Three.

HOWLER
BY DONNA TRANQUADA

GOOD STEPS
BY LESLIE CARLIN

THE PRISONERS’ TALE
BY MARIANNE K. MILLER
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

Three.
THE 2016 PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA
STUDENT AWARD FOR FICTION
Introduction

Apparently a Siberian elder once said that if you don’t know the trees you might get lost in the forest, and if you don’t know the stories you might get lost in life. I can almost see her speaking those words (or was it a him?) and that faint image of her in my mind speaks the power of story to give some order to our chaotic lives.

The three pieces included in the 2016 issue of Three are all wonderful examples of the power of story. I offer special thanks to the jury consisting of Jade Colbert, Alexandra Risen, and Helen Smith, who had a very difficult time deliberating over lunch before deciding on the winner of the $1000 prize, finally agreeing on Donna Tranquada’s beautiful story “Howler”, in which two sisters visit Guyana with their father and learn something of the secrets of their own heritage. What made that decision so difficult was the power of the other two pieces included here: Marianne K. Miller’s novel excerpt “A Prisoner’s Tale”, which tells of a young Ernest Hemingway chasing a news story about a prison break in Kingston for The Toronto Star; and Leslie Carlin’s “Good Steps”, in which two very different characters, scientist and academic Lilian, and ex-soldier and academic Matthew, manage to step on one another’s toes.

Thank you so much to Lihua Gui, Benjamin Wood, Karen Fraczkowski, Luba Zisser, Nory Siberry, and Emily Sanford here at SCS for all your help. And thank you to Gina Pieroni, Tracey Turriff and everyone at Penguin Random House Canada for your ongoing support of Canadian stories and writing through the Penguin Random House Student Award for Fiction! A final thanks to our amazing instructors and all the students who entered. The competition, as you’ll see here, was fierce. Please try again next year!

Lee Gowan
Program Director, Creative Writing
One of the great pleasures of my time at the School of Continuing Studies has been watching the growth and maturing of our Creative Writing Program and the community that it supports. The last year has been marked by a staggering number of successes from our students, including novel publications by Sabrina Ramnanan (Doubleday, Canada: 2015), Lynne Kutsukake (Knopf, Canada: 2016), and international success for Alexandra Risen’s memoir *Unearthed* (Penguin, Canada: 2016). All three, you’ll notice, are published by imprints of our valued partner Penguin Random House Canada.

To those three successes, we are excited to add three more: the authors published in this year’s edition of *Three*. Donna Tranquada’s story “Howler”, a haunting exploration of two children’s discoveries of their Guyanese roots, wins the 2016 Penguin Random House Award for Fiction. You may be familiar with the author’s name from her role at the CBC, but rest assured it was only her words that influenced the jury, as the entries are judged blind, with no names attached. The two runners-up selected by the jury for publication are Leslie Carlin’s story “Good Steps”, and Marianne K. Miller’s novel excerpt “The Prisoner’s Tale”.

This contest, which has been such a key in nurturing our students’ successes, is a result of the generous support of Penguin Random House Canada. We’re so proud to be able to work with such a visionary organization to develop new Canadian writing talent. Our thanks to our students for participating, to our wonderful instructors for helping them to hone their craft, and to Penguin Random House Canada for their ongoing support.

Continue to Learn!

Marilynn Booth, Dean
University of Toronto, School of Continuing Studies
I am so pleased and proud to have the opportunity, on behalf of Penguin Random House Canada, to congratulate the winner and honourable mentions for this year’s Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction.

2016 has been another great year for creative writing. Penguin Random House Canada was proud to publish books by two alumni of the University of Toronto’s School of Continuing Studies Creative Writing program this year: Lynne Kutsukake’s *The Translation of Love*, published by Knopf Canada, and *Unearthed* by Alexandra Risen, published by Viking Canada. The impressive fiction contained here in *Three* by Donna Tranquada, Leslie Carlin and Marianne K. Miller are other examples of this, and the amazing work being done by students of this program. Penguin Random House Canada is proud to be associated with the University of Toronto’s School of Continuing Studies Creative Writing program, which shares our commitment to, and passion for, the development of emerging Canadian writers.

I would like to thank Lee Gowan for his leadership of the Creative Writing program and to all the instructors for their support of the students. We would also like to acknowledge the generous support of Marilyn Booth and Nory Siberry. A special thanks to this year’s jurors Jade Colbert, Alexandra Risen and Helen Smith, and to my colleagues at Penguin Random House Canada who helped make *THREE* possible.

Congratulations again to Donna Tranquada, Leslie Carlin and Marianne K. Miller. We hope you will all enjoy reading *THREE*.

Tracey Turriff
Senior Vice President, Corporate Communications
Penguin Random House Canada
Finalists for the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction 2016

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DONNA TRANQUADA was born in Canada to parents who emigrated from Guyana. She has worked as a radio reporter, host and news anchor for many years in Toronto, mainly with CBC Radio. She has also written for Canadian Living, Homemakers and the Toronto Star. Donna recently completed her final project for her Certificate in Creative Writing from the School of Continuing Studies: a collection of linked short stories titled, Upriver.
There was an emerald green lizard in the sugar bowl that day. When I lifted the lid, the lizard was curled like a ribbon, its scales dusted in crystals. It flicked its tongue. My sister and I stared, our spoons suspended over our porridge. This place was full of surprises. Donkey-carts in the streets, insects the size of our hands, bats that swooped around our room at night. A lizard in a sugar bowl.

“What should we do, Tisha?” whispered Marie. “Just leave it alone,” I said. But as I lowered the lid, it shimmied to the lip of the bowl and flicked its thread-like tongue once more. It scampered across the table through the open window next to us and darted onto a banana tree swaying outside. “I hope it comes back,” said Marie, as it vanished.

Mana walked slowly from the cramped kitchen where she had made our breakfast. “You like it, girls?” In one hand she carried her bowl of porridge. In the other, she clutched a small glass and a bottle of rum. She set them down loudly on the table. “It’s good,” my sister and I lied. We both wanted to sweeten it, but couldn’t. Not with lizard footprints in the sugar.

Mana was our grandmother and this was our first time meeting her. She was our father’s mother and had stayed behind in Guyana when her children moved to Canada. “No life for us back home,” was what my aunts and uncles always said when they gathered for curry, roti and pepper pot dinners in Toronto. Only a few returned for visits, landing at the Timehri airport late in the evening, then the drive to Georgetown, hoping not to be robbed by bandits hiding in the cane fields; readjusting to the withering heat, the stinging bites of the betes rouges and the wild dogs that prowled once the sun went down.
Mana lowered herself onto a wooden chair. Her bare arms were pale and bloated; her faded yellow cotton shift already damp in the morning heat. Her eyes watered and looked sore. Marie and I glanced under the table. We had noticed her strange feet the night we arrived. Her left foot was much smaller than the right, and two of her toes were crossed as though they were making a wish.

She reached for the sugar bowl and scooped a large spoonful. Marie and I said nothing about the lizard. We watched as she stirred her porridge. I imagined iridescent green scales dissolving in oats and milk.

The three of us ate in silence. Outside, chickens clucked in a neighbour’s yard, water splashed into a metal bucket and voices rose from the street.

We were on the second floor of Mana’s house, a building that sat on cement block stilts resting on a dirt ground floor. “We need to be high-high,” she explained that first night. “The country is below sea level and, if the seawall don’t hold back the ocean, the city, she flood.”

The small house was open to the sea breezes. The walls were just partitions. None of them reached the low ceiling. Each room was crowded with heavy dark chests, tables, mirrors and chairs that had once occupied much larger spaces. A few days into our visit, my father opened a dusty box filled with tarnished silver flatware and softly closed it. “The remains of better times,” he said quietly.

Mana sighed, reached for the rum and poured some into her glass. She wiped the rim of the bottle with her finger to catch the last drop and licked it. “So, you girls are going across the river with your Papa today.” Marie giggled. Mana filled her glass again.

He nodded. She met our eyes briefly and opened her mouth as if to say something else. Then she frowned, shook her head slightly and lifted her glass. She drained it.

The floor creaked and my father stepped from his bedroom. “Tisha!” he said, smiling at me as he crossed the floor to the kitchen. “Are you getting your grandmother drunk at this hour?” Marie giggled. Mana filled her glass again.

He kissed Marie and me on our heads. He patted Mana’s shoulder, but she didn’t smile. She raised her glass and toasted him before taking a sip. He winked at us and grabbed two guavas from a basket of fruit on the table. “Can’t get enough of these,” he said, slicing them open with a knife and admiring the pink flesh inside. He took a bite and juice ran down his chin. Mana topped up her glass.

“So, you taking these children to Best,” she said, tightening the cap on the bottle. “You still think it wise, Boy?”

“We discussed this,” he said quickly, wiping his chin. He took another bite of guava. Marie looked at me. Her dark brown eyes were wide. I squeezed her gently under the table. We had heard them arguing last night, their words floating over the partition between our room and the living room. We lay side-by-side in our bed, listening to them fight as insects buzzed against the mosquito net draped around us. Marie reached for my hand, the way she always did when she was uncertain or scared. She was eleven, two years younger than me. “It’s okay,” I whispered. I squeezed her hand.

“These children just lose their mother, Desmond,” said Mana. Marie turned in the bed and put her head on my chest. It’s okay, I whispered to her again. At the mention of my mother, thorns grew in my throat. “Actually, she’s been gone a year,” he said. “And she’s not dead.” I needed no reminding. I could feel Marie’s heart beating through my ribs.

Well, she gone. She gone!”

It was a humid night just like this one when she left us. Marie and I had shared a bed then, too.

“Y es, I know, but --”

“She up and leave you!” shouted Mana. I miss her, whispered Marie. Yes, I whispered back and, despite the heat, pulled her closer. “Now, you bring the girls here and you want to visit this Best nonsense?”

My father didn’t answer her. The drone of insects attacking the net filled my head. Marie’s body was hot against mine. I have you, Marie whispered. Always, I said. Always.

“You know the daughter isn’t well. She not well!” Mana continued. Whose daughter, I wondered. Me? Marie? I stroked my sister’s hair. “It’s going to be fine,” he said. And they spoke no more. I felt Marie soften in my arms. Sleep, I told her, just sleep.

I watched as Mana emptied her glass and placed it on the table next to the sugar bowl. Her grey hair was tucked into a wilted bun. Strands of it slid down her flushed neck. She looked at us and stood up. “Nobody
“Please, Daddy,” said Marie. Her face glistened in the heat. “I’m thirsty.” Vendors lined the sidewalks on the street to the market. We stopped at a table heaped with green coconuts. The man behind it had skin like dark chocolate and a large machete strapped to his belt. “Three coconut waters,” said my father, pointing to the pile and placing coins on the table. The man nodded and slid the machete free. He picked up the coconuts and his blade flashed in the sunlight as he hacked off the tops. Marie and I took paper straws from a small cardboard box at his feet. We stuck them in the coconuts and drank as we walked through the market.

