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Opening Extract from...

I'm Thinking of Ending Things

Written by Iain Reid

Published by Text Publishing

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PRAISE FOR *I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS*

'One of the best debut novels I've ever read…
A tight, ferocious little book, with a
persistent tenor of suspense.'
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'A road trip to the heart of creepiness.'
SJÓN, author of *The Blue Fox*

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exploration of identity, regret and longing.
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A harrowing road trip that keeps you
riveted until the final destination.'
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Library Journal

'Here are some near certainties about *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*. Number one: you're going to read it fast. Over the course of an afternoon or an evening. The momentum is unstoppable—once you start, you won't be able to stop. And two: once you race to the end and understand the significance of those final pages, you won't be able to stop thinking about it. This novel will find a spot in your heart and head, and it will live there—for days, weeks, months, or (in my case) the rest of your life. Yes. It really is that good.'

CRAIG DAVIDSON (AKA NICK CUTTER),
author of *Cataract City*

'Fuses suspense with philosophy, psychology, and horror…Will shock and chill.'
Publishers Weekly (starred review)

'Preternaturally creepy…Tightly crafted… Comes by its terror honestly, building a wall of intricately layered psychological torment.'
Kirkus Reviews (starred review)

'The construct of this book is brilliant… A dark and compelling debut novel, it is a most uncomfortable read but utterly unputdownable.'
Booklist (starred review)

I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS

Iain Reid is the author of two acclaimed memoirs, *One Bird's Choice* (winner of the 2011 CBC Bookie Award for Best Nonfiction Book of the Year) and *The Truth About Luck* (one of the *Globe and Mail*'s best books of 2013). Reid received the 2015 RBC Taylor Emerging Author award, and his comic writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*. He lives in Kingston, Ontario.

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A Novel

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To Don Reid

I'M THINKING OF ENDING THINGS

I'm thinking of ending things.

Once this thought arrives, it stays. It sticks. It lingers. It dominates. There's not much I can do about it. Trust me. It doesn't go away. It's there whether I like it or not. It's there when I eat. When I go to bed. It's there when I sleep. It's there when I wake up. It's always there. Always.

I haven't been thinking about it for long. The idea is new. But it feels old at the same time. When did it start? What if this thought wasn't conceived by me but planted in my mind, predeveloped? Is an unspoken idea unoriginal? Maybe I've actually known all along. Maybe this is how it was always going to end.

Jake once said, "Sometimes a thought is closer to truth, to reality, than an action. You can say anything, you can do anything, but you can't fake a thought."

You can't fake a thought. And this is what I'm thinking.

It worries me. It really does. Maybe I should have known how it was going to end for us. Maybe the end was written right from the beginning.

The road is mostly empty. It's quiet around here. Vacant. More so than anticipated. So much to see but not many people, not many buildings or houses. Sky. Trees. Fields. Fences. The road and its gravel shoulders.

"You want to stop for a coffee?"

"I think I'm okay," I say.

"Last chance we'll have before it becomes really farmy."

I'm visiting Jake's parents for the first time. Or I will be when we arrive. Jake. My boyfriend. He hasn't been my boyfriend for very long. It's our first trip together, our first long drive, so it's weird that I'm feeling nostalgic—about our relationship, about him, about us. I should be excited, looking forward to the first of many. But I'm not. Not at all.

"No coffee or snacks for me," I say again. "I want to be hungry for supper."

"I don't think it'll be a typical spread tonight. Mom's been tired."

"You don't think she'll mind, though, right? That I'm coming?"

"No, she'll be happy. She's happy. My folks want to meet you."

"It's all barns around here. Seriously."

I've seen more of them on this drive than I've seen in years. Maybe in my life. They all look the same. Some cows, some horses. Sheep. Fields. And barns. Such a big sky.

"There're no lights on these highways."

"Not enough traffic to warrant lighting the way," he says. "I'm sure you've noticed."

"Must get really dark at night."

"It does."

IT FEELS LIKE I'VE KNOWN Jake longer than I have. What has it been . . . a month? Six weeks, maybe seven? I should know exactly. I'll say seven weeks. We have a real connection, a rare and intense attachment. I've never experienced anything like it.

I turn in my seat toward Jake, grabbing my left leg and bringing it up under me like a cushion. "So how much have you told them about me?"

"My parents? Enough," he says. He gives me a quick look. I like the look. I smile. I'm very attracted to him.

"What did you tell them?"

