

Judy J. Johnson

THIEF
of
REASON



a novel

Thief of Reason

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IGUANA

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This is an original print edition of *Thief of Reason*.

For my son, Marc Shandro, and my three Grandies:

Morgan Shandro

Aaron Shandro

Nicola Shandro

*“Understanding the ‘other’ will pose the 21st century’s
greatest social challenge.”*

— *Charles Taylor (1931–)*

Chapter 1

I want to love him, but I can't, Rick thought as he watched his father, 55-year-old Dick Wright, generously fill seven crystal wine glasses, then bow his head in prayer.

“In the name of Jesus Christ our Saviour, we give thanks for our blessings, especially family—my wife, Dorothy, my loyal brother, Harry, and his lovely wife, Rose, my charming daughter, Joy, and her partner, Al, and my...only son, Ricky. Amen.” Dick lifted his chin and looked at his wife of thirty years, raised his glass and said, “And a toast to you, my long-suffering wife. Thank you for bringing us together to enjoy another of your special Boxing Day feasts.”

“To Dorothy,” everyone proclaimed, hoisting their glasses and sipping traditional Beaujolais.

“Thank you,” Dorothy said, leaning across the maple dining room table and repositioning the platter of crown roast beside the large bowl of fluffy mashed potatoes, a gravy boat, and colourful vegetable serving dishes.

Rick pondered his father's rare streak of largesse. *Could it be? A tender-hearted moment?* “Nice touch, Dad,” Rick offered, hoping his compliment would extend his father's magnanimity.

Joy reached up and patted Dick's shoulder. “Thanks, Dad. That was lovely,” then half winked at Rick and said, “Please pass the beets and sautéed mushrooms.”

Sporting a full white beard that suited his short, stocky stature and basketball belly, Harry gave a throaty “Ho, ho, ho,” and raised his

glass. “Here’s to my lovely sister-in-law, Dorothy, who keeps the family ritual going and works magic with aging.”

“Hope I have Mom’s magic genetic mapping,” Rick joked, then tapped his temples. “Got a few grey hairs that make me look like an old man at twenty-eight. Then again, I am pushing thirty...no career, no wife, no children.”

Rick’s uncle winked and grinned at his nephew. “Get a move on, Ricky! You’re on the cusp of death and taxes.” Having had no children of his own, he had a special place in his heart for Rick, who, in turn, cherished his uncle’s unconditional acceptance and easy banter.

“Bloody taxes!” Dick proclaimed. “I’m sick of paying taxes and sending all those royalties to eastern Canada. Bloody Liberals don’t give a rat’s ass about our oil and gas industry.” As usual, Dick’s eyes were concentrated on his son, who was hoping against disaster that his father wouldn’t launch another harrowing, threadbare political argument.

Joy dared to intervene. “I don’t like taxes either, Dad, but without them, we’d lose universal access to public health care. Albertans would have to buy private insurance and those premiums would cost more than we currently pay in taxes.”

Rick pointed to Al and shouted across the table, “Hey, Al! You, me, hiking boots. Kananaskis. This summer, man. You game?”

“All in,” Al said through a mouthful of glazed carrots. “Five days off, end of June. Let’s tackle Mt. Kidd.”

Rick liked Al’s friendly, easygoing disposition. Just the kind of guy this family needs, he’d concluded shortly after his sister, Joy, had introduced him to the family three years ago.

Dick refilled his empty wine glass and topped up the others, most of which were a couple swallows short of full, then watched his brother lace his mound of food with a generous sprinkling of salt.

“Harry, salt’s bad for yer heart! We talked about that in the hospital, remember?” Dick shook his finger at the salt shaker. “Don’t kid yerself; that’s the leading cause of heart disease.”

“How *are* you doing, Uncle Harry?” Joy said, with strained cheerfulness. “Haven’t seen you since your bypass. Are you on the three Rs: rigid rehab routine?”

“Yep. Regular exercise and no second helpings,” Harry said, smiling and looking directly at Dick. “I’ve already taken off five pounds of blubber.”

“Stick with it,” Dick said. “I figure you’ve got at least thirty to go. Here’s the thing about exercise. Good for the heart, but—”

Joy covered her face with her hands and peeked between her fingers at Harry, who scowled at Dick and said, “Please, not another tirade. I’ve cut back on everything that’s bad for my heart and I’m working out on the torture equipment my darling wife bought me. Body bag included.”

