

Life in L

Novel by

Andrew Mark Hamilton Brooks

Fear is the Filthiest of Conditions.

Its Love is Devastating.

Its Passion Annihilates.

Created

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Transparent Black

Chapter 1

I don't know when I first started drinking coffee. Sorry, that's wrong - that's the wrong thing to say. I do remember. I drank my first cup in jail. No special blend, probably Sanka or Dickerson, but that's beside the point - no . . . everything matters, all the details, all the scars. I shouldn't forget anything about that time. Every moment still echoes through me. I should never forget that.

Staring into its rimmed blackness while mindlessly stirring in some powder with my finger, it's easy to forget many things, to take what could have a reason and to push it beneath the surface. Qualities and virtues, lies and blemishes that should never be left alone to die a natural death, but how does one remember without appearing to dismiss the banality to some extent? Or, when the good byes become faint hellos, even glamorise the stench of failure with the allure of effort? Indeed overcoming this liability appears impossible, if not completely futile.

All of these limited thoughts make me pause with more discrimination. Allowing me to rediscover the cup that is in my hands - what an interesting life it has had. If only I could just turn it over without draining its substance onto the floor, maybe then I could find a few insights into life on its backside. Even though I am capable of forming this miracle in my brain, able to develop a picture of a cup floating upside down in space, in the moments where the possibility is almost conceivable I stumble. I take a breath and sit back in the moment. I press down on the virtues of my cup and look away. Before completely recovering to a state of well-trained compliancy I believe for a second, just a second, that I see a very small word in front of me.

Staring.

Screaming.

It is the word 'if'.

Suddenly, I want to throw the cup to the ground. I want it murdered. Why? It's just a cup, it's just a word. To be provoked by such a mild object seems ludicrous.

But is anything really innocent?

Are we ever alone?

What about ourselves?

What if the cup is part of a darker picture? Perhaps it is fraction of an insufferable poem, part of a dream that made you feel like you had grown into a god and been numbed by infinity, where all your cells were rushing to the end of a billion different places. Perhaps this statement is mad. What do you think? Perhaps you are indeed wise to take this scene as nothing more than a fool trying to destroy reality with a joke. Yet, you forget that a moment in space, a pothole in time, is always concealed by what is around it

And perhaps a cup,

. . . and a word can be very powerful cuts when they are held by the teeth of a boiling void.

For I believe that anxiety usually exists in the burning pieces of flesh that are around our lives. And cups and words are the elaborate devices we employ to find the mocking holes in ourselves.

What nonsense I make up.

It's very hard for me to think sometimes.

Let me start again . . . with all being flat and curved there is nothing that stands by itself. Perhaps things and people can exist in isolation but I doubt it. Everything needs something.

A hammer needs a nail.

Truly, is there enough carnage in your thoughts to understand that the word 'if' can destroy worlds of hope? Where the hammer either never finds its purpose or continues to break apart under blind effect. Sanity can be lost in the becoming, in an empty action.

Now do you see the water that is running into my lungs and drowning my hopes? Do you possibly comprehend how intensely frustrating it is to deal with all the possibilities that this word can produce? Is there enough honesty in your own mind that it will allow you to accept the immeasurable blanks that this word can develop in the space around you? Are you capable of reason without naming such a devastating state of mind as just being merely futile?

It is possible to live, to exist without a final purpose?

Having nothing else but perpetual emptiness to mark a life is often part of existence.

I could throw the cup that had so much to say against the ground and think nothing of the lessons I have heard, but to do so means that the experience didn't exist. And perhaps, meant nothing. Looking back on an event such as the one I have just vaguely stated without answering for it, can cause deadly commotion. Furthermore, without the word 'if', the beginning and the ending of any thought, of any story, are too close together to make complete sense of the message that is held within. Without more suspicion, without more hungry appetites to soothe previous memories that have withered, a person can sometimes begin to expand and grow again. If there is the possibility, there is the chance of success. However that is a very big 'if'.

