

ROBERT LAKE

## BASED ON A SOMEWHAT TRUE STORY

“FETCH US ANOTHER STORY from your well-stocked pantry,” suggests Hannah’s sly granddaughter. Abigail knows her toothless grandmother loves assembling tales, stuffed like a Thanksgiving turkey with antique words and phrases: fetch, the back forty, pusillanimous, steeped, mewl, caterwaul and, Hannah’s favourite: what a load of hooey. Hannah steeps the names of those who inhabit her carefully rehearsed fables, which she pretends she spins spontaneously. Hannah chose Abigail’s name, meaning source of joy, a gaffe she’ll lament as she coolly waits upon Death.

“If I hadn’t been born and bred in Jericho, I’d have penned editorials for the *Parrsboro Courier*, maybe become a writer,” claims Hannah.

Abigail, blonde as Hannah was before dementia stalked, must ransack Hannah’s stories. Her creative writing profs harangue her to write what she knows. Reared in a traffic-calmed suburb, a brain-dead Canadian college, Abigail knows nothing. She’ll steal her grandmother’s nattering, happily trashing her teachers’ shopworn advice.

“Tell us a true story,” interrupts Hannah’s grandson.

Hannah flinches, hurdles interior barbed wire and retrieves a printout from her bedside drawer. Usually she natters Jericho stories from memory.

“Gran, when did you learn to keyboard?” asks her grandson.

“Your father bought me that Apple contraption to email family from this load-of-hooey nursing home,” Hannah replies, then pauses dramatically and begins.

The bus brakes outside Jessop Hardware. An insignificant man in pressed blue pants, thin leather tie, white shirt with turned collars, and brown windbreaker steps into a puddle. Jericho’s potholed main street is deserted. Nobody hereabouts heeds weather forecasts from mewling

Parrsboro when ashen clouds, goaded by gusting southwest winds, billow from the sea. Arthritic bones predict that hail will pelt prosperous and dilapidated farmhouses impartially. Power lines will topple. The wealthy fuel their generators. The poor will endure a pitch-black night, perhaps nights. Even Jesus can't predict when electricity will be restored to the Valley.

The frail balding man, carrying two heavy yellow plastic shopping bags, glances north and south along Queen Street. Inside his hardware store Jeremiah Jessop, thumbs looped in his suspenders, paunch bulging, sniggers. As presiding Elder of Jericho's Jubilation Chapel, he cautioned Peter Fielding's parents not to fetch their pervert son home.

Will Fielding hazard walking fifteen drenched kilometres?

Fielding crosses wind-whipped Queen Street, confronted by Jessop's CLOSED sign. Fielding flops on a bench. Jessop hauls the bench inside and hoses down his stoop. Fielding retreats to the cenotaph and unseeingly inspects the chiseled names of forgotten men and one woman: farm boys giggle that the nurse was bayoneted after being raped. A blustery hour later he enters Ruby's Home Cooking. Ruby announces loudly that she's closed, while taking an order for home fries with gravy. Fielding protests he hasn't eaten since yesterday.

"Go eat in hoity-toity Parrsboro," Ruby suggests triumphantly.

He retreats; wind whips debris along Queen Street. A woman furtively beckons him down an alley. It's skinny Mrs. Faught. He remembers her contrariness, but not her first name, perhaps he never knew it. Valley rumours claim the crone has buried two children and one granddaughter. Mrs. Faught slips him four slices of white bread and a hunk of bologna. "No, eat here where nobody can see you. Your folks won't come. Your Ma would, but your Pa's cowed."

Mrs. Faught rounds the corner; he hears her being slapped. A man, Mr. Faught perhaps, more likely her brother, says, "The Elders ordered nobody succour the pervert."

Jessop's cell phone alerts scattered farmhouses that Fielding's journey has begun. Jessop phones Fielding's parents, checking if they've hung the condemning sign at their gate.

"A cell phone back then?" asks Hannah's puzzled grandson, stared into silence by Abigail.

Four caterwauling kilometres on, the morose Vietnamese school janitor watches Fielding pass Jericho Consolidated School. Jericho laughs at *Phouc* because his name means “lucky.” Jubilant Chapel sponsored him, a heathen who has refused to accept Jesus Christ as his Saviour. *Phouc* says he was a coffee farmer back in Vietnamese hill country, where the Viet Cong stalked American colonels on leave, while they unsuccessfully hunted tigers.

Oh, yeah, says Jericho.

Fielding taught in Consolidated’s pusillanimous classrooms for a decade before being accused of child molestation. *Phouc* regrets that Fielding, who treated a boat person fairly decently, faces further humiliation at the crossroads two kilometres on. There Fielding confronts a small sign slung over a post. PERVERT, HANNAH LIVES HERE NOW. STAY CLEAR!!!! Fielding inspects the stone farmhouse up the slope and the name on the mailbox: Noah Murray. He remembers Noah: bright, unruly, ruddy, short-fused temper and not a reader like bookish Hannah. Fielding slings the sign around his neck. This apology, if that’s what it is, is reported to Jessop, not by Noah or Hannah. Fielding plods through wind-whipped drizzle.

