

THE BREAK

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L O N D O N

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For my mother

In honour of those who have been lost.

With love to those who have found
a way through—you lead us.

Betty, if I start to write a poem about you
it might turn out to be
about hunting season instead,
about 'open season' on native women

~ from "Helen Betty Osborne"
by Marilyn Dumont

"The most common way people give up their power
is by thinking they don't have any."

~ Alice Walker

PART ONE

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The Break is a piece of land just west of McPhillips Street. A narrow field about four lots wide that interrupts all the closely knit houses on either side and cuts through every avenue from Selkirk to Leila, that whole edge of the North End. Some people call it nothing and likely don't think about it at all. I never called it anything, just knew it was there. But when she moved next door, my Stella, she named it the Break, if only in her head. No one had ever told her any other name, and for whatever reason, she thought she should call it something.

It's Hydro land, was likely set aside in the days before anything was out there. When all that low land on the west side of the Red River was only tall grasses and rabbits, some bush in clusters, all the way to the lake in the north. The neighbourhood rose up around it. Houses built first for Eastern European immigrants who were pushed to that wrong side of the railway tracks, and kept away from the affluent city south. Someone once told me that North End houses were all made cheap and big, but the lots were narrow and short. That was when you had to own a certain amount of land to vote, and all those lots were made just inches smaller.

The tall, metal Hydro towers would have been built after that. Huge and grey, they stand on either side of the small piece of land, holding up two smooth silver cords high above the tallest house. The towers repeat, every two blocks, over and over, going far into the north. They might even go as far as the lake. My Stella's little girl, Mattie, named them robots when the family first moved in beside them. Robots is a good name for them. They each have a square-like head and go out a bit at the bottom like someone standing at attention, and there's the two arms overhead that hold the cords up into the sky. They are a frozen army standing guard, seeing everything. Houses built up and broken down around them, people flooding in and out.

In the sixties, Indians started moving in, once Status Indians could leave reserves and many moved to the city. That was when the Europeans slowly started creeping out of the neighbourhood like a man sneaking away from a sleeping woman in the dark. Now there are so many Indians here, big families, good people, but also gangs, hookers, drug houses, and all these big, beautiful houses somehow sagging and tired like the old people who still live in them.

The area around the Break is slightly less poor than the rest, more working class, just enough to make the hard-working people who live there think that they are out of the core and free of that drama. There are more cars in driveways than on the other side of McPhillips. It's a good neighbourhood but you can still see it, if you know what to look for. If you can see the houses with never-opened bed sheet covered windows. If you can see the cars that come late at night, park right in the middle of the Break, far away from any house, and stay only ten minutes or so before driving away again. My Stella can see it. I taught her how to look and be aware all the time. I don't know if that was right or wrong, but she's still alive so there has to be some good in it.

I've always loved the place my girl calls the Break. I used to walk through it in the summer. There is a path you can go along all the way to the edge of the city, and if you just look down at the grass, you might think you were in the country the whole way. Old people plant gardens there, big ones with tidy rows of corn and tomatoes, all nice and clean. You can't walk through it in the winter though. No one clears a way. In the winter, the Break is just a lake of wind and white, a field of cold and biting snow that blows up with the slightest gust. And when snow touches those raw Hydro wires they make this intrusive buzzing sound. It's constant and just quiet enough that you can ignore it, like a whisper you know is a voice but you can't hear the words. And even though they are more than three storeys high, when it snows those wires feel close, low, and buzz a sound that is almost like music, just not as smooth. You can ignore it. It's just white noise, and some people can ignore things like that. Some people hear it but just get used to it.

It was snowing when it happened. The sky was pink and swollen and the snow had finally started to fall. Even from inside her house, my Stella heard the buzzing, as sure as her own breath. She knows to expect it when the sky fills with clouds, but like everything she's been through, she has just learned to live with it.

(1)

STELLA

STELLA SITS AT her kitchen table with two police officers, and for one long moment, no one says a thing. They just sit, all looking down or away, for a long pause. The older officer clears his throat. He smells like old coffee and snow, and looks around Stella's home, her clean kitchen and out into her dark living room, like he's trying to find evidence of something. The younger one goes over his scribbled notes, the paper of his little coiled book flips and crumples.

Blanket over her shoulders, Stella wraps one hand around a hot mug of coffee, hoarding the warmth but still shaking. In her other hand, she balls a damp Kleenex. She stares down. Her hands look like her mom's did, older-looking hands for a young woman. Old-lady hands. Her Kookom had hands like this too, and now that she's an old lady all over, her hands are practically transparent, the skin there worn thin. Stella's aren't that bad yet, but they look too wrinkled, too old for her body, like they have aged ahead of her.

