

A Darling Story by Richard Van Camp

Our love has made us old, Lance thought as he sank back into the couch and adjusted the bag of frozen peas in his track pants. Oh, he was swollen and tender. It felt like the surgeon had stomped on both of his testicles before stuffing them back inside his scrotum six months and a week earlier. And every day they swelled until the pain was beyond agony.

“You good?” Duane asked.

Lance winced and nodded as he shifted in his seat and waited for the hash brownies to cradle him, to sink him into the couch and vanish him for the night. “Where did we get this?”

Duane lit another candle. “Compassion Club.”

Lance let out a long breath and watched the candlelight flicker on the walls. “I thought you needed a doctor’s note or something.”

“That’s Compassion on Wheels. Compassion Club doesn’t care.”

“They come all the way out to White Rock?”

Duane ran his hands over Juanita’s hips and kissed her gently. “They do.”

Supper had been magnificent but quiet. Duane and Juanita had prepared a salmon feast that could have fed three more couples: there was also baked halibut, fresh potatoes, corn and a salad that Shari had put together in the way only she could. Juanita kept glancing at Shari, and Duane, the peacekeeper, had done his best to raise everyone’s spirits by talking about what they had learned at the couple’s retreat. Lance had tried to keep up but the gnawing agony between his legs and the wall of resentment between he and Shari had been too much. He had faded in and out of the conversation, stirring his food, rather than eating it.

Duane was Gitxsan. He was an architect and slowly making a name for himself in the industry. Juanita was Haida and was in line to take over the vice principal position at a local elementary school. Both Duane and Juanita volunteered with various downtown Eastside causes. This, somehow, was their ticket into the hash brownies situation, Lance thought. They had a gorgeous townhouse. Their home was filled with the artwork of Roy Henry Vickers, Chris Paul, Susan Point, and George Littlechild. There were plants everywhere and Lance inhaled deeply, picturing himself breathing pure vitamins. Lance watched Duane and Juanita lean into each other as they hugged. *They’re going to have beautiful children*, Lance thought before glancing at Shari but Shari looked away, tucking her feet under herself.

“So, how are you two doing?” Duane asked.

“We’re sorry about the news,” Juanita said and looked directly at Lance.

Lance felt the heat of the buzz start in his fingers. Over the four years that he and Shari had known Duane and Juanita, they had become closer. They were allowed to ask. Lance and Duane were sweat brothers. The Dogrib did not sweat, but Lance was one of the helpers. He and Duane had shared many conversations about their partners as they helped prepare the feast and sweat at UBC. He let Shari field this one.

“We’re coasting, hey, Lance?” Shari said. It wasn’t a question. Her cut hair only accentuated her sharp Dene features and Lance closed his eyes because it was too painful to look at her and not be able to touch her or comfort her. The distance between them was too thick, too fiercely protected, and they had run out of words for each other. She had not spoken to him on the hour-long ride out here. Lance had watched Vancouver sweep into Richmond and Richmond grow into fields. He’d seen horses, and felt a quiet peace knowing the ocean was to his right.

Lance thought of Duane and Juanita. They’d just returned from a rediscovery camp for couples and couldn’t stop kissing each other. *They have found their way*, he thought. *And we have lost ours*. Lance wanted to reach for his coffee but couldn’t. Ever since he learned that the six-month reversal test was a bust, he was now back on the coffee in a big way. He had been sipping tea that tasted like bog water from his acupuncturist that was supposed to promote fertility, but that was all gone now that his infertility was confirmed. Each sip of coffee now seemed to lighten the sorrow he felt in his bones for a little while.

Since the reversal, his orgasms had grown stronger, but he hadn’t told anyone—not even Shari. There was a team of people who’d been cheerleading them on: his doctor, his surgeon (who was the best in the province), his acupuncturist, his homeopath, their couple’s counsellor, his counsellor, her counsellor, his friends (Duane being the head cheerleader), his brother, her friends (he assumed mostly Juanita), her sister, their friends—and the “team” all agreed on two things: 1) he had to start talking to Shari about this. If he didn’t, he’d lose Shari. 2) Shari had to forgive him for something he did long before he met her. She had to or she’d lose him.

“The road to pregnancy can either make or break a couple,” his acupuncturist said. “Sometimes the wish is not the reality. The key is you have to talk through it. You have to do the good hard work, and you have to do it together.”

The good hard work, Lance thought. All talk of buying a home together was frozen; all talk of a traditional marriage was off; what used to be a full fridge of groceries was now littered with the basics. Lance often ate alone now.

“I’m scared,” he whispered and closed his eyes.

“What?” Shari asked.

“He’s stoned,” Duane said.

“I feel like a broken horse,” he said.

“Cheap date, Lance,” Shari said. “This party’s for you.” And there was that edge, that how-could-you? tone, as he called it.

Lance sank into the couch and started to drift. He’d scoffed when he caught Shari sneaking a puff every once in a while at parties or outside a pub, and he’d refused to join her at Duane and Juanita’s when they hosted hash brownie parties, but, after the urologist suggested adoption or sperm donation, Lance pretty much surrendered to depression. They’d learned together that the scar tissue from his vasectomy was too thick and that nothing life-creating could get through. Lance had this vision of squeezing semen through a scissored fortress of bone spurs every time he ejaculated. And, worse, he now had an infection of some kind. Something *was* trying to squeeze through the scar tissue and it was agony.

“Bring on the hash cookies,” he’d said to Duane when he called to see how things were. And he and Juanita gladly obliged.

