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AT NINE-THIRTY in the morning that same day, Jim Owen, was just finishing his fifth cup of coffee since getting up at seven o'clock.

Jim had been an early riser since before Kelly and Jack were born. Twenty years in the Royal Canadian Air Force had ensured he would never wake up any later than seven-thirty. He was a pensive man by nature, and there was a time not long after he'd left the Air Force in 1986 when he really enjoyed having some quiet time to himself. It had offered him a chance to reflect and analyze the events of the previous day, and to plan ahead for the next one.

Sixteen years ago, Jim had retired early from the Air Force. Now at fifty-five, he felt as though he still had a lot of years left in him. Sometimes, he admitted to himself, he did regret leaving the service so early. If he had stuck it out, he probably could have retired with a much larger pension, and then his kids wouldn't have to live in some low-rent motel or worry about helping with the groceries each month. Rare bouts of employment had kept him busy and intellectually challenged for brief periods, but they usually didn't pay a lot of money and only lasted a few months. His work tended to be sporadic and hard to predict.

When he originally decided to join the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in the late sixties, he was twenty years old, eager and strong—a cocky young runner. Back then, he thought the world had no boundaries; it was his to explore and conquer.

Jim's Dad, Albert Thomas Owen, was a large man whose six-foot-two, 240-pound frame had filled many uniforms. He'd taken on a number of impressive and colourful roles in his life: gambler, amateur journalist, welder, army private, volunteer firefighter,

door-to-door salesman and refrigerator repairman. According to the quality and quantity of his father's stories, the high-point of Al's diverse career was his service in the RCAF during the '50s. Al had worked very hard to fill his son's head with exciting stories of big Air Force bombers and tall tales about small commercial flights up and down the west coast of British Columbia. It was part of Al's romanticized past and it eventually fueled Jim's tank enough to convince him to enlist, much to the disappointment and confusion of some of his friends.

When his Dad died of a heart attack in 1966, Jim moved back in with his mother, taking whatever work he could get to help her with the bills. He felt cooped up and unhappy and immensely guilty for desiring his freedom. Although Emily Owen rarely ever admitted how much she disliked his career choice because of its inherent dangers, Jim knew she wasn't the kind of mother who would hold her son back. She supported him because she knew it was what he wanted.

Jim did enlist, and when his day came, he wanted to fly out east to begin his basic training. But his Mum insisted on buying a train ticket for him instead, insisting that he'd see much more of the country that way. He couldn't argue with his mother, especially after learning that for months and months she'd set aside train money from her part-time jobs, her pension and Al's life insurance settlement.

Jim remembered how his Mum had ridden with him on the bus to the train station, and how she'd nervously stood next to him on the platform, as if she were trying to make small talk with someone she'd just met. It was just as difficult for Jim to know what to say. He remembered looking around the busy station and thinking that it seemed like everybody was going somewhere. Watching people his own age rush past him, he almost felt like an outsider—the only one from his generation who was leaving Vancouver and going in the opposite direction. Everyone was going somewhere, and now he was someone going somewhere, too—east to Toronto. He felt like he was part of some generational exodus. Lots of his friends had already split for places like San Francisco or Los Angeles, looking for money, drugs or just an escape.

Robbie Gosling, one of Jim's best friends from high school, had turned hippie-dippie in his senior year, grew his mustache and beard real long and thick, and one day packed his backpack and decided to leave Vancouver for good. "The west coast is so full of assholes," he declared to everyone who would listen. Jim never saw him again after that. It was weird how people would decide on some direction and take it, and how it always seemed to change everything for other people, too. The Vietnam War was raging, and the idea of joining the military hadn't been very popular with some of Jim's friends, but at the end of the day, Jim had decided he didn't really care what other people thought about his decisions.

When it came time to board his train, his mother had sniffed and wiped her eyes on her coat sleeve. It was the first time since Dad had died that he'd seen her shed a tear. She gave him a tight hug and a tweak on the cheek and said, "Good luck, sweetie. Give us a call when you get all settled in." Using "us" was an old habit, and even though his Dad had died almost a year earlier, it put Jim's heart right up in his throat. He told his Mum he would call as soon as he could. They said "I love you" to each other, and he straightened up and flung his big canvas pack up onto his shoulder. His Mum had never looked so small and worried. It was a wonderful, horrible little goodbye.

By the time his train passed the town of Mission and was following some river, Jim was deep in thought, remembering his dad's stories about being in the RCAF. He'd heard all about life in the service. His father had spun romantic, idealized images of it, talking about planes as if they were rock stars: the "Lanc," the famous Lancaster Bomber used in the Second World War, or the Hercules, or more recently, the Vulcan. His Dad talked about them as if they were gods of the skies. It was probably as close as his Dad ever came to worshiping anything.

