

The Social Worker

You paused on the way to the car. Bending down to flick the lilac leaves littered with snow in your front yard. It was a cold windy day on the prairie. The road was all slush in front of your house. Snow piled up over the curb. Big trees devoid of leaves standing in a barren row down either side of your street. Staring buck naked, swaying from the wind. Snow piled up around tickling their truculent trunks.

Brushing the grunge off your ten-year-old Toyota. Giving you time to think about your day ahead. Straining to get every spec of snow off your front window. Desperately trying to put off the inevitable. Stopping to step back, taking gasping breaths due to the exertion. You raise your head & stare directly into a grinding grey grunt of a sky.

Slipping into the car, stooping through the door, crammed behind the wheel — your eyes are full of tears.

To-day is the day. There are no more words to say. You had gotten the call last night from your supervisor. One of your families was in crisis. Dad was arrested & in jail, Mom's a mess. You have to go get the kids. Apprehend you must. They're currently at the neighbours.

You had made a case for the kids to stay with the Mom over the phone—with more in home supports-- but the supervisor was clear. There was just too much risk, a gun was involved, the kids had to go—to-day. In the end you knew she was right. You agreed in your heart.

It didn't make it any easier. This is the part of the job that is the hardest because it goes against your grain. You sit silent behind the wheel getting your bearings, settling your breathing.

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You had got this particular file about four months ago. The husband had beaten up his wife & a neighbour phoned it in worried about the kids. There were two boys; five & seven. It was investigated & a file was opened. It was assigned to your caseload. It became your responsibility. You made arrangements immediately over the phone to meet with the family at their home. The father out of the picture, he couldn't come back until you said it was safe.

You offer services based on a casework model. An extremely generic approach which allowed for you to do basically whatever you thought was needed to protect these kids. All you had to do was make sure you record what you're doing-- in depth-- so your supervisor will know what's going on.

You drove over to the house, a two-storey weathered townhouse in the poor part of town. Part of a large complex. You parked in front & went up the stairs, stopping for a breath & knocked with notice on the screen door & was let suspiciously in by the mother. You immediately introduced yourself to the mom & kids. Two boys, shy hiding behind their mother at the door.

You make your way into the kitchen following her lead, thanking her graciously for the proffered pink naugahyde kitchen chair. You sit, Mom sits across the table from you., You start chatting about nothing, probably the weather. Both boys, sticking close to Mom, start peeking round her back to check you out. You've got that part covered because it gives you a chance to play peekaboo & that makes them smile, it's also a good indicator of where they're at emotionally. It gives you a good indication of their attention span, ADHD is epidemic amongst children witnessing family violence. When the boys start to relax you turn your attention to the mother. She's sitting scared to death. Masking it with trying to be polite, contrite. Offering up tea or coffee.

'Tea please if it's not too much trouble,' you reply,

'No problem,' she says needing something to take her mind off the matter at hand.

This is the first & most important part of your job. Forming a relationship with the family. If you fail everyone loses. You need to get a sense of who they are & they of who are you.

As she makes tea you have a look around from your chair. Don't get up that establishes a position of authority & you work more on an egalitarian belief. You're in a two storey two bedroom upstairs worn-torn townhouse. Walls painted the color of yellow with a fresh coat of despair. Decent size kitchen, leading to a well used living room bordered by stairs to the second floor. A rusty fake iron railing with a fake wooden banister highlighting the temperature of the place. This complex is a breeding ground for child protection services. Everyone in the complex in some sorta trouble. All the homes identical only difference is the degree of disrepair. But I digress.

She brings the tea over to the table almost trembling, yet defiant. She's a beautiful woman. The red swelling coagulating cut over her eye & the dark blue bruise on her cheek gives colour to the subtle swelling pale palette of her face. Long red hair to die for, a lanky all legs figure that guys go for. A sharp peaked nose shadowing a long firm mouth. Lips that in novels are referred to as luscious. Dressed in stylishly ripped jeans & a floppy open turquoise blouse that had seen better days. She gives me my tea & offers up milk & sugar which I decline.

She was mad angry I could see it like it was written. Ashamed, mortified, she has to have me in her life & she knows it. I'd read that word on the street was that she liked her wine & her coke & was not one to be messing with if she ran out of either. She was straight today but you could see she was coming down from a binge. That's probably one of the reasons that led to the beating I thought. He just broke when they ran out of coke, she screaming for more. Still no one ever deserves to get a beating no matter what's going on. Definitely not within view of your children. It's all just about control anyways.

It was a nice pleasant kitchen with little nick knacks spread about on the walls & inside cupboards. Nice big kitchen window over the sink looking out over the road & some barren trees. A big beautiful barren lilac bush—which had seen better days-- just off to the side of the

view. Sink clean of dishes. Box of corn flakes on the table. A coffee maker on the counter & a spot for the tea pot on the stove. Everything looking rather freshly washed.

'The place looks nice,' I say, rather defensively. Trying to adjust my level to a trusting tone.

'Thanks,' she sheepishly replies. Looking down into her cup. Coffee I assume. She's sitting across from me at the table. Her end toward the sink mine towards the door. Her long legs crossed tightly at the knee. A slight slouch like she's always bending down to light a cigarette.

'How long have you been here,' I asked, a genuine inquiry. I was starting to slide my chair closer towards the table. My style was casual, I liked to lean my elbows on the table(as long as the stains weren't dirty & gross) & listen close to what people were saying to me. Look em in the eyes if I so choose.

She reaches in her sweater pocket draped over the back of her chair & pulls out a pack of smokes. She lights one up as if she's expecting a fight. Her lighter's a bic her brand Kent Menthol. Not even bothering to ask if I mind. She was right that's the last of our problems.

'We've been here about a year & a half,' What's it to you inferred in the voice.' My oldest boy started school here.' I detected a clink in her armour.

'How old is he,' I already knew but I'd like to hear it from her. Her inflection. Does she say it with passion or with disdain.

'He just turned seven,' she smiled ever so slightly.

'How old 's the other one,'

'He's five, be six soon. '

'I bet he's a real little terror,' I said moving onto the table with my elbows. Taking a chance, I'm not being threatening. Now in closer I noticed she wore rings. Two on the hand holding the cigarette just off her lips, resting her right elbow on her gangly knee. The other hand settled lightly on her left thigh clear to my view was a wedding ring. She was twirling it about nervously.

She hesitated to answer. Should she admit sometimes they both test her limits of patience or should she lie, or was there something in between she could say.

She changes the subject. 'He just started kindergarten this year,' I let it slide but it gives me some idea of how we'd have to broach the subject of why I am here. A verbal sparring was taking place.

The boys had no qualms about cuddling up to Mom. She smiled & hugged one into her knee the other standing a little back.

'This cuddle bug here is Mark & the shy one hiding behind me is Shane.' She started to sit back in her chair. Not perched on the edge like a pigeon ready to take flight.

'How long have you been married,' I took my queue from the evident display of the ring shown as a symbol of sanity.

This took some time for the reply. She took a drag, lips clenched like she's sucking a duck. Smoke curling out of her mouth into her nose. Nostrils flaring ever so flirty. Lower lip ever so slightly extended.

'Bob & I have been together 13 years, married seven.' She said impressively as if it was a badge of honor.

High school sweethearts, I clued in. Starting to grow apart. Trying to glue it together with drink & drugs which came into their lives like a military force.

I started to relax a bit. I got this I thought. I can do this. I sat back in my chair & crossed my legs trying to hide my Gucci boots & medium length nice plaid skirt. But leaving just enough showing to be styling. I am woman too.

Assuming the counsellor trance I got down to work.

'Where's Bob now,' a simple direct question.

'At his brothers in Millwoods,' it was like she had rehearsed the answer.

It was a pretty standard reply in these situations. Usually when there is an incident like this & the cops are involved charges will be laid & a condition will be he has to leave the house. The cops using their authority to take away his choice. Then they let people like me take it from there. In situations such as this, the husband inevitably ends up at a relatives. Usually, mother or brother. That way he can still stay in touch with the kids & she can phone family without restraint of course. They can maintain a sorta subversive situation.

Sometimes they lied. He returning to the scene once the cops have left. Court charges mean little to the addicted once released. She of course letting him in, he pleading for false mercy. It happens!

I looked her quietly in the face. Reached out to the table grabbed my cup in a sophisticated manor & had a sip of tea.

'Have you talked to him since he left,' I ask.

She deflected the answer by stubbing out her smoke in an ashtray on the table which somehow mysteriously appeared.

'He phoned the boys this morning,'

'How'd that go,'

'Fine,'

I looked down at the boys. They were feigning disinterest but I knew they were listening. The one thing you learn when you make your money protecting children, you get to learn children of all ages from their quirks.

Now I might mention I haven't totally forgotten the cuts & bruises on her face. I was waiting to see if she brought them up. If she didn't, I could use that to my advantage.

'How's that going,' I asked, motioning mildly towards her face.

'How's what,' she shot back. She knew perfectly well what I meant, she was just stalling.

'Between You & Bob & what happened the other night.' There it was it was out there. I-- like a ballerina-- landed my pirouette with beauty, grace & truth.

She grabbed for another cigarette from the pack now moved to her blouse pocket. Lit it like a movie star & blew out a long-exasperated spew of smoke.

'It was nothing really, just some shit got out of control.'

'By the looks of your face I'd say that's an understatement,' I said this softly gently like a compassionate friend. Someone who's concerned for her.

She got my drift & lightened up.

'We were just playing it simple I thought,' she started up. 'Bob's brother was over for some beers. He had some coke, no big deal. Laughing kidding around listening to music. Me & Bob's brother had a couple of dances. No big deal.'

'When Bob's brother had to go Bob asked him to leave some coke. He said he didn't have any more.'

'Bob knew he was lying, so he started calling him out. Bob's brother just left. No big deal.'