Hail pelts him; he knows the pellets will boost their assault. He understands how scrupulously he’s under surveillance and is not surprised ten kilometres on by the sign on his parents’ gate: SEEK THE FORGIVENESS OF JESUS. NOT OURS. He releases his yellow shopping bags of gifts. Penitently he slings that sign around his neck.

With *three* signs, one that terrifies him, looped around his neck, he trudges back toward Jericho. The storm strengthens, the road’s a slippery swamp, he’s soaked, he can’t see an inch ahead. Hail batters. A honking stake truck skids down the slope.

“Get in,” yells the driver.

Fielding refuses.

“Before you drown,” the driver roars.

Fielding cringes outside, takes off the three signs, looped around his neck, and hands them to the driver, who rips two into quarters, and contemplates the third. PERVERT, I’LL SHOOT ANY OUTLAW AIDS YOU.

The driver chucks that sign behind his seat, hauls Fielding into his truck’s manure-reeking cab and guns up the lane in bull-low. The smell soothes Fielding. Noah’s still the whippet he was in grade ten.

“Crouch,” Noah instructs when they reach the farmyard. His cell phone rings; Noah listens a minute before replying. “No, you listen up your-

self, Jeremiah. I'll leave Mr. Fielding in the truck. No way he's coming into Hannah's kitchen. You always say we don't want our soiled linen laundered in Parrsboro. That's why you Elders beat him to a pulp instead of reporting him to the Parrsboro copshop. Mr. Fielding drowns out there in that deluge and Parrsboro cops will crawl over us like lice."

Jessop is Jericho's leading Elder: dairy farmers don't dare sass Elders. Noah, the quick-tempered upstart, deserves being slapped down. "We saved the pervert from serving time. Nobody from the Chapel has ever become resident in the Parrsboro pen. After we dumped him at his parents' place, we gave them three days to repair him before banishing him from Jericho. A beaten man can find some kind of employment: cons can't."

Noah slams shut the truck door.

Fielding envies him in Hannah's kitchen's affectionate lights. The horses of Noah's grandfather, a Jericho pioneer and toiling drunk, hauled stones from flinty fields to build it. The truck's cold—colder than a witch's teat, Valley people said before the Elders decreed that was cursing. Suddenly the world's black. Fielding remembers Valley power failures. Noah arrives with a lantern and asks if Fielding could hold the light while Noah beds down his horses. Noah wonders where and at what tasks Fielding's hands became so hideously calloused.

"I got my Masters because I wasn't much good at farming," confesses Fielding.

"Why come back?" asks Noah.

"Farming's comforting."

"You sleep in that there stall. The straw's fresh. I'll bring you supper. Judas Priest, no! Follow me."

Hannah serves cold lamb, carrots, potatoes and chokecherry pie, nostalgic food that pacifies Fielding's gut. As dawn breaks after a sleepless night, Hannah's relieved the electricity's back on. Her coffee quenches Fielding's soul's thirst. "Storm was only a squib," says Noah and tells Fielding, who is ready to resume walking, to rest. He'll drive Fielding to catch the Parrsboro bus after lunch.

"Thank you, Sir. Thank you, Ma'am," says Fielding, who bows slightly. Hannah and Noah laugh. Fielding often addressed his students as "sir" and "ma'am." Hannah, no longer a grade-ten giddy girl, confesses that Fielding's mother yearns to feed him. She begged the Elders: a mother wants her son no matter. Jeremiah Jessop ruled that if she hadn't been a poor excuse for

a mother, she wouldn't have raised a pervert. Hannah at the kitchen table, good Valley elm, stammers; she always does when she's about to say something knotty.

"I regret reporting you, Mr. Fielding. I was really, really naive, all Valley girls were, still are for that matter. Probably you weren't touching me inappropriately."

Fielding contemplates his folded hands before staring straight at Noah. He can't bear speaking directly to Hannah. "I was groping. I'd explain if I knew why myself. Noah, your wife was the only one and only that once. The Elders beat me fair and square."

"Don't stop, Gran," says Abigail, zealously rehearsing mental notes. She's learned how swiftly impressions vanish from short-term memory. Hannah's grandson's glare accuses his sister of treachery.

In mud-spattered Jericho, Jeremiah Jessop beckons to Noah. "You best take your woman in hand."

Hannah and her uncle Jessop's stares lock in incomprehension. Noah grasps something he's struggled to understand since grade ten when the Elders gleefully thrashed Fielding.

"I will, Elder Jessop, and for starters we're not attending Chapel anymore," Noah announces.

He extends his arm, "Ready, Ma'am?"

"Sure am, Sir," replies Hannah and waves to Fielding boarding the bus.

"Ma'am?" asks Hannah's grandson. "Gran, Clint Eastwood riding up soon?"

"Where will you pray," asks Mrs. Faught, who intercepts them before they reach their farm-stinking stake truck.

"In our parlour. Care to join us Sunday morning?" improvises Noah.

