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Opening Extract from...

Born Weird

Written by Andrew Kaufman

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BORN WEIRD



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THE FRIDAY PROJECT

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W

The Weirds acquired their surname through a series of events that some would call coincidence and others would call fate.

Sterling D. Wyird, in the process of emigrating from England to Canada, worked his way across the Atlantic aboard the Icelandic fishing trawler *Örlög*. Inclement weather and empty nets made the six-week journey three months long. When Sterling finally stepped onto the freshly built planks of Pier 21 in Halifax he presented his papers to an immigration guard who, just that morning, had met the woman destined to become his wife. This guard, in a stroke of either inspiration or absent-mindedness, changed the *y* in Sterling's last name to an *e*. Seventy-seven years later, as his great-grandchildren gathered for the final game of their high school football team's season, the spelling mistake remained. They were still Weird.

The four oldest siblings—Richard, nineteen; Lucy, seventeen; Abba, sixteen; and Angie, fourteen—were in the stands, ready to watch Kent, the youngest, play football. Or rather

to watch Kent sit on the bench as his teammates played football. Kent was in Grade Nine but he'd skipped Grade Six, so he was only thirteen—yet he'd somehow managed to earn a spot as the third-string quarterback. That Kent had spent the season sitting on the bench didn't bother the Weird siblings in the least. They preferred that he should never make it onto the field. The idea of having to watch him play filled them all with anxiety. Which is why the last game of the season was the first they'd come to see.

They stood in the crowd, feeling awkward. Theirs were the only faces not painted blue and white, the school's colours. Their classmates chanted fight songs that they didn't know the words to. But Kent remained safely on the bench.

Then, with fifty-seven seconds left in the game, the team's star quarterback, Kevin Halleck, received a stunning sack and had to be carried off the field. Mike Bloomfield, the second-string quarterback, had just been diagnosed with mononucleosis, and therefore was home. The coach looked at Kent and gave him the nod. Kent ran onto the field for the first time that season, failing to notice that his shoes were untied.

The home team was losing by a field goal. Or, to put it another way, a touchdown would give them the game. The idea that Kent had been given this chance seemed unbelievable to his brother and sisters. It's not as if the Weird children were outcasts. They were popular. They just weren't A-list. To reach the zenith of teenage popularity, at least at

F.E. Madill Secondary School, athletic accomplishment was a non-negotiable prerequisite. The sort of popularity that, should Kent win this game, would instantaneously be transferred on to each of them. Angie was very aware that this was the strange thing about excelling in high school—it made you more normal, not more exceptional. And normalcy was what she craved more than anything else.

But did she yell and cheer for Kent? No, she did not. None of them did. They didn't even call out his name. They were terrified. Not one of them spoke as Kent bent down and tied his shoes. Angie searched the crowd but she couldn't see their mother, father or grandmother. Her parents had gone to the airport, or so she believed, to pick up her grandmother, arriving for her annual month-long Christmas visit. The plan had been for everyone to meet in the parking lot before the game. But her parents and grandmother had never arrived. The thought that they were missing Kent's potential moment of triumph was greatly upsetting to Angie. But then she forgave them, instantly. And as Kent called the play she forgot about them completely.

The teams got into position. The siblings remained silent. The blue and white faces surrounding them cheered their heads off.

"Hut!" Kent called.

The centre flicked the ball into his hands. The clock ticked. Kent went back. He threw a pass. It tumbled through the air and into the stands.

The teams huddled again. Kent clapped his hands. Everyone went into formation. Second down with thirty-six seconds left on the clock. The ball was snapped. Kent faked a pass. Then he handed the football to a running back, who was quickly tackled just behind the line of play. It was a loss of two yards.

Twenty-three seconds were left on the clock, which continued to tick. Last down and last chance. The centre snapped the ball into Kent's hands. His brother and sisters still didn't cheer. They were terrified that Kent was going to drop the football. He took two steps back and then a third. He turned his head to the right and raised the ball but he didn't throw it. Angie glanced at the clock. It ticked down through the number thirteen. When she looked back at Kent, she saw him do a very odd thing: he shut his eyes. They remained closed as he tucked the ball against his chest and began to run.

Their breaths held, Richard, Abba, Lucy and Angie watched Kent as he ran forwards. His head was down. His eyes were still closed. He ran directly into the defensive line. For a moment he disappeared behind opposition uniforms—and then there he was, on the other side.

Less than twenty yards separated Kent and the goal line. At the five-yard line a lanky safety caught up to him. The opposing player leapt into the air. He landed heavily on Kent's back. Kent didn't seem to notice. With the safety's arms wrapped around his waist Kent ran over the goal line and into the end zone.

Kent didn't open his eyes until he heard the roar of the crowd. He saw the cheering fans and his astonished siblings and his overjoyed teammates running towards him. Then he saw his grandmother. She stood at the edge of the field. Her face wordlessly conveyed that something horrible had happened. The ball fell out of Kent's hands just as his teammates reached the end zone. They tried to hoist him on their shoulders. But Kent evaded their grasp. He walked to the sidelines, took off his helmet and approached his grandmother.

