

ROBERT LAKE  
**BLINDERS**

JASON'S SISTERS SPLUTTER.

Perhaps Sheila did want to be cremated, but her ashes spread in the Ottawa River from a canoe? Preposterous! Their brother's claim that Sheila, handmaiden of common sense, stipulated in her will that the family shepherd her ashes from canoes was absurd, another sick jest from their brother's heaped bushel of ailing yarns.

The sisters confer and decide that the family will be pleased to attend a proper cremation service, after which Jason possesses the legal right to dispense Sheila's remains wherever his delusions dictate. They point out that scattering ashes in the Ottawa River is illegal.

Jason's neighbour, Marie Johnson, who herself has lost a spouse, now resident in a century-old Anglican cemetery, tells the sisters they'd best humour Jason.

"He's suffering Sheila's death like his arms have been ripped from their sockets," she advises, and the sisters wonder if Marie is quoting Jason: her harangue seems too melodramatic for such a stubby creature, her perm clutching her scalp.

The sisters continue to balk until a daughter reminds them that Marie supplied soup and succour as cancer gobbled Sheila's liver. Jason had bellowed that he'd care for Sheila himself, Marie please fuck off. She refused, using her key when Jason locked her out. He changed the locks, then admitted her begrudgingly. Marie begs the sisters to forgive Jason: she knows, as Sheila surely knew, how much Jason, kneecapped by infidelities, cynicism and an unruly nature, loved Sheila. Is "kneecapped" Marie's word or Jason's? Even the sisters reluctantly find themselves mimicking Jason's expressions.

They aren't clambering into canoes to paddle beside a spit the army uses for rifle training. The sisters watch from a pebbled beach. Marie asks to accompany Jason in his canoe; he vetoes that. Jason will sit in the front

of the lead canoe with Sheila's urn and needs a strong paddler behind him. The shorter sister's husband paddles Marie; the lanky, bad-breathed husband of the bossiest sister paddles Jason. The canoes—two with Jason's nieces, another with two women who worked with Sheila at the Food Bank, and one with a brace of gay neighbours—set out. The mourners carry a single lily per canoe; the gay couple emailed a website that advised that wreathes are ecologically irresponsible.

Jason's son is absent. During the weeks of Sheila's viciously abbreviated endgame, which she'd organized brilliantly, she chatted for an hour each day with *her* son by phone. She always asked Jason to leave her stinking-of-death sitting room; she wanted to be alone with *her* "prodigal son," her indictment of Jason; when he referred to Regan as prodigal, Sheila winced.

What did they talk about?

"Mundane things," she replied. "No, we don't discuss you. We've shredded that tempestuous paperback."

"You've forgiven me, why can't he?"

"I have not forgiven you," Sheila sharply replied. "It's just ... just what?"

If forgiveness was impossible, why had she stuck with Jason?

"I loved you passionately for decades, even do now on days I'm capable of feeling. I couldn't break the habit. Or don't dare try. You're like a fine cigar."

"Thanks," he replied, wondering if this was compliment or complaint.

Why am I cowering in my home office during Marie's invasions, he wondered. Marie implored, ordered him to call Regan and beg him to fly back to be with Sheila. Jason declined: he didn't know Regan's whereabouts and Sheila had forbidden his summons. She rasped that an hour's conversation was plenty, even a bit exhausting. She'd feel guilty forcing her darling Regan to waste his time hanging about. Jason believed that Regan was wasting his time wherever he was, but kept his peace.

He regretted not clamping his big mouth more tightly. Spite urged him to snitch that Marie had phoned Regan, demanding his return, promising to run interference with Jason. Sheila berated Jason for betraying Marie's confidence, but didn't cough her decades-old excuse that Marie meant well. Marie was like cigarettes, a companionable addiction. Companion? No, Marie was Sheila's walking cane as Sheila had been Marie's crutch during George's abuse. His belt raised welts on Marie's legs. Jason and Sheila never

understood: why had George whipped only Marie's legs? A fetish? A shred of decency? Because he raised his crippled right arm with difficulty?

The flotilla paddles alongside the spit. Jason is pleased that a kingfisher flashes, a little grebe, too; gulls settle on the water and hey! Look, a common merganser, its drenched green head dazzling in the evening sun. Jason suppresses the sentimental whimsy that these friends of Sheila insist on shepherding her mourners. The entrance to the bay, Sheila's favourite birding site, is blocked by a string of buoys linked by rope.