"Can I bring family?"

Hannah nods, "Mr. Faught is an Elder. He won't come."

Mrs. Faught ducks her head, ready to rebel unto blasphemy. "God ordained that men head the family. Women are the necks and necks move heads. Invite the Fielding family. Hannah, don't you dare prepare a single bite. We'll pack baskets for a Friendship Hour after worship."

“What was a Friendship Hour?” asks Hannah’s grandson.

“Stop interrupting,” orders Abigail.

“Feasts that lasted hours, my I enjoyed them,” sighs Hannah. “You’d call them pigouts.”

On Sabbath morning, after a Saturday’s vigorous scrubbing, Hannah watches the road, wondering where Noah has disappeared to. Elders block the lane to Hannah’s farmhouse. Noah brakes, yells that he’ll call the Parrsboro detachment if the Elders impede anyone and guns up the slippery slope. Noah and Fielding emerge, both in Sunday suits, and stand side by side to welcome worshippers. They take off their ties and stuff them in jacket pockets. No other vehicles follow. The Elders have blocked the lane’s entrance by overturning cultivators, their teeth upright, jagged weapons to puncture tires. Noah angrily strides down to the road, clutching a sign. Hannah, imploring her impetuous husband to return, hears his condemnation. “Jeremiah Jessop, read this here sign: PERVERT, I’LL SHOOT ANY OUTLAW AIDS YOU. Jeremiah Jessop, you want to wash a murder off your hands? Don’t prod the deranged.”

Elders confer, shuffle to their tractors and haul away their cultivators.

The Faught truck is first up the lane, followed by a few cars and vans, their passengers clustering uncertainly in the farmyard when they spot Fielding. The Fielding pickup rattles up the lane.

Fielding’s mother hesitates. She doesn’t rush to her son, she won’t crumble by crying and she doesn’t desperately clutch him. Valley farm matrons neither crumble nor clutch. Mrs. Fielding climbs Hannah’s verandah stairs, shakes Noah’s hand, then her son’s, and moves inside to hug Hannah, but not before telling her husband to hustle up with her Friendship Hour basket. Women silently exult. Hereabouts matrons daren’t speak insolently in public to their husbands more than once every couple of years. Everyone, clustered in the farmyard, male and female, child and adult, knows it means: “Defy me and I’ll make your life a Judas priest’s torture.”

His neighbours watch the man straighten, move forward, shake Noah’s hand with his left—his right hand is missing two fingers—hug his son, followed by a trickle of neighbours, which becomes a brook, a bubbling stream of spring water.

“Gran, your story’s bogus,” accuses Hannah’s grandson, ceasing texting momentarily. “Cell phones weren’t invented back in ancient times when you were young.”

Hannah frowns. “Memory’s a difficult accomplice, but my saga is surely based on a true story.” She hugs Abigail, such a joy, the only relative who honours her. Abigail will begin her Master’s degree next fall, far away in New York: perhaps Hannah will never again see her. Email must suffice. Hannah is resentfully proud. The Elders forbade Valley boys and girls from attending college in Parrsboro, claiming the Papists there taught sacrilege. Only a few boys, never girls, rebelled. Hannah hugs Abigail again. Nobody dares forbid Abigail going wherever she pleases and doing what she fancies. Life is easy for Abigail these days. Hannah corrects herself. Life’s never easy, even for those we imagine float like butterflies on breezes of whim.

“Grandpa died while Dad was a bun in the oven. A religious lunatic’s shotgun blasted him. Tell me that story,” orders Hannah’s grandson.

“No! Can’t!”

Hannah stammers. “Cameron, dear, memory haunts me. It’s a tale I can’t bear telling. Abigail, please write my grief, but only after I die.”

Abigail sways silently in her grandmother’s hug, unwilling to torment Hannah by confessing she’s a traitor before her time. Abigail’s written that story. It gained her admittance to grad school.

Tonight she’ll begin her novel. The writing’s easy. Not all: she’ll weep as she types—worse, revises—her grandmother’s agony: Hannah leaves the farmhouse her slaughtered husband’s grandfather built from rocks wrested from family fields. The Parrsboro police never apprehend the assassin. Provincial cutbacks mean police cannot guarantee her safety or that of her newborn son. Hannah knows Noah’s assassin prowls.

Abigail, when she wins the Booker Man prize, stammers when asked how much of her moving mystery novel is true, how much fiction. Did Noah’s assassin really drape his corpse with a sign addressed to Hannah? WHORE, YOU SPURNED ME. YOU HELPED FIELDING. I’M WATCHING YOU. Abigail is no longer sure. She’s learned that writing transforms truth into lies, revisions transform lies into half-truths and more revisions morph half-truths into new truths. She flinches when interviewers, who haven’t read her book, ask her reaction to her brother’s review in *The Guardian*. He said that Gran’s oral stories were honest and plain, becoming jumbled after she acquired a laptop.

“Abigail’s precious literature spews muck from stem to ample stern of the manure spreader,” he wrote.