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Life Kicks

**a novel by Kevin J.Morris**

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T h e I C Y c e n t r e

**Day 1**

chapter

#  one

The phone’s ringing, it has to be Lena getting back to me, finally. She’s surely open for a stroll on this perfect autumn day. This door, of course it has to resist now. Just jiggle the key harder, chance it.

An uproar behind me. A quick glance is enough, it’s two of our youth, Jill and Chelsea, they’re screaming at the traffic. I push my shoulder into the door while giving the key another twist and it gives way — but the ringing dies.

I turn around. They’re actually staring at a cat, a black and white tabby, splayed flat out on the street, more than dead with its rictus smile, and staring up at a hooded head that’s stooping to scrape it onto a square of cardboard. He turns, stone-faced, Guillaume — a nasty job, the first time in two months into our project that he’s given a hint of extroversion that this deed demonstrates, unless his cell phone addiction can be assessed as a communication skill. He carries the cat’s carcass back to the dumpster at the side of our youth centre.

“Feral cats don’t live long around here,” I say.

They reply with blank stares. Our parallel universes, why am I surprised?

The girls trail me in, almost on my heels. Jill’s hair is now dyed black, a new response to her mid-teen predicaments. They head for the sofa, their daily perch off to the side of the common room. Perhaps the cat’s still their concern, a life that ends not with a whimper but a bang — it’s

tempting to throw that line out to them.

Guillaume passes me. His interest is now on the girls, holding his look a moment longer than usual. His acne may explain his hoodie. Jill does look across to him, but too late to catch his attention — his tall and limber frame often draws their attention. He crosses to the opposite side of the room, his arms dangling, trousers as usual heading south of his hips. He unpockets his cell phone and plops down into the armchair, again glancing across the room where they’re now kitty-corner to him — again sitting cross-legged on the sofa and into their more urgent matters.

His open jacket reveals his familiar black T-shirt with its *Born From Pain* logo in blood red letters that spreads in an arc above an ash white skeleton that’s seized in the embrace of a full breasted harpy. He hunches over his phone, returning to his early morning scanning.

My suspicion, he’s into besting them through social media. That’s our daily challenge, how to bridge these disconnects in this group.

The pool player enters, or rather drops in, and greets me with a hand wave — drop-ins know how to secure permission. His friend again trails behind him, another hoodie. They head for the pool table in the centre of the room. Online gamers both of them, so just showing up here must be a seismic shift in their world views.

Barbara, our outreach worker, being more in touch with the youth, summed them up the other day when she said, “They get by.” I answered in jest, “They’re just not caught at it yet,” given whatever the devilment they’d been into that night. But they now show up here, despite the number of police cars parked outside. Their stress seems to diminish at the pool table.

A clap on my back, “Good morning, Bryan,” almost a shock. It’s Barbara as she crosses behind me. Not an unwanted slap, though a reciprocal greeting from me is in times wanting for her. She projects a warm but questioning smile, probably reading how focused I was on the distance that separates these youth, particularly between Guillaume and those girls.

There’s not much distance between Barbara and me, but we’re still separate.

“Morning” I say. “I see you’ve had an impact on Jill’s choice of hair style.”

She eyes Jill for a second, with a lift of her eyebrows in approval, then a tilt of her head that suggests Jill may soon be going all out for Barbara’s half-head buzz cut. I’m now tempted to brush her fuzz with the back of my fingers.

The pool players wave to her with their pool cues. She returns their greeting with a raised fist and says, “Good news, guys. Phil will let you both join our media project, but unfortunately there are no stipends for unofficial participants. You’ll have to” — as she stabs my shoulder with her finger — “talk to the head honcho here about the dinero”.

I thought Phil, being the project coordinator, would have his hands more than full with the current full slate of youth participants. I spread out empty hands and say “Let’s start with a car wash next week.” They nod to say thanks for the effort, and they return to their pool game.

“Thanks,” I whisper.

She laughs, “Money isn’t their focus. It’s the video editing those two gamers want to learn about. And guess what, they were afraid of phone calls, but Phil told them they

at least had to do the phone interview to get in. Ahi esta! They both had a great conversation.”

“A phone interview? Wouldn’t the test be a simple face-to- face discussion?”

“No, Phil sticks to the landline phones for the first selection step,” she says, her voice slightly elevated. “Go figure. Seems he’s too busy with the day’s schedule. The taller one, he’s bunking at his friend’s place. But couch surfing usually leaves you a beached wreck soon enough.”

Clearly she has no qualms of them overhearing what she’s saying.

I follow her into her office, which is almost as barren looking as my own. Though she has, since she started here, set up her own shelf of books at one side of her couch, with her desk off to the opposite corner of the room. Her couch is obviously her priority, the space where youth feel most relaxed when meeting with her.

“How’s it with Guillaume?” I ask.

“I doubt if any of the girls in the project are much buying into him.”

“With his trousers hanging like they do, they could be talking more about his sagging prospects.”

“Phil says he’s beginning to voice some opinions in the workshops. Says he’s even working on a video idea. And hey, he dropped his hood yesterday on the third run- around for opinions that Phil keeps soliciting. At least Slender Man’s no longer faceless.”

Slender Man, the reworked Pied Piper, possibly the avatar of his dreams. “In my day low-risers would be about pulling-a-moonie … or,” — I can’t suppress a chuckle as

I think of a particular pack — “call him a lone wolf, out howling at the midnight moon.”

She looks to her open office door, but Guillaume’s not at

his regular spot, not in her line of vision.

“Well, *fuckhead* is his father’s nickname for him,” she says with a grimace.

