



SPIRIT CHASER

By ELIZABETH WITHEY

WHAT IS IT THAT WE INHERIT FROM OUR PARENTS?

WE UNPACKED OUR SUPPLIES IN ONE OF the shelters at the Nipawin Regional Park. Hard liquor. Mix. Giant plastic cups with lids and straws. A person could get drunk faster using a straw, we'd been told.

The Regional was a good spot to “get primed” before the party. We couldn't get primed at home, unless someone's parents

were out of town, but we were too young to get into the bar and we didn't want to risk driving around with open liquor in the car.

The park was a five-minute drive away, along the river on the edge of town. During the day families gathered there for cookouts, birthdays and playground activities but the place was deserted after dark. No

campers, no staff. The cops rarely drove through. We could be as loud as we liked.

My friends and I were going to a cabaret at the Legion Hall later that night. Everyone would be there: hotties, scammers, bitches, druggies, freaks, skanks, hockey players and the puck bunnies who dated them, headbangers, douchebags, dropouts, geeks like us. The cool and uncool were oil and water, swirling in one vessel but never mixing, watching one another's every stupid move while pretending the other didn't exist.

It was a warm September evening in 1993. I wore my jean jacket, the one from *Bootlegger* that had pretend

patches all over it. I had a twenty-six of Southern Comfort all for myself. It was the colour of iced tea, and I liked it because it was spicy and sweet, unlike vodka, which tasted like nothing but burned all the same. I sat at a picnic bench and pulled the bottle from a paper bag. The label was black and white, old-fashioned looking. Southern Comfort had been crafted in a New Orleans bar on the banks of the Mississippi River, which I knew how to spell thanks to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* books. What would Laura think of me? Never mind. I twisted off the cap, poured some of the brown liquid into my cup, and cut it with Coke.

The drink was strong—one-third booze, two-thirds pop—and it stung as I slurped it through the straw, filling up fast. My friends drank vodka and orange, paralyzers, coolers. I don't remember who pulled for us, maybe someone's older boyfriend.

My friends' names all ended in A: Natasha, Paula, Anita, Melissa, Pamela. We were sixteen or nearly, but Anita was the only one with a car, a blue Firefly that we all crammed inside to get out to the park. Anita played designated driver and chaperone. She laughed—with us, at us—as we grew sillier and sillier, smoking cigarette after cigarette as the swigs of alcohol went into circulation.

Illustration ROBERT CARTER

After a while, Melissa and I headed off to the playground. Melissa had the greatest laugh, sober or wasted: girly, clownish, naughty, scot-free. She cackled now as we staggered at high speed toward the swings and slides. We each mounted one of those riding animals on giant springs; Melissa rode the turtle and I got the squirrel, or was it a duckling? We rocked back and forth madly, willing the springs to snap, laughing and belching and screaming maniacally, our up-combed bangs flapping and reeking of Salon Selectives. The booze sloshed in our guts. Before long, we fell to the ground in hysterics. We were so alive, so loaded, so right-here-right-now and who-gives-a-sweet-shit-what-anyone-thinks.

I ran over to the helter-skelter, feeling nostalgic. As a kid, I'd loved this white metal cone, a lighthouse with a slide twisting around the outside. I would climb up in it to the lookout, then fly down the steel loop until my feet hit pine needles and dirt. It was rusty now, much punier than I remembered, and I had to duck my head to get inside. I pulled down my Guess jeans and squatted, watched with dizzy fascination as the urine pooled in the sand between my Doc Martens and splattered the black leather and yellow lacing.

"I'm pissed and pissing! Ha! Ha!" I shouted. My words echoed inside the helter-skelter. Melissa laughed and laughed, and when I returned we stretched our arms out like wings and spun in circles under the yard light—sisters, monsters, moths.

Things went black and neon after that. My memories are a series of ruined Polaroids, water-marked and smeared, swampy-dark with bright spots, the images barely recognizable. I had finished the twenty-six of Southern Comfort and smoked all my cigarettes. There was puking in the shelter, a big red splat of it, and someone jumping back to avoid the spray. I don't remember whose mouth it came from.

