

owenothing

by e. john love



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acknowledgements

Most of the characters and places in this book are based upon real characters and places that I have known. The car and motel culture of Kingsway was dying even when I lived in it briefly as a kid, and it is certainly long gone now. The Mountain View and Peacock Court motels were bulldozed sometime in the 1980s, replaced by condos and strip malls. I suppose that one day Jack and his family will have to move on from their neighbourhood as well.

My deepest love and gratitude go to members of my family for, each in their own way, inspiring the events which were the basis for this book. In particular, my heartfelt thanks go to my wife Grace for her constant support and encouragement, and to my brother David Love and his associate, Tim Hicks, for volunteering their invaluable military experiences and personal stories. For these things, I do owe something.

PROOF

1

HE HAD been in the same spot for as long as he could remember—the master of his little territory, yet also bound to it. He had learned to take pleasure in the few sights, sounds and smells that could be found in his immediate area. His view was obscured by large, flat surfaces, but this had mattered less as the years went by and his vision began to fail. He always trusted his nose and ears more anyway. Breezes brought him smells and echoes from unknown sources, and he tried to absorb them all.

Sometimes, local residents visited him discreetly when only he could see them. Usually the slender ones with big eyes and long tails would slink near and silently watch him for a moment or two. He did not understand them but had long ago stopped disliking them. He was fascinated by their calm nature, their mild scent and their insistence on keeping him company.

Whenever night came, he felt the pain of loneliness most of all and couldn't stop himself from calling out in vain to his mother and brothers, wherever they were. Occasionally, one of the little flying ones would land nearby, proclaiming its bravery while sitting on the edge of his dish stealing tiny drinks of water. In the past, he might have chased it away, but now he just envied its boldness and liberty. He wanted to float up into the trees, too.

He had lived with The Big One for most of his life, or at least as much of it as he could remember. Even though he was quite old now, he knew that age had not robbed him of all his strength and virtue. The Big One, however, was a large, dark and terrible monster that always made him feel small and unworthy.

Like many other nights, the moon looked down on him with its big cloudy eye. He sang out to it as he had many times before, feeling an old ache in his heart.

With a loud noise, The Big One suddenly emerged from his shiny shell. “Shut the fuck up with yer howling, you goddamn mutt!”

The Big One growled at him and brought his large grubby arm down again and again. Lonely howls turned into bitter shrieks.



Jack Owen woke up slowly, becoming aware of the measured two-note “see-saw” of a mountain chickadee. It was a gorgeous spring morning in Vancouver, BC. Monday in May. He sighed, slowly yielding to the bitter clarity that always killed those golden first moments of consciousness. He yawned and stretched languidly under his bed sheets.

Jack lived in the Mountain View, a worn-out roadside motel amidst a long row of restaurants, hotels and grocery stores on Kingsway, one of the city’s rapidly clogging arteries. To a passing driver, the Mountain View was a momentary blur, a site to speed past on the way to somewhere better. It was a place where nobody ever intended or wanted to stay for long but where many ended up staying permanently.

The Mountain View Motel had once been a clean, hospitable mini-community, its dwellings conforming to each other in bright white, forest green and clean cool pavement. Today it was a sagging collection of small wood-and-stucco houses tinted in the greys and browns of pollution, mildew and old age. It was named for its view of the Coast Mountains on Vancouver’s north shore, easily visible to anyone from the front parking lot. In fact, Grouse Mountain overlooked Jack’s home, its ski runs resembling a gigantic crooked letter K—a set of massive blue-grey shoulders leaning protectively up against the city’s northern edge.

Faded postcards in the manager’s lobby attested to how pretty the Mountain View Motel had been during its heyday in the early 1960s, when vacationing families and young couples in their shiny gas-guzzlers cruised into the parking lot looking for a brief stop-over on their way to Hope, BC. Jack observed that nobody ever seemed to come by looking for that now.

Each of the motel units looked like miniature houses, and they were paired up like little duplexes with narrow walkways on one

side leading to the rear. The motel was laid out like a square upside-down letter U with each end culminating in a huge driveway on the street. In the middle of the U was the manager's office, the largest and most house-shaped structure on the lot—a full-scale model amongst all the miniatures—and the only two evergreen trees. Behind the manager's office, a large patch of broken asphalt and flattened grass served as a trailer park that was usually filled to capacity with diverse samples of wheeled habitation from the past thirty years. Jack thought it ironic that he never saw trailers enter or leave the park. Once in a while, one would just disappear and be replaced with a different one. Generally, though, for homes built on wheels, they seemed to be rather permanent fixtures.