“No wonder he high-tailed it out of the north. He now seems to be casing a tougher pack in the market area. He’ll not be long at the men’s shelter.”

She flips open her laptop. “Got a name for that gang?”

I sit up to have a better view out her side window. “Maybe you could check out that cop car that’s now parked out back.”

She glances at it. “Guillaume would be looking for a career in the wrong places — but he’s not alone in that.”

“I just hope he opens up a bit more and gets away from his cell phone.”

Her cell phone buzzes, but she gives it only a quick glance. “Wilwal, he’s bonding with me it seems, and he’s tagged Guillaume a *maumauer*. He says it’s their slang for those hanging trousers. I’ll second that.”

“Maumauer?” I ask.

“Wilwal would be alert to that term, he’s Somalian.”

Something to look into, and I pull a Moleskin from my backpack. Real leather, a real feel and personal. “Any idea who this belongs to? I found it last night on top of the towel dispenser in the washroom. I flipped through a few pages, but there’s no name.”

Barbara steps around her desk and reaches for it. She

checks the front and back covers and flips through a few

pages. “It likely belongs to Marcus.”

“He stuck to his workstation all day yesterday, which was a nice surprise. But he’d already left.”

“He’s mixed, like me, so I suspect he’s now working through some identity issues” — yes, Barbara’s Chicano ancestry may account in part for her choice of career. “He’s quite in touch with his grandmother who lives on a reserve up north, so maybe he sees this spot here as his ancestral territory. His mother’s not much the picture. His father’s Caucasian. He lives with him just across the river.”

“I get the odd nod from him. He must be into his early twenties, likely into job searching.”

“Well, Guillaume once mentioned him. They’re both in from the north, but, hey, we all ignore each other too much.” Her eyes fix on me as she hands back the journal.

Her look, she’s about to ask a certain relationship question that I’m not ready for. “Well … if he comes in today, let him know the journal’s on my desk.” She braces her lips as I raise my hand for a see you later.

As I turn to exit, a body runs into me. Gail, another drop-in. She steps back, she’s holding a few sheets of paper.

“Sorry,” she says, and her head bobs as she ducks around

me and enters the office.

I look back. Barbara gives me the thumbs up and explains, “We’re working together on a script.”

“Definitely not my territory,” I say.

“Well stranger, I’m good for a coffee break sometime

soon.”

Which means a longer conversation, just not now at least. “I’m good … let’s have lunch together tomorrow.”

She confirms the date with eyebrows up and a nod.

“Great,” I say.

Barbara’s intensity can’t be denied. Her poking my shoulder didn’t crack through my shell, which is clearly a bit thinner today. A meal together could be the breakthrough she’s angling for.

chapter

#  two

I flip through the journal, it must belong to Marcus. He’s been sitting at that same workstation almost daily for the past week or so. My door’s always open for the youth, and it also provides a direct view of him across the common room.

Tempting, but I push the journal off to the side of my desk.

Don’t need the guilt when handing it over.

Gail, Barbara’s forming a strong bond with her. A youth will respond to me with a scoop at times or an account of a recent incident, welcomed in my breaks from my laptop — though nightmares must be closer to their reality given the moments of distress in their eyes. Talking isn’t their forte

* at least with the director.

If I turn to my growing unease, it’s Lena I need to talk with.

If one could at will halt the mind spinning. It’s in overdrive since I last saw her, then reaching last night for Ali Smith’s *How to be both,* a Booker short listing, a reading where I expected some insight into the longevity of intimacy. Only books sit with me in my bachelor apartment. I found myself jumping from one book to another, with sleep not a hope in hell. Finally I spot Jack London’s *The Son of Wolf* at the bottom of a pile. The blurb on the back cover caught my attention, *Man rarely places a proper valuation upon his womankind* — also the opening sentence of the story, a prospector cut off in the wilderness during the Klondike

gold panning days, his self-reliance and endurance finally winning him a lady. But there was little in the story about the valuation of the woman.

The stilted sentence might be what mirrored my mindset when it comes to Lena, with the inevitable questions that started tumbling through the night. Was our meet-up nothing more than a one-night stand? Not even a one- night, especially when a phone call cut it off. Lena, where’d you spend the rest of the night? Why did I have to high tail it out without an explanation?

A lone wolf, perhaps that image fits me, baying at the mythic Moon Maiden of the night. A simple phone call would have given me the lay of the land ... the state of affairs — a lay? an affair? Juggling this pulled me down into a week-long series of dreams, this time roaming hallways in search of my classroom.

Why a teacher? I did fill in a few days as a supply teacher, a lead from the editor of our community newspaper, giving me a chance to move beyond the stringer status of my job then. Not surprising I’ve never imagined being a teacher. And my current job, when I get down to it, is primarily assessed by another single output, funding, fundraising, all about the dollars — not youth work, nor relationships.

Not surprising then that in these dreams I’m an everyman spewing out a range of multi-directional strategies in front of a class of students facing a slew of problems that run from world-wide youth and unemployment to global warming, which invariably triggers anarchy in the classroom, if not total rebellion, with students walking out, some returning at will. Quite the opposite I imagined myself to be, a foot soldier slogging away in the trenches, at least fighting the good fight. No denying it, vestiges of my dad’s persona, the head of the family, the ex-military jock.

But this dream had some in this gang of students listening. Even if they weren’t speaking I’d get a nod or two. I propped myself against the front of my desk to hold their attention as a dialogue started up, though I can’t remember a word of it. Just their focused eyes and quizzical grins.

