

The Other Side of the Bridge

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Extract

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Prologue

THERE WAS a summer back when they were kids, when Arthur Dunn was thirteen or fourteen and his brother Jake was eight or nine, when for weeks on end Jake pestered Arthur to play the game he called knives. Jake had a great collection of knives at the time, everything from fancy little Swiss Army jack-knives with dozens of attachments to a big sleek hunting knife with a runnel down one side for blood. It was the hunting knife that was to be used in the game because according to Jake it was the best for throwing.

'Just once, OK?' Jake would say, dancing about barefoot in the dust of the farmyard, tossing the knife from hand to hand like a juggler, leaping back quickly if it decided to fall blade first. 'Come on, just once. It'll only take a *minute*.'

'I'm busy,' Arthur would say, and carry on with whatever task his father had set him to. It was the summer holidays and the list of tasks was unending, but it was better than going to school.

'Come on,' Jake would say. 'Come *on*. You'll *love* it! It's a really good game. Come *on!*'

'I gotta fix this hinge.'

Jake had explained the rules of the knife game to him and it was crazy. You stood at attention facing each other, about six feet apart, and took turns throwing the knife into the ground as close as possible to your opponent's naked foot. You had to be barefoot, Jake explained, or there would be no point to the game. Wherever the knife landed, your opponent had to move his foot alongside it. The idea was to make him do the splits bit by bit, as slowly as possible. The more throws the better. The smaller the distance between the still-vibrating steel and the outer edge of your brother's foot, the better. Nuts.

But in the end, as they had both known he would, Jake wore Arthur down. That was Jake's speciality – wearing people down.

It was a warm evening in July, the end of a long hot day out in the fields, and Arthur was sitting on the back step doing nothing, which was always a mistake. Jake appeared around the corner of the house and saw him, and his eyes started to shine. Jake had dark blue eyes in a pale triangular face and hair the colour of wheat. In build he was slight and reedy ('frail' was the word their mother used) and already good-looking, though not as good-looking as he would be later. Arthur, five years older, was big and slow and heavy, with sloping shoulders and a neck like an ox.

Jake had the knife on him, of course. He always did; he carried it around in its own special sheath with its own special belt-loop, so as to be ready for anything. He started badgering Arthur right away and eventually Arthur gave in just to get it over with.

'Once, OK?' Arthur said. '*Once*. I play it once, now, and you never ask me again. Promise.'

'OK OK I promise! Let's go.'

And so it was that on that warm July evening when he was thirteen or fourteen years old – at any rate plenty old enough to know better – Arthur found himself standing behind the line his little brother had drawn in the dust, waiting to have a knife thrown at his bare and vulnerable feet. The dust felt hot, warmer than the air, and soft as talcum powder. It puffed up between his toes every time he took a step and turned them a pale and ghostly grey. Arthur's feet were broad and meaty with red raw patches from his heavy farm boots. Jake's feet were long and thin, delicate and blue-veined. Jake didn't wear farm boots much. He was considered by their mother to be too young for farm labour, although Arthur hadn't been too young at the same age.

Jake had first throw, by virtue of it being his game and his knife. 'Stand at attention,' he said. His eyes were fixed on Arthur's left foot and he spoke in a hushed voice. He had a great feeling for the drama of the moment, had Jake. 'Keep your feet together. Don't move them, no matter what.'

He took the knife by the blade and began swinging it loosely

between finger and thumb. His forefinger rested easily in the blood runnel. He seemed scarcely to be holding the knife at all. Arthur watched the blade. In spite of himself, he felt his left foot curl inwards.

'Keep it still,' Jake said. 'I'm warning you.'

Arthur forced his foot to lie flat. The thought came into his mind – not drifting gently in but appearing suddenly, fully formed, like a cold hard round little pebble – that Jake hated him. The thought had never occurred to him before but suddenly, there it was. Though he couldn't imagine a reason. Surely he was the one who should have done the hating.

The knife swung for a minute more, and then, in one swift graceful movement, Jake lifted his arm and threw, and the blade circled, drawing swift shining arcs in the air, and then buried itself deeply in the ground a couple of inches from the outside edge of Arthur's foot. A beautiful throw.

Jake's eyes left the ground and he grinned at Arthur. 'That's one,' he said. 'Your turn. Move your foot out to the knife.'