Jack lived in Unit 22 with his sister Kelly and his father Jim, in a quiet corner near the back of the lot, far enough away from the main road that occasionally the sound of the birds won out over the rush of passing cars. Most units had three or four rooms: a living room with a narrow galley with kitchen appliances, one or two small bedrooms, and a tiny bathroom with a tub. Privacy and permanence were not in the design. As far as Jack knew, theirs was one of the only units with an entire room dedicated solely to the kitchen, and that always made it feel more like a real house.

As he slouched on the edge of his bed lazing in the warmth of a sunbeam and a crisp breeze from his window, Jack could hear the morning news from the kitchen radio and the clinking of teaspoons against coffee mugs. His father and sister always woke up before him. Yanking open his stubborn bedroom door, Jack trudged out into the hall in a T-shirt and sagging pajama bottoms. In the privacy of the tiny bathroom, he scratched himself and peered into the mirror. The face looked back at him with tired, calm green eyes under longish eyelashes and arched eyebrows. The eyelids looked heavy and sluggish. Not enough sleep again, he thought. The noticeable bones of his cheeks gave Jack's head a narrow, streamlined appearance. Dark-brown hair curved down over the sides of his forehead, the occasional flecks of grey showing through at the temples. Premature greyness was hereditary in Jack's family, and at twenty, he was already showing small signs. His Dad's hair was faded and tarnished like the smoky finish of neglected silverware. Jack reflected sullenly on the few white hairs

he found and decided that greyness was something he wasn't looking forward to.

He splashed ice-cold water on his face, rubbed his eyes, and worked some water and gel into his hair, trying to tame the effects of "bedhead." Two days' worth of stubble had tinted Jack's chin and upper lip a dull light-brown. He decided that it made him look tougher than he was and he liked it. He was a handsome young man, in a slightly scraggly, offbeat sort of way. His sister said he looked a bit like a young Rob Lowe (he hated Rob Lowe) mixed in with an eighties Johnny Depp. Probably the slight gauntness in his cheeks. The face in the mirror smiled at this notion, and the familiar chipped front tooth peeked out like a broken fencepost. Yeah, maybe he was an acquired taste, like Dr. Pepper.

"Morning, son."

"Mornin'," Jack replied, yawning. Nodding vaguely at his sister Kelly, he shuffled towards the half-empty coffee pot on the kitchen counter. Nine times out of ten, the smell of coffee was what got him out of bed, as he was not at all a morning person.

"Anyway, Dad," Kelly continued, not to be interrupted by her younger brother's cameo appearance, "there were so many other girls applying to this vet hospital, right? But the vet said they really wanted someone with proper training, and she said my school had a really good reputation, right?"

"It sounds like you've got a good shot, sweetie," Jim Owen said supportively, amused by Kelly's enthusiasm. When Kelly really got excited about something, she used the word "right" to punctuate the end of almost every sentence. He always got a kick out of this little affectation.

"Yeah," she continued. "They were pretty busy that afternoon, so they asked me to come back on Tuesday afternoon so they could talk to me some more, right?"

"Right," Jack said flatly.

Kelly tried to ignore him. "This place is way out in Kerrisdale on East Boulevard. Curtis said he can drop me off. Oh, I hope I get the job. Veterinary Clerical Assistant! That'd be so awesome!"

"I hope you get it, honey. You've certainly worked hard enough for it." Jim Owen really did want this for his daughter. He knew how hard she had worked and was immensely proud of her for it.

All through high school, Kelly had managed to keep her grades up while handling a succession of part-time jobs in coffee shops and restaurants. After a few years, she finally gave it up and decided upon her future career, and committed over a year to studying animal sciences at a vocational school in the hopes that she might one day work in animal care. God, he barely remembered ever seeing her back then, except under the glow of their small red kitchen table lamp. The grind of her course load had kept Kelly hunched over that kitchen table scribbling away in her notebooks until all hours of the night and morning. Many times Jim had awoken at his regular early hour to find Kelly still at the table, heartbreakingly unconscious, her face planted in one of her textbooks. What a stubborn girl she was! She had refused to hear her father's advice about moderation and during those many months her courses steadily became her burning obsession, eclipsing her father, her brother, meals, and occasionally even Curtis, her arrogant twit of a boyfriend. It had seemed like ages, but by the end of the previous fall term, Kelly had indeed passed her final exams and earned her graduation certificate. She had said she would do it, and she did. He was so proud of her. Nowadays, it was gratifying for him to be able to spend a leisurely breakfast chatting with his daughter while she scoured the want ads looking for places to use her newly-earned skills.