The entrance door scrapes open. The youth are trickling in, looking for a break within our ‘Inner City Youth Centre’, ICY for short. Most are street youth seeking to escape the rural traps. Drop-ins include the secluded and cut off urbanites. And then the immigrants. Migrants all. If they’re not escaping wars and family skirmishes, it’s their unending job-hunting forays, all with little hope of building a future.

Given our postmodern world, youth permanently at-risk have to run wild, instinctively.

Dreams must essentially be driven by instincts.

Yes. Trust your instincts. They’ve driven you and Lena together, at least for our one night together … well, a half- night that pulled me into a primal state of purely being, much deeper than instincts.

And her being a potter, that’s about getting your hands dirty for a change.

I press the start-up button on my laptop and sink back into a black swivel chair, contoured correctly for the lumbar zone. More likely a model that denotes the boss — definitely not my intention. You’d think my main transport by bicycle and my switch to jeans and collarless shirts would be enough to bridge my divide with youth, at least to escape the over- thirty rap. Being thirty one, in the eyes of some funders I myself would be labelled a senior youth.

Gerry passes by my door, not even a glance my way. He’s probably headed directly to the project room to bear down on his video editing without any interruption until our workshop starts up. Not yet a word out of him in the youth

circle discussions. Being cool’s not even a concept for him. He’s hobbled as much by his bulbous five foot frame as by his one interest in life, wrestling.

The youth centre somehow fills up every day, and each face sends a message that they’re on board for another day. This stopover spot is virtually my holding position as well, given how everyone and everything in this whirly-bird world speeds by our front window. Perhaps that’s the trick, how to handle the speed and remain relaxed. If anything, this centre presents a safe space with an air of stability and calmness which seems to slow these youth down. Their tension lessens, faces look younger.

At least be in touch with where you are, especially if you can’t be in touch with who you are.

Barbara’s mention of Wilwal’s *Maumau* jumps to mind. I punch in for an internet search. Go for the lengthy listing on *Mau Mau* … *The post-war uprising of blacks in Kenya against white settlers … colonialism … turned blacks into strangers in their own city … raising their rifles in revolt*.

*Strangers in their own city*, no surprise then for the rise of the maumau fashion. Guillaume would jive with this.

*Pulling a moonie* does make the same point, giving the

world your finger.

A Facebook listing brings up a photo of a teen standing beside his skateboard that features images of a coyote and the iconic American Indian, while he’s in head feathers and holding up his lance-like pole topped with a paint roller. His slogan is splashed in red paint across the wall behind him. ‘*Make America Great Again! Like before the cowboys came.*’ His hint of a smile is the icing.

A .uk website. *Mau Mau* … this search brings up a store front featuring T-shirts and posters, with the motto on the signage over the entrance door, *Fears make the wolf look*

*bigger*.

The wolf, a possible lead into these psyches. Lone wolf may be a proper moniker for Guillaume and a few other youth. Lone wolfs howling at the moon in the frozen god forsaken straits they find themselves in, and forever firming up their position in their pack, affirming it. I could actually turn any one of these lines into a Mission Statement for our ICY Centre.

I look up. Marcus isn’t in yet. A drop-in, he comes and goes

as he sees fit, almost feral.

My instincts now push me to reach for his journal. I open it

at random, just read a few lines … I flip back a few pages.

One journal entry amounts to short scribbled lines down the page. A few pages, somewhat of a real story.

chapter

#  three

**Adrian, you probably won’t appear. Guess I’m stubborn just sitting on this concrete deck of the hardware store and burning up in the sun. The shack directly across the higway has to be your house. And one va- cant lot away, there’s the Gas Bar, where I first met you when I was heading up north, it gets most of the traffic. But up the road, the general store where we’d hang out, it’s dead silent.**

**You really must have taken off, both you and Guillaume.**

**The green overalls flashed by again. Had to be your dad. He crossed back and forth a**

**few times, for small items, nails, a few pine floorboards, then back for a box of screws.**

**He’d only glance at me, must be some wood shavings in his hair this time. I expected him to ask why I was parked in front of his house. I did get an ugly look this time, I must be a drug dealer or something.**

**I’m sure he was your dad, and that shack’s your place. ~~With brick walls~~, no, the siding’s old imitation tarpaper. The For Sale sign out front, it leans into the remains of the picket fence. Garbage cans at the side wall, no lids.**

**Plastic bags and cardboard blown against the fence.**

**Sound of hammering — hammer ing, ~~maybe you were helping~~ no, not likely, he wouldn’t trust you with a hammer, he**

**wouldn’t trust you with anything you said.**

**That alone is reason enough why you simply high-tailed it out, if that’s what you’ve done. It’s so much like my grandma’s reserve, we’d agree about that. Too bad we didn’t understand how angry those kids were, too bad we didn’t anticipate what our visit would lead to.**

**~~Maybe you haven’t heard~~ Things are just going worse on grandma’s reserve. But you had reason enough to head out on your own.**

**Wild touch-me-nots survive in the front yard, the one touch of beauty.**

**Hardly anyone ever walks by, plenty of the largest trucks and recent models of shiny half-tons, but Guillaume was right, not much of a friendly place to outsiders.**

**Where’s the spirit.**

**I hope you headed out.**

**I decided to speak the next time your dad cuts across the highway again. And he did, and I tried to sound like a local, Nice day, eh? All I got was that ugly look again and he yanked open the steel front door of the hardware store. He soon came back out, but**

**not even a glance at me this time. He headed across the highway and cleared the one step of his porch.**

**I was about to shove my journal back into my backpack when I heard shouting coming from inside your shack, and the door opened.**

