

THE COWBOY & THE INDIAN

Chapter 1

Morning in Prince George was dismal. Thick dusty sour smell. Grim scarred landscape. Naked terrain; entombing the town.

Ray & Kate were a couple who lived on the edge of Prince George. He was 27 she 25. Kate had two kids-- Brandy 7 & Cheyanne 5-- from previous relationships. Ray & Kate had been together for a couple of years now & things weren't going well.

He had a good job when they met but the cutbacks of the 80's hit P.G. hard. Ray had lost his job as a mechanic at the mill about a year ago & it wasn't looking good. Kate was a nurses-aid at P.G. General, she had no problem with work.

It's funny how that goes Ray reminisced as he lay in bed half asleep, his mind clearing up enough for him to open his eyes.

Ray was just waking up after another rough night partying. Lots of beer, joints, a little coke, mind a mess.

He'd gotten home late. Kate would be pissed he thought as he rolled over. She's not there, a cold indentation in the sheets met his inquiring fingers. Things were not going well with Kate; he knew he was pushing the needle.

Fuck! What time is it?

Ray turned & looked outside. Trying to focus on the light of the day. Grey always grey. Waiting for his brain to kick in. He was in a bad way & he knew it. Watching the dreary grey didn't help.

Laying here hung over, head hurting. Mind spinning like a squirrel on a merry go round. Coming off drugs & booze. Body twitching, scratching, dry sweat. Pain in

the groin, stomach doing flip flops. Having to pee not having to pee. His head pounding like a beating heart.

Fuck, he sprang out of bed & rushed down the hall-- in t-shirt, jockeys & socks-- to the washroom. An explosion of brown bile from his bowels stained the toilet bowl. Him thinking he must've had those extra hot chicken wings at the bar last night. Relief, he sat staring at the floor. Flush, wipe, flush-- finally clean-- stand, pull up the jockey's, wash the hands, rinse, dry. He turned & faced himself in the mirror, hands braced for balance on the sink.

Watching himself trying to focus. This really sucks he thought, look at me where's my fucking head at.

A gritty sunburnt pain scratching his throat. Eyes pounding. Lips quivering. Dry booze oozing out from under his arm pits.

Ray hacks like a rummy, head bouncing on a string-- face criss crossing in the mirror-- shaking all over. He can't stop it long enough to focus.

A stream of flehm --- desperate to release itself--- erupts from his over smoked lungs. He buckles over & engages one final ear shattering hack--- feeling like he has just coughed up his left lung, spitting it into the sink.

Oh, my fucking head!

--Raymond are you up yet --

Kate's calling him, from down below in the kitchen.

She must've heard me hacking.

--Yea I'm up--

He yells back down, sounding like a hoarse horse.

Kate cringed; she couldn't believe how easily the sound of his voice grated on her nerves. It attacked her, like slivers of razor-edged granules of sand running up &

down her spine. Very unpleasant, very unhealthy she thought. But that's what it had to come to. He just made her sick.

Ray takes a long look in the mirror—his lanky cowboy build slouched low-- trying to talk himself into looking somewhat human but it ain't working. The stubble on his face looks like a million little black spikes poking through. His bodies starting to percolate that sour body odour. Yellow rings of crusted sweat staining the pits of a well-worn t-shirt. Too hung to shower, too lazy to shave. Anyways she's calling him down.

--Raymond come on; we have to talk--

Kate had been hoping for more from Ray. She had come to realize it just wasn't going to happen. Kate was a wonderful mother, with two beautiful young girls, who she couldn't be prouder of. Letting Raymond move in was more a reflex action then a commitment. It had gone along well, for awhile, as life should, until he lost his job & became a drunk druggie.

Oh fuck, we have to talk, she has to talk, Ray thought, turning back from the mirror, sounds serious. She talks I listen; he mumbled to himself. Fuck, fuck, fuck. It'll be like little needles poking in my brain. My head throbbing trying to listen to what she's saying-- but honestly-- not hearing it at all. We've been there before, seems like every day these past few weeks.

Leaving the stink of last night's excess swirling to the sewers, Ray heads back down the hall to get dressed.

