

THE INDEPENDENT

You had to have the right attitude and be honest with yourself.
Margaret Atwood

The Speaker of the House referred to his list, indicating that the newly elected MP from one of the western provinces could take the floor with her proposal. She had been warned her Private Member's Bill would never get passed its first reading. Richelle Bonivista stood her ground, defying years of male obfuscation and interference. Her voice was not the deep baritone of a pasture bull like that of her colleagues and those who filled the opposition benches surrounding her on all sides. She hesitated for few seconds, lowering her head with the utmost gravity before quavering out sentences in a determined soprano.

"Honorable Prime Minister, members of the assembly, and Mr. Speaker," she began "I wish to propose we amend the constitution of this great nation of ours...."

A groan of displeasure interrupted her introduction. These new MPs were consistently callow, disrupting both protocol and the status quo with its organized lobby groups. As novice MPs they showed up at the start of every reconvening believing they had the god given right and power to effect *change*. Veterans on the Hill (as parliament was called) knew how things worked and to whose advantage. Nothing passed through the tepid waters of parliament unless it was to the advantage of those who could support the elected through large contributions. Richelle was undeterred. Underneath her photogenic cameo, a populist dreamed of becoming her country's next prime minister. A chorus of derision was a petty obstacle when it was televised on the parliamentary channel. She was getting the coverage that would make her synonymous with hard nosed grit. She continued as the disclaimers rose in volume:

"...amend our constitution such that the rights of young women to walk our streets without threat or interference of any kind be respected by *LAW*, Mr. Speaker." The jeers in the House of Commons had intensified. This gadfly wasn't going to take a hint without further discouragement. "Mr. Speaker," she shouted, "I speak from the experience of a young woman who was swarmed by a group of men in a public park in broad daylight!" Then she introduced her topic with a force of expression that resonated to the upper rafters of the inner chamber. "Sexual violence against women in this country – women of color, minorities such as our indigenous women, women of immigrants – all women (Mr. Speaker) deserve to see their rights enshrined in our constitution." She lifted a thin leaflet and waved it towards the camera such that those who voted her in to office would take note. At the mention of 'sexual violence' the rancor subsided, lest the stigma of misogyny fall against any of them. Ms. Bonivista had achieved her objective. The next 3 years and 364 days were hers to command.

She continued. "Mr. Speaker, I have here..." she held up the binder for the benefit of the opposition members, "the amendment that will enshrine the rights of women forever, as long as the sun shines and the rivers flow in this great nation." She took her seat, scowling at those who would dare support the ongoing abuse of girls and women.

Across the floor, James J. Rudolf as the leader of the opposition rose to support the independent MP Ms. Bonivista. Her proposal, he stated, was succinct and bore the aspect of urgency that made its passage through both Houses imperative. He reminded his colleges, turning to the house members as he spoke without any notes, they had recently pledged to uphold impartiality. That trust, he said, was fiduciary. Ms. Bonivista's proposal deserved immediate and prompt enactment, passing first through

the Commons and then through the perilous waters of the House of Lords with its political appointees. MP Rudolf took his seat to calls of “Here - Here,” and “Bravo”.

The bill as presented by the new MP from the outback would be the first of hundreds of revisions to the constitution destined to pass through parliament in the next 4 years. The party in power held a majority. They could do as they wished, accountable only to themselves and a pantheon of bankers. A parliamentary *majority* was in toto a blank slate to privatize as many government services as they could get their hands on. With the exception of the passage of a few bills from the Bonivistas in their midst, the country would be turned on its legal head while the electorate watched in dismay. Orwell had drawn his reader’s attention to this pattern in his allegory *Animal Farm*.

But for MP Richelle Bonivista it was her signature tour de force. Outside in the marble halls of the chamber, she was swarmed by *La Press*. Microphones like the ends of a dozen pikes were thrust towards her lips. Halogen lamps bathed her in an exposure of publicity. Like an orchestra attempting to tune their instruments, one question emerged from the cacophony.

“You said you had been *sexually assaulted*?” asked the reporter. “Could you elaborate?” Richelle lowered her eyes, shamed by the gravity of her own confession. She tossed aside the tresses that reached her shoulders and volunteered:

“I have never told anyone (not even my former husbands) about this incident. I was afraid of tainting our bonds of matrimony – as would any woman in my situation. This has got to stop,” she insisted with tears of rage, looking directly at the reflective camera lens. “As a Member of Parliament, it is imperative to *keep-my-word*. I promised to raise this issue once elected and now (you saw for yourself) I will do more than just speak out against this form of injustice.”

“Could you give us details of the assault?” another reporter begged. “When did it take place; where; were you impregnated by a group of men or just one of them; and at what age?”

“I was just fourteen,” she related as other Members of Parliament passed in the hallway, disgruntled by the way the new MP was turning their 40th session of parliament in to a publicity stunt. But *La Press* loved it as great copy.

“I was on my way back from school with one friend (she has since deceased) when a group swarmed us. I tried to talk them out of the assault but they were determined.”

“Where they fundamentalists?” asked another reporter.

“I don’t remember,” she said. “There was five of them and we were frightened out of our wits.”

“Did you report this incident to the police afterward?” asked one journalist who was looking for a lead.

“I was too ashamed,” she said. “My Bill once enacted will give women in this country the power to report sexual violence while remaining anonymous.”