**A small boy came out. Your young brother.**

**He’s in short pants and a white short sleeved shirt. He’s on the edge of the porch, standing still, looking at the step that drops away from him. He spreads his arms and flings himself off and stumbles on the grass. He almost loses his balance but he grabs the For Sale sign, then looks up and sees me.**

**Yes, I’m looking at you.**

**He hops through the open gate, the stillness in the air must signal the coast is clear.**

**He wears a small black cape. It flaps behind him when he crosses the highway and jumps onto the sidewalk below me. He flings one foot forward and stomps on the concrete, then launches himself with the other foot as he glances back at his cape.**

**He looks up at me. A high forehead, and serious, but very hollow eyes.**

**He flaps his arms to be certain I don’t miss the cape and he says — I’m learning to fly.**

**I smile back.**

* **You can go far that way?**
* **I dreamt it last night.**

**Like my own dreams as a kid. I could fly cause I had five fingers on each hand.**

**Absurd, but it made sense in my dreams. So I ask — What did you dream about?**

* **I grabbed my sister’s hand, to take her far away.**
* **And she flew away with you?**

**The boy frowns, and looks down at his feet.**

* **My daddy yelled at me. I was standing on top of the stairs, but my arm hit a board and made it fall.**

**In the dream? or not I wonder. But it makes no difference — Did anyone get hurt?’**

* **My daddy was standing below me, but it misst him.**
* **You were lucky.**
* **It fell all the way to the basement. It was floating, it was learning to fly, like I did in my dream.**

**He smiles.**

* **Aren’t you afraid? If you fall, you’ll scrape your knees.**
* **I will float to start, people can see I can do it.**
* **That will surprise your dad.**

**The boy looks down at the ground again, a pout is forming on his lips.**

**I nod. My hand reaches up to rub the pendant hanging from my chest.**

* + **What is dat?**

**I look down at it, just pieces of bone stuck in mud-like plasticine.**

* + **Oh, it’s something old looking. It reminds me of my ancestors.**
	+ **What are ant stores?**
	+ **People who lived a long time ago, but are dead now.**
	+ **Did it kill them?**

**The kid’s question stops me for a second.**

* + **I don’t think so. Maybe. It’s my wishing stone now.**
	+ **It scares me.**
	+ **It’s okay. See, I’m holding onto it. You’re safe.**
	+ **It might turn back into a monster.**

**With a stern look he glances back at his cape, and starts hopping up and down, his feet raising dust again.**

* + **I will soon be able to fly to the top of buildings. If it gets away, I can fight it. I will fly fast and catch up to it and kill it with my Taser gun.**

**His hand shoots out to let loose his bolt of electricity.**

* + **ZZZZZZZ Zap. Like that. He looks back at me with a wide smile.**
		- **You’re a real superman.**

**A shout breaks in, from across the street. His father looks around and kicks the toy wagon aside as he steps off his front porch.**

* + - **Jason, you come back home right now. And don’t be talking to a stranger.**

**The boy shuts his eyes.**

#  four

chapter

I’m so tempted to keep reading this journal. This tells me that I need to get back into writing. Jotting down dreams is somewhat a stimulant, but I need to dig deeper.

No sooner am I closing the journal than a knocking jerks me back to reality.

“Bryan, can I talk with you about something?”

Nadine is standing in the doorway. Her hand is raised and resting on the door frame, as hesitant as her knocks, drawing my attention to the studs in her eyebrow and bottom lip.

“Hi, Nadine. What’s up?”

“I thought I was permanently expelled from school, but the principal contacted me today. I can return.”

I can’t resist a question. “By the way, why were you originally expelled?”

She hesitates.

“You don’t have to tell me. Barbara may be a better fit for

you.”

“No, it just embarrasses me. I was accused of sexting, but I wasn’t nowhere nude. We were joking during recess, bend your arm or leg, like you can find a bum anywhere.”

I nod — authorities almost sound eager to criminalize kids, like the 14-year-old classified an offender for Snapchatting while wearing a sports bra and boy shorts, and simply

wanting to fit herself into the boys’ team. But this isn’t the time for stories. “Has our group talked about social media yet?”

“Yes, and… Well, I told the principal about your project.” “So, you don’t want to stay with it?”

“I want to stay with this gang. And … well, I need the money.”

“You might be able to do both.” I step around her. Barbara’s door is open, and Nadine follows. The two teens playing pool raise their cues and smile. I catch Nadine’s return smile, they’re friends. The others around the room are mostly into cell phones — who needs our desktops in the back room? And Jill and Chelsea are leafing through a book on the table, a large coffee-table book.

I knock on Barbara’s door. Nadine’s invited in and the door closes.

Fibi enters. She gives me the finger with a refreshing smile this time, nice, and Marcus walks in behind her. He clearly catches Fibi’s gesture and my two-thumbs-up response. The bookcase in the far corner of the room is still her prime target as she continues past his workstation, not giving it a glance. So they’re not friends, not surprising, she’s been keeping to herself when not attending the media project. This time he looks across at me, clearly puzzled by my response — my explanation will have to wait. I have given her my tip to underline words with her finger, it eliminates regression, reduces subvocalizing, and pushes her across the page and into the story — she obviously can already read at a rewarding rate. She pulls down the tome size bio of Chagall and flops into the armchair next to the bookcase. She took to that book like a fish to a hook, with its numerous pictures of his paintings.

And she’s surprisingly fresh. She’s probably taken up our

offer of the shower facility upstairs.