She started to rub the hair of the youngest still almost laying on her thigh. The other one standing listening leaning his frame on the back of her chair. Her hair falling about her face. She stubbed out the cigarette & pushed her hair back. I could see she was having a problem as to how much she should tell me. How far should she go, how honest need she be. I could see by the water welling up under her lids that she was being pulled.

'After he left Bob took a kinipshin. Calling his brother every name in the book.'

'Where were the boys,' I asked.

'Well, I thought they were asleep up in bed. But when the cops came, they were just hiding, hidden, on the stairs.'

'So, what happened next?'

'Well Bob was acting crazy. I was just sitting on the couch telling him to cool down.

'Then he turned on me. Said I was flirting with his brother. Said he saw us dancing, he wasn't stupid.

'I said that's nuts, You're nuts & I got up to get more wine from the fridge & he backhanded me back down.'

At that the boys looked back at each other. They both agreed telepathically to go into the living room & watch TV. She waited patiently for them to leave. The boys settled on the oversized disoriented deep cushioned couch. Curiosity had inspired courage for them to check me out. They were afraid for there mom. Evidently it was apparent to them that no big catastrophe was going to happen. They started looking for the controls to their game hidden in the cushions. It was obvious they were still unsettled from the other night when Dad almost killed Mom & they saw it all, clutched & trembling from their perch.

'I don't know what they saw,' she said in a lament to no one in particular. Her tone was scared.

She lit another cigarette. Almost smoking desperately now. As if each one is her last.

'That set me off,' she continued.' I can get at it when I want. I flew at him in a frenzy. Maybe I shoulda just stayed down.'

'Honey,' I said with the voice of experience, 'No matter what your part you didn't deserve to get beat.'

This I saw gave her some comfort. She realized I wasn't into the blame guilt shame game. She & her kids were the victims here & we go from there.

'After that I don't remember much.' She remembered she just didn't want to say.

'Does he hit you often,' I ask looking like a seal waiting for fish, not on the edge of my seat but close. Needing to feed on the answer.

'Not really,' she lied, it was written like a stock ticker tape across her forehead.

'He didn't hit the kids. He never does.' She's quick to establish that, thinking abuse is just physical.

'Doesn't matter,' I was quicker in my response. 'it's still abuse for them to see & hear him beating on you.' I took my time & explained, 'Just them witnessing the scene cracks a splinter in their emotional cover. It makes them see their world isn't safe, they have no control. That's abuse.'

'How long has this been going on,' I pressed my case. She didn't know I knew the answer. It was all in the file.

'It was ok before the coke came on the scene. Before it was just wine, beer & weed, we liked to party, go out.' she was trying to justify, rationalize their behavior. 'Coke was like a welcome guest. It was just fun at first. It was something to keep the party going.

'No big deal,' she said almost as an afterthought. I almost choked at that. From the look of the fractures on her face it must've been frightening. She became slowly cautious as the words came out of her mouth. Had she shared too much, being too cool. She didn't know & it sat like a lump in the air over the kitchen table. Her once again scared. How was I going to react. How far can she trust?

I didn't react. Staying casual in the chair, I wasn't going anywhere with that. I know all about it. It's very clear in the police report I read that these two have had frequent unfavourable incidents of disturbing the peace at their place over the last couple of years. This last was just the worst. Its inevitable in situations like this that they escalate & its important to intervene before the kids get seriously hurt, at all levels; physical & emotional. Anything can happen when two adults are sporting such insane, that nothing can be overlooked.

She lit the next cigarette with the last. Flicking the falling ash off the used one into the well used ashtray. The presence of which I was now aware. I finally realized the repulsive receptacle had been hidden behind the box of corn flakes on the table & she had moved it within an easier reach.

She looked at me. I could see the wheels turning as she was trying to decide what to say next. So I gave her a break & broke the hesitation by emphasizing with empathy,

'You're pretty beaten up.' She immediately looked down to the ground. I continued as if reading from a script. 'The police were at your house, as were the paramedics who took you to the hospital. Nurses & doctors & your neighbour looking after the kids while you were getting fixed up & he was off to who knows where. I'd say of deals this was a big one. Good thing they didn't find any coke or you would've bin busted & then where are you.' I tried to tone down-- through a trained sensitive control-- my voice. Trying to initiate an atmosphere of two ladies talking at the mall with one wishing to buy something which just wasn't practical. Trying to impress that the incident we were discussing was certainly a big deal. Trying to imply we have to be real.

It should be noted I never take notes. I've always feared that traditional image of social work service as a middle-aged lady with glasses & prunes for lips & close-cropped bouffant hair sitting with her pad & pencil taking it all down scaring the bejusus out of the client. When you do that, everything seems a secret & it makes it hard to be sincere.

'What are we going to do now,' I asked directly, trying to impress we're in this together.

'I don't know what do you mean,'

'Bob can't come home for awhile.'

'How long?'

'I don't know,' I'd been around long enough to know not to get tied down by time. (Even though legal requirements required me to set limits, but that'll be addressed in the papers we'll sign later.)

'That's rather vague,' she shot back trying to be inconspicuous.

'We've got a lot of work to do before we can even think of Bob coming home.' Emphasizing his name, getting it out there.

'What do you mean work,' she was curious. She tilted her head up & some hair slapped her face, caressing the long pink abrasion above her eye. She gave a sneaky wince hoping I didn't notice.

A social worker has four primary modes of delivering service; Advocacy, brokerage, referral & counselling. The counselling had already started.

'We need you to follow up with the Dr. for one. Did he break any bones are you ok walking, lifting, did you hurt your back? Can you do your day to day making sure these boys are ok.'

'I'm ok. Broke my pride but that will fix.' She said this as if musing a meditation

'That's what I mean. We need you strong.' This was a pretty typical word thrown out when ever you're dealing with the unfortunate. It's important that they be strong because sometimes it only gets worse.

'The boys need to go back at school.'

'I kept them home today,' I could see her eyes fill with moisture. She'd kept them home not wanting to be alone.

'You need to show them they're safe. They have just witnessed a traumatic event. Their world's been tuned upside down. They are scared. You have to show them you have it under control because now they don't believe that.'

I took a look over my shoulder to the boys now playing some sort of game on the TV. I could see what's happening here. Ya they're upset about what's happened & Dad not being around. But they're also kids & if they can work it so they can stay home from school & play video games all day they're going to milk it.

'You boys listening to your mother?' I asked in a playful voice.

They both sheepishly replied in chorus never taking their eyes off the screen,

'Ya.'

I laughed & mom cracked a smile.

'So, I'm going to be in your life for awhile, hope you don't mind,' I said almost in jest. Unfortunately, we both knew, it wasn't her decision to make.

'How's your money?' I asked, always a sensitive topic.

She looked patiently & with a sigh stood up asking if I wanted more tea. Evidently needing a break. She rose & stretched, I noticed she still had her figure. I'm sure that's a source of the jealousy. Bob probably thinks everyone wants to do her.

'No thanks,' I said, 'I've still got some,' but I didn't. Too much tea & I have to pee & I don't like sitting on strange toilets. I went over & sat on the arm of the couch watching the boys kill-- en masse-- what looked like zombies on the TV.

'Wanna play,' they asked as if who wouldn't. Thumbs never stop clicking.

'Not right now but thanks for asking.' They still staring at the screen. A by product of family violence is a diagnosis of ADHD in the kids who witness it. Their world becomes a foreign thing not to be trusted, so every little noise & movement becomes a distraction. These guys seemed to be ok. Totally focused on their game, concentration appears sincere.

I get back up & head back for my chair at the kitchen table. She's finished pouring herself some coffee from a depleted pot & sits back down with a steaming cup.

She takes a breath & lights a smoke.

'Bob's a roofer, so when he's working, we're ok We're on & off EI, sometimes welfare.'

A roofer I thought. No wonder we're in this mess. The roofing profession being notorious for indulging in coke. Their reputation precedes them as being a culture of stone. But they do make good money when they're working. Hard high work in more ways than one.

'Is he working now,' I picked up my cup & pretended I was taking a sip. Giving me the chance to divert my eyes & give her time to tell me the truth. I know by the report he hasn't worked in weeks. She hesitated knowing that she was going to lie.

Just as she was about to speak, she was alerted by a familiar sound of a backfire. She tensed like a snake in the grass. A coughing car was heard in the parking lot.

Then everything changed in an instant. She'd been lying & misleading about her contact with Bob. Clever girl. She was like a cornered cat. She knew it was Bob's car. She'd failed to mention that when he'd been talking to 'the kids' he'd also been talking to her I figured. Telling her he had to come over & get some clothes. She had probably said not today the social workers coming but Bob probably wasn't listening. Didn't care.

He came in through the door like he was coming home from work. The kids propelled up & pole vaulted to his legs clinging like leeches. He looked about & spied me sitting at the kitchen table & he froze.

He was a handsome man six feet if an inch, broad muscular physique, well tanned. That of a man who worked outside with his hands. Eyes dark blue almost too blue to be true. Hair cropped short as was the style for the working man. Cotton jacket with a zipper up the front & crest with the business logo of-- I suppose-- the roofing company, it was well worn & almost raggy. He wore it well & I'm sure quite often.

'Who are you?' he said in a challenging crackling high pitched vibrato manner.

I hesitated for effect then got up like the lady I was & walked purposely over right at him. At the last moment when the tension was so stretched you could feel the boil, I stuck out my hand in a professional manner & said,

'You must be Bob. I'm the social worker,' I said taking total control. I knew women like me scare the shit out of men like him.

All this time she was silent. I glanced quickly over as I said the above & she was sitting in stone, like a statue holding a burning torch.

