

BOY WITH A PROBLEM

CHRIS BENJAMIN

DURING THE YEAR FOLLOWING the accident, the year he turns fourteen and moves from a tiny Nova Scotia village into the capital, Dan's favourite place becomes Aunt Chelsea's kitchen. He often sits at her round laminate kitchen table and listens to talk radio. The deep-voiced shock jocks make him laugh. They're verbal bullies—he can barely tell their voices apart—and he's a safe bystander, unseen and unheard, too young and unknown to be their prey. On a hot summer day when the sun through the window makes him sweat, they go on about drugs in the north.

“Here's a story from today's *Chronicle Herald*,” one of them says. “Says half of all teenagers up in Frobisher Bay are addicted to alcohol, gas or glue.”

“What are the other half addicted to?” asks the other jock.

Dan can tell by the jock's tone that it's a witticism. He obligingly laughs. Aunt Chelsea whips her head around and shoots him a look. But her shoulders stay square to the counter. She's working on her latest batch of sweets. “This'll cheer you up,” she says, every day it seems, handing him a heaping plate of cookies or a steaming piece of pie.

“Dan,” she says now. “That's not funny.”

“Yes, Aunt Chelsea.”

“I told you to drop it with the aunt stuff. No titles in this house.”

“Seriously,” the first jock is saying. “And if half of them aren't hooked yet, why aren't they doing something to stop the other half?”

“Here's what ticks me off,” the second jock says.

Aunt Chelsea and Dan stare at the radio as if it's a charismatic guest.

“These so-called experts, these social-policy wonks, are so fond of whining about *systemic* this and *systemic* that. Never is there any accountability on the part of the individual. What I'm saying is”—here the jock pauses dramatically—“Where does the buck stop, y'know? I'm sure the socialist media will blame the system ... or the white man. But hey, are we the ones drinking Frobisher Bay's babies to death?”

Dan looks away from the radio to Aunt Chelsea. She's stopped mixing whatever's in her bowl and stands still as a photo, except her mouth is opening and closing, like in a silent film. He notices now that she has the phone held to her ear. Aunt Chelsea still has her old rotary phone, but it has a long chord.

"I'll hold," she says.

She shuts off the radio and turns to Dan. "Go listen to this in your room."

He runs up the stairs and flips on his ghetto blaster.

"Anyway, moving on," jock one says, "The city is facing yet another shortfall thanks to the big spenders at City Hall."

"Wait a minute," say jock two. "Before we get into that I'm told we have Chelsea MacDougall on the line from Halifax, and she wants to talk about the Frobisher Bay situation."

"Holy shit," Dan whispers.

"Mrs. MacDougall, go ahead. What do you know about it?" jock one asks.

"It's Ms. MacDougall," Aunt Chelsea's voice says through the radio. "And I don't know anything about it. I've never been there. Have you?"

There are a few seconds of dead air. "Well no, Ms. MacDougall, I haven't," jock one says. "But why would you call in about something you don't know anything about? I mean we get a lot of, y'know, with all due respect, Ms. MacDougal, *morons* calling us with two-bit opinions ... and we're always happy to tear them a new one. But most of them at least have an opinion, Ms. MacDougall."

"You a little bored all alone at home today, Ms. MacDougall?" the other jock says.

"If you've never been to Frobisher Bay," Aunt Chelsea says, "why should we give a tiny shit about anything you have to say about it? Your opinions about the place—and mine—amount to absolutely nothing, you ... you pompous asses."

There's a loud click and a few seconds of dead air, followed by an outburst of deep laughter. "Well, sir, looks like we've been told by the bored spinster set," the first jock says.

"Dan! Supper!" Aunt Chelsea hollers, her voice cracking.

Dan switches the radio off and runs back downstairs to the kitchen, where a tenor's bombastic voice fills the air. It's the first time Aunt Chelsea's

changed the radio station since he moved in, right after the accident and his hateful last words to his parents.

“There’s goulash on the table,” Aunt Chelsea says.

He almost cries this time, having allowed himself to remember them. His dad used to make goulash for supper too. Instead of crying he smiles at Aunt Chelsea, sits down and takes a bite. Dan hates goulash. But it doesn’t matter like it used to.

Dan’s problems start with the November writing thing, his English teacher’s idea. “You’re a good young writer,” Mr. Lee tells him after class in late October. “Every November writers from all over the world try to write 50,000 words. Lots of young people do it. It’s not competitive, just a chance to practice the art of writing. Wouldn’t it be great to have written a novel at your age?”

His father is the novelist, and he doesn’t want Dan to suffer the same fate. “Writers are the most miserable, insecure people on the planet,” he says. But it’s no surprise when he encourages the November novel idea. Dan knows the pattern well. His dad will be full of suggestions, euphoric at the chance to mentor his only child. Soon after, Dan will try out his father’s proffered wisdom, but will screw it up somehow. His father will lose interest and grow distant again. Same as when Dan was a boy scout and his dad became a leader for exactly one camping trip. Same as when Dan took up the clarinet—his dad’s old instrument—and his dad showed him how to care for the reeds, and when Dan left one attached to the mouthpiece his dad got mad and never went to any of his concerts. Dan is as powerless as his father to prevent the pattern’s endless repetition.