Marcus bends down to check the side slot under his monitor, then looks around the room, likely checking the probabilitiess behind his journal’s disappearance.

I retrieve his journal and cross over, getting a curious glance from him this time.

“Marcus, you seem to be looking for something. Maybe it’s this. I found it in the washroom.” Best not to mention my reading yet. “I flipped through it a bit, there was no name.”

“Nice. Thanks, Sir.” His deference is up front, but some words from him finally. As I turn to walk away, I say. “Feel free with the internet. See you later.”

“Thanks again, Sir.”

“It’s Bryan. You’re welcome.”

I scan the room, most of the youth have arrived. Phil should show up soon enough to plow into another workshop, so I head for my office.

But why this rush, and who knows where my admitting to reading Marcus’s story might have led to.

Another youth crosses my path and passes the kitchen island and reaches into the overhead cupboard. Also a streeter, and as anorexic as Fibi. His homelessness seems to also be by choice, given his family issues. He holds a glass under the sink tap while thumbing his smart phone — trying to again connect with his own wolf pack on the 5.5” display. Face-to-faceness isn’t his forte.

I’m about to disappear into my office when the front door scraping alerts us to Phil’s entrance – that door needs fixing. He waves me a Good Morning and turns to corral his gang. “Hey guys, I suggest videos start off our day today,”

his daily heads-up before he sweeps the room. With the build of a football player and a puffer vest over his black T-shirt — which only amplifies his six foot plus frame — he always generates readiness for a good day. He walks past Guillaume, who lifts a finger to signal he’s good and appears to rise from his armchair, but keeping to his cell phone, his hood still cloaking his real interest — and not likely making much progress on his Life Action Plan. Their LAP positions, Phil will have to update us on all of the life and employment assets that the youth have targeted, even if their worlds are in a total spin.

Those on the corner chairs keep to their smartphones, the streeter in the kitchen salutes Phil with his glass of water. Noah’s in as well, I hadn’t noticed him standing beside the pool table, finally with an apparent ‘in’ with these players — a step up from the bullying he’d get at school. They clear the pool table by drilling the remaining balls into pockets as they quickly circle the table.

Fibi closes her Chagall, slowly, replaces it on the shelf, and glances back to the sofa where Jill and Chelsea are hunched over their book — perhaps books will generate a friendship between them.

And seated across from the sofa, Wilwal, which is a new spot for him. He’s into his smartphone, but gives the gals a quick glance — Chelsea’s shirt’s ablaze with splotches of reds and yellows. Or is he eyeing Jill’s new hairdo that matches her black blouse?

In the mornings Wilwal is usually slouching on any chair, reading, focused on improving his English. He’s given up on the shuffleboard and foosball table, which have ‘til now failed to attract a partner. His cropped curly hair, long fingered hands, and short delicate frame marks him Somalian. I’m tempted to say that his complexion in itself

sets Wilwal apart in the Caucasian world, the distancing possibly a hangover from Medieval times, when the light umbral hue of his skin alluded to the barbaric, possibly diabolic, at best alluring but puzzling in itself. Keeping to this continuum, at best I sense it points to the embers flickering in the depths of our interior self. Our youth need at least to sidle up to the promises in befriending and appreciating the cool laid-back spark I see in him.

Phil turns toward the sofa to shoo the girls into the project room, though they’re totally into chatting and flipping through their book. Wilwal sits up and turns away from the sofa.

Breaking from his herding efforts, Phil looks to me, “By the way, Bryan, if you can call Ned, he’s giving a lighting workshop …”

We hear a crashing sound, and Phil turns back, “Heh, heh, heh,” and we both rush forward. Phil grabs Wilwal by his shoulder as he’s about to leap across the table, his soft drink tipping off it — I grab the can in time. Chelsea’s glaring at him and shouting, “No selfies, no photos, I never gave you permission.” His phone lies in pieces at her feet.

Wilwal looks back to Phil, “I’m reaching for my cell phone.”

Chelsea cries out, “He whipped out his phone and snapped a photo.”

Wilwal seems to be staring into empty space. He turns to me, hands outstretched and open, “It’s just a selfie with them behind me. What’s the deal? They wrecked my phone.”

“Did she give you the okay?” I ask.

“Everyone does it. Just look at what they did to my phone.” I look to Chelsea, “Couldn’t you simply have asked him to

delete the photo?”

She leans into him with her finger stabbing, “You’ve

probably posted it right away.”

“No, no. No, I swear, I didn’t,” shaking his head.

Her lips balloon out, “You might have. I don’t even have a Facebook page. I don’t trust them, who would trust them?” She falls back into the sofa, rubbing her eyelids with her thumbs.

Wilwal responds in an almost pleading whisper. “Really. I just wanted to be ….”

“Selfies? I thought this was a safe place that might help me get to a better place,” her eyes and furrowed forehead still brimming with anger.

“Chelsea. It’s a misunderstanding,” I say. “He’s apologized.” I gather up the pieces and hand them to him, but I won’t yet suggest us replacing it — perhaps an odd job could help him.

Their book is open to a picture of a painting — a picture. “Wilwal, I thought images were forbidden in Islam. And, eh, here you’re taking a picture of a picture.”

He points to the book. “Just look at it, it’s not even a painting.”

Jill pipes up. ‘It’s abstract, but it’s a painting. We’re talking about artists, that’s what you need to pay attention to.”

A Pollock, not my taste either. A chaos of squiggles, how world wars left us dangling, hardly a transcendent vision for an artist. If anything, he prefigures the chaos facing youth today, my thought as I catch the streak of blue in Jill’s bright black hair, a squiggle winding itself down the side of her head — which at least speaks of the freedom and fun of a toddler flinging paint at a canvas.