Old passages about ourselves are so important and shouldn't be used to pass the time at a bar, written and re-written by blind souls on paper coasters. No - real thoughts about ourselves should be employed to prevent drops of alcohol from staining the countertop we rest our lives on. Our mortality should not be wasted in the emptiness of waiting for any cup to be filled or emptied by somebody else. Have the nerve to fill it yourself?

Don't be so dismissive of the process. Don't blame others who are distanced by not being you. Remember, they will eventually vanish from your view and you will not. And once you have sobered up, tales that were previously induced and made to conform, will be as intense as ever. We should all be obliged to speak of them once the bottle is empty. Take all the fiery that had been pencilled out by our bad habits and asked to perform. Leading one to laugh when it would be utter madness not to break down in tears and hide in shame.

To many, this renders the entire exercise of remembering too violent.

So what - life is violent.

Trite as it may appear, I wish to empty my own bottle. See where my own 'ifs' will take me. Pretend to be an omniscient narrator and make some pretentious observations for awhile. Be somebody else, with somebody else's responsibilities. As to whether the story I am presently offering is a lie or not, it should not matter. In truth, most of the details eventually will be forgotten. If it is ennobling or beneficial for the reader to believe that the actual characters did exist, or still do, then believe so and take comfort in that decision. However, it should be remembered that these thin white pages bind the life these characters have, and it is only through the act of reading these remembrances that history or imagination can truly come to life. So be as intense as you can.

But why should others care about a collection of emotions bound by a name and a place which, may or may not have ever happened? The characters in this story that give me so many 'ifs' may have never drawn a single breath. They may be less than dust. Without the ability for something to choke or to consider the world that it occupies, there doesn't seem to be any reciprocity at play: why should the living care about the dying or long dead when the bare act of living is such a struggle in itself? Why not put the book down and give attention to what's around you? Look at the sun and the world it uncovers. Press your head against the soil and smell everything that falls upon it. Measure the amount of life you think you may have with a single thought.

To this, I answer a simple because.

Not because you will learn

Not because you will like it.

And certainly not because you care.

But because

A because that tells us that existence has a beginning and an end, a time and place, but a person does not. Humanity is secondary. We each have our own becoming which relies, as I have stated before, on everything else. We each have a hammer and a nail to make this connection. Some find that nail. Others don't. And to me most of us slip on too many 'ifs' to make ourselves real. Therefore, due to the ambivalence of the exercise there should be no more need for a why.

Now that I have made myself clearer, or just made it even more difficult to comprehend this situation, a worrying state that is very necessary to bring the soul to the table, it appears that I can no longer delay this tale. Prepare to ridicule and to succumb.

The central figure in my sermon, a person of some delinquent means, is Nick. Like everybody else on this planet, he is inconsistent, uneven and bound to break things. As such, I will have to show patience, and try to keep to the facts. At least, lie in a meaningful fashion. However, the reader has to forgive me if I sometimes appear to be too open in my comments. This is not done because of hate or malice, but because of what he represents to me.

He is a cup that is cracked

. . . and chipped

. . . and dirty.

Yes, it is true that I see much in him, and even nothing at times. Sometimes I will want my ‘third person’ opinion to have the teeth of a circular saw. Other moments, I will want to treat this as a documentary that can be easily shelved. Mostly, I will want to overstep myself and have the outcome come to me without calamity, but I can’t. For I will be governed, most of the time, by the word ‘if’ and the pounds of flesh it can suffocate me with. Other times, my anger and frustration will be probably be due to my stasis as a forgotten storyteller; the result of no longer being in the past and turning myself into a causal observer who is neither causal or unwilling.

However, I also need a time and a place to exist. I can’t forget that.

Ah, for lack of more credible feelings or deeper ideologies, I will start with his appearance. Although the size of his torso permits him to wear a large shirt size, the sleeves are too long for his arms. This causes him to roll them up all the time, thereby giving him the visage of a hard worker. Yes, he is a hard worker. I will give him that.

Even if I don’t like looking at him, I will give him that.

Mid 90's, in a residence near Alberta Hospital Edmonton

"I was sure you were going to say something. Weren't you? I don't understand why you're holding back?"

