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Stone Temple

IAN COLFORD

AS DAY BREAKS A MAN APPEARS holding the hand of a small boy, leading him across the frozen waste of an empty field. The two figures are backlit by the rising sun. The horizon is streaked pink and mauve. Behind the stand of pine they've just passed through is an old house. It's the house where, until a few minutes ago, the boy lived with his mother.

The boy's name is Luke and the man, his father, is Bobby Flint. He's tall and gaunt and unsure what he's doing is right, but he's doing it anyway because what else can a man do when he's denied his son through a perversion of justice? Mary Beth lied to the judge. When she said that he'd beaten her and threatened Luke, Bobby could hardly believe he'd heard correctly. He understood at once that her mother had put her up to it. On her own Mary Beth would never dream of lying. But it was too late for him to invent a story of his own. Everyone was staring at him. Nothing he said was going to convince them Mary Beth's story wasn't true. So he didn't say anything.

Excited at first, Luke is tired now and when he stumbles Bobby lifts him gently into his arms. Luke is still wearing his pyjamas and has only

running shoes on his feet and nothing on his head because Bobby had to move quickly and quietly to get him out of the house. It's February. They breathe thick fog into the air. Bobby has a blanket and some food in the truck, which once they get across the field and over the fence will be visible just where the Old Mill Road veers into the Hatcher property. The truck will be warm, too, because Bobby left the engine running. Nobody will be out there to notice a truck with its engine running, not at this hour.

The moon sits placid behind slivers of drifting cloud. It grazes the top branches of the tallest trees.

"Daddy, look!"

Luke, who is three going on four, has spotted a huge bird gliding in silhouette against the brightening sky. He points, his small hand bare, and Bobby realizes he's forgotten mittens as well as boots and a cap.

For a moment he stops walking and lifts Luke higher, seating him on his shoulder. He adjusts the wool cap that covers his own head. It turned cold this morning, very cold.

The bird could be a hawk, or an owl, or maybe it's only a crow. He can't see well enough in this dusky light to be sure. But there are eagles in these woods, too. Bobby's seen them at Colby's, fifteen of them perched in a willow tree, waiting to be fed chicken entrails.

"It's beautiful," Bobby murmurs and glances around at Luke. Luke watches as the bird lowers itself into the trees, which shudder for just a second. Then he turns and smiles at his father.

"Neat, huh?"

"Neat, huh?" Luke echoes. His breath stirs the air.

Bobby starts walking again. When they reach the fence he lifts Luke from his shoulder and places him on the ground on the other side. As he's climbing over the fence he realizes his mistake. The snow will hold his footprints. He should have worn rubber boots and taken a wider route, crossed the stream behind Hatcher's and approached the house through the forest. Then he could have gone back and waded upstream, away from the truck, before retracing his steps.

"Daddy, I'm cold!"

Luke is about to wail.

"Sorry, Bud."

Bobby's over the fence. His heart thudding, he hoists Luke high into the air and sets off at a trot, his son's delighted squeals echoing like the tolling of bells off the trees and across the snow-smooth field back toward the house.

"You like that?"

Luke is examining a plastic package containing a small foamy chocolate cake. He can't open it himself so Bobby takes it and, one hand on the wheel, splits the plastic with his teeth.

"There you go," he says, and, returning it to his son's hands, forces a smile.

Luke seems happy now. The truck bounces over ruts and through potholes. This is a game for the boy. But Bobby has realized that his plan ended the second he opened the door and put Luke into the cab of the truck.

He wanted to get on the highway and just keep driving. Once they were safely out of the province they'd stop for gas and something to eat; a real breakfast with coffee, not the sweets he's brought for Luke. Then he'd put his foot to the floor and keep driving — New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario.

But two RCMP cruisers silently passing the truck at high speed was enough to convince him that Mary Beth had already been on the phone to her mother, who had called the police. Bobby has been turning over in his mind the idea of being hunted. He does not want to go to jail. He does not want to lose his son.