I look from Jill to Wilwal, “So, what’s this really about for you?”

Wilwal scrunches his shoulders, eyebrows lifted, and puckers his forehead in response, then looks to Chelsea. She falls back again, mouth open, while Jill sits up, her hands brushing her hair from her eyes, and asks, “Are you interested in a photo of us, or just hot on us? If you’re interested, why don’t you talk to us?”

My glances from Jill to Wilwal and back to Chelsea catches the more pressing story, the dart of his eyes to Chelsea’s cleavage — or simply it’s Jill’s newly primped hair and matching shirt loosely buttoned that may have put him into a spin. Jill’s eyes shift from me to Wilwal, “And begin with something real, not a selfie.”

Wilwal bows his head. He looks sideways, as if to grab a colleague’s attention, then glances at Jill, considering something, but what? and fingers the pieces of his phone.

Phil looks from one to the other, “Why don’t you all talk this through at lunch. Take a deep breath for now, and we’ll all head over to the project room. Alright?”

He gets a “whatever” glance from Chelsea. Jill smiles, perhaps to say she’s happy they’ve moved beyond the anonymity of the selfie, and I nod, which seems to be accepted.

I turn to Phil, “See you later. I’m out for an hour or so, call me if needed.”

As they move into the project room, I check on Marcus. If he’s noticed the commotion, his attention is back to his monitor.

I turn back for my office and spot Ira, my boss. So, it’s not

to be a mid-morning coffee in a café with him.

chapter

#  five

Ira, our Board Chair, my boss — and Lena’s father. Odd, I’ve met him informally only once, at our fundraiser, the night I met her. The vibes I now have from him leave me somewhere between concerned detachment and objective engagement, the poise that my journalism studies aimed to cultivate, but reality only landed me frontline in car crashes, fires, mid-night murder scenes. Not my dream job.

But the little I’ve learned from Lena suggests that Ira’s real interest is in engagement, political engagement. Ira’s got a few Board meetings under his belt, enough to see the lay of the land and make his first assessments of our youth engagement strategies.

Though, at this present moment, subjective engagement is my dominant concern — where the subject is Lena.

He’s chosen a table beside the kitchen and across from our offices — so he’s not necessarily checking up on us. His oilskin vest isn’t what I’ve associated with a Board member, but gripping his aged lumpy leather briefcase that rests on his lap does speak of serious business.

Definitely an in-house staff meeting. Best not to seek an

update on Lena.

Or would he know about our relationship? I reach across and shake hands. “Morning, Ira. Can I first make you a coffee?”

“Sure, thanks.”

He’s relaxed, that’s good. As I fill the kettle, I see he’s

looking at Marcus across the room. Perhaps the morning’s shenanigans has generated his need to touch base in- house.

I look back at him. The intensity he emits must be about more than my meeting with his lawyer friend for fundraising. Our overall financial situation isn’t bad, but he may be pushing other ideas. “Ira, perhaps it’s time for our Board to Mau Mau some ministers for funding.”

He nods, amiable — to be expected. Kenya would have been one of his stopovers.

A bowl of tomatoes sits at the end of the counter, perhaps he’s dropped these off. I reach into the overhead cupboard for my bag of coffee beans and find a few loaves of fresh bread, whole wheat. I open another door, spaghetti, a bag of instant muesli, a bag of whole wheat flour — very promising. And a package with Japanese script reads Kombu. Seaweed. And as I replace it I notice that most of the canned food has disappeared.

And the fridge? Fresh veggies, eggs. In the door bins, yogurt, cheese, a pound of real butter.

“Interesting,” I shout over to Ira. “There’s a supply of healthy food here. Know anything about this?”

“About time they became chefs.”

I nod to second that strategy. I grind the beans and place the tea sieve in his mug. He’s watching. “It’s a technique I picked up from a Mexican friend, call it Café Feleena. It leaves some grains. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Campesinos know best,” he says, watching me pour the second cup. “You’re just missing the music.”

I nod, “That’s another necessary purchase.” I hand him his coffee and take a seat. He settles back, obviously wanting my report on meeting his lawyer.

“Mr. Johnson was totally on board with your fundraising idea, he must be a friend of yours. So I also pitched the idea of linking our workshops to a production van. I know I went off topic.”

“You need to develop a steel-trap mind for some situations.”

“Steel-trap, I don’t know about that.” My visceral reaction was the opposite, perhaps given my latent insecurity just sitting in a lawyer’s office on the thirteenth floor, glass and aluminum surrounding you, hemming you in — it had me pressing my elbows into the arms of the chair he offered me. “We just need to tell him where and when.”

“And what about your production van idea?”

“I explained the van will let our youth hit the road, see some action on site, shoot some stories, at least hit the air waves with their own stories. He wanted to know more about our activities. The youth were more addicted to landing jobs I said, and he asked why the word addicted. I told him the word was a bit of a slip, because we’d just finished the workshop about addictions.”

“What’s the workshop?”

“On dating and bullying. The girls zoomed in on pornography and its fixation on intercourse. I threw in some data for him, how online pornography increases the addiction and how over time it reduces pleasure. Guys may even lose their erection.”

Ira now gives a solid laugh. “That would grab his attention.”

“He did enjoy the story.” I sit back, crossing my legs does relax.

“So, will he also be staging a house party to get this rolling?”

“Maybe he’d be happier if you started this off at your farm.” A bit devious of me, but not entirely, because chances are Lena will be present whenever Ira stages his.