Jeans & shirt tossed over the chair. At least I got out of them before crashing—he mistakenly thinks-- I must not've been that bad. Any old rationale will do. How long can I go on making excuses. A real man doesn't make excuses, well maybe you're not a real man—said his bad side-- that hurts man.

Faint memories of last night returning in brief flashes. A beer with a biker who was just passing through & wanted to know if he was interested in doing some business. I gotta admit I did think about it. I sure need the money, but Kate would kill me if she found out. Fuck it was just drunk talk. He remembered a toke—

outside in the parking lot-- with an old hippy, whose family has been living in P.G. so long the hippy has no idea how to get out. Arguing with some drunk about some hockey game that wasn't even on TV. Some game that he really didn't give a fuck about. Going for lines in the washroom.

Fuck! How did I get home? He rushed to the bedroom window & push's it open; an awakening blast of arctic air plastered his face. Thank god it's there, he saw to his relief. That old Dodge might not look like much but it gets me around, he thought, needs a tune up, I'll get to that. God I can't remember driving. What the hell, I made it.

--Raymond come on I have to go to work --

Kate was finishing up the dishes-- looking out the window at a dried-up old tree-- dressed in her nurse's outfit ready for work. Kate had been a single mother with Brandy during high school, then Cheyanne came along & then they were three. She was originally from P.G. so she had family help. When she met Raymond maybe she was feeling a little smug & let her guard down.

'Who knows,' she asked a crow, perched on the lonely tree, watching her through the window. Its black eyes glaring back, like it was sharing her stare.

Work the word hits Ray like a pail of acid. She's the nurse, I'm the unemployed mechanic. Fuck, is it my fault that Prince George's economy has collapsed. No wood no business, no business no trucks, no trucks no work.

I feel forever cursed. Yea if I compromised something would come up, take a lesser job, it will work into something, I've heard it all & I'm sick of it. I've been to every fucking mill & garage in P.G., nothing, fucking assholes, no wonder I drink.

-- Come on Raymond please--

What the fuck is the rush. Christ just go to work. My head's pounding.

Kate really did have to get to work. Kate enjoyed her job, nurses-aid. She worked in the operating room, cleaning utensils, assisting the surgeon, following up with

the patients-- hard work-- satisfying work. She wanted this business with Ray, dealt with before she headed out.

I drag on my jeans over the jockeys & pull my still buttoned shirt over my swampy t-shirt. Socks, not surprisingly still on my feet. I think this is day three for this pair, it has to get around day four before Kate starts giving me those, Raymond throw those socks in the wash stares. Funny when I was working, I'd make sure to change my socks everyday.

Where's my boots. Frantic, I find one flopped by the door & the other still on the bed. Must've kicked them off. That's good didn't sleep with my boots on. Bin there done that before. He sits back down on the bed & makes a struggling effort to pull on his boots but he can't be bothered. So, he gives up & leaves his boots standing up by the bed. Back in the day when we first met, she used to let me make love with my boots on. Wild nights when the girls were at Gramma's & we had the place to ourselves.

On a bit of a slide now though-- my fault-- I guess.

Ray walks off in stocking feet to the washroom. He throws on some B.O. juice & English leather-- I'm not an animal. If he can't be bothered to shave, at least he can still smell civil, hopefully. Swishes some mouthwash in his throat. Trying desperately to get that sandpaper off his tonsils.

Heading downstairs to talk.

They have an old two storey house, rented. Two bedrooms up, one each for the girls & them. Ray moved in with Kate & the girls a couple of years ago. The girls just young. A shared family bathroom, living room & big country kitchen with a swinging door, nice place. A little old & rundown but this is supposed to be just their first step. They have plans. At least that was the thinking.

He makes his way down the old rickety stairs. Each step creaking, his head in dread. Nine steps down, sensing each one slowly, like he was walking on glass.

Kate hears him coming. Surprisingly she is quite calm. Not really mad, disappointed of course. Ray's not a bad man she thought, he can be sweet when

he wants too. But he's gone sideways & there's no turning back. She rinsed her hands in the sink & dried them with the flowered tea towel her mother had bought her in one of their second-hand store shopping binges.

Prince George used to be a good place to live she thinks. Everyone working, having kids, dances, curling, fun times. But it just crashed. The damn pine beetles eating the trees, mills cutting back like crazy-- even shutting down. A way of life changing by the hour, in a world that doesn't take kindly to change.

