

WAYNE YETMAN

## THE BACK SEAT

SO THEY WENT OUT TO the car, Walter opening the passenger door for Sally, then going around to the driver's side, leaving Gary to get in the back. Gary hesitated; it didn't seem right for him to be tossed in the back what with all that was happening, but it would look stupid to make a scene when so much had gone into all this. He shrugged, got in and tried to breathe calmly, in and out, nothing dramatic, just like the doctors had told him. He didn't want to be the bad guy. It was important, this time at least, to do what was right.

"Beautiful," said Walter, "It shouldn't take much more than an hour. We can all sit back and enjoy the drive. Get to know each other a little better."

"Yes," said Sally, "It's been a long time."

"I can't get over how lucky I was to find you on the internet. We wouldn't be here if it wasn't for that. Isn't that right, Gary? We'd almost given up."

"Right," said Gary.

"Your mother would never tell us where you went. I guess she had her reasons. But then someone said they'd heard you were in Halifax and I went through the phone numbers on that website and there you were. Thank God for that. And thank God you were good enough to talk to me. A lot of people wouldn't have done that. A lot of people would have been too bitter. We're grateful for that. We're grateful, aren't we, Gary?"

"Yes," said Gary, "A miracle."

"Then you taking all the trouble and expense to come here and see us. After all these years. You're a good daughter. A damn good daughter. Isn't she, Gary? Aren't you lucky to have such a fine daughter? Back with us again."

"Guaranteed."

Gary kneaded his temple with his thumb. He knew he had to stay calm. He had to behave like a sane and sensible person or this whole thing would just blow all to hell. That mustn't happen. Everyone in town knew

what was going on. Everyone knew how Sally had come back to see him, the first time since she was a child, the first time since the divorce. Everyone would know if he buggered it up. Some of them, he was sure, were expecting him to bugger it up. Maybe even hoping.

But still, why was he in the back seat? Sure, Walter had to drive, it was his car. And that left just one seat up front so someone had to sit in the back. But why him? Why him stuck in the back like a criminal headed off to jail, while Walter and Sally purred at each other up front, stroking each other like lovers, barely thinking of him, the lump in the back seat, only tossing him a tidbit every so often as if he wasn't capable of opening and closing his mouth in a civil manner. As if he couldn't be trusted to converse with his own daughter without tight supervision.

"We'll have lunch at Tippy's Cove. There's a nice restaurant there. Gary's going to treat us to lunch. Isn't that true, Gary? You're going to take your brother and your long lost daughter out to lunch?"

"That I am."

"Have you been to this place before, Gary?" said Walter, "No I don't think you have. But I've been there many times. It's a ducky place. We'll have a fine feed."

"Sounds good to me." said Sally.

"Right on." said Gary.

Gary knew there was more to all of this than met the eye. Walter and Sally had been emailing back and forth for a long time. Apparently they had even talked on the phone. A number of times. What had they talked about? They seemed so familiar. Cozy. She was apparently living with a guy, had been for many years, but she had come alone. Come to see her foolish father and the sweet-talking brother who would have handled her so nicely on the phone, soothing her and questioning her, worming his way into her heart so that maybe she was more interested in spending time with him, and not so interested in spending time with her father. This was Walter's kind of scene. He would be working this for all it was worth, then eager to dish out the dirt to anyone who would listen once Gary was out of sight.

"So would you be thinking of moving back here full time?" Walter said, "With your boyfriend, of course."

Sally seemed to reflect on that.

"I don't think so." she said, "He's got a good job. He wouldn't want to give that up."

“But maybe you’ll come on vacation every so often. Bring the fellow. Let Gary see who his daughter is carrying on with?”

Sally shook her head.

“I don’t know how much ‘carrying on’ there is. We’ve been together over twenty years. But yes, I’d bring him. It would be a change.”

“Sure, we’d be glad to see him. We’d Screech him in, wouldn’t we Gary? A kiss of the cod and a shot of the rum, make him an official Newfie.”

“Oh yeah.” said Gary.

“I don’t know if he’d like that.” said Sally, “He’s not exactly a party guy. He’s very set in his ways.”

