

STEVEN BENSTEAD
MALCOLM

I SIT AT MY DESK and wait for my grade ten class to take their seats. It's 10:30 and the sun has begun its slow and awkward rise.

Yesterday I went to Julia's for supper, as I do each Sunday. I am a middle-aged widower and, according to Julia, can't cook worth a damn.

Everyone thinks we are brother and sister, Julia and I, even her husband, especially her husband. (Allen is an SI, a senior investigator, with our local security cell.) Normally Julia and I would have been separated within days. Moving children from one safe house to another was risky for all involved—we were, after all, property of the state—and the task of finding us families would have been easier had we been settled separately. But Julia became so distraught at the prospect of going anywhere without me that a family finally came forward and offered to take us both. Thus we grew up living a lie we could never reveal.

I got off the bus and walked the two blocks to their house. My niece and nephew welcomed me with shouts. They each grabbed an arm and pulled me into the kitchen. Allen was chopping vegetables. "There you are, Thomas. Thank God." His greetings are characteristically dramatic. He wiped his hands on his apron. "Let me get you a glass of wine."

Julia walked by with a stack of plates and paused to kiss me on the cheek.

After supper we did the dishes while Allen and the children went into the lounge to select a board game. She washed, I dried. The clatter of plates and cutlery masked our conversation. Lately, she avoids discussions about the past. She will put her fingers on my lips to silence me. She has even begun to claim that Malcolm never gave her a book to take with her. Yet I have a clear memory of her clutching it to her chest. She would have been eight years old, which would have made me almost ten. I was a perfect reflection of her, hugging my own book and staring at the door while we waited for

the signal to go. We had been hiding at Malcolm's for almost a week. The door opened and he appeared, waving us forward. "Hurry, children. Hurry."

We had grown up in the town of New Florida, on the northern edge of the habitable zone, a town small enough that you could walk from the school at one end of Main Street, past the Rec Centre, the shops and the single garage, to the Regeneration Centre at the other end in twenty minutes. We were raised at the school. We knew nothing else. Apart from the nursery next door—and we had only the vaguest notion that we had begun our lives there—the school was our world. We had lessons and exercise, three meals a day, and access to a doctor and a nurse on duty around the clock.

All the children, the young scholars, as we were called, were assigned a minder. The headmaster recruited them from amongst the teachers. The goal was to offer the children something akin to a personal experience. Under the rubric "a healthy mind, a healthy body," the minder's role was to supplement our lessons by taking us for walks and indulging us with little treats, an ice-cream at the Cone and Wafer or a lemonade at the tea room. The latter was on Main Street, about halfway between the school and the regeneration facility. Lemonade was nice, but Malcolm was the real reason we went there. Wednesday was our excursion day and the day Malcolm made his weekly trek into town. He arrived with a satchel of books and spent the day at the tea room, reading to anyone who would slip him a coin, even a small one.

Julia and I were paired with a minder named Mrs. Kaye. She almost always took us to the tea room, anticipating our gleeful reply as she asked "Where would you like to go today, children?" She signed us out at the security gate and, with a hearty, "Come along," led us across the lawn, showing her pass to any of the constables who approached us. They were particularly thick around the school, but one could encounter them anywhere. They patrolled the town 24 hours a day in pairs of a handler and his dog. The latter were fearsome creatures in the presence of which Julia was careful to keep her hands to herself. On the rare occasion we were stopped, she might whisper "Nice doggy," but with her fists tucked under her chin and the protection of Mrs. Kaye, who scolded the man for his officiousness with a curt "You are scaring the children."

Malcolm was a legend among the boys at school, one of the myth-like protagonists who populated the comic books we were allowed to read. In my dorm, a group of us would stay up till lights-out, inventing wild tales based

on the few facts we knew. One boy considered himself an authority on the Malcolms of this world. He claimed no one knew where the holos came from. Most had been decommissioned when they were first discovered, long before we were born. Malcolm and his like only survived in the remote hinterlands, in places like New Florida, villages and small towns where, unless they proved a threat, the cost of flying in a team of decommissioners was considered prohibitive. How long he'd been living out there in the bush was a mystery that fired much of our late-night speculation. A few of the boys said they had overheard locals talking about Malcolm in a way that suggested there had been sightings of him that went back generations.

We always arrived early at the tea room. Despite the fact that only a handful of patrons were ever present at that time in the morning, Mrs. Kaye would usher us to a table at the back before giving us each a coin for Malcolm. Not everyone was comfortable with our being there. The patients from the Regeneration Centre were particularly sensitive to our presence. They often frequented the tea room while undergoing their pre-op tests. We tended to avoid the tea room entirely when an influx of new patients arrived. Many came up with their families, some of whom stayed for a week or more at the Rec Centre to see their loved ones properly settled.

