

A Second Look at Nothing

He went to his son's house and he waited. He sat down, pushed his back against the door, and because the wood was rotting, it felt like he was sitting on springs. The sun was a dull blade, sawing his eyes, so he kept his head down, in a cloud of his own second-hand smoke. He'd get lungfuls of it when he breathed in. He was tired, because that was a long drive from Corner Brook to St. John's. Trees, no trees. Trees, the ocean, a hundred little ponds. A flurry of gas stations, more trees. All the grease from a cheap meal at Irving sat in his stomach like a ball of wax.

His son was supposed to be there when he showed up. Eric was missing, but in Ches's mind, on the drive across the island, he'd knock on Eric's door, and Eric would open up, confused, and Ches would say, *We've all been worried sick.*

No one answered the door, and Eric's mailbox was stuffed so full of letters that the metal looked pregnant and ready to buckle. So Ches sat there, not knowing what else to do. He'd wait it out. He had half a lettuce-and-tomato sandwich in his jacket pocket, and a bottle of warm water at his side. It tasted like plastic whenever he'd take a swig. He had a crossword puzzle from yesterday's paper in his breast pocket, and the better half of a cracked-off HB pencil.

When Eric said he couldn't make it for his mother's birthday, that he'd try and visit them on the next long weekend, Ches heard the tell-tale signs in his son's words. Eric never lied, but he withheld truths, and Ches knew the sound of his son withholding a truth. All the unspoken words would pile up on his tongue, and weigh it down. It had a way of leaving awkward pauses in his speech.

His son had missed six days of work, and his employer had to dig out and dial Eric's next of kin. Ches's wife had her speculations: a slip and fall in the shower, drugs, *he's been mugged and left for dead!* Most of them entirely possible, but she'd never guess the scenario Ches concerned himself with. The whole drive to St. John's, Ches was thinking about that broken window. He and his wife had gone to visit Eric over Thanksgiving weekend, and there'd been a broken window out back, and Eric's answer never lined up.

"I'd locked my keys inside—"

"So you punched out a *window* ... in-instead of calling your girlfriend! *Nobody* busts their own windows!" But Ches's wife had a hand on his shoulder, *Let it go. None of our business.*

And he did let it go, because he knew the MO of a broken window. He knew exactly who would've thrown a brick through that glass. But he wasn't going to talk about that. Not with his wife there, connecting dots. She'd been through enough because of Ches; half of it she didn't know she'd been through. It was 2008, when a brick had come through their own front window. But she hadn't been home. She'd been Christmas shopping. By the time she'd come home, shocked and baffled about declined credit cards, he'd rigged the window to look like an accident.

He'd backed his truck up against the house, so a pole of scaffolding, stacked in the cab, speared itself through the glass. The lie wasn't hard to sell because she was more concerned about their emptied bank accounts. The useless credits cards. The giftless Christmas for the daughter they still had living at home. He pretended to call the bank, and he tried telling her they were the victims of fraud, as if she wouldn't go kicking the bank's doors down, demanding an explanation.

Ches woke up that Christmas morning, and had to tell his wife they'd need to find a smaller house now. As soon as possible. And that her engagement ring wasn't missing. It was gone. They'd spent Boxing Day dividing their belongings into what they could pawn off in a hurry. As she cried alone in the tub that night, he was running a paintbrush over the lines in the spare bedroom closet: *Eric: 8 years old, 3 foot 3. Eric: 9 years old, 3 foot 3.* "Are you sure?," he'd said. "Are you *sure*?" Eric looked at that ruler like he couldn't trust it, so Ches measured again. Lied. Added an inch.

There were black streaks chafed into the hardwood, where Eric had insisted on storing his bicycle. They took an hour to buff out. There was an open house that Sunday, and he had to erase every sign that he'd raised three kids there.

He hadn't slipped up and gambled for four and a half years after the Christmas of 2007, but retirement got boring, and luck had always been the devil on his shoulder; an overwhelming sensation, whispering, promising things. The new roof was going to cost forty-two hundred dollars. Forty-two black chips, he thought. Eighty-four red ones. He could rake in maybe half of that in a single night, if he played his cards right. He'd pictured his hands, scooping the stacked chips closer; felt their satisfying ridge in the palm of his hand. And he missed the good nights, when tall towers of chips blocked his view of the table, and hogged the space where he'd normally lay his cold Labatt Blue.

The room he gambled in smelled like urinal pucks. On account of poor plumbing, it sounded like there was a river running through it. He had to tolerate second-hand cigar smoke, scratching his eyes and prickling his lungs. But when he wasn't there, he'd long for the place, the same way someone thinks about childhood, and how they'd go back there if they could. Because

one moment, one handful of face cards, one five minute game, could bring him somewhere nothing else could.