He shook my hand in a grand gesture as if I was an armed apparition. He had the sweet-sour stench of years old boozing pouring out his pores. I was wallowing in how uncomfortable this must be for him. We all knew I could call the cops & get him right away busted for breaking the no contact agreement, which was highlighted prominently in the report. I had a copy of said doc all signed sealed & official sitting sternly in my briefcase, always be prepared I'd learnt over the years. I relished the confrontation, the real drama we had going on right now. Would Bob turn & run, would she cry out in disbelief, would the kids ever let go of his legs, would I be a prick.

'Just here to pick up some clothes,' he said. Letting go my hand & starting to realize his plan of coming back for awhile to see the kids & get a meal & watch some TV-- maybe stay the night-- was going down like the titanic. In the back of his mind his plan was to not make a big deal of what had happened & we'll just carry on as before. My presence threw, a huge ass wrench, into his spokes.

Finally, she broke her silence & yelled at the boys to come over here. Come on into the kitchen. They relented & let up their strangle grip on Bob's thighs & with the help of Bob pulling them off of him like a band aid & saying go, go, go on now. They stubbornly reluctantly went over to mother. Looking over their shoulder as they dragged their feet across a cheap well worn throw rug.

I walked purposely back to my seat in the kitchen. Everyone waiting to see if I asked to use the phone, note; this was before everyone had a smart phone in their pocket.

I could smell the temptation in Bob's temporal state to turn high tail & run. I watched her take a slow sip of tea from the mug with a picture of the Edmonton skyline crudely embossed upon it. I could feel her straining to be aggressively apologetic but the cat had her tongue.

The boys standing by her, starting to tear up. Each having no idea what is going on in the adult world. Why couldn't they be with Daddy spewing from their faces.

I hesitated for dramatic effect, then as if we were all just friends,

'Go up get your clothes,' I said as if an offhand remark. 'Boys stay here,' I said in another voice. This one a bit firmer, noticing they were anxious to follow Dad.

Bob bolted up the stairs. Taking them two at a time. He was obviously in good shape.

'I had no idea he was coming here,' she lied. She even had the makings of a smirk in the corner of one of her lips. You could see she was still in that compromising place where she wanted to believe her man needed her so much, he just couldn't stay away. Still living on that primeval plain that having a man made her somehow better than me.

I listened to Bob rummage around over head. I was timing it by the minute in my head.

We two just sat in silence. Me ignoring her last lie.

Bob came back in an appropriate matter of minutes & was standing at the door suitcase in hand ready, anxious to leave. He had no romantic intentions, his reality was all about power & control. With me here that balloon burst, he realized he was beat. He needed a beer with the boys at the bar, I could see the dry taste in his mouth.

'Hold up,' I demanded, getting up off the chair & walking with purpose, my short-healed leather low cut boots clicking on the kitchen linoleum & then muffled on the rug.

'You can't be here, do you understand that.' I stood & stared challenging him to a dispute.

'It's bullshit,' he blurted having the nerve to look me in the face.

'Whatever,' I strongly replied, ignoring him completely refusing to engage in his idiocy.' If you're here & I am unaware of it you'll risk losing your kids. Now here's my card. You contact me & we'll talk.' I said, like the person in authority I was.

'Can I say goodbye to the boys,'

I thought of the scene as he's leaving but it was also something the boys would've wanted.

'Ok, be quick.'

The boys flew like projectiles as he bent down on his knees & opened his arms. Maybe this will start the healing I thought as I watched.

It went on for too long & I gave him the eye. He had one boy on his shoulder hugging the other with his arm. If he doesn't de-embrace I will have to tear them apart, like pulling off tape. Lets say goodbye I said to the boys, gentle but firm. I'd seen too many of these scenes carry on so

long it became a screaming match, the kids wailing for him not to go. Cut it short & clean was my way.

He got up full height & shuffled the boys over to the couch.

'I'll see you soon, be strong' he said to both boys at once. They both clutched their game controls & started channeling their pain into shooting zombies. Big crocodile tears of confusion falling off their cheeks.

He picked up his suitcase which was more of a duffel bag,

'See you later Hon,'

'Yea right,' she replied, not even bothering to look up. Eyes transfixed on her coffee cup like she was waiting to watch it move.

He turned & left as if he'd never been there, except if you smelled really hard you could sense in your heart the carnage he has ravaged. You could feel the presence of perverted behavior which needed to be addressed if this family was going to have a chance of surviving.

The boys didn't even look up to acknowledge he'd left. That was an impressive display of discipline. At that age their innocent feelings are boiling up inside each one of them like a MacBeth witch's cauldron. They need to work harder than their age should allow, to suppress their conflicting confusions.

She'd taken the opportunity, of the silence following his departure, to light up another cigarette. How many was that now I thought, four. Four, I'd been here for about an hour now, a little less. So she smokes a pack a day if this is her regular pace.

I moved ever so softly back to the waiting kitchen table. What now she must've thought-- sitting their quiet-- smoking her smoke. She gonna take my kids hammering like a thunder in her head. She must've either hated or loved me for how I treated her husband. I was hoping she was taking notes, at least in her head.

I sat back down, like a fighter after a round.

'What now,' she asked. She was getting tired I could feel her concentration waning.

'I need to pee,' she said stubbing out her smoke which was only half done. She'd probably been holding her need for relief hard, not wanting to go upstairs & use the washroom when he was there. She didn't wait for a response & hustled like a gazelle going after a prey taking three stairs at once. I waited, I appreciated the break actually, gave me time to refocus. They say after forty minutes the mind starts to wonder & you start getting repetitious. I heard the toilet flush & time for her to rinse her hands & this time she came down the stairs like a level headed banker. Each step showing that pain of having to pee a memory.

I let her get settled. Time to hit her with the plan to save her family. I gave her space to light up a smoke & check her cup to see how much coffee she had left. I waited & watched her sitting down, sensing her tension. No further distorted distractions to be delayed will be tolerated I thought. I needed her concentration now, this was serious.

Sensing the need to start I reached down into my standard government issue Archie Bunker briefcase leaning against the table & poked in to pull out the agreement we would need to sign. While searching my briefcase for the object of my intent, my fingers brushed up against the weapon I always kept, laying dormant in the bottom of my bag. A small iron tire wrench, about a foot long, with a crowbar end, it could do some damage if used.

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I learned early on in my career that you had to be prepared for any situation & that could include someone coming at you with ill intentions. I had actually been shot at once when I first started. I was working as a social worker in an isolated Indigenous community in northern Alberta. I was young & ambitious. All friends & family thought I was butt fuck crazy for taking the position. They said I was just looking for trouble, always pushing the envelope too far. Thinking back, they were probably right.

Well, I was sitting in the driveway outside this big Friday afternoon party in my government issued Bronco on the res. I was with this mother telling her that if she didn't come with me right now, I would be forced to bring her kids into care. Gramma had told me just prior that she's had enough.

Gramma & I previously sitting at Gramma's rickety kitchen table in her rickety home, Gramma saying, 'She's just wanting to party & dump her kids on me. I've had enough,' Gramma always in tears at what has happened to her people. 'I'm sick & Grandpa can't help he's too old. He can barely walk.' Grandpa sitting in an old-- seen better days-- chair staring at nothing out the foggy front window. Gramma trying to come to terms, rationalizing in her mind the demise of ancient tradition--family looking after their own. But ancient tradition collapsed when the ancient peoples discovered booze. Her daughter was a drunk there was no getting past that & her daughters no good husband was worse. She's had enough, you could feel the despair the desperation of seeing a way of life corroded to collapse. The only way to stop my daughter's destruction is for you take the kids she said. It was like a pain so deep for her to confront the truth.

So, I left the kids at Gramma's, two girls, five & seven, with a promise to return with mother or I'd take them to a foster home. Gramma trusted my word & sat patiently waiting for me to come back. Now here I was sitting in the conspicuous Bronco outside this trashy trailer party on the res, on a Friday afternoon talking to Mom, who'd come out when word got around whitey was waiting in the driveway. She was dead drunk. Head bobbing, words slurring, telling me she's ok. Long black hair falling down framing her face like snakes slithering, alert for action.

Small thin lips wet with drink, bits of spit spitting as she tried to put two words together. I listened to nonsense & finally made it clear,

‘I’ll make you a deal. You come back with me to Gramma’s & start looking after your kids or go back into the party & lose your kids.’ I’d had enough of the bullshit.

At that exact instant the door to the party trailer flew open & a crazed lunatic burst out onto the small elevated deck with a rifle, cradled resting on his thigh. Barrel pointing up to the bright blue heavens—sticking like a tree growing out of his leg-- ready to blast the shit out of a non-existent moon. Great big tall dark lanky Indian Man ready to rumble, you could feel the air vibrate with hate.

Her husband I presumed.

She jumped out of the truck—like a fire started under her butt-- yelling I gotta go I gotta go. She ran like a puppet, all arms & legs. Up the driveway across through the withered dried-up yard. I got out, thinking our meeting wasn’t over yet. Opening my Bronco door & stepping down onto the driveway, thinking about should I yell after her or just tell myself the interview is finished. What a dope, I chose the former &, yelled out calling her back. Well this of course inflamed the beast on the porch. He turned his attention to me. Standing swaying like he was on a boat like the fucking drunk he was. He lowers the barrel & points his rifle at me. Points the gun right at my face & fires over my head. I thought I was dead. I actually accepted my head was history. But no it was only his sick twisted sense of humour having his way at my expense. These people were crack shots to a man, hunters. Every one of them getting at least a moose or two when in season. They were men of the forests. If he had wanted to blow me to kingdom cum, I wouldn’t be writing this.

