

SCOTT RANDALL

MASS GRAVES

UP UNTIL HE WAS EIGHT MONTHS OLD, Mattie still took two naps a day, but at nine months, he doesn't seem to want even the one. Ten minutes in the rocking chair, his head will nod from time to time, but then it jolts right back up, and that's the end of that. Up against my shoulder while I pace, he will drift off after about twenty minutes, but if I put him down in the crib, he's awake and crying. The only way he wants to nap is the car—and I know—with gas at one thirty a litre and carbon dioxide emissions, circling Barrhaven for two hours a day is hardly responsible. After two or three blocks in the car, though, I check the rear view, and he's down. I wouldn't have tried this when we lived in Toronto or Montreal, where drivers lean on the horn the second a red light turns green, but Ottawa drivers tend to be less aggressive. I think the Baby on Board sign helps too.

What do I do for the two-hour drive? My mind wanders, mostly. I think about being a mother, and I think about my own mother and stepfather. Sometimes, if I'm down, I think about my father, who was once estranged, for a short time wasn't, and is now deceased. The roadside sign by the United Church is always good for an amusing typo. *Let Christ be your conscious. Except the lord into your life.* I've also noticed that a good number of the street names in our neighbourhood are no more than compounds of geographic nouns. We have a *Glenmeadow*, a *Meadowfield*, and a *Fieldbriar*. Toward the library, the emphasis is less on flora and more on fauna: *Deerfox*, *Foxhound*, and *Houndboar*. Today I'm circling around an enclave of new townhomes and two-bedroom singles, and I notice a sign that reads *Mass Graves*.

On second glance, it's actually *Moss Groves*, which is a far more reasonable street name. The mistake makes me think, though; I've had these momentary misreadings for as long as I can remember. If I'm reading on the bus, for example, and not really paying attention, letter combinations somehow rearrange themselves. *Infant* can become *instant* or *dressing*

gown can become *dressing down*. A couple of years ago, when we still lived in Toronto, I was walking down Yonge and out of the corner of my eye I misread a movie marquee for *Original Sin* as *Origami Sin*. *Origami Sin* with Antonio Banderas—yes, I’d pay to see that.

As my mind wanders more, it occurs to me that maybe these mental lapses are like inner Freudian slips—mistakes that can inadvertently reveal one’s mental state. It makes sense. If outgoing slips of the tongue are meaningful, then why wouldn’t incoming tricks of the eye?

“Anderson is looking after the provincial grants this year.”

“Is that a promotion for him?” I ask.

Peter doesn’t answer, but I can feel him shrugging next to me in bed.

“I was hoping for the assignment,” he says.

It’s only nine but we’re in bed already, chatting in the dark before sleep. Peter lets me go on about how Mattie turned the dial on his chatterbox telephone for the first time, I let him go on about work, and then we’ll fall asleep exhausted. This is how things are now.

“Did you hear that?”

“What?”

I can feel him shrugging again.

“Did I check the basement door?” he asks.

“You did.”

Ever since Mattie, Peter has been a bit compulsive. Is the basement door locked? Because home invaders could come in and that’d be it. Is the door to the garage pulled shut? Because carbon dioxide could drift upstairs and that’d be it. Is the iron unplugged and back in the cupboard? Because Mattie could pull on the cord and that’d be it.

“I walked with Adams at lunch today,” he says. “Only thirty minutes but we went at a good clip and the exercise felt good.”

Peter works in an office for a non-profit, where they collect subsidies from various revenue streams and disperse funds to emerging visual artists in the capital region. It’s not exactly glamorous, but as Peter points out, with two Fine Arts degrees, any job with a salary and family benefits will do. Up until Mattie, it also gave him leisure time for the gym or indoor soccer.

“Do you ever misread words?”

I tell him about driving Mattie for his nap and what occurred to me that afternoon.

“So *Mass Graves* means what?” he asks.

“I don’t know.”

Since he doesn’t seem all that interested, I don’t pursue the topic, and after a few minutes of quiet, I guess we’ve agreed it is time to sleep. I can’t seem to shake the thought, though. If *Mass Graves* does mean something – if the misreading does reflect something about my mental state—well, it can’t be anything good.