"That I met a pretty girl who drinks too much gin."

"My parents don't know who you are," I say.

He thinks I'm joking. But I'm not. They have no idea he exists. I haven't told them about Jake, not even that I've met someone. Nothing. I kept thinking I might say something. I've had multiple opportunities. I just never felt certain enough to say anything.

Jake looks like he's going to speak but changes his mind. He

reaches out and turns up the radio. Just a bit. The only music we could find after scanning through several times was a country station. The old stuff. He nods with the track, humming along softly.

"I've never heard you hum before," I say. "That's a quality hum you have."

I don't think my parents will *ever* know about Jake, not now, not even retroactively. As we drive down a deserted country highway to his parents' farm, this thought makes me sad. I feel selfish, self-centered. I should tell Jake what I am thinking. It's just very hard to talk about. Once I bring up these doubts, I can't go back.

I've more or less decided. I'm pretty sure I'm going to end it. That takes the pressure off meeting his parents. I'm curious to see what they're like, but now I also feel guilty. I'm sure he thinks my visiting his family's farm is a sign of commitment, that the relationship is expanding.

He's sitting here, beside me. What's he thinking about? He doesn't have a clue. It's not going to be easy. I don't want to hurt him.

"How do you know this song? And haven't we heard it already? Twice?"

"It's a country classic and I grew up on a farm. I know it by default."

He doesn't confirm that we've heard the song twice already. What kind of radio station plays the same song over again within the hour? I don't listen to the radio much anymore; maybe that's

what they do now. Maybe that's normal. I wouldn't know. Or maybe these old country songs all sound the same to me.

WHY CAN'T I REMEMBER ANYTHING about the last road trip I took? I couldn't even say when it was. I'm looking out the window, but not really looking at anything. Just passing time the way one does in a car. Everything goes by so much faster in a car.

Which is too bad. Jake told me all about the landscape here. He loves it. He said he misses it whenever he's away. Especially the fields and sky, he said. I'm sure it is beautiful, peaceful. But it's hard to tell from the moving car. I'm trying to take in as much as I can.

We drive by a deserted property with only the foundation of a farmhouse. Jake says it burned down about a decade ago. There's a decrepit barn behind the house and a swing set in the front yard. But the swing set looks new. Not old and rusty, not weather-beaten.

"What's with the new swing set?" I ask.

"What?"

"On that burned farm. No one lives there anymore."

"Let me know if you get cold. Are you cold?"

"I'm fine," I say.

The glass of the window is cool. I'm resting my head against it. I can feel the vibrations of the engine through the glass, each bump in the road. A gentle brain massage. It's hypnotic.

I don't tell him I'm trying not to think about the Caller. I don't want to think about the Caller or his message at all. Not tonight. I also don't want to tell Jake that I'm avoiding catching my reflection in the window. It's a no-mirrors day for me. Just like the day Jake and I met. These are thoughts I keep to myself.

Trivia night at the campus pub. The night we met. The campus pub isn't somewhere I spend a lot of time. I'm not a student. Not anymore. I feel old there. I've never eaten at the pub. The beer on tap tastes dusty.

I wasn't expecting to meet anyone that night. I was sitting with my friend. We weren't really into the trivia, though. We were sharing a pitcher, chatting.

I think the reason my friend wanted us to meet at the campus pub was because she thought I might meet a boy there. She didn't say that, but that's what I believe she was thinking. Jake and his friends were at the table beside us.

Trivia is not something I'm interested in. It's not *not* fun. It's just not my thing. I'd prefer to go somewhere a little less intense, or stay home. Beer at home never tastes dusty.

Jake's trivia team was called Brezhnev's Eyebrows. "Who's Brezhnev?" I asked him. It was loud in there and we were almost yelling at each other over the music. We'd been talking for a couple of minutes.

"He was a Soviet engineer, worked in metallics. Era of Stagnation. Had a couple of monster caterpillars for eyebrows."

This is what I'm talking about. Jake's team name. It was meant

to be funny, but also obscure enough to demonstrate a knowledge of the Soviet Communist Party. I don't know why, but this is the stuff that drives me nuts.

Team names are always like this. Or if not, then they're blatant sexual innuendos. Another team was named My Couch Pulls Out and So Do I!

I told Jake I didn't really like trivia, not at a place like this. He said, "It can be very nitpicky. It's a strange blend of competitiveness veiled as apathy."

