over new leaves. They do all the time.”

“Yup,” I said, although I wasn’t sure it was true. I felt, though, like Eric was changing. I hadn’t liked him and now I was starting to. Now I was admiring him despite myself. He was an honourable guy and I should just admit it. He wasn’t going to use his brute strength to beat the crap out of Tina or anything.

“So you just have to go on doing your best.”

Sperm King, I thought. “Yup, you do. Until I guess you don’t anymore.”

“Right,” he said. I couldn’t believe this guy was a cop, that he took full grown men down on a daily basis. He had the size, but he was as gentle as a golden Labrador, as Miss Dog.

He said, “You gotta give each day a chance. There’s this guy on Oprah, right? And he says to do ‘What if?’”

I looked at Eric and he shrugged and explained that he and Tina had been watching a lot of daytime TV. Mat and Pat leave, he said.

“So, like, what if my ex-wife gets Tina suspended? Well, okay, Tina gets to spend more time with the baby. I’d like that. She’d probably like that once she got used to it. What if we go further down the financial tubes? Well, so what? We just sell the condo. What if you slept with Tina?”

“I didn’t sleep with Tina. God, how long do you think you and Ruth were gone? Ten minutes? That can’t be any kind of compliment to me.”

“Okay then,” he said. He turned to go back in, waited for me to proceed him. He put his hand on the back of my neck somewhere between a choke hold and a caress.

When we got back to the table, Tina was telling a story about a patient she’d assessed who thought a foam cushion was her son. She kept asking the cushion for its opinion on the competency questions.

“Would you agree?” the woman asked the pillow. “I was born in 1914?” Or: “It’s 1956 now, isn’t that correct?”

The conversation stopped dead as we sat down. Tina looked hard at me, but I couldn’t discern any message in how she did it. She didn’t seem upset any more, though. I looked at my wife.

Eric kissed Tina’s cheek.

“A piece of foam?” said Ruth and grinned. “Ouch. Must have been a hard labor.”

Tina said, “Woman’s son started life as a contraceptive sponge.”

Ruth laughed then sobered. “At least she had a baby.” She nudged me with her knee.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “That’s me. King Shit-for-Sperm.”

“It’ll happen, you’ll see,” said Tina.

“Sure,” said Eric. “When you least expect it.”

Tina raised her eyebrows at me. “Make sure it happens.”

“Okay,” I said. Something had changed without us fixing it. “Sure, okay. I’ll give it my damnedest.” I knew Ruth must have sensed the change, too, because she slipped her hand into my lap.