Once, during a three-hour layover in Winnipeg, I read this magazine article about the top five causes of stress. Death of a child, death of a spouse, divorce, job loss, and new job. Divorce might have come before death of a spouse—which makes more sense, really. Nonetheless, if this magazine was right and causes of stress can be quantified and enumerated so neatly, then maternity leave should really be on that list somewhere. In a way, it’s the end of one job and the start of another. So maybe I am depressed. I don’t necessarily miss my accounting position with the city, but I was upset when I learned my cubicle had been reassigned.

“I swear I can hear something scratching,” Peter says.

Then I hear it too. The sound isn’t really a scratching, though; it’s more like something scurrying overhead.

In the morning, Mattie is in the highchair and I’m listening to *Ottawa This Week* on the kitchen radio—I like to keep up with community events I won’t be attending—when Peter calls in from the front door. I can’t make out what he’s saying, and I’m a little annoyed that he’s dragged me to the door.

“I think I found our problem.” He points through the narrow window in the hall and gestures for me to come closer.

“I’m feeding him the pabulum,” I say. “You couldn’t just come in and tell me?”

“I already have my shoes on.” Peter shrugs and apologizes, but I can tell he isn’t really sorry.

Outside, a chipmunk streaks from the side fence and cuts across to the steps. It runs impossibly fast and disappears.

“They’re going under the steps,” Peter says.

“They?”

“Yeah, this is the third or fourth one I’ve seen.”

Our front step is no more than a long concrete slab with this fake wood rail that came with the house.

“Our step is hollow?”

He shrugs.

“I’ve got to get back to Mattie.”

“All right.” Peter checks his watch. “I’m not going to get a seat on the bus.” He’s nodding to himself but hasn’t made any move to leave. “Is he eating the pabulum?”

“Just spits it out.”

“The book says to keep trying.”

It’s October and the wind is cold today, so Mattie and I stay only ten minutes at the playground. Afterwards, I park the stroller at the front of the house and take a closer look at the steps. I can’t really see where a chipmunk might get in, but the ground beside the patio stones is disturbed. Brown dirt has been kicked outward by the looks of it and, once I tilt up a few of the stones, I see that the chipmunks have dug a whole network of furrows. It looks kind of neat. The path weaves left and then right, and at one point it forks. Seen from above, the whole thing looks like one of those bisections of ant hills they have at the Nature Museum.

Ingenious. It’s admirable in a way.

“So how do you think they get from the front step to the attic?”

Peter’s mouth is full and, for whatever reason, he waits until he’s swallowed before responding with a shrug.

“I can’t imagine there’s anything up there,” I say. “Foam insulation and exposed beams.”

Our walk-in closet has an access door to the attic in the ceiling, but we’ve never been up there. Like most of Barrhaven, the developers threw up our entire neighbourhood in no time flat. The one time we tried the attic door, we found it painted shut.

“Between the walls?” I ask.

In his highchair, Mattie has knocked his sippy cup on its side, watery apple juice dripping onto the plastic tray until Peter turns it right-side up.

“Do you think they sneak up between the walls?” I repeat.

He shrugs.

“What I imagine is like a prison movie,” I say. “The chipmunks are making a break and they go through the cinder block and then squeeze between the drywall, inching along bit by bit. Once in a while, they might hit on a metal pipe they can’t get through, so they all have to double back and find a new route. One chipmunk would be the wizened old con and another one could be the brash young upstart who just started doing his time.”

Peter nods. "Yeah, I can see that."

That Saturday, after picking up a few groceries, Peter stops off at the Canadian Tire and comes home with a five-pound bag of blood meal.

"The guy in the garden centre said it should do the trick."

Blood meal. When we slice open the bag in the garage, I half-expect the soil would be a vivid scarlet in colour, but it just looks like normal dirt. Maybe a bit darker than the top soil we put in the box garden last year, but nothing too memorable. To spread the stuff around, we lift up the patio stones again, and it's a pain.

With the side of his sneaker, Peter brushes around the exposed earth, collapsing and filling in the chipmunks' elaborate system of furrows in less than a minute. All that industriousness, gone in a few kicks.

"We just have to sprinkle the blood meal," he says. "The guy said we might also try hair in a stocking."

"Hair in a stocking?"

"Yeah. Clean out one or two of your hairbrushes and put the hair in old nylons or pantyhose."

"Really? Was this some fifteen-year-old kid working in the garden centre by any chance?"

Peter doesn't even look up to respond. "It wasn't some kid. And the guy seemed to know what he was talking about. It's the scent that keeps the chipmunks away."