He stood up and tried Eric's doorbell again, like maybe Eric had been sleeping, and sat back down when no one answered. He lit another cigarette, tilted his head up, exhaled, and it looked like the clouds had come straight from his own two lungs. There was a daisy at his feet, tapping him with every gust of wind. He picked it up and plucked its petals off, one by one by one, until it was a judgmental yellow eyeball staring back at him.

At every meeting his wife had sent him to: *Addiction is hardest on the ones you love*. It was the kind of mantra those people would write on a cake. He'd hated how proud of themselves they were, for recognizing what shitty mothers and fathers and lovers and children they'd been. There was a wife at his first meeting, who'd been pilfering money that was supposed to go to her mother-in-law's rent at an Alzheimer's clinic. It was disgusting, the way she dragged her family into it and forgave herself to the sound of applause for her confession.

But he'd slipped up too, and run to his son for help. The day he went back to those tables, it wasn't supposed to be the gangster underworld that all those oil-well workers had turned it into. Since Fort McMurray and a dozen other prairie towns had started employing Newfoundlanders for half a year, and sending them back home with more money than they knew what to do with, the bored sons of bitches had corrupted how the tables were run. How the whole thing went. There was bigger money, tougher enforcement. They were using kids – kids with nothing to lose – to collect on debts. Too much had changed in the four years since he'd quit.

Kids, nineteen, twenty, circling his car like angry gulls, running a key across his door like they enjoyed the music of it. And when the police pinched them for aggravated assault or vandalism, and taught them consequence of their actions, the game runners would simply hire new kids.

Harder ones.

“Eric, please, they’re threatening your sister, your mother. They’ll loan *you* money, but ... not me.”

“This is the real world, not on an HBO show. No one’s getting whacked. Call the police.”

“They’re ... not talking about *shooting* anyone.”

Ches nodded his head, *Yes*.

Eric’s sister only seventeen years old.

Ches had gone banging on Fiona’s door before sitting himself at Eric’s doorstep that day. He’d wanted to know his son’s disappearance had nothing to do with the loan, and everything to do with how unexplainably withdrawn his son had been in the weeks leading up to the loan.

He banged on Fiona’s door and, not looking where he was swinging his big paw of a hand, and he’d cut a knuckle on the rusty number 9. He watched the cut fill with blood, and stared at a hand that looked twenty years his elder. The door opened. He hadn’t called first, and she was surprised to see him.

“Ch—.” she stopped as if fending off a sneeze. “Ches? It’s been ... forever.”

It had been a while, sure, a month or two, but this wasn't about catching up, so he stood there, wordless, waiting to be invited in. She tightened her bathrobe, and swooped her arm like, *come in*. A waft of butterscotch, some kind of bath product.

Her face said, *This is shocking, isn't it?*

"I. You came at a funny time," she said, rooting around in a kitchen drawer and plucking out a little black book. "You caught me right in the middle of a—. Just. Give me one second, okay? I need to—. Just. I have to make a quick phone call, and we can chat, okay?" She nodded like she'd needed his understanding, forgiveness. People had a way of talking to the distressed as if they were dumb children.

She squirreled away in a corner, "Yes. Yeah. Let it play out. Let it unfold." She was always overly emphatic on the phone, repeating the same thing two ways.

She sat back at the table and wrapped both hands around her mug like she was strangling it. She looked nervous as she sat into the table. Like she was thinking the worst. That Eric had been mugged and left for dead, or he'd run off with another woman.

"Just. Tell me. So I can understand. That it's not just me who thinks he's not himself lately. He missed his mother's birthday, his sister's graduation. He's been sounding so run down on the phone, you know?"

"Yeah," she said, as if contemplating it. "Something changed in him, fast." She was squinting her eyes at the mystery of it all. Her genuine incomprehension. "He never got mean, he doesn't have it in him, you know that. But he got *distant*. It was like something had happened, and he couldn't let himself tell me about it. Like he'd run someone over in his car and took off in a panic, or, he'd slept with one of his students, and couldn't bare to tell me. Whatever it was, it shut him down." She dropped a hand, like a karate chop, in front of her face.

She got up to fetch a pack of crackers; tore them open and laid them on the table.

Ches had desperately wanted to trace Eric's change in personality back to a date long before the loan. He wanted to clear his conscience, and erase the image of three kids kicking his son's ribs into dust.

"Last going off," she said, "it was nothing to wake up at four a.m. and find him not in bed. The TV blaring out in the living room. He was watching ... *infomercials*. Whatever was on, you know? Something was gnawing at him, in only the way guilt can. Or regret. I mean, if it was trouble he was in, drugs, financial trouble. I'd know that. It wasn't that."

Ches was waiting for more, staring at her, like, *Go on*. And that's when she told him. Gently. "Ches, you know we're not together anymore, right, me and Eric?"

