

CHARLOTTE BECK
EXIT CLOSED

HORACE SHUFFLED TO the doorway. The air in the kitchen tasted sour. There was no fire in the wood stove. His plate wasn't on the table and his pills weren't lined up beside it. And goddammit, where was Evelyn? He was mustering the energy to raise hell when she met him at the door.

"No time for breakfast," she said, her voice too loud. "I got a phone call while you were at the barn. There's been a cancellation. Dr. Star will see you this afternoon."

"Dr. Star? Who the hell is that?"

"The naturopath. Remember?" Evelyn sounded exasperated. "You said you would go if there was an opening."

Horace shook his head. He wasn't sure what a naturopath was—something to do with plants and flowers—but he sure as hell didn't remember agreeing to see another specialist. He was done with specialists.

"The office is in Toronto. It will take us two hours to get there, maybe more," she said.

"It's a waste of time."

"Maybe this time will be different." She didn't sound hopeful.

Horace shifted his weight. It wasn't Evelyn's place to make decisions, but there was no use arguing when her mind was made up.

"What about breakfast?" he said.

"We'll get something on the way."

"I get weak if I don't eat. You know my stomach."

Evelyn sighed. "Yes, I know your stomach. How could I not know your stomach? But this time you'll just have to wait."

"What about chores?"

"I called Mulder. He'll look after things if we're not back in time."

"You called Mulder? You know I don't want that man in my barn."

Mulder would do everything wrong and Horace would be forced to thank him for it; Evelyn was big on being polite.

“Do you have to go to the bathroom?” asked Evelyn.

Horace shook his head. “Not at this exact moment.”

She pulled his coat down from a hook and handed it to him.

“I’ll drive,” she said.

“Like hell you will.”

Horace swung his coat so hard that the zipper clanged against the wall. He pushed through the screen door and let it slam, not caring that Evelyn might be right behind him. He hurried as best he could towards the driver’s side of the Lincoln, but there was no strength in his legs. His knees burned with pain. Evelyn overtook him and slid into the driver’s seat before he got to the car. He leaned his palms on the hood and caught his breath before he went around to the passenger side. He folded himself into the seat, clasping his hands behind his knees to help them bend. As he settled in, he groaned, just to remind Evelyn of his pain.

He hated seeing her in the driver’s seat. He’d always done the driving, like a man should. Evelyn was a nervous driver; she drove too slowly and carefully. Even so, he was relieved. It was embarrassing, but he didn’t feel as confident behind the wheel as he used to. Cars and tractors and stop signs seemed to appear out of nowhere. Not that he’d ever tell her that.

Evelyn tossed a map into his lap.

“What’s this for?” said Horace.

There was never any occasion to read a map. They only ever travelled as far as the bank in town, or to the livestock market in the next township. They visited the girls in the city now and then, but they never had to drive. The girls came all the way up to the farm in their fancy cars and picked them up.

Evelyn ignored his question and headed west along the gravel road. They passed the Mulders’ farm. The Mulders were hippies. They had kids with names like Aster and Willow. Fern would have them sitting around the kitchen table doing school work, like she did every morning. In the afternoon, the boys worked the garden with their father. A garden that spread over acres. Horace could see early spring vegetables poking through the soil in neat rows. Organic, Mulder called it. No pesticides. No fertilizers. How that man made anything grow was a mystery.

The next house belonged to the Bennets. City folk. Their new house covered in fieldstone and wood siding. Nothing like the brick gingerbread house he and Evelyn had lived in since his father died. The family farm. As it should be.

The land around his hundred acres had been divided so many times Horace couldn't keep track. First there were fifty-acre parcels, now twenty-five. Narrow strips of land that weren't good for anything. People from the city built houses on them. Called them retreats. Carloads arrived on Friday afternoons in BMWs and Mercedes. Sometimes in the evenings they played their music so loud he couldn't hear the crickets or spring peepers.