It was crowded with shoppers and they jostled us as we wove through the aisles. Vendors shouted for customers to buy their limes, fish, okra and yams. My father bought cassava pone wrapped in waxed paper and a cellophane bag of tamarind sweets. Calypso music blared from a radio. Two large women swayed to the rhythm.

We finished the coconut water as we arrived at the ferry dock and tossed the empty shells onto a mound of discarded fruit, vegetables and fish scraps. Flies swarmed, a black humming cloud. The ferry had just arrived and people rushed to board it. Some carried chickens in their arms. Others had plastic bags of groceries. One man held a thin string fastened like a harness to a large pink and white crab. He walked it like a small dog up the boarding ramp. The crab held its white pincers high in the air as though it had just surrendered.

We followed the other passengers and climbed to the upper deck where we sat on a wooden bench against a railing. The Demerara River lapped against the sides of the boat, its water the colour of tea. My father unwrapped the cassava pone and broke it into three pieces.

“It’s sticky, but give it a try,” he said. I took a bite. It was like thick, starchy pudding and hard to swallow. Marie nibbled on hers and wrinkled her nose. “That bad, huh?” he laughed. He leaned forward and she popped the cassava pone into his mouth. As he chewed, he put his arms around both of us. But I was not comforted.

The ferry’s engine rumbled like the heart of an enormous animal. “What’s in Best?” I asked him. He didn’t seem to hear my question. Instead, he pulled us closer. Marie reached for my hand. I interlaced my fingers in hers.
The boat pulled away from the dock. The market's tower and small buildings of Georgetown slowly receded. A slight breeze cooled us. We looked upriver. Sugar plantations and tiny houses on stilts lined its thick, tangled shoreline.

My mother knew this river. On a rare good day, she would light a cigarette, lift her chin to exhale the smoke above our heads and tell us her favourite river story. She would make her way to a small curve of sand at the river’s edge. Taking a long, thin stalk of bamboo, she would beat the surface of the water. “To scare the piranhas and anacondas away,” she said. “They’ll eat you!” Once, she grabbed my arm and playfully bit it, leaving tiny red teeth marks on my skin. After scattering the fish and snakes, she would slip into the river and turn onto her back. She would float in the water, sometimes feeling soft reeds tugging at her bare legs. Whenever she told us that story, she tipped her face as if to the sun and smiled. I looked down at the river and imagined her floating in it once more, peering up at us as we passed by. I wondered if she would wave happily or disappear like a fish with a splash of its tail.

“They were hoping to find El Dorado,” my father said. “The British. The Dutch. The French. They all wanted to discover the city of gold.”

“Here?” I said. He nodded. Marie opened the bag of tamarind sweets.

“It was always rumoured to be in Guyana. Somewhere in the mountain jungles,” he said, pointing upriver. He took a candy from the bag, put it in his mouth and shrugged. “But all they found were small gold nuggets in streams.” Marie and I reached for the candies. More sour than sweet, the flat hard seed of the tamarind tucked inside. My father turned his head and spit the seed into the water below. Marie and I did the same, spitting our seeds overboard, watching the river currents carry them downstream.

“I think the howler monkeys chased them away,” he said slowly.

“Monkeys?” said Marie. Her eyes were wide. I was excited, too.

“Oh, yes. The howler monkeys,” he said with a smile. “They probably chased those scoundrels all the way to the coast and back to their ships.” The ferry rocked gently as it made its way across the river. Chickens clucked in the arms of the passengers around us.

“You don’t see them at first. You hear them,” he whispered. “They moan and scream, and their cries are like a thunderstorm bursting around you. They travel in packs and anything can trigger their howls – especially intruders.”

He saw them a long time ago, he told us, when he was upriver. It was the dry season and he was standing on a caked riverbank when he heard their terrible screams in the distance. They grew louder and louder. And then, across the water, the green canopy started to bend and shudder. The howlers charged through the treetops, snapping branches, shredding leaves. They were covered in long dark brown hair. Some had gold streaks running down the middle of their backs. Their mouths opened wide and they bared sharp white teeth. They sounded like a crowd shouting in pain. They were furious that he was on their river, but too terrified of the water to cross it. There were about 20 monkeys, he told us, but it was difficult to count them as they hurled themselves about the branches. The storm went on for some time. Finally, they exhausted themselves or they realized he was no threat or was unreachable. Their howls turned to whimpers. They slowly calmed down. One by one, they left the trees, crept to the water’s edge and started to drink.

I let out a long breath. I was relieved the story was over. The monkeys were quiet. He was safe. We were safe. But I scanned the approaching riverbank for angry shadows in the foliage.

“Oh, Daddy,” Marie said. “Did you ever see them again?” He looked down at her and shook his head. “I was never that lucky,” he said, stroking her cheek.

The ferry slowed and the passengers gathered their parcels and chickens. The shoreline drew closer, green and dense. In the distance, sweet brown smoke from a sugar cane plant drifted into the air. The ferry bumped hard against the shaky dock. We followed the other passengers off the boat. The man with the crab on a string was in front of us. He walked it carefully down the ramp, its spider-legs making tiny tapping sounds on the wood. “His dinner is walking itself home!” whispered my father. Marie giggled, but I thought about the string tightening around its shell.

The heat came for us once more. It was as though it had been crouching on this side of the river, waiting. We walked to some grey wooden buildings squatting in the dirt. Their sun-rusted rooftops and a few palm trees
“Where you live now, Mon?” asked the driver.
“Canada. Just outside Toronto,” said my father. He took a long drink of ginger beer.
“Maybe you know me brudder! Gerald Lopes!” said the driver excitedly. “He live on Ossington Avenue in da city!”
“I’m afraid not,” said my father. The driver looked disappointed. I sipped my ginger beer; it was no longer cold. The windows were rolled down, but there was no relief from the heat. My legs were now stuck to the vinyl seat. My hair, damp on my neck.
“You bin gone from Guyana a long time, Mon,” said the driver. “You lose you accent.”
My father didn’t answer right away. He was looking down the road, at the sugar cane fields and irrigation canals on either side.
“I suppose I have,” he said, shifting in the seat. I moved closer to him.
“Well, tings get lost, Mon. Everybody leave. Everybody go from dis place and tings get lost.” My father nodded, but did not smile. I put my head against his shoulder and thought of my mother. She’ll find her way back to us, he said on the night she left. She’s lost and she will find her way home. The pom-poms shook furiously above me.

We could now see slivers of the coastline through the cane fields on our right. To our left, still more cane, with the dark silhouette of the jungle hovering near the fields. Some cane workers sat by the road. Their heads were wrapped in cloth and they were naked from the waist up. They waved their machetes slowly as our taxi passed. Marie and I waved back.

A row of tin rooftops soon appeared above the cane. It was the village of Best. The driver stopped at the first building. My father paid him and we stepped from the car. “You know where you goin’?” asked the driver. My father nodded. “I hope so, Boy!” He spun his tires in the dirt as he drove off.

There were six wooden houses in Best, all of them battered by the sun, their metal roofs streaked with rust. No one sat on the porches. No one was on the road. A small rum shop was closed, its shutters locked with a metal padlock. We tossed our half-empty ginger bottles into a trash can next to the shop. My father looked around, hesitated, and then...
led us to a dirt path that disappeared into the cane field.

We started walking, not toward the ocean where the breezes were stirring, but toward the mass of the jungle. The sun had bleached the sky from blue to white. It was so hot. So still. We walked single file, my father leading the way, across a muddy irrigation ditch, through more towering cane, whispering cane, endless walls of cane, until finally we stepped into the open. We were breathing hard. My skin prickled with the heat.

A small wooden house with a weary porch sat in the middle of a clearing. A goat and some chickens wandered in the hot dirt. A large breadfruit tree spread its branches over the house, its fruit hanging like lanterns. There was a patchy garden and a mango tree on the edge of the clearing. Beyond it, more cane and the dark jungle rising.

As we headed toward the little house, the front door slowly opened and a raisin-wrinkled woman emerged. She squinted at Marie and me. Then, she looked at my father and they both smiled at each other at the same moment. She held up her arms. Gold bangles sparkled in the sun. My father walked quickly to the porch and hugged her. He patted her grey curly head. She barely reached his shoulder.

“You come, Boy! Desmond, you come home!” she cried. She stepped back and stroked his arms with her brown hands. Then, she started speaking quickly. I didn't understand everything she said, only that it had been many years and two people had shared a childhood.

My father turned and gestured to us to come forward.

“These are my girls,” he said. Her bangles tinkled as she clapped her hands and reached for us. She held Marie with one arm and me with the other. I could smell her body as she pressed us to her. Salt and rum. She smiled and her mouth was filled with gold. I felt trapped.

“This is Pinky,” he said. “She was our cook. She lived with us.”

“Dat’s right, Boy. For years I cook for you family,” she said, still smiling at my father. “I raise you from a baby, wid me baby, me own baby girl. You two so close, like dese chil’ren! Just like dese two!”

She stopped and studied my father’s face. “You know, Boy, you look just like he. Just like you daddy.” It was the first time I’d heard anyone mention my grandfather. No one ever spoke of him. All I knew was that he had died long before I was born. Pinky pursed her lips and took my father’s hand again. “Come, Boy, come.”

He turned to us. His mouth was a tight line. “Girls, wait for me here. I won't be long,” and he went into the house with Pinky.

Marie looked at me, a frown on her face. I took her hand and led her to the mango tree. We lowered ourselves into its shade and noticed several ripe mangoes lying in the dirt, partially eaten, deep gashes exposing their orange-yellow flesh. Ants crawled in their juicy wounds. “Gross,” said Marie. She nestled against me.

As we watched the ants pick through the fallen mangoes, there was a scratching sound from above. I looked up into the branches. The tree was heavy with fruit, thick with leaves. But there. Among the mangoes. A ruffle of green feathers, tiny feet and curved wet beaks. Small green heads twisted and gazed down at me with bright black eyes. I nudged Marie. “Do you see them?” I said, pointing. She lifted her head and gasped. “Mommy loves parrots!” she whispered. Yes, I remember. “We'll tell her one day,” I said.

The parrots fluffed their feathers. They shifted from leg to leg. Then we heard a low moan. Not from the branches, but from the house. There were voices, agitated voices, another sound. A growl?

“Why is she like this?” I heard my father cry. “What's happened?”

A whimper from something hurt. “She bin like dis for years now, Boy!” Marie clutched my hand. We stared at the house. The parrots fidgeted in the branches. Tisha, Tisha, whispered Marie, but I could not speak.

“Kept like this? Tied like this?” There was something in his voice I didn't recognize. I wrapped my arms around Marie. The parrots beat their wings.

“Is all I could do. She sick, boy! She bin sick in da head ever since you daddy die.” Pinky's voice was shrill. “He left we wid nutting!”

“Not like this,” my father sounded defeated. I want to leave, whispered Marie. I want to go home. I know, I said, rubbing her back. Soon. Soon.

“I must tie she or she run! She go to dem. Always, she go to dem. In da bush.”