I jumped back, like on a spring, into the government issued four-wheel drive Bronco & squirrelled off like a nascar driver, doing a donut on the front yard. I was running on pure adrenalin. Pissing myself a little in my haste. Just a dribble. That was ok. This was back in the days when I dressed for work like some one going on a hike. Thick sweaters, full boots, hardy blue jeans, no accessories except my saint peter’s medallion round my neck—to keep me safe—a gift from my Mom-- Mom was a worrywart. Never a hat, I liked to leave my blonde hair long back in those days it highlighted my beautiful blue eyes if I say so myself. So a little dampness in my-- what felt like-- army issued flannel panties was no big deal. I glanced back as I fled, the two of them on the porch in a furious frenzy. He letting off another shot thinking he was scaring me off. No need, mission accomplished.

I picked up the kids at grammas & skedaddled, a little faster than usual back to town. Driving quite quickly through the long northern forest cut in two by the intrusive northern Highway. The drive was desolate, the kids both fast asleep, emotionally drained. I alone except for the odd truck. At least the weather was nice. A golden dusk framed through canyon rows & rows of endless trees. After an hour & a bit I had the kids placed in a nice foster home on the edge of

town. I was so desperate for a drink I felt my self sweating. That night at the bar I was in my glory.

A couple of days later I had to serve these same two papers for court. I went to their house early in the day. Making sure I got there before they started drinking. They had one of the nicer places on the res. His father was a high up in the band hierarchy so they weren't living, in quite the squalor, of the rest of the community. This also made him feel entitled & disgraced that I'd actually apprehended his kids. I knocked on a flappy screen door & was called inside. They were sitting around their kitchen table just finishing breakfast. Two empty chairs quite noticeable standing silent. He saw me walk in & went berserk. He came at me like a banshee fists flying big long Indian legs striding. Abject hate pouring off him like a marathon runners sweat. She jumped up & started screaming—loud,

'Stop, stop, don't make it worse,' she pole vaulting in between us. He standing stoic spewing spittle he's so mad. I honestly had no means of defense. I stood naked in terror as she pleaded to him, please no. He finally stood down & went back to his chair. It was then I noticed an enormous black & blue shadow plastering her eye like a storm cloud. We got down to business & I explained what's to happen next. He just couldn't handle his rage & had to leave before I finished. She was quite reasonable once he was gone & she was sober.

After that day I started packing my tire iron just in case. It was a horrible humbling helpless feeling I experienced-- I didn't like it.

So yea my experiences throughout my career have warranted that a weapon could come in handy. So far I've never had to use it thank god. But like to-day. If Bob had of come in swinging, I would've been ready. When you're working in the field of family violence nothing & everything is predictable.

*

I started in with her on the negotiations. My document in front of me my pen ready to write. I pulled my chair up to the table for emphasis.

'Number one' I said, 'from now on all contact with Bob goes through me,'

The abruptness of my approach took her a little by surprise. I saw her thinking about raising her voice in protest, but I cut her off,

'If he wants to see the kids or the kids want to see him, I'll work something out. You are not to arrange anything.'

'What if he phones & I just pick it up,' she replied in a snarky arrogant street vernacular.

'I'll be meeting with him to talk about what he has to do. If he phones hang up & let me know.'

'What if he just comes by,' she thought she had me on this one.

'Phone the cops,' I said tiring of the subject.

'Number two, I want you to go for counselling.'

'What in the world for,' she shot back like I was imposing an imposition.

'Education,' I said.

'Whatever do you mean,' she said getting swarthy. By this time she had crossed her legs & was leaning forward. I met her challenge with a gaze of my own that could fry fish.

'What happened the other night was very serious. If it happens again, you'll lose the kids & I don't want that to happen.'

She raised her head like a log had just struck her in the face. No one likes to hear those words. They are very difficult to say.

'The counselling will help you understand the dynamics of family violence. How it is a learned behavior that has to change. I'll make the arrangements.'

'How will I get there. He's got the car.' She threw me this curve & I had to step make & time my swing.

'I'll take you,' I hit it out of the park with that one. 'Help you & I get to know each other better.' Not much she could say around that.

'I want you to go to drug & alcohol counselling, as well,' I expected a reaction to this. No one ever thinks their over indulgence is the problem.

She reacted as I figured she would, sitting straight up like a bird on a branch of a birch taking offence. Offended that you would broach the subject that was private none of my business. But it was & we have to address the elephant in the room.

'I don't have a drinking problem,' she said proud. She probably doesn't I thought but let's just make sure. We knew she liked her coke that she's admitted, so we better cut that off at the pass or she's destined to doom.

'We party just like everyone else,'

'No,' I corrected her, 'If everyone partied like you, I'd be in their face too. It's gone to far it's affecting the kids & your ability to protect them as their Mother.' This was a practiced speech & I said it almost like off a script.

'I'll make the arrangements. I'll arrange transportation & arrange care for the kids if needed.'

'Well I certainly don't think I want to be seen in that light,' she was indignant.

'Well, you're walking the edge,'

'Edge of what,'

'Peering into an abyss of pain if you don't deal with it now,'

'What's a fucking abyss,' she asked in a very sarcastic smirk.

'It's a deep dark hole that has no end.'

I moved my legs so they were sitting acceptably apart. Giving me a chance to get a second breath.

'Let me tell you a story,' I started.

'There was this judge here in Edmonton. he was right out of the old west. Even wore a cowboy hat to work & heaven knows what he wore beneath the robe. He was a hanging judge. Wanted everything to stay the same but it wasn't. He was hearing cases which just made no sense to him. Why were all these people drinking themselves stupid & losing their kids. So what he started doing was bringing a bottle of booze & placing it up front on his bench & saying as if God from above,

'Here you go you choose. Choose your kids or the booze.'

'It was very dramatic very wild west. Did it do any good in the end I don't know the jury's still out. But you get my point. Let's try & avoid you having to make that decision. If it comes down to You, Booze & Bob or the boys who will you choose. There's a decision which requires a clear mind.' I was exhausted with my speech. She seemed to be listening but I was stretching the strings of her concentration.

She was squirming & it was making her mad. 'I don't have a drinking problem I do have a problem with a husband whose an asshole.

'I don't think—I-- have a problem with drugs & booze.' She said defiantly a bit of life definitely coming back into her face.

Oh oh here we go I thought. The questions of who's right who's wrong. The yes or no thing that a person clings to because they think, I don't know what I'm talking about. You don't know anything about me is ignorantly implied. My right to live my life the way I want is none of your business. This argument is quite fine, until the way you're living is abusing your kids. That's where I come in.

*

Much earlier in my career I had come to terms with this diehard dilemma. I was the child protection social worker for an area way up north that was made up of Mennonite pioneers who lived their life by the good book & were doing quite well. Prosperous wealthy, all finances shared. Great big tractors, acres & acres of crops, barns as big as cathedrals.

It was highly unusual for child protection to get called into the affairs of their insular community. However, a young fourteen-year-old boy had runaway from home. He had escaped the confines of the colony & had runaway to his father's brother who had long ago left the colony way of life. The problem was the colony wanted him back & he didn't want to go. The Uncle had called the RCMP for help but the RCMP were reluctant to get involved. They had their hands full policing an area the size of a small European country. So, the RCMP referred it to child protection & I was assigned.

To get to Unc's place I was told of a short cut which involved taking a ferry. I had to take a long dirt road overgrown with poplar, ash & birch pushing for space down either side of the gravel. Coming out of this canopy upon a river where there was an old-fashioned wooden ferry that took you across one car at a time. Unc's place was just up the road on the other side. After a wobbly tense ride over the river, I drove off waving a weary farewell to the ferry man-- who was still so old world he couldn't get over a female driving-- & proceeded to Uncs. I pulled in to an old one floor wooden farmhouse, with a big porch highlighting the view. Which was of nothing, really just a grove of trees blocking off endless vacant vacuous bald-headed prairie.

I went up to the door, introduced myself & asked to talk with the boy. The man who had introduced himself as The Uncle led me into a big open kitchen & after sharing the necessary pleasantries about the weather, I got down to business. I was dressed as much like a farmer as I thought was appropriate. Loose blouse, blue jeans, a well tailored blue jean jacket with a pair of hiking boots hugging my feet. Good thing about visiting a farmers house is that you don't always have to take off your shoes. Only when it's muddy & wet outside. Today was in summer so at the worst everything was just covered in dust.

We were sitting at the big old kitchen table. Unc went to the backdoor & yelled for the boy to come in. The boy was immediately there, he hadn't been far. He was just a young skinny kid. Arms like sticks, body waiting to grow. Small pointy face all angles of chin, eyebrows & nose. Unc introduced me to Tommy his nephew, & directed Tommy where to sit at the table. Uncle asked if he could sit in. I asked Tommy if he was alright with this & he eagerly nodded his head, he seemed relieved.

'So what's going on,' I asked in a straight forward manner, trying to look Tommy in the eye. He immediately diverted his head, showing shy & said,

'I don't know.'

'I hear you don't want to go home. What's up with that.'

Tommy looked suspiciously up & into my eyes trying to figure out if he was in trouble. Who knows what he believes. In the world he's running from the consequences for his action could be severe. The devil himself plays a large part in any punishment in the ways of their beliefs. His mortal soul is at stake. His mortal sin being just a young teen ager who wanted to burst the confines of colony life.

'Have you been beaten?' I asked, I had heard rumours of corporeal punishment being popular in the colony. Tommy looked quickly over at his uncle. His Uncle with a compassionate loving nod gave him the Ok to talk.

'Just with a whip,' Tommy said sloughing it off.

'How often,' he had my attention.

'Just when I'm bad.'

'How often is that?'

Tommy looked back at his uncle, who nodded & Tommy lifted up his dusty well-worn shirt to his nipples. then stood & turned displaying his back. There were a series of pinkish welts criss crossing a spikey spine, none to deep but obviously he'd been assaulted.

'If I was to take you home right now would you get whipped,' I asked. This scared him, the possibility that I could do that. The uncle stepped in,

'I don't mean to speak bad of my brother but the ways of the colony can be severe. One must follow orders from the Elders. It's one of the reasons I left. Rules for disciplining a disobedient child are quite clear.'