Laughter lightened the air as Rose looked pensively at her husband and said, “Really, now. After your pretend version of morning exercises, you reward yourself with another coffee, loaded with cream and laced with sugar. I hate nagging, honey, but heart attacks are deadly serious and I’d like to keep you a while longer.” Vigorously massaging her hands and looking directly at her nephew, Rose said, “Ricky, have you been to our magnificent Central Library?”

“Masterpiece of architecture, isn’t it!” Rick said. “World class. I could spend a whole week hanging out there...reading, snacking, doing homework, or gazing at the panoramic view of Calgary’s bustling downtown.” Rick looked over at his mom. “Beats the community branch you took me and Joy to as kids, eh Mom?”

“Sure does,” Dorothy said, “but I’m grateful we haven’t lost our little neighbourhood one.”

“I remember how books were scattered all over the living room when the kids were young,” Rose said. “How they loved having stories read to them.”

Dick said, “Look, Rose, books are obsolete. Libraries are a waste of taxpayers’ money. Digital’s the only way to go.”

Rick gulped a mouthful of wine, looked over at his uncle and shrugged. “Looks like you’re fixin’ to say something, Uncle Harry.”

Harry tossed Rick a knowing glance. “How are classes shaping up for next semester?”

“Got the three courses I want...need to ace them all to get into grad school.”

“My money’s on you, Dr. Wright,” Harry said. “Then what?”

“Who knows? Short stories for magazines? An English prof?” He flippantly added, “The Man Booker Prize for literary fiction?”

In a deep, gravelly voice, Dick complained, “After wasting years bumming around Europe, you’re now a professional student. Full marks for dilly dallying.”

“Jeez, Dad! Why the snide comment?” Rick pinched his bottom lip and chastised himself for breaking his morning pledge. Hours ago, he’d paced the worn circles on his carpet and worried that his father, who’d been relatively civil during Joy’s Christmas Eve dinner and Dorothy’s turkey feast on Christmas Day, was surely overdue for pontification. *If Dad dangles the bait, I won’t bite*, he’d promised himself and Joy, who’d interrupted his pacing with a phone call. *Not during happy hour. Not during dinner. Not during Christmas pudding and Irish coffee. Today, Dad wins.*

According to that plan, Rick was hovering on the edge of a losing battle.

In the awkward silence that followed, everyone focused on their dinner as if they sensed Dick was about to offer another hefty helping of something more pungent than political acrimony, salt, and library books. Dick didn’t disappoint. He poked his fork at Harry. “Hey, little brother, why weren’t you and Rose at Christmas Eve mass this year?”

“Thought I told you we wouldn’t be there,” Harry said, reaching for one of Dorothy’s homemade dinner rolls.

Clutching his wine glass, Dick said, “Don’t tell me you’ve become the family’s infidel. A proud heretic.”

The only sound was the scrape of cutlery on dinner plates until Dick pushed his chest out and said, “Speak up, Harry! Say something for God’s sake.”

Harry gently nudged Rose and arched his eyebrows as if to encourage an answer.

Rose looked like she'd bitten into a chunk of mouldy potato. She gulped, glanced at Dick, and said, "This year, Christmas Eve was like none other—peaceful as the falling snowflakes." She took a sip of wine. "Harry and I decided to honour our religious differences. Packed cheese and nuts along with cinnamon rolls and a thermos of hot chocolate and went snowshoeing in the Kananaskis."

Harry chuckled. "And a flask of hot rum."

With a long, rumbling belch, Dick made it clear he'd heard enough, but Rose hadn't finished.

"You might recall, Dick, that although I'm agnostic I *am* spiritual. The Church of Kananaskis, in all its breathtaking splendour, is my place of worship."

Dick spoke to Rose, but his eyes were still on Rick. "C'mon, Rose, Kananaskis could never compete with the beauty of our church's Christmas Eve mass. A good Catholic shows up. Gives thanks to our merciful Saviour."

Rose drummed her fingers on the arms of her chair. "There's a deep spiritual truth in the land of our majestic Rockies, especially in summer. Nature's bountiful wildflowers, the aquamarine lakes and fascinating wildlife that roam the mountain valleys—they connect me to my God." Rose raised her glass to Dick in what looked like an abortive toast, then took a quick slug of wine, opened her arms, looked up, and said, "Thank you, Kananaskis Country, for letting me be part of all that you are."