When they first started coming he tried to make deals with them. He offered to farm their land and supply them with beef, but they weren't interested. Wanted their fields to be fallow. Horace had nothing to do with them after that. They didn't even wave when he rode by on the tractor, and that didn't bother him one bit. Evelyn seemed to like having neighbours close by. Sometimes he'd see her walk out the lane with a bounce in her step and knew she was off to visit with someone up or down the road; he didn't know who and he never asked.

Once in a while the neighbours came sniffing around his property too. Evelyn had beautiful flowerbeds—everyone said so—and these city folk would ask her to dig them some flowers. He'd see her out there, foot resting on the shovel, and one of the strangers pointing: *I want that one, and that one*. Evelyn smiled and dug as much as they wanted. Once he'd stormed out and told them flowers weren't free. Evelyn didn't say a word, just stomped the shovel into the dirt and headed for the house, leaving him alone with the strangers.

Horace leaned back against the faded fabric of the car and ran his hand along the seat. Of all the farmers in the township he owned the biggest, most luxurious car. Sure the Lincoln was twelve years old and the blue panels were pocked with rust, but it was the biggest. He still had the Ford half-ton too. Although he seldom ventured onto the road with it these days. The brakes were spongy and the steering was stiff.

Horace shifted uncomfortably. His stomach didn't feel right. Was it hunger? Or the other? They would have to find a gas station so he could go to the bathroom. He wouldn't be able to ride in the car for two hours without stopping. Evelyn knew that. Every morning he woke up to his insides churning. He held on until he got to the barn and fed the cows, the sheep, the chickens. Then he rushed through the barnyard, his rubber boots skidding on the slick rocks along the tractor path, and into the house to the bathroom. Sometimes he didn't have time to shut the door behind him.

Not that it mattered. Evelyn had heard it before. For years she talked about putting in another bathroom, but he didn't see any point. No need to spend money they didn't have. One bathroom was plenty. It was enough when he was growing up; it was enough now, especially with just the two of them.

The girls had been gone for years. Married and living in fancy neighbourhoods where houses were lined up one beside the other, hardly any room between. Kevin was the last to leave, but even he moved to the city. The city had swallowed every one of his children.

Towering structures caught Horace's attention.

"Wind farm," said Evelyn. "I hear you can get \$10,000 for having one on your land."

"They're eyesores. I wouldn't have one if they paid me a million dollars."

Evelyn looked away and he was sure she was making a face. They had applied for a wind turbine last fall, but their farm had been passed over. The wind never reached the land that spread out around their farmhouse; it stopped dead at the fencerows and windbreaks at the edges of their property, which created a pocket of stillness.

Too bad. \$10,000 was a lot of money. Close to what he got when he sent the calves to market every fall. He could use a new baler. Knowing Evelyn, she'd want to spend the money on the house, maybe install that bathroom. Or she'd want to go on a trip. She was always harping that they never went anywhere. Wasn't right that the neighbours would get all that money, especially for doing nothing at all.

"Turn that thing on," said Evelyn.

She pointed at the small square device on the dashboard. A GPS. Kevin, who seemed to know about electronics and computers, had bought it for them last Christmas.

"I don't know how it works."

She shoved a manual into his hands. He fumbled in the console for his eyeglasses and rubbed the scratched glass with the corner of his work shirt. He saw on the cover that GPS stood for global positioning system. Whatever that meant.

"Get it programmed so I know where I'm going," said Evelyn.

Horace opened the manual. Page one: Getting Started.

"Here's the address." Evelyn took a sheet of paper from her breast pocket and handed it to him.

Horace poked at the screen. He made several mistakes, but eventually a map appeared. A profusion of lines and colours that looked more like a bed of weeds than a map. It made no sense to him.

“See, that wasn’t so hard, was it?” Evelyn looked smug.

“Better find a gas station soon,” he said.

She didn’t look so smug anymore.