Gary leaned forward, squeezed his legs just above the knees. Squeezed hard, until it hurt. What right did Walter have to be prying into his daughter’s personal life like that? That’s the sort of thing she should discuss with her father. If anyone. Walter seemed to feel he could touch on almost anything with her. It was all those phone calls. They must have talked about him too. Talked about his problems and the doctors and his meds and how he couldn’t cope with people so much. Undoubtedly, Walter would have coached her on what to say to him, how to handle him. Walter liked to do that. Walter liked to think he was a bit of a psychologist and knew exactly what to say and how to say it so people would gravitate his way. He was smooth, the bastard, smooth as a silkworm’s fart. And now he thought he had Gary at his mercy.

“I have to take a pill,” said Gary.

He saw Walter glance at Sally, Sally glance back and bite her lip, Walter smile ever so slightly, Sally stroke her forehead.

“I’ll pull over. There’s water in the trunk,” said Walter, “You’ve got your pills?”

“Of course.”

“You want a drink Sally?”

“No.”

They pulled over on to the shoulder, there wasn’t any traffic, and Walter and Gary got out and went to the back of the car. Sally stayed in her seat. Maybe she recognized the men needed time to talk.

“What’s the matter with you,” said Walter, “You’re acting like some sort of outcast.”

Gary kicked at the dirt.

“It don’t feel right. I don’t know what to say.”

“Say what I told you to say. When we were practising. Ask her questions. Ask her if she likes her job. Ask her what she does for fun. Ask her ... oh Jesus, ask her anything. Aren’t you interested? She’s your daughter.”

Gary swallowed his pill. He stared across the highway, across the barren scrub and the rocky outcrop behind it.

“Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea.”

“By God, Gary, you’ve been yipping and yapping for years about seeing her again. Now it’s come true. It’s a bloody miracle. Don’t screw it up. You’ll never forgive yourself. Believe me, I know.”

Back in the car Sally looked at Walter, then twisted around to look in the back seat. It was awkward though: she more or less talked to the rear side door.

“Are you all right Gary?”

“A-1. I was just wondering if you like your job?”

“My job?”

“Yes, you work, don’t you?”

“Well, I work in IT. With a big investment firm. I make sure everything meshes when clients check their accounts on-line. I like it, sure. It’s a job.”

There was a long pause.

“That sounds pretty fine,” said Walter, “Doesn’t it Gary? Your daughter is a real success. Maybe she’ll give you some advice on your investments.”

“Oh no, I don’t know anything about the investing. I just manage the computers.” said Sally.

“I’m pulling your leg, girl. Gary doesn’t have any investments. Except for the government. The government pays most of his bills. He’s a clever character, your father. Isn’t that right, Gary?”

“Sure.”

Gary knew this must end. Another hour to the restaurant, an hour for lunch, then a bit of sightseeing out on the beach. That wouldn’t be too bad, the ocean crashing on the rocks would drown out any conversation, and then two hours to get back home. Maybe four o’clock in the afternoon. Hell. He couldn’t hold on that long. He would lose it. But he mustn’t. He had to take it hour by hour. Focus on making it one hour, and then another, and then another. Soon he would be free.

“And you, Gary. What do you do with your time?” she said. This time she didn’t turn to speak to him. She simply said it, like she was talking to the

windshield. Had Walter been coaching her too? Teaching her to deal with her half-witted father?

“Forget it,” Gary said, “I don’t want to talk about that.”

“Hell,” Walter said, “Don’t be like that Gary. I’ve told Sally all about you. She knows what a talented guy you are, you and your woodworking and your little engines and your music. Tell her about your music. She likes music.”

Gary slumped deeper into his seat. His music. He wasn’t going to tell her about that. His music was silly. Walter liked to make out like it was something special but Gary knew better. He recorded songs from the radio on an old tape recorder, tinkered with them until he erased as much of the voice as possible, and then he played the music track and sang along. It was like karaoke. Home-made karaoke. It reminded him of when he used to play the clubs with his guitar, when people thought he had a chance of going big, before it all came apart, before Angel left him, left him taking Sally, vowing she would never allow him near her again. That he was a monster and she had to protect her from him. No, there was no point in getting into his music. It was his music. His. Not theirs. Not an excuse to make him look foolish.

“Gary. Talk,” said Walter.

“I ain’t talking. I’m resting.”

Another of those wretched glances. They were like lovers. They couldn’t be, but they acted like it. Everything unsaid, everything understood.

The restaurant was on a barren rise overlooking the ocean. So close that they could hear the waves crashing on the rocks below.

“It’s lovely,” said Sally.