"Hee-haw and yahoo!" Rick cheered, throwing his head back like a cowboy in the Calgary Stampede Parade. "Bravo, Aunt Rose! Love it—a prayer to the Church of Kananaskis!"

Dick's resounding table thump rattled the silverware; broccoli florets bounced in their bowl. Dorothy's red wine splashed onto the white linen tablecloth and slowly bled into its delicate weave. Looking at his son and making boxer jabs through a spray of spittle, Dick said, "Ricky! When it comes to religion you're as ignorant as a toad, so I'll thank you to keep your mouth shut on every blessed word about it."

“Stop trying to prove you’re saintlier...” Rick’s voice cracked, “and wiser than everyone else.”

Joy threw her napkin on her plate. “Ricky, you promised!”

Dick’s face reddened. “Goddammit, Ricky! After all I’ve sacrificed for you, this is the thanks I get? Give me some respect or get the hell outta here.” Dick dropped his fork on his plate and vigorously rubbed his forehead.

Rick’s eyes moistened as he stared at his food, hardly touched, and wondered whatever possessed him to wade into another religious argument, especially at Christmas. In the most controlled voice he could muster, he said, “I simply want us to make room for all points of view. If things get too heated, we’ll summon the good manners of our upbringing and agree to disagree.”

Dick’s voice trembled. “Might that be all from the genius in the family?”

Silence blared.

Rick studied his father’s frown line. *Deep enough to plant carrots in. Or a fist.* He forced an odd version of a smile at Harry and Rose. “My apologies,” he said. “Even though it’s Boxing Day, I shouldn’t put the gloves on.”

Harry shook his head from side to side. “No need to apologize.”

Dick’s eyes looked about to detonate. “Not so, Harry! An apology’s in order.”

Dorothy passed the broccoli to Harry and, in her sweetest tone of voice, said, “Second helpings are mandatory at Christmas.”

That’s Mom, Rick thought. *Maintaining order in the face of madness.*

Al, who usually refrained from commenting during disagreements in the Wright household, looked at Joy and said, “Family feuds like this have paramedics like me loading someone on a gurney.”

As if to calm his racing heart, Rick pressed one hand against his chest and turned toward his father who glared at him. Rick glared back. “I’ve been stretched too hard for too long. I appreciate my free rent and working part-time for you and Uncle Harry, but

jeez, Dad, I'm tired of feeling like an outsider looking in...like I don't belong in my own family. Tired of not being able to state my views without coming under your almighty wrath. Why does it have to be this way? Especially now, in front of everyone. At Christmas, for Chrissakes."

Dick flung his hand toward Rick and yelled, "Enough!" He refilled his wine glass and siphoned off the top third.

Sensing that his father wouldn't let up, Rick inhaled deeply, pushed his dinner plate forward and his chair back, then stood tall, as if subconsciously reminding people that he towered over everyone in the family, especially his father who was a good six inches shorter. He tugged at his shirt as if to make a formal address but froze when he caught the injured expression on his mother's face.

Dorothy pleaded, "Ricky, please relax and finish your dinner. Like you said, it's Christmas."

"I'm truly sorry, Mom, but there's no way out but down to my room. Thank you for making this delicious meal."

Dick punched his right fist into his left palm. "Listen to your mother! Sit down and eat!"

Rose propped her elbows on the table and rubbed her eyes as if trying to erase the tumultuous scene, and Harry looked like he'd just passed a small kidney stone. Al stared in disbelief at Joy, now feasting in sensuous oblivion and intermittently clucking her tongue as if she were calling the chickens home to roost.

Nodding ruefully to each family member except his father, Rick left the table and descended the stairs to his basement suite where he stepped inside and stood motionless at the entrance, lit only by a street light that shone through a sizeable basement window. The kitchen, dining, living room, and study nook blended together in a large, angular room that once looked welcoming and homey, but now looked cold and dingy. Rick grabbed his novel, which late last night he'd struggled to put down. He read the same paragraph three times. Thinking booze would mellow his mood, he tossed the novel aside, twisted the cap off a beer, and dimmed the lights. *How many*

fathers in this city ruined today's family dinner? What stitched their obnoxious behaviour into the fabric of their being? Genes? Parenting? Childhood trauma? Drugs?

Rick traced the same old carpet circles he'd trampled on earlier and continued his quest for answers: *How many sons ruined today's family dinner? Why am I so bent on proving Dad wrong? So fuckin' obstinate? Can't get out of my own way. Should go upstairs and apologize.* He mulled that idea over, then said aloud, "Can't. Won't." Putting his hands together in a sloppy prayer to the God he didn't believe in, he begged, "It's been a long time, but please God, if there's any chance you're out there, help me and Dad find a way to heal our hurt."

