

“Red” by Chad Pelley

I was seventeen and he was that guy with a story, you know? He had no job, but plenty of money. All the neighbours wished he'd mow his lawn more. He grew turnips in his flower beds instead of flowers.

He'd shake your hand like meeting a stranger was a rarity, a profound moment. So he'd give you that fifth and sixth enthusiastic wrist pump before letting your hand go. It's like he'd plugged himself into the world, and 100 volts worth of its beauty and sadness coursed through his arteries where his blood should have been. I'm surprised his hair didn't stand on end. He'd cry during the news, is what I mean. He'd go looking for peoples' lost dogs on telephone poles. There were exactly 13 photos of fostered kids on his fridge. 12 from Africa and one from Cambodia. I didn't even know there was a place called Cambodia. I asked him their names one day and he said, "I dunno." He shrugged his shoulders and said, "It's best not to get attached to people and things in this life, kid, but it's important you do your part." And that's what defined him really, really: his big red broken heart. You could see it in his eyes. In their glosslessness. And I never felt like it was a girl who'd gotten away, or even a wife and daughter dead from a car crash or something. Life itself had lowered his expectations. All that needless evil on the five O'clock news. Or, moreso, the apathy of its viewers.

The first time I saw him, he was building a snowman with whatever snow had fallen that November. He never had children and he lived alone. Forty-something, and he built a fucking snowman, all alone, in his backyard. He even gave it branch-arms and a carrot-nose. I saw him out there, sort of laughing at himself; golden ponds of moonlight all over his backyard.

That was all I'd seen of him until the spring, and then I saw him every day. He'd sit on his patio, for hours, playing a black acoustic guitar that had a bunch of holes in it. There was a piercing melancholy in the tone of the songs he played, and I'd crack my window to let it. His music was how I knew we had something in common. He was my CD player that summer. My soundtrack to 1999.

I started finding reasons to cross paths with the man. I'd hear him on his patio, playing guitar, and I'd go out to Dad's shed and fetch something — like a hammer or a

roll of duct tape — so that I could pull an *Oh hi!* as if I just so happened to see him there, on my way back from the shed, with a roll of duct tape I had no use for. I'd say something stupid like, *Nice guitar, Did you write that song?*

"I haven't played someone else's song in ten years," he said. "That's not the point of an instrument. You don't see painters painting Mona Lisa on their canvases day after day, right? You don't see writers typing out *War and Peace* sentence for sentence."

"No," I said, but what I wanted to say was, *Why does yesterday feel like today and how come tomorrow will too?* What I wanted to say was, *Why does a woman like my mother give her life away, to a man like my father?* There was something in his music that had those answers.

I'd mix up the shed routine. One day I heard him rooting around in his front-lawn vegetable patch, and decided to walk to the store for a coke, even though there was two litres of the stuff in my fridge. I walked past him and he waved; that claw-like digging tool make it look like he had a cat's hand.

"Hey, I'm heading down to the store, you want anything?" The words came out without having to think about them, like a sneeze.

He shouted over a neighbour's lawnmower, "Yes, a dozen beer, come in and we'll draw a mustache on you, make you look old enough." He always laughed at his own jokes. There was an awkward silence during a lull in one of our over-the-fence backyard conversations one day, and he asked me if I played video games, and the next thing I know I'm always playing *Tekken 2* and *Jet Moto* at his house after school. My mother wasn't entirely comfortable with that, me playing video games with a bearded 40-something who had an unmowed lawn. But the night she invited him over for supper, he brought an apple torte he'd made himself. He'd dyed the whites of the apples red with non-toxic dyes for show. She figured dangerous, questionable men didn't bake tortes, and maybe there's some truth to that. She asked him for the recipe. He said "It was my wife's and I'm not sharing." He laughed, and she laughed, but he'd said *was*. *Was* my wife's, he'd said, and the word punched me in the throat.

He'd spend the rainy days in his garage, his stereo blaring the sounds of old, blind, blues guys playing out-of-tune guitars, and singing like they were coughing up razor blades; irritating on the surface, like you had to know something he knew about that

music to *get it*. Coming through the garage walls, it sounded extra muffled and shaky, which worked in its favour: it smoothed the rough edges of their voices and poor-quality recordings.

His name was Red. You don't need a last name when your name's Red. I called him Red Baron all the time, after that Snoopy skit. "Funny thing is," he'd said once, "My Dad's name was Baron!"