The tone wasn't brittle, nevertheless this male figure was curious and hurried in his desire to get an answer. Enough to stand there in the living room with both hands in his pockets. Feet glued to the hardwood floor.

"I know I shouldn't have said anything. It's nothing to worry about - just gossip, really nothing."

The older female, or more correctly, the older lady to whom he was addressing was playful in her response, her words echoing pleasantness and humour. Still, it was clear she wished she could have undone what had been said.

"You know as well as I that I won't hold anything you say against you."

The words were honest and the accompanying smile was very warm. Another wink and a nudge proved to be effective as she stopped looking towards the kitchen and sat down.

As her eyes moved about searching for words the lady began. "About two years ago on the ward I was working on at the time, I was talking to a nurse, someone who was in management, and your name came up."

"My name?" he replied sensing he knew what was about to be said. "I would take it that this person was possibly a head nurse? Do you have a name?" These questions were asked almost rhetorically.

“I can't tell you that.”

“Sorry. Please continue.”

“Well . . . don't get sore at what I'm going to say . . . she was told by a staff nurse, at least that is what she claimed, that you had been following someone a while ago, someone that was a friend of hers. And because of this, her friend was scared.”

“Scared? Just scared?” he added, feeling almost disappointed.

“Yes,” the lady answered with some consternation. Quickly, she lost herself for a moment. Eventually, following a brief interruption when her finger lifted itself from the surface of the table and came to rest on the skin on the underside of her chin, she woke up with a start and gave a friendly glance at the male who was still sitting there.

The polish of her teeth remained warm as the dwindling edges of the conversation were beginning to break up.

“But”, she exclaimed almost absently, "now that I know you, I can't believe that you would ever be able to do such a thing.”

“Do you mean scare someone intentionally?”

"Yes. Yes, I do,” was her firm response.

“Considering the situation . . . you remember how it was - I don't know. Maybe I do. Actually, I haven't thought about it for a while.”

The darkness that surrounded him soon disappeared as his shoulders quickly repositioned themselves and dwarfed the chiselled lines of the wall behind him, all of which was accomplished by him tilting his chair and relaxing against it.

“Did this person you talk to, this woman who spoke to this other woman about her friend, say anything else?”

“Yes.” It appeared the pain that was with her before had re-entered her eyes. It bothered the young man deeply and he wanted it to stop.

“It’s all right, I want to know. I think I need to know.”

“This person used the word . . . the word stalking.”

The young man didn’t argue. He couldn’t. He simply sighed and looked momentarily at the ground, perhaps looking for holes.

After thanking the lady for the information, he got off his chair and carefully rounded a corner covered with dust, and made his way quietly to a room beside the kitchen. There our tired point of interest started to search for a dictionary, seeking for something to research the past. And once its blackened surface was discovered and the proper word was found on page 816 of The New Webster Encyclopaedic Dictionary of the English Language he saw an empty denial that had been patiently waiting for him for more than two years.

It came silently in the form of the word Stalk, a collection of letters which could mean so many things. Scholars and thoughtful men wrote the following on that page: *to walk softly or in a stealthy manner*. This explanation did not please the man, and all he could think was no. Next came the following: *to walk behind a stalking horse*. Again, his brain was filled with the word no. Then: *To walk in a lofty or dignified manner*, no; *to pace slowly*, no; *to purse stealthily*. Close. He nodded to himself as he continued to read: *To watch and follow warily for the purpose of killing*. This last phrase caught him off guard.

The words were like music. The intensity of the notes almost overwhelmed his senses. In the aftermath of this sensation he found himself thinking over and over again: close; very close; very, very close.

Maybe he should have looked on page 616 of another book or even 832.

Faint Blue

Chapter 2

August 11, 1989, late evening, in a residence outside of Edmonton, Alberta

The undressed room that Nick occupied on bent and fallen knees was as macabre as the inside of a pine box – there were scratch marks everywhere. The walls and most of the floor were dark and clotted. Even the rug beneath him had lost its colour. It was no longer alive. It wasn't hard to see spoiled clumps of hair and food littering it. On top of all of this waste, toward the front of the room was a haphazard tower, consisting of letter-sized eight by twelve-inch cardboard boxes. They leaned dangerously to one side. This structure represented most of Nick's collection of car magazines.