Last night Julia walked out of the kitchen in a pique, saying, "Why do you always choose to live in the past?" I had no option but to follow her into the lounge where Allen and the children were waiting for us.

Less and less does Julia want to talk about New Florida, about the tea room and Malcolm. As a result, I am forced to retreat into my own memories, unable to verify them against those of my only witness. Yet my recollections of Malcolm are unwavering. He had thin sandy hair above a wan face, wore a grey suit, white shirt, dark tie and loafers. And he always looked the same, was always dressed the same, no matter where we encountered him. If you were to pass him on the street, if you didn't know, he would seem a most unremarkable creature, a clerk or middle manager, a glint in his eye the only suggestion that some part of him wandered the endless halls of the forgotten with the heart of a desperate gambler.

His readings did not always go smoothly. On my first visit to the tea room—before Julia, when I was paired with an older boy prior to his being selected—Mrs. Kaye had taken pains to introduce me to Malcolm. After she

left us, he said, “Tom?” as if testing the sound of my name. He had a much richer voice than I had anticipated. “Tommy? Or is it Thomas?”

“Tom’, sir.” *Thomas* was my name at the school, and I rather liked the sound of *Tom*. It sounded exotic in its own way.

“Ah.” He reached into his bag and pulled out *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, featuring a boy who, as we progressed into the story, I liked to think was a lot like me.

He read with a pleasing lilt, pausing as anyone would to turn the page. I was just getting over the notion that his outer edges were growing opaque, when he stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence, his mouth half open, his eyes blank. He didn’t slump, but seemed to hover, like a ghost. The book slipped from his hands and fell to the floor. Startled, I fled back to the safety of Mrs. Kaye’s arms and watched Malcolm vanish into a staticy incoherence. Some of the patrons began to snigger: the gawkers, those who came hoping to witness just such an incident.

“He’ll be fine.” Mrs. Kaye stroked my hair. “Just give him a minute.”

She was right. Malcolm recovered himself shortly afterwards. Awkwardly self-aware, he looked around as if to assure himself of his whereabouts, then at the clock, afraid perhaps that the time might have run away on him, worried that hours, if not days or weeks, might have passed. When he saw me across the room, he became more composed. My presence, the fact that I was the same boy I had been only minutes earlier, helped him define the parameters of his spell. He relaxed, gave me a nod and what passed for a smile, before picking up the fallen book. Although he didn’t raise his voice, he spoke in such a way that I could hear him as if he were sitting beside me: “Another time, perhaps.”

On another occasion, the tea room’s proprietress stopped by our table to have a word with Mrs. Kaye. “His spells have been getting worse.” She glanced at me and Julia before continuing. “I’ve told him there are people who might be able to fix his clock, but he refuses. Calls them ‘backroom tinkerers,’ and he’s right, but what’s the alternative?” She was expressing a concern shared by the boys in my dorm that Malcolm might stop working one day, collapse somewhere and expire under our watery sun. “He’s good for business,” she said. Although she had agreed to host Malcolm’s weekly visits—it was a condition written directly into the tea room’s bill-of-sale by the previous owner—her explanation masked a fondness for what was essentially nothing more than a complicated machine.

Although my speculations about Malcolm have always been tenuous, I have wondered to better effect about Mrs. Kaye, her fate and why she did what she did. The last time we saw her, we were running towards the trees.

Mrs. Kaye had not taken us to the tea room that morning. She had checked us out on an odd day, not one of Malcolm's. That alone might have raised a few eyebrows. We had stopped for an ice-cream at the Cone and Wafer, and when we left we didn't head back to the school. Instead, Mrs. Kaye led us in the opposite direction.

New Florida had been built in a natural clearing on a bed of granite, rock as old as the earth itself. The tops of the trees, the pine and the spruce that dominated the rough terrain outside of town, were forever lost in the low-hanging clouds, fed, it was rumoured, by a coal seam smouldering among the distant hills for centuries. Mrs. Kaye held our hands as we walked up the street, past the tea room. We kept on the near side of the road, sidestepping the Regeneration Centre to avoid the chemical-laden blasts of air that roared out the exhaust vents, then tramped through the brush that defined the town limits. She had taken us there a few weeks earlier. Looking back I wonder if she had done so as a test, to see what would happen, but we had returned without incident. On that previous outing, we had wandered along the cliffs of the old shoreline of a once vast lake, picking our way through the ruins of grand summer homes that had long since collapsed in on themselves. Mrs. Kaye pointed to a shallow pond barely visible in the distance: "Do you see it, Julia? Do you see it, Tom?" All that was left of the lake lay shimmering like a dull pool of mercury in a bed of cracked mud.