My father's name was Derrick, not Baron, and I never nicknamed *him*, because nicknames are spawned from fondness and companionship. Something my father and I never had. All I shared with my father were obligate hellos and goodbyes in passing. He never knew my friends by name, just "that tall lanky one," or "Pimpface," and I know he still works at LiveWire Communications, but I have no idea what he does there. What LiveWire even does. He ate toast a lot, that's what comes to mind when I think of my father. Three o'clock in the morning, it was nothing to hear the toaster popping; a knife scratching against dry toast. Always blueberry jam. Always saying, "Can't you get that stain out?" like it was my mother's fault he'd dripped jam on a tie.

My father was a self-absorbed hockey fan who shouted at the TV. That's all I know. And I don't even know what his favourite team was. And after all of these years, I can't even picture his face. Swear to God. Except that he had a moustache, and rubbed his nose a lot with the back of an index finger, like the thing was irritating.

The night of my grade six Christmas concert, Mom and I had come home early. One of the kids from the play had been in a serious car accident minutes before the concert was supposed to start. We walked in on Dad with some college-age slut. She wasn't even pretty. She wasn't even ugly. That made it worse somehow. The plainness of her. Her lack of irresistibility.

We walked in and she shot up off the couch like a frightened cat, then stood frozen still and petrified. She stared at my mother's shattered face, covering her flappy tits with a forearm, but not the rest of it. She had *Bradley* tattooed on her lower back, and she had bad teeth: there was gunk where tooth met gum. Mom covered my eyes with her purse, and seconds later I heard the back door slam shut, felt Mom's purse fall on my toes, then saw Mom running up the stairs. She took them three at a time. Long seconds between her feet hammering down on the floor. She was screaming, "Now you've done

it! Now you've ... done it!" She slammed her bedroom door. Howled like a witch in a fire. It haunted me for a year, that guttural scream. It changed the way I looked at her.

I looked back to my father after she'd let out the scream. I heard her whimpering up there, then I heard the slap of my father's forehead falling into his hands. He was still naked; didn't even bother to put a cushion over the thing. There was a pink bra wildly strewn across my mother's couch like a stain.

As a family we'd always eaten on that couch, at the coffee table. But she avoided the room altogether for months. No more Cosby re-runs, just the three of us. Maybe a month later, we all ate a meal together for the first time since. My mother's teeth fought with the lettuce and tomatoes, chewing them longer than they needed chewing. My father's sleazy slurps of beer. No one talking. But everyone adjusting, moving on. I held it against her that she'd stay. But what did I know about love.

All the nights I spent in that house, she tried to hide her dejection from me. I watched as year after year that man clawed the life out of my mother's eyes. By the time I was seventeen, she was all gone.

By seventeen I was also done blaming my father for my mother's descent into a perpetual funk. Because feeling bad for a woman who was willingly standing in a fire, and crying because it hurt her, was pretty fucking stupid. My father would have been happy to see her go, and take me with her. He never once put a gun to our heads to stay. She could have stepped out of that fire, but instead she stood there, and let me watch her burn.

By high school, my father was in the habit of storming into my bedroom, needing someone to vent to about "your bitch of a mother." He was the kind of insensitive man who thought his own son was the right set of ears. He'd come through the door in a needless hurry, pushing the door before he'd turn the handle, so there was a soft thud before the door swung open. I'd be mid-sentence, writing a paper on Shakespeare or Pierre Trudeau, and the door would bust wide open and derail my train of thought. He'd screw the top off a beer, and slam the beercap down on my dresser. "*For fuck's sake!* She's always looking at me like I hit her of something. I'm sick of it! I tell her I'm not in the mood for supper with her crabby mother, and she puts her head down and grabs her purse and walks out the door like I slapped her across the face."

He'd slam those beer caps down so hard they probably scratched up the top of the dresser. I wouldn't know; I haven't seen the thing since I took off at 18. Red gave me a month's driving lessons and his old Buick. He made me promise to write a postcard every two weeks, so he'd know he didn't "send me off to die in Halifax."

There was hesitation in his gesture when he finally passed over the key to his car. He raised his hand so slowly out of his pocket, like the key had taken root in his jeans. Like it was a plant in soil that needed a tug. I barely pressed the gas pedal, still afraid of the thing. It was a jumpy car, or I was a bad driver, I dunno, but I'd press the gas and it'd buck me like a bull would. I rolled down the street at twenty kilometers an hour, away from Mom and Dad and Red and the last few days of high school, assuming I'd passed all my exams.