“But is that fair?” shouted a reporter from the back, “Aren’t we all *innocent until proven guilty*? The accused will be vilified even while their accuser is protected behind a cloak of secrecy. Aren’t you attacking the fundamental right of the defendant to a fair hearing before an impartial legal system?”

Richelle scoffed at the mention of ‘impartiality’. Who believed that men would be impartial when it came to respecting the rights of women! She had had enough for one scrum. In any case the media would only broadcast a few seconds of her exchange, the rest was superfluous, wasting her time. She pushed past the reporters, politely demanding they respect her privacy.

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April showers bring May flowers, Evangeline reminded herself in reference to the gathering of young scouts at the entrance to the community center. Ironically the threat of a downpour was the only reason she was afforded this fleeting moment of felicity. Her son Kelly was too much of a whiner to walk to the center when it was raining. For her own reasons, she had given in to his sniveling and driven him to the scout gathering. Droplets of rain were falling like threads through the overhead lamp at the entrance. The faces of Kelly’s peers were buoyant under the artificial light, as if portrayed in a Renaissance painting. Reflecting on her own menarche, Evangeline Chicane promised herself she’d volunteer as a den mother to the boys gathered under the portico. Once granted approval from the local chapter of Scouting Canada, she’d follow her son and his friends in to the center each Wednesday evening. As initiates to scouting, these young men were supposedly being guided safely *through the icy gates of manhood*. That experience would be over in nine short weeks with the summer break. Before that happened, Evangeline intended to become an integral part of their transition. It meant she had to make a commitment. Such activities as scouting were always short on adult supervision. The same few people – like old Terrance Reid as scout master - held those positions for years. Eva felt assured she’d have no trouble forcing her way in to a good old boys clique.

The engine in her Buick was cycling as she sat in the rain. She hardly knew the vehicle was on except for the dash and headlights. The interior was a comfortable vacuum, like her marriage. It was true, Richard hadn’t forgotten her 34th birthday but his gift was a crystal unicorn which she considered a useless trinket. If anything, the marriage had become a convenience. In a few short years they’d have their house paid off and could move up the ladder to a better neighborhood and another mortgage. It wasn’t a matter of *never being satisfied*. Rather utopia had trained classes of people such as the Chicanos to always anticipate *more*. It stimulated the economy. Eva could pinpoint the origin of that craving. As a girl of nine, when visiting a ranch in the interior, the wrangler had allowed Eva and her friends to pick out which pony they wanted from the herd in the corral. The animals were panicked and stampeded around the enclosure, avoiding the lasso. Twenty five years later, dopamine contaminated her bloodstream all over again. As a wife and mother, she was unabashed in the shadows, picking out which boy she preferred over his peers.

Mr. Terrance Reid – *codger par excellence* – arrived at the entrance, carrying a bundle of instructions in his arms. He was greeted with respect by his scouts. The papers were distributed and Reid searched the pockets of his pants and scout shirt for the key to the door. Eva was amused, as if watching the early onset of Alzheimers. By any standard, Reid was an implausible *leader of men*. Rather than the beanie cap of the scouts, he was wearing a stiff hat such as Mountie Matt O’Brien would wear in an old movie. Eva stifled a laugh but snorted her contempt when Reid dropped the keys on the stairs and several of the scouts dived to retrieve them. Jimmy Stalker, the teenager with black locks she had

chosen as her favorite in the group, handed the keys to his leader. Eva huffed. Reid didn't deserve any such adulation.

With the latch unlocked, the group raced inside. Reid propped the door open, anticipating the arrival of a few stragglers. Before entering, he noticed Eva, the mother of Kelly Chicane, sitting in her car on a far curb. He waved to her with a warm smile and she (for the sake of appearances) smiled and waved back in return.

The rain slowly stopped falling from a canopy of gray cloud. Evangeline had returned after the passage of two hours. She was designated to drive Kelly and a carload of other scouts safely home. Navigating the city streets late at night was no small courtesy: one scout had been hit by a car the previous year when returning from a meeting. A few concerned parents including Eva Chicane lined the curb waiting for the boys to pile in to their back seats. Each time she chauffeured the scouts, a new and animated group taunted each other in her rear view mirror. Some would ask to have the windows rolled down on their side of the car, only to shout at passing vehicles or pedestrians. She never knew who she would be driving home but her favorites consisted of the five boys who lived together in a foster home at the end of Mariner Way. They were the wildest of the whole pack. She was amused to hear them curse like grown men in the back seat but (since she was an adult and a lady) had warned them she wouldn't "tolerate such language". The most brazen in the group had said in response, "You're right, Mrs. Chicane...shagging right!" and all the boys, even Kelly, had laughed at his sarcasm. Evangeline said nothing but thought, *Foster home or no foster home, these little buggers have what it takes!* True as that might have been, the behavior of her hell-raisers was closely regulated by the school curriculum and the strap wielded by a school principal. But Eva, watching them in her rear view mirror, was encouraged to see that their testosterone hadn't yet been bridled by any ethics. After fourteen years of marriage, Richard seemed too tired to give her more attention. But for the boys, life was an adventure with few rules, an open book with blank pages, not a ledger filled with the calculations of mortgages and property taxes. Important as those issues were, they were also the links of an invisible chain. The legacy of *success* (as far as Evangeline was concerned) was the lack of a sex drive. On the other hand, she was still attractive to other men. It was reciprocal. Her contact with Kelly's friends left her in a lighter mood. After realizing how much she looked forward to chauffeuring in the middle of the week, she decided to jump in with both feet. As a den mother she'd be on a pedestal, the focus of attention for 25 fledgling males.