He remembered pulling his dad's copy of "Bush Pilot with a Briefcase" out of his pack. It was the story of Grant McConachie, the guy who had founded Canadian Pacific Air. On this trip, Jim would finally read it. He had never gotten past the first chapter and had stalled over an inscription inside the front cover. Written in refined handwriting by a gentleman who eloquently praised the

value of his father's friendship, it hinted at a side of the old man that he would never know. Maybe the rest of the book would tell him something about his father—something between the lines and beyond the high-flying adventure tales.

A guy in cowboy boots with a leather headband and hair down past his ass sauntered up the aisle of the car. Scratching his neck under his shoulder-length, dark-brown hair, Jim sighed as he contemplated the brush cut he would get when this trip was over.

The train passed through the Rocky Mountains into the prairies of Alberta. The further away from Vancouver Jim got, the easier it was for him to claim his journey. In reality, he'd started this trip almost five years earlier, partly to please his dad. The idea of ripping along at supersonic speed in a jet had excited him as a kid, but he hadn't really thought it through past that point. When he was eleven, he'd joined the Air Cadets and got some hands-on experience in military discipline, rank and honoring commitments. He'd also seen some flying time in a small single-engine airplane, which had really thrilled him. As Jim had bounced the little Cessna back down onto the strip after his short flight, his Dad had beamed like never before. Maybe that was partly why he had joined the Air Force, he decided. After those first few flying lessons, Jim had discovered two things about himself: he loved the freedom of being up in the air, and he got wicked headaches later, which he never told anyone about.

Once Jim hit puberty and stopped revering his father, they tended to argue often. Jim knew how difficult it was for his mother to watch her husband and her only child challenge each other all the time. Late at night, Jim could sometimes hear them talking in bed. One night, while listening out in the hall, he heard his mother complain about their arguments. He heard his Dad say, "Emily, he's learning to push back. It's not even against me personally. He's taking a stand for his own points of view. I may not agree with him, but I'll absolutely defend his right to his own opinion. There's bigger, stronger guys out there. He's smart, and he'll need to use his brains to get by." After he'd heard this, he didn't see his Dad in quite the same way. It became less about who was right and who was wrong, and more about accepting the idea that there are different ways of looking at things.

Fields of yellow, brown and green whizzed past in the window, punctuated occasionally by a red or blue grain elevator, the skyscrapers of the prairies. As he watched a small herd of sheep grazing in a pasture, Jim told himself that even though he'd started this trip partly for his dad, he would have to finish it for himself.

After finally arriving in Toronto, he'd caught a bus to Clinton, Ontario where he began his basic training. After eight weeks of push ups, back-slapping camaraderie and verbal abuse, he was finally ready to move on to Camp Borden for Flight Aptitude training.

His memories flashed forward to when he'd first seen Barbara, his wife and the only woman he still thought about every day. They'd met in Victoria at a party held by mutual friends. At the sound of her, his feet had felt as if they were suddenly nailed to the floor. Her clear, perfect laughter had caught his attention. Man, that laughter—it had a warmth and joy that made the whole party seem much more fun than it was. He had searched for her, scanning the sea of bobbing heads and flailing arms. When the sea had finally parted, she was revealed, standing in the middle of a small knot of bland-looking bodies. He stood there with an empty glass in his hand, gawking like a wide-eyed kid at the most beautiful and lively woman he had ever seen.

Barbara was dancing with a guy who was unaware that he was too drunk to dance. She was wearing a dark-blue floral print dress and a string of pearls. She was doing the twist like she had invented it, unselfconsciously showing the room just how effortlessly she could move. She seemed to embody happiness and the joy of being alive. Little pink toes with clear polished nails peeked out from her white leather heels. Dirty-blonde bangs swung left and right across her forehead, covering a slight sheen of sweat. Her hair came down just below her shoulders in long arcs and moved loosely, free from the hairspray, pins and braids religiously applied by other women. Her light spring dress came just above her knees, and Jim watched in fascination as the fabric clung and twisted around her hips and legs. Barbara had a body that was slender but shapely, and Jim spent a long minute luxuriating in the contemplation of her slightly muscled calves before shaking himself out of his stupor.

When he slowly looked up to her face again, he'd been startled to see a pair of beautiful green eyes staring right back at him. Her mischievous smile said, "I know you were checking me out, you bad boy." She'd winked and smiled at him, her nose wrinkling like a pixie. Almost dropping his glass, Jim had told himself that only a complete idiot would hesitate to run right over to that girl and offer to get her a glass of punch.