Arthur moved his foot outwards to the edge of the knife and drew the blade from the ground. The skin on the top of his left foot was stinging, though nothing had touched it. He straightened up. Jake stood facing him, still grinning, arms at his sides, feet together. Eyes bright. Excited, but without fear. Without fear because – and Arthur saw this suddenly too – Jake knew that Arthur would never risk throwing really close.

Arthur imagined his mother's face if he were to prove Jake wrong and slice off his toe. He imagined what his father would do to him if he were even to catch him playing this stupid game. He couldn't think how he'd allowed Jake to persuade him. He must have been mad.

'Come *on*,' Jake said. 'Come on come on come *on*! Close as you can!'

Arthur held the knife by the blade, as Jake had done, but it was hard to relax his fingers enough to let it swing. He'd thrown a knife before and he wasn't too bad a shot – in fact a few years back he and his friend Carl Luntz from the next farm had painted a target on the wall of the Luntzes' hay barn and held competitions, which Arthur usually won – but the outcome had never mattered. Now, the chance

that he would hit that narrow blue-veined foot seemed overwhelmingly high. And then, all at once, he saw the answer – so obvious that only someone as dim-witted as he must surely be wouldn't have seen it earlier. Throw wide. Not so wide that Jake would guess that he was doing it deliberately, but wide enough to bring the game to a safe and rapid close. Make Jake do the splits in three or four steps. Jake would jeer but he was going to jeer anyway, and the game would be over, and Jake would have to leave him alone.

Arthur felt his muscles start to relax. The knife swung more easily. He took a deep breath and threw.

The knife circled clumsily once in the air and then landed on its side eighteen inches or so from Jake's foot.

Jake said, 'That's pathetic. Take it again. It's gotta stick in the ground or it doesn't count.'

Arthur picked up the knife, swung again, and threw, more confident now, and this time the knife embedded itself in the ground ten inches from Jake's little toe.

Jake made a sound of disgust. He moved his foot out to the blade and picked it up. He looked disappointed and pitying, which was fine by Arthur.

'OK,' Jake said. 'My turn.'

He took the knife by the blade and swung it back and forth, looking briefly at Arthur, and when their eyes met there was a slight pause – just a fraction of a second – during which the knife hesitated in its lazy swing and then picked up its rhythm again. Thinking back on it afterwards, Arthur was never able to decide whether there was any significance in that pause – whether in that instant of eye contact Jake had seen into his mind and guessed what he intended to do.

At the time he didn't think anything, because there was no time to think. Jake lifted the knife with the same swift movement as before and threw it, but harder than before, and faster, so that it was only a shining blur as it spun through the air. Arthur found himself staring down at the knife embedded in his foot. There was a surreal split second before the blood started to well up and then up it came, dark and thick as syrup.

Arthur looked at Jake and saw that he was staring at the knife. His

expression was one of surprise, and this was something that Arthur wondered about later too. Was Jake surprised because he had never considered the possibility that he might be a less than perfect shot? Did he have that much confidence in himself, that little self-doubt?

Or was he merely surprised at how easy it was to give in to an impulse, and carry through the thought that lay in your mind? Simply to do whatever you wanted to do, and damn the consequences.

One

Fire Fighters Battle Bush Fire

Lost Bear Hunter Located by Plane: In Bush 40 Hours

Temiskaming Speaker, May 1957

ON A small farm about two miles outside Struan there lived a beautiful woman. She was tall and willowy with a lot of fair hair which she drew back into a thick plait and tied with whatever came to hand – a bit of frayed ribbon, an elastic band, an old piece of string. On Sundays she rolled it into a shining ball at the nape of her neck and fastened it somehow so that it wouldn't fall down during church. Her name was Laura Dunn. Laura, her own name, soft and beautiful like she was; Dunn, her husband's name, solid and lumpen like her husband. Arthur Dunn was a farmer, a big, heavy-set man with a neck at least twice the width of his wife's, and to Ian, sitting with his parents three pews behind, he looked about as exciting as dishwater.

Ian had first noticed Laura Dunn when he was fourteen – she must have been around all his life but that was the year he became aware of her. She would have been about thirty at the time. She and Arthur had three children, or possibly four. Ian wasn't sure – he'd never paid any attention to the children.

For a year he made do with watching her in church on Sundays – the Dunns came into town for church every Sunday without fail. Then, when he was fifteen, Ian's father said that he should get a job working Saturdays and holidays and start saving up for his further education, the theory being that you appreciated things more if you'd helped to pay for them yourself. Ian couldn't recall anyone asking him if he wanted more education – it was another of the many assumptions people made about his life – but in this particular case he didn't argue. He got on his bike and cycled out to the Dunns' farm.