Lance had gotten a vasectomy during his first marriage when he told himself that any children would be an absolute burden, a never-ending series of chores and doom, a life of thankless duty, a kiss goodbye to anything luxurious. Truth be told, his ex-wife, Larissa, did not want children. Her upbringing had been terrifying. After four years of watching her try every form of birth control, it was apparent that her system was too fragile to handle anything more. She had a latex allergy; foam was like paint remover to her; she tried five different kinds of the pill, and Depo made her “bipolar” for the six months she felt it leaching through her blood stream. And her terror became his. He sank within himself and let himself remember for a second the dread around “period time.” If Larissa was a day or two late, there would be no sleep, tears, terror. It was during the horrible afternoon when her IUD had implanted itself into her uterine wall and became infected that Lance made up his mind. Sitting in his car on a rainy afternoon outside St. Paul’s Hospital as Larissa underwent day surgery, Lance made up his mind that would get a vasectomy so that birth control would no longer be an issue. He did not want to bring a child into a world with the woman he loved if she did not want a baby. What he did not know was that Larissa was having an affair with a colleague. What was worse was she let him go through the operation while cheating on him. Crueler was that Larissa and her colleague were now parents: they’d had twins.

His divorce had ruined him. He spent the first eight months on his couch watching movies, crying into a towel he kept close by. No words from family or friends helped. He felt alone. Worse, he could not imagine anyone wanting to be with him ever again now that he was sterile.

A year after his divorce was finalized, he'd met Shari and that all changed. Shari was what he'd always wanted but thought he'd never find: Chipewyan, a northerner who knew who she was and where she came from, ultra feminine from a family of matriarchs, a woman who was born to create a home for a family. Growing up in Lutsel'ke, she was learning her language and culture and was a master weaver of both cedar and birch bark. Her grandparents were medicine people, “the last of the chanters,” she'd once told him. She had been married before to a Gitksan and had lived in Hazelton for some time. She was working on her PhD and they'd met on campus. Lance taught storytelling and was working on his PhD, as well. They'd met and moved in together within a year and a half and, after two years of living together and discussing a traditional marriage and having a family, Lance had gone for the reversal. At first, Shari was a saint. She'd been a great nurse after the operation and had gone beyond the call of duty, but, after his first test, six weeks after his reversal, when the urologist said the results showed no movement and that “the tubes” were still swollen, something changed in her. Immediately. They'd gone home together in the car and she was quiet, so deeply quiet. Lance pleaded with her to say something, putting his own terror on hold. “Please, baby. Say something.”

She stared straight ahead as she drove, her cheeks flushed into fierce blades of red. “What do we do now?” was all she asked. And that was when the silence in Lance crept inside of him, and the fear. Fear that he was powerless, powerless in that what he'd decided for Larissa was now final for him and Shari. The next morning, Shari had called in sick and left for the day, leaving Lance filled with dread. When she returned that night, she had cut off her long hair and moved like an old woman. Every trace of anything to do with a baby was put into the nursery room they had prepared together and the room was locked. All the picture frames celebrating babies, the little moccasins she had made—everything was gone. She stared through things and retreated into a world of deep misery.

“She is grieving her dream,” Greg, his counsellor, told him. “Are you?”

Lance could only stare at his hands. He had retreated so far inside himself that he literally had no words for anyone when they questioned him directly about how he felt. He'd freeze. He'd freeze when he was talking about it with Shari; he'd freeze when he was talking about it with his acupuncturist; he'd freeze when he tried answering anyone. He would have no problem when he started the conversation, but direct questions locked him up.

Lance began to float a whisper above his body and the buzz bloomed behind his cheeks. He could feel a luxurious heat lift off his ears and he didn't care if the sun rose tomorrow or not. No. He was sterile and had an infection of some kind. He was sitting on a bag of frozen peas and it felt like he had three swollen balls. Shari resented him for his past life. The cold fear of his future gripped him completely on the way home in the car after his three-month test result when after the urologist had sat them down and said, “The tubes are still not clear.”

“How do I build a home without children?” Shari had thrown her hands up and started crying in the car. “How do I live without children? Why was I born if I can't be a

mother? Why? You tell me, Lance. I’m piggybacking my future on *your* past with that white bitch, and she has twins with the man she cheated with. Where’s the justice in that?”

Lance froze once again and looked down. “I’m sorry,” was all he could say.

“What are you apologizing for?” she’d asked. “I don’t need an apology.”

“Well, what do you need?” he had asked, confused.

“I need you to make it right!”

“Shari, I’m doing the best I can.”

“Well, it’s not working, Lance. It isn’t. Fix this for us. You need to fix this and you need to fix this right now. And I need you to bloody well talk to me.”

“I don’t know how to fix this, okay? I do not know.”

“Well, can I just be a bitch and ask why the fuck you didn’t bank some sperm?” She started crying into her hands.

Lance held her and rocked her gently. “Because I didn’t know I’d meet you, okay? I didn’t know. How could I know?”

“Why do they get to have a family and we don’t?” she’d asked and started crying again. “It’s not fair, Lance. I want a family for us. It’s all I want now.”

“Me too, Baby,” he said and cried with her. “Me too.”

And that was when Shari had started wearing pajamas to bed. They’d stopped making love. That was when she stayed out later with Juanita. They had found a women’s circle that involved sweats and spiritual retreats. Juanita and Shari had gone together. Often, she would come home smelling of cedar and sweet grass, but she would not talk about where she had been for the weekend or what they were doing. Shari would return strong for a few days but then she would get this look, this sadness, and move slowly again. She had also started sleepwalking. Lance found her a few mornings sleeping in the nursery room that they had prepared together. She’d be on the floor, wrapped in a blanket she had made for the baby. That was by far the worst for Lance: to see the pain he had brought to someone who had earned the right to a beautiful life. He hated himself for what he had done to Shari. And that was when he’d stopped trying to feel. He’d lose himself in movies, video games, online porn. Anything to feel like a man.