Scouting

Reid was under the misconception he was another Robert Baden-Powell. His objective was to help build character in each apprentice. Scouting on his terms was a waste of time as far as Eva was concerned, a baby sitting ritual rather than an initiation rite for young men. A disciple of the philosophy of Maislova, Eva lived like a tight rope walker with the belief that passage for boys in to manhood came through intimate contact with women. Other cultures had sun dance ceremonies and circumcision for their initiates. Instead *Scouts* was teaching boys like her Kelly how to tie knots for

badges and do door-to-door drives for coat hangars to make money for the troop. It was so ridiculous Eva laughed to herself. The outcome was predictable. It produced a generation who went to football games and hockey matches, screaming from the stands for touchdowns and fights with hockey sticks. Hollywood understood the sociology of these types better than any other syndicate. The films they sponsored were for those *who knew neither victory nor defeat* (Roosevelt); in other words, *vicarious*. A genre of films catered to the depiction of valiant men who were decisive, resolute. The myth was perpetuated by such popular films as Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*; Robert Mitchum in *Thunder Road*; Mel Gibson in *Brave Heart*; Tony Curtis in *Spartacus*; James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*; Brando in *Mutiny on the Bounty*. And if the script required the actors to get executed for their misdeeds at the end of the film (Fonda/Hopper: *Easy Rider*. Brando: *Last Tango in Paris*) it mattered little since the film stars would rise like Lazarus to accept an academy award. Not only were such movie actors perpetrators of *the Big Lie* as Eva saw it, apparently as men they were immortal.

Kelly was another disappointment. She complained to Richard: “The kid’s mind is stunted! He’ll make a lousy husband to some poor woman.” She spoke as a mother who could handle the truth about her offspring. Somewhere in the continuum of childhood, Kelly’s childhood refuted further growth. The choice was his own and deliberate. He was fixated to some stage in his pampered upbringing (or even further back to the time Evangeline had breast fed him for a week as a newbie). They had handed their son every opportunity possible but he failed at everything he took up whether it was piano lessons or judo practice. She had long since given up giving the boy any encouragement. The friends Kelly brought in to their house were another matter. Those few boys were refreshing, their personalities like chocolates wrapped in gold foil and she encouraged her son to have them stay over for the weekends. During those visits, if Kelly had a disagreement with a friend his mother consistently took the side of the other boy. Eaves dropping from another room in the house, she admonished his attitude. “Stop being so possessive, Kelly,” she’d call as if his conscience. “Friendship trumps everything else!” she’d remind him for the umpteenth time.

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The wipers were methodical on her way home. Her decision seemed the most natural thing she had ever imagined. The shackle around her ankle was broken. She slipped an arrow in to its nock and went hunting for quarry.

Later that night when in bed, Evangeline floated the suggestion past Richard as a casual reference. “But why?” he asked.

“I can keep an eye on Kelly if I’m working there while he’s earning his stupid badges. He’s been complaining he’s being bullied by one of the older boys.”

“Let him learn to stand up for himself,” rejoined Richard. His wife was always fomenting new strategies. “Kelly doesn’t need his mommy around to fight his battles for him.”

“Its only two hours each Wednesday,” she insisted. “It will get me out of the house.”

Richard might have pointed out she was never home as far as he was concerned. He did make the point it would be more than just two hours a week:

“You drive those kids all over Timbuktu– make that 3 hours and a tank full of gas.”

“Can I do anything,” she whispered, on the edge of losing her temper, “you approve of?”

It was getting late. Richard had to be up at 5 am that following morning. He rolled over and without further discussion, Eva had the affirmation she needed to proceed. Next she had Kelly pass a note to

Mr. Reid in his social studies class, informing him she had been appointed as the *scout mistress* to help with the activities on Wednesday evenings. The old codger was so gullible he took her for her word. At the same time, she filed a letter with the scouting council, informing them that Mr. Terrance Reid *-scout master par excellence-* had requested her help with his 9th division scouts. The next hurdle for Evangeline was the khaki uniform she was required to wear as a den mother. The dress reminded her of a 50 pound potato sack. She carted out her sewing machine and went to work on the seams, pulling them in until they complimented the curve of her hips. The hem was far too low. No one but Mennonite women wear a dress that long. But if she pulled up the hem by several inches, it might cause a reaction. The solution was to raise the hem each week by one inch. Reid and the scouts would gradually get use to her new hemline until it was well above her knees. Eva was having a blast being provocative and had just started as a volunteer. For the first time in Reid's years as a scout leader, he was working alongside a young married woman who dressed in a suggestive way. He noticed but didn't make any comment to the effect it was inappropriate. *If your eye offends, pluck it out!* Other men had compromised themselves around her so why should Reid be any different?

Evangeline did her research. The objective to their weekly gathering in the basement of the community center was to help develop well rounded youth, better prepared for success in the world. First off, she wanted to take the troop out of the dingy basement auditorium and do other activities but their adventures were hampered by a lack of funds. Any outings she suggested to Mr. Reid needed to have insurance coverage. The scouts couldn't so much as step outside the doors of the center without having the protection of insurance companies! Outings to planetariums or indoor swimming pools needed insurance and the cost was prohibitive. Scouting was a better investment it seemed if the parent's of the scouts were wealthy. Otherwise, the focus and scope of their scouting was limited to the activities in the basement of the community center.