"Here's as good a spot as any," Jason croaks. The men doff baseball caps, women bow heads. Marie prompts Jason to lead them in prayer, and he ignores her and dumps Sheila's ashes. Jason watches the black and grey mash sink; a few bits float, sucked along with the lilies and then pulled under by the current.

The sisters' binoculars follow the flotilla paddling back.

Jason's paddler coughs. "I give it a month before the sisters take you in hand."

"Marie?" Jason chuckles.

"Bent on marrying you. Poor bitch wants to hop out of the fire into the frying pan."

Until cancer took him down, Marie's husband George was an abusive Sunday drunk. Every time Marie phoned 911 Sheila begged her to leave George. "*The Citizen* will report my humiliation, maybe *Ottawa Morning* too," Marie countered.

"The sisters believe they owe Sheila. Sort of from failing hands we throw the torch, be yours to hold it high," Jason's paddler says.

Jason concedes that Sheila repeatedly saved him from asinine screw-ups. But she hadn't salvaged a total loser. He'd earned his doctorate in anthropology before he'd met Sheila, then a student in his first class. After their daughter died, he covered for her during what they agreed to call her wobbles, moods that oscillated between hysteria and misery.

He laughs loudly, provoking the curiosity or disapproval of the paddlers. Lost in memories, he isn't aware of their reaction. These days dating your student is a firing offense. His mother passed to the sisters an infallible truth: Jason is unstable; no, not unstable, but a directionless boat in need of a rudder. Jason needs steering through self-inflicted gales. The family never

knows where Jason is: Japan, Ghana, Chile, here, there, everywhere, except at home. And without announcement he's gone or returned.

On the beach his sisters hug him.

"What a splendiferous day," Jason says. Everyone murmurs agreement. He points to the lowering sun behind an island where Sheila and he frequently picnicked. Sheila often recounted Regan's joy the day his crawl beat Jason from the beach to the poison-ivy infested island.

"Shame Sheila can't be here; she'd enjoy a sunset dip," Jason cracks. His sisters choke. His nieces snicker. The gay couple smile.

A month, the disloyal husband warned. There's the rub. Jason's bereft of plans, aspirations and passion. Teaching and research might consume his time, perhaps the only thing that can jolt his mind from the rut of ruing the mayhem he'd committed against the woman he'd sort of loved most and who had cherished him.

Pickets block the entrance to the parking lot. During Sheila's final wheezing week, the faculty union called a strike. Jason missed the email. Other professors have retrieved what they needed. His laptop is trapped in his office; he can't rescue it without crossing the picket line. He explains that he'll just dash in and out with the laptop.

"Working on your lectures during a strike is scabbing," intones the picket line marshal, handing Jason his picketing schedule.

Kobe Alcindor from Religious Studies explains that Jason has just buried his wife, well, not actually, Sheila was cremated. The marshal strikes the first week of picketing from Jason's schedule.

"I must work. I won't be able to endure my own thoughts until the strike's finished," Jason tells Kobe.

Marie doesn't dally. She rings the bell for thirty minutes until he opens the door, and tells him no soup, cook for yourself, your brother-in-law is insulting, she doesn't fancy marrying Jason, she knows she can't replace Sheila just as Jason couldn't replace George. He misses the next five minutes of her natter, wondering why Marie thinks George irreplaceable. Jason figures Jack the Ripper would be more benign than George. Is Jack more benign than Jason? Is Marie addled or so profound she passes all understanding? She certainly passes his. She plops a book on the coffee table that Sheila

fashioned in a night-school carpentry course: *The Seven Steps of Grieving*. Oh, god, not that. He team-teaches an interdisciplinary course on Death and Dying and a bimbo assistant professor from Religious Studies insists *Grieving* be compulsory. No other word conveys Kobe Alcindor's sopiness.

Marie says Jason can't take the first step because he's in denial. Apparently, his grieving doesn't approach the ripping out of hair and the cursing of God that Marie considers appropriate.

Marie announces she won't come calling again, even if asked.

"Only a total prick would tell Sheila that I phoned Regan," she accuses. Her tone is typically bland, her misery signalled only by Jason's realization that he has never heard her swear. Not even George's belt elicited such language.

