

BRAD HARTLE

EVERYTHING ABOUT HIM

MY WIFE LOST HER virginity to my brother. Despite Janey and I being married for fifteen years, that thought still manages to creep up on me.

I'm waist deep in a lake. Somewhere off behind our rented cabin, my son, Alex, is chasing frogs. Beside me in the water, my daughter, Lydia, is showing off her handstand skills. But I'm not looking for Alex or watching Lydia. I'm gazing at Janey, all smiles in her bathing suit and sarong and flip-flops. She carries a tray of bourbon lemonades, three tumblers, sparkling yellow in the sun and garnished with mint. One for her, one for my brother and the other for his wife. Owen and Amber have kicked back on the dock in lawn chairs. As Janey approaches, Owen smiles, his head tilted in an admiring way, a hand held at his forehead like a visor.

Spending time with my brother isn't my idea of a good holiday. If Owen's life wasn't so messed up at the moment, he wouldn't be here. But his life is messed up. So we invited him and Amber to join us for the weekend, giving them what I imagine is a much needed getaway.

Owen is suffering through the most shameful days of his adult life. Three weeks ago, a sixteen-year-old female student, who was part of a ski trip he chaperoned over the winter, wrote on Facebook that Owen got her drunk on that trip, convinced her to strip and touched her. The post whipped around social media until it came to the attention of a CBC reporter and blew open. Owen's denied it, and Janey and I believe him, but he's on indefinite leave until the courts sort things out, and who the hell knows how long that will be.

Lydia crashes down and surfaces, looking for my approval. I tell her she was kinda shaky, which sounds more critical than I intended, so I add, "Still better than I ever could!" She frowns and dives back under.

Owen and Amber take their drinks. Janey says to me, "Andy, sure you don't want one?"

I got up at dawn and swam: a kilometre or so, a straight shot across the lake to a rocky island and back, something I've pledged to do every morning of this vacation. I've also cut out sweets and chips and I'm only drinking in the evenings. Over the last couple months, I've lost twenty pounds. The last time I remember feeling this good I was in my early twenties. I say to Janey, "I'm good."

She looks me up and down. "You sure are." Then she sits and compliments Amber's new hairstyle. Amber's always been a brunette, her hair long and straight, but now it's dyed blonde and cut short and choppy. It's like her long hair hid something confident and witchy that has been let loose.

Owen nods. His pink polo shirt hangs over his scrawny frame, gathering in wrinkly bunches at his khaki shorts. He's seated with his knees knocked together and his feet wide, his lemonade clenched between his thighs. He's always sat like that, legs like an A-frame, and I've always thought it makes him seem somehow gutless. Now, though, I think it's sad, like he's collapsing into himself.

Lydia topples and I turn in time for her to think I was watching. "Bit better," I say.

She pushes her bangs from her eyes. "A bit? That was the best yet!"

"I wouldn't go that far."

There's a foam noodle floating beside her. She grabs it and whacks my hip.

"What's that for?" I back away and guard against another blow.

"You weren't even watching," she says.

Janey chimes in from the dock, "Mess him up, Lyds!"

Lydia whips my shoulder. "Were my toes pointing up or were they flat?"

When I hesitate, she leaps around me and gets me in the ass.

"They were up!" I say. "They were up!"

"You guessed that, liar."

"Liar?"

"Yeah, you liar."

She moves to get another shot in and I dive at her, grabbing her at the waist and taking her under. Standing, I fold her over my shoulder and wade out to the deeper water. She giggles and I say, "What to do with a girl who calls her dad a liar?"

“Bite him, Lydia,” Janey yells. “Bite him good!”

And sweet Jesus that’s exactly what Lydia tries to do. I pick up my pace for the deep and, when I’m sure it’s safe, I bounce her up and throw her sassy ass as far as I can. She splooshes down and emerges in full, arm-flinging stride to come get me.

I call out, “Owen, brother, I need you!”

I look over at Owen, still seated in his dismal way. He smiles. “You look like you got this one under control,” he says.

Lydia tries to tackle me.

