

ROBERT BENZ

BACK STEPS

ONE DAY SHE'S CHOCOLATE-FACED UP TO HER ELBOWS in the batter bowl, sugar-grin ecstasy, but not afraid because her mother never taught her to be afraid of being happy, and then suddenly she's carrying humanity in her womb and the gestation period is a bitch let me tell you. I know she's got stories that would burn my ears to the ground but then I've got one or two myself that might toast some marshmallows, but we don't swap those stories. Funny old friendship like a crotchety bear and a lynx kitten, or maybe I'm a labrador puppy and she's the beluga behind glass at Stanley Park, too much soul for that shitty little aquarium tank, but still sometimes this grandfather hug impulse just wrap her round and wipe the chocolate and the tears and the blood and don't worry, everything's going to be all right.

She first came into my ken one back step cigarette evening, all of three foot nowt, porch-pyjama serenade *R-E-S-P-E-T-C*, spelling maybe wasn't according to Daniel but she had rhythm and pipes. Neighbour yells something ungracious and then her mother crosses the alley and ensues a quiet word, never heard him yell anything again and I pretty much fell in love with both those girls.

A few nights later I thought I was alone in the evening dark when her voice tapped me on the shoulder

—you oughtn't do that

When I was finished being startled I fished around my feet for the smoke I'd been about to light

—you oughtn't sneak up on folks, I grumbled back

—I didn't sneak, I walked, you just didn't see me

Nobody likes being told the obvious and I'm stubborn enough but I didn't like to smoke with her there so I waited and then

—where's your mother?

—she works at night sometimes

—so who's watching you?

She didn't stop looking at me.

—you are, she said

obvious

She didn't know you could make a cake without a box mix and I didn't know if I remembered how but she'd said it was her mother's birthday tomorrow and I found flour and sugar and cocoa and baking powder in the cupboard and buttermilk and eggs in the fridge and she did all the measuring and mixing. I told her the last time I made a birthday cake was for my wife and she said

—where's your wife?

—she died. a long time ago

—my gramma died too we used to live with her and she got cancered

Yeah I said that happens sometimes.

Her mother looked tired enough to be my age even though she was probably younger than my daughter would have been. She was apologizing for her girl showing up at my door unannounced and saying she'd had to leave before the babysitter arrived, long before it turned out because they never did show up. She was embarrassed as well as tired and was explaining that she told her girl if she ever needed help she should come to my house

—but I neglected to tell you that

—you don't know me from Adam

—I'm pretty good at reading men

I said I'm pretty good at reading poetry but I still found Shakespeare to be a cipher sometimes. She said well he is 400 years old and I said

—so am I

Somehow I fell into regular child care or maybe she was watching me bit of both I suppose. I told her mother I didn't need any money, I had my pension, and I saw her struggle with that a bit before she said thank you. The girl would come marching across the alley with a purpose and her head high, carrying a book or a doll or something new she thought we needed to learn about together. In the evenings she was usually in her pyjamas wrapped in a blanket and a threadbare teddy bear. She would sing something for me most days and we usually found something interesting to look at or talk about like the robins nesting in the backyard or comparing the maps in my atlas to the dollar store globe I bought for her or a piece of wood she found that looked

like the knuckles on her grandma's hand.

In the fall she started kindergarten and I felt the loss of those few hours like a hunger that could not be fed. I started smoking again. For the first time in almost five years I started dropping in on the weekday morning meetings at St. George's instead of just the Saturday evening.

The week after her twelfth birthday we were sitting on my back step, she was beating me at crib and telling me about a boy in her class, when we saw the cops walk around the side of her house to knock on the back door. Her mother's ex had tracked her down and showed up at her work. They argued and he punched her in the face and she shoved back and he hit his head on the corner of her desk and he didn't get up again.

Sometimes poetry is still a cipher to me.

She stayed with me for the next couple of years and they had to give up the rental on their house. I could see the pain and confusion fusing into an anger in her and I tried to be a calm place but adolescence is its own torment, let alone. I recognized the signs well enough but I tried hard not to preach and I wanted her to know my house was a safe haven and maybe I was just a coward. When her mother came back they got an apartment across town and I didn't see much of her for a long spell.

The coffee at St. George's still tasted like day-old dishwater.

Late night phone call a few years on she sounded wired and told me she was singing at Bud's on Saturday afternoon. Didn't exactly ask if I'd come but I heard the plea and the hope buried beneath the layers of it's just an open mike it's no big thing and it'll probably suck anyway. I hadn't been there in years and I sat on a still familiar stool and asked for an orange juice. She looked older than sixteen and strung out, but the rhythm and pipes put a rush in me and I sat there and cried into my oj. She'd learned how to spell, too. After her set she dragged the trombone player over and introduced him. He looked to be about 35. I saw the fading sunset of a bruise on her left cheek and she saw me see it and I looked away. I remembered the little girl who never stopped looking at me. She still walked with her head high.

—you're getting skinny old man

I lied I was feeling just fine.

The next time she called she sounded older and sober, she was still singing but she'd gone back to Nutana to finish her grade twelve and was going to university in the fall. She sounded worried about my voice and I stopped lying and told her I was at St. Paul's. She came over that afternoon

and brought her little girl. I held the little one in my lap and she pushed the wheelchair out into the sunshine. We talked for about three hours, well mostly she talked and I sat and felt whole for a while.

One day I'm one-day-at-a-time up to my eyeballs in back step smoker's cough lonesomeness but not giving a damn because life, and then suddenly I'm carrying humanity in my lap and the remembrance is a bitch let me tell you.

I thought about how we think joy and sadness are a one-or-the-other thing, that when one moves in the other moves on, but grace lives in your heart and lungs until sometimes you think you can't breathe, and lonely gets right into your bones and if it lives there long enough it will never leave. I knew well enough that they could co-exist just fine.

I read somewhere that the last beluga at Stanley Park died a few years ago. And this morning I watched three young robins clamouring outside my window as their parents took turns bringing breakfast. They were only just learning to fly.

I dreamed last night that I heard her sing Aretha at my graveside.