It took forever before Evelyn found an Ultramar. By then Horace was cramped up, holding his knees, moaning now and then. He pushed himself out of the car and headed for the men’s room. The door was locked and he tightened up his insides. He half-limped, half-trotted to the counter, ignoring the pain in his ankles, his knees, and his backside.

“Key,” he said.

The attendant, a foreigner, tried to look past him, maybe to see if he and Evelyn were paying customers. Horace glared at him and put his hand to his belt. The attendant handed over the key and Horace hurried back to the men’s room. He fumbled with the lock, then his belt and pants, before he was able to squat on the seat and let his insides loose.

He took his time. Evelyn would be anxious to get back on the road. Still he sat. Served her right for making him wait so long. It would serve her right if they missed the appointment, too. She had told him they were lucky to get it. The doctor was booked for months. According to her, the doctor had cured half a dozen of her euchre friends. They had her convinced that with a few natural ingredients he would be as good as new. Not likely. He’d seen every kind of specialist. It didn’t matter how many certificates lined the walls of their offices, no one found anything wrong with him. They promised medication would help, and Horace would start feeling hopeful with every new jar of pills. That hope lasted about as long as it took for the side effects to kick in. Dry mouth. Sleeplessness. Watery eyes. Sweating. Headaches. Nausea. Heartburn. Gas. Constipation. Diarrhea. He’d throw what was left of the pills in the garbage, ignoring Evelyn’s pleas to give them a chance.

They had their theories—the doctors, their neighbours, Evelyn’s friends—everyone had a theory: *It’s arthritis. It’s diabetes. It’s cancer.* Plus a bunch of diseases he’d never heard of. One specialist suggested his symptoms might be psychosomatic. When Evelyn asked what that meant, the doctor said Horace might not be sick at all, it might be all in his head. Horace had walked out on that doctor as he was writing a prescription for antidepressants.

“Don’t you think you should at least listen to him?” she had said.

Horace stared her down until she started fiddling with her purse straps.

“You think happy pills are going to fix me?”

Evelyn said nothing.

That was the last specialist he’d seen. Until now.

“I worked hard to get you this appointment, I don’t want to be late,” said Evelyn when they were back on the road. “Could be our only hope.”

“Why should this guy be any different?”

“For your information, Dr. Star is a woman.”

Horace laughed. As if a woman could fix him.

Evelyn sucked in air and he knew before she spoke that he didn’t want to hear what she had to say.

“I’m tired of all this,” she said. “I’ve tried to be patient, to think how it must be for you, but this has been going on for years. You keep getting worse. Things keep getting worse.”

Evelyn got fed up sometimes, Horace was used to that. He wasn’t as spry as he’d been when they got married. She didn’t realize how much pain he was in. How could she? She could spend a whole day in the garden. Sometimes he had to yell at her out there amongst the flowers that it was time for his eye drops or his bath. Sometimes he wondered if she just pretended not to hear him.

“Seems like you don’t want to get better.” Evelyn said it so quietly that Horace had to strain to hear her.

He started to protest but she cut him off.

“If this doesn’t help, I might move to town.”

He laughed again. Like a bark.

She turned sharply to look at him.

“You think I won’t?”

It was ridiculous. What would she do? And what about him? He’d had enough too. Couldn’t stand any more pain, or drugs, or having his body cavities lit up, photographed, analyzed. Displayed on a screen for all to see. He’d never told Evelyn this, but sometimes he worried that the doctor might find something, that it might be right there on the screen. He tried not to think about that.

Evelyn’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel, her engagement ring and wedding band, two perfect gold circles, so enmeshed in the flesh of her finger they would never slide off. Her skin was cracked and stained

with dirt from the garden. She took one hand off the wheel and touched the screen on the GPS.

“Watch the road,” said Horace.

Evelyn glared at him.

“Five hundred metres turn left.”

