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THE FALLS

WHEN I WAS EIGHT, my older brother's hockey team started travelling more often. They played in tournaments all over Ontario. Sometimes they played games so far away from our town that the whole team would stay in a hotel for a night or two.

In mid-December, I learned that they were going to play in Niagara Falls. I was sitting at the dining-room table with my mum and dad, waiting for my brother to come upstairs.

"Ben!" My mother hollered, turning towards the basement door. "Dinner!" She looked over at my dad and shook her head. "He never does what he's asked, and his reward is to go away for a weekend?"

I was reaching for the serving spoon in the ravioli casserole, and my mother touched my hand. "Wait for your brother," she said.

"What weekend?" I asked.

"Next weekend," said my dad. "Ben's team's got a tournament in Niagara Falls."

"Oh," I said. "Can I go?"

My mother shook her head. "No, you can't. We can barely afford it as it is." She shifted the cork mat underneath the casserole, which was so hot that the cheese was still bubbling at its sides.

"Please?" I asked. "I really want to. There's a pool at the hotel, right?" I turned to my dad.

He nodded.

My mother scooped salad on to my plate. "Don't use much dressing," she said. "We'll talk about Niagara Falls later. How was your day? How was school?"

I pulled my arms up and rested my elbows on the table, chin on my hands. "It was okay. We went to the library." I ate a piece of carrot off the top of the salad, and picked out all of the tomatoes. I tilted my plate towards my dad's and flicked the tomatoes onto his salad.

"Are you still having trouble with that mean girl? What's her name?" My mum passed me the Catalina dressing. We were out of French.

“She’s fine.”

“Did you do what I told you to? If you ignore her, she’ll leave you alone.”

I shook the dressing bottle, and shifted in my seat. “I got this book about Amelia Earhart out of the library. It’s heavy, but I brought it home. There’s a picture of her on the cover and it looks like she’s about to go swimming. She has a cap and goggles. And really short hair. I like her hair.” I drizzled the dressing, just a bit, over top of the lettuce and carrots and cucumber. I watched my mum as I did it, to see if she was looking.

My brother’s feet started pounding up the stairs.

“Herd of elephants,” said my dad, lifting a mound of ravioli onto his plate.

“Finally!” My mum yelled as my brother rounded the corner into the dining room.

Over the next week, I begged my parents to let me go to Niagara Falls. I didn’t even care if I had to share a bed with my brother, who talked and kicked in his sleep. I was too excited about staying in a hotel room and swimming in a hotel pool.

My mother wasn’t going to let me go. “December is a very busy month,” she said. “Wouldn’t you like to stay back and help with Christmas shopping and wrapping presents?”

No, I wouldn’t. I didn’t like malls or Christmas. I wanted to sit in the arena with my book, listening to the sounds of the skates on the ice, smelling the air, crunchy with cold, moist with boy-sweat. I wanted to swim in the hotel pool. I liked to see new things—new places, new signs, new people. We lived in such a small town. When I left its boundaries, I felt the potential of something different. I could feel myself standing on different streets, sitting on the benches in an unfamiliar arena.

Eventually, after arguing for a while, my dad said they should let me go. And then he turned to me and said, “Best behaviour, eh?”

I was generally on my best behaviour anyway. I nodded eagerly.

My mother looked at my dad and then looked at me. Her face resembled the face you make when you’re trying to swallow a piece of toast but it’s too dry and it gets stuck in your throat.

Early on a Friday morning, we got into our Dodge Caravan and headed to Niagara Falls. We were carpooling with a family that lived on the

end of our street. There were two dads, two hockey players, me, and Alvie. The hockey players sat in the two captain's chairs in the middle and the dads sat up front, meaning I had to sit in the back with Alvie.

"I don't want to sit next to her," said Alvie. "Her ass is too fat."