Kelly looked at her Dad and smiled. She knew he supported her. Filled with his attention and praise, she happily spooned in a mouthful of cereal and for the next few moments remained preoccupied with visions of landing her first job in animal care. She was looking forward to finding an apartment with Curtis as soon as they could both afford it. Life at home with her father and brother was secure in a way, but mostly she felt stifled and cramped, ready to get away and create her own lifestyle and living space. She pondered these thoughts for a little longer, concluded that it was the right thing for her to do, and then looked up at her younger brother, realizing that he was still in the room.

"So, I hear you got in pretty late last night," she said, eyeing Jack with a mixture of suspicion and mild disrespect. She loved her little brother, but she didn't think very highly of his job or the hours he kept.

Kelly's critical eye made Jack feel uncomfortable. She could go screw herself for all he cared, he decided. The less she knew the better. "Right. Hope I didn't wake you guys up or anything," he said with little conviction.

"What kind of car wash is open at night, anyway?" Kelly challenged.

Jim gave her an impatient look that said, *leave your brother alone*, but he still waited for Jack's reply.

"Night shifts aren't for washing cars. I told you that before." Jack hated feeling like he had to explain himself to Kelly. "I get extra cash by helping Bill and his mechanic friend at night. Besides, it's good money. I've almost saved up enough to give Val an overhaul."

"Bloody car," Jim muttered, shaking his head. "I don't know how you keep that old beast on the road, son. She's practically an antique. Should be on display in a classic car show somewhere."

"Val" was Jack's prized 1968 Plymouth Valiant. She was a faded gold family sedan that had belonged to Jim up until a couple of years ago, when he had decided it would be cheaper for him if Jack ran the car instead. So, he had said "good luck" and handed his son the keys. Jack had been devoted to her ever since and was quick to defend Val's honour.

"She may be old, but she refuses to die, Dad. The body's a little rusty, but the engine's basically okay. She's due for an overhaul, so—"

Although engrossed in his morning paper, Jim Owen absentmindedly interrupted his son. "The Slant-6 was the best engine—"

"That Chrysler ever made," Kelly chimed, having heard that sentiment a million times before.

"Humph." Jim Owen gave her a bemused look, wondering how he had become so predictable. He made a mental note to not repeat himself so much in future.

After gulping down more coffee and a burnt piece of toast, Jack hastily brushed his teeth and returned to his small bedroom. The dented pillow and rumped bed sheets beckoned to him, but he resisted the urge to crawl back into bed. He couldn't pretend the day didn't have plans for him. He shrugged and pulled on some

faded blue jeans and his cleanest T-shirt. He'd have to hustle or he might end up late picking up Parm for work. With a quick "bye" to his father and sister, Jack grabbed his leather jacket and wallet and trotted out the front door and across the parking lot to where he had parked Val the night before.

Pollen and gasoline fumes filled his nostrils, and he inhaled deeply.

"Hey, Jackie, how's the boy, uh?"

Jack recognized the gravelly French-Canadian voice and glanced around him to see where it had come from. The familiar denim jacket and horn-rimmed glasses of Mountain View's resident handyman finally caught Jack's eye. Lucien Thevarge beckoned to Jack from his front doorway with a rapid wave of his arm. Lucien was a relatively small man about five foot four, completely bald, and with a face like a wrinkled old catcher's mitt. He couldn't have weighed more than 140 pounds. Jack figured that in his younger years, Lucien might have been a tough, wiry little guy. Now in his late sixties, Lucien still had a lot of gumption, but old age plus years of drinking and smoking had visibly taken their toll.

"How's it goin', Lucien?"

"You going off to work, uh?"

"Yeah." Jack liked Lucien, but at that moment he really couldn't be bothered. He didn't have time to chew the fat with the old guy.

"Well, I don't want to get you in shit with your job, you know, but did you hear all dat racket last night?"

"No, I got in real late." The fact that Lucien knew he was keeping Jack behind made him feel less impatient with the old man.

Lucien's pale blue-grey eyes looked sharp and serious, if a little bloodshot. "Aw, geez, dere was all dis yelling and barking and yelping and shit coming from over dere, uh? I was watching TV. I didn't know what da hell was going on. Old Mrs. Austin came over here to my place around eleven-thirty. Banged on my door. She was real upset and said dat bastard over in da trailer park had been beating his dog. She was over dere yelling at him, giving him hell." Both of them chuckled in respect to the fearless and feisty old lady. "But she said he told her to piss off and then he raised his

hand to her! I couldn't believe dat! So anyway, she told me she got outta dere real quick and come over here to tell me."

"Geez! Is she okay? What an asshole!" Mrs. Austin had always seemed like a nice old lady. Jack really wasn't sure which dog Lucien was talking about, but he his stomach crawled at the thought that someone would be sick enough to beat an animal and then threaten an old lady when she complained about the noise.