He'd dangled the keys and I'd taken them. Then he handed me a note.

"What's this?"

"Stick it in the glove compartment. It's for the ... the police. In case you get pulled over. It's a signed confession that I know you took my car, in case they think you stole it, since you don't even have your license. So for God sakes, man, do *not* get pulled over and have to use that note, okay?"

"Good plan."

A handshake, and he hauled me in for a hug. He whispered, "You're not a coward if you change your mind and come back."

There was something soft about the heat of his voice in my ear. It's the way I remember the man. A soft sensation at my ear. It's funny, the way memory works. What falls away over the years, and what's left intact.

What I didn't know at the time was that I was abusing not only Red's generosity, but his temporary indifference to the consequences of getting caught. What he'd lost, a few months before we got close, was more than what the police or anybody could have taken away from him. For letting a kid find a new life.

Red never tried to influence what I was up to in Halifax. He was only curious. About the girl I was seeing and why things weren't working out, or how I'd caved and checked out the CDs he'd sent me, and that, yeah, I actually liked some of the blind blues guys. And that started our long-running postcard competition. We'd send each other the

most ridiculous touristy postcards we could find, and whoever sent the cheesiest postcard that month won. He always won. The only one I can remember now was the very first he'd sent. It was a scene of kids at a table with their grandmother, about to eat a cliché Newfoundland meal of cod and hard tack bread. The caption said, *Let's eat Nan!* instead of *Let's eat, Nan!* And Red had a p.s that said, "Matt, you got out just in time, we're cannibalizing the elderly here in Newfoundland now! Who knows how much longer I have?"

Red sent me two-grand a month for the first three months I was in Nova Scotia, until I got a job stocking shelves at a library in Halifax. He never told me what I should be doing with myself, up there in Nova Scotia. He never preached the virtues of a university education, like a parent would have. But don't picture him as a frizzy-haired man in a tie-dye shirt with a marijuana leaf on it. Picture a guy so well-tailored and fashionable that people speculated as to why he never had a woman. As in, maybe he was gay. Picture a guy who cleaned his colour-coordinated kitchen twice a day — with a neon green IKEA broom and — and lit fragrant jar candles after he cooked a meal.

Two months before I'd left for Halifax, I'd punched my father in the mouth: his teeth tore flesh from my knuckle, and I watched the triangular cut fill with blood. I'd hit him because he was snarling about my mother's voice being more annoying than an alarm clock, and the way he shouted it made her lips quiver. Her whole body rippled: she was a pond and he was throwing stones. Her husband, the only adult *really* in her life, hated her. And he couldn't hide it, couldn't just shut the fuck up and watch the commercials during the hockey game: he had to bark at her. He went on too long that night, he got too specific, about how there's probably makeup to hide her crow's feet and she should look into it, and how her double chin looked like an iguana's flap. *It's more like a triple chin* he'd said, and he looked at me like I should laugh along. And then he reached over, grabbed a roll of fat on her belly, and said, "Jesus, that got to go, don't you think?"

I ran across the living room and I belted him in the mouth, and the cut stung, and my wrist snapped, and I showed up on Red's doorstep saying, *I think I broke my wrist*. I was clutching the thing like it was an injured bird. Like the pain was why I was crying. And he just opened his door, stepped aside, said, "Maybe we should put some ice on it? I think that's what we should do?" And he nodded and fetched a Ziplock bag and some ice. Except he only had two cubes left, tiny ones at that, and it was kind of pathetic, but that gave us something to laugh about. He patted my shoulder. He intuited I had nowhere else to go that night.

After waving to Mom from Red's kitchen window to hers, so she knew where I was, I walked back out to his living room and sat in the chair I had always sat in when we played video games. I liked the familiarity, the comfort, knowing how to lean into the thing. I looked up and he was standing in the doorway, staring at me, like he was hesitating in saying something. His mouth opened once, like a fish on land, before snapping shut. He said, *Never hit a man until he hits you first*. He'd always try and explain things in some simile or metaphor that only half made sense.

"The thing is, Matt, when a doctor takes the bullets out a man, the damage is still done. What you've got to do in life, is you've got to never be in a situation where you want to hit a man. It's toxic."

He told me I could have his bedroom for the night, for the week if I wanted, and he'd let my parents bang on his front door all night. I looked down the hall like I didn't know where his bedroom was. He walked me there. The room smelled musty; it smelled differently than the rest of the house. There was perfume and lipsticks on his dresser, and a purple nightgown with white daisies all over it hanging on a hook on the wall. When he walked into the room, his body went loose at the hinges. A jellyfish out of water. He kept his head down, like he'd walked in on a naked stranger pulling her clothes off.

