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**Opening Extract from...**

# **The Guardians**

Written by Andrew Pyper

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## MEMORY DIARY

### *Entry No. 1*

We watched them come.

A lone police cruiser at first. The officer's shirt straining against the bulge around his waist. A look of practised boredom on his face, a pantomime of seen-it-all masculinity performed without an audience. We were the only ones who saw him walk, pigeon-toed, into the house. The only ones who knew he wouldn't be bored for long.

When he came out he wasn't wearing his cap anymore. His thin hair, grey but darkened with sweat, was a greasy sculpture of indecision, pointing in several directions at once. (Later, we wondered about the cap. Had it fallen off in the first jolt of shock? Had he removed it himself in a reflex of some sort? A show of respect?)

He tumbled into the car and radioed in. We tried to read his lips, but couldn't really see his face through the willow boughs, swaying reflections over the windshield. Was there a numbered code for this? Or was he forced to describe what he'd seen? Did he recognize, even in the shadows that must have left him blind after entering from the bright outside, who they were? However he put it, it would have been hard for anyone to believe. We weren't wholly convinced ourselves. And we knew it was true.

Soon, two more cruisers pulled up. An ambulance. A

fire truck, though there was no fire. Some of the men went inside, but most did not. A scene of grimly loitering uniforms, sipping coffee from the Styrofoam cups they brought with them. The last of history's union-protected, on-the-job smokers flicking their butts into the street in undeclared competition.

There was nothing for most of them to do, but they stayed anyway. An only partly hidden excitement in the way they scuffed their shoes over the cracked sidewalk and rested their hands on their belts, knuckling the handles of holstered guns. It was a small town. You didn't get this sort of thing too often. You didn't get it ever.

We stood together, watching. Unseen behind the curtains in the front room of the McAuliffe house across the way. Our noses grazing the diaphanous material that smelled of recently burned bacon and, deeper still, a succession of dinners scooped out of the deep fryer. When the paramedics and bearded man in a suit who must have been the coroner finally emerged from the house with the black bags laid out on gurneys—one, and then the smaller other—we held our breaths. A gulp of French fry, onion ring and chicken finger that, to this day, is the taste of loss.

We remember all this, though still not everything.

And some of the things we remember may not have happened at all.

[ 1 ]

THE CALL COMES in the middle of the night, as the worst sort do.

The phone so close I can read the numbers on its green-glowing face, see the swirled fingerprint I'd left on its message window. A simple matter of reaching and grabbing. Yet I lie still. It is my motor-facility impairment (as one of my fussily unhelpful physicians calls it) that pins me for eighteen rings before I manage to hook the receiver onto my chest.

"I don't even know what time it is. But it's late, isn't it?"

A familiar voice, faintly slurred, helium-pitched between laughter and sobs. Randy Toller. A friend since high school—a time that even Randy, on the phone, calls "a million years ago." And though it was only twenty-four years, his estimate feels more accurate.

As Randy apologizes for waking me, and blathers on about how strange he feels "doing this," I am trying to think of an understanding but firm way of saying no when he finally gets around to asking for money. He has done it before, following the unfairly lost auditions, the furniture-stealing girlfriends, the vodka-smoothed rough patches of his past tough-luck decade. But in the end Randy surprises me when he takes a rattling, effortful breath and says, "Ben's dead, Trev."

*Trev?*

This is my first, not-quite-awake thought. Nobody's called me that since high school, *including* Randy.

“How?”

“A rope,” Randy says.

“Rope?”

“Hanging. I mean, he hung himself. In his mom’s house.”

“He never went outside. Where else could he have done it?”

“I’m saying he did it in his *room*. Up in the attic where he’d sit by the window, you know, watching.”

“Did his mom find him?”

“It was a kid walking by on the street. Looked up to see if that weird McAuliffe guy was in the window as usual, and saw him swinging there.”

I’m quiet for a while after this. We both are. But there is our breath being traded back and forth down the line. Reminders that we aren’t alone in recalling the details of Ben’s room, a place we’d spent a quarter of our youth wasting our time in. Of how it would have looked with the grown-up Ben in it, attached to the oak beam that ran the length of the ceiling.

“Maybe it’s for the best,” Randy says finally.

“Take that back.”

“I didn’t—it’s just—”

“Take that stupid bullshit *back*.”

“Fine. Sorry.”

Randy has led the kind of life that has made him used to apologizing for saying the wrong thing, and the contrite tone he uses now is one I’ve heard after dozens of defaulted IOUs and nights spent sleeping on my sofa between stints in rented rooms. But then, in little more than a whisper, he says something else.

“You know it’s sort of true, Trev.”

He’s right. It is sort of true that with the news of Ben

McAuliffe's suicide there came, among a hundred other reactions, a shameful twinge of relief.

Ben was a friend of mine. Of ours. A best friend, though I hadn't seen him in years, and spoke to him only slightly more often. It's because he stayed behind, I suppose. In Grimshaw, our hometown, from which all of us but Ben had escaped the first chance we had. Or maybe it's because he was sick. Mentally ill, as even he called himself, though sarcastically, as if his mind was the *last* thing wrong with him. This would be over the phone, on the rare occasions I called. (Each time I did his mother would answer, and when I told her it was me calling her voice would rise an octave in the false hope that a good chat with an old friend might lift the dark spell that had been cast on her son.) When we spoke, neither Ben nor I pretended we would ever see each other again. We might as well have been separated by an ocean, or an even greater barrier, as impossible to cross as the chasm between planets, as death. I had made a promise to never go back to Grimshaw, and Ben could never leave it. A pair of traps we had set for ourselves.