Fast-forward past the blackness: by ten o'clock, the Firefly was angle-parked in front of the Legion. A girl named Liza stood at the car with the driver's side window open, laughing at me in the

backseat. "Hey Liz," she shouted, teasing, "Wake up! Wake up!" Liza was cool, but in a good way; she circumvented the cliques, liked everyone and was liked by everyone. How long had I been here? I could hear the music pumping inside at the hall. I'd almost made it to the party. I smiled at her lazily, caught the irony, and let my eyelids slide shut.

THIS WAS NOT OUR FIRST BOOZE CRUISE, nor would it be our last. Drinking was what most teenagers did—and probably still do—on weekends in rural Saskatchewan. Not that we ever worried about drinking underage. Everyone did it and everyone got primed before the real party started: to save money on drink tickets at a cabaret dance and to take the edge off, to reduce the angst of arriving, wherever it happened to be: in a basement, a garage, a hall, a farmyard, even a moonlit clearing like Tokers, the clandestine patch of land across the river where we held bush parties.

Did he know he would be picking up someone else, someone who looked just like, but no longer was, his little girl?

We didn't require an occasion to drink and we didn't care about the consequences. Who needed all those brain cells anyway? Why would we want to remember every lame-ass evening in Nowheresville, lapping Main from the cop shop to the Dairy Queen, again and again, looking for hot guys, chain-smoking, begging the gods for some sort of action—a meteor, a tornado, a sinkhole, anything. Of course the gods never delivered. Getting wasted livened up the dullness once the novelty of more innocent risk-taking—truth or dare, the fainting game, chatting up the dead via a Ouija board—had worn off.

I remember precisely the night I tipped over to binge drinking, went from light to dark and smart to stupid, as I see it now. It was with my friend, Regan, who lived a half hour from Nipawin. I was fifteen and had my learner's licence; my father, Peter, let me drive his little blue truck to Ridgedale so I could practise on the highway. The truck didn't have a

cassette deck, so we listened to the radio. Both of our lives were at the mercy of my hands, locked in at ten and two on the steering wheel, keeping us on the right side of the dotted yellow line.

"Have fun," Dad said when he dropped me off. Did he know he would be picking up someone else, someone who looked just like, but no longer was, his little girl? Was it like this for him the first time he got drunk, the first time he tasted the very thing that ruined his old man? Did he ever once connect those dots and think, "Hang on, this could ruin me, too?" Because I certainly didn't. I was a teenager, indomitable, my confidence lustrous and deadly as a blade. *Of course I won't fuck it up. Of course I'm smarter and better than my parents.*

We didn't talk about Dad's drinking. I was old enough to suspect what was going on, but I never got the Hollywood scene I hungered for. No one in my family ever said the word "alcoholic" out

loud, never mind "abuse." The latter was passed off as discipline and punishment, what happened when we did something stupid. (Which my brothers and I did, more and more in the evenings, once Dad had dipped into the Canadian Club, once his eyes got bloodshot and shiny.)

"Do you want to split a six-pack?" Regan asked before the party. "I only need three to get drunk."

She was talking about beer. I'd never even had one. "Three's fine," I said, faking casual, handing her ten bucks. As the purple bill slid from my hand into hers, I felt excited. I didn't notice something precious falling away, the sloughing-off of a softer, younger layer of myself. I didn't feel the invigorating kiss of a cold breeze, the kind that wakes you up and scares you at the same time. I handed Regan ten dollars and leapt. It was a thoughtless jump, a fearless one, because that's the best way to jump, because I was going to live forever, because I knew it all, because I couldn't wait to see how it felt to be on the other side.

At the time, I didn't care that there was no undoing this action, because the words running through my head were *fun*, and *up*, and *forget* and *onward*—not *sad* or *down* or *remember*.