The farm was an oddity in the Struan area because Arthur Dunn still worked his land with horses. It wasn't because he couldn't afford a tractor – the farm was prosperous enough – and it wasn't through any religious convictions like the Mennonites farther south. When asked about it Arthur would study the ground thoughtfully, as if the question had never occurred to him before, and then say that he guessed he liked horses. No one bought that explanation, though. They all believed that Arthur had been put off tractors years earlier, when his father got one and drove it down to the lower forty where he rolled it into a ditch and killed himself, all within two hours of its arrival on the farm. Even the youngest and least intelligent of the plough horses would have known better than to fall into a ditch. The day after the funeral Arthur got rid of the tractor and harnessed up the team again and he'd been plodding along behind them ever since.

He was out in the fields when Ian cycled up to the farm. Ian saw him, off in the distance, being towed along by two great heavy-footed animals like a picture postcard of a time gone by. Ian leaned his bike up against the pump, which he guessed would only be used to fill the water trough – all but the most remote farms in the area had running water, and electricity too; they'd been connected up to the grid two years ago, when the power lines were run in for the sawmill.

Ian picked his way between the chickens to the back door. There was a front door on the other side of the house but he figured no one ever used it. It would lead into the sitting room, where probably no one ever sat, whereas the back door led into the kitchen, which was where life would be lived. He could hear Laura Dunn talking as he climbed the three steps to the door. The inner door was open, letting the sound of voices out, but the screen door was closed, making it difficult to see in. She was scolding one of the kids, by the sound of it, though Ian couldn't make out the words because a baby was crying. Her voice wasn't sharp and sarcastic, as Ian's mother's voice tended to be when she was annoyed about something. It was exasperated, but still gentle and light, or so it seemed to Ian.

There was a lull in the baby's crying and Ian, standing on the top step with his hand lifted, ready to knock on the door, heard Laura Dunn say, 'Well for goodness' sake, Carter, couldn't you *share* it?

Couldn't you let her have a *turn*?' And a boy's voice said, 'She never shares *hers*!' And a little girl's voice wailed, 'I do *so*!' and the baby started to howl again. There was the sound of a chair being scuffed along the floor and then the screen door was flung open, nearly knocking Ian off the steps, and a boy charged out. He gave Ian a startled, angry glance before jumping off the step and disappearing around the side of the house. He looked about eleven or twelve and had the sort of face, Ian thought, that made you want to hit him. The sullen, sulky face of a kid who thinks the world's against him.

The screen door slammed closed again and Laura Dunn appeared behind it. She gave a start when she saw Ian standing there and said, 'Oh! Oh – hello! It's Ian, isn't it? Dr Christopherson's son?'

'Yes,' Ian said. 'Um, yes – um, I've come to talk to Mr Dunn . . . about a job. I wondered if he'd be taking on anyone this summer. I mean, full time this summer, but maybe Saturdays right away, and then full time once the holidays start?'

He felt himself flushing. He was gabbling, because she was so near, just inches away behind the screen door, and she was looking at him, directly and only at him, with those wonderful soft eyes, eyes which he'd noticed always seemed shadowed as if they contained deep, unfathomable mysteries, or – the possibility occurred to him now, what with the crying of the baby and the behaviour of the kids – as if she were tired all the time.

'Oh,' she said. 'Oh, well yes, I'm sure he'd be glad of some help. Just a minute, Ian – I'll come out. Just a minute.'

She disappeared. Ian heard her say something to somebody and then she reappeared with a baby in her arms. A little girl was behind her, but she shrank back when she saw Ian standing there. He moved down off the steps and Laura came out, bouncing the baby gently up and down on her hip. The baby was fat and sexless, like all babies, and had round, unconvincing tears rolling down its cheeks. It and Ian looked at each other and the baby gave a sort of snort as if it didn't think much of what it saw, and put its thumb in its mouth.

'There now,' Laura said, brushing the top of its head with her lips. 'That's better. This is Ian. Say hello to Ian.'

'Hi,' Ian said. He smiled warily at the baby. It stared back and then

curled up and buried its face in the folds of Laura's dress, its free hand clutching possessively at her breast. Ian quickly looked down at his feet.