“I don’t know where to start, Dad.”

“Boy with a problem,” his father says.

“Can you help?”

“I am helping,” he says, straddling a chair at the kitchen table. Dan has his laptop open to a blank document. “The basis of every great story is simple,” his dad says. “You need a protagonist with a problem. Establish the problem on page one. Solve it by page three hundred. The rest is tension.” He smells of aftershave and coffee and is wearing pajama bottoms and a white tank top, ready for bed. Dan’s father is pretty much immune to caffeine.

“Why a boy then?” Dan asks.

“Write what you know.”

Dan works on it for half the night.

There was a boy named David. And David loved Lucinda. Lucinda did not love him back.

No. He can't bear to write about unrequited love—too close to the bone.

Lucinda loved David as much as he loved her. The problem was, Lucinda was Catholic and David's parents were fundamentalist ... atheists.

"A satisfying twist to an old meme," he says to his dad in the morning, having rehearsed the line.

His father hates the idea. "That won't carry you to page fifty. A cliché in a mirror is still a cliché."

"But you said all I needed was a boy with a problem."

"Different boy; different problem. Try again."

Dan exhales and slouches.

"Think about real boys you know. What are their problems? What are your problems?"

At lunch Dan walks one of the trails through the woods around his school, hoping for inspiration. Everyone else on the trail is smoking. At the end he finds a half dozen smokers leaning against the property-line fence. "Hey," he says. They are grade twelves, three years older, gigantic.

"Hey," one of the girls says back. She doesn't look up. There are three girls and three boys. "What's wrong, buddy?" the girl asks, smoke rolling from her mouth. She's looking at him now, half smiling.

"Me?" he says. "Oh. Uh. Homework."

They all laugh.

"Can I ask you something?" he asks the girl.

"Shoot," she says.

"What are your big problems in life?"

They all laugh again. She doesn't answer at first. "Seriously?" she says.

"Yeah."

"You a social worker?" one guy says. More chuckling.

"No. Kind of related to my homework. I won't use your names."

More laughter.

"You sound like a social worker," the guy says.

They all nod except the girl. "Well, if you really want to know ... my biggest problem is my asshole boyfriend can't stay away from Earla White!" She shoves the guy who spoke and the other four make a big show of laughing hysterically.

The guy shrugs. "My problem is I'm dating the second hottest girl in school with the first hottest temper."

She shoves him again, flicks his cigarette out of his hand, and storms away. "Come on, kid!" she shouts.

Dan looks at the guy with pity. "Sorry," he says.

"Come on!" the girl shouts.

"I think she means you, bud," the guy says.

"Oh," Dan says. He turns and runs to her.

"Men! That's my problem. Men," she says when he catches up.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Oh. But I need a guy's problem."

Without turning to face him she says, "A guy's problem? A guy's problem looks like this. He can't keep it in his pants; he gets two girls pregnant and tells them both to have abortions. And the nice, smart one agrees. But the slutty stupid bimbo says no, so the guy has to help raise a kid with a stupid slut he doesn't even like." She's crying as she speaks.

"Sorry," Dan says.

She turns around and hugs him. "You seem nice," she says. "Don't ever force a girl to make a choice like that, OK?"

He nods as she turns and runs away. He is unsure of her meaning, but feels excited by her story.

Dan's father hates the abortion storyline. "It'll come out preachy," he says. "Use the one about the atheists."

There it is; his father has dropped the project, and Dan with it. Dan shoves his laptop across the table. "You do it," he says.

"What's the point of that?"

What's the point of any of it? Dan's father would just be disappointed or worse, disinterested, whatever the outcome. How can anyone grow up in this godforsaken hellhole and be expected to come up with a novel anyway? Anyone with half a brain is bullied or ignored. It was Dan's father who dragged him here and Dan's father who dismisses his best ideas. Dan sits there shaking, unable to articulate any of these things to his father. Instead he shouts the least intelligent thing he can think of: "Fuck you, Dad!"

His father winces when he hears Dan say "fuck." Dan can't stand that look of agony. He stands and goes to his room, locks the door behind him and crawls into bed. A few minutes later his father pounds hard on his door,

threatening to kick it down if he doesn't open it. Shocked as he appeared by Dan's use of the f-word, his father is using it liberally now. He's lost his temper like this before. Not often though, and usually at his wife.

Dan's mother intervenes with a gentle knock. "Dan?" she calls. "You got two options, pal. Apologize to your dad or we don't pay for your Christmas band trip. No Toronto."

And she starts a slow count to three. As if he's still a baby. They've been using this trick all his life. Making him choose between what they want him to do and some unfathomable alternative fate. You want the bullet to the temple or the knife to the throat? Choose.

He has to go to Toronto. He's been waiting all his life.

"Two," she counts.

He spits a one-word apology through the locked door. "Sorry!"

"Come out here and look in his eyes when you say it," she says, calm but firm.

He gets out of bed, walks slowly to the door, opens it and looks directly at his father's feet. "Sorry," he mutters, and closes the door.