“We arranged it just for you,” said Walter with a laugh. “There’s nothing out there until you hit Ireland. Nothing at all.”

Sally smiled.

“That’s what we say in Halifax too. It’s a big ocean.”

“By God you’re probably right. Smart little daughter you’ve got here Gary. Chip off the old block.”

Gary clenched his fists underneath the table. He had to say something. She wasn’t a chip off the block and no one in his right mind would fall for that crap. Walter was making fun of him. He had to be stopped.

But the waitress came along and by the time she took their orders he had steadied himself. Thank God. That could have ruined everything.

Walter went to the washroom, leaving Sally and Gary alone for the first time since she arrived two days ago. She toyed with the little plastic

stand that displayed the day's specials. Gary intertwined his fingers on the table in front of him and tried to breathe slowly. Sally finally looked at him.

"You mustn't mind your brother. He's overdoing it but he means well. He only wants us to connect again."

Gary stared at the table.

"You think so?"

"I know so. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him."

"But I wrote to you so many times and you never answered."

"You wrote to me a couple of times. And sometimes you wanted me, and sometimes you didn't. I didn't know what to think. Sometimes you were pretty vicious."

"So what did he say, that I didn't? What did he say that won you over?"

She leaned back in her chair, rubbed her hands up and down her legs, glanced at the ceiling. Then abruptly shifted forward and leaned over the table towards him.

"Maybe this is all a mistake. Maybe I shouldn't have come back. We're so different. We live in entirely different ways. Maybe we'd be best staying apart."

Gary chewed at his lip, nodded.

"Maybe."

"Maybe we should be, like, distant friends," she said.

"Very distant," said Gary, "Very, very distant."

Sally jerked back, then laughed. Laughed like he hadn't seen her laugh since she arrived.

"You're a blunt one all right. Why not? I admire you for it. Takes a whack of courage."

Then Walter was back.

"So. Having a bit of a chat, are we? Building some bridges? It's a fine thing. A fine thing indeed."

"Shut up," said Gary.

They ate lunch with little more to say. Walter and Sally both made a stab at conversation but each time they wilted under Gary's glare. The waitress came to ask about dessert, looked around the table and answered for them: "No. Not needed at all."

They skipped the beach walk. It didn't take much to agree that they'd all seen plenty enough of the ocean in their day. It was time to go home. Gary was in the back seat again.

He liked the way she had laughed when he pushed her away. It was like she respected him. That was queer-like. He hadn't seen any of that in the last few days. She always seemed so nervous. Afraid to let down her guard.

But there was no point letting a moment's sensitivity take over from commonsense. He still couldn't figure why she'd suddenly decided to come back. If she could see through Walter's old bull then what was she really after? He had nothing of value. If she thought she was going to inherit something then she had another thought coming. He wasn't going to miraculously turn into a doting Dad. Sure, he'd like to feel like a father to her. Why not? It was only natural to feel that your only daughter was close to you, that you had a special bond. But he'd waited too long. She'd waited too long. All those nice things were out of reach. So why was she back? Maybe to spite her mother? Angel, who had torn them apart and worked to make it final? Was that it? Sucking up to him to piss in her mother's garden?

Sally turned to Walter.

"I think we should stop emailing and phoning. It doesn't seem right."

"Well that's crazy. I'm your uncle. Your only uncle. That's special."

"I think it bothers Gary. It makes him feel left out. We shouldn't do that."

Gary saw Walter staring at him in the rear view mirror. So when Walter answered Sally he seemed to be speaking to Gary.

"Gary is sick. We shouldn't let him drive our decisions. He's sick and bitter and only knows how to destroy. Don't listen to him."

"I don't listen to him. I hardly know him. But I know what's right and what's wrong."

"Right and wrong? What is this? Suddenly our heads are in the clouds?"

"Let's just let him be. Let him lead his life without us screwing him up."

Walter looked in the mirror once again. Gary stared back at him. Walter had to turn away first—a truck was coming towards them.

Gary turned to the side window. No. This is not the way things happen. It doesn't make sense. Its dandy that she's sticking up for him but it still don't make sense. All those years away, never a glance his way. Never a thought. Now she's back and telling off his brother on his behalf. Charming. Heartrending. But why? What was she after?

"Why don't the two of you stop talking about me like I'm a suitcase? I don't need any of this. Lay off."