'The thing is, you'll really need to speak to Arthur,' Laura was saying. 'He's ploughing at the moment.' She nodded in the direction of the picture-postcard view of her husband. 'If you'd like to go out and have a word with him – just along that track there.' She looked doubtfully at Ian's bike. 'Only I think you'd be better to walk. The horses cut up the path a bit . . . But I'm sure he'll be pleased . . . it's so hard to get help. Men nowadays don't know how to deal with horses, you see.' She smiled at him. 'But maybe you like them. Is that why you've come?'

'Well, sort of,' Ian said. He hadn't given the work of the farm – the actual job he was applying for – a thought. Arthur Dunn could have hitched his plough to a moose for all he cared. At the moment all his attention was taken up with trying not to look at the baby, which had now, unbelievably, wormed its hand inside its mother's dress and was tugging at what it found in there, all the while making fretful smacking noises with its lips.

Laura gently disengaged the small hand. 'Shush,' she said to the baby. She smiled at Ian again, seeming not to notice his embarrassment. 'Come back and let me know what he says, all right?'

Ian nodded, and turned, his mind filled to the brim with the nearness of her, her overwhelming *presence*, and made his way down the muddy track to where Arthur Dunn was plodding up and down the furrows behind his horses. Arthur Dunn, so solid, so dull, so obviously unworthy of such a wife. Arthur Dunn, who, when he saw Ian approaching, halted his team and came across the field to meet him, and said yeah, sure, he could use a hand, and would Ian like to start this coming Saturday?

*

Ian's grandfather had been Struan's first resident doctor and, when he'd answered the Doctor Wanted advertisement they'd put in a Toronto medical journal, the grateful townspeople built him a house just a block west of Main Street, a couple of hundred yards from the

lake. It was a handsome wooden structure, white-painted and green-trimmed, with lawns on all four sides and a white picket fence surrounding the lawns. In the early days there was a neat white stable for the horse and buggy twenty yards from the house. Later the first Dr Christopherson acquired a Buick roadster, which became as much a part of him as his old black leather medical bag, and a garage was added beside the stable. He kept the horse for use in winter, when the back roads around Struan were impassable by anything except a sled. His son, the present Dr Christopherson (who also drove a Buick, though his was the sedan), was sometimes heard lamenting the absence of the sled even now, given the state of the town's one and only snowplough.

As much as anything else, the building of the house had been a statement of faith on the part of the people of Struan. Until then they'd had to go to New Liskeard if they required a doctor, and if you needed medical help badly enough to make the journey to New Liskeard, the odds were that you were in no state to make the journey. Getting their own doctor was a sign that the town had arrived. In the brief interval between applying the final coat of paint and the arrival of Dr Christopherson, the people of Struan found excuses to walk past the house and admire it. You looked at that house and you thought, this is no fly-by-night northern settlement sprung up around a sawmill; any town that can afford to build its doctor a house like this is here to stay.

Ian was aware of most of this personal and civic history, and as far as he was concerned his grandfather must have been raving mad. Imagine voluntarily leaving a city like Toronto to come to a hick town like Struan. And though you could excuse his grandfather's mistake on the grounds of ignorance – he couldn't have had any real idea what he was coming to – there was no such excuse for Ian's father. He had been born and brought up in Struan, and had then escaped, but after living in Toronto for almost a decade while he took his medical degree and worked in the Sick Children's Hospital, he had *returned to Struan* to take over his father's practice. Ian couldn't understand it. Why would anyone do such a thing? What was Struan, apart from a sawmill? A sorry bunch of stores

lined up along a dusty main street, with nothing in them anyone would want to buy. A couple of churches. The Hudson's Bay Company. A post office. A bank. Harper's Restaurant. Ben's Bar. A hotel – because, incredibly, some people chose to come to Struan for their vacations – and a little clutch of holiday cottages down by the lake. The lake was the town's only asset, in Ian's opinion. It was large – fifty miles long, north to south, and almost twenty miles across – and deep, and very clear, surrounded on all sides by low granite hills studded with spruce and wind-blasted pines. Its shore was so ragged with bays and inlets and islands that you could spend your life exploring and never find half of them. When Ian dreamed of leaving the town, which he did all the time nowadays, the thought of leaving the lake was the only thing that bothered him. The lake and Laura Dunn.