He held onto something he’d read at the urologist clinic: that a man needed to ejaculate every three days to create and maintain healthy sperm. The word “virility” had never mattered to him before, but it was his mantra all the time now. *Virility, virility, virility.*

He hated himself and his decision to burn the bridge, to cauterize “the tubes” that could give them what they both thought they wanted now: a family.

She’s biding her time to leave, he thought. I have failed her. And she’s rejected me. And there’s nothing more I can do. He remembered words that their couple counsellor, Wanda, had shared: “The number one reason marriages and partnerships fail is failed expectations. When a life changing event like infertility comes up like this, you can either fall apart or you can fall together. It will always come down to communication.” Lance bristled at how hard the past six months had been. “I’m a eunuch,” he said.

Juanita burst out laughing. “What?”

“I’m a eunuch,” he repeated and the room fell quiet. He never wanted to open his eyes again.

“Easy,” Duane said.

“And now my orgasms are strongest in doorways,” he confessed.

“What?” Shari asked, alarmed.

It was true. Whenever he had to ejaculate for a sperm count or to maintain virility or just to feel magnificent for as long as he could, he got down on all fours and discovered that any time he came half way through a door that his orgasms were beyond physical. They were metaphysical, loud in the soul.

“And I’m not a chronic masturbator. A man should ejaculate every two to three days to maintain a healthy sperm count.”

The group laughed. Even Shari.

This felt good. He could feel waves of weight leave his body. He wanted to reach for more hash brownies and chase it down with his beloved coffee. He knew there were two brownies and half a cooling cup of his beloved coffee left, and but he could not move. He started to drift around the room, as if he were having an out of body experience. The throbbing pain between his legs now hummed to a dull buzz.

“Did I tell you,” Shari said, “that my old soccer ball contacted me today on Facebook?”

“What?” Duane and Shari asked.

“What?” Lance echoed, delayed in his response time.

Shari sat up. “When we were kids, my mom brought us home a soccer ball she’d found one day. On it in huge letters was the name, “Nelson Crummy.” We fell in love with this soccer ball. We took it everywhere. We took it to the lake. We brought it out to

restaurants. And we’d all say, ‘Hey, where’s Nelson Crummy? Has anyone seen Nelson Crummy?’ Even my dad and mom got into it. ‘Well, Nelson Crummy,’ my father would say, ‘what do you feel like for supper tonight?’ ‘I think Nelson Crummy wants barbeque chicken with corn on the cob and baked potatoes,’ Mom would say.” She stopped to take a sip of water. Lance felt something lift inside of him. As Shari had started this story, he got a glimpse of her family when they were younger, running in black and white, laughing together, not kicking the ball but running together and passing it to one another somewhere in a field of tall grass. Her muddy hands, her marvelous feet in little shoes.

“Holy shit!” Duane yelled. “That’s like that Tom Hanks movie—what was it called…”

“*Castaway!*” Juanita said. And they started laughing.

“What?” Shari asked.

“The ball that Tom Hanks has as a best friend. Wasn’t his name--Wilson?”

“Yeah,” Juanita said. “Holy cow, this is just like that.”

“Did we see that movie?” she asked Lance.

Lance frowned. He had watched it with Larissa. “I don’t think so. Go on, Sweetie.”

She looked at him with surprise. He hadn’t called her that in months. She continued. “And it went on and on. We couldn’t leave the house without Nelson Crummy. We even snuck him into movie theatres and we even took him on the plane with us to my grandmother’s funeral. He became a member of our family. It was great. I don’t think our family was ever happier. It was like another baby or a pet. Well...not a pet. It was as if Nelson Crummy was an angel with us and we knew it. We played with Nelson Crummy and the thing is he kept leaking, so we had to keep pulling over to every gas station we came across and my dad didn’t mind. My mom didn’t mind. Nobody minded. And we loved it. We loved it all. We loved him. Then one day my mom came home and Nelson Crummy was gone. She’d met Nelson Crummy—the boy. The one whose ball it was. He was in her class. She’d noticed his name on her class list and confessed to him that his ball, his name, his very spirit had traveled with us across Canada all summer. He seemed unimpressed. All he cared about was getting his soccer ball back, so she gave it back—though we were all pretty sad about it. Even my dad.”

“Cheap,” Duane said. “So what happened?”

“Well, it was right after that that we had the fire and lost everything.”

“Oh, Sweetie,” Juanita said. “Did you add him?”

“I did,” she said and Lance tried to frown about this. He tried to frown but wasn’t sure he could move his face anymore. He was really stoned. But he had seen her. He’d seen Shari’s life.

“Well, that’s a sad story,” Juanita piped. “Who needs water?”

“All of us, Sweetie, please,” Duane said.

Lance listened with everything inside of him and he opened his eyes. His eyelids felt thick and sticky. There was Shari curled on the couch. She’d taken her socks off and he could see her feet. Her beautiful Dene feet. It was her feet that had secured the deal with them when they started dating but he’d never told her. Her toes were delicately shaped, each one a jewel to massage. Like amber beads. Her ankles, her feet, her toes, the muscles and perfection of her feet revealed themselves to him every time they used to go out because the night would truly begin with Shari asking for a foot massage. He’d gladly oblige and he remarked once that she used a certain red polish that drove him crazy. She’d apply it for him every Friday and they’d never make it out the door for supper or a night on the town. He hadn’t massaged her feet or toes in weeks now.