“Not even close! She’s wily like her mother.”

Owen slowly stands. “I am curious how far we could throw her.”

Lydia squeezes me tight and I look down at her. She says quiet, “Dad, no.”

“What? Scared we’ll throw you across the lake?”

Her eyes plead a different worry. “I don’t him want to,” she says.

Owen sits back down, holds his glass up and says, “You know, this drink is too good to leave.”

“Your drink isn’t going anywhere,” I say. “Get in here.”

With a smile that almost looks proud, he says, “Really, Andy. It’s okay.”

Afternoon clouds ruined Lydia’s swimming, but the weather’s great for fishing. I’ve lent Owen a rod and we’ve been casting off the dock. It’s been a half-hour. Not a nibble.

In the quiet of our casting and reeling, it occurs to me that Owen hasn’t yet said thanks for inviting him up for the weekend.

“It’s such a peaceful spot,” I say to Owen. “We’re lucky to have gotten it.”

Owen nods. His thoughts seem elsewhere. “Shit fishing, though,” he says. “What if we use a frog for bait?”

There are an absurd number of frogs around our cottage. For Alex, who is seven, this is heaven. He’s been hustling around with his hands cupped, scooping up frog after frog. Every so often he hollers and offers up a bigger catch than before. The last time, he tripped on a stump. The frog was so big he held it with both hands, and as he fell he crushed it into the gravel path. Owen and I watched from the dock as Alex kneeled in the grass and wiped frog guts from his fingers. He didn’t cry or look the least bit shaken. He got

up, his freckled face amazed, and said, "That was the biggest one yet!" Then he turned and booked it to find one bigger.

Lydia was on the dock with us, reading with her feet in the water. She looked up from her book. "He's a freak."

Truth is, Alex is kind of a freak. I mean that in the most concerned, fatherly way. The fact he didn't give a damn about the frog he killed is normal.

Owen's reeled in his line. Nothing but seaweed. "Frog bait might help here." He casts again, but his line catches on his finger and splashes down a few feet from the dock.

"I think our troubles are more basic." Owen doesn't acknowledge my dig. "Besides, pickerel like these glittery lures. Trust me."

He gives me a raised eye as he brings back his feeble cast. "You like the glittery ones, not the pickerel."

"You can't even cast properly, let alone rig a frog." I've never seen my brother fish before and I'm not at all surprised he's struggling.

"Alex!" Owen yells.

"What?" It sounds like Alex is underneath the cabin.

"I need you to bring me a frog. Something the size of my big toe."

"Okay!" And in less than a minute Alex is sprinting our way, frog in hand.

Lydia asks, "Uncle Owen, what are you doing?"

"Fishing." He squats over the tackle box, unhooks the shimmery plastic minnow he had on his leader and attaches a three-inch hook.

"Can I hook him?" Alex says. He's so excited he's hopping. "Can I, Uncle Owen? Can I?"

Lydia closes her book and gets up. "I'm going inside with Mom and Auntie. You guys are twisted."

"Lyds," I say. "Cut the name-calling. This is natural."

Lydia stops as she passes her brother. "It's not natural to be such a freak." Then she's off, shuffling her feet through the grass.

"Don't listen to her," Owen says to Alex. "This is stuff a boy should know."

"Actually," I say. "This isn't the best lesson for today."

"What are you talking about? It's fishing."

How do I say I don't want my son experiencing new forms of animal torture? Assuming this would be new for Alex. "Sorry guys, not today."

"Dad!" Alex complains.

"Yeah, c'mon, Andy. This is guy stuff."

"Seriously, Owen. Fish with the frog if you want, but Alex isn't hooking it."

"Dad!" He holds the frog up. It's gripped in his muddy hand. "Look, I'm being gentle. I'll be gentle." The frog is all squirmy fear.

"You can either sit here quiet or go inside." He pouts as he hands the frog to Owen.

Owen doesn't take it. "You know, buddy, I think I'm all fished out today. Why don't you put Kermit back where you found him?"

Alex glares at me, then sulks off. When he's out of earshot, Owen says, "You don't trust me around your kid?"