I pretended I didn't hear him, and put my backpack between us. I knew what I looked like. Gangly limbs, round stomach like an overturned salad bowl protruding from my Day-Glo blue bathing suit. I saw my round cheeks and chubby square jawline every time I brushed my teeth or caught myself in a reflection. Didn't need to be reminded. But I'd packed two bathing suits and was looking forward to the feeling of plush hotel towels. Spirits were high.

Halfway there, we stopped at McDonald's to get breakfast. My belly was empty and roiling with hunger, but I said I didn't want anything. My dad got me an orange juice. All the boys ate Egg McMuffins and hash browns. Alvie's face got all greasy with potato and sausage. I popped the foil off my orange juice, drank it in two big gulps, and then pretended to go to sleep.

We got into Niagara Falls early, before we could check into the hotel. My dad wanted to go look at the Hydro station but everyone else thought that was boring. Alvie's dad cajoled my dad into rolling slowly down the main strip, letting the car fill with the blinking carnival lights and sounds of the wax museums and freak shows and haunted houses.

"It's a Dracula haunted house!" I cried out, pointing. "Oh my god! Can we go?"

My brother said I'd shit my pants after five seconds, and then my dad said, "Oy, watcher fuckin' mouth." He and Alvie's dad laughed.

Alvie's dad spotted three or four more cars full of our own—hockey kids and parents. We parked and headed over to them. They were standing outside the arcade. We climbed over a snowbank between the cars and the sidewalk to reach them.

Someone's mum said hi to me and asked about our car ride, but I was caught in the call of Dracula. His large head, mounted on the building, was flanked by outstretched hands, pulling taut his black-and-red cape, as if he was about to swoop over to the arcade to play a few rounds of pinball. "Come in, come in," he said, his plaster mouth moving, "A ha ha ha ha ha."

I was wearing sneakers and they'd gotten wet instantly in the slushy snow. My feet were starting to freeze. I told my dad that I was going to lose a toe and needed to go inside Dracula's Dungeon to warm up.

He told me I could wait in the car if I wanted. He and Alvie's dad were talking to the other parents. My brother and Alvie's brother had joined the group of hockey players, who were now pushing, shoving, knocking ballcaps off each other's heads. There were also three hockey sisters standing off to the side and cringing or squealing when the writhing octopus mass of brothers extended from its boundaries.

I was standing behind my dad, and Alvie was standing beside me.

"Betcha I can get through the haunted house," Alvie said to me. "Betcha you can't."

I looked at my dad to see if he'd heard Alvie. I willed him to take me.

Alvie pestered his dad, poking him and tugging at his jacket. I stayed quiet and let Alvie do the work. Eventually it was decided that my brother and Alvie's brother would stay with the team. Alvie's dad said that we'd get to test our balls in the haunted house if it would just make Alvie put a cork in it.

"I don't have balls and I don't need them," I said, which got me a look from my dad. Best behaviour meant discerning who I could and couldn't swear or say "balls" in front of.

We crossed the street and I was so friggin' excited. The man in the booth saw us coming. He raised one arm and waved us towards him. "Those who dare enter rarely make it out alive," he said, and then the gaping maw of Dracula opened wide and let out a cackle.

"Batshit," said Alvie.

We paid and went inside. I let my dad lead and then followed him, happy to be in front of Alvie so that I didn't have to look at him.

We made our way down the stairs into Dracula's Dungeon. Everything was pulsating—the lights flashed on, flashed off. On, off. Bats and women were shrieking. Things seemed to be moving inside the walls, but I didn't look too closely. About two-thirds of the way down, a man wearing a hockey mask jumped out, just behind me, wielding a bloody axe. Alvie screamed, and then let out a string of swear words as he ran back up the stairs. His father's footsteps followed. Alvie had made it all of forty-five seconds, which made me so happy that it actually felt like my toes were melting inside my shoes.

The man in the booth had told us that we'd cross a line—a place of no return. I figured that all I had to do was get to the place of no return, and then I'd be forced to finish.