Even so, Eva took pleasure in keeping so many young men under her control. Mr. Reid was a kindly old chap but with a lackadaisical attitude. He didn't have the energy to instill discipline in his boys. Eva took charge of the scouts in this aspect, investing in a whistle she kept on a cord around her neck. Each week brought a new set of goals. On the second meeting, she showed up with panels where a variety of knots had been tied and fixed in place. The scouts gathered in front of the displays and tried to copy the knots as quickly as possible. It was a great learning tool and Reid complimented his assistant. Other changes she introduced were less endearing. One shrill tweet from that infernal whistle around her neck and the boys were trained to fall in to their respective packs. Two tweets on the same whistle, and they were compelled to stand at attention with their arms at their sides and heads facing in a line to the left, like soldiers on parade. Once immobilized, Evangeline Chicane inspected them from head to toe. She was highly critical, penalizing those whose uniforms were wrinkled or shoes not shined. With others, she would compliment their appearance by tightening their bolo neckties as they stood beaming with the attention she was giving them. Three tweets and the boys spread their legs apart and stood with their hands behind their backs at ease while Mr. Reid gave them further instruction.

Another drill required the boys to stand with their hands extended like sleep walkers. Eva walked down the lines with a clip board tucked under her arm, inspecting their hands for dirt. She made a note of those who had dirty fingernails and repeated the same exercise the following week until they got the

message. She wasn't going to let any of them away with anything. If they didn't improve, she'd berate them in front of the others. The boys soon cleaned up their uniforms, hands, and attitudes.

In a short time, a change was apparent. Even as the troop became more proactive, differences between the scouts became more obvious. There was one boy in particular whose mannerisms annoyed Evangeline. After dropping off the foster boys late one night, she broached her discomfort to Kelly when they were alone in the car.

"Mr. Reid seems a nice enough of an old man," she said to her son. "Is he?"

Kelly looked at his mother in the car, her face defined by the river of city neon surrounding them. He shrugged, not understanding the question. Mr. Reid was just *Mr. Reid*, scout master. To the scouts, he was a kindly old man they begrudgingly respected. His style of leadership was overly tolerant. Eva wasn't getting the information she wanted.

"Have you ever seen him spend time *alone*," she asked, looking directly in to his eyes "with any of the other scouts?"

"Like who?" Kelly wondered aloud.

"Like *Gerald Rawlings*?" she continued, annoyed her son was unwilling to be more forthcoming. Whereas the other boys handled their bodies with athletic agility, Rawling's gestures were more like those of a ballerina. Most of the scouts had grown up together in a loose federation starting in the first grade. They didn't discriminate as adults insist on doing. Gerald Rawlings had been accepted as a classmate from the start of their schooling and as far as her son was concerned, his differences were not an issue. It was true, Gerry had been pressured out of their competitive sports during recess and lunch. He seemed more inclined to play in the area reserved for the girls rather than the boys but that was his choice. Kelly laughed to recall the situation in the playground but he found it funny rather than an indication of anything abnormal. Eva wasn't satisfied.

"Yes, but does Mr. Reid show Gerald any *special* attention? Have you ever seen Mr. Reid take Gerald aside or drive him home - *alone*?"

Kelly shrugged again, his most annoying and infantile habit. He didn't understand. Changing the topic, he started to tell his mother about an incident where he and his buddies were playing soccer last week, and the ball went through the window of an upper story in the school. The sound of the shattering glass, the trajectory of the ball, the panic of the boys scattering from the area nearest the damage – it left Kelly chopping up his words with laughter, now that he had his mother's attention. He was just that shallow, his mother thought, and that dull. The issue had to be set aside for now. Suspicious of the good intentions of Mr. Reid, her mind continued to pace in its cage, searching for any possible motive. She wasn't able to find one – at least not the most obvious connection that Reid had a hangup for young boys. And why not the most obvious: the Rawlings boy when he was so effeminate? The contempt she felt for Gerald Rawlings concurred with her feelings for Terrance Reid. After three Wednesdays, Eva made the commitment to have Reid taken out of scouting altogether. Call it *retirement with a gold watch* if you will, but she still wanted rid of him. There wasn't room enough in the basement auditorium for both of their styles of management. Reid had to go!

Keeping the scouts motivated for two hours involved study and diligence on Evangeline's part during the other days of the week. Her husband found her in the garage at one point, standing at attention and moving her arms in a stiff pattern. Each hand held a small flag of red on one stick and white on the other.

"What on earth are you doing?" he asked, amused by her antics.

She continued. Her expression was focused. Her arms moved like the arms of a clock: first to 9 on the red flag and 5 on the white flag; 6 and 1: 2 and 5: 10 and 3. She took a short break.

"I'm sending messages. Flag semaphore is as old as the English alphabet. I told my boys to study up for the next week."

Richard shook his head, thinking the exercise a waste of time.

"If you need to send a message try using a walkie talkie. Or better yet a telephone."

"No," she assured him, going back to the same routine, spelling out a word one letter at a time: 9/5 6/1 2/5 10/3. Semaphore was a slow but effective way of communicating over a long range. Who says that during a war or other disaster all the other means of communication hadn't been compromised.

Richard conceded:

"Okay, what word did that mean?"