Their voices dimmed. But I could still hear them talking, quickly and urgently.
Marie started to cry, her tears wet on my t-shirt. I looked up. The parrots blinked at me. Then the door opened and my father stepped outside. Marie tried to call to him, but couldn't make a sound. I tried to keep my own tears from coming, but failed. He reached the tree and slumped in the dirt. His face was wet and pale. I had seen him this way only once before, on that night a year ago when he sat by our bed until we fell asleep. And, as he did then, my father pulled us to his chest, and said over and over how much he loved us and was sorry. He held us close, stroked our hair, rocked us in his arms. "It's okay. It's okay," he kept saying softly. "We're going to be okay."

We stayed like this for a long time, listening to the cane rustle and the chickens cluck nearby. I was tired and parched. The heat had found us once again. It was closing in. I lifted my head and looked toward the house. That's when I saw her, a woman at the door. It wasn't Pinky. It was someone younger, about my father's age. Pinky's daughter. She was small and pale-skinned, not dark like her mother. She was wearing a sleeveless top and beige shorts. Her arms and legs were thin and tightly muscled. Our eyes met. She bared her teeth and the tendons in her neck looked hard and painful. She raised her hands, as if to push us away, and then clenched them. Her eyes narrowed. She looked past us toward the shadows and grunted. A warning? Animal grunts grew louder and became a cry. No – it was a signal. The parrots joined in, screeching among the mangoes. My father held us even tighter. I closed my eyes, and that's when we heard it from the jungle at the edge of the cane field -- the first sound of distant thunder on the move.
BY TRADE, LESLIE CARLIN is an anthropologist. She remembers loving to write as soon as she could read, although it is only in the past few years, since moving to Toronto, that she has taken up creative writing seriously. Leslie has been fortunate enough to see one or two of her stories published and many more rejected. She gives credit for any success equally to the support of her wonderful husband Simon and to caffeinated drinks. In addition to writing fiction she is working on a creative non-fiction project about her lost aunt, and maintaining a blog that reflects on life in the US, the UK, and Canada (https://transatlantictravails.blogspot.ca/).
For Matthew, life is all about avoiding false steps. For Lilian, it is almost the reverse. Matthew knows that now.

Matthew’s arrival in Treadham is accompanied by the realization that he will have to walk from the train station to the college, which will use up most of his good steps for the day. Matthew looks around, wondering if the train had perhaps stopped by accident, some sort of malfunction, and allowed him to descend between stations onto this unprepossessing platform, empty, seemingly waiting for an as-yet-unmade town to appear around it. Too late; he is stuck here now. The red-and-blue Trans-Pennine Express shrinks away southward, twin black threads unspooling behind it, lengthening the distance between itself and Matthew. This is the last stage of his journey, Johnson City, Tennessee to Treadham, England. So long, so long. Like a sucker, Matthew stands on the rectangular slab of poured concrete. There’s a tilted pole bearing a placard reading ‘Treadham.’ So, not a mistake. Matthew looks around for a cab, or a bus, and realizes he must climb an iron stairway to reach the street. “You’ll need to take a taxi,” the department secretary had warned him on the phone, but he had thought she meant from the station to Treadham College. Matthew thinks that by now he should have learned to avoid making guesses. When you assume. Ass, you, me. Me. He is tired, already, at nine o’clock in the morning, and wonders how many good steps remain today.

He hoists his satchel across his body, best for balance, his physiotherapist has said, and begins to walk. To count his steps he has a digital pedometer but the counting has wormed its way into his brain. Once he climbs the corrugated steel steps over the low embankment he can see a structure
of tinted glass and ecru concrete blending with the dull horizon: Treadham College. It looks like an alien spaceship damaged by contact with the earth's atmosphere, at rest on a riverbank. It is, Matthew knows, a newly-created satellite of the ancient and elegant university nestled in the folds of the Pennines, in Richley, twenty miles distant, but there is nothing graceful or aristocratic about the angular distant building or this partly-built, partly-demolished landscape. He could really use a drink. A bourbon sour. He imagines it taking shape, the foamy egg white, the fresh orange, the lemon juice. And of course the Jim Beam, a full shot and the extra half that Alex always added just before the muscular, rhythmic shaking of the stainless steel beaker. He closes his eyes, only for a moment, seeing Alex's tattooed biceps ripple with the effort of mixing Matthew's cocktail; the memory will have to do. Matthew files his memories carefully, scientifically: drinking, diving into the sea, sex. His liquid past.

Lilian's life also involves counting. She is looking through her microscope now, counting round grey bodies that pepper the thin slices of mouse brain. She makes notes, hand-written, on the lined pad next to her on the bench. Later the figures will be entered into the database, by a student paid a pittance for the pleasure. Lilian likes bench work but she hates mice, is petrified of them, and no one can know. She would never get another grant. Lilian stands up and stretches, looking out the window at the grey. Grey car park, grey river, low grey hills pulsing in the middle distance. A train is slipping south, toward a low esker that runs parallel to the horizon. Once, as she queued to purchase a tuna and sweetcorn sandwich (soggy, salty) in the cafeteria (damp, dingy) she heard two students behind her discussing a seaside town with a ruined abbey and a pier. The students had eaten excellent fish-and-chips there at the weekend, and had consumed much lager. The red-and-blue train had taken them there. Lilian would like to go too, she thinks, but not as much as she would like to stay in her lab. She needs to continue counting.

She looks over the data generated by the mice and then captured by the various machines. Heart rate, breathing rate, electro-encephalography. Blood chemistry. Clues. Lilian plans to uncover the secret of sleep. She will uncover it here, in Treadham. Eight hours of the twenty-four, a third of the three score and ten years granted by the good Lord to all human beings, lost to unconsciousness. It is outrageous. Lilian sometimes finds herself amazed that newspapers have not declared a global crisis, announced an epidemic. “Thirty-three percent of human life annihilated! No prevention, no cure on horizon! Read all about it.” There must be a reason, a good reason, and Lilian aims to find it out. When that happens she will celebrate. Perhaps she will board the train to the seaside. She is partial to really good fish and chips.

She checks her desktop for the time, wondering whether Matthew, the new post-grad, will arrive before her lecture at noon. Trains to Treadham can be unreliable; there is no telling. Lilian herself lives in Richley, which is provincial but civilized, and drives the distance to the college in her little red Nissan Micra. When she has solved the mystery of sleep, she will get the hell out of this county altogether. The north does not suit her talents or her taste. She returns to the microscope and to counting the round grey bodies in the thinned mouse brains.

Matthew too has expertise in counting. Growing up in Durham, North Carolina he counted the eggs that came out of the cavernous, corrugated metal barn that housed his family's chickens, and the hillocks of chicken shit, eggs that carried the piercing ammoniac reek of it. Now Matthew must count his steps. The journey from the truncated, incomplete little train station to the college, he discovers, requires one thousand four hundred and ninety-two paces. Matthew has changed the satchel from one shoulder to the other every five hundred steps. Balance, says his physiotherapist. Matthew suspects that he was Lilian's second choice of post-doctoral fellow.

We're number two, we try harder. It's a fragment of a chant, an old advertisement, lodged in his brain, recorded apparently on the next track to his physiotherapist's voice, repeating in a rhythmic loop. We try harder. An advert featuring O.J. Simpson, he believes. O.J. had once been Matthew's father's hero; his father still talks of his exploits on the football field, skipping over the messy business of alleged murder.

As it turns out, Matthew arrives at the door of Lilian's lab just as she
steps out of it. “Dr Faber?” he asks, holding out his hand. Until now they have only exchanged documents, credentials, electrons. They have spoken via video-link. He knows her from the shoulders up. He is mildly surprised by the short, compact rectangular gestalt of her, draped in bright clothing: a loose green blouse, an electric blue skirt, and a white lab coat unbuttoned over the ensemble. It was as if she had been rendered by Miro, and had given no thought to her own attire. Matthew is drab in comparison, in his loose navy khakis and a dark grey wool pea-jacket.

“Oh, damn,” says Lilian. “I’m sorry. I can’t talk now. I’m going to give a lecture. You can come with me if you like. Or you can go get something to eat in the caff and meet me back here in an hour.” Lilian pauses and seems to replay her words. “Oh, that was awful of me. Do let me tell you how lovely it is have you here.” She moves her laptop to her left hand and reaches out her right. Matthew takes it in his own and they both look at her pale fingers against his dark ones.

“I’d like to listen to your lecture, if you don’t mind,” Matthew says politely, moving away from her grasp. What else can he say? No, I’d rather eat a stale scone and look out the window at the rain than hear your imparted wisdom? He has crossed the Atlantic— again— in order to learn from this woman, who seems to have all but forgotten his arrival. He is certainly not momentous to her.

“Come along then,” she says, and Matthew hears her disappointment and realizes that he has guessed wrong about her wishes. He wonders if this is a personal thing or a cultural one. Lilian sets off at a rapid pace that belies her small stature, and Matthew cannot keep up. Again, he detects displeasure in the small glances she throws over her shoulder, and he struggles to contain the limp that manifests when he has run out of good steps for the day. Today of all days, he wants to be able. Not superlative, not Superman, just an able man. He wants to postpone the moment when Lilian learns about his limitations. He is not ashamed, far from it; he has been told he is a hero, but he does not always like to be a hero. It is exhausting. He aspires to normal. Your garden variety grad student. Or rather post-graduate, as they say here, Matthew reminds himself. He wants to understand the need for sleep, a quest he does not see as heroic, and where he wants to feel limitless in his abilities.

Lilian senses Matthew like a shadow, attached to her without contact, so there can be no shaking him off. How ridiculous, she says to herself. He’s just a student. She has had to slow her pace to guide him along the system of corridors in this complicated glassy edifice, where you can see across to the other wings but struggle to reach them. She is now a few moments late to her lecture, a little flustered, and thus annoyed, unreasonably, with Matthew. The stray seconds do not matter; most of the seats are still empty because the students wait for her approach, watching from outside the plate-glass walls to stub out their roll-your-own and jostle their mates into seats once Lilian has established herself at the lectern. A fug of tobacco pursues them into the hall, shot with a sweet hint of cannabis. It’s like a perfume, soporific, and reminds Lilian of sleep.

Her undergraduates, seventy-odd first-years ready for a lecture on the primary structure of proteins, blur before her eyes. This is partly their fault for being so alike in their youth and freshness and wide-eyed ignorance, and partly hers for working in the lab until past midnight, implanting sensors in the brains of her repulsive mice. The students resemble her mice, she thinks, and for a brief moment imagines slicing their brains thinly and examining them under a microscope. She turns her attention to her notes, presents the first slide, speaks to the laptop screen that is projected behind her. She does not need to look at the students, nor at Matthew, sitting in the last row, nearest the door, as though poised to escape. Just try it, my pretty, she thinks. You have work to do here.

“Thank you,” Lilian says formally to the amalgamated faces, after her well-paced revelation of forty slides’ worth of material to them. “Next week we will discuss protein folding. You can find the recommended readings in the syllabus.” Lilian always recommends rather than requires the reading matter, because if she required it, she would logically need to check that her orders have been obeyed. She has taught; it is up to them to learn. Three students approach her as she folds her laptop; they catch up with her as she walks, almost trots, up the wide shallow steps toward the exit.