So he left the highway at Windsor Junction and found the trail out to Barrel Lake. He remembers that the trail follows the edge of the lake and that if you stay on this trail it will take you all the way to Highway 6. He's driven the route before, but only in summer, only in daylight, and only on an all-terrain vehicle. Taking the truck through there will be a new experience. But then, as Mary Beth used to say, if we don't keep up the search for new experiences we might as well be dead.

When he looks over he sees that Luke has chocolate icing all over his face and fingers. But at least he's smiling.

With a grunt, Bobby raises the log to a standing position and lets it topple over backward. It's no problem. He feels good, like he could do this

forever. But this is already the third time he's had to stop the truck in order to clear debris and fallen branches from the path he's been following. He's pushing himself through snow up to his knees. His feet are wet inside his work boots, and he knows that's not a good thing. He had hoped to be long gone from here by now — it's nearly noon — but a while ago the trail fooled him by swerving away from the lake and has narrowed to the point that he doubts he can drive much further. Luke grins at him from behind the windshield and Bobby stops what he's doing to wave.

He's going to have to leave and scout ahead to find out where they are. It's too cold to take Luke. The panic that stilled his blood the first time he struck rock and spun the tires has subsided to a languid, almost contented state of anxiety. He's confident he can find a way through, but until he catches sight of the highway he won't be able to conceal his doubts, at least not from himself.

He returns to the truck and climbs inside. It's warm. The droning engine and the whirring fan mask the forest's silence. He removes his wet gloves, folds his hands together over his mouth and blows. He deliberately does not look at the gas gauge.

Luke is eating a jam-filled pastry. The sweet sticky smell of raspberries nearly turns Bobby's empty stomach. New problems arise by the minute. He'd brought food but nothing to drink. A few miles back when he realized this he retrieved a crushed Tim Horton's cup from under the seat, blew it up like a balloon, and went outside to fill it with snow. He takes a sip from the cup now.

"Luke, Daddy's going to go on ahead for a bit to see if the road's over there." He gestures expansively as if indicating distance, vastness. But they are surrounded by trees. He can see no more than ten meters in any direction. "When I come back we'll hit the road and make good time."

Luke raises his fist.

"Hit the road!" he shrieks. "Hit the road!"

Pastry crumbs fall from his mouth to his lap. One of the reasons Bobby lost his temper was because Luke screamed and screamed for no reason. He just let loose, hitting those high notes and shattering the quiet that Bobby wanted preserved after working another ten-hour shift

at Colby's meat-packing plant. The cushioned rasp of saws ripping through flesh and bone still rang in his ears hours after he got home.

Luke whoops and hollers, but Bobby doesn't say anything, just sips water and stares through the windshield at these trees that have him utterly confounded. They *couldn't* be that far from the highway, not after going all this distance. He knows these woods. He grew up here. But the forest in winter . . . His father had told him once when they were out rabbit hunting, *the forest is a wild animal with a bloody leg. Make one mistake and it turns on you.*

He was only going to be gone fifteen minutes. He rolled Luke up in the red blanket and told him to go to sleep. Then he turned off the engine and slammed the door quickly to preserve the warmth inside. He knew it would get cold in the cab very fast. But he wanted to save gas in case he was able to get the truck out of here.

But now it's more than twenty minutes since he left. There's nothing but trees in every direction. He came upon a clearing where the remains of a collapsed hunting shack were visible: a mound of twisted slats and boards, like bones beneath the snow. He found the lake and stood at its edge gazing out over its undisturbed surface. He shielded his eyes against the glare and, after urinating against a tree, turned to go back to the truck. His heart is throbbing now with the effort of dragging himself through snow that's two feet deep in places. He knows the highway is close, but he'll never get the truck through. He'll have to back out, or else just leave it there and walk to the highway with Luke in his arms.

As he nears the truck he hears crying. He runs.