Edith covered her face partially with a flag. From behind her veil, she enunciated, "S – E – X – Y".

"Oh no!" her husband lamented, laughing. "So this is what you're teaching your boys!"

She continued, copying the flag positions she had written down earlier on a sheet of paper.

"Those young men deserve better than anything Reid can teach them." She was determined to memorize as many short words as possible. She knew what she was doing. The other words she would be flagging were D-A-M-E and N-U-D-E and B-U-S-T and (her most risque) P-U-S-S-Y. She had worked out the flag positions for a dozen other utilitarian words like DOOR and TIME but intended to insert a few provocative words at an opportune moment. Her boys would love the incentive to learn.

The following Wednesday evening, the scouts were separated into several groups. In each corner of the auditorium they were assigned to do either a scout task or be given instruction. Reid was over in far corner, surrounded by a group of scouts kneeling on the floor. His topic was the care and sharpening of knives and hatchets. He had a display of implements spread out on a table. The scouts were fascinated by the collection of hunting knives with antler horn handles. Edith had another group of boys in an opposite corner and was going through the routine of making letters with her flags. After a few basic words, she slipped into her routine for the 'other' words. Her pattern was well rehearsed. The boys called out the letters at random from her group but soon they understood she was intending

to spell out provocative words. Eva took little time to flag in words like ‘sexy’ and ‘nudes’. A howl of amusement came from her pupils when they guessed the right word. The scouts at Mr. Reid’s presentation were distracted several times by the laughter coming from the other side of the room. Evangeline was obviously a more engaging instructor than Mr. Reid.

Once regrouped, *old man* Reid commended Evangeline for the enthusiasm she had been able to instill in her students. She looked back at him with a saccharine expression. This man was intrinsically too dull to be suspected of anything, let alone of preying upon the Rawlings boy. Still she kept an eye on Reid, watching him when he put his hand on a boy’s shoulder for instance.

During successive Wednesdays, she’d arrive with a schedule on a clip board and proceed to tell Reid what would be on the agenda for the next two hours. Her intention was to run circles around the old bugger. The boys were behind her 100%. Scouting for them shifted from rote instructions to activities that implied *survival of the fittest*. Once they played volley ball for the entire time, spending only the end of the meeting in rank and file with their legs spread open and their arms locked behind their backs. But she found an idea for the ideal survival game in a book from the library. Mr. Reid was hardly listening to her (as usual) but it mattered little. She went through the steps of a game called *Detection*. After assembly and inspection, Eva had Mr. Reid and the scouts move a heavy table in to the center of the room. The boys were directed to form a wide circle around the table and sit on the floor. It was obvious she could control the entire group with the snap of her fingers. Eva paced inside the circle, her movements constrained by her uniform.

“This game,” she said, moving restlessly within the circle where the boys waited and listened, “originated in ancient Sparta. At night, the city left one small opening in their fortifications. If a slave could crawl out of that hole in the wall without getting caught, he was a free man. If caught, he was executed!”

She approached the table and placed a hand on its surface. She pointed to different scouts and said:

“Now you (or you or you or you) can be the slave who escapes – or the one who is put to the sword! Which is it going to be? The sword or freedom?”

The boys shouted “Freedom” in one voice. Some went so far as to raise their fists in defiance. Her presentation was superb.

Eva smiled over the heads of her scouts. Reid was watching with some discomfort from the outer circumference. Eva wheeled about and as if at random picked out the first participant, Gerald Rawlings. He was asked to come over to the table and stand at attention. Stimulating night at the Spartan wall, she unfurled a blindfold and tied it firmly around Gerald’s head, covering his eyes. He was a blind man now, and she guided him with her hands on to the table. His legs were left dangling off the floor, leaving barely enough room for a helot to slither under the table and escape. The game could start.

As the guard at the wall, Gerald was distracted by the sounds in the room. Scouts cupped their hands over their mouths and hooted softly so that Gerald moved his head from the left to the right, as if the night was filled with the distant movements of animals and men. Meanwhile, around the circle, Eva moved amongst her boys, picking out first one scout and then the next to crawl the length of the tunnel under the table. Gerald was unable to detain anyone and was hampered by the blindfold. One scout after another slid down the tunnel and out to freedom, jumping up as if in triumph afterward with their hands in the air. Eva tasted the exhalation and as a coup de grace signaled for the whole troupe to rush the table. A roar filled the auditorium. Scouts pushed through on all sides of the table, from the back to the front and from one side to the other. Surrounded by mayhem, Gerald swung his legs wildly about but was unable to catch a single helot. When the fight broke out it wasn't clear if Gerald had leaped down from the table on to another scout on the floor or if the scout had purposely pulled him off the table by one of his legs. It was clear however that Gerald Rawlings was intended as the scape goat in the game. Bedlam broke out. Gerald's blindfold slipped around his neck as he and another scout wrestled on the floor of the auditorium. The others took sides and jeered. In the middle of the disturbance, Scout Master Reid extracted the Rawlings boy from the headlock he was in with his opponent. Evangeline took charge of the second boy and was blowing her whistle for the scouts to fall in to their ranks. She was also decrying the show of poor sportsmanship from Gerald Rawlings.