She hadn’t painted them either. She’d also taken off the silver toe ring Lance had given her after their six-month anniversary. She’d also taken off her ankle bracelet that she used to wear. Lance came home to find them gone and, just like the haircut and the locked nursery, he knew not to ask about it. He and Shari were becoming strangers, but in this story about the soccer ball, there she was: that girl he adored. She’d lost her family photo albums in a house fire and he’d spent hours--days really--trying to imagine her as a girl, as a young lady, as a teenager. There were no pictures of her life that he’d ever seen and this was magic because when she’d told this story, he could see flashes of her life: her brother, her sister, her parents. For some reason, they were all wearing suits in this story. For some reason, this story was in black and white. For some reason, their hair was matted down with something. And he saw Shari with bad perms, awkward dresses, friends who’d moved on, sleepovers. He’d seen the memory of birthday cakes and pizza parties. He’d glimpsed a movie reel of Shari growing up.

“I love that story,” Lance said, fascinated. “What was his name?”

“What?” Shari asked.

He sat up slowly. “What was the soccer ball’s name?”

“Nelson Crummy.”

He felt a heat spread between his legs as he imagined her tanning, learning how to dance, laughing, kissing for the first time.

“What?” Lance asked again.

Shari looked at him with suspicion. “Nelson Crummy.”

Lance felt something more: he felt the heat spread within his thighs through his balls. “One more time,” he said.

“Why?” She asked.

“Please,” he said and motioned with his eyes towards his lap. “Baby. Please. Say it one more time.”

“No!” Shari said, but she said it playfully.

“What’s going on over there?” Juanita asked.

“You okay, buddy?” Duane asked.

“Yeah,” Lance said and looked at the group. He was looking at Shari and Shari was looking at him.

“Do you need more peas?” Duane asked. “We have more.”

“No,” Lance said. “I just want to hear his name again.”

“Nelson Crummy!” the group bellowed and everyone burst out laughing. Lance looked to Shari and smiled. “I feel like a broken horse, but I love that name.” And he exploded into laughter.

“You are so stoned,” Juanita said.

Lance nodded and smiled. He looked to Shari and sent her love through his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for all of this.”

Duane and Juanita stopped. Shari froze. Lance was surprised he’d spoken his thoughts.

“Sweetie,” she’d said and moved towards him.

As stoned as he was, he heard himself speaking. “I’m so sorry I’ve done this to you.” Hot tears started to fall. “I’m sorry you might never get to be the mother with me. I’ve shown up wounded. And I did it all to myself for the wrong person and it hurts you now. You’re sleepwalking now, baby, and it just kills me.”

She came towards him and their tears started to fall together. He held out his hands and took hers. All the words he had wanted to say all those nights as he waited for her to come home poured out. “I hate myself and what we’ve become. I never even got to see pictures of you when you were a little girl or when you were growing up, and, uh, I, “he swallowed hard. “I hate that because the truth is I want to have a little girl with you so

she can look just like you did growing up and... and... she can have your hair and your little hands and feet. I want to hear how you laughed when you were little and, uh, I want all of us to sleep on our bed together in each other's arms and I just don't feel like a man anymore. I'm so scared you're going to leave me and take your love away and we'll never have what you want...I just want..." It felt like he was trying to swallow his own Adam's apple. "I want to protect you but I did this to you before we even met. I feel like a ghost. I just don't know what to do with what I've, uh, what I've done." He wiped his eyes. "I'm just so fucking lost right now, you know? I really need you to know how sorry I am." Then he looked at her. "I feel worse than your ex who broke your jaw."

Duane and Juanita bowed their heads at this.

"I feel like I've hurt you worse than him." Lance's tears stopped and his body racked itself with sobs. She sat down beside him and rocked him in her arms. The bag of peas was soft now, and he was stoned but he meant it. He meant it all.

She kissed his face. She kissed his tears. "I know, Sweetie. I know. I know how sorry you are. But you've got to get well, okay? Whatever this infection is, you've got to get well. Why didn't you say this before? This is what I've been needing you to say."

He nodded. And she kissed his forehead. She wiped her tears away and reached for a paper towel and handed it to him. He wiped his tears and blew his nose and realized that it was the paper towel that held his former hash brownie. His nose was filled with chocolate and fudge. It was lovely. He looked to the kitchen. Juanita and Duane were hugging, rocking themselves together gently. *They're beautiful together*, he thought. "Sorry, you guys," Lance said. "I feel like such a shit."

"It's cool, you guys. Spend the night if you want."

"No," Shari said, wiping her eyes. "I want him home." She stood and reached for Lance. "Let's go, Hun."

As he reached for her hand, Lance looked up and saw her glowing. She was glowing and smiled at him. And in her eyes was pride. Pride for him and what he had just said. "This," he could hear their counsellor say, "is what a courageous conversation feels like."

In the car, Lance slept for most of the way. The T3s knocked him out. He'd popped two for the pain and three Ibuprofens for the swelling before they left. As he woke, they'd passed Steveston, the Massey tunnel, the Oak Street Bridge, and they were now on Marine Drive. They had a few minutes down Main Street and then they'd be at the apartment. There was no music or radio, and Lance woke to the peace that he would sleep without any arguments or silent treatment. He felt good. He felt lighter, somehow. He leaned his head against the cold window and inhaled the aroma of leftovers that Juanita insisted they take. Shari was quiet. He wasn't sure if it was because he'd finally cried or if it was because he'd finally said what he'd needed to say or if it was the hash, but he was exhausted emotionally. He leaned his head against the cold window and drifted.

“What was his name again?”

Shari stared straight ahead. “Who?”

“The ball.”

“*Ah you.* Nelson Crummy,” she said and dragged the ‘y’ out with her beautiful northern accent. “You like that, hey?”

“I do,” He grinned, pleased that they were connecting again. “You know how much I love your voice.”