“Bryan, it’s actually quite easy. I project on average ten grand per party, with up to a dozen parties moving from house to house. Word gets around the legal circuit, including Montreal and Toronto. It’s only up to you to attend, relax, enjoy the small talk.”

“Like I said, I tend to wander. The meeting did generate one surprise. ‘Working at ground level was the best,’ that’s how he saw my work.”

“With the international financiers and the multinationals mining our taxes, my friend will definitely be very supportive of our mission.”

“It was hard to read him. He didn’t get specific, didn’t ask any questions. I almost expected him to go off on a tangent about his own work. I imagine lawyers are more tied to their money than the reality at ground level, but I’d love to hear some of his stories. There must be some surprises in schmoozing. I should have told him grant-writing is mostly about story telling.”

Ira tilts his head somewhat, lips pressed. “There’re many tentacles that pull you down, especially when it’s ideals that are driving you.”

“I’d say he seemed quite frustrated in his job, maybe even depressed. He flicked the edge of one of his folders, as if he could have as easily flung it out his window … Just projection on my part I’m sure. Legalese must be his schtick, perhaps a Bay Street syndrome is boxing him in.”

Ira’s fixed his focus on me, his hands now hugging his coffee mug. I move to take a sip of my coffee, but decide to wait. He notices.

He places his briefcase on the floor — he was keeping it close to his chest. “Bryan, this is not about a Bay Street Syndrome, as you call it” — his face relaxes. “Working on governmental issues, call it the Parliament Hill Syndrome. He’s an immigration lawyer, a good one. They’ve had identity problems since the 2008 crash, I should have briefed you on him. He’s battling a horde of political operatives in the PMO office who’re … well, the Conservatives are only letting in refugees who’ll likely vote conservative, so they’re scooping up the Christians. There’s an election on the horizon. Muslims aren’t favoured, and keeping them out raises their party’s banner about barring all those terrorists from entering. Not to mention their barbaric cultural practices.”

I bow my head — I do jump to conclusions. “I imagine that would drive anyone into a mid-forties crisis.”

Ira’s ignoring my somewhat flippant comment. I do follow the news. “The three year old child lying face down in the surf, drowned, how can anyone not be moved by that photo?”

“Aylan Kurdi is his name,” Ira says.

How to respond to that? “Maybe I’ve been reading too much fiction, and obviously I don’t appreciate the value of good lawyers.”

He nods. “Fiction does open other doors.”

“There we are …” but I let that line of thought fade. Finally I say, “It must be nice up on the farm.”

He smacks his lips. “Yes, we’ll hold our own Bay Street social amid the autumn colours of the Gatineau Hills. As the locals say, It’ll be grand.”

He’s keeping to his fundraising strategy, but his troubled look is creeping back. Working globally would have given

him — and his in-kind lawyers — an interesting assessment of our one-world one-percent oligopoly. Some good journalists are digging into this story, but most of us are on the outs where it comes to decision-makers. What to say? “Robin Hood used to stand for the poor — a straight shooting journalist wrote that.”

He raises his mug in salute, “That’s spot on, isn’t it? The

global financiers are now the hard working taxpayers.”

Clearly he’s read the same article. “Well,” I say, “I was hoping the Panama Papers would help replenish our fed’s treasuries. And here we are again, slicing up each youth’s sense of self into a slew of skills, then shuffling them into possible jobs that seldom fit their dreams.”

“So much for any funding from our artful dodger the prime minister.” He picks up his briefcase and unclips the clasps, his face strained, clearly annoyed.

He’s reaching for something — whatever. If this is a total set-up, I probably deserve it. My mind clamps down on our main mission. “Ira, about employment skills and life plans, you have to admit they largely fall short. Our youth are just trying at least to connect some dots between each other.”

“Maybe that’s why I was invited in. I’ve spent my life parsing the macro data and weighing the indicators, and you’re right, our projects are cheap fixes, nudges at best

… austerity still rules.”

“And it cultivates depression,” I say, with my voice slumping, a reflexive downer. “I just read an article about youth in Greece who are returning to their rural areas, where the remaining citizens are mostly elders.”

“Bryan, your reading’s got it. Real unemployment is sinking half the kids across southern Europe — which comes close to describing our scene up our line.”

“I’m afraid I prefer stories to numbers,” I say. He nods, he agrees. “The article told of two old Greek farmers sunning themselves and having a good laugh over a couple of youth who’ve moved back to their village and opened up a café. Their menu featured urban cuisine, but one of the farmers says they’d best to wait for the real food from the garden that the youth had just planted behind their café.”

Ira’s eyes light up in glee. “I’d love youth swarming our farm, now that’s a delightful plan. And a young guy like you can take it over anytime. That’s what my mother wanted me to do.”

I want to smile, but not so much about the farm. “My week- ends are free,” spoken almost with a poker face.

“Well, I never wanted to give up my … but that’s all in the past.” He pulls a file out of his briefcase. “By the way, Lena’s mentioned you.”

And spoken with an edge of guilt in his voice, perhaps for easing into his daughter’s private life. “Yes. She told me of her idea of building a kiln on your farm. But she was more concerned about your work load. Aren’t you supposed to stick to the one day a week job?”

“She’s concerned, I see that, but I’m not ready to reduce my options to being a hermit or a latter-day settler. A fixed home still doesn’t mean happiness. I’m always insecure when fixed to one spot … Odd eh.”