"Sheila made me promise to tell you where Regan is. I can't bear to say it. His address is on this scrap of paper."

Starke, Florida. A state prison! Starke's near Jacksonville, Google says, the site of the first Florida State Prison. Jason returns from his computer to confront Marie. "How did Sheila manage to talk an hour with him every day?"

Marie diddles. She stares at Jason and Sheila's wedding picture. Beside it is Regan graduating from grade school, his bold grin a promise of brilliant achievement. Jason realizes she is considering, not answering. Sheila hasn't briefed her on how to handle this question. Marie's mouth twists; she's an inept liar, her answer must betray Sheila. "Sheila didn't talk for an hour. Only fifteen minutes. She sent Regan money to bribe someone. Apparently he's quite popular there. But then Regan always was popular, wasn't he? I found out when Regan phoned me."

"You never phoned him?"

"No."

"Drugs again," Jason mutters. "For how long?"

"Another three years. Not drugs. He was convicted for laundering money for a terrorist organization. Well, he calls it a liberation organization, something to do with ... with, oh, I can't recall where."

"Sheila said she didn't want him to return. He couldn't. Did she want me to contact him?"

"She said not."

"Why charge you with informing me of his address?"

Parched Marie shrivels. "Goodbye. Don't call. I don't know more. I can't bear more. Remember your scholarly paper?"

Jason flinches. Of course he remembers: more rapes are fucked in America than in any other country, if one includes the prison rapes of males by males.

Jason deletes drafts of letters to Regan. Paralysis overtakes him; he can't type. Questions plague him. Why should Regan answer? Could he? Regan might supply the facts of his conviction, or at least the facts as Regan understands them; his son habitually twists everything.

He ignores Marie's request not to phone. "Does Regan glimpse a glimmer of the reasons for his aimless life?"

"Don't attribute the sins of the father to the son," she blurts and hangs up. He laughs scornfully. Marie is quoting Sheila.

The strike ends. He's just entered his office when the bimbo from Religious Studies drops by with a book, *The Seven Steps of Grieving*.

"Jason, I'm sure this will help," says Kobe, hugging him.

Jason suggests that he fuck off, Kobe's forgiveness pissing him off further. Jason is bugged by grieving. But mourning exactly what? Sheila? Regan? His own grubby once-Tide-white innocence? The parade until death of meaningless days dispensing information to undergraduates? Maybe he mourns the whole drab shebang.

Contrary to expectations, the sisters do not descend like wolves on the fold to order his life. One or the other drops by, inspects him and the sanitary conditions of his toilets, finds them passable and departs.

Eriko's phone call is suspicious. Are the sisters helping a member of their congregation or have they devised a stealth strategy to pen him? Eriko is half Japanese, half mongrel Brit, her accent tinged with French, her purpose to finish her master's in religion. No, she does *not* attend any church, mosque or synagogue regularly. A professor, Dr. Alcindor, mentioned that Jason might have a room to rent, or better yet, in exchange for cooking, cleaning and other tasks. Perhaps she could type or proof Jason's papers? He asks Eriko if bimbo Alcindor has informed her that he is a virulent atheist. No problem! Can she come round? Jason can't detect any reaction, positive or negative, to his description of Kobe.

The chair of Religious Studies emails that Eriko is bright, industrious, courteous.

Eriko is beautiful. He suspects her magnificence embarrasses her; perhaps she experiences it as a liability. Perhaps people find it difficult to take seriously someone that lovely. The celibate or nearly-so Jesuit on her thesis committee must pant.

Eriko has not wandered blindly into Jason's interview. She interviews him as much as he does her. She has inspected his two books, particularly the one based on his doctoral work in the Amazon basin. She's chatted with his students and colleagues.

"Undergrads adore you, grad students split, and most professors loathe you." She silently requests an explanation.

"Students and professors, being human, are assholes. With students there's hope one will escape assholedom. It happens, but erratically, unpredictably. Ergo, my dear Watson, I must treat every student as if he or she is not irremediably an asshole."

Eriko shyly grins. "So there's hope for me?"

"By definition. You're a student. Be warned: it's odds on you'll remain an ass."

Jason detects no reaction.