"This isn't about you. It's about Alex. He likes this shit too much. It's a problem."

He pauses for a moment, surprised he isn't the focus of my concerns. "There's nothing wrong with a boy learning to fish."

"Since when does any of this matter to you?"

He squats over the tackle box and fiddles through lures. "I've always fished."

"Bullshit," I say.

"It's true," he says.

I go to the deeper grass and edge around with my sandals. A frog leaps. I nab it and bring it to Owen. "Show me."

He doesn't hesitate. He takes the line he's rigged with a hook, grabs the frog from me and digs the hook through the frog's back. The hook curls through its pale belly, the point beneath its mouth, open in a gasp.

"There," Owen says and lets the frog go. It hangs from his rod, kicks a couple frantic kicks, then goes limp.

"That's not how you do it," I say and point at the dead frog. "You hooked its heart."

"How was fishing?" Amber asks. We're in the kitchen. She's forming hamburger patties. It's just her and I.

I take a bottle of water from the fridge. "Nada."

"I figured you'd at least get one. Owen, no way. But you, I'd put money on you." She's wearing an apron and uses it to wipe her beef-slick hands.

There's a watery quality to Amber's eyes that makes her hard to read, like she's always on the edge of joy or sorrow.

"He seemed closer to catching one than me."

"I doubt that." She stares at me until I look away. "You should give Owen your exercise plan. The bean-pole could use it."

"He's got a lot happening."

"No he doesn't. He's just sitting around, wasting away."

"That's not fair."

"But it's true."

"I think he's doing well." I crack the water bottle and glug it back.

"You can't even look at me and say that." She turns from me to the bowl of ground beef. "You haven't been around him. He's changing. He's not okay."

Outside there's a scream. It's Lydia.

I run out to her. She's standing over her brother. He's kneeling at a plate-sized rock and holding a hammer. There's a frog on the ground pulling itself forward with its arms, its crushed legs dragging behind.

"He's breaking their legs," Lydia says.

Alex looks up at me. It's like he's offended.

"What in the hell are you doing?" I ask.

"He's torturing frogs, like a monster," Lydia says. "Like a little freak-monster."

"I'm not a freak-monster," Alex snaps.

I squat beside him, take the hammer and toss it a few feet. "Alex, this isn't okay."

"Yeah, it's not okay to be—"

"Lydia, shut up."

"But he—"

"I said, shut up." Alex wraps his arms around me and sobs. "What were you thinking, buddy?"

He cries into my armpit, then manages to blubber out the words, "I wanted them to stay with me."

Lydia huffs. "How does that make any sense?"

"Lydia!"

From behind me, Amber says, "Lyds, lets get washed up."

Lydia looks from Amber to me, then at the hammer lying in the grass. She takes it by the handle and kills the injured frog with three frantic blows.

Staring down at the mess, short of breath and trembling, she seems surprised. "You can't let it suffer," she says.

I reach for her and wave her in for a hug. "Nobody wanted it to suffer," I say, words that disgust her. She storms past me and I call out, "But you did the right thing!"

When Lydia and Amber are inside, Alex hugs me tighter. I tell him I'm sorry, but he doesn't respond. I can't tell if he's crying or snickering.

Janey's opened our third bottle of wine. The kids went to bed a while ago and the adults are up playing Scrabble. The booze is hitting me harder than before. I'm feeling wobbly.

"She's a confused kid," Owen says. He shuffles the letters on his stand. "I feel sorry for her."

It's Amber's turn. She thumbs down her letters with too much force. The tiles rattle. "She's not confused. She's a nasty little bitch." Her word: FLAX.

"Healthy choice," I say.

Amber looks at me like she wants to strangle me. I point to FLAX. She looks away and says, "She'll get a slap on the wrist and you'll be known as a pervert."

Janey lays down JOLT.

"I'll be cleared," Owen says. "I'm not worried."

"But not before being dragged through the mud," Amber says. Owen shrugs and Amber says, "I hate how cool you're trying to be. This isn't you. You should be crushed. But you're trying to be so cool."