It's a dirty smelling—depressed-- dusty hard drinking town now. Everyone is hurting. At least that's what we've talked ourselves into thinking. Christ come on Ray what's taking you.

The last creak on the stairs, he's down, into the living room. Oh, my head he grimaces, he is in pain. The rug feels grimy to his stocking feet. She's not the greatest housekeeper. The kids & her job keep her busy. But still you think she could run a vacuum now & again.

He sees the discarded bowls of half eaten cereal, on the coffee table, left by the girls. They'd been catching the last fifteen minutes of Barney on the tube before the school bus he thinks. Kate should really clean that up.

Fuck, I feel like I'm going to barf.

He spies the dirty ashtrays full of cigarette butts by Kate's chair, smoked down to the stub. Kate must have stayed up waiting for me he thinks. Listening to music, hoping I'd come home-- knowing I wouldn't. Fuck I think this time I might of really fuck'd up.

Last night Kate had been waiting up—sitting in her chair in the livingroom-- watching the outside shadows disappear. Smoking cigarettes, taking deep long drags. Smoke, flooding the room. She knew where he was. She was listening to music, Supertramp -- giving a little bit—Carole King--you've got a friend-- the stereo on loud. She having a beer then another— eyes fixed in a trance, looking out the window, black of night suddenly settling in. Knowing it's gotta end. Fuck. Best for her-- best for the girls. She couldn't take it anymore. She knew he was

suffocating her. She knew there was only one thing to do. She'd tell him in the morning.

His sad sick eyes froze--- daze-like--- on her chair. Wonder how long she waited. . . A feeling of loss hit him like a hammer, but it quickly passed.

Kate feels the kitchen door start to swing open. She had done all the thinking she needed to do. Resolved she turned from the window. Watching him-- still half drunk—as he staggers through the door.

'Raymond please sit down; I've made you coffee.'

This is good, maybe I'm alright with her. Who am I kidding? Yourself he thought. He looked up at her face. Seeing nothing but a blank steeled space.

Kate, turned back to look out the window. She couldn't bear to look at him. He was such a disgrace & disappointment. He threw it all away. For what! There's just no way he can stay.

He senses her tense; he can feel it in the room. It projects off her like fog falling off a cliff. Thickening the air, filling the space. Making it hard for him to breathe. He finds himself scared. A subtle sense of panic spirals through his sphincter as he makes his way across the floor.

He slides in behind the big wooden kitchen table. Into his spot. She's got hot steaming coffee—in his Edmonton Oiler mug—waiting for him. He pours in a ton of sugar & a little bit of cream, just enough to change the color.

She's thinking about something, he laments to himself, as he gingerly takes a sip. What? My coffee is hot but she's steaming.

Silence.

Kate's standing all starched in her nurses' outfit looking out the window. She's staring at a world where Ray plays no part. Ray's watching her back, she's sorta sexy in that nurse's outfit he thinks. Brings out her butt. Long blonde hair waterfalling down her back, reminds him of a playboy bunny. Her reflection in the

window, showing her pretty high school cheerleader features. Small in stature, big in heart Ray muses. A real pioneer princess, he smirks.

Ray raises the Oilers mug for another sip. He slurps back just enough so it doesn't burn. Slurp the only sound in the house.

Out the window he sees the crow glaring at him over Kate's shoulder, he feels its judging stare. The survivors. Survivors of what he thinks. Something deep inside of him thrusts its ugly way into his head. He gets a sense of fear, will I survive this mess I've got myself in. Right now, at this exact moment, within his sphere of reality, that bird has a better chance of getting out alive than me he thinks.

She's mute, I'm virtually comatose, in pain, mind still thumping, body still shaking. The silence is killing me.

A flock of swallows' swoop in & land on the leafless branches like a children's choir. Kate looks up welcoming the distraction. They are all fussing & chirping, going on & on about something important to birds. Kate takes solace in their dull grey colors & small little beaks. Yet, because of what is to come she finds it hard to take pleasure in their beauty. She feels dead inside. The pretty swallows sharing there's more to life than pain. She gains strength to do what has to be done.