He parked his bike up against the veranda of the house, climbed the wide wooden steps to the porch and went in. The door to his father's office was closed and he could hear voices behind it, but the waiting room was empty, so Ian sat down on one of the dozen or so battered old chairs lining the walls and flicked through a two-year-old copy of *Reader's Digest* while he thought about Laura Dunn. The way strands of her hair escaped from their elastic band and drifted around her face. Those shadowed eyes. Her breasts. He'd noticed – he couldn't help noticing – that on the front of her dress there had been two wet circles where her breasts had leaked milk.

The door to the office opened and Ted Pickett, owner of Pickett's Hardware, came out with his arm in a sling. He nodded at Ian and grimaced and Ian grimaced back. Patients entered the house by a side door but both the office and the waiting room were right off the hall, so all his life he'd been used to seeing people going in and out in varying degrees of anguish, and he'd got his responses down pat.

'He doesn't think it's broken,' Ted Pickett said.

'That's lucky,' Ian said.

'He thinks it's just sprained. Hurts like hell though.'

Ian nodded sympathetically. 'Did you fall off the ladder?' There was a ladder on wheels in the hardware store that Mr Pickett scooted

around on, reaching for nails or nuts or brackets or hinges, an accident waiting to happen.

'Yeah,' Mr Pickett said, looking surprised. 'How did you know?'

'I just . . . kind of . . . wondered,' Ian said politely.

When Mr Pickett left he knocked on his father's door and went in.

'I've got a job,' he said. His father had his back to him. He was rolling bandages and placing them neatly back in their drawer. His desk was littered with papers – patients' notes, medical journals, bills – but the tools of his trade were always properly put away.

'That was quick,' he said.

'Arthur Dunn's farm,' Ian said. 'He said I could start Saturday.'

His father turned around and took off his glasses and blinked at him. 'Arthur Dunn's farm?'

'Yes, you know . . . doing . . . farm work.'

'Farm work.' His father nodded vaguely, as if trying to imagine it.

'I thought I'd like something outdoors,' Ian said.

Dr Christopherson put his glasses back on and looked out of the window. It had just started to rain. 'Yes,' he said doubtfully. 'Well . . . if that's what you want. Arthur's a nice fellow.' He looked dubiously at Ian. 'It'll be hard work, you know.'

'I know,' Ian said.

'Did you see the horses?'

'Yes.'

'Magnificent animals.'

'Yes,' Ian said, though he had barely noticed them. He and his father smiled at each other, glad to be in agreement. They were usually in agreement, unlike Ian and his mother.

Next he went and told his mother, who was watching *I Love Lucy* in the living room. Television had finally – finally! – reached Struan a couple of months earlier, proof, if more were needed, of how backward things were up here. Ian's mother had disapproved of it at first, but now she watched it more than he did. In fact, just lately she seemed to watch it all the time. She was supposed to be in with his father – she was his nurse – but apart from the odd emergency, Ian hadn't seen her in the office for weeks.

'Mum?' he said, standing in the doorway. She was in one of her

absent moods – he could tell even though he couldn't see her face. She had two moods nowadays, absent or annoyed, and whichever one she was in he invariably found he preferred the other.

'Mum?' he said again. She turned her head a few degrees, not taking her eyes off the screen.

'I've got a job,' Ian said.

She turned a little more and met his eyes, and he saw the glazed look fade as she focused on him.

'What was that?' she said.

'I said I've got a job.'

'Oh,' she said. She smiled at him. 'That's good.' She turned back to the television. Ian waited a minute but there was no further response, so he went into the kitchen to get a reaction from Mrs Tuttle instead. She was breading chicken pieces for supper, dipping each piece in a bowl of beaten egg and then slapping it back and forth in a dish of breadcrumbs.

'I've got a job, Mrs Tuttle,' Ian said.

'Have you now?' she said, placing a breaded breast down on the baking tray and taking a pale, slippery-looking chicken leg from the hacked-up carcass on the chopping board. 'That's exciting. What is it?'

'Helping Mr Dunn on his farm.'

She paused, then turned her head to look at him. Her glasses were splattered with the day's cooking – a dusting of flour from the tea-biscuits, a little smear of butter, a scattering of crumbs, even what looked to be a shred of carrot peel. 'Goodness!' she said, ducking her head in order to look over the top of them. 'Whatever did you want a job like that for?' Which was what he'd expected her to say, and therefore satisfying, in its way, so he smiled at her and left.