It's my turn. I have my letters sorted: XNXFIBS. I'm considering my options. To buy time, I say, "I wonder why there's so many frogs?"

"Don't change the topic," Janey says. "We're family. It's safe. This is the place to be open."

Owen says, "I'm trying to be cool because there's only so much I can control."

"All this lack of control is killing us," Amber says. "I don't know why you can't just be angry along with me."

"I'm angry. You know I'm angry. I'm just not angry at her."

"There's no right or wrong way to deal with this," Janey says. "You're both doing your best. Maybe you're even balancing one another out, a sort of yin and yang thing."

"I'm tired of being the angry one," Amber says.

"It'll be over soon," Owen says. He's still arranging his letters.

"Over soon isn't over for good."

The table's quiet. I'm struggling to find a new word, having trouble seeing past my last selection. I ask, "What does this girl even look like?"

When I look up from my letters, they all glare at me. "Seriously?" Janey says.

"You're an ass," Amber says. Even Owen shakes his head at me.

"Okay," I say. "So maybe it's not *that* safe a place."

"She's sexy," Amber says. "Does that help?"

"She's not sexy," Owen says. "She's a kid."

"She's got full, womanly tits," Amber says. "That means she's not a kid. She's a sexy young woman."

"I get it," I say. "I'm sorry. Blame it on wine and weight loss."

"No," Janey says. "In fact, I'd like to amend my last word." She removes the J from JOLT and replaces it with a D.

"You can't change once it's down," I say.

"All in favour of me changing my word, raise a hand." They all raise a hand.

"Whatever," I say. The word I put down: FINS.

It's Owen's turn. His word: LEGS. "Triple-word score," he says.

Janey's not asleep either. She's restless. There's a question my mind can't shake, lying drunk under the ceiling fan's breezy press. I nudge Janey. She grumbles. "I need to ask you something." She doesn't respond, but I go ahead. "When you and Owen happened, you wanted it, too, right?"

I hear her breathe. "Sleep, Andy. I want sleep."

"It's kind of a simple question."

She exhales into her pillow. "Questions asked in the dark are never simple."

"Not exactly a comforting answer."

I feel her roll onto her back. "I'm not here to comfort you. Nobody is. You're fine."

"Is there a better way I can ask this?"

"None of this is about you. Get over yourself and go to sleep."

"You know you're in for a chat." I smile through the dark and hope she can sense it.

"You know him, everything about him. There's nothing surprising about Owen."

"There's something surprising about everybody."

"Not your brother."

"What if he took advantage of you? What if that's something he does?"

"You're an asshole for saying that and you know it."

"I don't like saying it, asking it, but what if? The way he's being, it's easier to what-if."

"Go to sleep before I smack you."

"You're gonna have to smack me."

"You don't need to know any of this. And you don't want to. Your brother is a good man. Maybe too good. Now that's all I want to say."

"Too good? What does that mean?"

"I'd like to smother you."

"You'd have to get on top of me for that."

There's silence for a moment. "How about this, Andy. I took Owen down. It wasn't him taking advantage of me. It was the other way around. He was drunk and I cornered him. I reached down his pants and took his hand and stuck it up my shirt. It was all me and barely any of him, because that's who he is. He's not somebody who takes, he's somebody who gets taken. You know this. In your heart, you know all this. Now, try and tell me you're surprised. Try and tell me you're surprised even the slightest bit."

"I'm not sure surprised is the right—"

"I'm not surprised you're asking question that are really all about you."

"This isn't about me."

"Oh, bullshit. It's always about you."

"You've answered all you need to answer. I get it."

"Nope, now you've gotten me all awake." I pull the sheets a little higher, up near my shoulders. "You know what I liked about our first time? You're the opposite of your brother. You cornered me. You undressed me. You wanted me and you took me and I thought, yes, finally, someone like me."

"I really wasn't trying to get into you and me."

"And yet that's where we are. Know why?"

"No. But I bet I'm about to find out."

"Because in some sick way, you're jealous of your brother. You've lost all this weight, you look fantastic, and yet you think he's the one with something new and exciting. It should be you, not him. You can't take it."