That was another thing about Shari he’d noticed the first time he had met her: she had the most soothing voice. He loved to talk to her on the phone. It was kind, generous. A voice that was up for anything. When they had first met, she had told him a story about a friend of hers who was half Ojibwa and half black. The term, she explained, and the way she pronounced it drove him crazy with desire. She over enunciated it so it sounded like, “Muck-a-day-wee-ah” with a quick break at the end. He had grown immediately and fully fascinated with the way she said it. Even though her jaw had healed correctly, there were still words she could not pronounce fully. Lance had always had a weakness for anyone with a lisp, but the way she said, “Muck-a-day-wee-ah” was his Kryptonite. He’d get weak and shivery the way she said it and, one night, as they made love, he asked her to whisper the word into his ear over and over. She loved it as much as he did, and, here, this enchantment was back.

Lance looked at the eagle feather hanging from Shari’s rear view mirror. He remembered their first night together, cuddling on his bed, falling asleep together. She’d fallen asleep first and turned towards him He’d listened to her breathe, thanking his lucky stars because his wish to hold her had come true and that morning, after she left, that very morning, he’d found an eagle feather on the beach when he walked alone thinking about her and he’d given it to her on their one month anniversary. How she treasured it, how she’d held it over her heart in astonishment. Lance had beaded a sheath of yellow, red, black and white beads for the stem. Shari was Dene; he was Dogrib. Two hundred years ago, they would have been traditional enemies led by the Chipewyan leader, Akaitcho, and the Dogrib headman, Edzo. Lance dragged his teeth gently up Shari’s back and recounted that he had betrayed the Dogribs by kidnapping her and falling in love with her, and she loved to listen to him tell elaborate stories about the love affair in their previous life together. He’d whisper as he breathed lightly into the lunar orbits in the small of her back that she was once Akaitcho’s daughter and that he was Edzo’s son. And as the Dogrib and Chipewyan tribes fought, they’d snuck away from each other’s camps at night to make love to one another, that they could not help themselves and that their spirit helpers, two white wolves, would warn them when scouts were approaching.

She placed her hand on his lap. “Thank you for saying what you said at the party. I really needed that, you know?” She grew quiet. “Can we talk about this in the morning? We need to talk about this.”

“I want to give you everything you’re asking for. You know that, hey?” He wanted to reach for her hand but his body still felt so heavy.

“I know,” she squeezed his knee softly. “I know this is very hard for you.” She paused. “I’ve been pretty hard on you, hey?”

Lance sniffled. “I’ve just felt so rejected, you know? And I am scared that this is what the rest of our life together is going to be like, and you don’t deserve this, Sweetie. You don’t. I love you so much and you’ve never sleepwalked before and it’s because of me, you know? I keep praying those tests are wrong, you know? I keep praying that this infection is my body’s way of fighting...or—clearing the tubes, you know?”

She nodded and sighed. “I know you’ve done all you can physically. But you did stop talking to me, Lance. I really needed to hear those words tonight.” She raised and kissed the back of his hand.

Lance looked at her and saw how tired she looked. “Did you get stoned tonight?”

She shook her head. “No. I didn’t take anything.”

“Why?”

“I just didn’t feel like it.”

“Duane and Juanita didn’t have any either, hey?”

“No. They had wine, but that was it.”

The hash brownie party, he realized, had been for him: to bring relief, to relax him. He was humbled. Lance nodded. He could feel her sorrow. “Remember how I asked before I left if there was any chance of the reversal taking care of itself, and he said that it was one in a million?”

“No.”

“I asked. I asked him. Maybe you were already in the hall but I asked him and he said it was one in a million.”

“One in a million?”

“He said it was one in a million. I know you don’t want to talk about adoption, but...if you want to start talking about a sperm donor...” He couldn’t finish.

“A what?”

“A sperm donor. I was looking into it.”

“Oh, Lance!” she said and pulled off the street and hugged him. “I can’t believe you!”

“What?” he said. “Baby, if you want to, I’d consider it.”

“Lance Charlie,” she said. “I want your baby. I want to bring your son or daughter into the world through my body. Any doctor who says pregnancy is one percent pregnancy and 99 percent the rest of your life has his head up his ass, and I want your baby. I want you and your beautiful balls to give me what I want so I can be your wife and the mother of our children.” She burst out laughing. “I love you, Lance. I love you and only you. I don’t want a life of wondering ahead of us. I want us. I want us. I want us.” She started to kiss his face.

Lance smiled and sank into her kisses. She had not been this affectionate in forever. “My beautiful balls?” he said. “I like the sound of this.”

“Baby, I love your balls. They’re smooth and they’re all mine and I have been praying for them for months in the sweat and in ceremony. Do you know we have a prayer circle for your balls right now?”

“What!” Lance said.

“Yes,” she nodded. “There are women you have never met—aunties and grannies—praying for your beautiful balls. They are praying and dropping tobacco for them to heal properly so we can have a baby.”

“Jesus!” Lance said.

“Sweetie, there is no finer sound to me in this life than your balls slapping against me as we make love.”

Lance burst out laughing. “Holy shit! Are you frickin’ stoned, or what?”

“No,” she said. “I’m in love with you and I’m just so sad to see you like this. Thank God you got stoned tonight because we’ve been worried about you. You’re getting too skinny. I don’t want to cuddle up to a little bag of antlers. You’ve got to get strong. You’re going to need your strength for our future. I won’t give up on you, but don’t you dare give up on our dream, okay?”

“Holy shit,” Lance said again. “I’m the luckiest guy in the fuckin’ world, you know that?”

“Yes you are,” she said. “You think I drank all that stink tea and ate all that rabbit for nothing?”

Lance burst out laughing. *Stink tea*. That was what Shari called it every morning when they had to drink it together. She'd plug her nose and wretch as she chugged it. Part of the acupuncture and fertility treatments was to drink a Chinese tea and eat foods like rabbit. There was a theory that rabbits could get pregnant when they were pregnant so eating them was inviting fertility. They also were to eat a lot of seeds, so they ate spits, sesame and hemp seeds with just about everything.