My dad was wearing a tawny cable-knit wool sweater and I followed it closely. When the lights flashed on, horrific scenes were illuminated. There

was a woman, a real live one, tied up and writhing around. Blood pumped out of a wound in her neck. Then a dummy vampire popped up out of a coffin, baring his teeth. I started to feel like I was understanding the pattern, knowing what was going to come next. I had practised slowing my heart rate at the Shopper's Drug Mart, at the station where you sit and put your arm in a cuff and it expands until it squeezes you tight. I tried to slow my heart rate and I thought about how my lungs felt like they were inside the expanding cuff. Squeezed tight.

A flock of rubber bats fell from a trapdoor in the ceiling and the soundtrack chirped and squealed and flapped. I didn't squeal, but I did reach out and grab my dad's sweater. I shut my eyes and focussed on being calm. Calm clam calm clam, I said to myself. I opened my eyes again and my dad and I weaved through the hallway. The lights flashed on, flashed off, flashed on again. I clung to my dad's sweater. It smelled kind of like a barnyard.

The lights went off and then we had to make our way through cobwebs hanging from the ceiling. There was a sound like a gorilla pounding its chest and then snorting and screaming. When the lights went on again, I realized that I was no longer holding on to my dad's sweater. I had buried my face into the torso of a gorilla hanging from the ceiling. Plastic entrails spilled from its waist. This time I did scream. I looked around for my dad and he was up further, past the cobwebs, past the point of no return, which was marked with a big red stripe on the floor. I looked behind me for a second, contemplating running back, but then I remembered Alvie and I pushed ahead, past my dad, forward, forward, even when the lights were off. The time leading up to the gorilla seemed like half an hour, but then it took only seconds to barrel through the rest of the haunted house until there was another set of stairs and the man in the booth was audible, calling out to passersby. I waited for my dad at the bottom of the stairs and focussed on my breathing again. The last stretch of the haunted house was easy. I felt a bazillion times ballsier than Alvie.

I got to feel smug for less than seven minutes. As soon as we got back to the arcade to meet everyone, Alvie boasted about Dracula's Dungeon, saying how it was so easy it was for pansies. His dad let him lie like that. I wanted to push him and watch his head knock off the floor. My brother asked if I got through, too, and I said I did. "It was kinda scary, though," I said. "There was this part where dad's sweater turned into a gorilla chest." And then I thought that that was why everyone liked Alvie and no one liked

me. Even though Alvie was younger, he could lie well and he knew a lot of dirty jokes. Me, I rarely said anything. And when I did speak, I said things that did not make any sense.

The boys won the first game and everyone was happy and excited and smelling bad and saying things like “we wasted ’em.”

I had watched the game in the part of the arena furthest away from the concession. I managed to not eat much all day, just the orange juice and then a banana. I was tempted to use some of my money to buy something at the arena but I didn’t want to cave, not now, not with Alvie around all the time. I couldn’t be seen with fries or chips or chocolate or candy, and that’s all they sold. So instead, I watched the game and read Nancy Drew.

After everyone changed and came into the lobby, we went back to the hotel. The parents decided we’d meet in the hotel restaurant for dinner.

I wanted grilled cheese but had soup instead. At first I didn’t eat the crackers but then I did. And I was still hungry. Most of the kids ordered ice cream and even though I didn’t ask for it, the waitress brought me some too. “The fudge is from the Hershey factory down the road,” she said, “it’s the best in town.”

“I didn’t—” I started, but then I changed my mind. My spoon had already done a shallow dive into the pool of chocolate.

The next morning we were back at the arena. I liked to watch the boys during their warm-up. When they first got on the ice, they skated round and round their end, slapping their sticks against the ice and chanting. They chanted “deh-vils, deh-vils, deh-vils,” faster and faster, skating harder, banging their sticks in succession. Eventually they broke from the circle and took some shots at the goalie.