The window on Luke's side is down three inches and the inside of the cab is freezing; Luke is sobbing. Bobby jumps in and rolls the window up and inserts the key into the ignition. To his relief the engine immediately turns over.

"What in the . . ."

"I opened the window to say hi."

Hardly comprehending the words, Bobby looks at his son. It's at least minus twenty outside, probably colder. He hadn't said anything about not rolling the window down. It hadn't occurred to him that he'd have to.

"There was a deer . . ."

He rubs his hands together and then takes the trembling boy into his lap and holds him. He doesn't want to get angry. Anger is pointless. He'll get them out of here first. The lecture can come later.

He closes his eyes.

"I'm sorry Daddy . . ."

"Shhhh." Bobby whispers, rocking his son in his arms. "It's all right now. I'm here."

In a few minutes Luke has calmed down and their shivering limbs are warmed and Bobby is able to think. It's one o'clock. They have four hours of daylight left and++ a quarter of a tank of gas. He switches on the radio. He doesn't remember any snowstorms in the forecast, but then he wasn't listening closely because he assumed that by now he'd be in another province.

They sit quietly listening to Garth Brooks on the country music station. Bobby tries to concentrate on the music, tries to ignore the tensing of muscles in his abdomen. When he looks down he notices that Luke has fallen asleep, his thumb in his mouth. No wonder. Poor kid's been up since five a.m.

Finally there's a weather forecast. Clear today, flurries overnight and clear again tomorrow. Very cold. He switches the radio off and carefully moves Luke from his lap to the other seat. He grips the steering wheel. The sun has descended to a point just below the tops of the trees and it blinks at him through the branches. The truck flinches as he shifts into reverse. He twists around to get a view through the rear window and presses the accelerator. A grinding noise comes from below, but the truck doesn't move. He tries not to swear as he opens the door and gets out. The back tires are wedged against a fallen tree that was buried by snow and not visible earlier. He tries shifting into neutral and pushing from the front. But it's no good. He can't budge it.

Now he swears.

They have to abandon the truck.

Luke is wrapped tightly inside the red blanket. Bobby cradles the bundle in his arms as he strides quickly over the uneven forest floor. The only sounds are his steps and his laboured breathing.

Luke asked once where Mommy is. Bobby could not prevent his lips from curling into a sneer. Luke has not asked again.

Bobby's ears throb with the cold. His toes are numb, as are his fingers. He cannot feel his face and his eyes are as dry as cinders. Overall, however, he's in good shape and proud of it. He never abuses his body, doesn't smoke, seldom drinks. He knows he can walk for a long time. But with each lungful of air he feels more like a slab of meat than a living creature, a carcass stripped of skin and hanging from a hook in a freezer. He's beginning to hate what he's done. But he can't see how he could have done anything else. His son is still his son. Nothing will change that no matter how many lies Mary Beth tells.

Suddenly he sinks into snow to his hips, and as he struggles to pull himself free he realizes that he's wondering *if* he can get them out of here. The thought of failure empties his mind of everything else. All he can see are the trees that surround them on all sides. He doesn't have any idea where they are. He's been following the sun, but now he's confused. If he was heading in the right direction he would have reached the highway long ago. Every few minutes he stops to listen for the swish of car tires on asphalt, the moaning whine of trucks gearing down.

It occurs to him, as he kicks free of the snow and starts walking again, that it's all Mary Beth's fault. If she hadn't stood there and lied he would have been allowed to see Luke every week. He wouldn't have had to take him from her. He didn't want to do this, but she left him no choice. Their life together was over, he could understand that. But it didn't mean she had to lie about him. All he'd ever done was frighten her. He'd frightened himself too. Whenever he got angry it was like a fire in his head, lights flashing in his eyes. He yelled and threw things. He broke furniture. But he never hit anyone. He'd seen enough of that growing up. Anger was his father's only legacy. He didn't want to complete the circle.