Matthew joins the retinue, because Lilian must be expecting him to make his way back to her lab, if she has not forgotten him. He cannot hear the question posed by the nervous undergraduate who leads the posse, but
he can hear Lilian's reply. “It’s a very good question, an intelligent one. Did you read the article I suggested, by Jacobson?” The student has not. “Well, the answer’s in there,” Lilian tells him. “If you don’t understand after reading, come back. Please.” All three students walk away. Perhaps all three had the same question, Matthew thinks, and perhaps they will go and read Jacobson, too. Matthew suspects he should find the article himself. It is not a familiar reference. The depressing sensation of fraudulence overtakes him again, kicking him, telling him that but for the unfolding of events in Afghanistan, he would never be here, in an academic setting, however junior. He would be working on the chicken farm, or in his uncle’s hauling business, or unemployed, or in prison, like his little brother. These are not thoughts he wants to bring into this polished building, and he shakes them away.

“Are you interested in teaching?” Lilian asks him, and he can tell—these things he can tell—it’s a barb, a sort of test.

“Not especially,” Matthew replies evenly.

“Good,” says Lilian. “I may ask you to take the occasional lecture, but mainly I expect you’ll be in the lab.”

That is what Matthew expects too. He follows her inside. He will count Lilian’s mice, and the ovoid clusters of cells in their brains. Lilian will learn that he is good at counting.

Lilian approaches the bank of cages housing her precious, despicable mice. The smell of rodent is dusty, dull, and fetid but at least it no longer arouses frank nausea in her. In spite of the inconvenience, she is glad of the regulations requiring that the animal quarters be separate from the staff offices and the classrooms. Each day Lilian descends into the basement labyrinth, accessing the secret terrain with her key-card, and she identifies which animals will be sacrificed next (sacrificed for knowledge) using a randomized coding scheme. Nigel, the wildly tattooed lab tech, will prepare the slides, thin slices of brain fixed to glass oblongs. He will also choose a control mouse, another sacrifice, and prepare slide-slices of its brain. Nigel knows which mouse came from which cage, Nigel knows which slides belong to which mouse. Nigel knows, and Lilian does not. Nigel keeps the key on his computer, and, to guard against catastrophic electronic failure, against invasion by aliens or viruses or malignant corporate takeovers, he prints out his spreadsheet every evening. The pages go into a ring binder on the steel shelves in the supply closet. What Lilian likes best about Nigel is his reticence. He knows everything, but rarely speaks, as though all he wishes to share about himself he has inked onto his skin. Communicating with him is restful, a bit like praying, but more effective. What Lilian requests, Nigel does.

Before identifying her sacrifice, though, Lilian checks to be certain that the mice are comfortable, that they have water in their bottles, food pellets in their stainless-steel trays. Once, in her student days, Lilian had filled a water bottle and hung it carefully in its wire cradle, but the stopper had come dislodged and the water leaked out, beyond the bars of the cage. A Bank Holiday weekend, as it happened. Lilian had gone home to visit her mother. When the professor arrived on the Tuesday morning, he found the carcasses of ten desiccated mice, a mother and nine babies, and had left them there for Lilian to clear up when she arrived after class. That was the last time Lilian had taken a holiday. In subsequent years, her mother occasionally visited, mainly, it seemed, to complain about Lilian’s failure to come back home. “What do you think will happen to me without you around?” her mother asked her last time.

“I think you’ll be fine, Mum, for a long time. I hope so,” said Lilian. “Let’s not meet trouble half-way.” Lilian heard the wheedling, patronizing tone in her side of the conversation and wondered when the switch had happened, when the child had become the parent. Lilian felt older, suddenly, as though she had been tricked into irrevocable adulthood, no possibility of return to youth.

“Arrangements. You’ll arrange to put me into a home, I have no doubt.” No doubts.

Her mother gradually turned into Lilian’s responsibility. When she was eleven years old, Lilian’s father died suddenly, of a frontal-lobe stroke. An amateur musician, he played the French horn in a brass band, a remnant of the colliery marching bands that flourished in mining regions in decades past. One night, practicing with four of his mates, he suddenly dropped his horn, clutched his head with both hands, and shrieked in pain. “Shrieked” was the exact word his mate Peter had used.
“He shrieked, he did, and fell on the floor, all curled up, like.” Peter had rung for an ambulance and Lilian’s father died in it halfway to hospital. Peter had gone with him, bless the man, and never really recovered. Years later he could still be found in the Crown and Rose of an evening, four or five pints gone, telling the story of Lilian’s father’s death.

Lilian’s mother was a primary-school teacher at the time, Year Fives, ages nine and ten, the year below Lilian’s. When she returned to the classroom after a month of ‘bereavement leave’ (leaving bereavement? Leaving it where? Lilian had wondered) her mother said she had regained her equilibrium. She went back to work on the Monday, and all was well. Also on the Tuesday, and the Wednesday. On the Thursday it seemed she found where she had left her bereavement, or it found her, and it was in the middle of the maths lesson. The children stared at her, and at each other as she sank to her knees and sobbed. “He screamed in pain. He was shrieking. His head, he held his head.”

“Miss? Miss?” the bravest pupil said, before running to the classroom next door for help.

Lilian remembered the weeks after that day far more than she did the weeks immediately following her father’s death. Her mother gone away “for a rest” and her Auntie Fay, who was not really an aunt, and who had to be paid, and who later argued about how much she was to be paid, moved in and looked after Lilian in between her visits to the bingo hall. Fay smoked ceaselessly, lighting one cigarette from another, and she dyed her hair—the same colour as an old penny, Lilian thought—with a bottle of stuff from Boots the Chemist. One bottle broke, or spilled, and Auntie Fay said, ‘bloody hell’ five times in a row. Lilian tried to stay at school as long as she could each afternoon, volunteering for any job the teacher offered: cleaning the chalkboard, tidying up the art corner, feeding the two white mice that served as classroom pets. Cleaning out their cage. Moving the creatures from cage to bucket in order to lay down fresh newspaper made Lilian want to vomit: not the smell as much as the feel of the animals in her hand, their matchstick bones slithering, barely contained by fur and flesh. But it was better than being home with Auntie Fay.

Eventually her mother came back, to argue with Fay about how much money she owed. Auntie Fay needed money to cover the costs of the bingo hall. Lilian had heard her on the telephone—the telephone whose bill her mother paid—promising someone on the other end to hand over ‘pure cash’ next week. And then the next. (It was from eavesdropping on Auntie Fay’s telephone calls that Lilian found out what happened to her mother in the classroom that day, and where her mother had gone.) The pleasure and relief of the reunion with her mother eclipsed the sadness Lilian felt about losing her father, and afterward, as she turned into an adolescent and then an adult, it was not her father’s death that Lilian mourned but his absence, the empty space in which her mother rattled and Lilian studied.

Her mother came home in December, just before a cheerless Christmas, and taught her nervous pupils for the rest of the academic year. But when Lilian left primary school the following July, her mother left it too. The local education authority found a vacancy for her in administration, and she occupied her grey metal desk with resignation and a rote dedication. Over the years she took on a vegetal tinge, it seemed to Lilian, matching the dusty aspidistra in their sitting room. Lilian spent a day in her mother’s office once, in Year Seven, when she had been found, shamefully, with nits, and was banned from school. She found a smaller replica of their aspidistra perched on the window ledge in her mother’s office. Nothing personal rested on the desk, Lilian noticed: no photographs of her, none of her father, not even the snow globe Lilian had given her mother two Christmases ago. Lilian had no idea what her mother’s job was now, and her mother said there was no point explaining it. “It pays the bills,” she told her daughter. At home, she took up knitting, long before it became fashionable—no stitch-and-bitch groups for her—and watched telly or listened to the radio. Conversation became rare and questions discouraged. She cooked Lilian’s meals, laundered her clothing, and attended school prize-givings, at which Lilian’s name was pronounced more and more frequently.

Lilian continued to stay after school for as long as she could, always until her mother returned home from work at half five because she could not bear to be in the house alone. At senior school she found teachers willing and even grateful to her for her extra-curricular interests, for her curiosity, for her willingness to help them out. They talked to her, and she to them, about anything other than home. In Year Nine, the science
teacher encouraged her to pursue chemistry and biology. Then he kissed her and pressed his hands on her body through her clothing and asked her to sit on his lap. She did, perched quietly, feeling his thighs tremble, bemused by her own power and eager to understand the Krebs cycle, information she extracted from him a few minutes later.

On the school’s advice, and with her mother’s acquiescence, she moved to the better sixth form college across town. On the advice of the knock-kneed science teacher and of the no-nonsense form tutor, Lilian chose to do biology, chemistry, and psychology at A level. No one really doubted the outcome, as her reputation for studiousness and discipline was unrivaled at the college. Amongst the teachers she developed a reputation for discretion, and she learned the meaning of quid pro quo without ever enrolling in a Latin class. The only real question after her exams was whether she would choose Oxford or Cambridge. Edinburgh was an outside contender.

In the months after she had killed the mice, Lilian adopted the practice of visiting the lab every evening on her way home from the library, to check. Just in case.

“I ruined the trial, didn’t I?” Lilian asked her professor. She had assiduously washed the cage and sprayed it with disinfectant. “The poor mice.” She hated them; from long practice she was extremely competent at hiding it. She put down the bottle of cleaning fluid and stripped off her rubber gloves. Professor Havens, looking up from his microscope on the next lab bench, came round and laid a consoling hand on her shoulder.

“You—well, the accident—put a crimp in the experiment. Unfortunate. But it’s too important to be ruined. We can’t let that happen and really, we knew already, didn’t we, what the results would have been for that colony. You do understand, I trust.” He had both hands on her shoulders, turning her so she faced him square on. Lilian’s pulse beat hard in her temples.

“Do you mean you’ll get more animals and carry on from where we left off? We don’t start over?”

“Yes, just so. We’ll bring in more mice, and carry on. Don’t worry.”

He looked her in the eye with such intentness that she wondered whether he had spotted some abnormality in her irises, or whether he could look right through to read her mind, maybe by decoding the firing of synapses in her brain. Zip, dash, dash, dot. Professor Havens, I would do anything you asked, said the neurons inside her skull.

“Don’t worry,” he repeated, tapping her cheek with two fingers.

Lilian had been a dedicated undergraduate, a real bore, said her few friends, but sometimes she went to the pub with them Friday evening, or with other girls for a coffee on a Saturday morning. With Kate, maybe, or her other flat-mates in their third year. After the great mouse massacre, though, such outings lost their appeal. “We’re heading to the Free Press later, Lil. Come with?” Kate put an arm around Lilian’s waist the week after the disaster. Kate, who had seen Lilian through an abortion in their second year (the biochemistry tutor), and had nudged her into joining the group holiday to Ibiza at the end of first year, made a point of inviting Lilian along at least once a week. Kate herself went out six nights of the seven, completed most of her assignments, and charmed her lecturers into higher marks than strictly warranted. Lilian felt gratitude toward Kate, mixed with puzzlement. Lilian knew not what she offered Kate as compensation for her unflagging friendliness, other than a steadfast determination to be a good flat-mate. Lilian never left dirty crockery lying around and even washed up plates and cups left by the others, if they got mixed up with her own.