“Now let's get home,” She said and drove back into the street.

My beautiful balls, he thought. *Goddamned straight they're beautiful!* He loved this! It had been so long since he felt adored. He wanted to make love to Shari and pull her close and vanish with the smell of her with the gentle brushing of his thumb against the smooth skin of her tummy. He wanted a daughter. Lance realized over the past year that a daughter was his secret wish. He wanted a little version of Shari. He wanted to see Shari holding their baby, her eyes saying, “Look at what we did. Look at what we've created together.” He could see the picture. He'd place it in their first photo album as parents. Shari had created 12 photo albums that were displayed proudly in their living room for all to see. All 12 of those albums contained photos taken of them as a couple in love, as a couple with hope. They were gorgeous photos highlighting their journey together, but her photography had stopped since his reversal. Lance realized that she had not taken a single picture since the cold panic moved into their home. She patted his knee before taking the steering wheel. “We're just about home. Let's talk in the morning.”

“Can we go for a walk on the beach?”

“Tomorrow?” she smiled. “Are you up for walking?”

He nodded. “I want to. I want to with you. Even if I hobble around. I want to see you in the wind.”

“Okay,” she said.

“I'm sorry you lost all your photos. I'm sorry about the house fire. Thank God you were all okay.”

“You've never forgotten that story, hey? That's sweet of you.”

“It's sad, Hun. I can't imagine it. But you know, when you were telling that story, I could see you. Like, I could see you in flashes. You growing up. You becoming such a beautiful woman. I loved it, Sweetie. I did.”

She was quiet. He could feel her listening.

“Can I make you breakfast tomorrow?”

She laughed. “You may.”

“Would you like it before or after your massage?”

“My massage?” She smiled. “I need one. Wait. Let’s talk about this doorway thing of yours.”

He smiled. “Not now. I’m still stoned. I adore your feet, Sweetie. Remember how you used to sweep your hair all over my body? You used to take me to heaven and back with that. And I’m not sure if you read the headline on the paper today but your nipples wanted me to know that they missed my constant and loving attention.” She let out a little laugh but she knew it was true. “Sweetie,” he said. “The truth is you look fantastic with short hair. Can you let me massage your feet tomorrow after our walk?”

“You may.”

Lance brushed the back of his hand gently against her cheek, where it had once been shattered by her ex. “What was his name again?”

“Who?”

“The soccer ball’s.”

“Nelson Crummy,” she said and she said it as if playfully annoyed.

He nodded and smiled. “One more time?”

“Nelson Crummy.”

He felt warmth spread again through his thighs, through his tubes, through his scars. “Sweetie, I just love the way you say it. I’ve always loved your voice.” His acupuncturist told him every session to imagine a clearing blue light pouring through him, to travel up his body and to blast through anything that blocked his chakras, tubes and spirit. He’d tried but every time he did, the light was green. Now, now it was blue and it poured through every artery, every vein, every passage with the speaking of the soccer ball’s name.

“I love you,” he said. “With everything. I am so proud to be your man.”

“I love you, too,” she said. “I’m glad you got stoned tonight. I’ve been hard on you, hey?”

He started to feel a freeze up so he nodded slowly. *Speak through it*, he thought. *Don’t freeze*. “Baby?” They pulled into their parking lot and Lance held up his left hand. “Can I tell you a secret?”

She turned the car off and turned to him. “Is it about cumming in doorways?”

He grinned. “No. It’s a secret and it’s only for you. I’ve never told you this before.”

He pointed to his left hand, to the cup of his palm. “This is my second favourite place in the world.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That first night I met you, like really met you, you were a consideration.”

Her voice became guarded. “A consideration?”

Lance nodded. “Well, you and I were aware of each other. You were seeing what’s-his-name.”

She pushed his arm gently. “Yeah, yeah. Go on.”

“Well, you’d come back from the bar and you were sipping coffee and it smelled great. It was midnight and you’d just finished singing. You stood by me. There were no other places to sit, so you stood beside me.”

“I remember.”

“You stood by me and you were coming back from getting another coffee and I wanted to smell it on your breath. It was fresh. You came by and I turned. I turned to ask you about the night, the band, where the gang was going, and I decided to place my hand on your hip. It was just the way we were standing. And I touched your hip, above it and it was so soft. I was cupping you with my left hand and you leaned into me and you even placed your hand on my shoulder. You answered me. You were holding your coffee and as we spoke you moved. You were moving to the music and I could feel your hips, the muscle, the softness of your skin underneath your shirt and then we got separated. The gang went one way. I had to go to work early. But when I went to bed that night, my hand was burning with how smooth you were. You and I have always been aware of each other. I’d been checking you out for months.”

“Stalker,” she grinned. “Checking me out for months, hey?”

He nodded. “Yeah. Sweetie, I went to bed and wondered about you. I wondered why the hell hadn’t we dated? I mean, there were times you and I were single at the same time. But I went to bed and when I woke up and my hand was still burning with the memory and the wonder of what was beneath. I drove. I remember I had to work in Abbotsford the next day and I’d look at my hand, where I’d cupped your hip and it was burning. It burned for a week until I saw you again and that was when I made my move.”

“You mean when I let you make your move.”

Lance nodded. He took her hand in his and kissed it. “Here’s what I’ve never told you. When I went for my reversal--”

“You touched me there again,” she said. “I wondered about that. You did it before you went under.”

Lance nodded. “I did. And when I woke up I asked for you.”

“And you did it again,” she said. “It was the first place you touched.” Lance saw a single tear fall down her face, surprising them both.

“To this very day,” he said, he could feel tears well. “I have never stopped feeling you in this hand.” He looked to his open palms. “I never told you this, but I’m magic.”

She laughed. “And stoned.”