They'd introduced themselves a bit awkwardly and then after a few minutes of chatting and some throw-away jokes, they'd danced and talked for the rest of the evening. Never before had he felt so comfortable with a woman right upon meeting her! In the next few weeks, they had started dating, quickly fell in love, and within six months were married. Throughout that whole time, Jim couldn't remember ever feeling happier.

As Jim's work responsibilities gradually increased, so, too, did the amount of time he spent away from his family. It strained his marriage, but he told himself that he was doing what was required of him, and that he would make it up to Barbara by taking her on a long cruise somewhere tropical in the summer.

Three summers passed. One day, when Kelly was three and Jack was almost two, Jim came home late and found his wife Barbara lying paralyzed and barely conscious on the floor of her brand new kitchen. She had suffered a major stroke. Despite having some of the most modern medical facilities nearby and Jim's constant presence at her bedside, she suffered two more strokes.

A week before she died, Barbara was paralyzed completely on her right side, couldn't speak, and rarely recognized him, lapsing in and out of dementia. Once he thought he saw a glint of recognition in her when she made eye contact and smiled at him. Then she called him "Gene," her brother's name, and Jim finally had to accept that the woman he'd loved and lived with and had babies with simply didn't recognize him anymore.

She died in the middle of the night while he slept in the chair next to her bed. The nurse had roused him with tears in her eyes. Barbara's head and hands were still warm, but something was different, gone. A tight ball spasmed in his throat and Barbara's emotionless face blurred and swam under the hot tears in his eyes.

Sitting just a few feet away throughout the night, he'd missed her by less than a minute.

For months after Barbara's death, Jim had been consumed with thoughts of the full, strong, beautiful woman whom he had loved and pledged himself to, and how she had eroded into a ghostly husk of a person, losing her physical beauty, her faculties, and in the end, her entire personality. Alone in their bed, his nights soon became cold, pathetic vigils to her memory. He found himself sleeping on her side of the bed, clutching her pillow. During the day, he snuck furtive sniffs at her clothes and makeup in an attempt to burn some of her remaining cells into his brain so that she might always be part of him. He was getting closer to the edge now, starting to lose his balance. The loss of Barb, the stress of life as a single parent, and the pointless plodding along at work started taking their toll of him until one day a small something finally broke loose.

In Chilliwack a few days before Christmas in 1985, Jim's neighbour, Mr. Fred Bennett, heard a rapid and light knocking low on his front door, and opened it to find two frightened little faces looking up at him. Four-year-old Kelly told him that her daddy had banged his head and wouldn't stop crying. Little Jack said he was scared.

"C'mon, loves, let's go see about your Dad then," Bennett had said, as he walked the little children back home.

Fred found Jim in the kitchen leaning over the stove, surrounded by grocery bags. One bag had fallen onto the kitchen floor. Teary-eyed and sniffling, Jim had looked up with shame and embarrassment on his face.

"Are you alright, Jim?" Fred had asked carefully, aware of how proud his friend could be.

Jim had taken a deep breath and spent a few moments composing himself before he tried to speak. "I think so. Thanks. I...I was just putting the groceries down when I lost a bag." Jim pointed to the broken eggs and toppled milk carton on the floor by his feet. "I tried to grab it, and when I straightened up, I banged my head on this bloody thing!" He flung his wrist angrily at the metal fan hood over the stove. Jim took a sharp intake of breath and

swallowed before continuing. "The next thing I knew, I just lost it. Started crying like a baby." His voice was still a bit shaky. He took another breath.

Fred watched Jim's knuckles slowly regain their colour as his grip loosened on the stovetop. He looked sympathetically at his neighbour and friend, and then down at the two tear-streaked little faces at his side. "Why don't you guys go and give your ol' Dad a hug."

Kelly and Jack walked gingerly around the broken pile on the floor, murmuring, "I love you, Daddy" and "Don't be sad."

"I love you guys, too," Jim told his children. "C'mere," he said, kneeling down and squeezing them tightly. "I'm okay now. I was just upset for a moment."

"Did we make you sad, Daddy?" Kelly asked him.

"No, honey. You and your brother make me happy all the time."

"I miss Mommy," she said.

God, Jim remembered thinking, Kelly was always such a bright girl. At four years of age, she seemed to know that expressing her own loss would help him see through his own pain.

"I miss Mommy, too, baby," he told her. "Maybe it just caught me off guard this time, but I'm okay now. All right?" Jim used his most tender, loving voice with them, wanting them to feel safe with him once again.