“I think I won’t,” Lilian said to Kate. “Not tonight. I’m going back to the lab. Thanks, though. Have one for me.” Her attempt at a casual and courteous tone caught Kate’s notice. It was unusual.

“Lilian,” Kate suspended her application of blusher. “The mice thing was an accident. You know that, right? You’re not a murderer or anything. They’re sodding mice, for god’s sake. Give yourself a break, forget them, and come for a drink. It’ll do you good. We’re young and life’s short,” she concluded, infelicitously.

But Lilian did not feel young any more. Once you kill something without meaning to, you put aside childish things, she thought. Professor Havens complimented her assiduity.

“You have the makings of a true scientist,” he said to her one morning, just before he himself left for lunch. “I can tell that you must have been here until midnight at least.”
Lilian nodded. In fact she had stayed until dawn, returning to her flat just in time to brew a pot of Earl Grey. She had poured a cup for herself and had brought one to Kate in bed.

"Mm. Thanks. What time is it?" Kate murmured, eyes still closed.

"Early. Drink your tea. I'm having a bath." Lilian gave Kate's forehead a gentle kiss. She walked back to the kitchen and stood before the small oblong window, sipping her gentle tea and watching the new leaves turn shiny and green in the rising sun. She had set two alarms in order to get to her advanced biochemistry lecture at ten o'clock.

Professor Havens also stayed late in the lab the day the new colony of mice arrived. Lilian had an essay due the next morning for her psychology tutorial, and planned to spend the evening in the library. "I'm sorry," Lilian apologized. "I ought to have planned better."

"You go ahead," he said to her. "Really, don't worry about it."

Lilian worried.

"Actually, I have plenty of time tomorrow after lunch," she said. "I can help then."

"Lilian," Professor Havens said, his voice quiet, "I can't risk the experiment going wrong a second time. These mice are costing good grant money. The setting-up needs doing now, today. It's not a problem. I'll do it on my own."

"No, it's my responsibility," she said, and they both knew it was true.

Killing and its consequences. Lilian felt a shock at this evidence of the professor's life outside the laboratory and the lecture hall. And was he not too old for car-seat-aged children, she wondered?

When he turned into the narrow street of terraced houses where Lilian's flat nested, there was no place to pull in, so he drove to the end of the road and perched the car on the curb at the corner. "The door-handle sticks sometimes," he said. "Let me help." He set the handbrake and came round to open the door for her from the outside. "Milady," he said, holding out his arm and conjuring a charming awkwardness by slipping slightly off the curb.

"Thank you," she said, equally off-balance. He put one hand on the roof of the Vauxhall, and one hand behind her neck, pulling her in, kissing her lips. Leaving.

"Thank you, kind sir." That's what she should have said, rather than standing silently as he got back into the driver's seat.

Her professor became her lover after that. Lilian thought that probably he wanted to comfort her for the mistake she had made. He told her she was clever and that she had promise as a scientist. She liked that he did not comment on her beauty, or her lack of it. She apologized again about ruining his experiment and murdering his mice.

"You didn't ruin anything," he said, his hand on her breast. "We won't let this ruin anything," he continued. "This experiment is too important. What happened was an occupational hazard, but we can't let it delay the work." He laughed a little, to cover the seriousness, to lighten his confession. Lilian knew there was a grant application deadline next month.

"Come here," he said. In the lit laboratory in the darkened building, John
wrapped his arms around her and held her against his chest, the two of them together in an ammoniac cocoon.

When the data were collated and analysed and written up, John put Lilian’s name on the publication, as well as his tongue in her mouth. He wrote her a strong—a very strong—recommendation for the Ph.D. programme, suggesting his colleague as her supervisor. And then he told Lilian that he had accepted a job offer in America, and over the summer he moved to New England with his wife and their two little boys.

In the years since, Lilian and John had met several times, at conferences usually. Last time, it was in November in Milan. “I miss you,” he told her the first evening, at dinner, drinking a third glass of Valpolicella.

“How is your work?” Lilian asked him. She missed him, too, because in his lab the data always turned out clearly, and progress bounded along like an escaping hare. His publications multiplied, also like rabbits. On her own, the answers did not come easily into focus for Lilian. “I’ve been trying to look at adenosine in relation to ambient temperature during REM, but there’s no consistency. I can’t understand it. When we did the same thing five years ago, the results were entirely clear.” Neither of them could forget that study, she thought. Seminal in so many ways.

“Lilian,” he had said, brushing his fingers across her neck, through the curls at the base of her scalp, giving her shivers, “Lilian, sometimes the data need a little help to get themselves straightened out. You know that, don’t you?” She thought of the dead mice, and the completed experiment, and when they left the restaurant, the trace of his fingers stayed in her tangled hair.

Lilian’s own fingers touch the thin gold chain John gave her the last time they lay together, and she wonders whether Matthew will help or hinder her efforts.

In the following days and weeks Matthew watched Lilian prepare the tiny brains so the machine could freeze, thin-slice and then scan them. They both knew she could have asked him to do it, but she did not. The smell of the rodents did not bother Matthew. Chickens stank to high heaven. So did cordite and human bodies crammed together in a tent in an Afghan winter. The aroma of mouse throbbed in the nostrils, domestic, nearly pleasant, in contrast. Matthew counted grey bodies in the brain slices that Lilian prepared. He learned that Lilian had a theory about sleep, different from the prevailing ones he had studied: she believed that the protein adenosine, in concert with mammalian thermoregulation, was tied up with sleep requirements. “It’s because we are warm-blooded,” she instructed Matthew. “The neural consequences are secondary, a fortunate happenstance.”

“But reptiles also sleep,” Matthew objected.

“It’s not the same phenomenon,” Lilian said. “That’s what you’re going to demonstrate when we get the ethics approval through to look at the snakes.” That would be Matthew’s Ph.D. study: examination of reptile tissue after manipulating their ambient temperature to disrupt normal sleeping and waking. Lilian had arranged for Matthew to enroll in a vertebrate zoology class at Richley University, since Treadham did not offer one.

“You’ll need to go there twice a week,” she told him. “That’s not a problem, is it?” Matthew had moved into student accommodation for post-graduates in a yellow-brick block behind the college, less than five hundred steps away. To get to Richley, Matthew would need to walk to the minuscule train station. Or perhaps he ought to buy a car. He wondered whether he needed a British driving license, and what sort of special permission would be necessary.

“Maybe you should get a car,” Lilian said, invading his thoughts.

“Maybe,” said Matthew.

“You can drive, can’t you?” Lilian inquired, looking at Matthew suspiciously.

He had to tell her now. “I can,” he told her. “I have a license. It’s a conditional one because of my leg. I don’t know how it works here.”

“You limp sometimes,” Lilian said, as neutral as if she had commented on the chance of rain.

“When I’m tired, or not concentrating,” he said, “I can’t help it. This,” he gestured downward, “is a prosthesis.”

“There’s a shuttle service for disabled students between Treadham and Richley,” Lilian said, not missing a beat. “You can use that.”

“No, thanks,” Matthew told her. “I’ll take the train.”
She shrugged, lips pursed. “Please yourself. But the conditions set by the ethics board include one of us having formal training in reptile zoology, so you’ll need to get a decent mark in the class.” The subject closed between them. Lilian returned to slicing and Matthew to counting grey bodies. Unlike steps, there was no upper limit to them.

Matthew has always been helpful. It is his stock in trade. The eggs, collecting and counting them, when he was a child. In Afghanistan he had been helping his buddy when they caught the edge of the blast from the landmine. His buddy, Frederick Wilson, had survived for three days, three extraordinarily agonizing days, in the field hospital near Kandahar, while they waited for transport to Germany. Frederick did not however survive the transit; nor did Matthew’s leg. “I’m really sorry,” the surgeon had said. “In other circumstances we might have saved it but I’m afraid it’s going to have to come off. The good news is that it’ll be below the knee.” And oddly, at the time, Matthew agreed that it was indeed good news.

And now here he is, being helpful again. He and Lilian occupy the lab, just the two of them, the building empty and quiet. He will not leave before she does; he has determined that already. Matt looks at Lilian’s profile, the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, the plain paleness of her cheeks, the firm closed mouth. He watches her as she records the figures he reads out.

“I can do this on my own,” she tells him.

“It’s fine. I don’t mind. Isn’t it more robust this way? Quality control,” Matthew says. She looks at him, fingering the chain round her neck.

He has pulled up a stool and leans on it now, taking some weight off the prosthesis. “Ten point two six three,” he reads out.

“Ten point two six three,” she repeats.

“Ten point two six three,” he reads out.

“Yes,” says Matthew, then: “No, ten point two.” He has peered over Lilian’s shoulder and seen the twelve to the left of the decimal point.

“Yes, I’ve got it,” Lilian says impatiently.

“Are you sure?” he asks, puzzled.

“Please read me the next set,” says Lilian, her voice shot with steel.

“This is my lab. I know what I’m doing. Next.”

Matt leans his weight on his prosthetic leg for a moment, feeling the sharp pinch where stump meets flesh, and watches the moving lights of a Trans-Pennine Express roll past the matched pair of smokestacks, heading in the direction of the sea. The air in the lab smells slightly of mouse blood. “Nine point one one zero,” he says to Lilian, just before she can tell him to get on with it.

It is, after all, her lab.
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Prologue

Picture a man on a train. He's a young man. Good looking. At least he thinks so. As the train sways and rocks, he looks out into the cold night. Outside the window the leaves are beginning to turn, exchanging green for shades of red and gold. It is late in the evening of September 10, 1923, somewhere between Toronto and Kingston.

For the past week the young man, Ernest Miller Hemingway, late of Oak Park, Chicago, Kansas City, Italy, Northern Michigan, Toronto and, most recently, Paris, has not been sleeping well. He dreaded the fate that awaited him on this day. It couldn't be any worse he wrote to his friend, Ezra, I start work on Monday.

As the train swings closer to the lake, Hemingway looks out into the darkness. Black smoke from the engine billows against the grey cloudless sky. There is a scream inside of him that he wants to let out and send out across the dark universe: He is too young to be a father. Hadley knew there wasn't supposed to be a child.

The unborn child has brought him here. Here to this country. Here to this first horrible day of servitude at The Toronto Daily Star.

Up at six this morning to report for work at seven. The sky dark. The light in the city room blinding him, stabbing at his eyes.

His new colleagues clutched mugs of coffee as they studied the assignment sheet. When he approached, they moved aside. He was to pass the day picking up photographs, stalking the corridors of city hall, hanging around the King Edward Hotel. Just in case something happens or someone important shows up.
His fellow labourers in the field of spot news studied him, exchanging glances over the warm mugs in their ink stained hands. These, he knew, were not the literary aspirants of The Toronto Star Weekly whose gentrified offices were but a flight of stairs away. These were the foot soldiers in the news wars, the staff reporters. It is not about writing. It's about selling papers.