I want to say the idea sounds like witchcraft to me. The blackest of the black arts. If human hair and used panty hose don't work, will we move onto toenail clipping or menstrual blood? Peter doesn't seem like he's in the mood, though.

"Is the monitor turned all the way up?" he asks.

Mattie is in his playpen in the living room, the Fisher Price monitor standing guard, but Peter doesn't always trust the thing.

"It is."

While we're trying to put them back in place, one of the patio stones slips and hits the side of the front step, cracking the thing from one corner to the other. The break is an almost perfect diagonal and the two triangles pieces are nearly symmetrical. The odds against such an accident have got to be astronomical, but Peter is concerned only with where we're going to find a replacement stone.

It rains that night and for the next two days, washing away the blood meal and diluting any horrifying scent that might have been on my panty hose. The guy at the Canadian Tire suggests cement paper and cashew butter. The store doesn't carry them, but in a conspiratorial voice, he tells us we can find them in the Rona three blocks down.

In the car, I admit to Peter that the guy did sound like he knew what he was talking about.

"Quite knowledgeable about rodents," I say.

"Didn't I say?"

"Cashew butter sounds delicious."

At home, we drop dollops of the stuff in the middle of a half dozen sheets of cement paper. As we spoon it out, it smells great and I am tempted, but the jar strictly warns against human consumption. When we're all done, we stand inside the front hall and consider our work through the window. It looks absurd, as if we've dropped papers all over our lawn and just left them there.

"I guess it's the same principle as fly paper," I say. "But horizontal."

"As long as it works."

"And what do we do with all the chipmunks frozen in their tracks?"

Peter shrugs beside me and lets out an amused exhale. "I hadn't thought that far ahead."

By the next evening, all the cashew butter is gone, but we don't find any chipmunks frozen in their tracks. On one of the sheets of cement paper there is a fragment of tail. *Look at that fine piece of tail*, I think but don't say. The thing just looks like a tuft of coarse fur at first, but when I pick up the cement paper, I can see it's definitely a part of the animal's appendage, ripped off with a bit of dried blood left behind. It's horrifying.

I'm still thinking about the sight of the tail fragment hours later, but it doesn't seem like something I might reasonably start an argument over, so we fight over the thermostat instead. Peter doesn't think we should turn the furnace on before November and I think we should turn it on whenever we feel cold—as far as arguments go, it's a reliable standby, and it can escalate pretty fast.

I feed Mattie his dinner in the kitchen, and Peter eats in the front of the computer upstairs.

"What's the worst that could happen?"

The scurrying above our bedroom occurs more often at night and we hear it only every few days, but it has gotten louder. The original few chipmunks seem to have invited over their entire extended family.

“The worst?”

Peter shrugs beside me in bed and lets his voice trail off. We’re in post-coital cuddling mode, and he’s more inclined to sidestep any kind of conflict.

“They could set up home up there,” Peter says after a moment. His tone of voice sounds defeated. “They could nest up there, store food all over the place, reproduce, gnaw away at the support beams and electrical wiring, leave droppings all over the place.”

“Grow old and die peacefully,” I add.

We’re quiet a moment more and then he tells me what we do have to get rid of them. Which, of course, I know. It’s just that the torn-off bit of tail freaked me out a bit.

“The sight of it, that’s all.”

They’re rodents, I know, and it’s not as if I’m vegetarian or ever objected to a pair of leather heels. Fur, I don’t care for, but who does these days? Really, I don’t know what my problem is.

The next day we drive over to the Home Depot and purchase a medium-sized pest trap-and-release cage, which comes close to seventy dollars with the tax. To justify the expense, I point out the ingenuity of the cage: the wire box is rectangular with entrances at both ends. The one-way doors silently lock into place after the animals have entered and they aren’t even aware that they’re trapped.

“Think of the teams of mechanical engineers and all the effort that went into designing this thing,” I say.

The cage does get results. When we go to the front hall the next morning, three chipmunks are inside the cage. I would have thought they’d be frantic to find themselves captives, but they’re all just standing there, as if loitering.

“Can you take care of this?” Peter asks as he checks his watch.

He really hates not getting a seat on the bus.

“Sure.”

The guy at the store said the chipmunks would have to be released at least fifteen kilometres away from where they were captured, so when it’s naptime, I head south to Manotick, a village just outside of Barrhaven. Before

Mattie was born, Peter and I came here a few times—once for a pumpkin-carving contest and once for a used book sale at the library—and he always made a fuss about the small town’s charm. He said *smalltowncharm* as if it were one word, and I teased him about it.