Unc's words gave me an option-- for Tommy to remain here at Uncs if he wanted—staving off his going to foster care. Unc was presenting as a very trustworthy sincere honest man. I kept that thought, ready if needed, in the back of my head.

'Do you want to go home?' I asked.

'Yea, but I like it here to.' Kids, never could they ever give you a straight answer.

'So would you be willing to go home if you could & visit your uncle when you wanted.'

Tommy's eyes opened like dark clouds parting exposing a blue sky full of hope. I think he had honestly thought that I was going to just take him home. He now clued in that's not at all what was going on.

The wife emerged through the door, out picking peas I could see them in the basket. A couple of small kids on her skirt tails. Nice long cotton dress probably made it herself. It looked very utilitarian easy to work in & lots of play. A slight scent of perspiration like a perfume entered the room. Her hair all short blonde & curly very pragmatic, very durable.

She introduced herself proper. Wiping the dust off her hands on the foils of her dress. Striding directly at me holding out a now clean paw. I stood & met her lovely soft blue eyes, so deep you felt yourself falling through a tunnel. I brushingly touched her outstretched hand. She introduced herself in a tender sweet voce, I responded trying my best to take it down a notch.

'Would you like something to drink?' she immediately asked, 'I'm sure Ben here hasn't been the good host,' pointing a stained slender finger delicately at Unc.

She then glancingly gave Unc a flirty smile & they quietly shared a moment. Unc remaining silent knowing when to keep his mouth shut.

'That would be lovely,' I said.

Before you knew it there was a nice cold glass of pure spring water in my grasp.

I took the time to get to know the boys family-- his name was Thomas, Tom, Tommy. He had one older brother, two younger sisters & one sister older than Tommy, but she wasn't as old as his brother. He was sorta like a middle child I deduced. He missed them all terribly. Especially his older brother they were quite tight. I asked the ages of the girls & noticed that they were all at some puberic stage in their life. As a woman I sure knew how confusing those times are. Especially when the blood starts becoming a presence that doesn't go away.

I had to be careful. Now that Tommy was getting comfortable, he started extending his needs the way all teenagers all over the world do when they get an inch they go for a mile. He was talking about attending movies, getting video games, wanting to go out with friends. It was over at one of his friends that he saw his first TV & he was hooked. His parents flipped when he told them all about it in his innocence & he asking why can't they get one of those. But that had shown Tommy another world. His friends at school—as well-- were telling him stories about life outside the colony & wearing cool clothes not like those farmer pants he had to wear.

Some of his talk was that of a typical rebellious teen who's just starting to see there's a lot more to life than God & the Bible.

I asked him what brought on the last whipping. He said he got it because he was late coming home after a spring time affair at the Mennonite Hall. He'd gone over to a friend's house to see a movie instead of coming right home. No big deal he had thought. Father saw it differently & had him lift up his shirt & gave him a couple of swats. Didn't even hurt he said trying to be tough. But he wasn't I could see in his face that it had made him feel ashamed. He was a well-loved child. That was evident. Raised in a loving place. The beatings sounded like they were more just following gospel rules then for actual discipline. Little did I know, the argument awaiting me, when I tried to explain, you can't do that, when I met with his Father the next day. You can't do that I don't care what it says in the Bible. But I digress.

I told Tommy that I would contact his parent's as soon as possible & try & work this thing out. Unc asked what should he do if his brother calls. I told him to just have him phone me.

I said my goodbyes & headed back to the office. This time I took the long way. I didn't want to risk getting stuck at the ferry. Unc told me the ferry really isn't that reliable & the least little swell will delay a crossing.

'It's just Old George & its bin his bread & butter since I was a boy.' Unc said describing the ferryman.

I drove off into the early dusk of a prairie sunset, driving down a perfect prairie highway. Endless fields of forever stretching out into the never.

I Immediately phoned the father when I got back to the office, it was near four thirty so the secretaries were getting ready to leave & my colleagues were making arrangements for drinks. I was the one still working as usual, some of my colleagues had more experience & were able to do a lot more in a little less time & with a lot less worry. Some just weren't as conscientious as me.

I arranged to meet with the family at eleven o'clock the next morning. At least they lived straight east no worry about a ferry. Just a long drive out & sometimes a longer one back. That night I set out a hardy set of slacks on the bed & dusted off my boots before I went to sleep. Spending a long time in front of the mirror in thought, combing my hair.

The next day I got a good start. All my caseload was a drive north east west south from the office. I stopped to pick up a coffee & something sweet to eat at Terry's takeout before I filled up at the Red Rooster—where, just a note, when I first started I didn't know the difference between unleaded & diesel, so the second day out I filled up the trusty Bronco with a good dose of diesel resulting in the Bronco coughing like it had bronchitis. That didn't go over well with the bosses—this morning I used the right hose. I pulled out onto the Mackenzie Highway & started to make my way to highway 58 east. I had gotten used to listening to CBC's Peter Gzowski's morning show on the radio in the Bronco to keep me company on my morning drives. Get my mind in motion. I had that on in the background as I made my way today, heading east into a bright prairie-- recently risen-- sun. I had on my shades, I looked cool. I always enjoyed Gzowski's interview style very personable, very Canadian. Him & I became quite an imaginary team over the years. It worked out well because it gave me time to plan in my head what I was gonna do at each stop. Usually, if I was going to the Res, I'd be seeing 8-10 families a day & had to review every file in my head & what was the plan. Sometimes no matter what you planned it never worked out the way you thought it would. Best laid plans of mice & men oft go astray. There was never more truth to that statement then working in the north. One thing about the north, the weather could become severe in a second, you never knew what you were potentially walking into. Today was a little unique. We never got calls from the Mennonite Colony. They were famous for keeping everything hidden. I was excited with the challenge.

I turned into the farm & it was immense. A typical very well-off prairie place. Big long recently gravelled driveway, tall popular trees standing as centurions on either side lining the drive. Huge red barn, steepled, statute of Jesus on the top, arms spread out in vane, swaying with the wind. Three monstrous combines standing idle in the yard. They were so big & clean they looked like something out of a Star Wars movie. A farm house to die for. Beautiful wide

windows, pretentious porch, slanted sloping deep black roof. An elegant stain glass design, decorating an otherwise pragmatic front door. The type they could see you coming but you couldn't see in. I was sure I felt eyes on the Bronco, watching wondering, who in the world was approaching. An alien on their land.

Fields all around smelling prosperity. Endless. I pulled up the Bronco & parked. Stepping out maintaining a sense of dignity with a touch of authority, swinging my legs out of the Bronco, I touched my boots to the gravel. Suddenly I felt a chill, like an electric shock after rubbing a rug, but it came from above.

I let it pass in a flash & walked up to the house as if I owned the place. Up the stairs unto the well-furnished porch, with the obligatory swing. I rapped firmly on the frame with a loud snap. The door was automatically opened as if on a switch & I was invited in by someone obviously the father. I graciously stepped through into a foyer, used for coats & shoes. I noticed a large living room off to one side with couches, chairs & a rug. Rather elegant I thought for all their turning their backs on material needs. Stairs staring right ahead going straight up. A wide canyon hall on the left leading to the kitchen. Hall walls covered in pictures containing content particular to the Bible. Just the hits, Jesus on the cross, Daniel & the lions, Paul on the Road to Damascus, Samson tearing down the temple, Noah in his boat. An overhead hall light spotlighting a gallery displaying their chided children's stories.

I was immediately caught off guard. The father instead of introducing himself introduced me to-- The Elder-- who had been sitting in an easy chair patiently awaiting my arrival. I never invited him I thought. The Elder rose like Jesus from the cave & extended a punctured palm my way. He stood shaking my hand looking like someone from an Exorcist movie. First off, he wasn't as old as I'd have thought, being an elder & all. Maybe about fifty. Hard to tell at first because he was wearing this ridiculous ancient black wide flat rimmed hat, with the brim almost hitting me when he reached out his holy hand. He looked like everyone's vision of a puritan prophet, presenting as an ethereal evil. A full black robe-- presenting a disciple of the devil look-- buttoned up like a blanket, was open just at the top. Revealing a sternly starched immaculate deep white shirt adorned with a cute little bow tie sticking out from his neck. I almost thought I'd just stepped back two hundred years. But no this is now I had to remind myself.

The Elder was immediately in charge. He never gave a name. The Elder introduced me to Tommy's father who was actually a bit smaller than I had envisioned. A rather small frail, thin chinned, hair fallen out, short type of guy. Eyes that looked always afraid. He looked ashamed.

The Elder ushered we three down the hall to the kitchen, the bible story gallery entertaining us as we made our way, The Elder in his element. Not a woman in sight. Not even a smell.

In the kitchen The Elder seated us around, the actually quite modern, formica kitchen table, set about with a set of nice store-bought chairs. I thought everything was going to be hand carved & elegant for some reason. But no, it was actually quite drab. I sat at one end of the table,

Tommy's father at the other end. The Elder in the middle. We were positioned, ready set for battle.

The kitchen was huge. Big wooden island slab in the middle just perfect for chopping, peeling & talking. A nice broad kitchen sink, with rows of cupboards overhead full of dishes & pots, forks & knives. Jars of all types holding mounds of preserves. Everything looking down stoically, like an audience watching an operation. Stark linoleum floor, easy cleaning.

The Elder spoke;

Bowing his head, he said a prayer of patience & we got started.

'We resent this intrusion into our affairs,' a voice deep & controlled, used to a pulpit.

'We have our own way of raising children following the guidance of the scriptures.'

Oh god I thought here we go. Right off the bat on the attack. I listened respectfully biting my tongue till it almost bled.

'The gospels are quite clear. Spare the rod spoil the child.'