“No,” he said. “No. I’m serious. You know my grandparents were medicine people, too, and that they never spoke a word of English. I wish you could have met them. They would have loved you. Treasured you.”

She whispered, “I’m sorry I didn’t, Sweetie. I know you miss them.”

He nodded. Lance had been raised by his grandparents. His own parents were alcoholics who refused to change. They weren’t close at all. Getting a vasectomy was about not passing on what he had been born into, and this is why he didn’t drink. “I do. You know, when I was growing up, there’s a lot you still don’t know about me, I was looking forward. I mean... I had this idea that I could spend the rest of my life telling you and showing you how magic I am.”

He looked to her. She glanced at him. “Go on.”

“And I just trusted that you would spend the rest of your life with me, astonishing me with all the little things you do without even knowing.”

She smiled.

“When I was a kid. Every Canada Day we used to go out to Pine Lake. Remember when I took you there?”

She pushed his arm, playfully. They’d had the whole beach to themselves and in broad daylight on a picnic table on sand the colour of cinnamon, he’d gone down on her over and over all afternoon, drinking her, lapping her and making love to her only with his tongue, breath and lips. She’d been astonished at how hungry he was for her and she was both exhausted and speechless with how wonderful it was, to have him between her thighs, him knowing exactly what to do and her looking up to clouds as white as snow,

the sky so blinding in blue. *He had wanted nothing*, she thought. *With his kind hands and hummingbird tongue, Lance had wanted nothing but to please me.* She smiled. “Go on.”

Who could ever love me more? She wondered. *This man who never holds back with his love? This gentle man with a huge heart and nothing but devotion for me, this man who gave himself to another woman, who altered his body and future for her and who has done the same for me.* She saw Lance let out a long breath and continue. He looked tired. He’d lost weight these past six months and it showed in his face and chest. She watched him and wanted to touch his hair but didn’t.

“We used to go on these expeditions called Bison Creeps,” he said. “You can’t do this now. But back then, we used to go in the bush and we’d creep towards the bison. Our parents and elders used to wait on the highway in their trucks and I was like seven or eight. There’d be about forty of us. And what we’d do is we’d move slowly with the shadows towards the herd. There’d be fifty to a hundred bison in the shade, and we’d move with the sun to take the fur that they’d rubbed off onto the bark of the trees. The game was whoever could grab the fur on the trees closest to the herd and make it back to the elders would be the winner. You’d have bragging rights for a whole year.”

She laughed. “How would they know who won?”

“They watched from their trucks, using binoculars.”

“Your parents let you do this?”

He winced at the memory. “My parents never knew: they were drinking at the Pine Crest or sleeping it off at home. It was the way boys became men. It was a ritual for the town. I loved the way the fur smelt. I can still smell it sometimes when I miss home. I felt like a wolf.”

She ran her hand over his arm. “Wow.”

Lance nodded. “One year, I really wanted to win. I did this thing where I moved with the sun. I wasn’t going to leave until I knew I won. I had bathed myself in the smoke of the fire in our backyard, and I hadn’t eaten buffalo meat in ten days. I was dead serious about winning. I had dropped tobacco, and I even asked that we pray together for a week before the event.”

“Ho-la,” she said. “I’ll never make fun of Fort Smith again. Go on.”

“Well, I did this thing where I moved so slowly and I prayed to my grandparents. This was when they were still with us. I prayed to them, and I did this thing where I put myself in my own back pocket as I moved, my spirit, I mean. And I moved within the shadows and I knew other kids were turning back, so I had to move in closer. I moved in closer and, as I moved, I could hear my heartbeat. Soon, I heard other heartbeats, like little drums. And I realized that it was the heartbeats of the herd I was approaching. I swear to

God I could hear them, feel them. And I moved. I moved and I made my way. And I closed my eyes and I trusted. I don't know how long I moved so slowly but I did and I brushed up against something and it was a bull. We both jumped and he ran away, starting a stampede. I had walked into the heart of them and bumped a bull. Holy cow, you should have heard people yelling for me. They were worried I'd been trampled. I had walked right into the heart of them and had touched the biggest bull there.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “That's crazy.”

“Yeah,” he said. “And you know, as they ran away, I looked down and in my hand was a handful of fur. I had been pulling it off of his body and he didn't even know until it was too late.”

She looked at him. “Are you telling the truth?”

He held his palm up and opened it. “I swear to God.” He pointed to the little blue beads in the sheath he had beaded for her on their one-year anniversary. “Those seven blue beads are the heartbeats I heard in the heart of where I stood. I have not felt anything near that kind of magic until I felt you. Not only that night, but on that first night we laid together. I placed my hand on your hip as you slept and that was when I knew that I wanted everything with you: a future, a family, a home.” He pointed to his palm again. “This hand is yours. I've never stopped feeling the memory of you in me. I swear. You are the most mysterious woman in the world to me, and I've never stopped thinking of ways to amaze you. I live to see you smile. I love pampering you. I do. You got me through that reversal and I did it for you.”

This was tender ground and he decided to stop because the slingshot answer often came out in therapy was, “But you got a vasectomy for her.”

But she said nothing. Lance could tell that response was on her tongue. She nodded and put the keys in her purse. “Thank you.”

He took her hand and kissed her palm. “I'm sorry it took me so long to find you.”

She kissed his palm. “Oh, Sweetie. Thank you. Thank you for saying this. Do you know how long I've been waiting to hear you say something?”

“I'm just so scared sometimes you'll leave me when I've just realized that I want to be a father, and I want to see you as a mother. I'd love to be parents with you and I never felt safe enough with Larissa to ever even think like this before or wish for a family but with you I know I found the right wolf to run with.”

She smiled, astonished at his sweetness. “Well, words like those will always hold me close. So keep talking, okay? You're a storyteller, but that is different from saying what I need to hear—and from what you need to say.”