Too many mysteries now, too many omitted truths. In recent phone calls, his wife would put Eric on speaker phone, and ask him about Fiona, and Eric would say, *She's doing great*. And he'd say it with that numbed-tongue tone; not a lie, but no mention of a breakup.

He could only shake his head, almost embarrassed at not knowing. "When?"

She looked at him like she didn't know where to start. "It got messy, early autumn, and he moved out in November."

"Where!"

She looked as shocked as he was that he hadn't known. "Patrick Street, seventeen, remem—"

"*Seventeen Patrick Street*." He said it to himself, not her.

She eyed him like she thought he had no use for her now that his son had left her. "I've always loved you as my son's partner," he told her, nodding, like, *say you know that*.

She looked confused by the simple statement. He stood up, said, "I should be going."

“Where?”

She looked desperate for him to stay.

Ches had been sitting in front of Eric’s new apartment ever since. Four hours and he knew it was futile, but he didn’t know what else to do, besides suck on that cigarette and despise himself; keep his head down in that cloud of smoke. He had one son, just one, and he’d fucked that up.

He was hiding his tired eyes from the sun because the bright light could’ve jerked out a tear, and tears would mean things were beyond his control. Tears would mean something was wrong with his son, and a father can’t accept that kind of world.

He didn’t like the way Fiona had described Eric as some kind of mannequin now; catatonic and devoid of life. Eric used to come home from school smiling with grass-stained jeans and bloodied elbows and a story to tell. He’d play up his own stories, clearly exaggerating to keep people interested. His flair for melodrama had lasted into adulthood. Eric still talked with his hands; he still shook his head in disbelief of his own stories.

When Eric was a kid he couldn’t even sleep, he’d pop out of bed and need to interact with the world. Crash into it, head on. So Ches would leave his wife in bed and take Eric to the over-sized sandbox in Bowring Park. At six or seven in the morning, it’d be just the two of them there, finishing a McDonald’s breakfast — Eric sitting on a green park bench, his legs dangling, kicking air, not quite touching the dusty ground. Except maybe an untied shoelace. And then he’d hop down, still chewing the last bit of a hashbrown – those he always ate last. He’d pull that bag of marbles out of his pocket like it was a bag of magic.

It was a blue velvet bag, and it couldn't have held more than a dozen marbles, but it always felt like more when Eric upturned the sack, and the marbles fell out like cannonballs; the sand splashing up like there were bombs going off. They'd dig little holes, and flick the marbles with their fingers to shoot them into the holes. Or they'd draw pictures in the sand, using the marbles instead of paint. Smiley faces, a snake. Eric made up a new game for them to play every time.

The kid radiated an energy that buzzed in Ches's bones, and Ches understood that energy as paternal love: a connection he could feel. But only when Eric was a kid. Before the move. Before all the distance got in between them.

One morning in Bowring Park, they'd made a circle of marbles in the sand, as a hoop, and took turns throwing the leftover marbles like mini basketballs. Excited slaps off of Ches's knee every time Eric made a shot. The sounds of those slaps. Echoing, with no one else around to hear it.

A kid cut off his daydream: he heard footsteps, saw a pair of feet. The paperboy took the stairs two at a time — his untied shoelace flapping around. The kid paused at the overly full mailbox, “That's, like, totally full, man. Can I just leave this with you?”

It was a bag of flyers. A white bag with *Your Bi-weekly Bag of Bargains* etched on it. Ches glanced up at the *No junkmail* sign Eric had taped to the mailbox. He nodded to the kid anyway, took the flyers, because he felt awkward, just sitting there on the doorstep. The kid walked away, glancing over his shoulder, and Ches found himself plucking all the mail out of

Eric's mailbox, like maybe there was a clue there. But it was only eleven bills, a pound of flyers. He read the name on one of the envelopes. Jocelyn Kent. Flipped to another envelope, Jocelyn Kent. He looked at the house number again, seventeen. Checked the address on the mail, seventeen.

He looked across the street, and saw Fiona there in her car, spying on him. From that distance, she looked withered, older, as she squinted into a violent sun. She opened her passenger door as an invitation, like she hadn't told him the whole truth back at their house.

Ches took his cellphone out of his pocket. 4:47 P.M., November 17th, 2012.

2012.

He turned his phone upsidedown, like maybe he was reading it wrong, or the 2012 had meant it was December 20th. There were six missed text messages from his wife.

Where are you? Stay where you are;

Ches, dial 709-688-6061. The car is gone, you've taken the car;

If someone is reading this, my husband suffers bouts of dementia, please call me. 709-688-6061;

Ches, Fiona Bronwyn has called me. I'm on my way there. 116 Springdale Street. Please go there when you get this message;

Ches, he's gone. You won't find him;

Please meet me at Fiona Bronwyn's house.