OUR VOICES ECHOED WHEN WE PLAYED under the bridge at the lake, this little bridge built into the gravel road that ran over the creek by Ivan's cabin. My brothers and I loved to run down the grassy embankment and collect fireweed and daisies, watch the creek water trickle and lap over stones on its way down to the lake. Sometimes we could see Ivan's cats under his cabin, in the outdoor litter box he'd fashioned for them. We called Ivan the Bridge Troll, and not just because of where he lived. He was troll-like, by his own admission: big-bellied, unkempt, greasy, with grimy hands and a booming voice. But Ivan wasn't scary like a troll, not scary like my dad. Imagine a burly, dark-haired version of Doc in *Back to the Future*, a talkative, jovial and chaotic foil to my father who taught us about flying squirrels, showed us rat testes under the microscope at our cabin and invited us over to watch a cat give birth to kittens on his bed. We loved his collection of pets: a scruffy black poodle named Missy, ferrets who ran up our pant legs. He played the cats like harmonicas, holding their front and back legs tight as he brought their furry bellies to his mouth.

Ivan and Dad were close; they shared a love of DIY projects, the Prairies and small planes. Dad wanted an airplane, so he could fly up to the lake, just like Ivan, who took us for rides to see northern Saskatchewan from the sky. The landscape was a furry pelt of evergreen dotted with thousands of glistening lakes.

Dad never went swimming, not at the lake, not in pools, not even wave pools or at hotels with waterslides. I only saw him in the lake once, when we were putting in a new dock and he wore hip waders, as if he was allergic to fresh water. I couldn't understand why Dad loved being at the cabin so much, why he'd want a plane to fly up to the lake, when he didn't swim, hardly ever fished, didn't want to get into, or onto, the water. Was he secretly afraid of the leeches, the drop-off? How could sitting on a La-Z-Boy listening to CBC

radio, watching the sun set over the lake out the picture window possibly trump floating around on a black inner tube or snorkelling for treasure? It made it hard to believe Dad had ever been a good swimmer who could waterski barefoot, like he'd once told us, ever even dipped his toes into anything but bathwater.

Dad was an old-fashioned bath man. He rarely showered, preferred a good long soak in the tub, alone, away from the rest of us. When I was really little, though, four, five years old, sometimes we bathed together. My father took the deep end, the uncomfortable end with the taps, where I sit now when I bathe with my own little boy. Dad always put a facecloth over his penis. I don't know if he hid his privates out of respect or shame, or thought they were somehow a little more protected from a child's rough tub antics—the splashing and kicking and frantic searches for the bar of soap. Peter and Peggy couldn't agree on soap; she liked Ivory, he liked Irish Spring, or Zest, which would make us "zestfully clean, the ads promised. But both of them liked Herbal Essences shampoo. It was emerald-coloured and came in a clear bottle. On the label, a blond woman sat in a pond that was surrounded by flowers. I decided she must be a mermaid.

The mermaid watched one night as Dad squirted a green quarter into the palm of his hand and lathered it gently into my hair, then picked up an old cottage cheese container. "Eyes shut," he said, and I squeezed them tight while he poured water over my head.

I had been learning that song about the girl named Alice, the one with legs like toothpicks and a neck like a *giraffe-raf-raf* who meets her doom after she goes upstairs to take a bath. I sang it now as Dad put in the cream rinse.

"Alice stepped in the bathtub, pulled out the plug and then: Oh my goodness, bless my soul, there goes Alice down the hole!"

Mom lifted me out of the tub and dried me off while Dad washed his hair. He pulled the drain plug, laid down under the faucet to rinse out the shampoo. The water had gone all milky. I caught sight of myself in a full-length mirror on the back of the door, wet hair stuck to my head,

wrapped in a light brown towel like one of those piggies in a blanket that Mom made for parties.

A wail. I looked back quickly to see a look of fear on my father's face. "The sewer monster!" He was shouting. "The sewer monster's got me, he's got me, I'm going down!" He flailed, his neck at the drain as though he was being sucked into the pipes. His voice echoed through the bathroom, over the golden tiles that made the bathtub look like a honeycomb, and I began to cry and scream for my mother to save him.

I can still see Dad's terrified look, a terror I believed was real.