Eriko forthrightly negotiates her duties in lieu of rent. He doesn't understand; apparently her parents in Edinburgh forward a large monthly allowance. She's banking the money. For what? She plans to become a nature sculptor when she finishes her master's. What's a nature sculptor? A woman who crafts her sculptures, not for museums, not for collectors, but for specific sites in nature, parks, wilderness and so forth. Why study religion? Despite the hokum, religions successfully explore spirituality. Sculpting in nature is spiritual. It must be to elude the gimmicks of commercialization. Do her parents approve? Who cares?

"My parents thought it would be amusing to have children. Feeding us and changing our diapers convinced them otherwise. My brother and I were shuffled between private boarding schools and Swiss summer camps."

Where's her brother, Rupert, now? Bloody banker for Goldman Sachs.

The words itemizing Jason's misery spew unbidden: he blurts out where Regan resides, that he's been unable to draft a letter and that they have not communicated for a decade, not even by email. Regan bullheadedly flushed prodigious promise, scores of gifts, and his future. Jason gags himself before revealing what he did that Sheila never forgave, what Regan cursed him for when Jason dropped him at the Greyhound station, the last

time they'd spoken. Eriko listens impassively, says she'll return tomorrow with her few things. They'll experiment for two weeks, renegotiate their arrangement or trash it.

Chilly rage seeps through Jason. Sheila knew to dread the signs, but Eriko's naive. He struggles to strangle his antagonism, subdues it for a turbulent hour before it yanks him into the living room, where Eriko is reading. She enjoys spreading her notes on Sheila's coffee table. He unleashes every vile sally he can muster against religion, coldly watching which thrusts torment so he can deploy vicious mates. She stares calmly. The bitch is assessing him. To torture Eriko he must search for a different weapon than religion. She isn't religious, just interested in religion, the same as he hadn't been a member of the Amazon group he'd lived with and studied for two years. Eriko is an anthropologist of religion.

"Fuck off," he yells.

"Do you know the number of people you tell to fuck off weekly?" she asks. "It's boring. Worse: stupid. You're bright: hew a distinct insult to suit each person who frustrates you."

His rage stumbles. Boring? Impossible. No, she's right. What suits her? Yes, this will work. "Would your thesis committee be so supportive if you were ugly?" he asks. She's heard that slur before, parries it, but not easily. He's scented the right rabbit trail; he'll destroy her pronto.

"I've been investigating Regan," she interrupts. "I mean the organization, Arabs for Justice, he was charged with laundering money for. They were helping migrant workers in Arab countries. Saudis are the worst abusers. Their royal family lobbied for Arabs for Justice to be placed on an American terrorist list. You got oil, you get what you want."

"Who asked you to meddle?"

"You wouldn't have told me Regan was in prison unless you needed a meddler. You wouldn't have lied that Marie's a nosy bitch."

"I thought you were studying religion, not psychoanalysis. Regan's an idealist?"

"His defense was honest. He didn't know they'd opened a batch of accounts in his name. They admitted as much when caught. The prosecutors needed convictions. They charged the 'conspirators' were perjuring themselves. They cut deals. The 'conspirators' testified against Regan."

How had she discovered this? She gives him a website.



“Email your son.”

“No.”

“I could ghost a draft. Or at least some talking points?”

“We both can terminate our agreement with two weeks’ notice. Consider yourself notified,” he says.

“I’ll draft talking points anyway.”

Jason is gobsmacked. Eriko’s interference is elevated beyond the reach of Marie and the sisters. He should pitch her out instantly. He concedes she has a point. He *has* unwittingly provoked her prying. Why? Is Eriko the daughter that a drunk driver deprived Sheila of? The blonde toddler, her limbs too nimble, her breath warm, her heart generous, her intelligence precocious, was named Regan, too. Their son was born two years after the accident. Jason should have gripped her trusting hand tighter.

Jason staggers home from an undergrad party, the only prof invited. Odd: the alarm system is armed. Eriko must still be out. On Sheila’s coffee table he finds a note: Eriko will sleep at Marie’s tonight. A card is propped prominently against a lamp. Shit! An invitation to Eriko’s opening. Tonight. He’d promised to attend the presentation of her drawings and preliminary-constructions for a sculpture in the university’s botanical garden. Should he phone? Apologize? He peers across the dark alley. No lights. Waking them won’t help. Jason flops onto the couch and when he lurches to the toilet at dawn, Eriko is cross-legged on a kitchen chair. He begins his prepared apology, often practised with Sheila.

