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Gutless

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Gutless

Bridget Canning*

The church has one of those billboards with the changeable letters for posting platitudes. I read it out to Jerry as we pass.

“You know that little voice inside, that gut feeling? Listen to it. God finds ways to speak.”

Jerry stares straight ahead in the passenger seat.

“Interesting thought,” I say. “Kind of misguided, though.”

I turn down the volume a touch so I can focus on what I mean.

“The stomach is a bag of nerves,” I say. “More so than the brain. I read an article about it. Gut feelings are caused by microbes. They give emotional cues that structure the brain. These scientists did MRI scans comparing gut bacteria to brain

behaviour. When they switched the gut bacteria of anxious mice and fearless mice, their behaviour changed. Pretty cool.”

I hit the indicator. Across town to the overpass to the Trans Canada Highway, the bypass road is the first exit. The turn signal sounds like a thumb popping a lid.

“The ancient Egyptians were in touch with that. When they mummified a body, they would take out the internal organs and put them in clay jars, for the dead person to have in the next life. But the brain, they hooked that out through the nose. They thought the brain was just for balance. Understanding and thinking, that happened in the belly.”

Jerry inspects the weather. It will be dark soon. We’ve had three straight days of monochrome, overcast sky. At the end of each day, it fades straight from grey to black.

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“Might rain soon.”

We’ve been driving all day. I can drive for five hours without stopping, but today I take a break every two hours. Too much to do; I need to have my wits about me.

“I used to get nervous about driving in the rain,” I say. “Especially when it was foggy. The fog blankets slick surfaces; you can’t see how slippery the road is. When it rained, every hydroplaning story I knew would come to mind. I’d check the forecast; if I saw that grey cloud icon, my tummy would curdle.”

We cross the overpass. Not many cars on the road. Grey days mean stay inside and get things done. Or do nothing. No guilt ‘cause you didn’t get off the couch and make the most of nice weather.

“One time, I called in sick for work because I didn’t want to drive in the freezing rain,” I say. “Back when I was driving back and forth to Bull Arm. I felt guilty about that though. Using up a sick day.”

The GPS tells me to take the next exit to the bypass road. It will be a half-hour drive from there. Things are on schedule.

“But that job was stressful,” I say. “And Max made everything worse.”

Jerry’s lips jut out, parallel to the brim of his cap. His profile like the edge of a cliff, a place to ponder the situation with his own tumultuous innards.

“Max. What a little brute. Short guy, but built like a bucket. You have to watch the short guys; they have the most to prove.”

Jerry’s face is blank, but tender.

“No offense, Jer. And Max was one of those guys who love to make you uncomfortable. Like, he would fart just to gross you out. You’d be in an elevator with him and see his face screw up, like he was concentrating. That was him, trying to fart. People made excuses for him, said he was trying to be funny. But I think he got off on causing discomfort.”

I shift in my seat at the thought of Max. The seatbelt against my scar makes it itch. I work my hand under my sweater and rub the puckered flesh. I don’t like to scratch it directly. The skin feels too new.

“He gave me a bad vibe from the start. On my first shift with him, I had on a t-shirt from a concert: The Shins. He had never heard of them. ‘What’s that?’ he said. ‘Besides a good place to hit you.’ He mimed cracking me in the shin. He did the same thing every time I walked passed him;

he'd swing at my legs with his welding gun: 'Here comes the shins.' I joked that it was a good thing I didn't wear a Hole t-shirt. He didn't get that. Guess he never heard of that band.

If the boss wasn't around, Max told stories. He wore camouflage gear a lot; he said it was so he could sneak up on pussy. He joked that when he lived in the trade school residence, he threw a woman out in the hallway after he was done with her. He didn't even give her time to dress: tossed her clothes out after her and locked the door."

The Department of Highways has been busy, judging by the state of the bypass road. The foliage is cut back along the sides of the pavement. Ravaged dirt and tree stumps pepper the arch of the ditch leading to the trees. Makes me think of my scar, the torn up strip. Mostly healed, but I still get tingles from time to time, the invisible openings and closings, settling cellular connections.

"Max bragged about nights downtown with his buddies. The time they got thrown out of this bar. The time they ran out of that bar without paying the tab. The times they found a solitary guy and chased him. 'Herding faggots,' he called it.