THERE WERE MONSTERS IN MY FATHER'S life, not sewer monsters, and they wanted to drown him. It took me time to realize this; too much time, for by then, Dad was long dead. The single-engine Piper airplane he planned to buy had already crashed with him inside it. It was May 25, 1994, and I was sixteen years old.

For years, I thought of my father as the bad guy, the tanker truck in that Steven Spielberg movie *Duel*, a mean, scary old thing hunting me and my brothers, Graham and Aaron, chasing us, trying to drive us off the road. Dad, the grumpy one who smacked and snarled and shouted and swore. The one who cuffed and threatened and picked Graham up by his curly black hair. The one with red cheeks and booze breath who had us tiptoeing around the house after school, three mice, not blind, just terrified. The boys and I were the salesman in the red Valiant, the prey, shit-scared and trying to get away. We couldn't ever go fast enough and we wracked our brains about what we'd done to deserve this. We wondered if he, that truck, was even real or something from a bad dream. I took great delight reliving the scene at the end of the film where the salesman tricks the tanker truck and it careens off a cliff. Bullies and bad guys can be beaten, I'd remind myself; they can be outsmarted.

But as I got older, I learned more about Dad and his dad, about the way families, work, and don't work. I began to see my father in a new light, and considered recasting the characters in the *Duel* that looped in my head.

My father did not like his own dad. He used the word “hate” when he confided things to my mother about Grandpa Bob, she tells me. Grandpa Bob, who died before I was born, was a high-ranking, well-respected Mountie in Calgary, and an alcoholic. He didn’t come to my parents’ wedding in 1970, I learned after my father’s death. The backstory is complicated and hush-hush, but it boils down to Grandpa Bob’s fall from grace at the age of fifty. Three months before my parents got married in Saskatchewan, Supt. Walter Carroll “Bob” Ferguson skipped town under the pretext of visiting rural detachments in his subdivision. He was driving a black Plymouth Fury that belonged to the RCMP. According to his discipline file, my grandfather was distraught after ending an “emotional” relationship with a person other than my grandmother. For three days, Grandpa Bob hid out in hotels in Beiseker, Drumheller and Irricana, drinking beer after beer, popping Valium his doctor prescribed for “tension,” as well as antihistamines for a cold. On May 27, alone behind the wheel, he missed a turn near Irricana, veered off the road and crashed the Fury through a barbed wire fence. The Fury eventually came to a stop in a farmer’s field. It was a serious accident that herniated one of Grandpa Bob’s discs and cost him his career. By spring 1971, he had been “compulsorily retired” from the RCMP to “promote the efficiency of the force.”

In my parents’ wedding photos, Grandma Julie beams next to her son, the groom, a Mountie, too, in his red serge. She is beautiful, elegant, proud. There is no trace of disappointment, bereftness or rage at her husband’s absence. Did the pain of his back injury keep Grandpa Bob away, or was it shame?

Very best of happiness now and for the future, he wrote in a telegram to the newlyweds, sent to the Corona Hotel in Yorkton, where Grandma Julie was staying. He signed it simply *Dad*. A token gesture, or was he asking for forgiveness?

And then I think of my dad, mired in his own chronic back pain and misery, sip after sip after sip, and I wonder: was he the tanker truck? Because my dad wasn’t just chasing us, he was being chased, too: by his past, by his own father, by family

history and genetic predisposition. Dad wasn’t just the truck, he was the salesman; not the hunter, but the hunted, strapped into his seat, pedal to the metal, trying to escape in his little red Valiant. His pilot’s shades askew, tanker truck barreling down, his genes, his past, his own father barreling down, but my dad couldn’t get out of the way in time. I wonder how he felt when he saw his reflection in the bathroom at home after he’d snuck another drink, or clocked one of his children across the head; when he realized he’d failed, become the guy he told my mom he hated, missed the turn and crashed himself. Driven off the proverbial cliff, like that nasty tanker in *Duel*.