He got himself into therapy and talked about it. But it was already too late. Even though he controlled his outbursts from that day forward, Mary Beth was afraid of him. He could see the fear in her eyes and it reminded him of being small and in bed huddling under the covers listening to his parents fight. He moved into his own place and visited whenever he found the time. But one Saturday he went over and

Mary Beth's mother was there and she wouldn't let him in. She called him names and said he was dirt — said that his whole family was dirt — and told him he'd get inside over her dead body. So he went and grabbed the rifle from the truck and emptied a couple of rounds into the front door. And he knew, even before the explosions faded, that he'd done exactly what she wanted him to.

So before forcing the window this morning and creeping upstairs to Luke's room, he hadn't seen his son in more than two months. He knows he's lucky they didn't send him to jail. But he also knows it isn't fair what they did to him. He isn't a criminal. He didn't do anything wrong.

A branch strikes his face. He stumbles but keeps his balance. There is desperation in his actions. He feels it, a tightness in his bowels. He's never been this cold or this alone in his life. Nothing has gone right and he senses the futility of each step he takes. When he slows his pace for a moment and listens, all he hears is the sighing of the trees as a breeze passes through their limbs. He wonders how many miles he's strayed from the path he wanted, and at this thought his burden seems to lighten because maybe the house he shared with Mary Beth for almost four years is just over the next rise. Preposterous. But to his exhausted mind even this appears as a possibility.

As he enters a clearing a sob emerges from within the blanket and when he separates the folds a biting stench follows. Reeking steam. He flinches, averts his head. Luke howls, kicks against the restraint of the blanket. His pyjamas are a mess of piss and shit.

"God dammit! God dammit!" Bobby growls, but he can't even hear himself above Luke's wild bellowing.

He drops the blanket on the snow and sets Luke on it. He pulls the wet running shoes from Luke's feet and uses the pyjamas to wipe the boy off as best he can. Everything stinks. He feels tears in his eyes when he sees Luke's bare skin redden as the freezing air assaults it. The tiny genitals shrink from the cold.

"Hold still!" he shouts and grips Luke tightly by the arm.

But there's no need to yell. Luke is suddenly quiet. Bobby can almost see the heat being drained like blood from the boy's slumping body. He tosses the pyjamas away and hoists Luke into his arms. It's happened faster than he would have thought possible. Luke's eyes are

glazed; he seems to be sleeping. Bobby lowers the zipper of his coat and squeezes Luke inside. But the coat is too small; Bobby can't get the zipper up again, even with Luke pressed firmly against his ribs. Cold air pours in and grips him in a painful embrace.

He takes Luke out and pulls the zipper up. Luke, nearly naked, flops limply in his arms like a freshly cut side of ribs. Bobby seizes the blanket and pulls, but it rips where frozen urine has cemented it to the ground. He drops it and searches the clearing with his eyes, as if the forest is hiding a secret fountain of warmth. But there are only trees, snow, bare domes of exposed stone. He rests Luke on the blanket and starts removing his coat. But the cold air sings his throat and for a moment he struggles to breathe. He stops what he's doing as a sound of muffled whimpering reaches him — the kind of mewling groan a trapped animal might make as it chews off its captured limb. He holds himself motionless to listen, hoping that it's Luke making the noise. But it isn't. Tears burn his eyes. He's so tired — he sways, almost falling.

Slowly he pulls the coat back on. Gently, solemnly, he folds the corners of the blanket over the small body until it's hidden. He wipes his eyes and watches the blanket for signs of movement.

He stands before the shrouded remains of his son and scours his mind for words that will excuse, or explain, what has happened. His breath steams the air.

"I'm sorry, Bud," he says and focuses his eyes on the blanket, still watching for movement.

Behind the trees the sun is almost level with the horizon. It's rays peek through and catch Bobby's eyes, making him squint. The blue of the sky has deepened and taken on hints of green, yellow, red. He feels he should stay but a clenching in his stomach tells him to get moving. He adjusts his wool cap and backs off, his eyes on the blanket. At the edge of the clearing he steadies himself against a tree, then lowers his head and turns away.