"Okay," Kelly said.

Little Jack pressed a face full of tears and a runny nose deep into Jim's chest and said something muffled and unintelligible. Kelly patted her little brother on the shoulder, acting the part of the big sister, and then teased Jack by saying, "He was really scared."

"I wuf nob!" came the loud retort from near Jim's armpit. Little Jack hated being teased by Kelly. Jim smiled. Maybe things were getting back to normal again.

After the kids were safe up in their room, Fred had put on some coffee and talked with Jim for almost a half-hour while they cleaned up and put the groceries away. Jim had still needed to talk it out, but the look of shame had vanished and his voice sounded clearer and calmer.

"Fred, I've been a basket case for the past six months," Jim confessed. "Work has become an absolute joke. I've been flying a

desk, managing training programs and dealing with bureaucracy and other people's agendas. I've been assigned to the Officer Candidate School at Canadian Forces Base, Chilliwack, as a Basic Officer Training instructor. I have to evaluate new recruits for their potential ability to become officers. They're mostly fresh-faced young kids. You know, steeped in the culture of the forces and filled with promises from movies and TV. Strong, proud, Canadian." Jim snorted derisively. "More like raw material for the federal millworks to grind into whatever it decided it needs that year."

Fred said nothing, but continued watching and listening to his friend.

"I feel swamped in all these abstract duties," Jim continued. "Sort of detached from the physical world. Obligated to squish these macroscopic levels of information down out of all logical proportion. How the hell do you sum up the reality of a young person, of everything their parents, their community, the education system had made of them? You know their meager life experience hasn't prepared them to question your judgment, so what happens to them if you're wrong? How do you decide what box they go into for their career or maybe their life?" Jim had gazed at his hands for a moment and then at Fred, who said nothing. "All this writing, management, and endless administration has worn me down. More than once I've found myself sitting in the driveway with the headlights still on, wondering how the hell I got home!"

Jim stopped to catch his breath, as if he had been talking too fast. "It all feels like such bullshit, Fred. They put me there so I'd have regular hours. 'Be more grounded,' they said. 'For my family's sake,' they said. It was supposed to help give me a break after losing Barb, to 'stabilize my situation,' but if anything, it's made me feel less in control than ever! It's not good enough to just hire some homemaker to clean house and take care of my kids. Honestly, I'm at a loss."

Fred looked at his friend sympathetically, unsure if he should say anything.

Jim sighed and began again. "This is not the first time I've been taken out of the action. After I got grounded the first time, I was in this bar with a buddy and got into a bit of a scuffle with this

other guy. The guy was bigger than me, and, I dunno, I must have had a huge chip on my shoulder. Aw, hell, I was drunk and I heard this guy bragging to his buddies about all these flights he's been making and all the places he's been getting to. I guess he was some commercial pilot or something, maybe thirty-five or so, with this big red-and-grey mustache. I just started getting a major hate on for this guy, hearing him talk about his flying. I piped up to him that he didn't know shit about anything anyway, and he said something like, 'Sit down, Shorty, and have another drink.' I don't remember much after that, except that I was yelling at him and next thing I knew, he was holding me face down across his table with my arm behind my back, telling me to calm the hell down." Jim cracked a small smile. "Some of his buddies were wisecracking to him about his new dancing partner and goading him on to throw me out, but he didn't do it. He just let me up. I apologized and walked out. It was pretty damn humiliating. I learned not to let my anger and frustration get the better of my judgment. I was just young and pissed off because something I'd wanted so much and had worked so hard for had been taken away from me."

"I think you're holding on to a lot of things, Jim," Fred said calmly. "With everything that's happened to you and your little ones, you've got a lot of pieces to juggle."

"Yeah..."

"I mean, maybe you ought to put some of those old pieces down for a while or get rid of 'em. Focus on the important stuff and just go day by day. You're carrying a lot of stuff around with you, my friend, and that's what's wearing you down, if you ask me."

Jim smirked to himself and then looked at Fred. "I did ask you, didn't I. Thanks, Fred."

During the next week, Jim had reviewed the sound of his own bitching and accepted the fact that he was burned out and needed some sort of change. He had recalled Fred's calm, encouraging words and suggestions about a leave of absence or a career change. He wasn't sure if those were the right answers for him, but not long afterwards, he'd begun to consider his options. His little breakdown had forced him to admit that he really did need to make a serious change in his life, to give himself some slack, and most of all, to be there for his kids. To be the father they needed.

It would be difficult emotionally, not to mention financially, as Barbara had no life insurance and they'd had little savings.