Near the bridge I pull onto the gravel shoulder and remove the caged chipmunks from the trunk. Setting the cage down, I feel a bit like a kidnapper kicking hostages out the side of a van and peeling away.

“Be good.” I wave farewell.

Mattie is still asleep in the back, so I drive around to stretch out his nap. The roadside sign by the United Church says *3nails+1Christ=4giveness* and I can’t help it, the stupidity of the thing cheers me right up.

Over the next week, I’m back in Manotick setting chipmunks free on four separate occasions, but I choose different drop-off spots: a couple of public parks, the side of a rural road, and once next to the library. Some thirteen chipmunks if my count is right. I wonder if I’m disrupting the local ecosystem in some way. Nonetheless, the cage isn’t working. The scurrying sounds overhead aren’t going away. The little critters are either navigating their way back home to our attic or we have an inexhaustible supply of chipmunks.

Today I not only finagle pabulum and apple puree into Mattie, I also manage to put him down in his crib for naptime. Mother of the year, that’s me. Then, as I’m coming downstairs, I happen to look up at just the right second and spot someone through the front hall window—someone lifting his arm and about to ring the doorbell and undo my hard-won victory. I must look like a madwoman from the attic because I swear I hurdle the banister, fling myself through the foyer and pull open the front door in a matter of half a second.

“I just put the baby down.” I’m breathless. “Please don’t ring the bell.” The two boys at the door look up at me in unison.

“Good afternoon, Miss.”

The Church of Latter Day Saints. Seventh Day Adventists. Jehovah’s Witnesses. Mormons. I can’t tell the difference. Is there a difference? They can’t be anymore than seventeen or eighteen years old. Healthy-looking young men in grey ties with short-sleeve dress shirts, white and carefully pressed in that proselytizer way.

“Do you mind if we ask you about your afterlife?”

“Oh. Certainly. Not at all.”

I have to remind myself to be kind in these situations. After all, these people are trying to save me and, given all the harm that people can do to one another, there are certainly worse motivations.

“Do you belong to a particular church?”

“I’m afraid not.”

The one closest to me seems to be doing all the talking. The other kid is just standing there grinning—the serene, beatific smile of the saved. Hiding behind the screen door feels wrong, so I step outside to listen and nod.

“Were you raised with religion?”

“Not particularly.”

My estranged father was a Baptist who didn’t much care about faith until cancer spread throughout both his lungs. I was raised by an Anglican mother who didn’t practise and a Jewish stepfather who didn’t observe. We had a Christmas tree, but it didn’t have an angel or a star on top or anything. All of this seems like too much to explain at my front door.

“Well, my name is Timothy, and my friend Isaac and I are in your neighbourhood today to talk about the Church of Latter Day Saints and the joy that we have found in giving our lives over to our Lord and Saviour.”

Well, my name is Helen and now I suppose I’m more-or-less obliged to listen to the end of the spiel. Sometimes I think hell isn’t other people, but the ability to see other people’s points of view. Stupid empathy.

What amazes me is just how sure of themselves these young men are. What gives a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old such certainty? What makes them think they know the first thing about anything? How can these two young men stand there and presume to give advice to a woman twenty years older than they are? I listen for two or three minutes more and then the silent kid finally speaks.

“Don’t you want your baby to find heaven?”

That night, Peter greets me through Mattie.

“Hello, big boy. And how was your day with Mommy?”

“Tell Daddy how well you slept.”

“Daddy had a long conference call to Toronto this morning.”

Without ever agreeing to, we sometimes communicate through Mattie. I suppose all parents of infants do.

“Ask Daddy how the call went.”

“Went too long. No time for a walk at lunch.”

We'll have to stop these proxy conversations at some point. I mean, if we're still talking through our son when he's thirteen or eighteen or whatever, we'll really screw him up.

"Tell Mommy that the chipmunks will leave on their own if there's a cat or a dog in the house"

"Really?"

"Daddy read it on the Internet. And it's not like the dog or cat has to be a hunter. It's just a threat that will scare away the chipmunks."