We spent most of the day at the arena—the boys had three games to play. Sunday promised at least one more game and then a championship game if they were lucky. I had finished my book and bumped into my dad when I went to see if they had any free papers.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said, “you eaten lunch yet?”

I said yes. Then I told him I’d finished reading my book. He talked me into standing with him and watching the game.

“Feel like I haven’t seen you all day,” he said.

I nodded and he raised his bushy eyebrow. “I do have some money, you know,” he said. “Let me buy your next lunch.”

We went back over to the stands, near Alvie and his dad. My dad hugged me close for a moment. “You sure you’re alright? Seem a bit off.”

I nodded. “I just want to go swimming at the hotel again,” I said. “I can go tonight, right?”

Alvie started laughing at something and I was sure it was me. Then I wasn’t sure. My dad was right. I was off. I felt like I might start crying but I didn’t know why.

“Yeah, kid,” he said. “Deffo.”

They lost one Saturday game and won the other two and then we all went back to the hotel. I changed into my bathing suit as soon as we got back and sat on the bed waiting, bouncing up and down and kicking at the bedskirt with my heels.

My brother had to lay out his hockey stuff to dry and then my dad had to have a shower and then finally, finally, we got to leave the room.

Everyone had congregated in the hallway. It seemed like all the kids wanted to go in the pool. Or the hot tub. And all the parents wanted to go to the hotel bar. It was taking them a while to sort everything out.

I was wearing a white terrycloth robe I’d pinched from the back of the bathroom door in the room. My feet were bare. I stared down at them. They were ugly—winter pale, with purplish toes.

Eventually the parents decided they’d take shifts with us in the pool area. The first elevators that came filled up quick. I said bye to my dad, who was going to the bar, and ran down the stairs.

In the pool area, I lined up to get my towel. Hockey kids and a couple mums set up their stuff on plastic lounge chairs flanking the pool.

Some of the boys started doing cannonballs into the pool. Alvie and a few of the others who couldn’t swim so well were already in the hot tub.

“Cannonball contest!” One of the boys yelled.

“I put my money on the orca!” Alvie called back, pointing at me. They all laughed.

I looked at the adults. They hadn’t heard or they were pretending they hadn’t.

I dove into the pool and let myself sink to the bottom. I watched the bubbles form at my mouth and nose, then rise up to the top of the water. Everything was muffled and blurry underwater. I couldn’t see or hear Alvie or anyone else. When my lungs began to burn, I kicked up to the surface long enough for a breath of air. Then I started doing somersaults. I wanted to see

how many I could do in a row. I took a deep breath and then started. I tucked my knees into my chest and held my arms out to propel me, then I swung myself forward. I went round and round and round—made it to three the first time. The hardest part was running out of breath. I had to exhale through my nose the whole time so that water wouldn't shoot up and choke me. I tried somersaulting backwards but it was harder. I tried forwards again. I made it to five in a row and then moved to the shallow end to do handstands.

When I finally got out of the water, I walked up the steps in the shallow end and then followed the edge of the pool back to my chair. The pool was surrounded on one side by floor-to-ceiling windows. The bright overhead lights illuminated everything in the pool room, but it was impossible to see out the windows.

"Your sister has a pot belly," said Alvie, when I passed the hot tub. "She's fat like Elvis. Does she fry peanut butter sandwiches?"

Everyone in the hot tub laughed, even my brother.

I stopped and faced them all.

"Alvie didn't make it through the haunted house." I said.

He splashed the water in the hot tub. "Liar! You're lying because you're fat and sad."

"Okay," I said. "Fine then. Was your favourite part the part where Dracula's bride's head flew off her body and landed in a moat, or when the Dungeonkeeper ate a live mouse?"

Alvie thought for a moment. "It was sick when he ate the mouse," he said. "There was blood dripping off both sides of his mouth and the tail wriggled around before he sucked everything in."

The boys hooted and laughed and agreed it was sick.