He looks across the room. I see a somewhat deflated face. I glance back toward Marcus, he’s totally focused on his monitor. Ira now tilts his head with a somewhat mischievous grin and says, “But, then again, there’s the option of a nomad’s minimal approach to life,” as he opens a file.

I am not so interested in Ira’s files as to a question he raises.

“I imagine the farm is a world away from international development.”

“I suppose …,” he says, fingering a sheet with letterhead, official looking.

I persist. “Well, there’s something about living in the moment.”

His eyes lift to the skies as if to say, Tell me something I don’t know. He replaces the letter and picks up what looks like a community rag. He flips through the pages, then passes it to me, pointing to a headline, “EXPLOSIVE DISCOVERY AT LAC BROWN ”.

I skim through the article:

“… summer camp caretaker made a possible life-saving discovery last week when he uncovered 119 sticks of dynamite on his property. …the rural camp — which he believed is largely used by underprivileged families throughout the summer…”

I look up, “What’s this?” His eyes give nothing away, but I detect the boss in him.

“Do you think we should worry about it?” he asks.

I reread the article; actually, it’s more like a bulletin. “Well, it does highlight our at-risk mission statement.”

“Nothing else?”

How ludicrous can this get? But he’s definitely serious. “You must have witnessed this morning’s scuffle. What should we read into that explosion?” I don’t want to belittle this, but I can’t repress my smile.

“Bryan, nothing of the kind. If anything, I almost hope for

more scuffles like that one.”

“I’ve always had problems reading Board members. Well, other Board members. Maybe corporate structures in

general, there’s never enough straightforward talk.”

“My apology then. This is probably a box of dynamite overlooked by a road crew years back. Believe it or not, a Minister’s assistant handed me this paper, guess because it’s up my way. Still, I need to know if there’re … Well, are there other visible minorities showing up out of the blue?”

We exchange stares. I do trust this board member, and I like him — and not only because he’s introduced me to his daughter, which could only have been a social gesture.

“Well, you’ve seen our attendance sheets for the media project.”

He nods.

“So, there’s Noah. He casts himself as the Tomahawk Man in his videos …” There’s also Adrian’s kid brother dreaming of being a superman, but telling that story can’t be sticking to the steel-trap mindset.

“Tomahawk? A First Nations story? I never did get to work in our north.”

“Inuit. He edits in reverse mode, so he bursts out of a river like a missile and lands on an overhanging tree branch, then a stream of water rushes into his gaping mouth as if he’s feeding on the river. Actually, it’s a gulp of his Red Bull that he spewed out. That’s the real fuel that propels these youth.”

“At least there’s fire in his belly,” and he settles back onto

his chair.

“There’s also Gerry, he’s of Russian descent” — Ira’s eyebrow jerks up. “He’s producing YouTube videos on wrestlers, the flesh and blood heroes” — Ira shrugs, keep to the topic at hand. “There’s a few others from across the river. And for our Battle of the Bands nights, everyone has to sign in, and you could check our lists from all the special

events.”

Ira’s blank stare says he isn’t impressed by my … a bit too, well insouciant. The Feds seem to be drilling him about potential terrorists.

“Ira, do you mean Wilwal Mohamed, because he’s a Muslim? Or is it because he’s Somalian?”

I turn away before he can answer, to beat down a mounting dismay. He must have seen Wilwal’s bio, but bios tell little of their stories. Wilwal doesn’t talk much, though he’s being drawn into some healthy battles here. Ira could find immediate leads on him in Wikipedia … Kenyan, but ethnic Somali, his family surviving the sixties Sifta wars when the Northern Territory tries to join Somalia. Thousands killed by the rampaging Kenyan soldiers, survivors then pushed into concentration camps. But this probably isn’t news to him.

What to highlight? “Wilwal’s Kenyan family were nomadic herdsmen. He did mention his family moving into a refugee camp. His father studies, becomes a teacher, and somehow escapes with his family to Canada with Unicef’s help …” — Ira sees how my mind’s racing. “I mean, I don’t see anything in Wilwal’s story that suggests terrorism of any sort. A migrant, yes.”

“Bryan, I understand. Don’t get me wrong. People are

fleeing wars world-wide — not to mention climate change.”

“So, migrant youth are also prime suspects I see. Street kids here are all migrants from rural areas.”

I turn and scan the room. Participants are still in the workshop, perhaps the pool players as well.

“There’s Marcus,” and I nod toward him. “He’s new, a native. Correction, half-native.” I finish off my coffee. “Sorry, I’m definitely off the rails now. I’m getting my fill of

security issues with our daily media bombardment.”

“Well, paranoia’s also my problem. Their current focus is on immigrants, and we’re located downhill from Parliament.”

I shake my head, no masking my exasperation. “The story of the lone attacker on Parliament Hill is endlessly repeated. But there’s little news about the man’s efforts at a police station days before that assault when he was seeking help for his mental state — not to mention he’s no immigrant.”

His eyebrows lift, but he nods, acknowledging my point. “Ira, what’s the lowdown?”

“Like I said, we’re too close for comfort, so the Feds want us shut down. They haven’t targeted the Operation Come Home facility yet, but their concern is similar.” Ira gathers his papers and closes his file. “Bryan, like you say, we’re working at ground level, so you need to know this.”

“That probably explains the extra squad car out back.” “Crazy stuff. Sorry for sounding like an inquisitor, I surprise

myself at times.”

He drops the file into his briefcase. “If anything comes up, let me know.” He shrugs as he gets up, shakes my hand and exits for his office upstairs.

But one image now marks this meeting, his filing the news- paper article. I sense it reflects my life now, going through life from one file to another.