Some of them were well-preserved, while others were badly torn.

That evening, in this cluttered room amongst his gathered allotment of small possessions, Nick wanted to burst into flame, to become ash, to fly apart into all the cracks that could not be seen - to become the impossible, to live without contact, without time, to be immeasurable, without any connections to this place or any aspect of it.

Nick especially wanted to escape the screaming that was resonating inside his head.

It made him nauseous.

He couldn't stand how overpowering it was.

In the kitchen were his parents. That was where the screams were the loudest. People did not talk in there, they cried like savages.

The scene was explicit as usual.

Nick's father was sitting on a chair in the corner of the room, too intoxicated to move, blinded by the glass that was cupped in his hand, pressing his beautifully built head with all the weight of the world into a nearby counter-top creating a red dot in the middle of it. Impressing upon his white skin a red rose. Meanwhile, the center of the madness was occupied by Nick's mother. She stood wounded in the middle of the floor with her makeup dripping as she fired away at anything that was less pathetic than she was.

Her eyes stretched as wide as they could, trying to take everything in and seeing nothing. Even the dog in the room, one of her prized Dalmatians, cowered at every word that spewed out of her mouth.

"Poor Ben", Nick thought in the protection of his room, "he doesn't deserve to be treated this way."

Nick wondered whether it was peeing on the floor as it usually did when it was scared.

This vacuum of chaos was nothing special to him. Love and hatred had become the same thing. No, that's wrong. There were no actual emotions. There was only space and leaded distance. All things had become hard to distinguish. What's more, he had heard worse coming from that room before and no longer cared. There was only so much responsibility that a 22-year-old could put up with without thinking everything else was worthless as well. He wasn't going to get up and walk into that room and try to make things right.

That wasn't his job.

He didn't want to be chewed up by the void.

Not like so many times before.

There was too much friction in the air of that room. His older brother Tom had given his best shot a couple of hours before, but to no avail. At which time he had honestly informed her that she was killing everybody. While speaking in a voice devoid of harm, he had excused her of stupidity and deceit. In response to this honest reproach, all she could do was to rebuff it with an immature comment - little more than a child's pretentious whining, saying something about how she expected more out of him. And why was he turning on her like Nick usually did? After that Tom just left the house and got into his car and drove away. To where? He most likely didn't know or care. Just as long as she wasn't they're to greet him.

The problem was she would.

In some ways, she always would.

Although Nick was trying not to notice, standing behind a habitual trance, a dull stupor that could last for weeks, he couldn't help but overhear a strange snapping sound that seemed to punctuate the end of one of her louder paroxysms. It was like a shower of tiny pebbles had entered his ears and had jumped into his head. For a few more seconds this uncertain noise was foreign to him and kept his attention. That was until he realised that the sound was the result of series of yellow tablets bouncing off the ceramic tiles that covered the kitchen floor. Beyond merely recognising the sound, Nick didn't try to put any more thought into what was going on. For all he knew, she was probably throwing her medication onto the floor in a miserable attempt to get a reaction out of her husband's vacant body.

There was no interaction.

There was only escape.

The pages of the magazine in Nick's taunt hands started to rip as he held them in front of his face. It was the September 1988 issue of Road and Track. His eyes fixed on the outline of a sports car he particularly fancied, its orange surface glowing with the heat of Nick's maniac desire to seeing nothing else.

Yet, for all its appeal and moderation, the happiness he felt by doing this and acting normal could not entirely filter out what was occurring. Before he could stop himself, he had mentally produced the figure of twenty eight in his head. For a moment, he was at a loss for this number. That was until the question came into his conscious: how many bottles of Cherry Jack could fit in the hatch back of a 240z?

This caused Nick to bit down slowly on his lower lip. He wanted to chew it off, but then decided to accept his sickness as well. All of them had gone to hell, and there was no way a person could exist without this kind of anguish. As his throat caught a hold of his own existence, a familiar sickening wave continued to swell and rise from his head to his stomach, back and forth along a widening channel. With every word that he could not stave off, the rocking motion increased ever so much. Building until it might have covered him completely.