"Didn't happen," I said quietly. And then I said it again. "Never happened. Go see for yourself. Alvie's lying cuz he was too chickenshit to even get down the stairs."

I looked at their faces and their expressions were changing. They looked to Alvie.

"He screamed like a dying mouse," I said. "But no mice died."

Alvie had pulled himself out of the hot tub and jumped onto me before I realized what was happening. He was tearing at my hair—I could feel the roots beginning to give. I was much larger and able to keep my balance. I grabbed both his arms near his scrawny biceps, stumbling a bit before swinging him to my left and letting go.

Alvie bounced off the pool deck and right into the water, holding a small chunk of my hair.

He started thrashing in the water, spitting and yelling. Alvie couldn't swim. The two hockey mums at the far end of the pool stood up from their chairs but didn't move forward. It was like they were still watching from the stands.

I dove into the water and put Alvie's arm over my shoulder. I hugged his torso to me. He scratched at my back and bit me, sending up big splashes of water and pulling us both under.

We struggled over to the side of the pool. The mothers had finally rushed over, and one of them reached into the water, grabbing Alvie under the arms and pulling him onto the deck.

I got out, too. I got my towel and sat on my lounge chair and watched the bubble of excitement surrounding Alvie. My scalp was throbbing and when I shook my towel out after drying myself off, I realized that I'd gotten blood all over it. I wasn't sure if I should give it back to the attendant, all bloody, or just hide it somewhere, like under the lounge chair.

Later on, I sat in the hotel reception area waiting for my dad. He was talking to Alvie's dad. I was dressed now, wearing corduroys and my winter jacket and shoes. The lobby doors opened and shut, opened and shut, and curls of snow blustered through them every time they parted.

Every time someone came into the hotel, it was like they knew what I'd done. I wanted to see, in their faces, if they were going to forgive me or not—if I was going to get in trouble, or not. Mostly, their faces didn't say much other than that they were cold from being outside. The muscles around their mouths were tight, their eyelids almost closed. They never really even looked over to where I was—they narrowed in immediately on the people at the front desk.

One woman, though, she looked right at me. She looked me up and down and I could tell she didn't like what she saw. The corner of her mouth twitched as she set down her two large bags. She snapped her fingers at the desk attendant, who sent a lobby boy over.

I decided, then, that it didn't matter if I got in trouble. I didn't regret what I'd done and I didn't care what anyone else thought about it.

"Alright, kid," my dad said when he came to get me. "I've left your brother with a pack of rabid animals. Let's go for a walk."

I hopped off the ottoman I'd been sitting on and followed him outside.

We walked down to the falls area where bright lights played over the rushing water. My mum would have wanted to walk through the park, where there were Christmas scenes decorated with lots of coloured bulbs.

I didn't want to say anything about anything, so we just walked for a while and then stood in front of the falls, listening. A crust of icy snow had developed at the edge of the stone wall overlooking the water. I bored into it with my shoe, loosening the ice and then stamping it back into place.

"Smarmy little git got what he'd been asking for," my dad said eventually. "Way I see it." He looked down at me and wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

"Yeah," I said. "He did." A small smile pulled at the corners of my mouth.

Besides, what am I always telling you? Use your size to your advantage. Right?"

We stood there for a little while longer. I was dizzy from not eating, and from everything that had happened.

"Dad?" I asked.

"Yeah?"

"Can we eat something?"

He nodded. "Christ. I'm always hungry."

He took my hand and we walked back up towards the strip. I said I wanted spaghetti and garlic bread. My dad said he felt like a burger. And then he said he wanted to know why girls had to have it so hard.

"You just do what's good for you, eh?" he said. "Fuck the lot of 'em if they don't like it."

At the restaurant, my dad ordered red wine and then snuck me some, pouring it into my juice glass. I twisted my noodles round and round, using a spoon to support them, and took little sips of the wine. My cheeks flushed and I felt rosy and warm.