Twice, the upstairs front door firmly closed. *Nine o'clock and everyone's gone*, Rick thought. *Even Joy and Al left earlier than usual. Dad will go to bed soon, and I'll go up and help Mom with the dishes.* He flopped back down on the sofa and journeyed into his favourite painting that hung above his desk—a lone, scraggly tree stood at the side of a long, barren highway that narrowed and vanished into snow-capped mountains that poked holes in a melancholy sky.

Suddenly, heavy thuds grew louder until the basement door burst open and slammed into the wall behind—doorknob lost in the drywall. Dick's face, sweaty and coloured by rage, burned like an asteroid plunging through the stratosphere. "YOU make my blood boil! Correcting me in front of everyone! Cursing Jesus Christ our Saviour!"

Rick stepped closer to his father and braced himself for unfinished invective.

Dick's hands sliced through chunks of air as he emphasized each word. "In this house, I call the shots!"

Something inside Rick snapped and before he could stop himself, he shrieked, "Shove it up sideways!" then turned and started walking away.

Dick grabbed the heavy broom that Rick used to sweep the walks and slammed it into his son's back.

Rick screamed as he spun around and caught the edge of the kitchen table. “What the fuck!” He lunged at his father, who raised his arms to shield himself and yelled, “Don’t you touch—” but before he could finish his sentence, Rick pinned his dad’s shoulders against the wall and pushed his face within inches of his fiery eyes and hot breath.

Like a llama flaunting dominance over a lower-ranked male, Dick spat in his son’s face.

Enraged, Rick wrestled his father to the floor, rammed his right knee into his chest, and held his shoulders to the carpet. With rhythmic, unrestrained punches, he dragged out every word, “Give *me* some respect, goddammit!” He pounded Dick’s face until his nose and mouth oozed blood. Until his dazed eyes closed, his arms dropped to the floor, and his legs stopped flailing about.

Physically and emotionally drained, Rick stared down at his father, now reduced to a speechless, motionless old man. “Why do you *hate* me, Dad? *Why?*” His voice quivered. “I can’t take it anymore.” His heart throbbed, his hands shook, and his mind went blank. Scarcely stopping to think, he jumped up, grabbed his winter jacket and key ring, then flew up the stairs and out the back door.

Rick jumped in his car and started the twenty-minute drive to his only safe refuge—his uncle and aunt’s. Frightening images of his father’s bloodied, sagging face and vacant stare blurred his vision as he traversed a safer side route. To keep his foot from trembling on the gas pedal and get a grip on more than the steering wheel, Rick stopped beside a playground, buried his face in his hands, and tried to stop the dizzying flashbacks. With the brute force of that broom handle, guilt hurled him into a terrifying scene—a whole new world walled off by heavy prison doors, clanging key chains, and strange sounds. A world where he huddled in a corner, trying to shake relentless shame and unresolved anger. A world that, until tonight, was inconceivable. Rick’s stomach began convulsing so violently that he flung the car door open and coloured the snow with a stream of emotional,

projectile vomit. He wiped his face with a fistful of snow. *Stop it!* he ordered. *Dad assaulted me. I needed to defend myself. Keep calm. One step at a time. Turn the key. Check rear-view and side mirrors. Drive. Don't speed.*

Rick rang the doorbell and waited patiently. He rang it again and was about to leave when Harry appeared in his new Santa Claus pyjamas and winced at the sight of his nephew. "Come in, come in! Holy moly! Did everything go haywire after we left?"

Rick stumbled over his words. "Dad attacked me first...can't stand the sight of me. Christ, we could've killed each other!"

"Have you been drinking?" Harry asked and, without waiting for an answer, added, "Could've phoned me."

"Nothing serious—didn't finish my wine at dinner and had one beer since."

Rose rushed into the living room. "Ricky, my God! Are you okay?"

Rick felt as sober as the look on his aunt's face. "Dad drilled me with the heavy broom I use to sweep the walks. I hit him back. Pulled no punches. It's all a blur." Rick frantically patted his jacket pockets. "Where's my phone? I should call Mom, ask about Dad."