First, I thought it was him

bullshitting, but I heard stories over time. Someone said, when he was younger, he got kicked out of residence 'cause he shaved a cat and fed it LSD. And later, he stalked an ex-girlfriend and she had to get a restraining order. He messed up the car of a guy she was friends with by burning thermite through the hood of his car. Used a magnesium ribbon and a blow torch from the site."

A car approaches in the opposite lane; its headlights flashes, once, twice, three times. Warning signals. Maybe cops or a moose. I tap the brake lightly. It's nice that other drivers give you a heads-up. But there's the awareness of being seen.

"Then he brought Julia to the staff Christmas party. I remember feeling sorry for her. She had this hair hung in these long thin wisps down her shoulders. Just the ghost of hair, really. And she had a bug-eyed look about her, like she was on the alert. When Max was talking, she stood still, like a statue. Like any movement from her meant taking attention from him.

That summer, she almost burned their house down because of Max's hockey card collection. He was drinking outside with his buddies, beers out of a cooler. He dragged out his collection to show off: his signed Guy Lafleur, Brett Hull. The next morning, Julia went out to clean up and

the hockey cards were at the bottom of the cooler, soaked in the melted ice water.

Even though it was his fault, she knew he'd find a way to get angry at her. So she took the cards into the house and lay them out, trying to dry them. They were starting to curl on the edges. She took heavy books off the shelf and put the cards inside, so they would stay flat. Then, she turned on the oven and put the books on the racks. In her mind, this would dry them out."

Something large and dark in the ditch. I pump the brake; Jerry sways forward and back, slow and silent. We inch along. The large bulbous head of a cow moose lifts and stares at us. She stands in the ditch about three feet from the road. Cutting the underbrush back was a good idea on the Department of Highways' part.

We glide by. A brown flicker on the left. The calf bounds onto the road, heading for Mom. I watch him in the rear view mirror; he stops at the yellow line, the mother clamours up to meet him. They nuzzle each other, brown silhouettes against grey.

"Max complained about Julia afterwards. 'That bitch is a real dummy,' he said. But I understand why she did it. That's what happens when you're scared. You can't think straight. You'll do anything to not feel scared. I started feeling that way

about Max. It got to a point that if I knew he was on my shift that day, I could hardly eat my breakfast. Belly seized up at the thought of him; I'd choke trying to get cereal down. He drove a silver Dodge Ram with oversized tires. The bumper stick read *let's play carpenter. First we get hammered, then I nail you.* Seeing it in the parking lot gave me instant gut rot.

But this is what I mean. These physical triggers, their purpose is to reinforce the reality of fear and shame. Love pangs and anxiety flutters, nervous diarrhea even, we've evolved so that they serve a purpose. You might wonder what happens when they go away."

The light is fading. I press the gas. The brown shapes shrink behind us. Ten minutes, the GPS says. Lots of time.

"And then it started. Twinges of discomfort while swallowing. At first I blamed it on stress. But Dad had the cancer. Uncle Rob had the cancer. The endoscope was hell; doctor had to knock me out with drugs to get it down my throat. The whole stomach has to come out, he said. Full gastrectomy. And when they took my stomach out and studied it, they found sixty-one precancerous lesions. Waiting to pounce.

It was hard to eat for months. Nowhere for the food to go. Tiny bites. If I

swallowed too fast, it came up. A bite of cake hit the bloodstream immediately. Instant queasiness all over.” My hands clench the wheel at the thought.

“And disability paid shit. When I went back to work, they had to find something for me to do. They got me to do presentations: Occupational Health and Safety for new hires. I told myself public speaking would be scary. But it didn’t happen. When my stomach was present, I would have hid in the bathroom, taking deep breaths and releasing everything that bubbles up with nerves. But no stomach, so I felt nothing. First time I ever spoke in public with dry hands.”

A car approaches: a red hatchback. I glance at Jerry. The frayed edges of his hair are starting to curl up, like shiny black spider legs. Looks itchy.

“When I accidentally shoplifted the first time, I realized the possibilities. A pack of gum at the bottom of the basket; I forgot to put it on the counter. I shoved it in my back pocket and left. The gutful version of myself would have gone back and paid, apologized.”

It’s dark enough now for headlights. Best to keep them on until the turnoff. Where there are two moose, there are many.