Eriko interrupts, “Don’t pollute silence.”

She puts her fingers to her lips, signalling him to be quiet, motions to a chair, and they sit silently for an hour. Why? He doesn’t dare ask. According to his sisters’ family legend, Jason’s mouth hasn’t been closed for ten minutes since he vacated poor Mom’s womb. He was a terror in church, even before he reasoned a path to atheism.

Jason succumbs to the charms of silence, irritated when Eriko opens her eyes and asks why he’d never written another book about his Amazon group. How could he lose interest?

“I didn’t. Still can’t shuck memories of them. I returned to Brazil on my first sabbatical. Sheila came, belly bulging, two months pregnant. Her logistical ability found a way up river without relying on the fucking mis-

sionaries. When I was first there, I thought they valued my research. They did, but only to devise ways of rooting the forest gods from ‘primitive hearts’ and inserting their brand of fundamentalist Christianity. I couldn’t obtain a permit. Nationalists had taken over; only Brazilian anthropologists were granted access, and very few of them. My tribe had been shunted elsewhere; loggers and farmers wanted their land.”

“Are those friends you wrote about so eloquently still alive?”

“Physically? Culturally, they’re lifeless. Something snapped.”

“In them?”

“Something snapped in me.”

“You’re a thoroughbred wearing blinders.”

Eriko has packed. She hasn’t asked for another chance. Jason won’t back down. Fuck this!

“Did my sisters plant you here?” His vehemence shocks him.

“No!”

“Then why have you woven yourself into my life?”

“We’re joint weavers. Stop pretending. We’re in love,” she says plainly. He’s flabbergasted. Eriko’s twenty years younger, gorgeous; he’s balding and dissipated.

“Hold hands. Quietly. Gently,” Eriko whispers.

He takes her sweet hand, granting him an interlude to weigh his situation. This baffling occurrence is not the first of its kind. Sheila invaded his office one late-winter day, announced they were in love, that they’d marry in June after she graduated. Where had her whimsy come from? He was fucking another undergraduate in a different class at the time. Sheila grinned and said she’d ordered her rival to bug off, which the Venezuelan girl did, after accusing Jason of dating two students at the same time. “My confessor is right: men are pigs.” She threatened to, but didn’t, expose him to the Dean. Jason protested quite honestly that he hadn’t been dating Sheila.

“You’re such a liar, asshole!” the Venezuelan screeched.

But the most bizarre of these gratuitous declarations occurred when he and Marie were planting petunias. Marie stammered that they’d always be in love, that some forest fires can’t be doused, but it was their secret, they couldn’t wound Sheila. George wasn’t mentioned. Jason in love with this dumpy gardener? He must emit a scent, perhaps a brain wave, that sparks such fantasies in some women. He couldn’t forecast which women would

imagine he loved them and which would find him “a mouthy armpit in need of deodorant”—this the amusing gibe of a secretary he thought he’d charmed.

Jason knows he must prevent Eriko from ruining her life.

“Want to know the worst thing I’ve ever done?”

“Not really. Dr Alcindor says if you can tell someone the worst thing you’ve ever done, it’s not the worst thing you’ve ever done.”

Good *bon mot*, Jason silently congratulates the bimbo. Perhaps Kobe’s a late bloomer. “Actually, if you can *remember* the worst thing you’ve done, it’s not the worst thing you’ve done.”

“Kobe overheard you calling him a bimbo. You wounded him. He respects you. Did you know his ancestors were runaway slaves? They came to Leamington on the Underground Railroad.

“I didn’t know.”

“There’s so much you refuse to know.”

“Does prissy Kobe hate my guts?”

“A little. But he believes those who finger our faults are our most benevolent teachers.”

Jason darts into his office, returns and flings a book at Eriko. “Here’s more Taoist ‘wisdom.’ Memorize it.”

Eriko chucks the book back. “Kobe’s already lent me this.”

“And are you enlightened?”

“No, merely better informed. By the way, I blundered. Regan *did* know about the accounts. He *was* laundering money for Arabs for Justice.