They didn’t try to hide their smiles. Behold The Star’s great foreign correspondent. He’s not cruising around the capitals of Europe anymore on the company’s ticket. Now he’ll be out on the streets of Toronto the Good, gathering the news, just like them. Write it up, get it in, then forget it and start all over again.

Hemingway pulls the covers over his eyes and moans as the train crawls through another Ontario town. In the darkness, he counts the things that are making him unhappy. Not happy about running around Toronto all day hunting for news. Not happy about being sent out-of-town on a late-night train. Not happy about being a father. Most of all, not happy to have left Paris.

Yet, unhappy or not, here he is, exhausted but wide awake, in the middle of the black Canadian night. All because his wife got pregnant and five convicts at Kingston Pen chose this day to go over the wall.

The convicts, Norman “Red” Ryan, Ed McMullen, Tommy Bryans, Arthur Sullivan and Gordon Simpson, have also had a long day, a day that did not follow Red’s carefully laid plans.

Set fire to the prison stable; Use the smoke as a screen from the guards in the tower; Scale the 20 foot wall; Steal a wealthy neighbour’s high powered car; Out-run the police. That is how it was supposed to go.

But on the other side, the powerful car is nowhere to be found. There’s only a lowly Chevy owned by a man who is painting the house. It will have to do. Off they go: Ed McMullen driving; Thomson, the painter, screaming, as they peel out onto the street.

Two guards close behind, first, on foot, then when they commandeer a vehicle, by car. Policemen arrive on motorcycles. Nearby residents volunteer their cars as more and more guards respond to the prison alarm’s incessant wail. Wah-oo, wah-oo, wah-oo. Work gangs outside the walls are hustled back inside.

When Red looks in the rear view mirror, the guards are getting closer. Closer. They all crunch down when the rear window shatters and bullets whistle through, barely missing Tommy Bryan’s head. “Good thing you’re a little guy,” Red Ryan says “If you were any taller, you’d be dead.”

Ed McMullen cries out when a bullet hits the steering wheel, splits it in two and rips through his index finger. The wounded hand and the damaged wheel make it hard to steer.

They race through the streets of Kingston, heading north. The Chevy is not up to the role it’s been drafted to play. The engine whines. Fire and smoke spewed from the exhaust.

When Red looks back, they are the first car in a fast-moving parade. They cross the railway tracks and, at last, city starts to give way to country. As they go over the crest of a hill, Red studies the road ahead.

To the right and the left he sees long stretches of dense woods. The lead chase car is about 200 yards away. Guards lean out the windows firing as they come. In the distance, he can see a curve to the right. They will be hidden from the guards for a moment or two. He tells McMullen after the curve, swerve hard, hit the left shoulder.

When Ed does, they jump out, run across the road and head for the bush on the other side. Ed, his face white, his body shaking, his prison greys covered in blood, tries to keep up.

That evening, guards with rifles station themselves on the four roads that surround McAdoo’s Woods. Five guards on horseback patrol the path that cuts through 700 acres of trees. Red Ryan, Sullivan, Simpson and Bryans have left Ed McMullen behind.

When Ernest Miller Hemingway arrives in Kingston, it’s the early hours of September 11, 1923 and all of this has already happened.
Chapter One

Hemingway gets off the train and looks around in the early morning dark. The grey stone station is out in the sticks. "Land speculation," the Station Master tells him. "Somebody got wind the railway was looking and land got too expensive in the city. But there's a shuttle," he says. "Don't worry. We hook the sleeping car up to it. We'll get you downtown."

In the waiting room, everyone is talking about the prison break. This isn't the first attempt on Warden John C. Ponsford's watch. The prison is a terrible place, they say, where terrible things happen. No wonder people want to get out.

There is a copy of yesterday's The Daily British Whig abandoned on a train station bench. Hemingway picks it up. "Where's McAdoo's Woods?" he asks the Station Master.

"Northwest of here. Not too far." The Station Master motions for Hemingway to come closer. "From what I hear," he whispers, "Red Ryan met this guy McMullen on a train. They're both bank robbers. They were on the way to Kingston Pen. Buddy of mine's a conductor. He says the two of them got pretty darn chummy during the trip."

"Who was in charge of that?" Hemingway asks rummaging in his pocket for his notebook to start writing things down.

The Station Master rolls his eyes. "The last time Red Ryan was in the Pen, before he pulled this last job, they let him out to fight in the war. Gave him a full pardon."

"That's probably where he learned about smoke screens," Hemingway says. He laughs and begins making notes, drafting the story in his mind. Use short sentences. Use short first paragraphs. Use vigorous English. The rules he learned before the war as a teenage reporter on The Kansas City Star.

The Station Master walks toward the door, cigarette and matches in his hand. Hemingway follows him, scouring the landscape in the semi-darkness. From what he can see, everything north of the station looks like dense, wooded terrain. It shouldn't be too hard to lay low.

The sound of the shuttle coupling with the Pullman car makes the Station Master throw down his cigarette and stamp it out with his black boot.

"You better get going, young fella. They'll be leaving without you."

Hemingway swings on board and climbs back up to his berth. As they roll toward the city, he thinks of the men loose in the bush. If it was him, he'd know how to survive on the run. His father taught him how to hunt at their summer place in northern Michigan. Hell, he's even hunted pigeons in the parks of Paris to stay alive; wringing their necks before they had a chance to squawk.

The shuttle train follows a gentle slope down to the banks of a river. He can see hard-edged buildings here and there, almost as if someone had shaken them like dice and then let them fly across the landscape. Every now and then, as they rattle along, there is a house with a golden glow spilling out from a window. Nothing like Paris, crowded and glittering all night long.

They clatter over the mangle of rail lines that cross the bottom of the city. There is a grain elevator and huge cargo ships in the harbour. The fall sun is still below the horizon but the mist that's hanging over the water is starting to glow red.

Last night in the club car, he heard more rumours than a freshman in a locker room. Some people think the convicts are in the city; some people think they're hiding in a barn. Some people think they stole a rum-runner's boat and headed across the river to the U.S. of A. Everybody has a theory but nobody knows.

The brakes squeak as they bump to a stop at the inner station. It's only 5:30. He asks about hotels and gets sent to a grey stone building down the street.
“Good morning sir,” the hotel clerk says to him as puts his valise down on the front desk. “Welcome to the Prince George Hotel.”

“Hemingway, Toronto Star. I need a room and a photographer.”

“You’re just in time for breakfast,” the clerk says swivelling the hotel register around for Hemingway to sign. The smell of bacon frying fills the air.

Red Ryan is not happy to see the sun come up. Darkness is your friend. During the day, you have to keep moving. Night should be like the Christmas Day cease-fire during the war. Everything should stop. Everyone needs a little peace. At night, you can tell when someone is approaching you with a torch in the dark. At night, you can rest. Or at least three can rest while one of you stands watch. But now with the darkness turning into day the hunt for them will be back on. He can already feel the tightness creeping up his body. The sun is making the morning sky glow blood red. All day yesterday he felt good. If he’d looked down he might have seen his heart beating in his chest. When they broke through the line of guards into the north end of McAdoo’s woods last night and headed further into the swamp, he felt like he used to when he won a race at school, when he won the first place ribbon. Their prison greys, their prison shoes and their prisoners’ caps all stink of stagnant water but he doesn’t care. It’s better than being covered with the stench of the prison and the hard dust of the yard. It’s better than looking up at the high walls that surround you, guards in the towers with their loaded rifles pointed down, aimed right at your heart or your head.

Freedom is like a drug circulating through his veins. Yesterday he wanted to keep running. He thought he could run all day and all night. He thought he could run forever. But today he notices the swamp has a smell that is soft and dank like an old familiar mattress. The bull rushes are spongy and the reeds are beginning to turn brown.

He looks over to where Sully, Tommy Bryans and Gord Simpson are still sleeping with nothing for pillows on a small circle of dry ground. Look like wee little angels, a mother might say. That’s true of some of the toughest guys he’s ever run across. You can always see the boy the man used to be when he’s asleep.

Sully rolls over, opens his eyes and looks around. Red can tell that, for a moment, he is wondering where he is. Sully pushes up onto one elbow and scans the swamp and the forest around him until he gets to Red sitting on the rock. “What time is it?” he says.

“What’s the matter, Sully? You wondering if it’s time to go down to the dining hall for breakfast?”

That’s the trouble with men who are in prison too long. They get used to the routine: the identical rhythm of every day; the rules, the being told what to do; the living their lives to the clanging of the warden’s bell. There’s no requirement to think. They’ve forgotten they are men, not sheep. The smallest decision about the smallest thing becomes a burden, a trial. When nobody is telling them what to do it doesn’t feel right any more. They’re paralyzed.

A flock of geese goes by and Red gazes up at the sky. It’s losing its summer glow even though it’s only early September. Yesterday, they were lucky. The weather was good. But this morning there’s a coolness in the air. Something is coming. Over to the east, there’s a kind of white light behind the blue sky as if winter is waiting to make its move somewhere just over the horizon.

Far to the north of them the land pulls away and begins to rise. Maybe he’ll send Tommy Bryans up a tree like a cabin boy to the crow’s nest of a sailing ship. The rest of them will stay back a safe distance in case there’s trouble. No big loss if the guards use Tommy for target practice. The kid has been a pain in the ass from the beginning.

He turns toward Sully and mouths, “Get up.” Then he walks over to Gord and Tommy and gives them both a kick on the shoulder with his prison-made boot. “Get up,” he growls in a whisper. The two of them open their eyes. He can tell both of them are ready for a fight until they remember who he is and where they are. Gord stands up first with Tommy right behind.

“We need to get moving,” Red says.

“Jesus, Red,” Gord says. “Give me two minutes to take a piss.”

“Yeah,” says Tommy, taking a step toward Red. “Give us a minute. I need to take a piss too.”

They go behind a tree and start to relieve themselves. Sully gets up
and joins the other two. Red watches the three grey backs standing in a row. Last night he found out all their stories.

Arthur “Sully” Sullivan a.k.a. Brown, sentenced to ten years for house breaking and theft. He and his brother robbed a bunch of homes in the west end of Toronto: Got caught in a boarding house melting down the rich people's silver.

Gordon Simpson, sentenced to five years for shop breaking in Toronto and stealing safes from United Cigar Stores.

Thomas Bryans, sentenced to 15 years for manslaughter.

He, Norman “Red” Ryan, is the only bank robber among them. A year ago, he was sentenced to 25 years for robbing two banks on consecutive days.

Bank robbers get the lads’ respect in the Pen. Red learned that early on. Ed McMullen was a bank robber too.

“Small time crooks,” Ed used to say, looking at the men circling the prison yard. “Why bother with petty shit? If you’re going to go, you might as well go for something big.”

The forest is so dense that as the sun comes up everything on the ground is bathed in green light. Red can see steam coming off the earth where the three streams of hot urine hit. As he watches the backs of Sully, Gord and the kid, he thinks if he had a gun he could take the three of them out right now. He could go it alone. Maybe that would be better. They wouldn't know what hit them.