Silence again. Gary tried to occupy himself looking out the window but his eyes kept coming back to Walter's glare in that mirror. Walter kept looking at him, turning back to the traffic, looking at him again. When Walter got that look on there was no telling what might happen.

"So have I got it straight now, Gary? All your bitching and hollering about how you wanted to see your daughter and why didn't she ever show any interest, now you don't want that any more. She's here and you don't want to have anything to do with her? Am I straight on that? Can I proceed on that basis?"

Gary dragged his fingers up and down the top of his head. Why did so many things end up this way? Was it the medication? Was it him? Was it simply the way life is? He'd made big mistakes before. Got on his high horse and decided exactly what was going on and then ran smack dab into the fact that he was completely wrong. And yet, other times, he had pretty well pinpointed things perfectly. Saved himself a lot of grief. This confusion. This constant confusion. In a better world someone would make all these decisions for him. It would be cut and dried—here's the right way, do it. But then he'd still kick up a fuss. He resented people telling him what to do.

"I want to see her," Gary said.

"Oh," said Walter, "So what did I miss here? So why do I have such a sad sack in the back seat?"

Sally raised her hand as if she was about to intervene. But Gary rushed ahead.

"I need more time. I need to think about all this. Straighten it out in my mind."

"Good Lord Jesus Gary, you've been thinking about this for twenty-five years. How much more do you need? And how much more do the rest of us have to be tortured by your thinking? I'm tired of it. I'm tired of the whole goddamned affair."

Gary winced. This is what always happened. Something about him set people off. His brother was always urging him to get out and meet people. Socialize. Bring some life into his life. But that had never worked. It didn't work for him. He got upset. Others got upset. Something always went wrong. Angry words. Threats and accusations. Bad feelings. No, it was better to stick to himself. Stick to the house. Don't get people going.

“May I say something?” said Sally.

There was a long pause as if the answer might be no.

“Speak,” said Walter.

“Let’s take a little break. Let’s get back as quickly as possible without talking about this anymore. Then we can each have some time to ourselves. I go home Friday. We’ll see how we feel.”

Walter sighed, glanced at Gary again; his face said: See what you’ve done? Don’t even think of blaming this on me. This one is completely on your head.

Gary turned to watch the road. He knew the route. He would count it down, town by town, harbour by harbour. Soon he would be home.

They dropped off Gary first. That didn’t really make sense. Sally was staying at the Fisherman’s Inn and they would have passed it early except that Walter came in the back way so Gary’s house was first. Gary could see what Walter was up to. Walter wanted to ditch him so he could have more time with Sally. Make sure she understood how screwed up Gary really was; how Walter had tried his best to straighten him out for the visit but it just wouldn’t happen and how Walter could be counted on to support her at this dreadful moment. Ready to let her cry on his shoulder, spill her guts to him.

No matter. Gary got out. He hoped that they would just drive away but instead they both got out of the car. Stood side by side in front of him like mourners around a grave. Gary hoped he wouldn’t have to hug her. Just say goodbye and let it be. Nor did he want to shake Walter’s hand. Walter liked to shake hands. Walter was a master at making things look good when they were truly awful. Gary’s wish came true.

“Thanks for coming, Gary,” said Sally, “I’ll see you again before I go.”

“Right,” said Gary, “And thank you.”

Walter kicked at the dirt, shook his head, then turned around and got back in the driver’s seat. Sally lingered for a few seconds, patting her hands on her legs as if she didn’t know what to do. Then she too turned and walked back to the car. As they drove away she lifted her hand slightly, as if she wanted to wave but wasn’t sure it would be appreciated.

Gary turned and went into the house, He locked the door behind him, took the phone off its hook and went up to his bedroom, closed the door. He really needed some time to himself. He would hunker down until she was gone. Up here he would barely hear if someone came to the door, and any

visitors certainly couldn't tell if he was home or not. It would be natural to think he had gone out for groceries or the mail. They would trudge back down the driveway unaware that he was listening to their footsteps on the gravel.

He knew he was making a huge mistake. In the months and years ahead he would berate himself for his behaviour, for letting her get away without telling her how he really felt about her. Or how he imagined he really felt about her. It was all so mixed up. But for now this was a good decision. He stripped down and slipped under the covers. Rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. Groaned long and deeply. It was magical being back in his bed, away from it all. Soon he would be asleep. Whatever Walter and Sally were hatching wouldn't matter. That was enough for now.