But it did not.

For within a minute of the tablets hitting the floor and what sounded like someone shuffling around on it, the terrible screaming grew calmer until nothing else was being said. This caused more of a reaction from Nick than if the kitchen had exploded. He sat there motionless for a few moments looking at the wooden door behind him, wondering what was going on.

He hated doors. He absolutely hated them.

Worse than that, he hated how they would never stay shut.

Before he stepped fully into this idea, he asked himself about the noise: Were they actually sitting down and talking? This question and any hopeful conclusion was soon dismissed as soon as he heard his mother slam the door leading out of the kitchen, and the other one that opened up to the front hallway that would take her to stairs and her second floor bedroom.

Nick took a few moments to wait and hear if anything else was going to happen after she had gone upstairs. Nothing did. The room remained his and he was safe. She and her demons had enough for one night and it was time for all of them to fall into morbid slumber. The ugliness of everything attached to her pain was far too weak to sit upright any longer.

For a long time Nick sat there lingering, waiting for the earth to stop shaking. Imaging how wide the cracks beneath him would be if the world was part of his soul. Once the ground had settled he took the remote control which was covered by a 1985 issues of Motor Trend, and put it away. Besides it was already late on a Saturday night and he knew that nothing good was on TV. Moreover, he didn't want to push his luck and wake up anyone. For extra insurance he decided to try to clean up the books that surrounded him in a scattered pattern of shapes and styles. This, he figured, would bide him some time until he was sure that she was asleep.

A short time later, Nick had finished putting his magazines away and walked softly out of the Rec Room and into the emptiness of the hallway. This filthy area was dimly lit by an oversized light bulb, a novelty item from the seventies. It was pointed downward. At the bottom of its shape, was a large dark patch, an area where hundreds of flies had died.

Their bodies were fragmented by the heat of their graves.

What light made it through this stain vaguely illuminated a well-worn section of the house, a slim corridor between the kitchen and the back door. For more times than he was aware of, Nick had been in this area letting the dogs held in the basement out the back door so that they could relieve themselves from the stench of the house. Nick looked up at the bulb without being aware of it. He thought for a moment he heard something inside the bulb move. He blinked a couple of times and decided he was just imagining it.

Without making a sound, Nick stopped to listen to what his father was doing. Nick didn't hear much except for familiar sound of a chair's metal legs scrapping against the tiles on the floor.

Nick was about to look through the crack between the top and bottom halves of the Dutch Doors leading into the kitchen, but kept his distance. He knew very well what he was going to see, he knew very well how it was going to make him feel. There was nothing he could do to alter the scene. Anything inside that room was beyond his grasp. It could not be touched or made to change. Any power he had was as small as the smallest moments he had to think. Any conclusions he had about his own life were constricted to survival and the endless torment of repeating itself.

Nick felt the weight of his body as it turned and walked the 45-degree angle between the floors and carried himself into his room.

For the time being everything was quiet. The room next to his, Tom's, was still empty. The rest of the dogs housed two storeys down were strangely silent. Indeed, they had not made their presence known for most of the evening.

Maybe they had enough as well.

Why bother barking if no one comes?

Nick slept pleasantly that night. No upsetting dreams or disturbing images visited him. The only sensation that kept his rest from being completely even was a prickly feeling that he had missed out on something that day. What could it be? Nick thought as he put his eyeglasses on the floor. He knew he had completed all of his chores around the house. It was as if someone had placed a pair of earphones on his head. Ones that continued to play, without any batteries, the words “remember” and then “please, forget” in some embracing ballad. Nick certainly was aware that he had forgotten an important part of this day, but couldn't figure out where it was – or didn't want to find it.

The first voice Nick heard the following morning seemed to come from his own head, an ambiguous collective of feelings that were muffled by a thick layer of skin. The sound was heavy and sad, full of tightness and finality.