Good one I thought how about the one stoning to death your women for infidelity. Or if there wasn't a law against that, would you still be stoning.

'The laws of the gospel & the laws of man at times come to clash,' I said in a passionate challenging manner.

'Do you believe in Jesus Christ,' The Elder asked.

'I believe that no child deserves to be abused. If that puts me at odds end with Jesus than we could have an issue. Do I believe in Jesus' word, of course who wouldn't. But correct me if I'm wrong. but didn't this business about spare the rod spoil the child,, come up before Jesus was born.'

'It's written in the gospel from where we get our rules to live our life.'

From here we proceeded into a rhetoric of religion that went round & round in a circle. Everything coming back to the ways of God versus the ways of me. No matter what I said no matter what I implied no matter how hard I tried I couldn't convince The Elder that you don't need a god to be good & I'm a lot closer to Jesus than he'll ever be. The father was not to use the whip on the child no matter what your good book says. It finally evolved into who has the right to determine how a father can disciple his children.

'God has paved a path for life which must be followed. To not will mean an eternity in hell.'

That's butt fuck crazy I thought but I didn't say it out loud thank goodness. To seriously live your life in such fear of damnation just makes you a fool. I could talk all I want about how stupid I thought this was, but you just know you'd be wasting words.

This seemed to be his rationale for every action known to man. I started to learn that sometimes a brick wall is just a brick wall. Butting your head like a rutting bull up against a fallen fence, sometimes you just have to accept your efforts are futile.

I learned that there is a reality of arguing with a fanatic & that is that you will never win. This knowledge was to serve me well through my career.

As Me & The Elder were jawing it out, the mother was coming in & out of the kitchen puttering about. Father sat, caught between his allegiance to the church & his love for his boy. Mother was a wiry stout woman with breasts like pecs, hidden legs beneath a long willowy skirt. She never once looked me in the eye. She was in for water & to get the kids lunch ready as it was getting to that time they'd be home from school, for their midday meal. Never once did she sneak a peek. To think what she thought of me could be quite astounding. I must've presented as a creature from another planet. It would be too difficult for her to comprehend; I was a woman-- we were of the same sex-- we shared the secrets of our sensations.

I heard the outside door open & the girls filed down the hall. All breathtaking in the pureness of their beauty & who do you think was coming up the rear no one but the illusive Tommy. He'd obviously just come home for lunch & to visit his sisters & older brother who I assumed was out working the farm. I didn't say a word. The oldest daughter came solemnly first, followed by the two younger girls, then Tommy, who was all smiles. As the girls passed me by within a breath, I got a sudden chill up my feet. They were all dressed in bonnets & beautiful almost wedding dress attire except of course Tommy dressed in dusty overalls & a blank yellow shirt. The girls carried an aura of servitude dressed in a beautiful bowl.

They all got their meals & sat down at a small table off the kitchen in a large pantry. Out of hearing distance from the adults.

By now I had maneuvered the discussion to confront control. Trying to explain to a disinterested Elder & a subservient father that whipping was abuse & abuse is all about control. It traumatizes the child & this stunts the child's emotional growth. Well The Elder was having none of this.

I explained by using the bible as an excuse was just a hypocritical myth. Rationalizing the real reason for your using the whip. That was, it gave you free reign to assert excessive control over another human being & this is abuse.

We were getting nowhere. Now that Tommy was home it upped the ante of my presence. He wasn't staying if he was going to get whipped for running away. When I said that I said it loud enough to make sure Tommy heard it loud & clear, I had noticed he was sitting at the edge of the table, trying to listen but not get caught. His ears were perked, while he was peeling his banana & devouring his sandwich like he hadn't eaten in forever.

The Elder had had enough. He must leave. He had a very important meeting with the leaders of his community he shared-- in an attempt to imply threat & power. Insinuating I am nobody, he

will take this up with those much more in control than me. I snickered inside at his illusion that this was a matter of politics. Good luck with that I thought. He replaced his hat & took his leave. Being very apologetic to the father but he must be off. To me he looked me in the eye like he was trying to scorch my soul, took my hand in his as I stood & told me;

‘God loves you,’ In a most sincere-- absolving my sins-- manner. He then departed through the kitchen door like a devout dervish on a black sledge of ethereal real. Dedicated to a way of life, which within his world, was not in dispute. Because if it was then they’d all look like fools & that will never be the case.

Now it was just me & the father. Interestingly enough mother came over & sat in the vacated Elder seat. The kids also started to filter in. The oldest daughter standing over by the sink the other two standing shyly beside her. I asked both mother & father if it was ok if I invited Tommy to the table. They both reluctantly responded in silence. I motioned Tommy to come over & sit. He pulled up a chair keeping close to his Dad. Draped about his Dad’s shallow shoulders. Showing a sense of feeling, definitely not defiance.

Dad-- as I had guessed-- was much more pliable to be molded, to come around to appreciate my ultimatum once the preacher had passed. The strain of having to balance their love for family with their love for God must be quite extraordinary. The sincerity in their faces was soothing. You had to believe there was no malice in their actions. They truly believed in a way of life dictated by the scriptures. The common denominator had to be love, so that was the card I played.

I knew they loved their boy & I knew Tommy loved them. There had to be a way to work this out.

I talked of the whipping & how it had to stop. The father was very emphatic he only does it because he can’t fathom his boy ending up with the devil apart of his heart. It must be beaten out of him. The Mother sat silent. The older girl was secretly intent on what was being said. I could feel she had something to say but daren’t venture forth.

‘Tommy what do you think,’ I asked.

‘I don’t know,’ he said,’ I would like to be able to go over to my friends.’

I asked the Father, ‘what’s the issue with Tommy’s request?’

‘I don’t like him going over there, it’s a devils lair.’

‘What do you mean,’ I queried.

‘They listen to devil music & watch movies which just aren’t suited to our way of life.’ Father realized once he said this that perhaps we had some room to maneuver. Aren’t suited-- by virtue of the phrase-- leaves itself open to an expanded interpretation.

‘Tommy what do you do over at your friend’s.’ I asked the young boy in a kind understanding genuine manner. A manner which let him know he was not in trouble, no matter what the answer.

‘We just watch like cartoons, play video games.’

‘What type of video games,’ this was important, I took a chance with this question because if he answered, ‘Masters of War,’ I was in for another long debate. My problem was that if he was playing a war video I would’ve tried to steer him away as well & agree with his Dad that his friends house was not a healthy place.

‘Donkey Con,’ he said. I was relieved.

‘So basically, just fun stuff,’ I said trying to get the folks to see there was no harm. There was a degree of innocence at play here, Donkey Con, was a pretty innocent game. I explained this to Mom & Dad. He wasn’t over at his friends watching porn & playing killing games I said. So let’s negotiate I said to myself, do a little bit of advance advocating for the kid.

‘Can we agree to cut him a touch of slack,’ I almost pleaded to the parents. Switching my vision from one to the other. The older girl overheard my manner & turned her head away & looked blankly out the kitchen window. Sun stripes streaming in, squinting her view.

‘Tommy if your parents agree that you can go to your friends, will you stop running away.’

‘I guess,’ he sorta said out of the side of his mouth.

‘How’s that sound,’ I looked up & watched both their reactions. The Mother was lost in thought the Father saw he needed to retreat a bit about this devil stuff.

‘He must agree to be home for dinner, prayers & chores,’ The Father decided.

‘How’s that sound,’ I replied talking directly to Tommy.

‘Ok I guess.’ Tommy said into his sleeve.

At this I noticed the older girl started to move away from the counter. There was that chill again like lightening running up my back. What’s going on here I thought. Am I just scratching the surface of something severe. The girl looked over at me with what looked like tears in her eyes & left the room. The other two younger sisters close in tow.

Now I wasn’t averse to being suspicious. Sexual assault came in many sinister forms justified by the Lord.

This issue of Tommy visiting the friends seemingly resolved. I moved on to the elephant in the room. Making my speech I asserted my authority, applying it effectively to address the immediate issue of whipping.

'I must get a commitment from you that you will no longer use the whip to keep Tommy or any of your other children in line. If you can't make that commitment then I can't leave until you do.'

Father eagerly complied, was he being sincere or was he throwing me a lie. In my job as a Social Worker sometimes you have to make life changing decisions on the spot. Sometimes you just have to trust what's been said will be true.

Time to wrap up, I could see we were all exhausted. I asked Tommy how he felt. He felt fine, said in a melancholy demeanor. He's gonna stay here & not go over to his Uncles. Yes, he understood that. I made sure I gave him a card in front of the folks. The insinuation was obvious no words need be said.

I stood up from my kitchen chair, stretching my legs, & extended my hand which was grasped softly by the Father, the Mother just acknowledged with a flick of an eyelid. Who knows what secrets are hidden, what torment & fear have been inflicted on her gender in the name of the lord. Imprinted on the inner lids of her eyes the doings of the devil. She turned her head quickly but not fast enough I had seen.

They followed me down the hall. The older girl was sitting quietly on the couch in the living room. As I reached for the door I was startled by her movement of material. She had switched her legs crossing one leg over to the other. Causing her draping dress to billow, like a soft quick burst of blowing wind was joining us. Was she trying to get my attention. The folks were just coming up as I looked at her & could swear she was silently mouthing some sounds. It was all happening in a flash in the speed of light. What was it all about? Did it really happen or was my imagination just running away. They say in matters of sexual abuse you have to be careful not to let your imagination run amok as it will drive you crazy. Yet right around this time there were documented incidents of children being taken & being manipulated to be forced to perform sexual indecencies by the twisted minds of twisted people.

Those thoughts went through my head like a bolt of lightening. I regained my composure & walked out the door. Out across the yard on a breezy prairie afternoon, got into the Bronco & hi oh silver I was gone in a cloud of dust. Almost dismissing the tingling feeling of doom as just my imagination.