Horace jumped at the alien voice in the car. A female voice.

“Two hundred metres turn left.”

The voice was coming from the GPS. He noticed the steady click click of the signal light. Evelyn had already pulled into the turning lane. He thought he detected the trace of a smile on her lips.

“I will,” she said, “move to town. The girls have been telling me I should for ages.”

So, his girls were in on this. He should have known.

“What about Kevin? What does he say?”

“We never talk about you.”

Horace slumped. Kevin. His only hope for taking over the farm. After high school Kevin had left for university. He had a job in the city now. Downtown, he called it. He lived in a tall building with an elevator. Horace had never visited. That’s where he drew the line.

Once, when Kevin was home for a visit, Horace had asked him when he planned to take over the farm. They had been on their way to the barn and Kevin had stopped in the middle of the path. He’d stood straight and stiff, hands clenched at his sides.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

Horace had shrugged. What was he supposed to say to that?

“You never taught me a thing about the land, or the animals, or how to run a farm. You never taught me how to plow. You never taught me how to read the weather or how to fix the equipment. You were the only one who could ever do anything right around here. All you ever had me do was grunt work. I picked stones. I shovelled manure. I slung hay bales. How could you even think I would take over the farm?”

Horace had stared at his son. Clean-shaven and dressed in clothes that weren’t any good for farming. He was wearing a pair of Horace’s old rubber boots so he wouldn’t get his loafers mucky.

“Besides,” Kevin’s face was red, “I’ve got a job. I bet you don’t even know what I do for a living.”

“Course I do,” said Horace.

He had pushed past Kevin and hurried towards the barn. All those years he put into the land and this was the thanks he got.

The enjoyment had gone out of farming after that. Knowing that someone other than his son would be working it someday. Or worse, that city folks would buy it and let the fields go fallow. Still, it nagged at him. Maybe he should have taught Kevin more about farming. Kevin didn't have a knack for it, that was plain, but maybe if he'd spent some time with him. Not that it mattered. Kevin was gone. The girls were gone. Now Evelyn was talking about leaving too.

They were getting close to the city. Fields gave way to massive buildings with no windows. Trees lined the outside walls in straight lines. A plane flew overhead, so low it made Horace nervous. He had never been on a plane. A man should have his feet on the ground, always. Cars and trucks whizzed by. Green and white signs loomed overhead. 401 EAST. 401 WEST. Evelyn gripped the wheel, eyes darting.

"Speed up," he said. "You're driving too slow to keep up with traffic. You always drive too slow."

"You want to drive?" she shot back, not looking at him.

His stomach rolled over. The egg sandwich she had bought him at the gas station had oozed with mayonnaise. It wouldn't settle.

"Take the next exit to the right."

The GPS voice had been calmly guiding Evelyn for a while now. Horace hadn't even opened the map. It lay curled and bent in his lap. He had been rolling it and squishing it between his fingers. It was damp with sweat from his palms.

"Oh no," said Evelyn.

There was a line of traffic cones on Horace's right, the size of garbage cans, striped orange and black. An orange sign with black letters read: EXIT CLOSED.

He laughed. Now Evelyn couldn't rely on the GPS.

"Find out where we are on the map." She looked down at the map in his lap. "Never mind," she said, "I'll just take the next exit and backtrack to the right road."

The next exit was closed too. They sped down the 401. The GPS advised them to take the next exit, but they couldn't. They couldn't stop and they couldn't turn around and they couldn't get off.

“Do something,” said Horace.

Cars and vans and 18-wheelers and orange signs flashed by his window.

“What can I do?”

“I don’t know.”

“There—” Horace leaned forward. Pain shot through his arm as he waved it frantically, pointing to an exit that wasn’t closed. “There!”

“I see it, I see it.”

“Get over then.”

Evelyn jerked the car to the right and followed the ramp. She was going too fast and the tires squealed. The ramp curled in an almost complete revolution before it opened onto a regular street. One with traffic lights and bus stops.