The idea sounds like a good one, and we scrutinize it throughout dinner and most of the evening. Cats and dogs can be good companions for a little kid. They can help teach affection and responsibility. Peter and I both had cats growing up, so we're leaning towards a cat. A cat is more independent. And neither of us really has the energy to walk a dog. Female cats are less territorial. Would she be an indoor cat or an outdoor cat? In bed, we're trying to settle on the right cat name, and the conversation turns.

"Has Mattie been tested for allergies yet?" Peter asks.

"There's no cat allergy on my side of the family."

"Can't these things be recessive for a few generations?"

"Cat feces are toxic to pregnant women. Does that mean it's toxic to babies?"

He shrugs beside me. Our conversation slows down, punctuated with long pauses.

"Cats shed all over the place."

"Mattie still puts his hand in his mouth all the time."

"I don't agree with de-clawing a cat."

"Neither do I."

We give the cage another few days until I admit it isn't really working. All three exterminators I contact say there's no way to get rid of chipmunks without killing them. The last guy is the rudest.

"That's kind of what *exterminator* means."

Fumigation is apparently the best method, and we'd have to stay in a hotel for a week, which is pretty much impossible with Mattie. There might still be lingering odours after a week too, and it isn't worth taking the chance.

I'm already in a bad mood when Peter comes home with another idea from the Internet.

"A bucket filled with water and sunflower seeds."

I don't understand at first.

"You fill the bucket with water and then cover the surface with sunflower seeds. The chipmunk leans over to get a seed and falls in."

"It drowns?"

"It drowns."

"How many chipmunks can you drown?"

"You don't have to. A few die and the other see the bodies and—"

"And word gets around?"

"I suppose."

We're silent through dinner. After Mattie goes to sleep, I watch television downstairs and he watches a show on the office computer. He feels one way and I feel another, so there's not much room for reasonable debate.

In bed, we try anyway. I say we might give the cage more time. He says it's been over a week. I say we could buy a large cage or a second medium-sized one. He says the cages cost too much. It's an unproductive but civilized argument and then Peter breaks the rules of engagement.

"What if one of these things hurts Mattie? Don't you care?"

Against my wishes, he drives to Costco the next day and returns with two twenty-litre buckets and five pounds of sunflower seeds. They're salted, and I can't help thinking about the chipmunks' high blood pressure.

The buckets don't seem to be working for the first few days, but their presence on our front lawn has meant Peter's been sleeping in the upstairs office the whole time. I don't want the buckets to work, of course, and I don't even really want to look at them. Every day, as I carry Mattie out to the car for our naptime drive, there they are, and I can't stop myself from taking a quick glance to see if the surface of seeds has been disrupted.

All is fine until the fourth day, when I chance a closer look. Sunflower seeds still cover the top of the water, but when I knock the bucket with my toe, they part, revealing three chipmunks drifting at the bottom. The water method has been working all along, I realize.

I start to cry as I buckle Mattie into his car seat with Mr. Snuggles, and there something about crying in front of my child that makes me want to cry more. We take *Bisonwolf* all the way down to *Elkheron* and, as always, circling the neighbourhood soothes Mattie to sleep, and I calm down too. What I can't do, though, is to put the chipmunks from my mind; it was stupid of me not to expect the sight of them, but the sudden appearance of their little froze-up bodies did shock me. They had that taxidermy combination

of being lifelike and very much dead all at once. Of the many painful ways to die, drowning has to be up high on the list.

The afternoon I was brought into obstetrics, one of the nurses kept asking me to measure my pain on a scale of one to ten, and I remember it baffled me at the time. I wanted to ask if pain could be quantified and, if so, how—but such a response would have been ridiculously out of place. I think I wound up saying six. What would drowning rate? Close to ten, I imagine.

Near the end, my father's lungs were so bad that he had trouble breathing. He said that he knew the air was there and that logically he should be able to pull it into his lungs, but something inexplicable simply didn't work. His first reaction was panic and if one of his oxygen tanks was beside him, he'd reach for it desperately. After another few seconds without air, he said his mind clouded to fanciful delusions pretty quickly. This is what drowning must be.

I'm stopped at a red light and I'm crying again. I close my eyes for what feels like no more than a second, the light turns green and the car behind me honks. Mattie's wails fill the car before I realize what has happened, and I turn to glare out the back window. The driver is a kid in his mid-twenties, driving some sporty Honda model. We make eye contact and the kid's hands flip upward from the steering wheel in disgust. I turn to face forward, put the car into park and switch on the hazard lights.