Rose said, "Your mom phoned after she got your father upstairs and into bed. Wants me to let her know how you are if you come here...doesn't want to talk to you, at least not tonight. She's very upset, with both of you. I'll call in a bit and tell her you're spending the night with us." Rose stepped closer to Rick. "Where did your dad hit you?"

Rick slipped his jacket off and raised his shirt to expose the damage.

"It's a real doozy," Rose said, as she ran her hand over the red, swollen lump, "but the skin isn't broken."

Harry stepped back from his own examination of the damage and put his hand on his nephew's shoulder. "Your father's so angry...so set in his ways. After every family dinner I swear it's the last. Then I

start feeling guilty. Your mom gets the Nobel Peace Prize for keeping their marriage together.”

Rick closed his eyes and nodded hesitantly as Harry beckoned to follow him into the kitchen. “How about a cup of tea?”

“Thanks, Uncle. Need something to calm my nerves.”

“I’ll check out the guest room,” Rose said, “and you can call your mom in the morning.”

Rick sat down at the kitchen table and looked at his uncle, who leaned against the counter as he waited for the water to boil and smiled at something known only to himself. Talking more to the kettle than his nephew, Harry said, “Bet you haven’t heard about the time your dad—” Harry looked at Rick, shook his head and chuckled. “You should’ve seen it. Grade eleven. Dick had the hots for Marylou Fancy Pants...that’s what all the guys called her. A feisty, wild one, if you know what I mean. Didn’t give a damn about social values or decency.”

“Yep,” Rick said, grinning. “The type of girl guys want but don’t respect.”

Harry smiled and nodded. “Miss Fancy Pants’ locker was beside your dad’s and one day, or so the story goes, they got into a shouting match and be damned if Dick didn’t go gaga over her. Said he’d bring lunch and a couple beers if she’d meet him over the noon hour next day and go down to the river.”

“Seriously?” Rick asked.

“Uh huh. Marylou agreed, and to prep for the big date, Dick spent an hour in the bathroom, slicking his hair back with greasy goop and doing God knows what all else. Under some phony pretense, he borrowed our father’s leather jacket, stashed three beers in his school bag alongside his usual peanut butter and jam sandwiches—a couple extras for Marylou—and chocolate chip cookies.”

Harry peeled a mandarin, put half of it in his mouth and gave the rest to Rick.

“Then what?” Rick asked.

“Next day at noon, I stood a safe distance from their lockers and watched Marylou Fancy Pants scream her lungs out in a strange,

seductive way...didn't let up until your dad opened a can of beer, dumped most of it over her head, and guzzled the rest. Marylou just stood there looking stunned, then ran to the washroom."

"Did you do anything?"

"Nope," Harry said, shaking his head from side to side. "By then, Dick's classmates had gathered, and it soon became clear—at least to all the girls—that no one argued with Dick Wright and won, not even Marylou Fancy Pants."

Rick raked his hair and racked his brains, amused but not knowing what to say.

Harry poured tea and sat down at the table. "Your dad! After that crazy sideshow, the girls shunned him, and believe you me he was quite a hunk in his younger years."

Rose walked into the kitchen and adjusted the sash on her fluffy red bathrobe. "Guest room's ready for you," she said, then walked over to the fridge and rifled through it. "You didn't have much supper."

"Please, I don't want to put you out. You were already in bed when I rang the doorbell."

"No problem, I wasn't asleep."

Rick looked at Harry and said, "Years ago, I asked Dad what it was like growing up in a small town and he said that it's never easy when everyone knows your business. Since then, I've only heard bits and pieces about his past—grandma died from cirrhosis, and grandpa was killed in a car accident. Joy and I never got any of the details, but I always sensed those tragedies left Dad with deep wounds—wounds that haven't healed."

Harry stacked the orange peelings. "Do you remember the Boxing Day dinner a couple years back when we were all having coffee and Baileys and I started describing our alcoholic mother? Your dad said, 'Stop right there! We owe it to Mom to honour her for who she was. Period.' So you see, your dad had a soft spot for our poor mother, as if he understood that alcoholism was a disease, not a weakness."

"That's touching. I always knew he didn't like to talk about his past, and all Mom ever said was how horrifying it must've been for

both of you to lose your parents at such a young age. I kept hoping that someday Dad would let it all out, but it looks like Marylou Fancy Pants will ask him to marry her before that happens.”

Harry chuckled. “What a miracle that would be! But yeah, too much of Dick is all tangled up in childhood rage.”

“Childhood rage?”