We ran because Mrs. Kaye had told us to run. She had taken us in her arms before turning us towards the trees. "Run," she said. "Now. As fast as you can," as if, with only hope as her guide, she were releasing two balloons into an uncertain sky. And run we did, driven by an urgency in her manner, hand-in-hand because I knew Julia would not otherwise have been able to keep up. The land was flat but uneven, and we had almost reached the trees, were close enough to see between them, even smell the rich earth that waited in the shadows, when Julia stumbled. In helping her up, I turned to see Mrs. Kaye standing in the distance among the ruins of the summer homes. She was looking out across the dead lake, standing there in her long brown dress and sensible shoes, as if she were contemplating something, a secret buried deep in her heart, a future she could only imagine.

Moments later we were in the trees. We crashed through the bush with no idea where we were going, the scrub grabbing at our ankles. It was cooler here, the air more fresh, the grey light different, dappled.

"This way! Julia! Tom!" Malcolm came out of nowhere, striding towards us. "This way." Down by the lake, we could hear dogs barking and men shouting. "Hurry," Malcolm ushered us on ahead of him. "Don't look back."

He led us along an old road. Overgrown in places, it nevertheless cut a straight line through the trees, not as if it had been the product of casual rambles, an unlikely scenario, as the residents of New Florida rarely ventured this far afield. At the time I didn't think about it, but, with hindsight, its existence has caused me to speculate. It had clearly been engineered. Any deviations were accommodated by long curves that swung over the course of a mile or more before resuming the original direction, as if whoever had built it had some far-off destination in mind.

Our pace slackened once Malcolm was sure we were not being followed. We trudged on for hours, stopping only once for him to give us a sandwich and a drink of water.

Malcolm lived in what I thought was an old bus, but it was not the kind of bus that stopped at the Rec Centre three times a week. Set a few hundred paces off the path, a darker shape among the trees, it was bigger and longer than a bus, and heavy looking, its metal sides studded with rows of rivets around which halos of rust had formed. It sat on two six-wheel trucks, one at either end. As we walked towards it, I could see that the wheels—also rusted and bare of any rubber—had sunk into the ground to their axles, but unevenly, so the entire body of the thing was canted to one side.

I entered the lounge to find Julia seated with Allen and the children. They had bought a new board game and the children were anxious to show it to me. "It's a strategy game," Allen explained as he went over the rules. The winner was the one who ended up with the most revenue-generating land. But to make their properties work for them, the players had to link their parcels of land by building transportation links. In the game they were called *railroads*. "It's not such a ridiculous notion as you might think," Allen started to explain. "I believe one of the universities has begun a research project."

But then the children jumped in. "Trains, Uncle. Trains they are, a hundred cars long pulled by engines as big as houses." Their eyes were wide. "On rails that stretch from one end of the country to the other."

I glanced at Julia. The concept behind the game struck me as oddly familiar. But she refused to be engaged. She smiled at the children. "As if anyone could know where the ends are." Then at Allen. "As if the ends had been charted and defined." With the same smile on her face, she said, "I mean ... really."

During the week we stayed with him, while Julia and I waited for the little hover car that eventually took us away, Malcolm never let us out of his sight. Often he simply sat with us, but sometimes he would break his silence and begin to talk, and once he started he would go from one topic to the next, telling us all manner of things. He confessed, for instance, to having difficulty creating new memories and that some of the memories he did have were unreliable, left over from dreams, he said. He had a sense of motion when he was standing still, a floating cone of light cutting through the darkness, the ground shaking; plagued perhaps by the lives of people with whom he might have once worked. But in what capacity? Had he been a clerk charged with duties that no longer existed? He referred to his home as an abandoned work car, a converted sleeper, parked on a siding off the mainline, names for things that didn't mean anything to me. He complained about waking to the thin glimmer of dawn to find that the deep memory that had been playing out inside his head had slipped away, leaving only a memory of a memory, rumoured events and unfathomable tales. He talked about a marshalling yard where the Regeneration Centre now stood, and about data streams and satellites without being able to explain what they were. I had no idea. I still don't.