“Unroll your window,” said Evelyn, as she pulled up to a bus stop.

“Are you crazy?”

There were people milling about. Black people, white people, in-between people.

“Unroll your window so we can ask for directions.”

Horace didn’t move. He crossed his arms over his chest and stared straight ahead. Even with the windows closed, dirty city smells filled the air. The noise of traffic pulsed inside the car. A tall black man wearing a leather jacket gestured at them and strode quickly towards the car.

“Jesus Christ,” said Horace, shrinking back from the window.

The man pointed behind the Lincoln and Horace turned in time to see a bus bearing down on them.

“Drive!” said Horace, as the bus driver leaned on the horn.

Evelyn kept driving. She made random turns. The GPS issued instructions but they were no help. After dozens of turns and street lights and a few stop signs, Evelyn turned onto a tree-lined street. There were large brick homes with garage doors and rectangles of lawn. The kind of neighbourhood his daughters lived in. There was no traffic. Only a boy on a bicycle and a woman walking a poodle. Evelyn pulled to the side of the road and stopped. She rested her forehead on the steering wheel.

“What are you doing?” said Horace. “Are you going to ask for directions again? That didn’t go so well, did it?”

He had the upper hand now. He’d gone along with her plan, but it had failed. They were lost somewhere in Toronto and it was her fault. They would miss the appointment. He was too pleased to be frightened. If they

managed to find their way out of the city soon enough, he might be home in time for chores. That would keep Mulder out of the barn. Everything would be the way it was. Evelyn would look after him.

“No, I’m not going to ask for directions.”

Evelyn pulled her purse into her lap and wrapped her fingers around the straps. She unlocked her door and got out, hefting her purse onto her shoulder. She walked away from the car towards the woman with the dog. Her blouse was stuck to her back with perspiration. Part of her skirt hung below the rest; Horace thought he could see a thread dangling. Blue veins bulged on her legs. Even so, she was lovely. She looked like the woman he’d married.

She’d been the talk of the township back then. All his buddies had been after her too, but he was the best catch around. Sometimes he wondered if she’d chosen him just because he was the most persistent. It didn’t matter either way. In the early years they couldn’t get enough of each other. Then the kids came along, one after another, and he’d had to work harder. More mouths to feed. Those kids were always needing something. New shoes, bicycles, winter coats.

Then one day it was just him and Evelyn at opposite ends of the kitchen table. He couldn’t think where the years had gone. The farm had gotten quiet. Nothing but the hum of the fan and the hiss of the fire in the woodstove to liven up the kitchen. No one at his elbow to pass the plate of chicken. No one to refill his water. Just Evelyn. And she seemed a long way away. He’d put his head down and eaten, wanting the meal to end quickly. That’s how it had been ever since.

Maybe there was still time. He could make it up to her. He would take her on a holiday. She always wanted to go to Niagara Falls. He didn’t see the need to stare at a waterfall, but if that’s what she wanted. This year they would do it. Or next. Hope coursed through him. Maybe his joints would get better. The aches would ease up. They would go to dances again. He could almost hear the fiddle now. He tapped his toes on the rubber floor mat. People would clear a space for them to dance. Those seated at tables would stop talking to watch. Oh yes, he and Evelyn would dance again.

The woman Evelyn was talking to was skinny and blond, dressed in black. A city woman. She looked at him from a distance and frowned. For some reason Horace felt ashamed. The back of his neck warmed. The woman took hold of Evelyn’s forearm. She pointed in the other direction. She turned Evelyn away from the car and led her down the street. The dog walked obediently on one side of her, Evelyn on the other.

Where were they going? Horace made a move to unroll his window, then stopped; she was already too far away to hear him. He reached over to honk the horn, but pain flared in his elbow as he stretched across the seat. It was too far. He let his hand drop. He leaned back in the seat as the city surged outside the car.