The silence is making Ray uneasy. He sits pinned in pain. The veins on either side of his head pounding like a bass drum in a marching band—he starts shaking. The intensity is harsh.

Turning very slowly, thoughtfully, purposefully, Kate fixes him with a hard stare. Her deep blue eyes clouding over like a pending storm. Peering through Ray like they're piercing his skull. Tearing up his brain. Ray's head's going to explode. Laser beams of blame bombarding his brain.

Ray closes his eyes in fear & guilt. Its all he can think to do.

'Ray', oh no she never calls me Ray. Always Raymond. Oh fuck, what's up. Ray opens his eyes & looks up like a puppy about to be punished.

'Ray,' Kate repeats his name.

'I'm not going to mince words here Ray.'

Ray that's my name he sarcastically thinks. His mind fades as if he's drowning.

'Ray, listen to me,' her gaze softens. His mind is vulnerable, naked to her intentions. Here we go. Whenever they want you to listen it's never goes well.

'Ray, I want you out of the house.'

'What!' Ray responds mortally wounded. The words hit him like a sledge hammer. His mind bounces off the table & scrambles itself off the dry wall drop ceiling hanging low.

'What the fuck are you talking about?', is all he could think to say.

'Ray enough is enough. You're out of control Ray. I don't feel safe. The girls don't feel safe. You're never home & when you are, you're drunk. I know you're not looking for work, like you say. Ray you're twenty-seven, you can't be partying every night. Shit Ray, we can't afford it. Your pogeey seems to go into your beer & pot & coke. We're living here on my salary. Ray you're going nowhere except downhill & fast. Christ Ray last night it was after three in the morning when you got in. Knocking around, slamming doors, stumbling up the stairs, crashing into walls. Christ you were passed out before you hit the sheets. I had to take your boots & clothes off, they stank of beer & stale smoke. Enough is enough. I know you woke the girls, they won't say anything, but they were dragging their butts this morning. Ray, we're not doing it anymore, you've got to get your shit together & you sure as hell can't do it here,' Kate pauses, 'with us', she sighs.

There she said it, she thought. Proud she had the courage & sense of purpose to get it out.

I'm numb, too hung over to have any feelings. Too young & dumb to keep quiet, so I automatically fight back.

‘What the fuck are you talking about?’ That came out like I was vomiting, without thought, just pure automatic knee jerk response. It seems, that’s all I can come up with. I’m not thinking, I’d do better by just keeping my mouth shut.

‘Come on Ray. You know. We—you-- can’t keep on like this. It’s been over a year since you’ve seen any work.’

‘So now it’s my fault there ain’t no fucking jobs for me here in this scum bucket town.’ I reply starting to stick up for myself. Though I know anything I say won’t mean dick.

‘Now it’s my fault I don’t have no fancy fucking nursing degree so I can flaunt it in front of my boyfriend’s face every chance I get. I’ve brought in my share of the bacon. You, you’re the bum.’ Might as well get in a personal shot he thought. Realizing as soon as the words rolled out of his mouth it sounded real stupid.

‘Ray fuck off, you know what I’m talking about. I’m not saying it’s all your fault. The town’s economy is in the tank & you can’t find work. Christ if that’s all it was it’d be no big deal, you know that. We can make it on my salary that’s not the thing.’

‘Oh, yea fuck you, ‘we can make it on my salary’, I rapidly sarcastically reply. ‘That sure boosts the old male ego,’ I can actually hear myself getting dumb & dumber.

‘Come on Ray, you know what I mean. Fuck Ray you’re not even trying anymore. Why—hell-- when were you ever trying. You’re just partying Ray, you know it & I know it. You’re partying every night & we’re just a flophouse for you to sleep it off. Something has to be said & I’m saying it. This is for your own good Ray, come on.’ Kate wasn’t pleading, she was just tired off all the shit.

‘My own good! Fuck you, it’s for your own good,’ my mind is starting to wander. The pain in my brain a distinct distraction. I’m trying to focus, but much more of this & I’m going to explode.

‘My own good, my own good, fuck you my own good.’ I seem to be repeating myself.

‘Why don’t you just say it, you’re fed-up living with a loser like me & you’re setting your sights on something better. What is it, a new doctor, you jerking off a young stud?’, even a rat fights back when it’s trapped.