"Nick, Nick," was the first couple of words that Nick could make out once he was fully aware that he was awake. Kneeling beside him, in a pair of loosely tied pyjamas, covered in pain and anxiety was his father. This, however, was not the aspect of the scenery that first got his attention.

His father was crying.

The torture was evident in his eyes, so was something else, something that could only be described as blinding fear or complete hopelessness.

"Nick . . . your, your Mommy's dead "

“My what? Is what?”

He hadn't heard the word Mommy for years. Nick was hesitant to use so gentle a word.

His eyes darted around, unable to follow everything that was happening inside of his own head. Flashes of screaming light intermingled with pulsating streams of energy, which then exploded and quickly condensed. As different feelings made him more confused, Nick noticed another individual in the room, someone in a flat uniform.

Once the young man whose name was still Nick, the only invited guest in the room had regained his bearings and thought about the situation, he soon realised that this other person was a police officer, a RCMP. He was standing by the door with his hands behind him, standing firm and not saying anything. Was it coolness or was it certainty?

Again his father repeated that his mother was dead, then suddenly lost control of his muscles and fell dramatically to the floor, becoming completely limp, as if someone had turned him off.

Silence itself was soon to follow.

Within a few seconds of this, the constable had moved warily over and helped Nick's father regain his composure and led him out of the room in a professional manner. Moments later a different officer came by to ask if Nick was okay.

"I'm fine, thank you," was all Nick could say.

"Are you sure I couldn't get you something?"

"No, I'm fine, thanks." When the second officer quit the room Nick noticed how steady he felt. As he sat there trying to focus in on his situation and what was going on around him, he asked himself the same question. Am I fine? To this he answered the same way, repeating that he was fine, except it was a stronger feeling than just fine. He could not figure out exactly what state of fine he was in.

Unexpectedly, each of his breathes had turned into Valium and he was thankful to pull each of them deeply into his chest. So pronounced was this sensation of relief that Nick almost had to contain himself from giggling when he started to get dressed. Each of his socks was put on with an extra bit of effort. They slid on so softly up past his ankles, he was certain that his legs had turned to pillars of woven silk - before there had been effort in waking up, now he felt that he could draw inspiration from it.

A short time later he was downstairs sitting on a printed couch in the same room he had abandoned the night before. To his satisfaction and surprise, he had found a cushion on the couch that was only lightly covered with dog hair.

Nick's company at this time however was more substantial than mere books. With him was the same policeman that had asked him how he was doing without wanting an honest reply. Nick sat there with him for a few moments while another officer with a walkie-talkie in his hand quietly explained to Nicholas that he should stay in the room for the next couple of minutes. There was no specific reason given to Nick. But as soon as he heard a loud thumping sound from the staircase, accompanied by a string of male voices that sounded like they were in the process of loading a truck, ones that belonged to throats he didn't recognise, Nick knew what was going on.

It was too obvious to overlook. The way the house shook as the body hit the individual steps was too pronounced. She had gained a lot of weight over the last couple of years. Why?

Depression?

Stupidity?

Insanity?

Nick then glanced earnestly over at the man that sat across from him, wanting to tell him to relax, wanting to tell him to make up a knock-knock joke - the kind that begins with: knock-knock, whose there? Boo. Boo who? Why are you crying? There is no reason to cry at all.

There was nothing said. Nick understood what a human was expected to do. He knew how much people liked blocks of well-placed silence. So Nick decided to look at the ground so his inconsiderate gaze wouldn't make the officer feel more uncomfortable.

Soon afterwards a third strong looking man escorted Nick outside. He was a well-built individual who had a clipboard and an enlarged Adam's Apple. This officer stayed beside Nick as they walked to an awaiting car in the driveway. On Nick's way to the blue and white vehicle he couldn't help but notice how clear and sunny the day appeared. To him the walk was more like a leisurely stroll to water the grass than a prelude to a usually uncomfortable situation.

Without being aware of it Nick was swinging his arms.