And so Kent was the first of the Weirds to learn that everything had changed forever.

Their father was dead.

BOOK ONE:

Blessing + Curse = Blursing





On April 7, 2010, eight and a half years after Kent scored his first and only touchdown, Angie Weird stood in a hallway on the fourth floor of the Vancouver and District General Hospital, eavesdropping on her grandmother as she dictated her epitaph. "Until you realize that coincidences don't exist, your life will be filled with them," Grandmother Weird said. "Everywhere you look there coincidences will be. Coincidence! Coincidence! Coincidence! But the moment you accept there is no such thing, they will disappear forever and you'll never encounter another."

Angie tried not to vomit. The corridor, in fact the whole hospital, smelled like artificial pine. But her grandmother's ridiculous speech was as nausea-making as the smell of disinfectant. Hearing her grandmother's words reminded Angie of everything she disliked about her family, and why she had avoided all contact with them for so many years. Even though she'd just flown from New York, five and a half hours in the air with a two-hour stopover in Toronto, Angie decided to head back to the airport.

She turned away from her grandmother's hospital room and towards the elevators. It was at this exact moment that an orderly was checking his phone as he pushed a cart down the hall. He did not look up until his shoulder struck Angie's. Knocked off balance, Angie was sent stumbling into her grandmother's room.

Each of the four beds in Room 4-206 was occupied by an elderly lady. Grandmother Weird was in the bed closest to the door and Angie's stumble concluded at the foot of it. She looked her grandmother over. Her cheeks were rosy. Her eyes were bright. No tubes were attached to her, not even an intravenous line. In no way did Grandmother Weird appear to be on her deathbed.

"That's an awful lot of text," said a male voice. It came from the speaker in the telephone.

"Then make the letters small," Grandmother Weird said. She rolled her eyes. She saw Angie. She looked back at the telephone.

"No name? No date?" the speakerphone voice asked.

"Neither."

"It'll still be really small."

"I'll need it in thirteen days," Grandmother Weird said. She reached out her tiny arm. She jabbed her index finger to the telephone, ending the call. Shuffling her body back into the middle of the bed she looked her granddaughter over.

"Does it have a father?" Grandmother Weird asked.

"Are you asking if this is the child of God?"

"How far along?"

"They looked at me funny in the airport."

"But no ring . . ."

"Who am I to go against family tradition?" Angie asked. Grandmother Weird issued a small laugh. She hadn't been married when she'd given birth to her only son, Besnard, Angie's father. The laugh made Angie feel slightly safer. She attempted to sit on the corner of the bed. The mattress sagged. She slid off. She attempted this several more times. Then she noticed the chair in the corner. Pushing it towards the bed, Angie sat down.

"Are you done?"

"Yes."

"No more wiggling?"

"Nope."

"Okay then," Grandmother said. She smoothed the wrinkles from the sheet. "I'm dying."

"Again?"

"I will die at 7:39 p.m. on April 20. Not a second later or a moment earlier."

"Who doesn't love a countdown?"

"Thirteen days from today."

"Is there something special about that day?"

"It's my birthday. I guess it slipped your memory?"

"Death's not much of a party."

"I've asked you to come here because there are mistakes I've made. Mistakes I need your help correcting."

"I plan on living until I'm at least a hundred. Maybe older."

"Be quiet, Angelika!"

Grandmother Weird said these words in what Angie and her siblings called *the Tone.* They each had a pet theory to explain why it was so effective. Kent's was that her voice became all bass. Abba thought it was the way she stressed each word, making them all sound capitalized. Lucy's explanation was that her lung capacity allowed her to push out twice as much air; therefore her words came out twice as strongly. Angie liked all of these, but she felt that only Richard had gotten it right. His explanation was that she stripped all emotion from her voice, leaving only her harsh judgment.

However it worked, it made Angie comply. She sat still. She folded her hands in her lap. Grandmother Weird didn't speak and more than a minute passed.

"You've always been impatient," Grandmother Weird finally said. "Do you know that you were born in a hallway?"

"How could I forget?"

"You almost died in that hallway."

"Yup."

"With the cord wrapped so tight around your little throat."

"Crazy," Angie said. She'd stopped paying attention to her grandmother. The thought of giving birth in a hallway was so terrifying that she'd begun conjuring the scene in her

mind, replaying it over and over. This was the way Angie often dealt with events she feared would happen.

"That's why I gave it to you," Grandmother Weird said.

"Of course."

"The power to forgive."

"I know. Wait. Gave me what?"

"It was your father's fault. That idiotic car. Whoever heard of driving a Maserati in the city? I knew it would define you."

"The car?"

"I knew you'd spend your whole life having to find it in yourself to forgive your parents for almost killing you before you were even born. With your very first breath you needed the power to forgive. It's odd because forgiveness is not something I'm particularly good at. I didn't even know I had it in me."

"What are we talking about?"