“Mm-hmm. Our family was as unstable as a rotten barn ladder, so poor Dick had to practically raise me.” Topping up their tea, Harry continued, “When I was about nine, I remember Dad—your Grandpa Wright—telling Dick and me, ‘Life’s cool when all your mother does is sit and nod her head.’ Dick asked him what he meant by that and Dad muttered something about Mom’s drinking, but we both knew by his tone of voice not to say anything more about it.”

“Was Grandpa Wright a bit like Dad?”

Harry scratched his thick, tinselled beard as Rose, listening in from the kitchen counter, glanced back at him and said, “From what you’ve told me, your father was a stern, God-fearing man at the best of times.”

Harry looked agitated. He walked over and put his hand on Rose’s shoulder. “Dad was as gruff as a grizzly but could turn on the charm like tap water. He liked women, beer, and curling, in that order.” Harry dropped his chin. “Poor Mom. Had no career or close family ties, just us and her absentee husband.”

“Except for the curling and philandering, Dad’s got Grandpa’s love of beer,” Rick said, looking forlorn.

“You got that right. As for philandering, I’m sure all the realtors and curlers gossiped about the town’s infamous womanizer. But he did sell lots of real estate. Won so many prizes in company sales that we ran out of space on the mantle for his trophies.”

Rick swallowed hard. “Still and all, Grandpa must’ve been a real embarrassment to Grandma.”

“Yep. She hardly ever poked her nose out the door. No wonder alcohol became her best friend...and worst enemy.”

“Alcohol’s becoming Dad’s best friend too. Maybe it’s in his genes.”

“Possibly, but I doubt he’ll ever be the alcoholic Mom was.” Harry sauntered back to the table, sat down, and tapped his foot on the kitchen tile. “Every day before your Dad and I got home from school, Mom was well into her liquid salads—vodka and orange or tomato juice, with celery stir sticks. By supper time, she was pretty well wasted, and Dad, good ol’ Dad, was either wheeling and dealing or rutting with the ladies. That’s when Dick became the parent. He’d make mounds of popcorn smothered in melted butter, or we’d fix ourselves the same old sandwiches we’d had for lunch. To this day, the smell of peanut butter makes me gag.”

Rick shook his head. “That’s so sad. Did Grandma and Grandpa fight a lot?”

“They rarely spoke. Dad must’ve known it was only a matter of time before booze would take her.”

“At least my parents talk,” Rick said. “Well, Dad does most of it. I hate it when Mom doesn’t stand up to him.”

“That’s what I love about you, honey,” Harry said, winking at Rose. “Won’t take guff from anyone.”

“Including Dad,” Rick said, grinning. “You didn’t let him get away with anything tonight. Loved everything you said.”

“Really? I told Harry on the way home that I should’ve known Dick would take his frustration out on you. Wish I’d kept my mouth shut.”

“Glad you didn’t. He needed to hear from you,” Rick said. “If family doesn’t challenge him, who will? Most people wouldn’t bother.”

Rose studied Rick’s facial expression then placed a tray of cheese, whole-wheat crackers, ham slices, and dark fruitcake on the table. She squeezed her nephew’s shoulder as she passed slowly behind him and said, “I’m off to bed. Get a good sleep and we’ll talk over breakfast.”

Rick yawned into his cupped fist. “Thanks, Aunt Rose. I’m so grateful for your help.” He glanced at Harry and added, “Both of you.”

Harry nodded and asked Rick, “Where was I?”

“Grandpa, the realtor...among other things.”

“Right,” Harry reached for a slice of fruitcake and talked more about how it’s taken years to appreciate that, overall, Dick tried to be the good parent who watched out for his younger brother.

“Did your father spend any time with you and Dad?” Rick asked. “Take you to hockey games, go camping, fishing, play catch...stuff like that?”

“Nope. But one thing he did do...then we better hit the hay. Sundays were special. Your grandpa would cook Dick and me a big breakfast, then we’d dress in our proper church-going duds...and be sure to comb our hair. Dad got hot under the collar if our hair wasn’t clean, parted straight, and nicely combed for all those church-going ladies. At supper time, he’d treat us to a full meal at the family diner where we’d order the regular special—roast beef with gravy, mashed potatoes, some vegetable or other that I didn’t touch, and dessert, usually pie.” Harry paused. His eyes had a faraway look. “Dick and I ate lots, said little; Dad drank lots, ate little. And lectured us.” He glanced at the wall clock and groaned faintly. “Now that we’ve had our tea and a bite—ten years ago I would’ve brought out the scotch—maybe we should pack it in.”