Lucien's expression showed that he must have a similar opinion. Some of the anger left his face, and he spent a moment looking at the ground. "And dat bastard has done dis before, too. I heard people talking in da laundry building before. Mrs. Austin said she even complained to da manager, but he never done nothin' about it."

Jack could only shake his head in disbelief.

"Dat's da trouble with people nowadays. Nobody does nothing cause dey don't wanna get involved in some trouble. Back in Trois Rivieres when I was a kid, everyone was always in each udder's business, you know? Nobody could get away with stuff like dat because everyone already know about it anyways and would say something or do something, you know?"

Jack had heard about the good old days in Trois Rivieres many times before, but nonetheless he respected Lucien's opinion and nodded politely. "You're right, Lucien. Someone should do something about that guy."

"Yeah, he's a bad guy. A big drunk. And tough I think, too, uh?" Lucien put a pungent, nicotine-stained hand on Jack's shoulder and leaned in way too close for comfort. "Yer a good kid, you know. Don't go tell nobody dat you heard all dis from me, uh? I don't need no trouble from dat bastard." Lucien's mouth was a floppy, toothless maw, and his breath was a nauseating mixture of bacteria, tobacco and regurgitated beer. Jack winced as Lucien spoke to him, and then had to smirk. With a weapon like that, Lucien was probably safe from anybody. He told the old man to take care, waved goodbye and walked briskly over to his car. Now he was definitely in danger of being late.

Jack gave Val's body a quick visual inspection to see that she hadn't suffered any damage overnight. Satisfied that all she had

endured were the footprints of a few neighbourhood cats, he hopped in and started her up. Val woke up reluctantly, grunting and breathing heavily for a minute. As her congestion cleared, she settled into a breathy rumble, and after a minute Jack tapped the gas pedal sharply to put her into low idle.

Moments later, as he was driving south up Boundary Road towards Parm's place, the dog incident was still in the front of his mind. He vaguely remembered a dog that he and his sister used to visit when they first moved into the Mountain View. The memory started to come back to him. It was a large blonde dog named Sully, and back when she first saw him, Kelly had guessed that he was probably part Springer Spaniel, Golden Retriever and God knows what else. Kelly had met Sully first, going over to sneak him little bits of wiener. Jack must have been about twelve years old back then.

He remembered a dark evening, walking with his sister through a maze of steel hitches and rubber hoses and finally finding a big, quiet, curly-haired dog tied on a short length of rope to a shiny Airstream trailer. His young hand had touched mysterious bare patches on the dog's wide back. Fine blonde fur had grown back in some spots, but in others the skin was exposed and red. Sully had trembled at their touch and his big red nose had seemed reluctant to sniff their hands. Jack's instincts told him that Sully was very, very scared. Was it the same dog that Lucien had been talking about? That thing would be positively ancient now, for a big dog. Jack felt a shiver. Christ, it had to be him.

He came out of his thoughts just in time to turn into the alley that led to Park Place, the large townhouse complex where his friend Parminder Singh lived. Park Place was a collection of one hundred and fifty town homes connected in small groups. It got its name from its proximity to Burnaby's Central Park, which was less than a block away. Each town home in Park Place was two stories high, with two or three bedrooms plus a large basement. Compared to where Jack lived, these places were large and well cared for. They were modern homes, with brown wood siding and thick, solid front doors painted in bright yellow or orange. Every place had a small cement patio in the front, surrounded on three sides by hardy bushes. Evergreen trees and shrubs dotted

the property everywhere you looked, and well-tended lawns stretched out across the front of each home, adding to the park-like setting and the impression of calm domesticity. On a fresh, dewy morning like today, Jack especially enjoyed the pungent smell of the bark mulch that the groundskeepers had spread over the garden to keep the weeds away. It made the whole area smell like freshly cut lumber.

When Jack pulled up, Parm was already waiting in the parking lot, slouching with a faded purple backpack slung over his shoulder and a thumb hooked into the front pocket of his blue jeans. He looked bored and a little put out.

“Morning, Parm,” Jack said somewhat sheepishly as he rolled up to the curb. “Sorry. I was a little delayed.”

“Hey, Jack. How’s it goin’, man?” Parm climbed in and tossed his pack into the backseat. As he turned around to face Jack, Parm’s face opened into his familiar wide, toothy smile. Parm never really got mad at him about anything. “Don’t make me late again, dude!” Parm teased, wagging a finger at Jack’s nose. Jack smirked and pressed his foot down. Still fumbling with his seatbelt, Parm involuntarily blurted out a dirty word as he fell off balance against his right shoulder. An excited squeal left Val’s tires as she swerved sharply out of the parking lot.