"The ability to forgive!"

". . ."

"It's my heart," Grandmother Weird said. "My goddamn elephant heart."

Grandmother Weird's heart, while much smaller than an elephant's, *was* unnaturally large. The average human heart weighs between 250 and 350 grams and is about the size of a fist. The weight of Annie Weird's heart pushed 600 grams and it was the size of two fists together. She was convinced that its exaggerated dimensions were the source of all the

drama that had ever befallen her. And she was well aware that Angie was her only grandchild who'd inherited this condition. Angie's heart was even slightly bigger than her own.

"I held you in my arms," Grandmother Weird continued. "I looked down and it came from me and tumbled into you. I gave to you the power to forgive anyone, anytime."

Angie looked down at Grandmother Weird. She saw how loosely her rings fit on her fingers, the tremor in her right hand and the droop in her eyelids. "That's so . . . it's . . . it's r . . . really b . . . eautiful," Angie said. She'd started to cry.

"Maybe I should have given you the power not to be such a crybaby sap," Grandmother Weird said.

Angie had a deserved reputation as the family's crybaby. Yet her grandmother's comment stung. "Couldn't it have been invisibility?" Angie asked, her tears ceasing, instantly. "Flight maybe? Something a little more useful?"

"You came out bright red. Not very attractive, I'm afraid. Like a boiled lobster!"

"Super-speed?"

"All of you got one, you know. All five of you got one."

"You gave Kent the power to be an asshole?"

"Yes. In a way I did. Kent is slightly stronger than anyone he fights. Physical fights, I mean. He came out so small and I knew he'd need to defend himself, somehow. That he's emotionally stunted is not my fault."

"He's not stunted. He's just angry all the time."

"Lucy is never lost. Abba never loses hope. Richard keeps

himself safe. I never thought they'd all become curses. They were supposed to be blessings. I didn't know that they'd end up ruining your lives."

"Our lives are ruined?"

"And it's not just you kids. It's the family. The family name! I will not go to the grave responsible for taking down the good name of the Weirds."

"Oh yes. Well, then, that makes more sense."

"That's why you're here, Angie. You must go and find them. Round all of them up and bring them here. All five of you must be in this room at 7:39 p.m. on April 20 precisely. At the moment of my death I will lift the curses."

"Can't you just lift mine now? If it's a curse, the sooner the better, no?"

"Again with the sass! Angie, I have no control over these things. I didn't consciously bestow these abilities. I can't consciously remove them. I just know that at the moment of my death, when my heart is confronted with a now or never situation, it will see the damage these curses have inflicted and take them away."

"I see," Angie said. She looked down at her belly. She put both of her hands on the arms of her chair and stood. A blue plastic pitcher sat beside the phone on the bedside table. She filled a Styrofoam cup with water and took a drink.

"Did you hear me?" Grandmother Weird asked.

"Even the water smells like pine."

"Look at me."

"Hmmm?"

"You think I've lost my mind."

"No. Not at all. It's just big. Big news. I just need some time to absorb it, that's all."

"I see. Perhaps a demonstration then?"

"Not necessary."

"There's a marker in there," Grandmother Weird said, pointing to the drawer in the bedside table. "Could you get it for me?"

Angie opened the drawer. She searched through it. Beneath several celebrity gossip magazines Angie found a black felt-tipped Magic Marker. She handed it over to her. Grandmother Weird took the cap off with her teeth and spit it out, sending it sailing through the air.

The instant the cap hit the floor, every light in the room dimmed by half. The television sets lost reception. Angie felt her grandmother's cold, bony fingers encircle her wrist. She tried to pull away but the old woman's grip was incredibly strong and she could not break it.

"Watch the little old ladies," Grandmother said.

Angie looked up. The elderly woman closest to the window fell backwards, as if she'd been deboned. The machine beside that bed made a high-pitched whine. Grandmother Weird pressed the Magic Marker against the skin of Angie's forearm and began to write. The lights dimmed further. The white-haired woman in the next bed collapsed. A second machine began making the high-pitched whine. A nurse ran

into the room. Angie tried again to pry her grandmother's fingers away. She still couldn't. Grandmother Weird wrote a series of numbers on Angie's skin. The lady in the bed closest fell backwards. A third machine whined. More nurses ran into the room.

"Stop it!" Angie yelled. "Stop this right now!"

Her grandmother did not look up. She wrote the last number of a ten-digit sequence. Then she let go of Angie's wrist. The lights returned to full-strength. The televisions regained reception. The machines stopped making their high-pitched whines. The elderly women sat upright in their beds and looked around the room, dazed and frightened.

"Never doubt your elders, child."

"Shark!" Angie yelled. She began to back out of Room 4-206. "You will never hold my baby. You will never see me again."

"Yes I will," Grandmother Weird said. She smiled broadly. She began to laugh. She laughed in *the Tone.*

Angie backed out into the hallway. Holding her belly she ran as fast as she could. She did not look back. By the time she'd reached the elevators, Angie had already forgiven her grandmother.