He nodded. “I promise.”

The next morning, there was breakfast. Lance went all out. Even though the swelling was tender, most of his pain was gone. Shari’s ancestors were chanters, she once told him. Maybe the way she said, “Nelson Crummy” was a chant that had begun to work on him. “Nelson Crummy, Nelson Crummy, Nelson Crummy,” he said. “Virility, virility, virility.” He made his famous Spanish omelets; he made her coffee just the way she liked it, and he cut up fresh fruit for her. He even made them a smoothie for their expedition. He had three cups of coffee himself as celebration of their big breakthrough as a couple. *We’re back!* He quietly celebrated. He even went outside and dropped tobacco in gratitude for the new day before them. After, they shared a slow walk along Kits beach stopping for tea and muffins, watching the Vancouverites enjoying the day and each other. After, a careful shower. Lance surrendered to the bliss and warmth of her tummy against his as he soaped her body from head to toe. The kissing through hot water, the losing himself into her body where his body became hers was theirs once again. When they used to make love, Shari would run her fingers through his hair over and over, as she grew close to climax.

“I want you,” Lance said.

Shari brushed her nipples across his. “Are you sure?”

“Baby, yes,” he said.

“Be careful, okay?”

“Promise.”

They unplugged the phones, shut the blinds to the house. Lance provided an hour-long body rub and foot massage using coconut oil. He made her moan and took her toes into his mouth. He devoured them with kisses and moaned as he licked with playful nibbles around them. It was delicious. She bucked and writhed in delight at his skill and, after, there was gentle pampering using massage, breath and tongue. He was still too sore to have sex but Shari orgasmed twice and was thrilled with how much she missed him, missed *them*.

As they lay together, her back against his chest, he breathed into the nape of her neck. He pulled her close in his strong arms.

“What was his name again?” he whispered.

She closed her eyes. “What?”

“Tell me his name.”

There was this game again. This game he adored. “Whose name?”

“The soccer ball’s.”

She smiled and let out a long sigh. “Nelson Crummy.”

She felt him grin against her back. He hugged her lovingly, pulling her into him. Her nipples ached, ready for attention, as the tips of her ears and the heels of her feet were burning from his massage. He’d gone deep and she’d surrendered to the pampering, pushing the worry and grief away. She was thrilled with his hunger to please her again but worried he was still too tender to make love to. But he was so hungry for her today. “I see you. I see you growing up. Keep going. What was his name?”

She giggled. “Nelson Crummy.” And she said it as if it was playfully exhausting her.

“I see you. You’re growing up and you’ve got big hair, and then short hair, and then a great perm and then a bad one.” She laughed. “What was his name?”

“Baby,” she said as if she was too fatigued.

He kissed her neck and feathered his thumb across her nipple. “Please, baby, just tell me. I can see you when you tell that story.”

He ground himself into her from behind and he started kissing her neck, where he knew it drove her crazy. She turned and rolled into him. They were naked and it felt so good to touch tummy-to-tummy, nipple to nipple. Lance smelled of coconut. She licked the taste of herself off of his lips and felt the hot bloom of blood beneath her throat spread like a sunset under her skin. Her breasts began to ache for touch, nuzzling and kiss—in only the way he could adore them. Each time for them was like the first time for him. He trembled and shivered every time they made love, and she enjoyed seducing him with her power, her strength.

“Want me to say it again?” she whispered and placed her leg over his hip so she could feel his heat brush her sex with a whisper.

He placed his hand there, in that magic spot. “Please.”

“Whose name?”

“The angel at your table.”

She smiled and took her time, whispering into his ear. “Nelson Crummy. Nelson Crummy. Nelson Crummy.”

He could hear her little sharp breaths at the end of every time she said it and he became weak. “Oh, Baby,” he said. He kissed her and gently brushed himself against her. She

carefully used her leg to pull him closer. She could feel his body heat caress her sex and she curled her toes. “Say it again. Say it over and over.”

“I’m healing you and it’s Nelson Crummy.”

“Oh,” he started to shiver and groan. “Oh, Baby.” He gripped her hips harder.

“His name was Nelson Crummy. Can you see me?”

She started to kiss Lance’s face and his eyes were closed in complete trust.

“Baby, I can.”

She could feel him against her. “Be careful, Sweetie. Don’t hurt yourself. What do you see?”

“I see you. Growing up. Laughing and trusting. I see you, Baby. I see you.” And suddenly Lance was inside her, gently. Just the head of him and she was wet and ready. She was surprised that she was soaked and Lance was inside her now. “Tell me,” he said. “Baby, tell me his name.”

She took him inside of her and was surprised to feel how hot and hard he was. They hadn’t made love in months and here they were. She took him, and they were together, and she needed this. She needed Lance inside of her. Lance started to kiss her neck and he glided inside of her, carefully, slowly. He gripped her ankle, his favourite thing to do when he was close and she said, “Baby, I love you and his name was Nelson Crummy,” and that was when Lance burst inside of her. He came in such a rush that neither of them was prepared, and he filled her with himself. She cried out in both surprise and delight as she took all of him. She took all of him and felt something inside her she’d never felt before. She felt a blue searing light spread sweetly from her thighs into her tummy, and she suddenly felt a light fill her womb. Her eyes opened in shock. *My womb*, she thought. She’d never said those words before. A light filled her womb and her body heaved to catch all of it and gather it inside her, into herself, into her life, into her future, and it was everything she’d asked for, everything they deserved.

“Baby,” he pulled her close. “Oh, Baby. Did you feel us?”

She took his hands and pulled them towards her heart as she backed into him. She smiled. *We have fallen back into ourselves*, she thought. As heat and light found them both, Shari suddenly burst into tears. “Yes.”