During the entire time when the officer was interviewing Nick about what had transpired the night before, interjecting ambitious questions as to whether the pills were forced down her throat or something of a similar nature, Nick had to remind himself how to act. Should I pretend to be depressed and distracted or emotionless and strong? Should I be evil, or should I be good? Perhaps I should go back inside the house and flip through some of my mother's Reader's Digests for help. Before trying to leave the cruiser and create a scene Nick decided that the latter course of action was for the best. And then before anyone could tell, Nick took this advice and assumed a stoic, if not tempered demeanour, adding the necessary pauses in his voice so that there was some element of respect to his unwashed appearance.

As he did this, he reminded himself of how comfortable he had been that morning putting on his socks.

How effortless everything seemed.

The rest of the session with the officer went well. So well that when Nick's foot finally kissed the pavement beside the car he was confident that there was no fault levied against anyone but the person in the large black bag.

Later that evening, while the house lay quiet, unmoved and unshaken, acting as if it was a forgotten ship in a distant ocean, Nick heard a car pull up outside. The voice of his brother came quickly to him when the front door was opened. Tom was soon upstairs and, with little irony in his question, asked Nicholas how things were going, doing so as he walked straight into his room. With fluid ease, Nick got up from his bed, thought about what it meant to be compassionate, and entered Tom's Room.

As Nick studied his brother and how obvious everything had to be, he pulled up a chair beside Tom. Then without a second thought or the desire to assuage anyone in particular he said,

“Tom, as of today we have one less parent.”

To this, his brother minimally shifted the muscles in his face. Not in shock, but with curiosity.

“You mean she's dead?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.” Tom replied in an even tone, then leaned back in his bed and closed his eyes.

The room stayed beautifully calm.

Billowy Tungsten

Chapter 3

In the charming days that followed this incident, the usual turmoil and surprise that often accompanies such an unexpected event ensued. Questions of all shapes and sizes were sent to the immediate family of Nick through every mode of inference: She was such a healthy individual. How could she have had a heart attack? How long did Dr. Bonnie know that his wife had such a serious condition? Are you okay, Nick? Are you? Can we do anything for you? Do you need to sit down? Do you need to go away for awhile? Belonging to and working for the same hospital as his dad made it rather difficult for Nick to evade the questions which were asked of him about his mother's death. All he could answer, without fear of contradicting himself, was that his father was going through a very traumatic period and needed time alone to heal. And that he, his father's son, was going to be okay. All he wanted to do was to work so that he could focus on something positive.

The funeral itself, which took place in late August and was humbly surrounded by a well-washed fleet of at least 40 cars, was another exercise in well-earned diplomacy, something that didn't happen naturally though. Certainly what transpired inside the funeral home was a display that was well-orchestrated and barely intentional, coming together into a series of ceremonial gestures that were carried out by Nick and his brother Tom. To all those around them at the chapel, they appeared to be pillars of strength. Solid and unmoved, perfect contrasts to a grieving father and husband who was completely racked by waves of grief. Throughout the ceremony, both sons stayed on either side of him, remaining ever passionless and ever restrained.

It was only natural to conclude that they were putting aside their own obvious grief so that Dr. Bonnie had a pair of dry shoulders to place his weary head on. Oh, what good boys they were.

As with any other situation the questions and prying eyes were eventually focused on other prey when the blood turned cold. Soon the death of Mrs. Bonnie was part of the general knowledge at the hospital, another page in the endless history of the institution that was on the north-western tip of Edmonton, Alberta. Which itself was an oversized mass of names that had the unfeeling population of a city, but was more like a town that didn't know when to stop growing.

Though life continued above ground, Nick would occasionally be asked about his mother's death in any number of units he worked on throughout the institution. He would give a spotty answer that made the listener think they had better drop the subject. This reaction usually caused other such related scrutinises from being dispensed. Anyway, he didn't have to worry too much about this considering that his job as a Psychiatric Aide at the hospital, at Alberta Hospital Edmonton, was going to become only part time as soon as he went back to school. There at the University of Alberta they didn't know what happened, and didn't care if anything was worth mentioning either.