It took several minutes for order to be re-established amongst the scouts. Gerald was bruised and shaken. Mr. Reid used the blindfold to wipe the blood away from his nose bleed. Then Reid spirited Rawlings out of the room entirely leaving Eva to take over the assembly. Her whistle blew a second time. She was in charge and meant to be obeyed. The boys ran over to their respective corners and took their places like trained Pavlovians. With the scouts standing at attention, she gave a short lecture on showing *self control* (such as Gerald had been unable to do) and fair play. She praised the others, saying they had (to the last scout) shown great skill in mastering *Detection*. She glanced towards the door where Reid and Gerald Rawlings had left, hoping they'd never return. But Reid did. He came back alone. By then the scouts had carried the table back to its place and were sitting in a circle, participating in another game whose purpose was to teach them timing skills. With their eyes closed, they were asked to raise their hands at the precise moment a minute (60 seconds) passed. Only one scout was able to tell the time to the exact second, the Stalker boy. Eva wondered how a young man of his quality and good looks had ever ended up in foster care. She waited with a stop watch in her hand and wagged her finger at Jimmy Stalker when he raised his arm exactly on the 60th second. "Fantastic!" she praised. "Fantastic!"

They had a final inspection for the evening. Their uniforms were a mess, Reid noted, after crawling like reptiles across the linoleum floor. A few of the scouts had scrapped and bruised knees. He approached Evangeline when she was packing up to leave.

"Was that necessary?" he asked, obviously referring to the way she had provoked the incident with the Rawlings boy.

She thought to avoid an answer. Reid's opinion was of little consequence. No one took him seriously.

"No one was hurt," she volunteered.

Reid shook his head in such a way as to amuse Eva even further. Rawlings and Reid were two peas in a pod. The boy had a thin skin and was better off out of scouting if he couldn't show better character.

When Reid returned to his dark apartment, a light was flashing on his phone. The message was from Vivian Rawlings, the mother of Gerald. He called Mrs. Rawlings back immediately and described what had happened that night in the auditorium, apologizing for not stepping in much earlier before Gerald was taken advantage of in such a callous way. Her son had come back in the taxi he had ordered and was in tears, she told him. Was this any way to hold a scout meeting? He agreed and apologized again, giving her Evangeline Chicane's phone number. The woman assured Terrance Reid he had not heard the last of the matter but he encouraged her to call the Evangeline as soon as possible. Hanging up the phone, he wished he could listen in on the call between the two alley cats.

Vivian put the phone down and interrogated her son as to who this Chicane woman was and what was her function in the scouting program. In tears, Gerald recounted not only the incident at scouting but also the assaults he was getting from Kelly Chicane and his friends. They had been badgering him after school, slapping the homework out of his hands and calling him filthy names when he tried to stop them. His mother was furious. Why hadn't he told her sooner? She punched the Chicane number into the pad on the phone, intending to give that bitch and her brat a dressing down. Richard answered the call and told Vivian his wife hadn't returned from scouting yet. "Oh, wait," he said, "They just got back now."

A few seconds passed. Richard was standing at the door when Evangeline opened it. He handed the phone to her saying, "Its for you."

Without asking if she had the right party on the line, Vivian's indignation pounced with both claws. She was screaming in to the speaker, demanding an answer – no, many answers – about the treatment her son was receiving from her and her boy.

"I think you have the wrong number," Evangeline said calmly.

"Don't you bullshit me," Vivian shot back. "Terrance Reid gave me your number. My son came back home with blood all over his shirt after what you did to him!"

"The choice was his," Eva countered. "Did Terrance tell you your son attacked another boy when he realized he was losing? Scouts don't act like that."

"Your son's been attacking my Gerald on the way home from school!" Vivian wasn't interested in platitudes being tossed her way by an outright lying bitch.

"Oh really now," Eva said in a patronizing tone. "You share the same trait as your son. Both of you are living with a persecution complex. I suggest you go get the help you need."

But Eva was also staring at her son who was standing on the opposite side of the kitchen. He was apprehensive least the caller uncover what he kept concealed. The hard look in his mother's eyes warned him he was in trouble.

"I'm calling the principal," Vivian assured her in a level tone. "You haven't heard the last of this one – not by a long shot!"

The phone went dead. The hurricane was over. No damage had been done as far as Evangeline was concerned. *Sticks and stones will break my bones but threats will never hurt me.* However it was news to her that Kelly was involved in tormenting the other boy after school. Eva slammed the phone down.

“What was that about?” Richard asked.

“Well,” Eva snapped at Kelly, “what have you been doing to Gerry Rawlings after school?”

“Nothing,” he said weakly, looking at the floor. “It was the other kids. Alan was the one who punched him in the back of his head.”

“What?” asked Richard. “What are you two talking about?”

“Besides,” piped up Kelly in his own defense “you don’t like him either. Otherwise you wouldn’t have made a fool of him at Scouts!”

This marked the third time Evangeline’s behavior had been highlighted. Coming from her son’s mouth, she was infuriated. She didn’t have to take shit from her own little boy.

She exploded: “Don’t you talk to me like that!”

“I hate you!” her son shouted back. Eva moved around the kitchen table, attempting to grab Kelly by his hair, but the boy scrambled. Knocking down a chair, he ran up the stairs to his bedroom on all fours. Eva stood at the bottom of the stairs, shouting epithets to the effect she had *a big baby* for a son. Vivian kept her promise and called the school that next morning.