That night after a couple of beers I had to go home from the Zoo (our local watering hole) early, I was exhausted. I had decided while I was relaxing that I was going to do a surprise visit to the home the next day. I had to figure out a way to talk with that girl. I can get my foot in the door by saying I'm here to make sure Tommy didn't get a whipping. Quite willing to take the chance, that their trust in my belief they wouldn't hurt Tommy would be compromised. I was willing to compromise that component of my relationship with the parents if it meant that I could possibly get that girl alone. Like in the bathroom or walking out back. I knew I would figure out something.

Driving out the next morning It was raining, hard. Dark clouds laying low for as far as the eyes could see. Dropping dregs of oversized droplets splattering my windshield. I had to make sure I didn't miss the turn off, vision was that impaired.

I turned in at their mailbox. Driving, almost creeping up the long rain drenched driveway. The canyon of poplars bending like flags waving trying to withstand another prairie storm. You could almost sympathize with their efforts to stay standing.

I pulled up in front of the house & everything was still. Like the world had stopped twirling. As the storm raged around there was no motion of any type anywhere about. What the fuck I thought as I rolled down the window in spite of the wet. It was actually quite scary. These big huge monsters of machinery standing silent. No activity in the yard. No hum of motion. Probably just inside from the weather I thought. Yet the stillness seemed something more than that. For some reason I got the feeling I was at an abandoned movie set. Now no sense of anything but weight.

I pushed the Bronco door open against the wind & carefully stepped down to the ground. Being careful to cover my head by pulling my mountain coop hikers hood over my long blonde hair. It goes all straight when it's damp. I look like a blonde vampire queen.

I made my way to the house fighting gusts of a wet angry wind. It seemed intent to rain itself hardest on me as I walked up to the front door. Ominously trying to keep me back from what was next in store. I pushed my way through the weather finally reaching the steps. Up I went wet with rain & I knocked like a boxer on the large almost medieval looking front door. The hard wooden frame actually shook.

Not a response.

I peeked in squinting through a very blurry stain glass design. Standing on slippery toes to see through clearer glass near the top, I couldn't see a thing. Not a miniscule of motion everything was still. Everything quiet except the rain relentlessly washing the windows.

I pounded on the door again & waited. I had just read Truman Capote's book In Cold Blood so my mind was sorta twisted to the macabre. What if they were all in their dead. What if The Elder was right & the devil himself came in the form of Richard & Perry like in the book. Richard & Perry with their dirty black slicked back hair look. What if the family lay inside. Slayed like The Clutters for unknown sins. The family dreaming deep, sleeping heads comfortable on pillows, when evil itself surfaced & slaughtered them all. But I digress. I was losing concentration on matters at hand for the moment.

I brought my self down to earth, realized the futility of my knocking & started looking about the house. First, I noticed all curtains were closed on both floors. The door of course was solidly locked I tried the knob, solid as a rock. I could see what looked like a bolt with a lock up top of the glass. it was obviously secured from the outside as someone would have had to reach up & snap the bolt into place. Then apply the rather large lock, looking like a prop used to deny entry

to an old abandoned church. It's raining hard & the maiden is pounding on the door for salvation. I really needed to reign in my mind I was all over the place.

I walked around the yard in the pouring rain, but I must admit it was starting to let up. Now, not more than a prairie shower. Damp & fresh on your skin. I was looking around for the brand-new extended cab Ford truck I'd seen in the driveway the other day, but it was nowhere in sight. I walked around to the back door & knocked again, trying the door knob. It was locked solid like a block of ice. It was chilling.

I peaked in through the little window in the door. The curtains were drawn across so I could just see between the folds. I couldn't see anything but the cutting island & the empty kitchen table. All chairs placed neatly around as if they were all talking. But no, all was still like time itself was taking a break.

I walked off the tiny porch down the three wooden steps. I stood still, looked & listened. The swish of the trees in a softer breeze, the sound of a crow squawking. A few pigeons flocking about the barn. The rain drops bouncing off the metal roof, slapping off the leaves. A solitary shutter flapping like a slow clap.

I walked over to the barn & proceeded through the big swinging doors. All the stalls for the milking cows were eerily empty. A sour smell of aged dung stifled the air. Phew, I curled in my nostrils. The sharp stench went right to my brain like an ice cream freeze.

I had a decision to make, what the hell am I to do now. The rain was letting up, the sky starting to clear. Patches of blue like painted splotches poking through the breaking clouds. I decided there definitely was no one here. Images of murderous rage at the family's expense were just not real. Everything was all in perfect order. Nothing out of place. Nothing had been disturbed. It was like everyone left in advance of a plague or a forest fire.

I had a choice. Go back to the office & call it a day or perhaps head over to Uncs & see what may. Easy choice, the prairie beckoned eager for a drive. It was just after noon in the afternoon, I had the time. I'd go the long way avoiding the ferry. I wasn't that committed to risk staying the night if the boatman decided to pack it in.

It took me about an hour to get to Uncs, Watching the black clouds through the front window float away like a boat leaving a bay. A bright afternoon sun taking their place. The fresh breeze of recently rained prairie perfuming the air.

I pulled into Uncs & immediately noticed nothing had changed from when I was here before. Same old pick up waiting for someone to jump in & take it for a ride. Same dusty scene with dilapidated stairs leading up the porch approaching an aging swinging screen door. Same old view of trees & prairie. I went & knocked & immediately heard a commotion in the house with Unc appearing-- as if he was expecting me-- opening the drab inside door.

'Can I come in,' I asked.

Unc said softly,

'Of course.'

We went & sat at the now familiar rickety kitchen table. The difference between the two houses hit me hard. The brother who stayed in the colony was quite rich compared to Unc's humble home. The financial disparity in household finances made you realize the sacrifice it took Unc to turn his back on the Colonies way of life & try & make it on his own.

Unc went over to a jug on the counter & pouring a glass of water asked me if I was thirsty. I answered, 'thank you, yes.' He handed me the glass which I graciously accepted.

'Where is everyone,' I asked looking around seeing no one.

'The kids are at school & Mother's out back feeding the chickens,' he said as if he'd had that prepared.

'Is Tommy here,' I inquired.

'No,' Unc said speaking shyly a little embarrassed.

'I was just over at your brothers & the place appears abandoned.'

'They ran away,'

'What do you mean they ran away,'

'They ran away to BC,'

'They ran away to BC,' I said in shock. Like someone had told me there was no Santa Claus. It just couldn't be.

'They ran away to a colony in BC,' Unc was trying to be sincere, he knew how this must have sounded.

Of course, I responded in total bewilderment, 'What do you mean? Why would they run away to BC?'

'You scared them off' Unc looked me right in the eye as if I shoulda known the answer.

'How could I have scared them off?' I was totally flabbergasted asking myself that question as much as presenting it to Unc.

'My brother thought you were going to take his kids,' Unc didn't even believe it himself but he had to say it.

'Why in the world would they think that,' I was racking my brain for a clue.

'They were afraid you'd find out certain things they don't want you to know. So on the advice of The Elder they packed up & moved to a colony over by Williams Lake.'

'Just like that,' I sarcastically replied. This was incredulous going through my head.

"Just like that,' Unc repeated.

'So can you tell me what I'm missing,' thoughts like bullets were filling my mind & I kept going back to that look of needing to talk, on the older girls' face.

'It was one of the reasons we left the colony,' Unc said.

'Did it have anything to do with the girls,' I blurted out now I was getting really worried. 'I did see the older one seemed to want to tell me something but we never had a chance to talk.'

'Well, what she was probably doing was trying to protect her sisters, from what had happened to her.' Now Unc was talking like a man who'd been involved in countless conversations challenging the colonies ways. He was now able to speak freely about a despicable behavior, which if told-- he believed-- would lead them all to the fiery depths of hell.

'You see they have religiously tolerated rituals which they impose on the young girls of the colony during puberty. They religiously rationalize that it says in the bible their physical development into women needs to be at the control of the fathers & Elders of their faith.'

My mind was in overdrive,

'What the hell are you saying,' I almost screamed.

'It's referred to as the Ritual of Rights.'

'What does that mean?

'When the women children come of age & start to bleed it is a right of the father, uncle, Elder to break the young girls hymen. First touch, sanctioned by the lord.'

'What in the world,' I reacted. I was not naïve & was pretty experienced in the area of sexual abuse-- it took a lot before I'd cry. But this was that & more. This was institutionalized patriarchal sexual exploitation.

'When my niece was trying to get your attention,' Unc carried on,' it might have been she was trying to give you the heads up that maybe she could trust you to protect her sisters.'

'She has been put through this atrocity?' I asked, now tears did start to swell.

'Yes, she would've been. She's sixteen, older than Tommy.'

'Have you ever participated in 'these rituals',' I asked even putting my fingers up mockingly like bunny ears to insinuate a quote.

'No,' Unc said sad. 'But I didn't stop it either, that's perhaps the greatest sin.'

‘What in the hell happens, how can they do this, to their own children.’ I now had to know the depths of this deprivation.

‘When you can justify it, by some interpretation of some words in the Bible, you are pretty well free to do anything you want. It’s brutal.’ Unc was talking like he needed to confess some silent sin. Share a secret which in the language of the colony would send him straight to hell.

‘It’s a formal ceremony, right out of the dark ages.’ Unc sat up straight, he had decided to tell.

‘When the daughter--turns twelve or thirteen-- some are slower than others to start their menstruating—a date is set for the ceremony. On the chosen day the daughters are given special ritual dresses to wear. Short white gowns, looking like little girl ghosts. A veil is placed over her female parts-- specially made of fine white lace her mother would’ve been working on for the past six months. A low hanging fine spun mask covers the young girls face. Mothers of course doting on their daughters day as if they’re getting married.