The officer breathes heavily. Stella finally looks up and

braces herself to start explaining, again. The officers both sit with shoulders up, and neither touches the steaming mugs of coffee she has poured and placed in front of them. Their uniformed jackets are still on. The radios at their shoulders spit static and muffled voices, numbers, and alerts.

She has given up trying not to cry in front of these strangers.

Officer Scott, the young one, finally breaks the silence.

"Well, we know something significant definitely happened out there." He looks at her side-eyed. His voice matter of fact, slow and hinging on the words *happened* and *out there*. His mouth frowns in a practiced sympathy that Stella knows is fake but takes anyway. The older one, Officer Christie, doesn't look at her, only agrees with a quick nod of his bearded head and another throat-clearing noise. Stella thinks he's bored, and the young one, he's so young, is eager, maybe even excited.

Officer Scott tries to look nice, again, and asks her, again, "Can you think of anything else? Anything at all?"

Stella blinks a tear and shakes her head. She looks out the window at the Break, that empty expanse of land next to her house. She doesn't have to look to know it's snowing lightly. She can hear the faint buzzing, the low drone of the Hydro towers just out of view. The sky is still bright pink in the night, swollen with more snow to come. The Break is mostly a blank slate of white stretched out to house beyond. The house's siding and the snow reflect the streetlights and the moon, but the windows are dark, of course. Everyone's windows are dark except Stella's.

The two officers had gone out there, stomped around, and made a circle around the blood, the puddle that melted the snow. Stella can just make it out from the window, a corner of it. It lies across the white ground like a dark shadow, probably frozen now. Flakes fall on top of it, wanting to cover it up. It

doesn't look sinister. It doesn't look like what it really is.

Stella goes over each detail in her head, remembering everything, wanting to forget. It is probably 4 a.m. now, and Jeff will be home soon. She wants Jeff to be home more than anything. She listens for her children, ready if they wake, surprised they haven't from the all the foot stomping the officers made when they came in, but everything is quiet upstairs. The baby's been asleep since Stella finally got her kids to bed about four hours ago when she got off the phone with 911. They slept but she couldn't. She waited and stared out the window with nothing to pass the time but her anxious thoughts. So she got up and started cleaning. Everything was spotless by the time the officers finally arrived.

Her mind scatters, but she remembers everything, over and over.

"She was small, so small." Stella's shoulders shake as she finds her words again. "Like a really tiny woman, maybe five feet, not much more than that." She clings to the blanket around her. "Long straight black hair. I couldn't see her face. So small and skinny." Stella reaches for her own long black hair and remembers something else. Her voice chokes out for a minute. She knows she's repeating herself.

"Now, you only saw her through your door, right?" Scott has stopped taking notes. His pen rests on the paper pad, over his few blue scrawls. Christie finally takes a sip of coffee.

"Yes, through the screen door. The glass." Stella motions at the air. She can still see the small woman through the foggy glass, slowly moving away, finally moving down the back lane.

"That's a pretty long way away, Mrs. McGregor. Are you sure it couldn't have been a young man? You know a lot of these native boys wear their hair long."

Stella just looks at him. His too-young face still a mask of

a smile, stuck there. Naïve. She thinks of the word and rolls it around in her head. Naïve.

"No, it was a girl. A woman." She looks down again, wraps her hands in the blanket but still shakes.

"Okay, okay, tell us again," Scott tries gently. "From the beginning, please. You heard noises outside..."

Stella shakes her head. "I didn't hear anything outside. The baby woke up. I went up to get him and saw out his window. I didn't know what I was seeing at first, thought it was a fight or something. It looked bad, so I called 911. But I couldn't do anything, my baby was crying so hard. He's teething."

She looks up to see this Scott officer nod and lean forward. Practiced. His partner takes another audible sip of coffee and looks at his watch. Stella turns to the old clock on the wall—4:05. Yes, Jeff will be off shift by now and on his way home.

"911 EMERGENCY."

"Yes. Hi, there's some sort of fight going on outside my house. Looks like someone might be getting jumped."

"I'm sorry I can't hear you, ma'am. Did you say an assault? Outside your residence?"

"Yes, yes. Shhhhh, Adam, shhhhhh, my boy."

"And where is your residence, ma'am?"