‘Shut up Ray, you prick. You’re just making a bad situation worse. You know it’s nothing like that, never been. I care for you Ray but I can’t stand seeing you go down like this & it’s not good for the girls. We’re not doing either one of us any good. Christ Ray, the booze, the pot, the blow, every day, you haven’t sucked a straight breath in months. Christ the girls & I have a life to live here & you obviously don’t want any part of it.’

I was fading fast. I hadn’t expected this, well at least not to be this severe. A reaming out, a screeching screaming crying drama scene, yes, but a cold dry eyed well thought out attack devoid of any real emotion. Shit, she’s been thinking about this for awhile. This is a pre-meditated intrusion into my debauched lifestyle.

I’m too drained, hung, & confused to panic. My thought patterns are mush. To tell you the truth all I want is a cold glass of orange juice, then my coffee, then maybe I can take what’s being said. Absorb it & react in a civilized manner.

But she won’t let up. She’s on me again,

‘Ray, are you even listening to me.’

Fuck the orange juice, I want a cold beer.

‘Ray, I want you out by the time I get home from work! You can go stay with one of your party friends, Jimmy has space. But Ray you have to understand you have to leave; you can’t live here anymore. You’re killing yourself, & I’m not going to be party to it.’

I feel like killing her. It’s all I can do to just sit here & take this shit. Her voice is driving icicles through my head. My rage knows no bounds. Oh, who am I kidding, I’m so tired & fucked up I really can’t give a damn. I guess I should respond-- show some semblance of humanity.

'Fuck Kate, what the fuck are you talking about. Killing myself, fuck you.'

'Yea well fuck you Ray, just make sure you're gone when I get home.'

'Fucking right I'll be gone. Why the fuck I've been sticking around I don't know. I don't get any respect around here & you've turned the girls against me.' I was getting desperate, swinging blind.

'Ray the girls are just scared. They want the old Ray back, not this self-destructive missile you've turned into. We don't want to see you explode.' Kate was being sincere. She was sensing she was getting through to him. She was doing what had to be done. It was the best thing for her & the girls.

'We care for you Ray, but you can't live here.' Kate looked him right in the eye. Saddened inside by what she saw. He looked like he'd been dragged by a truck through the bush.

'Go off, do your own thing, come back when you're ready. But if you can't handle it don't come back. Ray, I sincerely hope you don't throw us away. But if you do, it's your choice. We'll be here waiting for you to straighten your life out & become the man we know you can be. Not this party animal who's impervious to everything but himself. Ray, we love you but you've got to get your shit together.'

'What the fuck are you talking about?' I'm back to my stock response.

'You're throwing me out telling me to come home, telling me you love me, telling me to get my shit together, telling me this, telling me that. Do you even know what the fuck you're talking about.' My mind was on a treadmill. I can't think. I'm confused & stupid. Grasping at straws like a drowning man. My only hope to throw it back at her, maybe at least she'd just shut-up.

'Ray just be gone when I get home. I've already arranged for the girls to go to my sisters after school.' Kate was finished. She'd said what had to be said. Now she had to go to work.

Ray couldn't compute. The only responsibility he had left in this life was making the girls a snack when they got home after school & hanging out till Kate got off

her shift. To take this away was the fatal dagger. He began to spew force nonsense as her words were now really hitting home.

‘Oh, so your sister is in on this shit too eh. Who else, I bet your mothers behind this bullshit.’ He was losing it. He was grasping at anything, trying to make her feel guilty about what she’s doing.

Kate was on the move now. She picked her coat off the hangar on the door & got her purse from the counter. She looked through it to make sure she had her keys & wallet.

‘Ray the only person who is responsible for this is you. Good bye Ray, please remember we love you & are your biggest fans, don’t let us down.’

She left. He watched her leave through the steam rising from his Oiler mug.

She pulled the inside door shut & he heard the screen door slam. He listened as she crunched her way down the walk on the hard covered unshovelled snow. Ray heard her car start. She’d be letting it warm up while she scraped last night’s frost off the windshield.