She knocks again. "Enough. Apologize with respect or lose the trip."

He manufactures just enough respect to calmly apologize, saying the words his mother needs to hear, like he always does. It doesn't make him or his father happy, but he gets to go to Toronto.

The perpetual avalanche of humans rushing through downtown Toronto makes him painfully anxious. He's so been looking forward to this trip, and rehearsing at Roy Thompson Hall with a professional conductor. But mostly it's the city he wanted: the size, the life. When their bus rolled through an eternity of superhighway he started to feel it pulsing, something super-electric, a billion megawatts burning at once. But cold. The sun is only visible by its reflection in the banks.

Following his classmates around the sights has been awful. These backwater bozos have a better knack for navigating the anthill than he does. The pulse paralyzes him. And the sights: the Eaton Centre shopping spree; a basketball game; a communications tower resembling a monolithic phallus. Everything turned up: too big, too loud and too fast.

His parents. He can't stop thinking about them. How they hate Toronto, take every opportunity to delight in its failures, yet keep checking its concert and gallery listings. "Why can't we get art like that here? We have enough artists you'd think we'd merit a Modigliani show, just once!" Dan

has never forgiven them for taking him away from the city before he was old enough to archive its smells. And he can't stop thinking about them, how he cursed them to hell before he left. He's still angry, yet he knows he is at least partially responsible.

After they leave the CN Tower he falls behind the group, feeling woozy. He stands on Front Street in the cold, is nearly trampled by masses of strangers. He looks at his home number on the screen of his phone. He imagines his father's hello, and what he should say. "Sorry, Dad. I know you were trying to help." But he puts the phone back in his pocket.

She's a peculiar creature, this Halifax aunt. He'd met her a few times before the accident and she seemed like a person who could be busier than anyone else and have less to show for it. She's forever cleaning a filthy house, working on an incomplete masterpiece, complaining about a world that's lost its way.

That's the most entertaining part: her arguments with the news. As far as he knows, she's only actually called into one of these shows the once, when she told off the shock jocks. Mostly she's content talking to Dan or to herself, chastising the politicians of all partisanship, the reporters for their lack of affiliation, and occasionally the current affairs hosts for their faux objectivity. "Who picked these two extremists? What a bunch of ugly nothing. There's no nuance when a cat fights a dog."

Sometimes she apes a politician, the mayor being her favourite. Her impression of the mayor is a cross between a tongue-tied silver-spoon conservative Quimby and Elmer Fudd. "Er uh, ba-daa ba-daa, I uh, I stick to what I said before about not saying the thing that, uh, ahh, is being said that I said." She makes him laugh with that. She's the first to make him laugh after the car accident.

He came home early, alone on an airplane, no Roy Thompson Hall rehearsal with real conductor. He went straight to Aunt Chelsea's, practically a stranger, but he came to her weary and she put him to work assembling an old cot she bought at the Army & Navy. "The deals you get there—and good stuff too. I got all my kitchen knives there. I don't know why people buy all this made-in-China stuff from Walmart. A million square feet of hell that is. Look, Dan. Still in the box. Help me put it together."

And it hasn't stopped—her tongue, the work. Constant as the radio playing in the background.

“How am I supposed to work on my writing if I have to sweep the floors every night?” he complains.

“I thought you wanted to be a photographer.”

“I’m not good with machines,” he says.

She laughs. “So much like your father. And our dad and him used to *fight*, oh my.”

“What about?”

“Everything. Politics. Chores. Art. By the time he was eighteen your dad couldn’t wait to flee. Halifax wasn’t even big enough anymore, or far enough away. Keep in mind your grandfather didn’t see a car till he was ten years old. Anyway, you know the rest.”

“Tell me anyway.”

She whacks her nose side to side with her index knuckle, a habit he can’t figure out if it’s nervous or excess energy. “Anyway. The irony is if not for all those farm chores I don’t think your dad would have finished his novel.”

“He wrote what he knew, and he knew farming because of Grandpa.”

“The chores taught your dad discipline. He would always say, ‘A novel’s a marathon.’”

“How come he never wrote another one?”

“What’s this story here, Dan? Turn up the radio now.” She shuffles around him and does it herself. “Twinning the highway. What a waste of millions. And still no abortion clinic in rural Nova Scotia for God’s sake.”

It’s ten months since the accident. Ten months of sweeping and washing and gardening and raking a ramshackle house that never looks clean. And finally he cries. She’s on him with the speed of an insect but with hugs and kisses for his hair. “Dan, we should make some cookies,” she says.

“Maybe if the roads were better they wouldn’t have died,” he says, scarcely a whisper.

“Oh, Dan.” She hugs him, head to chest. She doesn’t list them, but he can hear her counterarguments, the big-picture reasons why the road shouldn’t be widened, all that money to maybe, maybe not, save a few lives. He’s heard the speech on other issues: spraying pesticides, building skyscrapers. His parents would agree with her.

“I should write a letter,” he says.

“If you think it’ll help.”

“To the radio station.”

“Sure.”

“And I should finish my novel.”

“You have a novel?”

“Sure,” he says. “It’s about abortion.”

“Your father would be so goddamned proud.”