His mother was still in front of the television when he passed the living-room door on his way upstairs; *I Love Lucy* had finished and she was watching a programme in French. It struck Ian as strange, because she didn't speak French. He wondered if anyone else's mother watched television during the day. It was hard to know. The mothers of most of his friends were farmers' wives and didn't have time to sit down, much less watch TV. But his mother had never been

like other people's mothers. She didn't come from the North – she was an outsider, from Vancouver originally. She wore smart shoes with heels, even around the house, and skirts with sweaters that matched, and had her hair set in loose waves instead of tight little corkscrews like the mothers of his friends. In the evenings, she and Ian and his father ate formally in the dining room, instead of at the kitchen table. They used napkins – proper white linen ones, washed and starched and ironed by Mrs Tuttle every Monday. Ian suspected that no one else in the whole of Struan would have the first idea what to do with a napkin.

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One good thing about his mother's moods of late was that suppers were fairly brief and painless affairs. In the past they'd been hard work because she would insist on having what she called a 'civilized conversation' while they ate. That was what evening meals were for, according to her – they were for families to get together and exchange views and experiences in a pleasant environment. Maybe that would have been OK if he'd had half a dozen brothers or sisters to share the burden of thinking up something to say, night after night, but there was only him. He didn't see why they couldn't read at the table. He would have preferred it and he knew his father would as well – you could tell by the wistful, unfocused look in his eyes. He was longing to immerse himself in an article on the renewed threat of polio in rural areas or the latest wonder drug or a new type of surgical dressing that didn't stick to wounds. In Ian's case it would be fishing magazines: a fifty-five-pound muskie caught down in French River, the pros and cons of trolling versus casting, the last word in fishing tackle. He pictured himself and his father, shoulders hunched, chins six inches from their plates, absently forking in their dinners, happily absorbed in the printed word. His mother could look at one of her Eaton's catalogues. Why not? It would be much more relaxed and at least as companionable as the performance they had to go through every night in the name of family togetherness.

But in the last little while she seemed to have lost interest in conversation, civilized or not. Sometimes she still made a half-hearted

attempt to get things rolling by saying something like, 'So, what has everybody been doing today?' but this evening she didn't even do that. The three of them ate more or less in silence (he and his father both gazing into the middle distance as they chewed, thinking about the things they would have liked to be reading) and then they all excused themselves from the table and went their separate ways.

Ian got on his bike and set off for the reserve. It had rained hard for ten minutes or so while they were eating but now it had cleared and the evening air was cool and fresh. The clouds were drifting away out over the lake and the pale sky shone in the puddles at the sides of the road. Main Street – the only road out of town – was deserted. The stores closed promptly at half-past five and the entire population of Struan went home for supper. That was one of the things about the town that exasperated Ian – the way it died in the evenings. The only places that stayed open were Harper's, which served meals until half-past six – seven o'clock on Fridays – and Ben's. Ben's Bar was the nearest thing Struan had to a den of iniquity. Every Saturday night it filled up with men from the logging camp upriver who came in to town to spend their week's wages on liquor. They'd get completely hammered, cause Sergeant Moynihan and Ian's father between them no end of trouble, and then go back to the camp and the town would settle back into its usual dull predictable self for another week.

For many years Ian hadn't given the town a thought, because it was all he knew, but the previous summer his mother had taken him to Toronto for a week and his eyes had been opened. What had impressed him most had not been the size of the city or the noise or even the buildings – he'd been expecting all of that. What had struck him most forcibly was the fact that when he walked down the street he hadn't known anyone. Thousands upon thousands of strangers. He'd found it amazing. Liberating! Contrast it with Struan, where everyone had known everyone else since the day they were born. And it was worse for him than it was for most people because of his father being public property – 'our doctor', people called him – and having his office at home. Ian had noticed that they didn't call his mother 'our nurse' though. They called her Mrs Christopherson and

left it at that. People were a little bit afraid of her – he knew that. She could be sharp. She could say, ‘The doctor is a busy man, Mrs Shultz. Use your common sense.’

But they seemed to claim Ian’s father as their own, and his home too, and maybe – in the past year or so he had started to feel this – even Ian himself. Virtually everyone in Struan had sat in his father’s waiting room at one time or another, waiting to have their sore throats looked at or bits of their fingers sewn back on, and while they sat they had watched Ian grow up. Many of the older ones must have watched his father grow up as well; they would have seen him crawling around on the same wooden floorboards that Ian crawled around on, getting bigger by the day and gradually turning into their doctor. Ian was starting to suspect that they thought of him in the same way. Increasingly he got the feeling that people looked at him and automatically thought, Here comes another one. The next Dr Christopherson.