He sat waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting for her to come back. Throw her arms around him, tell him she’s sorry, tell him she didn’t mean a word. Tell him she was wrong, her family put her up to it, her friends gave her bad advice. Tell him she really really loves him & knows he’s not a loser, it’s all been a misunderstanding. Come on Ray I’ll take the day off; we’ll go upstairs make love all day. The girls can stay at my sisters, we’ll smoke joints, drink beer, eat pizza, make love, make love, make love.

Ray heard the car pull away. He was all alone. Silence descended like a cloud. The creaks of an old house the only thing keeping him company.

Ray looked down long & hard into his coffee. He was hoping he'd wake up & it'd all been just a dream. But it wasn't. It was real. It was happening. He looked up from his cup at the closed door, with the coat gone from its peg.

She didn't even give me a goodbye kiss. Fuck.

He fumbled in his shirt's top pocket & pulled out a scrunched pack of smokes.

Ray took another slurp from his coffee & lit a smoke. The inhale burning his throat like a fire in a desert, bringing on a horrible hack. A vicious cough that seemed to last forever, watering his eyes. The violence of the coughing spasms made his mind dizzy. He managed a sip of coffee & the wet warmth on the back of his throat helped douse the pain of flame he felt in his lungs. He hacked up a great gob of flem. Enough to get him up from the table & make his way over to the sink. He spat out what felt like the other lung. He hacked up some more, spitting a mighty hork in on top of his lost lung. He turned on the tap & watched the horrendous mass swoosh like a beaten beast down the drain.

He braced himself with both hands clutching the kitchen counter, taking long hard breaths. He lifted his head & looked out the same window Kate had been using as a portal to stiffen her resolve. He saw nothing but his reflection—pasted on a leafless tree—in the glass. He turned back looking at the kitchen table. His cigarette burning down in the ashtray, sending smoke signals curling in wisps up to the ceiling. Oilers mug still steaming, the whole scene resembling an abstract painting.

Ray's eyes teared over.

Kate was right & he was too damned fucked up to tell her. He had to argue, challenge, get mad, get angry. Like a little child who couldn't fess up to breaking the lamp, though it was lying—broken—on the floor right in front, for all to see. He was fucking up royally & things did have to change.

He made his way across the kitchen. His eyes welling up with tears. The tears soon dried, not because they weren't warranted, he was just too dehydrated from the drink & the drugs.

What the fuck am I doing he thought.

He sat down in a slump & wiped dry tears off his face with the sleeve of his shirt. He was exhausted. Without thinking, reacting like a reflex, he lit another smoke with the smouldered butt of the last one. This brought on another round of cough, this one a little less than the last. Everyone gone, girls to school, Kate to work. What now? He's supposed to leave, get out, go where?

Smoking, sipping coffee, trying to come to terms with his new reality. The quiet thick with guilt. What now? Who the hell is she to kick him out. This is as much his place as it is hers, he knew that was bullshit. His mind grasping at nonsense, anything to make sense of what was happening.

When he moved into the house, a couple of years ago, Kate was quite settled in, living the life of a single mother with her two daughters. They'd met at a bar, Ray's regular watering hole. Kate had been on a nurse's night out from the hospital. He was nursing his regular stool at his self-proclaimed spot by the bar. Being cowboy cool.

That particular night was a good night. Lots of drink, a little smoke, lots of dancing, laughing, a few shooters. Groping in the truck. Crashing through the front door of this very house loaded & laughing. The girls—who'd he'd never yet met-- at Kate's mothers for the weekend. They made love right there on the rug in the living room. Then the kitchen & finally they made it up to the bedroom. Falling asleep on each other. Next morning they made it again, intimately exploring & smooching till noon. Then they went out for brunch. They'd been together ever since.

Until now

He knew he'd been pushing it for the last while. He's been really avoiding Kate & his responsibilities at home & to the girls. Out of work, feeling like a loser. Kate had a tendency to spoil his fun, make him feel guilty. So, he'd hang out at the bar with his friends—most of them in the same boat as him—hoping something magical would appear & he would get everything back on track. But nothing ever came up, except his friends & beer & whatever was going around that night. He

had grown a particular affinity for coke but that was expensive & was making things that much worse. He probably needed this kick in the ass. But kicking him out is rather extreme he thought.