It didn't take Nick too long to settle into the usual routine at school. After four years he knew what to do. The only thing he had to get use to was his new apartment. His semi-basement suite, number 114, at Garneau Bay Apartments was an affordable address situated about three blocks away from the campus. This along with the quietness of the neighbourhood made it a comfortable setting. On first inspection this lifestyle may have seemed ideal however Nick wasn't completely at ease there. The actual location was not the problem. It was the fact that this was the first time that he lived by himself: no roommate, no dogs and no screaming, sheer emptiness in its most basic form.

No one else was there to break up the day for him into sections that could easily be labelled. Before he had placed himself into this particular space, he had experienced, no lived an almost indestructible timetable. With obstinate pride he knew when to do the dishes, when to walk the dogs, and what time he should attempt to make the dinner. Other years and he had either shared the rent with someone else or stayed at home. But this year he had to get use to himself. Get use to the uncertainty of being an adult.

“What. . . What – no,” said a startled figure, filling the room that encircled him in solid fear. Cautiously, Nick tried to examine the greyness in the air. This was the sixth day in a row it had happened. It was about two o'clock in the morning and he was upright in his bed looking intensely at the corner of his bedroom. He thought he had seen something or someone there in the darkness, a damp silhouette of no particular shape. It had torn itself from the darkness and charged at him. Giving the fullest impression that nothing would stop it, but as before, just prior to it hitting him, it would turn violently into drops of nothingness and vanish in quiet thunder.

After a few moments of thoughtful stagnation, Nick got out of bed and turned on the light. Just as he thought, he was alone. He considered trying to go back to sleep, but he was very aware of all the loose ends dangling inside his skull. He got changed and walked downstairs to the underground parking lot. The certainty of the overhead lights made everything seem perfect and peaceful. His steps were steady and repeated themselves with purpose. Then he thought he felt a light breeze against his cheek. It made him stop and look around.

There was nothing there.

His brain blinked a number of times and he continued onward.

Twelve steps later, Nick brought a slimy key out of his pocket. Upon inserting it into a brilliantly clean lock, a door was opened. For a moment Nick stood admiring how the overhead lights warmed the curves of the car. His fingers softly touched the surface of the metallic brown Datsun. It was a 5 speed 280Z. He had registered it on September 25.

A couple of times he had tried to memorize the car's Vehicle Identification Number. Seeing that it was: HLS30448119, and he didn't have a good memory, he had given up. Instead he was happy to easily recall that it was built on February 1978.

The car was very similar to the one that he had read about in that Road and Track Magazine that he had been reading the day his mother had decided to vanish. It was true that they differed in year and color. That didn't matter to him.

It was his.

Now he had his palm flat and could feel some of the heat that remained in the car. This sensation caused Nick to think about the time he had taken his father for a drive. They started from their acreage and ended with an abrupt stop just before a large intersection three kilometers away. They were probably 45 kph over the speed limit prior to the end of the blast through the gears. His father had laughed as loud as he had. Nick smiled thinking about that night.

Once inside the car, Nick put on his seat belt

The strong vinyl smell inside the car caused him to smile.

He locked the doors and closed his eyes.

Soon it was early October. Soon Nick no longer looked anxiously at one of the corners of his bedroom. Between calling home, working at the hospital and visiting his mother's grave in Sherwood Park with some vigilance, he kept in touch with his family in one way or the other. Whenever Nick called Tom he was told that their dad was keeping himself busy at work and was doing well. The thunderous moments of classical music in the Rec. Room were no longer as loud, nor as pensive as they had been.

Nick never made any comments about the incident causing this display and Tom never made any inquires either. Someone had died and that was that. There was nothing to lament over or to consider.

Mostly they just talked about small things and the young woman that his father had hired to clean the house. Tom's remarked that she was helpful and that her boyfriend drove a Mustang GT. More importantly, due to this young woman's efforts, the house was almost becoming presentable. In the past it was one of the many reasons neither of them had any friends come over.

Their discussions were concise and formal. There seemed little need to repeat the description of a moment that was already gone. Besides, the past, present and future were the same to Nick. And even when he was caught in a reflection, his mind would only ask him how he was going to fill the space around him. How he was going to keep it perfectly still and placid.