He had been so sure, so very damn sure, that they would outrun the police. He didn't think they would need to know anything about the land north of Kingston except where the roads were. Instead here they are with no car, lost in a stinking never-ending swamp.

Tommy is from Northern Ontario. He said they have to be careful or they'll go around in circles. If you don't know the woods and you don't have a compass, that's what happens. They need a way of marking where they've been. Rip the leaves off the underbrush, a certain branch, in a certain pattern. It's a good idea but the way the kid said it, it's like he's the sergeant and they're the privates. Sully didn't agree. "It'll be like hall-marks on silver,” he said, “The guards will get wise.”

They have no idea what's around them, other than the farm houses to the south they saw on the way in. They can't go anywhere near the road: too easy to be spotted. They need to steal another car or hop a train. They need to get the hell out of here. And fast.

"Let's go," Red says. The three grey backs startle and the trio turns to face him. Each one with his dick still in his hands.

"Hey!" Gord says giving Tommy a shove. "Watch what you're doing kid, you're pissin' all over me."

When Hemingway gets out of the photographer's car the sun is clearing the tops of the trees in McAdoo's Woods. He crosses a field still wet with dew and approaches a small group gathered on the edge of the trees. In the centre is a short man with slicked down hair wearing a rumpled grey flannel suit. He has the ramrod bearing of a military officer.

"P-o-n-s-f-o-r-d, John. C.," the man says.

Ah, thinks Hemingway, it's the keeper of the keys himself. He joins the other reporters whose pencils scribble as the man talks.

"We have the woods surrounded," Warden Ponsford says. "It is an ever-tightening cordon." He holds out his hands like he, too, has strangled a pigeon or three in his day. "We'll squeeze them out of their hiding place."

Hemingway casts his gaze over the thick underbrush that marks the beginning of the woods. The edge of the road is lined with cars and there are guards everywhere. Guards are strolling; guards are sitting; guards are smoking; guards are reclining on the grass. It doesn't look like a manhunt to him. All these guys need are parasols and it could be Sunday afternoon on La Grande Jatte.

He approaches a small cluster of men. They are laughing and blowing smoke rings up into the branches of the trees.

"Good morning," Hemingway says. He has a letter of introduction identifying him as a reporter for The Toronto Daily Star. As he pulls the envelope out of his pocket, one of the guards stomps his cigarette out and starts walking toward him.

"Toronto Star," he says, holding the letter up so the small group of guards can see the blue-masted letterhead of his employer. "Can I talk to you for a bit about the prison break?"
All the guards look in the direction of Warden Ponsford. He’s still holding the attention of the reporters, gesturing towards the woods like a referee calling a penalty at a football match.

“What do you wanna know?”

“How many men are out on the hunt?” Hemingway asks. The other guards get up off the grass and form a tight khaki circle around him.

“Where’d you say you were from?” one of them asks.

“Toronto Daily Star”

“Big city paper huh?” says a red-headed man with a droopy moustache. The hairs that droop down over his lips become stained brown as he spits tobacco juice in the direction of Hemingway’s feet.

“We all got ordered out here including the off-duty guys and the guys on vacation,” says a man with a scarred face. “Ain’t hardly anybody left back at the prison.”

“Theym convicts did us a favour, if you ask me.” The voice belongs to a tall slim boy, so young that Hemingway wonders if he has ever drawn a razor across his face.

“If you’re thinking they’ll pay us overtime, you’re dreaming, Probie.” The older guards laugh. The young guy opens his mouth like he wants to say something else but he doesn’t. The red-headed guard puts his arm around the kid’s shoulder. “You better tell that new wife of yours to get out her old flannel nightgown because you won’t be coming home for a while.”

Hemingway turns back to see what the photographer is doing. He’d like to remember these guards with their rough skin and hollow eyes. Not for the paper but for himself. He tries, with a wave of his hand to catch the photographer’s eye, but the fool is sitting in the car, head back, eyes closed. This is what happens when you drag a man used to doing portraits out on a newshound’s mission.

“Who’s that you’re waving at?” A stain of brown tobacco juice lands on the toe of Hemingway’s shoe.

“I was hoping to get a few pictures.” The guards close around him in a circle. The man with the stained moustache takes a step closer.

“No photographs,” the moustached man says. “We don’t want no trouble.

Hemingway’s been a reporter long enough to know that when you meet resistance from the people in authority it’s better not to confront them. Withdraw, regroup and make another plan of attack.

While the reporters continue to buzz around the warden, he walks back to the car. “I’m going to distract him,” he says to the photographer pointing in Ponsford’s direction, “While I’m talking to him you take some pictures.”

He moves back to where Ponsford is still holding court.

“I am certain the four men are within a few hundred yards of the abandoned car.” Same old stuff. The man is as well-rehearsed as a defence witness at a trial.

Hemingway pulls his notebook out of his pocket and writes it down.

“My men have the area covered,” Ponsford says with his arm raised in the air as if he is Marc Antony addressing the Romans. “There’s no need for the army or the mounted or the provincial police.”

Pretentious fool.

Where the hell is the photographer? Hemingway looks back at the car. The photographer is struggling to get the huge camera out of the back seat.

“My men are the best men for this job.” Warden Ponsford’s voice rises above the questions yelled at him by the crowd of reporters.

“Why is that?” Hemingway hears himself say in a loud voice. He has pushed his way to the front and stands facing Ponsford across the wet grass.

The warden of Kingston Pen stops and turns. He slicks a long hank of hair back down across the top of his head. “Only the guards will recognize the convicts on sight.”

As Hemingway scribbles this down, he hears a loud whirring noise. Oh Christ, it’s the goddamn camera. A hand comes from behind him and clamps around his wrist. His pencil falls into the dirt.

“I told you no pictures, Toronto.” It is the guard with the tobacco-stained moustache.

The camera whirs again and the guard tightens his grip. “You better tell him to knock it off or that idiot is going to get you both in a wagon-load of trouble.”

Hemingway can feel the skin on his arm starting to burn. His wrist is
starting to ache. He tries to pull away. He may not be a concert pianist or a surgeon but he sure as hell relies on his hands to make a living.

“Let go of me,” he says, but the guard doesn’t move. When he tries to pull loose again, the guard pulls his arm back and up, behind him. His whole arm hurts. He can feel the pressure on his bones. The son-of-a-bitch is trying to get him down on his knees.

The other reporters have turned away from Ponsford and are beginning to stare. The camera whirrs again. Hemingway jabs his elbows back with a quick jolt and as much power as he can muster. The tobacco-soaked breath hits the side of his face when the burst of air leaves the guard’s lungs. But it doesn’t work. The guard gets him in a choke hold, then, lets him fall to the ground.

“Tell him to put that camera away, Toronto. Tell him or I’ll tell my men to open fire.”

Hemingway gets up and turns to face him. The guard takes a step back, his gaze focused on a point somewhere past Hemingway’s right shoulder. “Harris! Did you hear me?”

When Hemingway turns, he sees the young guard with the new wife drop his cigarette in the dirt. He flips his rifle up against his shoulder and stares down the barrel as he starts walking toward them. The other guards fall in behind. The sharp crack of the kid’s rifle makes the assembled press corps dive for the dirt.

On the way back to Kingston, the photographer can’t stop talking about what happened. “I thought we were going to die.” He’s clutching the steering wheel so hard his knuckles have turned white. He keeps saying it over and over. “I thought we were going to die. I thought we were going to die.”

“They wouldn’t have killed us,” Hemingway says. “Too many witnesses.”

“There’s a rumour circulating around these parts like a crow over a cornfield,” the photographer says, “the Penitentiary Department up in Ottawa is going to pay $50.00 for information leading to the arrest of each escaped convict.”

Hemingway can tell: the photographer has caught the fever.

“As what I hear all the farmers north of the city are loading up their rifles and searching their sheds and their barns.”

“Maybe you should go up there and get a few pictures.” The photographer nods and Hemingway can see he doesn’t get the joke, he’s actually thinking it over, entertaining it as an idea.

“It’s like the guys on the way to war. They were terrified but they couldn’t wait. There’s something about the feeling of knowing you might die any second; you get addicted to it mighty fast. It scares the hell out of you but at the same time it makes you feel more alive than you’ve ever felt.

Hemingway tucks his notebook back into his pocket and turns in the passenger seat. Just beyond the photographer’s face, through the driver’s side window, he can see the harvested yellow fields and the red autumn woods and the cold grey rock of the pre-Cambrian landscape going by.

“You ever been to a bull fight?” he asks the photographer.

But he already knows the answer is “No.”

Back in Kingston, Hemingway gets out of the photographer’s car and walks up the stone steps of his hotel. He pulls open the heavy oak doors with the frosted glass panes and stares into the lobby. The clerk has a large chalkboard propped up against mail slots. He’s copying out the menu for dinner. The choices are roast beef with mashed potatoes and carrots or salmon with hollandaise sauce.

The stairs creak as Hemingway begins his trek up to the third floor. Creak the way they did in Oak Park when he was trying to sneak in at night. He’s only been here a few hours but Kingston is starting to feel a lot like Oak Park: a place where even young men who have fought in a war are not free to express their opinions at Sunday dinner.

His suitcase and his portable typewriter are sitting on his bed. He pulls his notebook out of his pocket and sets it down beside the faithful Corona. On the drive back from McAdoo’s Woods he bought a copy of the Monday and Tuesday editions of The Daily British Whig. He sits down beside the window and starts to read. “Five Prisoners Escape from the Penitentiary” is the headline on Monday. “Wounded Prisoner Found Exhausted,” the headline on today’s paper says about Ed McMullen’s capture.

His eyes travel up and down the columns as he turns the pages. The Tokyo earthquake has killed hundreds of thousands in Japan. The Prince
of Wales will arrive at Quebec on Wednesday. Luis Angel Firpo is getting ready to fight Jack Dempsey in New York.

He reads the reports about the convicts again, underlining things that might be of interest to the readers of The Toronto Daily Star.

He's learned one thing writing for The Star in Europe. You don't have to be present at an event to cover it well; you just have to write like you were.

He opens up the Corona and begins. “Escaped Kingston Convicts Still At Large” He has about an hour before deadline to make the late edition.

Hadley wakes up from a nap. For a moment, she forgot. It’s Toronto, not Paris. It’s the Selby Hotel, not 74 rue du Cardinal Lemoine. She gets up and, as she looks down on the businessmen walking back to their Rosedale houses, the delivery truck of The Toronto Daily Star pulls into the yard.

She finds her handbag under the bed, sorts through the francs in her change purse until she finds two Canadian pennies. Like a child on the way to the candy store, she heads downstairs to the lobby with them tight in her hand.

When she arrives at the front desk, the clerk is cutting the string from around the stack of newspapers with a silver pocket knife. She and Ernest have only been there a couple of days but he knows her by name. “Mr. Hemingway got something in the paper today?” he asks.

Hadley nods. The clerk smiles and hands her a copy. “Good for him. And how is Mrs. Hemingway?”