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The last meeting for the scouts took place in the city park near the community center. As if by a clap from the hands of the Creator, the park trees were bursting out with bouquets of beautiful color. Every clock in the country had its hands moved forward by one hour with Daylight Savings Time. Sharing in the rites of spring, the sun shone for an extra hour in the evenings. The scouts had been instructed to bring their runners shoes. The park had a circular track with lanes marked in chalk. The boys could run relays in each of the six lanes, passing the baton to the next boy ahead of them who would race to the finish line. Scout Master Reid stood at the beginning (and end) of the track, with his one hand in the air and his other holding a stop watch. Staring at the watch, he dropped his raised hand and said “Go!” The first set of runners raced towards their compatriots. Batons were passed like royal edicts to the next set of runners and they too raced around the track like Olympians.

The remaining scouts marched over to another area of the park. Evangeline’s role involved teaching the boys the importance of calisthenics for aerobic conditioning. She had memorized a number of exercises. The boys were lined up with enough space around each of them to allow for the swinging of their arms and the bending of their bodies. Eva stood at attention at the head of the group. She was visible from every side, her silhouette accentuated by a tight outfit. With hands on her hips, she rotated her torso in each direction in a semi-circle. The troop followed her lead, looking like novice dervishes.

“Now bend,” she instructed her boys. “Left hand/right foot....Right foot/left hand.”

Evangeline moved smoothly through each exercise; bending, twisting, and turning while presenting the boys with a list of steps and the example of her own agility. For the next exercise, the boys were instructed to touch their toes without bending their knees. Coming up from her toes, she threw her arms wide open in a maneuver that expanded the chest and lungs. Again. She bent over, touched her toes and returned, throwing her arms aside as if doing a swan dive. Down again, she touched her toes. The boys followed, stumbling through her directions and looking pathetic for the effort. But they weren't alone in the park. Another group was leaving the grounds with their skate boards tucked under their arms. These juveniles were older, perhaps 15 or 16, and chauvinistic by default. A few were attempting to grow their first goatees and others considered themselves mature enough to smoke cigarettes and steal cars on the weekends. They sauntered their baby faced machismo behind Eva and from a safe distance began hooting at her callipygian body. They whistled and called on her to do more for their entertainment and pleasure.

The scouts were easily intimidated by older peers. Evangeline ignored the intruders. She touched her toes with determination, sticking her derriere up at a bunch of dead beats. They were lightweights, scum; of no consequence. The delinquents fell silent. Again, she touched her toes and called out for the scouts to do likewise. The scouts looked at each other. In their city jungle, the sociopaths amongst them were inducted in to adult brotherhoods to sell drugs and procure young women. Eva stopped and demanded her boys get moving and obey her every word. Like a band of mutes, they resumed mimicking her example. Behind them their compatriots were passing off the baton, running towards a finish line in an imaginary race against time.

Once back at the center, *Scout Master* Reid congratulated each boy for completing the season and handed out some new badges. The promises of summer were soon to be a part of their young lives. The boys smiled. Cherry trees could be raided in the early hours of the mornings.

They were disbanded. Breaking in to smaller packs, the foster boys piled in to Evangeline's Buick. Kelly took the seat next to his mother. Their enthusiasm was contagious. At the junction on Simon Street, the signal on her dash was flashing to make a right turn. Before moving any further, Eva proposed to Kelly that his friends in the back seat come to their house for a last visit. She'd drive them home a little later in the evening. The foster boys yelled their approval in one voice. She clicked off the right signal and responded when the left flashed in its place.

At home again, Eva began to prepare the kitchen for her guests. She laid out a tray of foil chocolates and baked goods covered in icing sugar. Kelly insisted on taking his friends to his room to show them his hobbies. Their laughter and taunts could be heard downstairs as Eva moved about her kitchen.

Kelly's main attraction in his bedroom was his booby trap. This consisted of a balloon suspended by light fishing line from a telephone cable opposite his bedroom window. He boasted how he had filled a condom with water and was waiting for a pedestrian to walk under it at night. When the two were aligned, he'd cut the mono filament tacked to his window sill and *-Bam!-* the condom would fall like a bomb and burst on the head of a passerby. It was hilarious. The boys poked each other as Kelly mapped out his intrigue and its execution. One of them pointed out the *sissy picture* that hung on his

wall above his bed. It showed a shepherd carrying a lamb on his shoulders over a raging brook. The inscription on the picture read *The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth*. The picture had been a gift from Grandma and Grandpa Chicane.

“That’s sucks,” the boy sneered and the others agreed.

“Watch,” Kelly responded, scrambling over his bed where he reversed the picture, facing the glass to the wall. On the back Kelly had pasted a lewd and graphic joke he had cut out of one of the magazines he had found in his father’s closet. The boys roared with laughter. Kelly lived with a set of double standards, one for himself and another for his oppressive parents and grandparents.

Next Kelly pulled out his collection of baseball cards. The boys found places around the room to sit while passing the cards amongst themselves. One boy spotted a pellet gun in a corner and was pumping it up. Kelly volunteered he used the rifle to pop off the birds that landed on the telephone lines outside his windows in the spring, watching them fall to the pavement with worms still dangling from their beaks. He even gave a demonstration of a bird being shocked by a shot to its chest. He was great at imitating a mortally wounded bird. The boy with the rifle in his hand dug through the drawers until he found a box of lead pellets. Loading up, he stuck the barrel out the window and began firing off single shots at the street globe. One after another, the boys demanded their turn with the rifle. Kelly sat on the bed sorting his cards and proudly moderated their access to his rifle.