Rick smiled. “Yeah, I’m losing steam too. Thanks for the bedtime story. Never knew the half of it.”

Harry raised his eyebrows and said, “Family histories. Because of ours, Ricky, I’ve always cut your dad a lot of slack.”

In the pitch-black guestroom, Rick tossed and turned until the sheets, soaked in perspiration, were as knotted as his stomach. The discomfort he felt from his wound was drowned by crashing waves of guilt and grotesque images of his father’s bloody face, his glassy stare and immobile body. When sleep came, it didn’t last long.

At 8:05, in Calgary’s dawning light of winter, Rick awoke to the sound of a garbage truck in the back alley. Dazed, he slowly got his bearings and gasped aloud, “Oh no...NO! Dad!” Hearing voices downstairs, he pulled on his wrinkled clothes and lumbered into the kitchen.

Harry looked up from his newspaper. "Good morning, Ricky. How did you sleep?"

"Hope you were comfortable," Rose piped up, then poured Rick a cup of steaming coffee.

"The bed was comfortable, thanks, but I only caught a few hours," Rick said as Harry passed him a large plate of pancakes. "Is it okay if I call Mom?"

"Yes, yes, of course, you can do that now if you like." Harry reached for the cordless and plunked it in front of his nephew.

"I'm almost as worried about Mom as I am about Dad." Rick frowned and slowly shook his head. "Wonder why she didn't want to talk to me last night?"

Harry stood up, gave Rick's shoulder a squeeze, and beckoned Rose to leave the room with him.

Rick pushed pieces of pancake around on his plate as he waited for his mom to answer.

"Good morning, is that you Rose?" Dorothy said.

"No, it's me, Mom. Can't tell you how sorry I am for last night."

In an unsteady voice, Dorothy said, "Come home now. Joy's here and we need to talk to you."

Rick's voice was strong. "Look. Dad attacked me first. When I wasn't looking, he slammed that heavy broom into my back. Dammit, Mom, I *had* to defend myself."

The phone connection crackled. "Come home now," Dorothy said, now sounding impatient.

Rick wolfed down a few bites of pancake and dragged himself into the living room. "Mom hung up on me. Ordered me to come home immediately." He went to the door and reached for his jacket. "Time to settle this family matter, then do some soul searching on the slopes." Rick walked over and gave his Aunt Rose a hug.

"We'll always be here for you if you need us," Rose said.

Harry followed his nephew to the door, lifted his arms, and wrapped him in a bear hug. "I admire you for standing up to your old man. That took guts."

Rick's deep blue eyes glistened as he lowered his head, stepped out the door, and tossed Harry a loving wave.

Traffic had narrowed to a single lane on Calgary's busiest street. As Rick crawled along, accelerating then decelerating, his thoughts drifted from his favourite ski slopes to his parents' kitchen table where he pictured his mom and Joy waiting to pounce. *What if Dad's there too? Nah, too early. Even on his good days.*

Rick gently tapped and opened the kitchen door, walked in, and boldly said, "Before either of you say anything, keep in mind that I could've called the cops." His voice grew louder and more urgent. "Could've charged Dad with assault."

"Mother of God, I'm glad you didn't do that," Dorothy moaned. "How is Dad?"

"Had a fitful night, but I just checked in on him and he's sound asleep. What on Earth got into you two? I heard the racket...the shouting. Should've come downstairs, but..." Dorothy's voice trailed off.

Rick's voice softened. "Please tell me, Mom. How is Dad?"

"Cut and badly bruised. The gash on his forehead took forever to stop bleeding. Needs stitches, but he refused to let me drive him to the hospital."

"I'm...I'm still in shock. And I'm sorry," Rick said. "So sorry."

"And I'm so disappointed...in both of you," said Dorothy. "Dad was belligerent at the table, but you...*you* practically sent him to an early grave."

"Why, Ricky? Why?" Joy said, in a tone that complemented her mother's scorn.

"Go ahead, give me hell. But remember this, Joy, in case Mom didn't tell you. Dad assaulted me first."

Dorothy repeatedly sniffled; her eyes were tearful. Shielding her face, she left for the bathroom, a common escape route when Dick railed about some unpardonable mistake, like not putting the lid on the pickle jar tight enough, or flinging the towel over the shower rod instead of hanging it "properly."