In fact the previous week old Mr Johnson, who’d had his toes shot off forty years ago at the Somme and shuffled along with the help of two sticks, had stopped him in the street and asked if he could have ‘more of them pills’. Ian had said, ‘I think you should talk to my dad, Mr Johnson,’ and the old man looked bewildered. He stood in the middle of the road, blinking up at Ian, his mouth hanging open with the effort of trying to make sense of what he was saying. Ian thought, Oh, come on! I’m only fifteen! But everyone said he looked just like his father, the same big-boned, loose-knit Scandinavian frame, the same pale hair. Maybe if your eyesight was poor it was hard to tell the difference. In the end he took pity on the old man and guided him back onto the sidewalk before he got flattened by a logging truck, and said he’d have a word with his father about the pills.

But the incident irritated him. In Mr Johnson’s case it might have been just a matter of confusion and poor eyesight, but it brought home to him the assumption – unspoken, but suddenly clear – that he would follow in his father’s and grandfather’s footsteps. As if he had no say in the matter, no ideas of his own.

He imagined living in Toronto, or Vancouver or New York. Think of the freedom. You could be whoever you wanted to be. No

one expecting anything of you, no one knowing who your parents were, no one caring if you were a brain surgeon or a bum. Only wherever he ended up, there would need to be a lake or at least a river nearby. He couldn't live far from the water.

He cycled down Main Street to the outskirts of Struan, which took all of three minutes, and then out along the road to the Ojibway reserve, which took a further five. The reserve was spread along the shore of a bay, with a point of land jutting out into the lake between it and Struan, a symbolic barrier as well as a geographic one. The road ran out of pavement half a mile before it reached the reserve, and the land itself was so low it would grow nothing but bulrushes and bugs – black flies by the million in early summer, then mosquitoes big enough to pick you up and carry you away. The reserve store, though, where Pete Corbiere lived, was situated right down by the lake, which meant it got the benefit of the wind and was less buggy than the rest. Pete's grandfather was sitting on the steps when Ian arrived, smoking and staring off into the woods. He had scars on his fingers from letting cigarettes burn down too far.

'Hi,' Ian said, leaning his bike against a tree.

Mr Corbiere nodded in greeting.

'You look busy,' Ian said. He liked the old man but was never sure how to approach him, and several years ago had settled on an uneasy jocularity that he now wasn't happy with but couldn't seem to stop.

Mr Corbiere nodded again. 'Workin' my butt off,' he agreed. 'Your rod's inside. Put it there to be safe. Kids were playin' with it.'

'Oh,' Ian said. 'Thanks.'

'How's your dad?'

'He's fine, thanks, Mr Corbiere.' He looked around for some sign of Pete. 'Is Pete out already?'

The old man jerked his head towards the lake.

'Thanks,' Ian said again. 'Where's the rod?'

'Pete's room.'

Ian stepped delicately around Mr Corbiere's broad rump and went up the steps into the store. It was dark and smelled of mould. A gigantic chest freezer hummed to itself against one wall. At certain times of year the freezer was full of game – rabbits, sometimes still

unskinned, hunks of venison, ducks, geese, once a whole beaver, its tail stretched out flat. Beside the huge freezer was a smaller one full of fish, and beside that a smaller one still, given over to ice cream and popsicles. Along the back wall there were a few shelves with tins on them – Heinz beans, tinned peaches, Irish stew. On a bottom shelf were three loaves of packaged sliced bread. At the other end of the room were hardware items – matches, fish-hooks, batteries, snare wire, fly swatters, axes, woollen socks. No beaded moccasins. Beaded moccasins were sold by the roadside at rustic wooden trading posts, along with quill boxes and miniature birch-bark canoes and totem poles six inches high. The trading posts themselves were advertised by large billboards portraying stern-looking Indian chiefs in warpaint and full headdress. The Ojibway had never gone in for headdresses and the totem poles belonged three thousand miles away on the west coast of Canada, but the tourists liked them so the band went along with it. ‘Wouldn’t want to disappoint anybody,’ as the old man said.