When we arrived at his place, he led us up a set of steps at one end and through a thick, steel door. There we found ourselves in a cramped kitchen or galley. Piles of paper lay stacked on the counter, bottles of ink stood in a basin, and on the surface of a small stove sat a tray of old-fashioned pens with nibs, like those we had once used to practice our penmanship. Beyond the galley, a row of double bunks, or rather their shells, stretched to the far end on either side of the aisle. Malcolm moved about as if he were at home, knew every inch, was not bothered by the stale air with its infusion of metal and old wood. The only ornamentation was the rows of books loosely arranged spine-out, leaning against one another on shelves that ran the length of the space on both sides just above the windows; books by authors such as Dickens, Laurence, Orwell, Smollett, Woolf, Tolstoy, Braddon, Sterne, Brontë, Shakespeare. There were dozens more, but these are the only ones I can recall. They were like the books

he brought to the tea room, like my copy of *Tom Sawyer*, bound in plain paper covers, the hand-written pages stitched together with twine. The originals, which he claimed to have found stashed under a bunk, and which he said had been a great comfort to him, had long since crumbled to dust. This was what he did with his days, he confided. Using his tea room earnings to buy pens, ink and paper, he busied himself over the weeks, months and years, carefully copying each book, page by page.

On our first night with him, as he unrolled sleeping bags, one for Julia and one for me, he told us what was going to happen to us, and why.

Behind him, the lights of New Florida hugged the horizon, now a world away, like the crescent of a fallen half-moon. Later I came to wonder how long Malcolm must have contemplated that light before he walked out of the bush, driven by an obscure loneliness for which not everyone in town gave him credit.

The evening over, Allen saw me out. We stopped on the porch and he closed the door behind him. "There's something I have tell you." He surveyed their front yard. "Julia needs an operation. It's her heart. But she's going to be fine. Everything's arranged. We've secured a donor. I can tell you the bidding was fierce. I had to pull a few strings. Not that we won't have to re-mortgage the house, but still." He squinted. "There's a town up north, near the edge of the habitable zone. They have a regeneration facility. Top notch. There used to be an old holo," he said, as if thinking out loud, "causing trouble until the reeve finally called in the authorities." I stared at him for what must have been a long time until he said, "Thomas? Are you all right?"

Despite having searched the libraries of every school in every town I've ever been posted to, every bookstore and public library, I have never come across any books by Mark Twain, let alone another copy of my *Tom Sawyer*—Malcolm had thrust it into my hands moments before Julia and I were extracted—nor any of the other books I encountered at his place. Early in my teaching career, I quizzed my colleagues about these books, naming them and their authors, those I could remember. Everyone professed ignorance. I stopped, however, when the head called me into his office. He warned me off the topic. He refused to elaborate, but I had the feeling my Mark Twain was not unknown in certain circles, and possession of it could draw unwanted attention. For some time afterwards I wondered how many children Malcolm

had sent on to new lives with one of his books clutched to their chests, and if the head might not be one of them. Nevertheless, his words were enough to make me terminate my enquiries, and I kept the book a secret, even from my late wife.

Yet here it sits now on my desk, waiting to be opened, waiting to be read—out loud. My students have grown quiet in anticipation of a day unlike other days. I rise from my chair. Their eyes move from the window—where the sun, smeared across a black sky, throbs intermittently—to take my measure, their heads cocked, an unfamiliar curiosity filling their faces. I turn to Chapter One, and begin at the beginning, the sound of Malcolm’s voice in my head as I open my mouth to speak.

Malcolm had a theory. “Have you ever heard of the Great Forgetting?” he asked us one morning. “It’s my own term, you understand, and it’s just a notion, but sometimes it seems to me as if something must have happened. A cataclysm of sorts. I haven’t been able to determine when or why, but I’ve looked into it as much as I can, talked to people. There’s evidence, I think, that over the course of a very short time—and it might have been only hours—people, whole cities, disappeared, and no one realized anything had changed. There are things in these books,” he pointed at the shelves above the bunks, “references to places no one seems to know about, talk of technologies that seem vaguely familiar, as if I come from that place, arrived here, marooned in an eternal present, struggling with memories I can’t remember.”

Word gets out that I am reading an unapproved text to my class more quickly than I would have thought possible. Acting on a sense of wariness, I have taken the precaution of leaving the book in a safe place. I am in the middle of my lunch when I am summoned to the admin office. My colleagues are careful not to look at me as I leave the staff room, my sandwich half-eaten, a stack of papers half-marked. I expect to be grilled by my head or even the district superintendent, fellow professionals who understand the tenets of education. Instead, I find Allen waiting for me. I am surprised at first, but then not so surprised.

He is angry, not simply as an official, but on a personal level. “Who are you?” he asks, his unspoken question hanging between us—“And who is my wife?” My act of conscience has compromised him and his family. Such

was not my intent, but I can see how it might lead to unpleasant questions for him. He leans forward. We are sitting at a small table. “What, Thomas, are we going to do with you?” My disappearance will go unnoticed, just another one of the faceless dead discovered in a ditch. “You have put me in a very awkward position.” He taps his fingers on the desk, rapidly as if marking a line he cannot cross. “If you turn that book over to me right now, we might be able to work something out.”

My reply, good citizen that I am in every other way, surprises even me.