He was coming to realize that maybe Kate is right. If he doesn't get moving now, he never will. Maybe she does love him enough to realize he's just digging himself in deeper & deeper. Maybe Kate knows him well enough to appreciate that he's like a rock on top of a hill, rocking forward & back. If he isn't given a helluva push he'd just stay there, indecisive, stagnant, lazy. Quite content to live out his lot staying stoned. Maybe she's scared he'll fall the wrong way; crushing her & the girls.

Maybe.

Maybe she's fucking around with some fucking doctor & just wants him out. Maybe she's just a fucking asshole!

He knew that was bullshit. Kate wasn't like that. It was just his mind trying to redirect the blame. He knew in his heart he was the fuck up. He's the asshole.

He'd miss the girls. He didn't figure his partying was hurting them. But he knew that was a lie. When he was around, they'd play, he'd pay attention to them. He just wasn't around enough anymore & when he was, he was usually just waiting, killing time, till it was time to go out. He'd got caught up in his own shit & Kate had called him on it.

What the hell should he do?

The silence of the city engulfs him. The silence of commerce not happening, of trucks not moving, of items not being sold, of wood not being cut, of crops not being sown. The silence of an economy ground to a halt. The silence of Ray being swamped with despair.

He suddenly felt very alone. He finished his coffee & put out his smoke. He stretched himself up to get another coffee. Then immediately slouched back down in his seat. Dizzy. He lit another smoke hoping it would help but only

making it worse. His mind turning like a tornado twister. He wished it would all just go away.

An epiphany of emotion flashed through his aching head. If only life just spread out before you like a bright yellow brick road. Endlessly stretching into a golden horizon. He on painted palomino making his way toward the light.

But its not. You've got to find your own way. The only one responsible is you.

He wished he could just stay. He wished his pounding headache would go away. He wished the world would just stop spinning so he could think.

Whatever happens life will look after itself he told himself. I AIN'T DEAD. I still got a life to live. Just not here.

His mouth was dry. The coffee wasn't helping & the cigarettes were just making it worse. He really wanted a nice cold beer. He sat all alone feeling sick in his sorry state.

If only this just wasn't happening. His head felt like a hurricane was blowing through it. He was having trouble thinking clear. If only he hadn't lost his job, if only the fucking town wasn't in the shits, if only he wasn't such a fuck up.

He could almost taste that beer.

So, what the fuck, he better get going. Do something with his life. The one thing he knew, he couldn't stay here. Even if she said later in the day he could stay, he was gone. Enough of this bullshit. I'm outta here he thought. This town's the shit's, it's time in my life to be moving on.

He got up slowly from the table & walked over to the kitchen sink. Turned on the tap, got a glass & took a drink of cold cool water. That didn't help the head, only doused the scorch in his throat. He looked out the window. One lone tree with a bunch of birds & a single crow, everything else covered in snow. No trucks on the road, no roaring sounds of overburdened air brakes. No swirling smoke from a dead mill with no wood. No, he thought, I've gotta get out. Kate's right about a few things & one of em is I ain't going nowhere here.

The buck stops with me he lamented. I gotta do something for me. He knew he had a choice. He could go east, maybe get something in Alberta's oil patch, or he could head south to Vancouver.

He knew the oil patch was slowing down (thank you Pierre Trudeau & your NEP). He would probably have to go to Fort McMurray or High Level to get on. Vancouver seemed like a lot nicer choice; he could pick up something in the big city for sure. Plus, it was a lot warmer.

He took a last look out the window at the sober terrain. All the birds had left, only the crow remained. Ray looked it right in the eye as if it was human & said, 'what the fuck you looking at.' The crow cackled back a caw & flew away. Ray smirked a feint smile.

The faster he got packed the closer that cold beer. He turned back from the window to the table. Picked up his Oiler mug—couldn't go anywhere without that—time to cowboy up, make a decision.

He decided he'd head out to Vancouver. There's gotta be work there.

For the first time that morning the pounding started to cease. Except that his mouth just kept getting drier.

Ray headed upstairs. Pulled on his boots, packed his old duffel bag. He was excited now. His head was starting to clear, but he really needed that beer.

Ray was going to Vancouver. But first, he'd stop by the bar.