"Magnus. 1243 Magnus. On the west side of McPhillips. Just passed that Break thingie, area."

She hears the operator sigh. "All right ma'am, is the assault still taking place?"

"Yes, I think so, or wait, I think... They're running away."

"Okay ma'am..."

"Oh no! Oh my god. Shhh, Adam, it's okay."

"Ma'am? What direction are they running?"

"McPhillips. They're running that way. But someone's hurt! It's a girl, a woman, I think. Oh my god!"

"Ma'am, I will dispatch someone right away. Ma'am?"

"Oh god oh god oh god, she's not getting up. Her legs . . . she's not . . . moving."

"Ma'am?"

"Oh god, oh my god."

"Ma'am, I can't hear you with the baby crying. I will dispatch someone right away."

"Oh my god."

"Please stay where you are, ma'am? Ma'am?"

"But she's not moving."

SCOTT TRIES AGAIN. "And then when you went to the door and watched her, the victim, get up?"

"Yeah," she chokes out, nods.

"And you didn't go out there? Or talk to the person?"

Stella shakes her head and looks down at her hands again. She can't stand how these officers look at her.

He tries again. "Did you see anything distinguishing on the attackers? Any clothing logos or something?"

Stella tries to swallow her anger and tears, her shame, and look at this officer. His skin is so young he still has a couple of pimples. He has dark freckles across his nose. Stella has always liked freckles like that, skin sprinkled with brown.

"No just, umm." Stella pauses, thinks. "Dark, baggy clothes, bomber jackets, I guess. One of them had a long black braid. The others were wearing hoods, black ones. Big dark jackets." These are all things she said already. She thinks they might be trying to trip her up, like she's lying about something.

Scott sits back. Christie just sips his coffee again, nearly says, “Ahh,” he does it so loud.

“If you remember anything else, Mrs. McGregor, even if you think it’s not important...”

Stella shakes not just her head but her whole body. She doesn’t want to think about it but can’t think of anything else. It runs over and over in her head, a visual echo, the images blending together. The details are getting fuzzy already, blurry black bodies on the white snow. The muffled night outside, the baby crying, crying, crying. Stella’s hushing voice, shh, baby, shh, but she’s watching bodies hunched over something, what is it? What is it? Then they all jump up, suddenly, and they run away. No, not all of them. There’s one. Only one. Lying there, so still, not moving, something, no someone dark and small in the snow.

“Stell? Stell?” Jeff yells as he pushes through the back door. Stella startles and goes to him before he gets louder.

“Hey.” She sees his worried face. She grabs on to each side of his open parka and pulls him to her. She doesn’t know where to start.

“Where are the kids?” he asks, his voice short and scared.

“Your children are fine, Mr. McGregor,” Scott calls from the table. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

Jeff pushes Stella away gently and looks into her face. She nods and falls back against him, crying all over again. The inside of his jacket is so warm. His arms are strong around her, and for a second, they make her feel better.

“There was an incident just outside your property, Mr. McGregor,” the young officer continues. “Your wife witnessed some sort of an assault.”

“Assault?” Jeff asks. He takes Stella’s hand and they sit at the table. She doesn’t want to let go. The officers don’t introduce

themselves, but only speak in curt, official-sounding sentences. Jeff nods as they explain. Stella feels cold again.

"Your *wife* believes it was a *rape* of some sort." The young officer says the words as if they are questions. Wife? Rape?

"No, it was a rape. Someone *was* raped." She turns to Jeff. "It was a woman, a small, skinny woman."

Jeff only nods at her and squeezes her hand. He thinks he's helping.

"Keep in mind, Mrs. McGregor," the older officer finally pipes in. "We've been doing this a long time, and it just doesn't look like a sexual assault. It seems, unlikely?" He says his words like questions too.

"Why? Why do you say that?" Stella stammers and tries to sound firm, but she doubts herself now. It was so dark, and she is so tired.

"Well, it's outside for one, in the winter. That's highly unusual. And there's a lot of blood which means someone was, well, bleeding."

"What if she was hurt? Beaten up? Can't you test the blood or something?" Stella is stammering now.

"I know you're upset, but let's think of the facts. There was a broken beer bottle at the scene." Christie pauses, sighs. "Drinking often means fighting. Blood also means fighting. Sexual assaults don't usually happen in the cold, outside in winter. It seems . . . unlikely. I know it was probably very hard to witness. It was probably very violent. It's common to . . . panic." Christie nods and takes one last sip of his coffee as if to say the conversation is over.