"That's horseshit. No part of me wants to be a scandal on CBC."

"But what would you have done? If you were there with that sexy little thing? What would they be saying about you?" She's talking right at me. The wine on her breath is sour.

"How do I even begin to respond to that?"

"You're not listening." The bed craters toward her as she sits up. I hear a click and the room explodes with light. My eyes clench shut as she stands.

"Open those weak eyes," she says. And in the squinting brightness, I see Janey standing over me, her back against the fake wood paneling. She's wearing my old Blue Jays shirt and her blonde hair is held up with a red scrunchy. Behind her is a painting of sunny wilderness. "I'm not saying you like little girls. I'm saying you're afraid you've lost something. But you haven't. You're better than you've ever been." She takes off her t-shirt and drops it on the floor. The tan-line of her bathing suit arches across her breasts. Above her green cotton panties her c-section scar smirks. "Show me I'm right," she says. "Show me you're better than you've ever been."

It's a new day. I didn't make it out for a morning swim. Instead, Owen and I drove into town and rented a boat. The kids found an inner tube in the shed and have been begging to go tubing. The boat is nice, fairly new, with enough power to make the kids scream. It's gonna be fun.

We're in the boat, taking our time returning to the cabin, touring the bays and islands and pointing out the cottages we wish we could afford. Owen spots a ramshackle cabin on a sloping island lot. Plenty of trees. Big boulders. It's the one. We dream aloud for a bit about how we'd tear it down and build something new, something perfect. It doesn't matter if it's unattainable, I'm enjoying dreaming with him. Knowing our dreams are equally beyond reach makes him feel closer.

"I'm sorry about shutting down the frog fishing yesterday," I say.

"Ancient history," he says. "You were being a parent."

I throttle down to hear him better over the engine. "Yeah, but with what's going on, I don't want you to think I don't support you, or that I think less of you."

We're at trolling speed. He says, "You know what the worst part of all this is?" I shake my head. "Nobody has ever assumed I could have done it."

"I would say that's a good thing."

He looks at me with a flimsy smile. “When I told Amber, know what she said? First, she laughed, like how ridiculous, then she said there’s no possible way I did anything.” He waits for a response. “She said there’s no *possible* way.”

“And?”

“No *possible* way?”

“I don’t see why that’s a problem.”

“She thinks I’m too weak for anything like this. Or too wholesome. Too, too, I don’t know, too fucking careful. Who wants to be any of those things?”

I put the boat in neutral. We slow and bob with the current. “Owen, I have no clue what you’re talking about, but a big part of me is worried you’re saying you did something horrible. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Nah, I didn’t do anything. But that’s the problem. I didn’t. What I’m telling you is I wish I did.” He’s not looking at me. He’s looking out over the lake. “Where the fuck else is the magic in this life?”

“You want magic? Find a rabbit and a hat. Little girls don’t need to factor.”

“But you should’ve seen her. In that room. The fireplace going. The moon over the mountains. The things I wish I did.”

I’m speechless, and he takes my silence as a cue to say more.

“She’s smart, too. She’s got this great—”

“Shut your fucking mouth.”

He chuckles. “What’s the matter?”

The bow launches up as I throttle down. When we plane, our cottage in sight, I yell over the engine, “You need help.”

Owen sits back. “Wanna know what worries me?”

“Nope.”

“What worries me is what I heard from your bedroom last night. You’ve forgotten how to make Janey come. How could anyone forget something like that?”

Janey didn’t finish last night, it’s true. I throttle down harder.

“I used to look up to you, Andy.”

“I’m not the enemy here. I’m on your side.”

“You’ve given up. You don’t even know it.”

The dock is less than half a click away. I see Janey there with the kids. She’s putting on their life-preservers. Amber stands behind them, looking out

at us. I say, "We're gonna dock and you're gonna leave. I think that's best."

"No, that's not what's happening. What's gonna happen is you'll get off the boat and I'm gonna take your wife and kids on a nice ride, just like they were promised. And you're gonna let me."