‘A white curtain-- I’ve even heard of a sheet being used if a curtain can’t be got-- is strung across the living room. Hung so as to divide the room in two. A set of chairs, usually from the dining room are placed on one side of the divide. The men come in. The Elder, sometimes two, father & perhaps a favoured relative take their chairs. Not a word is heard other than the mumbling prayers of the presiding Elder.

‘The girls—in my brothers’ case the two youngest--- would be arranged to participate on the same date. Sometimes other girls in the community are chosen to partake as well, I’ve heard up to six. They are led in as in a procession & take their places standing on the other side of the divide.’

‘Can the girls see the faces of the men,’ I asked.

‘No that is part of the mystique, thinking that this is being done by god’s messengers. Anonymity of the male participants is central to the Ritual.’

‘So what now,’ I was in disbelief that this actually occurred amongst members of my own species.

‘The girls stand straight & wait. At their own discretion each male will lift the sheet & fondle the young girl at his own pace. Sometimes they switch chairs if one isn’t working out for them. Like the girl who screams oaths to the devil at the violating intrusive touch. This of course is upsetting, impeding the intentions, so best to change chairs rather than get angry. She will get her comeuppance soon is thought. She will see her sin of self will not get her far. Perhaps you were being too firm with your fingers. For the next one you’ll have to adjust.

‘Did I mention there is always a matron or two standing behind the girls inconspicuously like ethereal statues, making sure the girls participate in a proper manner. So if a girl is not submitting to this vile intrusion of the most intimate part on her body, she will be given a good

rap across an exposed backside with a special ritual righteous paddle. Of course, the matrons are also there to clean up whatever mess might materialize.'

'How long does this go on for,'

'Until all the girls have been ritually ripped,' Unc was getting angry, his eyes started to glaze like he even couldn't believe what he was saying. 'Usually ten minutes to an hour. Depends on the compassion of the patriarchs.' He said this with an awkward almost embarrassed smirk, the sarcasm swirled like a cesspool.

'The Elder calls an end to the ceremony. A few prayers are shared & everyone gets back to business. Sometimes a couple of the men will stay for coffee & talk crops. The Elders usually need to get back to their flocks & duties for the church.'

'What about the girls,' I had a real pain in my groin trying to process what I was hearing.

'The matrons take them back to their mothers. Who are usually in some room together in the back of the house on their knees in prayer, thanking God for this gift. God is great God is good.

'A bath would be prepared for each girl at her own home. She would clean herself off, having what I'm sure is a little cry & then get back to her chores or whatever, piano lessons, whatever.'

Unc was exhausted knowing at any second, he could be struck down dead for what he had just told me. He sat silently waiting in contempt.

Nothing of course happened, except the shuffling of my feet on the floor to try & flick that awful tinkling feeling out of my head. No lightening strike or booming voice from above. The devil-- in spite of the threats-- remaining in his den.

I left Unc's thanking him for sharing, I know it wasn't easy. He just looked me in the eye & said good luck. I knew we probably wouldn't be talking again. If called I'm sure he'd deny. He was all too clear about the power of the church. He lived in constant waiting of its wrath.

I jumped into my Bronco & headed out. Down the driveway out onto a grated gravelled road. I was at least an hour from the office. The flat prairie was flatter then ever. The afternoon sun was getting tired of hanging about. I'd be on gravel for about half an hour before I reached the two-lane HWY. The thread of asphalt tightens northern living, rendering this vast never-endless land into a maze of squares & rectangles. Fences, slews & groves of trees mark out your space. You live here & you get to work the field for your bread & butter. Free as you ever wanted to be.

Thirteen I was thinking. When I was thirteen the only problem, I had was Tyler Two Fingers, trying to touch my tits, when I crossed the old wooden Willowdale Park bridge, on my way home from school. The bridge forded Willowdale creek where rumour had it, amongst the boys, that someone had really seen a floating turd. I was the first one to sprout breasts in my class & the horny boys in my grade six class at Glen Avon had taken notice. So, they conspired

on the walk home where they could get a good feel to see if they were real. The wooden walk over the bridge was the perfect spot for their ambush. They made it into a game & I played along yelling & screaming laughing & gasping for them to stop & they were just perverts. In honesty I liked the attention & how it made me feel more grown up. I can't imagine standing behind a sheet & having someone feel my crotch at that age-- or any age for that matter-- that was horrible how sad I thought for those poor girls. To feel so helpless to the will of your fathers. How after that, could they ever enjoy the passions of pleasure shared with a lover.

The prairie has a unique sense of forever. When you're driving through, it's like listening to a song you like. Your mind can relax, there's always a long way to go.

I thought back to when I lost my virginity. I guess it was natural for my mind to turn its attention to myself. A protective device. If I let myself be consumed, by the evil I have just heard, it could turn my head away from the beautiful. I had a wonderful memory of my first time in love. We were only fifteen, he just turned, being four months younger than me. We'd been going out steady for six months & things were getting heated.

One afternoon at his house after school we'd gotten pretty far. He got up under my skivvies & I tugged his thing. We were a little shell shocked & I think-- if I think back-- he went off like a gun right after you pull the trigger.

That week we decided we'd skip school & go back to his house. His mother worked & his brother was in college. He had the house to himself. It didn't take us long to get started. I was there by ten, walking over I was sure my mother was following me. We went to his room & he had on his radio. His room was so cool because he had a set of drums in there. That made it a little wild. I had worn a button-down blouse & a short skirt with knee socks & nickers. He was in jeans & a t-shirt—with some obscure musician's name across the front. We undressed each other & melted like an ice cube onto his waiting sheets. We tugged & caressed for what seemed like forever much to my pleasure. In a brilliant finale at just the right moment he entered me a little bit too eager & I a little bit too tight of course. The instant flash of tear just added to the pleasure.

How sad I thought, bringing my mind back to the here & now. Those poor girls never getting to experience the physical pleasure of their first love.

Hands firmly on the wheel eyes glued to the road, the social worker smirked to herself having a little laugh at how sometimes life goes. She was starting to rid herself of that load of bile vomited on her heart.

The town was creeping up slowly. Farms getting closer together. Finally the industrial park & she was back in High Level her home base. She made her way to her office at the hospital.

She told her supervisor what she had heard. He'd been up north a lot longer than her. A sad look crossed his face but just in a flash, he looked at her sternly & said,

assaulted. The worst of it all is when they're just craving to be kids. So, the boys goodbye hugs pricked my spidey sense to go slow.

I flashed on a past case & wondered what ever happened to those girls in the colony. I shoulda done more. We live with the guilt & ignore the success. I'll make sure these guys are safe I resolved.

The boys lost interest in me & rushed over to their mother who was sitting quietly in thought balanced on the edge of her kitchen chair. Smoke flowing like a curtain about her face. Long legs crossed. Wearing nice fluffy slippers. She was a hard ass I'll give that to her. But she's met her match in me I hoped.

'I'll phone you, with appointment times,' I said over my shoulder opening up the creaky screen door.

'Whatever,' she said cold as ice. What happened to the love & want to do better for her kids I thought sarcastically, as I walked down the steps from the porch to my car.

[illegible]

Epilogue

It'd taken about four months for things to go sideways. For all the plans to explode like napalm. When it did it cracked like an egg on the side of a sizzling skillet. Those poor kids. All they wanted is to be safe. But no the adults couldn't keep it together for the sake of the kids. Obviously something severe had gone down & she knew the boys were in the middle of it.

The social worker reached down & switched the key to on. The old Toyota kicked into action as if just fresh out of traction. Slowly clicking into gear, she reversed down her driveway. All was clear nothing to fear. She put it into drive & headed out to do the deed.

Your talk with your boss fresh in your head. She set the scene for the upcoming events like a director in a movie, as she drove through a dull grey Edmonton day. She knew the way without having to think.

You'll be passionate but firm to the family. That no matter what-- the kids are going with you. You know the script, you've done it before & inevitably you'll have to do it again. Child abuse is a hidden pandemic. You're putting band aids on gunshot wounds & that's why you weep.

You can either work with me or I'm going to court, you'll say again to the mother. Your choice, you'll tell her. It's gone to far & they-- better than you-- know it. I've even heard tell of a gun

being pulled you'll say & that'll seal the deal. Either sign this agreement for the kids to come into care or get a lawyer. Either way I'm taking the kids.

She'll object of course. But you'll be quick to point out she hasn't taken the counselling seriously & she's been seeing Bob behind your back. The kids will be scared, though they won't show it. They're young, six & seven now, they've never known any other way to live. All kids—sadly but sincerely-- want to stay with their father & mother. Abuse is like an icicle to a child—transparent, cold & lethal. Something that slowly melts their innocence away.

You'll be all the time torn up inside. Almost pleading trying to tell mother & the kids it doesn't have to be hard this way. She'll pack up the kids' things & you'll explain If they'll only stop the violence, stop doing drugs, become better mothers & fathers, you will help them. But you know your words will be falling on deaf ears. You know she can't get past the rage she feels, over the hand she's been dealt. Well tough shit you think, she's had a fair chance, she's going to have to deal with it or someone else is going to raise her kids.

The hardest part is taking the kids with you out to the car. They'll be quiet mostly crying. You trying to lighten up a tragic scene. Look at that cloud up in the sky isn't it pretty, you'll say knowing that it's useless. The whole fucking thing is just so fucking stupid, so unnecessary.

You pull your car into their snowy parking lot dreading what's ahead. Knowing its about to happen. Lots of cars still covered in snow dotting the lot, like snow statues placed despairingly about a bland landscape. Doesn't anyone work around here you think. You pull up in front of their place. The snow well packed indicating a number of cars-- most likely the police-- had been here over the night.

You switch off the ignition resolutely. Checking your face in the rear-view mirror. Fixing your dripping eye makeup with the tissue you always have up your sleeve. The Social Worker you are slips into resolve & goes to work.