Dorothy's absence gave Joy permission to have at it. "Even though Dad hit you first, why in God's name did you beat him within an inch of his life?" She sat back and took a deep breath before continuing. "You showed amazing restraint during Christmas dinner when he went on about his wacky conspiracy theories, and I thought you'd decided to let him have his stupid ideas and ignore—"

"Look! I tried to ignore him last night too, but there's a limit to my endurance."

Joy said, "Just one more night, that was all, Ricky—for Aunt Rose and Uncle Harry. For Mom. For Christmas! You made things worse than they already were. Listen, all kinds of fathers in this world act like Dad, but their sons don't retaliate like rabid animals."

"*You* listen! All kinds of sons confront their fathers' stupidity, but their *fathers* don't attack them like rabid animals. Dad was the worst he's ever been...to Uncle Harry too."

"Cut the melodrama! Dad was just being Dad," Joy said. "Mom's right, he was belligerent, but when will you get over your endless grudge?"

"*My* melodrama? Did you see how he glared at me? How he looked for any excuse to hammer me with another spiteful insult? I'm always in his crosshairs, in case you haven't noticed."

"I *have* noticed. But the minute Dad disagrees with you, you become an arrogant, pompous ass who sounds like one of those ancient philosophers you love to quote. All that's missing as you stride back and forth is a white toga draped over your shoulder."

"Fuckin' enough! Try imagining that *you're* that little kid Dad rejected. Vividly imagine it instead of doing what you always do—defend him."

Joy gave what sounded like a painful squeak. "And you can try imagining what our lives would've been like without this nice home and heaping wad of financial security we'll inherit. Doesn't that prove Dad loves us?"

"Loves *you*! Your little love alliance is sickening. And don't tell me to stop feeling sorry for myself. Twenty-some years of calculated

cruelties finally exploded. *Understandably* exploded.” He stared at Joy, who now sat expressionless and speechless. “I’m trying to hold it together, Sis. Trying to see what role I play in this fucked up family.”

Dorothy had returned from the bathroom and as she busied herself at the kitchen counter, Rick asked, “What happened after you went downstairs, Mom?”

“Couldn’t believe what I saw.” Dorothy leaned heavily on a dish cloth she pushed back and forth across the counter top. “Dad was lying on the floor, his face covered in blood. For a split second, I actually thought you’d killed him, but as soon as he heard my shocking reaction he mumbled, ‘Get me outta here.’ I helped him up the stairs and into bed, cleaned the blood off his face and wondered where you’d gone.”

“Did he say anything about me?”

“Said something about you having to move out. Good idea if you can’t control your anger.”

“Mom! It’s not like you to take sides. You haven’t said anything about Dad having to control *his* anger. I’m controlling my own right now...toward you.”

“Now just a minute here, Ricky. You’re bigger and stronger than Dad. Why didn’t you take that broom out of his hand and calm him down? Or escape upstairs?”

“You’re kidding, right? Wild animals don’t let humans calm them down. I told you, he attacked when I wasn’t looking.” Rick pushed his chair back and announced, “I’m going skiing...need to find true north.”

Joy’s brooding...they’ve abandoned me, Rick concluded as he descended the stairs to his suite. *Feels like I’m sneaking down some grotty stairway in the Roach Hotel...my very own House of Horrors.* Frazzled and unfocused, he changed his clothes three times until he got the right layering, then threw together two cheese sandwiches that he put in his backpack along with a water bottle and shortbread cookies.

Fresh fallen snow sparkled in the brilliant sunshine as Rick bore down on every push—one stride of pity; one, disgust. One stride of guilt;

one, anger. As always, nature had the upper hand and it wasn't long before she smoothed the edges of Rick's jagged emotions. Two hours in, he chanced upon a small opening where he flopped down on the soft snow and devoured his lunch, then rested his head on his backpack and thought of his fun-loving friend Gabe. Compassionate, witty, easygoing Gabe was spending Christmas with family in Vancouver. *He'd know just what to say at a time like this. Never felt so bereft. So alone.*

Snow had seeped into Rick's clothing and the slow melt made his return trip bone-chillingly cold. Gliding into the final clearing before his descent to the trailhead, he stopped and stabbed his ski poles in the snow. Streaks of orange-tinted sunlight had burst through a veil of cloud, and although Rick had seen many awesome sunsets over the years, this one had special impact.

Ah, twilight, he mused. A tranquil gift for tortured souls.