Ian pushed aside a row of plastic strips hanging in a doorway and went into the back of the store. Pete and his grandfather lived here. The store was owned by a Scotsman – according to Ian’s father, every reserve in the country had a store owned by a Scotsman – who let Pete and his grandfather live there in return for minding the store. There were two bedrooms, a bathroom and a kitchen that consisted of a sink and a stove at one end of the hallway. Pete’s room was small and square and stupendously untidy – clothes and gum wrappers and schoolbooks and snowshoes not put away since March and girlie magazines left lying open as if the old man wouldn’t mind, which he probably didn’t. Ian’s fishing rod was standing in a corner, looking new and shiny and very out of place. He retrieved it and went back outside. Mr Corbiere had started on another cigarette. Ian stepped past him.

‘Thanks, Mr Corbiere.’

‘Catch a big one.’

Ian grinned. ‘I’ll try.’

Once he got down to the shore it took him only a few seconds to spot the *Queen Mary*. She was across the bay by the sandbar at the entrance to the river – a good spot for pike, especially in the spring.

By some trick of the light the old rowboat seemed to be hovering just above the surface of the water, as if it were a ghost ship or something out of a dream. He watched it for a moment, and Pete's motionless shape within it. The evening was very still and the water gleamed a dull silver.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled. The sound flew out across the water and the figure in the boat moved, and lifted a hand in acknowledgement. Then there was a distant putputput from the little outboard and the boat turned towards him. Ian walked out to the end of the dock.

'How's it going?' he said when Pete was close enough. The smell of gasoline and fish rose up from the boat, luring him in.

'So-so,' Pete said.

The boat sidled up alongside the dock and Ian jumped in, avoiding half a dozen glistening trout in the bottom. Pete pushed off and headed back across the bay. When he reached the sandbar he cut the engine. The smooth swells of their wake caught up with them, rocked the boat gently and moved on.

'I can't stay long,' Ian said absently, picking through the tackle box for a suitable lure. 'I should study. We've got that biology test tomorrow.'

Pete stuck a mayfly on his hook and dropped it over the side of the boat. He said, 'You got your priorities wrong, man.'

'I know, I know.' The tackle box was in a similar state to Pete's bedroom, lures and weights and hooks and bits of fur and feathers all over the place, with the odd dead bug tossed in for good measure.

'It could be a hundred years,' Pete said, giving his line a sharp jerk and hauling in a perch, 'maybe two hundred, before you get another night as perfect as this for fishing. But there will always, always, be another test.'

'Too damned true,' Ian said. He was still going to have to go back in time to have a look at the textbook though. He and Pete shared the same policy, developed and fine-tuned over the years, of working just hard enough to keep out of trouble, but in Ian's case, being the doctor's son, the teachers' expectations of him were irritatingly high.

They fished. Pete used a jigger – a stick with fishing line attached

and minnows or bugs for bait, or sometimes just a weighted hook with a bit of deer fur on it. Ian used his fishing rod, which was a good one, a birthday present from his parents. If tonight was like other nights, and it would be, he would catch one fish to every four or five caught by Pete. If they swapped equipment, Pete would continue to pull them in and Ian would continue to get next to nothing. It was a fact of life and he had accepted it long ago.

They'd met through fishing – Ian wasn't sure if he actually remembered it or if his father had told him the story at some later date. It was before they'd started school, so they would have been about four or five. Ian's father had been teaching him how to fish and had taken him around to Slow River Bay, and over by the sandbar at the mouth of the river they'd seen another boat, which had turned out to contain Pete and his grandfather, also in the middle of a fishing lesson. Ian's father knew Pete's grandfather the same way he knew everybody within a radius of a hundred miles, and he drifted over to say hi, and the two men started talking. Pete and Ian had eyed each other up and down, their fishing lines hanging in the water, and while they were busy doing that both lines were grabbed. There had been a few minutes of chaos – Ian did remember that – spray flying, boats rocking wildly, both men trying to help without looking as if they were helping, and when the fish were finally landed and held up to be admired, Pete's was a fourteen-inch pike and Ian's was a four-inch sunfish. Neither boy had been able to figure out why the two men laughed so hard – Pete's grandfather had tears running down his cheeks. But the boys held up their catches triumphantly, grinning at each other across the gunwales of the boats, two skinny kids with their bellies sticking out, fishermen for life. The fact that from then on Pete had continued to pull in the big ones and Ian had continued not to was just one of those things.

Ian reeled in his line, checked the lure and stood up to cast again. He whipped the rod back and forth, listening to the hiss of the reel as the line played out, and let it fly. The lure sailed out over the water and then dropped down, light as a raindrop. Not a bad cast. He began slowly reeling it in, the line drawing a delicate V-shape across the surface of the water.