He saw me sizing up everything feminine in the room. "She was killed on the job," he'd said. "She was a nurse, and ... one night a schizophrenic patient went off on her, and it was the Goddamn hospital's fault. But I never went in there punching anyone, did I?" He turned and walked away. I don't think he even breathed the whole minute he stood in that room.

The duvet was pockmarked by dust; threads of grey had woven themselves into the fabric like tiny fossils. I took it off and threw it to the floor. There was a staleness to the sheets, like they'd been trapped under that duvet a year or more, unexposed. And there was a novel with a pink bookmark in it on the nightstand, which she obviously never got to finish. I picked it up and read a page.

I pretended I needed a glass of water, as an excuse to stumble around his house and see where he *had* been sleeping. He had been sleeping on a kid-sized cot in his garage. And then it made sense why he flinched whenever he got up from a chair, or sighed as he fell into one: it was because of his back, because of that cot.

There was still a prescription made out to Mrs. Tanya Levesque in the medicine cabinet. He wasn't throwing things out and crying about it, like they do in the movies, but he was sleeping in the garage, which seemed even worse. And it's why he could give me the keys to his car and not care who found out.

He pretended that the first night I stayed in his house was the first night he slept on that cot in his garage. But the lie was there in that staleness of his sheets, and that year's worth of dust on the duvet. There was a nightstand missing from his room *before* he'd let me in there, and it was in the garage with an alarm clock on it.

I stayed there for a week a straight. We never answered the door when my father came knocking, and my parents never called the cops. One night, a bunch of his friends came over. They drank like college kids, and talked about women like college kids, and didn't seem like the kind of friends Red would have. When one of their eyes would wander to that picture of Red and Tanya on the wall, they'd look away like it was some intimate scene they shouldn't have witnessed — strangers kissing — or they'd look briefly at Red and sigh for him. They talked about the US election and moron politicians and music and someone's mother who'd just won a slip-and-fall lawsuit, and in every conversation, Red wasn't as enthusiastic as the rest of them. He was only half-contributing to the conversations. Always staring off in the distance, seeing something no one else saw.

That night, by the time his friends had left at two a.m., on a Wednesday night, Red was intoxicated. It was like he was drinking to block his friends out, not to carry on with them. Or it was like the booze was dumbing him down to their level, where maybe

some part of him *could* laugh and forget. The whole night, he looked like owed them at least trying to have a good time, since they'd all come over. Again.

He got up from his chair to walk to the kitchen, so drunk he was stepping on his own toes and almost tipping over. "W-water. A drunk man needs water before bed. Don't you forget it."

He swung the fridge door open, grabbed a beer, and stared at a bottle of Dijon mustard. He told me how Tanya used Dijon and he hated it, and he used plain yellow mustard, and she thought that was tasteless of him. He laughed as he fell into a chair. "*Tasteless*, get it, because we're talking mustard?"

He fell asleep in the chair, and when his beer tipped over, I sopped up the mess with my sock, because I couldn't find any paper towels. I looked down at him, sad, lonely, and snoring. Eventually, drooling. Seeing that side of him was what gave me the conviction I needed to get out of that town. To move on. People like Red and Mom, they were seeds in shaded soil and would never really bloom where they were. They were warnings of stagnation. I mean, that bottle of Dijon in Red's fridge. It was cemented shut by a ring of grime around the lid.

We kept in touch through those postcards for a good year or so after I left. I won a scholarship at some point, and called to tell him all about it. But three years later we were out of contact. My university workload, his new job. It happens.

More than a decade passed before another postcard had shown up. I still don't know how he found my new mailing address. Sixty-something, and he's getting married. *Matty-boy: I think you owe me a favour, for that Buick I gave you? How about you be an usher at my wedding? Her name is Ursula. Horrible name, right? I told her she could keep her last name, when we marry, if she'd please change her first.*

But he died before the wedding. Pulmonary embolism. I read up on it. That means a blood clot blocked off blood flow into his lungs. He would have felt breathless; he would have felt pain when he breathed in. His confused heart pumping hard as a heart

attack. That's about where I stopped reading, choosing to believe he passed out before any real pain set in.

I think you owe me a favour he'd said, in that letter.

Sometimes you don't get to pay a man back.

But fifty bucks says Red would say that's a wonderful thing.