After a few more days of running through the various options and scenarios in his mind, he'd brought the matter up with his superiors ("hypothetically," he had stressed at the time) and then made some discreet inquiries. The more he thought about it, the more he was certain he wanted out. It might not have been the best decision financially, but the idea of untying himself from the vast multi-armed, multi-headed beast that for so long had been his career caused Jim to feel a rare sense of elation—a lightness and relief of pressure that he hadn't experienced since he was a kid. Perhaps this really was the right thing to do after all.

The years flashed forward in Jim's mind, and he absentmindedly rubbed his left leg. It was chronically weak and ached from time to time. He resented the pain, and having to use a cane made him feel like a crippled old coot.

Being a single parent and unemployed had turned out to be much more stressful than he expected. It took him months just to get used to the idea of living solely on his pension income. He'd given up the big rented house they had all enjoyed in Chilliwack, and eventually found a more affordable three-bedroom apartment on Vancouver Island on the outskirts of Victoria.

Jim had quickly become bored with not working and tried for years to find employment in Victoria, with no luck. He couldn't shake the feeling of being out of touch with the world, like a square peg in a world of round holes. There were no suitable openings for him.

Finally in 1997, an ad from a Vancouver company caught his eye and he applied for a contract position as a business security consultant. Wearing his best navy blue suit, he came over on the ferry for the interview. After two weeks of waiting and one phone interview, he eventually got a message telling him that he had been accepted. He had whooped for joy as he told the kids that they would be finishing high school on the mainland in Vancouver. They'd settled into a new life in a new city, with the expectation that living in a motel was the just first step towards future stability.

After six months, Jim's employer started cutting costs due to financial problems. Contractors were among the first to go, and so he found himself out of work again. To keep busy, he started going for long walks around town, to the movies or the library or shopping malls. He would watch colourful, happy young people chirp like birds about fashion or TV and serious-faced men march along the street in dark, pressed outfits, dripping of self-importance, concerned with some venture, wealth or security. He denied that he deeply resented it all. He denied resenting the happiness on the faces of the efficient ladies of the public library staff. What were they so goddamn pleased about? Eventually, he lost interest in finding work altogether, but wouldn't admit that to himself, either.

After a few months of this morbid routine, he noticed that his walks began leading him into pubs or bars, where he would spend the rest of his busy day drinking, smoking and complaining. Getting out the door in the morning to find a job had been reduced to just "getting out the door" to keep himself from going nuts. He began to consider this work his daily routine. Eventually, he decided it was easier to just drink and smoke at home, without the effort of walking and talking to other people.

His family's temporary stay at a motel had gradually transformed into a long-term residency. Without realizing it, Jim slowly became used to a much simpler and lower standard of living. The Mountain View Motel was cheap enough that his pension could just cover the rent and some groceries. He had never asked his kids what they thought of their living arrangement, but felt pretty sure they didn't mind too much (although, in fact, they did mind and had complained on a number of occasions). He also never noticed how much he was drinking or how lousy he felt physically. He had long ago stopped asking the scale and the mirror for their opinion.

All that changed in late 1998. Jim was sitting at the kitchen table with his morning glass of sherry when he noticed he was having trouble seeing. The headlines on his newspaper blurred and fuzzed at the edges, as though he were looking through a long, glass gun barrel. The left side of his face was madly tingling, as if on fire. He started to panic. He was having a goddamn stroke!

The kids were at school. He was able to reach the phone on the wall by the fridge, and dial 911. He heard himself say something that sounded like “smoke” to the person on the other end of the line. Why weren’t his lips working? Why weren’t the words coming out right? He felt frozen. The far wall pivoted ninety degrees and the floor rose up violently to catch him. He desperately wanted to talk to the fuzzy voice still coming from his right hand, but his head pounded and felt like it was a million miles away. His whole left side was pins and needles and dead weight. His body started spastically letting go of everything below the waist. He realized that he was now helpless, stranded and ashamed. He worried about the wet puddle forming on the kitchen floor. Who was going to clean it up? God, what a mess he had left for his kids to clean up. Unable to hold back, he began to cry.

For maybe half an hour, he weakly tapped out S-O-S on the floor with the buzzing telephone handset. Eventually he heard the wail of a siren. Two big young men in white uniforms burst into the kitchen and lifted him up onto a stretcher and into the flashing ambulance...

Jim was brought back to the present, startled out of his memories by a light, rapid knocking low on his front door. He blinked and listened. There it was again! What the hell? he said to himself as he limped his way out of the kitchen. He opened the front door and two concerned little faces looked up at him. A tiny little girl and her even tinier brother.