Jason flips through the second draft of the first three chapters of Eriko’s dissertation. It’s bloody brilliant, each sentence thoughtfully breast-feeding its successor. She discusses druids, witches, pagans, wiccans and less familiar sects, all of which worshipped outdoors. She hints that the open-air sermons of John Wesley will be examined in a later chapter. Her simple argument is profound: “Herding worship indoors mummifies spirituality.”

Migod! She’s drawn on findings from his first book, chapter five, contrasting the full-moon rituals of his tribe with their half-hearted Sunday-morning hymn sings in the stifling church, donated by Kansas supporters of the missionaries.

His digital alarm must be malfunctioning. Only three? 03:13? He shakes himself from a lurid nightmare in which he lurches drunkenly from

his house. Rams the Volvo into reverse. Tires squeal. Sheila screams. He's backed over his daughter, Regan. It's noon, the sun blazing. Sheila calls 911. She hustles Jason into the house and hides him in the cellar. "Don't make a peep," she hisses. The police arrive: she claims that she backed over Regan. The ambulance arrives. Sheila clammers into the back with her barely breathing, generous-hearted, once nimble, once precocious daughter. Regan is dead on arrival. The police will report a tragic accident. Sheila curls up in bed in the fetal position. He attempts to hug her.

Jason's nightmare fast-forwards. Their home is a toxic waste site. Crud clings, food squirms, their driveway accuses. They flee across country. New city, different university.

Now their son Regan appears, asking questions about his dead sister. They construct a fiction about a hit-and-run driver, which they dish to Marie, other friends, colleagues, Kobe Alcindor.

The nightmare zooms forward again. Jason is dropping Regan at the Greyhound station. Sheila has told Regan the truth. Spite? Sick of mouthing lies? Maybe she merely needs someone to know the source of her soul-lashing soreness. In slow motion Regan curses Jason, his rant issuing a single indictment Jason can't hear.

He's not wriggling in a nightmare's web. He is awake. Memory buggers him, cripples him, accuses him, plants thorns on his brow, summons a masked torturer to lash him with a cat o' nine tails. "What's fair's, fair," says the bureaucrat.

"I had a ghastly nightmare last night."

"What happened?" Eriko asks.

"Well, you know nightmares: so vivid, and then by morning forgotten."

Eriko leaves abruptly. She emails an hour later. "Marie says Sheila called you crack. I know why. Kobe's advised me to go cold turkey. I am. Please don't reply."

Jason advises himself not to be a prick. He doesn't love Eriko; she'd learn that and leave him eventually. He doesn't love her, but cares enough not to lure her back for a year, five years, or a decade's distress. He wonders if Kobe fancies her. Kobe's married. Two kids. Wife's a chiropractor. Maybe Kobe fancies being merely a mentor.

Jason vows to finish this email to Regan, bugger the cost. What was it Aristotle said? Order what you want and don't bitch about the bill.

“Son, please answer my questions. I’ll ask more later, but no more judgements. I promise. First question: Can we get you moved to a Canadian jail? That’s if you want to. Marie and I certainly want that. Second question ...?”

Marie advised starting with a few questions, say five. What five? What is his second obligation after bringing his son home? On Regan’s first day parole, they’ll paddle to where Jason scattered his mother’s ashes. The sisters were right: Sheila hadn’t requested that. Jason believes she would have enjoyed his tribute.

He shudders convulsively. His eyes refuse to focus on the screen. He knows the questions stoking his spasms. What if crushing life from his own daughter wasn’t the worst action of his life? What if there’s worse than hiding in the basement while Sheila soothes their mangled darling? No, neither qualifies. Regan had told him that what was unforgiveable to Sheila was that Jason had learned nothing. Surely killing your daughter and hiding behind your beloved’s lies should be a cautionary tale.

He controls his shaking. What had he said to Eriko? *If you can even remember the worst thing you’ve done, it’s not the worst thing you’ve done.*

Panic seeps back. No matter! Terror can’t be permitted to torpedo his email.

“Please, gods of memory, block recall of whatever my worst atrocity is. Prevent Regan telling me, if he knows,” Jason bleats. Eriko criticized him for wearing blinders. Fair enough, but blinders help some thoroughbreds in some races. He resumes typing. “My second question, son, one Marie is also curious to know, is ....”