Despite this, we were still close. There was a love between us too. A sexless, stillborn love, yet just as fierce as the other kinds. The common but largely undocumented love between men who forged their friendship in late childhood.

But this wasn't the thing that bridged the long absence that lay between our adult lives. What connected Ben and me was a secret. A whole inbred family of secrets. Some of them so wilfully forgotten they were unknown even to ourselves.

Only after I've hung up do I notice that, for the entire time I was on the phone with Randy, my hands were still. I didn't even

have to concentrate on it, play the increasingly unwinnable game of Mind Over Muscles.

*Don't move.*

It's like hypnosis. And like hypnosis, it usually doesn't work.

*Everything's okay. Just stay where you are. Relax. Be still.*

Now, in the orange dust of city light that sneaks through the blinds, I watch as the tremor returns to my limbs. Delicate flutterings at first. Nervous and quick as a sparrow dunking its head in a puddle. An index finger that abruptly stiffens, points with alarm at the chair in the corner—and then collapses, asleep. A thumb standing in a Fonzie salute before turtling back inside a fist.

*You know what I need? A week in Bermuda.*

These were the sort of thoughts I had when the twitches showed up.

*I need to eat more whole grains.*

*I need a drink.*

The hand-jerks and finger-flicks were just the normal flaws, the software glitches the body has to work through when first booting up after a certain age. I had just turned *forty*, after all. There was a price to be paid—a small, concealable impediment to be endured for all the fun I'd had up until now. But it was nothing to worry about. It wasn't a real problem of the kind suffered by the wheelchairred souls you wish away from your line of sight in restaurants, your appetite spoiled.

But then, a few months ago, the acceptable irregularities of the body inched into something less acceptable. Something *wrong*.

I went to the doctor. Who sent me to another doctor. Who confirmed her diagnosis after a conversation with a third doctor. And then, once the doctors had that straightened out, all of



them said there was next to nothing they could do, wished me well and buggered off.

What I have, after all, is one of those inoperable, medically unsexy conditions. It has all the worst qualities of the non-fatal disease: chronic, progressive, cruelly erosive of one's "quality of life." It can go fast or slow. What's certain is that it will get worse. I could name it now but I'm not in the mood. I hate its falsely personal surnamed quality, the possessive aspect of the capital *P*. And I hate the way it doesn't kill you. Until it does.

I spoke to a therapist about it. Once.

She was nice—*seemed* nice, though this may have been only performance, an obligation included in her lawyer-like hourly fee—and was ready to see me "all the way through what's coming." But I couldn't go back. I just sat in her pleasant, fern-filled room and caught a whiff of the coconut exfoliant she'd used that morning to scrub at the liver spots on her arms and knew I would never return. She was the sort of woman in the sort of office giving off the sort of scent designed to provoke confessions. I could have trusted her. And trusting a stranger is against the rules.

(There was something else I didn't like. I didn't like how, when she asked if I had entertained any suicidal thoughts since the diagnosis and I, after a blubbery moment, admitted that I had, she offered nothing more than a businesslike smile and a tidy check mark in her notepad.)

One useful suggestion came out of our meeting, nevertheless. For the purposes of recording my thoughts so that they might be figured out later, she recommended I keep a diary chronicling the progress of my disease. Not that she used that

word. Instead, she referred to the unstoppable damage being done to me as an “experience,” as if it were a trip to Paraguay or sex with twins. And it wasn’t a journal of sickness I was to keep, but a “Life Diary,” her affirmative nods meant to show that I wasn’t dying. *Yet*. That was there too. Remember, Trevor: You’re not quite dead *yet*.

“Your Life Diary is more than a document of events,” she explained. “It can, for some of my clients, turn out to be your best friend.”

But I already have best friends. And they don’t live in my present life so much as in the past. So that’s what I’ve ended up writing down. A recollection of the winter everything changed for us. A pocket-sized journal containing horrors that surprised even me as I returned to them. And then, after the pen refused to stand still in my hand, it has become a story I tell into a Dictaphone. My voice. Sounding weaker than it does in my own ears, someone else’s voice altogether.

I call it my “Memory Diary.”

Randy offered to call Carl, but we both knew I would do it. Informing a friend that someone they’ve known all their life has died was more naturally a Trevor kind of task. Randy would be the one to score dope for a bachelor party, or scratch his key along the side of a Porsche because he took it personally, and hard, that his own odds of ever owning one were fading fast. But I was definitely better suited to be the bearer of bad tidings.

I try Carl at the last number I have for him, but the cracked voice that answers tells me he hasn’t lived there for a while. When I ask to have Carl call if he stops by, there is a pause of

what might be silent acceptance before the line goes dead. Randy has a couple of earlier numbers, and I try those too, though Carl's former roommates don't seem to know where he is now either (and refuse to give me their own names when I ask).

"Not much more we can do," Randy says when I call him back. "The guy is *gone*, Trev."

There it is again: *Trev*. A name not addressed to me in over twenty years, and then I get it twice within the last half-hour.

I had an idea, as soon as Randy told me Ben had died, that the past was about to spend an unwelcome visit in my present. Going from Trevor to Trev is something I don't like, but a nostalgic name change is going to be the least of it. Because if I'm getting on a train for Grimshaw in the morning, it's all coming back.

Heather.

The coach.

The boy.

The house.

The last of these most of all because it alone is waiting for us. Ready to see us stand on the presumed safety of weed-cracked sidewalk as we had as schoolchildren, daring each other to see who could look longest through its windows without blinking or running away.

For twenty-four years this had been Ben's job. Now it would be ours.