Stella's tears dry in her eyes, and a familiar rage fills her. She can't find the right words. They are none that would convince them anyway.

"Well, we don't know what happened, do we? None of us

know for sure,” Jeff tries. Stella sits beside him, still clutching his hand. She can tell he is relieved. She can tell he thinks everything’s okay now.

Since it happened, all she wanted was for him to be here, to comfort her. Now that he’s here, she doesn’t feel better. She feels stunned, and he just squeezes her hand. Not helping. She wants to let go but can only loosen her grip, let her hand go limp inside his. He doesn’t even notice. She looks out the window. The snow’s falling harder now.

What she really wants to do is call her Kookom. She thinks of her, her beautiful grandmother undoubtedly sleeping now in her mouldy but warm basement apartment, just over on Church. Stella wants to go lie there in her wrinkled arms and have her whisper that everything is okay, the way she always did. Stella always believed it, no matter what.

“We’ll let you know if there are any developments.” Christie gets up. “Likely, around here, it’s just some gang violence. I wouldn’t worry about it. Just lock up. Keep yourselves safe.”

Jeff sees them to the door, but Stella stays sitting, seething and staring out at the snow. She hears them half laugh politely, the way white men say goodbye, and it only makes her more furious.

“Oh fuck, I was so worried, hon,” Jeff says as he comes back to her. He wraps his arms around her, comforting, but only himself now. “When I saw the cop car out front. Christ, I have never been so scared.”

Stella just sits there, lets him hold her.

“I know what I saw,” she says after a moment, knowing she only sounds defiant now. Pathetic.

“I know, hon. I know. But maybe,” he pauses, rethinks. “Who knows what the hell that was?”

“I do. I know,” she says, and then lowers her voice so she won’t wake the kids. “I know what I saw, Jeff.”

"I know, I know. But, they're right, aren't they? It seems, unlikely."

"But..."

"They know what they're talking about, Stell. And I mean," he pauses again, really trying. He sits down beside her, looks her right in the eye. "You know, Stella, maybe you did, like, dream parts of it?" He's talking in questions now too. "You haven't been sleeping very well with all Adam's fussing and teething, right?"

Stella gets up, fuming. She grabs all the stupid coffee cups and takes them to the kitchen, throws them in the sink and starts scrubbing. She puts them in the drying rack and starts wiping the counter. Jeff just sits at the table, waiting for her to talk.

"I'm not crazy," she says finally.

"I don't think you're... No one said that. I just think, maybe." He yawns. She can tell he doesn't mean to but he does. It is so late it's early. She had waited hours for the police to come. Waited shaking, thinking they would come at any moment. She was unable to stop cleaning or crying. She should have called her Kookom then. She would've been asleep, but she still would've answered. Or Auntie Cher, she would've been up. Auntie Cher would've listened. She probably would've come over, made the coffee, yelled at the cops when they started acting like they didn't believe her. But Stella didn't do any of that.

Jeff gets up, stands behind her at the sink and pulls her into his arms, forcing her into a hug. She waits until he's done so she can ring out the wet cloth.

"You were half asleep. And it's okay. It's okay. But with your past, hon, you know you could've just been dreaming. You could've just been confused."

She breaks away from him and goes to wipe the table.

"There's blood all over out there," she says over her shoulder as she storms out of the kitchen again. The wind picking up outside, knocking at the old window.

"No one says nothing happened," he sighs. "It just might be different than you think."

She doesn't say anything, just scrubs.

He stands there a moment, in the middle of the kitchen. She refuses to look up, just bends her head as she passes him, and shakes the rag out in the sink.

Defeated and tired, he goes to the bathroom and starts to get ready for bed.

Stella wipes the counter again, prepares the coffee so it's ready again in the real morning, and tidies the towels. Then she goes down to the basement and pulls the clean laundry out of the dryer and starts to fold.

By the time she gets into bed, the cold pre-dawn grey is coming up. Her whole body aches and her husband is fast asleep.

She thinks about her Kookom again and wants to call her. Her Kookom always gets up early. She would probably be up, making tea and looking out her window, "Watching day come," as she calls it. When was the last time Stella called her grandmother? It's been too long. The guilt washes over her. She chills the hot rage with more of her cold shame. But she doesn't call, she can't. She can only pull the covers up to her chin and lie there.

The grey light stretches out behind the blinds, but she doesn't do a thing. Not until she hears her daughter wake up. Then, ready, she springs back out of bed.