"Why's that?"

"Because you can't admit that you might be afraid of me."

We're pulling up to the dock. Lydia and Alex bounce with giddy anticipation. Janey waves at us and yells, "Ahoy, mateys!"

"Ahoy!" Owen yells back. To me he says, "So?"

My family's eager to get boating. Behind them, Amber hasn't moved. She's got her arms crossed, holding her elbows. She's studying us. As we ease aside the dock, I say to Owen, "Be happy that you're the predictable one."

"You're not going with them?" Amber asks as I walk past her. I'm headed inside.

"I'm too hungover for the boat."

She follows behind me. I hear the boat's pattering. The screen door closes and she says, "You were fighting. He had that look about him."

"We weren't." I go to the fridge and take a beer. Out the window over the sink I can see the boat reverse away from the dock. Janey sits shotgun. "Everyone's fine."

"I didn't ask if everyone was fine. Nobody's fine. I asked if you were fighting." She steps by me. She smells like coconut, thick and sweet. She's wearing a lacy white shirt over her blue bikini. The shirt only covers half her ass. Her long legs have a tanned honey hue. She squats to get at the liquor cabinet and takes out a bottle of Beefeater.

"You were right," I confess. "He's cracking."

She takes the tonic from the fridge and a lime. "We were up last night. We heard you and Janey arguing, then the marvellous makeup."

"Sorry about that."

"Don't be. I was jealous." She cuts a lime wedge. The juice leaches onto the cutting board. "Owen and I haven't had sex in months. I said to him, we should compete with them, with the sounds Janey was trying to muffle but couldn't. Want to know what he said?" She drops the lime in the tonic and it fizzes.

"I'm not sure it matters."

“He said he knows first-hand there’s no competing with Janey.”

“He’s trying to be destructive.” I take her hand and squeeze. “It’s an act.”

“He talks about Janey more lately. About his, quote, wasted youth.” We’re still holding hands.

“Which is pretty sad.”

She steps to me. There’s only just enough room between us for her to take a drink. I’ve never seen the watery ledges of her eyes this close. She says, “Even the score.”

“Don’t say that.” I slug back some beer, but I don’t let her hand go. “Janey’s your family. A friend. You don’t mean that.”

“This has nothing to do with Janey. This is us saying a big fuck-you to your brother. Fuck him, Andy. Fuck everything about him.”

I shouldn’t just stand here and stare at her. I should move. I should step away. I should tell her no.

She kisses my neck, my throat, my jaw. Our hands remain held. I feel the press of her chest against mine. Through the window over the sink I see the boat far out and turning wide circles.

I put my beer down and slip cold fingers down her bikini bottom. Then my shorts are down. It happens with her bent over the sink. My hand is pressed on the counter and hers is over mine, our fingers intertwined. The dishes on the drying rack clatter. The boat’s distant puttering faint.

While we were on the boat, looking out at that old cabin, Owen said, “I’d love to take a sledgehammer to it.”

“God bless the sledge.”

“We’d have to haul in materials over the winter,” he said. “With the lake frozen.”

“You might want to get a few pushups in before we try that.”

“I don’t need pushups,” he said. “I’m all heart.” And with a fist he made a couple of ape-blows against the boney-hollow of his chest.

“It’d be good for us,” I said. “Come out here and build a place of our own. We’ve never done anything like that.”

“We’d build something amazing,” he said. “Big windows. A stone fireplace. I’d be out here all the time. Be my life.”

“Paradise,” I said.

“Paradise.” He looked at me and nodded. Then he looked back and said, “A barbecue built right into the deck. Outdoor speakers just pumpin’.”

“And a big dock. The ladies could tan. Lydia and Alex could dive.” I waited a moment to see if Owen would come back at me with another detail, but he seemed too deep in the dream. I’m not even sure he heard me. We bobbed for a bit in the morning quiet. “It’s good to dream with you, brother,” I said and slapped him on the shoulder.

He smiled at me, then the smile fell. “I wanna do something. We’ve got to do this. Do you think we could ever actually do this?”