Jake isn't striking, not really. He's handsome mostly in his irregularity. He wasn't the first guy I noticed that night. But he was the most interesting. I'm rarely tempted by stainless beauty. He seemed a little less part of the group, as if he'd been dragged there, as if the team depended on his answers. I was immediately attracted to him.

Jake is long and sloping and unequal, with jagged cheekbones. A little bit gaunt. I liked those skeletal cheekbones when I first saw them. His dark, full lips make up for his underfed look. Fat and meaty and collagenic, especially the bottom one. His hair was short and unkempt and maybe longer on one side, or texturally different, like he had distinct hairstyles on each side of his head. His hair was neither dirty nor recently washed.

He was clean-shaven and wore thin-framed silver glasses, the right arm of which he would absentmindedly adjust. Sometimes he would push them back up with his index finger on the bridge. I noticed that he had this tick: when he was concentrating on some-

thing, he would smell the back of one hand, or at least hold it under his nose. It's something he often still does. He wore a plain gray T-shirt, I think, maybe blue, and jeans. The shirt looked like it had been washed hundreds of times. He blinked a lot. I could tell he was shy. We could have sat there all night, beside each other, and he wouldn't have said a word to me. He smiled at me once, but that was it. If I'd left it up to him, we never would have met.

I could tell he wasn't going to say anything, so I talked first.

"You guys are doing pretty well." That was the first thing I said to Jake.

He held up his beer glass. "We're helpfully fortified."

And that was it. Ice broken. We talked a bit more. Then, very casually, he said, "I'm a cruciverbalist."

I said something noncommittal, like "huh" or "yeah." I didn't know that word.

Jake said he wanted his team's name to be Ipseity. I didn't know what that word meant, either. And initially I thought about faking it. I could already tell, despite his caution and reticence, that he was exotically smart. He wasn't aggressive in any way. He wasn't trying to pick me up. No cheesy lines. He was just enjoying chatting. I got the feeling he didn't date all that much.

"I don't think I know that word," I said. "Or the other one." I decided that, like most men, he would probably like to tell me about it. He would like it better than if he thought I already knew the words and had an equally varied vocabulary.

"Ipseity is essentially just another way to say selfhood or individuality. It's from the Latin *ipse*, which means self."

I know this part sounds pedantic and lecture-y and off-putting, but trust me, it wasn't. Not at all. Not from Jake. He had a gentleness, an appealing, natural meekness.

"I thought it would be a good name for our team, considering there are many of us but we aren't like any other team. And because we play under a single team name, it creates an identity of oneness. Sorry, I don't know if this makes any sense, and it's definitely boring."

We both laughed, and it felt like we were alone together in there, in that pub. I drank some beer. Jake was funny. Or he at least had a sense of humor. I still didn't think he was as funny as me. Most men I meet aren't.

Later in the night, he said, "People just aren't very funny. Not really. Funny is rare." He said it as if he'd known exactly what I'd been thinking earlier.

"I don't know if that's true," I said. I liked hearing such a definitive statement about "people." There was deep confidence bubbling just under his veneer of restraint.

When I could tell he and his teammates were getting ready to leave, I thought about asking for his number or giving him mine. I desperately wanted to but just couldn't. I didn't want him to feel like he had to call. I wanted him to want to call, of course. I really did. But I settled on the likelihood that I would see him around. It was a university town, not a big city. I'd bump into him. As it turned out, I didn't have to wait for chance.

He must have slipped the note into my purse when he said good night. I found it when I got home:

If I had your number, we could talk, and I'd tell you something funny.

He'd written his number at the bottom of the note.

Before going to bed I looked up *cruciverbalist*. I laughed and believed him.

—I still don't understand. How could something like this happen?

—We're all in shock.

—Nothing so horrible has ever happened around here.

—No, not like this.

—In all the years I've worked here.

—I would think not.

—I didn't sleep last night. Not a wink.

—Me neither. Couldn't get comfortable. I can barely eat. You should have seen my wife when I told her. I thought she was going to be sick.

—How could he actually do it, go through with it? You don't do that on a whim. You couldn't.

—It's scary is what it is. Scary and disturbing.

—So did you know him? Were you close, or . . . ?

—No, no. Not close. I don't think anyone was close with him. He was a loner. That was his nature. Kept to himself. Standoffish. Some knew him better. But . . . you know.

—It's crazy. It doesn't seem real.

—It's one of those terrible things, but unfortunately it's very real.