These antics could be heard from the kitchen. Evangeline was emptying the dishwasher when Jimmy Stalker wandered down from the upstairs. Lately Jimmy had been distancing himself from his friends, dogged by anxiety. Evangeline smiled at him when he showed a preference for her company over her son’s and his own friends. She suggested he set the table by folding the napkins at each place setting. But soon Jimmy was standing next to her and saying nothing, abashed by the impulse he had to find comfort in the arms of a surrogate mother. Evangeline knew. She was approached frequently by men of various persuasions, some of them staring at her through windows at the mall and others leaving messages on her cell phone. They all wanted the same thing. Little wonder women turned such attention in to a profession. But the urgency wouldn’t leave Jimmy Stalker alone. His lower lip was trembling. These younger men were so self conscious, so serious; she liked that. She glanced down to confirm he was aroused. Teasing him but with no commitment of her own, she made the pretense of being fascinated and vulnerable. She combed her nails gently through his black locks.

“Why,” she suggested in a whisper “don’t you do something about it?”

Stalker’s face flushed. He shook his head with uncertainty. Eva nodded towards the bathroom door and handed him a few serviettes off of the table.

“I’ll be right in after you,” she said. But of course, she had no such intention.

Jimmy Stalker did as he was told, looking back at her in the hallway before he entered the bathroom and shut the door. Upstairs, the scouts had decided to launch the booby trap and yelled ‘bombs away’ with one voice that broke in to hysterical laughter when it hit its target.

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After having a snack around the table and exchanging expectations about the summer jamboree in Golden Crown Provincial Park, Eva drove the boys home. The foster home they shared with a dozen others was a dilapidated three story dump with a fire escape zigzagging down its back wall. Eva

couldn't drive up to the place without thinking it was a firetrap that deserved to be condemned. But this time the road was blocked off by construction. Barricades surrounded a deep excavation and signs advised a detour was required.

"I guess that's it, fellas," she said, dropping them a block away from their destination. The boys clambered out of the back seat and thanked Mrs. Chicane for all she had done for them in scouting. Eva smiled and made eye contact for one last time with Jimmy. She promised herself she'd have even better sex with her husband that night. Jimmy Stalker with his black locks and Jim Morrison face would make some woman very happy one day.

The Buick made a U turn and left the five scouts standing on the pavement, waving goodbye for one last time. The upper lights in the foster home were visible in the distance. With the tail lights of the Buick fading in to the night, the boys formed a huddle.

"Look what I got," one boy boasted, showing the box of lead pellets he had stolen from Kelly's room. The others did likewise, extracting from their pockets the things they had pilfered from the Chicane residence. One had a handful of Kelly's prize marbles. Another had rifled the medicine chest, taking away Tylenol and birth control pills. But Jimmy had the best of the lot. He opened his hand and showed off the crystal unicorn he had pocketed from its place in the Chicane living room.

Then one of them jumped on to the hood of a car and suggested they all go to the park and do some *chick hunting*. It was a good suggestion. It would only take an extra half an hour and besides they had an excuse: it was Mrs. Chicane's fault. *Go phone her if you don't believe us*. During the summer months, girls in the neighborhood often hung around the park in groups long after any curfew.

The city planners had a sense of humor when they named the park *Sunrise*. The open space with monkey bars for children, a tennis court and baseball diamond was surrounded on all sides by the structures of industry and warehousing. The five boys blended with the darkness like a band of neolithic hunters. Their prey was neither elk nor bison but any young women who might be alone in the night. They were not disappointed. The shapes of two females were shadows near the playground. It was too dark to make out their age. Attacking older women in their late teens or early twenties was ill advised. One of the boys called out to Shelley Breach and her friend:

"How old are you babes?"

"Fourteen!" shouted back Shelley who had just turned thirteen.

"That's fine for me," another of the boys shouted back.

Then the wolf pack raced forward and surrounded their prey. They grabbed at the coats and jeans of their quarry as the girls squealed and screamed like piglets. It was over in ten seconds. The girls ran across the park to the safety of the nearest street light and the hunters regrouped near the tennis court. They were consumed by exhilaration and bragged about the parts of a female's anatomy they had been able to pinch and grope. But it was late, almost 10 pm. It was time to return to their foster home where every cent spent on their discarded lives was tallied up on a ledger by a bureaucracy of misers.

On the other side of the park, the girls stopped running when they reached the sanctuary of a street light. They were out of breath but laughing and clinging to each other. Their youthful predators had not pursued them any farther.

“What a scream!” the one girl panted to the other. “That was better than the roller coaster!”

“The one guy tried to feel me up!” Shelly Breach confessed, amused they had been attacked by a pack of dingoes who proved to be toothless.

“They were wearing *short pants*,” rejoined the other girl, nearly hysterical. “We were goosed by a bunch of boy scouts! Can you believe it! *Boy Scouts!*”

The girls laughed until they were out of breath. The whole episode was totally comic. Each girl had told her parents they’d be studying at the home of the other girl, so they could go out together and wander the streets for an hour or so. Parents were so gullible. But it was time to go their separate ways, returning to the opportunities and homes that were jails to their hormones.

“Let’s do this again next week,” prompted the one girl. “That was awesome!”

Whereupon Shelley Breach, singing a few bars to a popular melody, bid goodnight to her best friend Richelle Bonivista.

END

THEN THE JAMBOREE AND HER TIME IN THE POOL WITH THE STRANGER.