“It started gradually. I was on a budget; it was hard to go from a solid paycheck to the sixty percent disability throw at me. And no stomach meant a new approach to eating. Big meals became a waste of time; I’d eat three bites and be full. I’d reheat the plate over and over, eating the same supper all night. Drinking plain water made me feel raw and chafed inside. The nutritionist said it wasn’t a good idea anyway: filling up on no calories. And I had to maintain my weight. Thirty-five pounds gone in the first four months. I needed new clothes. I needed to find ways to eat more. I stood in an aisle at Sobey’s with a different protein drink in each hand, trying to decide which one to buy and I just slipped them into my pockets. I paid for my other things at the cash: deodorant, raw almonds, yogurt. No one noticed. I waited for those fingers of worry to poke me from inside, but nothing. A couple of ghostly sensations. Nerve endings had turned to cobwebs. I thanked the cashier. She put the change right into my hand.”

The first raindrops hit the windshield. We’ll be there in five minutes. If it rains all night, it may prove complicated. But I have enough supplies.

“At first, the stealing happened in pairs like that. I’d be trying to decide between two products: rechargeable batteries, light bulbs, vitamin pills. The thought

of returning one—remembering to keep the receipt, driving back to the store, finding a parking spot—what a pain. I just took them both. Then I always had extra stuff, so I gave it away. Dean caught on pretty fast to what I was doing. He usually came by once a week to play cards, so I'd offer things to him. I'd try to trade it for weed.

Dean knew a guy who bought stolen stuff; he ran one of those 'outlet' markets. He showed me how to make those bags with the foil lining that could fool the scanner. It was great for razor refills. Those things are marked up at least 200%. I'd go to a drug store and fill the bag when the aisle was empty. I would never consider doing that before; I'd be too nervous."

We're getting close. I won't be able to stretch or piss once we turn off the road. Best to pull over for a minute. The grey of the sky deepens in its last attempts at light. Rain spits on the pavement. I relieve myself in the woods and do a few lunges. Jerry's stillness rings with anticipation. I get back in the car.

"Where was I?" I say. "Oh yes. The stealing. It went on for months before I got caught. I was real cocky that day; I left the store and went to another part of the mall to go to the bathroom. Julia was there when I came out of the toilet. I had no idea she was store manager. Waiting with her arms

folded: she wasn't a rigid ghost anymore, she was this fierce little woman with a crew cut and a Wal-Mart jersey.

But I was lucky with her. She pulled out her cell phone to call the cops. And I asked her to let me have a cup of coffee first. That's another thing; I wouldn't be that bold if my stomach was full of fear. We sat in the Tim Horton's and I sipped my double-double slow. Figured I'd talk to her until I got an idea." I smile at Jerry. "It's amazing when you just meet someone and you realize you have so much in common. And she manages the whole store. Access to all the supplies. And more."

The turnoff is hard to see in the dark. Good thing the GPS gives us lots of notice. I mute it and turn off the headlights as we creep up the drive. The silver Dodge Ram is parked in front, just like Julia said it would be. Nasal twangs of new country music reverberate from the house. I let the car glide past and park by some trees.

"Julia knew where to get the ingredients for thermite. We googled how it worked. There are videos for everything now. Julia also knew how to be creative. 'Why not?' I said to her. Why not indeed?"

The rain ends quickly. When the music stops and the lights go out, I get Jerry out of the car. Dealing with Jerry is pretty

awkward. With everything inside him, he's top-heavy while his legs swing like a rag-doll's. But I get him over the fence. The wet grass softens my footsteps. I lay Jerry on the hood of the Dodge Ram and prop up his back on the windshield. I arrange his nylon legs straight out from his torso. He's weighted at the feet and knees so he won't slip. I apply the lighter fluid in strategic places: the front of his shirt, the top of his camouflage pants. It's important that he doesn't flame up, but that everything simmers enough to get to his innards.

I lay one finger on the tip of Jerry's plastic chin. His synthetic eyes stare back into mine. I light his shirttail and cross the lawn in loping steps. I start the car. Jerry is smoking up. Julia said with Jerry's bum right over the centre of the hood, the thermite will heat up and become molten iron. She said it will pour into the engine block. His head and chest will melt gradually. I don't put on the headlights until I am past the house and speed up on my way to the pavement.

It's quiet back on the bypass road. I don't pass anyone else. It occurs to me that I should feel bad. I didn't flash my headlights at that red hatchback after seeing the moose. I really should have done that.