“Very well, thank you,” she says, but it isn’t true. When Ernest left last night she felt lazy as a cat on a cushion but today she feels impatient. They need to settle on an apartment, buy some furniture. He needs to come home. The baby is due in less than five weeks.

She opens her hand and lets the pennies slide onto the polished wood. “No, no, Mrs. Hemingway, it’s on the house.”

She holds up the paper and points at the headline, “Escaped Kingston Convicts Still at Large.”

Hemingway sits in the hotel dining room going back over the copy he sent in to the paper. Pleased with what he wrote, he pulls it in a little closer. The waiter is reading it over his shoulder.

“I hear,” the waiter says from behind him, “there’ve been a lot of resignations in the last few years.”

Hemingway stares up into the man’s suntanned face. “At the newspaper?”

“No, at the penitentiary. Makes sense, if you ask me. It’s not natural to be your brother’s keeper.”

The waiter retreats through the swinging doors to the kitchen. Hemingway takes the napkin off his lap and pushes back his chair. A woman at the next table turns and faces him. She says, “I hear the salaries are low and the hours are long at the prison.”

She is young and pretty with long brown hair. Her skin is translucent white. Her eyes are blue and a small blue vein runs beneath the cameo at her throat. He finds himself leaning, looking at her left hand, to see if there’s a wedding ring. Ezra always said there is a direct connection between the crotch and the creative brain.

The woman twists a strand of her hair. Her head is raised, her eyes focused upwards as if she is studying the pressed tin ceiling.

When she turns her head and lowers her eyes, he knows she has caught him staring. He picks up the carbon of his story again and pretends to study it while he thinks.

She’s beautiful but he is, after all, married to Hadley. He is not Ezra Pound. From what he saw, Ezra’s wife, Dorothy, accepts his behaviour.

The waiter comes back with a pot of coffee and Hemingway raises his hand. The woman says, “May I please have some too.” The waiter changes course and scurries to her side. Hemingway’s eyes follow the dark brown liquid as it descends like a muddy waterfall into her empty cup. Beneath the white fabric of her dress he can see her breasts rise and fall with every breath.

When the waiter leaves, the woman turns to him again and smiles. The spirit of Ezra clutches at his elbow. Ernest, Ernest, Ernest, do something. Art, Beauty, Truth, Sex, they all go together. A man needs a regular bathing in bodily fluids to get the creative juices going.

The first time he met Ezra Pound, Hemingway thought he was a joke. His hair was wild and he dressed in a velvet jacket like some kind of
nineteenth century poet, Lord Byron or Samuel Coleridge. All those literary manifestos, pretentious nonsense, he thought at first.

But after his time in Paris, there are different things that he would hold up to ridicule. Some things matter less to him now than they used to. Some things matter more. He's beginning to believe artists do think differently. Artists, like convicts, lead different kinds of lives.

He rubs his ear to keep Ezra's voice out of his head but it doesn't work. It's easy, Ezra is saying. No true artist would ever love just one woman.

Hadley sits by the window and reads the story on the front page of The Star: The story of the convicts’ escape and the chase and gunfire and the flight into the bush.

But, according to The Star, despite the gunfire, there was no bloodshed and there were no bodies. No blood, no bodies and, Hadley notices, for Ernest, there is no by-line.

She moves onto the bed and spreads the paper out before her, studying the front page. Her hand covers her mouth when she sees that no one gets a by-line. Not for writing about the much-anticipated arrival of the Prince of Wales or the Tokyo earthquake. Mussolini is defying the League of Nations and creating a crisis in Europe. No by-line. First page, second page, no by-lines. Second section, first page - no by-lines.

She pulls out her scrapbook and searches through the clippings waiting for her to glue them in. This spring, from Paris, Ernest did a ten-part feature for The Star. When she finds it, she nods her head. She didn't imagine it. Six of his pieces on Franco-German relations are on the front page; all the rest but one on the first page, second section.

Every one of them says - By Ernest M. Hemingway.

Every one of them is copyrighted to him.

Everywhere Red looks all he sees is swamp. Swamp, swamp, swamp. There's a mist hanging in the air and a bird that sounds like it's laughing at them. He can't sleep. Gord volunteered to stand watch tonight. Nobody said no but nobody trusts him either. He spooks too easily. He's always thinking he hears things in the woods: men calling or men cocking their rifles or branches moving or dogs howling or dogs sniffing their way through the underbrush.

Tommy's awake too. He's sitting beside Red on a fallen log. Red studies the kid he never wanted to bring along in the first place. Somewhere along the way he's lost the ID number off his sleeve.

Tommy picks up a blade of grass and starts rolling it between his palms like he's trying to start a fire with a stick. His hands are small, the fingers short and stubby. Red knows there are crescents of dirt under his nails, blacker than the night that is descending on them. He's a poor little rich boy who couldn't control his temper. He killed a guy in Montreal.

While he watches Tommy, strands of clouds come together and then separate around the moon. The crickets keep singing. The bird laughs at them again. The wind blows through the trees. Far off in the distance he can hear geese honking, getting ready to head south. Gord stands up and looks around.

"It's geese for Christ's sake, Gord," Tommy says, "Calm down."

Red knows tomorrow he'll have to do something or he will go crazy. He doesn't want to hear the slosh of their legs wading through the swamp any more. Their movements separate the bright green scum on the top of the water leaving a trail. All that wet around their ankles and calves travels up their pant legs. It feels like a day when the prison won't give you a change of clothes even though you've been out working in the rain.

Tommy is terrified of getting blood-sucked by leeches. He should have chosen his travelling companions more carefully. Next time Red Ryan escapes from anything he is doing it with a gun. It might come in handy should the need arise for culling the herd. These guys are staring this test of manhood in the face and some of them are coming up wanting.

Tommy drops the blade of grass, stands up, and strips the scarlet leaves off a branch from one of the bushes that grow around the fallen log. "I'm sure the guards have figured out it was us they fired on. That was a little too close. I almost caught a bullet."

Gord says, "I almost shit my pants."

Tommy leans over and twists the branch until it comes free. "You ever had the lash?" he says to Red, flicking the branch like a whip. Flick-snap, flick-snap, against his leg. Like he's jockey and horse or warden and prisoner all in one.
“Stop it,” Gord says.
Sully turns around. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing. Lie down and try and get some sleep,” Red says, giving
Tommy a look. He doesn’t want to think about what will happen if they’re
captured. All he wants to think about is how they are going to get out of
this goddamn swamp. He doesn’t like travelling blind in the bush. He
doesn’t like the country. He’s a city boy. He wants to think about all the
things he’ll do when he gets back to Toronto.

“It’s awfully quiet out here at night,” Sully says, “It gives me the creeps.”

“Quiet?” Gord says, “Are you crazy?”

Red lights up the last of his cigarettes, takes a draw and holds it out to
Gord. Maybe a smoke will calm his nerves.

“Where’d you get that?” Tommy says. “I thought the smokes were all
gone.”

Sully, not Gord, comes over and takes the cigarette from Red. Sully’s
hand is starting to shake but he manages to get it to hold steady. He sucks
the tobacco smoke in and a look of satisfaction spreads across his face.
He keeps it there, in his lungs, stopping time while Red waits for him to
exhale.

“Jesus, that’s good.” Sully’s nostrils flare as he blows the smoke back out.

“What was that? Did you hear that?”

Even though Red knows that Gord sees boogie men behind every
tree, images of bloodhounds and German Shepherds and guards with
rifles and a bloodlust are beginning to invade his thoughts too.

“Don’t get spooked,” Tommy says. “It was only an owl. They like to
hunt at night.”

“Hunt what?” Sully says. “It didn’t sound like there was anything out
there.

“Oh there are things out there. There are always things out there.”

Sully signals with his hand and Red leans in closer. “We have to do
something, Red. Tomorrow morning it will be forty-eight hours with-
out water or food.” He nods his head in Gord’s direction. “I think it’s
beginning to show:”

“I guess we’re going to find out who’s made of what, Sully,” Red
whispers.

They hear a scuffle in the bush, the sound of leaves beaten by wings
and the half cry of a startled animal. Gord stands up looking like he is
ready to run off or turn himself in. “What was that?”

“Sit down,” Tommy says. “It’s just that old owl. He got something I
guess.”

Every time the woman moves, her perfume floats across the dining room
and caresses Hemingway’s cheek. When she lays her napkin down, the
waiter reappears and slides her bill across the table.

There is something about the movement of the waiter’s long fingers
across the flat white linen that Hemingway does not like. It’s too slow. It’s
making him angry. It’s like another man leaving his hand a moment too
long in the small of your wife’s back.

“T’ll sign it to my room,” the woman says, “204”

The waiter pats his chest like a gorilla in heat until he finds a silver
fountain pen.

The woman signs and starts to walk away. Her waist is small, her legs
are long, her shoes a soft grey. When she reaches the arched dining room
door, she turns and smiles. Hemingway sits a little straighter. His face
begins to flush.

Opposite him, slumped in his chair, the shade of Ezra looks down and
shakes his head.
The Judges’ Comments

A good story is more than a series of events. It requires an inner energy, an internal narrative engine, to push up to its conclusion. Donna Tranquada knows this. From the first line of “Howler,” her haunting story about loss and intrusion during a Canadian family’s return visit to Guyana, Tranquada takes us down a winding path of startling imagery, a bright cacophony of sensory details jostling for our attention. The motor that keeps this scenery running past is a mystery that needs solving, a question asked by the teenaged narrator: “What’s in Best?” Past its striking final scene, “Howler” suggests a world that goes beyond the borders of the story, where a family drama plays out on two continents.

Jade Colbert, Book Reviewer for the Globe and Mail

With a perfectly appropriate crisp style, “The Prisoners’ Tale” is an ambitious, fresh look into a young Ernest Hemingway as he struggles to accept impending fatherhood, and develops his journalistic skills with The Toronto Star. Writer Marianne Miller skilfully chooses and crafts details that bring Hemingway to life, and mirrors his ambitions and tensions with those of the escaped convicts he follows. Her deft juxtaposition of two legendary characters of the early twentieth century—Nobel Prize winner Hemingway, and the notorious criminal Norman “Red” Ryan—allows Miller to build a fascinating story of parallel tension while she explores the notion of freedom and makes us ponder the cells that imprison each of us.

Alexandra Risen, Author and SCS Creative Writing Certificate Graduate
Leslie Carlin’s marvellous “Good Steps” is thoroughly captivating, a meditation on the delicate dances we all perform and the myriad ways our lives can collide or intertwine. Clinical, cynical biochemist Lilian has isolated past injuries within herself, muffling them in layers of clinical protocols. The arrival of Matthew, her newly-hired post-graduate student, threatens to disrupt her hard-won equanimity—even as Matthew’s own desire to transcend his calamitous past pushes him forward into unknown territory. One meticulously-crafted phrase at a time, “Good Steps” cracks and peels back the patina of mundane life, bringing the shining and searing moments of human existence into stark focus: the demands we make of ourselves vis-à-vis others, the false steps we avoid…and the false steps we knowingly take.

Helen Smith, Associate Editor, Penguin Random House, Canada