I never made the connection. I never saw how the thing we did for fun, this teenage phase I outgrew without consequence, was the same thing that made my father so un-fun. Perhaps I was trying to connect with him, to know him and to learn his language. Or maybe I wanted to flout him, show him how good it *used* to be, how fresh and beautiful it was at first, until you can’t stop, until you need it to get through each day. I stopped before I went too far. I have wondered since if it could have turned out differently for me.

When does a drink go from being a means to an end into simply an end? At what moment does it change from game to crutch, from pleasure to poison, from coat to skin? How, precisely, does one become a drunk? Is there a science to it, a checklist? Must one consume a certain volume of liquor, go on a certain number of benders, spray vomit into a certain number of toilet bowls, sustain a certain number of bruises, make out with a certain number of strangers, invest a certain number of dollars, commit regularly for a certain number of minutes, hours, years? Must one experience a certain number of stupors, blackouts and regrets? Perhaps it is like tracing the origins of a cancerous tumour, pinpointing the very first cell that went bad and divided.

I BLOOMED LATE. I WAS SLOW TO CATCH on to makeup, drinking, sex, lying. At junior high dances, I was a wallflower, putting in every effort to look good in

acid-wash skirts and polyester blouses from the SAAN store, only to stand on the edge of the dance floor in the school gym and watch my crush of the month sway to *November Rain* with some other girl, someone prettier, with better hair and a better dad. I would watch the guy slip his fingers from her waist down her jeans as the song went on, cupping her butt like some sort of hand-ass bra, and I’d imagine how it felt to have his warm, sweaty palms on my bum. Was she close enough to feel his thing? Was it hard? Could they smell each other’s bodies through the suffocating veil of Exclamation and Calvin Klein Eternity? One of the teachers would notice the butt-grabbing and move the guy’s hands back up to the girl’s belt, and when the song ended, they’d peel away from one another, return to their respective clutches to whisper about it.

Some girls got drunk even then, when we were thirteen, fourteen. They hid booze in non-aerosol hairspray bottles—Alberto, probably, or Paul Mitchell—so the teachers wouldn’t confiscate them, then chug-a-lugged between songs in the bathroom beside the gym. Sometimes, when my friends and I went to inspect ourselves, we’d catch them in the act and I’d feel like I was missing out, that this was my ticket to *November Rain* slow dances.

I made up for lost time in high school (which, despite the distinctive title, was the same school, and the only secondary school in town). Alcohol made me cool, or at least less uncool, I discovered after that weekend at Regan’s, in which I drank my three beers, line-danced like a mad hill-billy and kissed a guy I met that night. A few swigs, and suddenly I was mingling with the in-crowd, making people laugh, frenching boys, feeling their bodies and letting them feel mine. Alcohol was a language we all spoke. It took time, patience and investment to build up my tolerance until I could drink a twenty-six of Southern Comfort by myself, or a whole case of beer, or some other impressive volume that now seems impossible. We were proud of our binges, pinning them on our coats like war vets did their medals.

MY FRIENDS TAXIED ME HOME IN THE FIREFLY that night of the legion cabaret. I made my curfew of twelve-thirty, shuffled into the porch, took off my Docs in the dark without undoing the laces, using the toe of one shoe to pull off the heel of the other. Our dog Popcorn was asleep on the shoes under the bench, squashing Mom’s black penny loafers. She put dimes in the little slots because she thought the silver looked prettier than copper. Dad and Graham were in the basement watching TV. I had to walk past them to get to bed; the year before, I’d traded my room upstairs for the guest room downstairs, as far away from my parents as possible without moving out. I walked down the green carpet stairs as soberly as I could, caught sight of the Ferguson clan’s Scottish tartan hanging over the stairwell. Dad sat in his usual spot, Graham across. They looked up at me and to this day, I wonder what they saw.

“Have a seat,” Dad said. I plunked

myself down next to Graham. Could they tell? Nah. I was so good at faking it.

“What’s on?” I asked, making conversation, oblivious to any slurring or stink. *Kids in the Hall* had just started. The humour was risqué; it came on late at night.

“Have a good time?” Dad asked. Did he really want to know or was he baiting me?

“Yeah!” I said, a little too cheerfully without meeting his eye, suddenly engrossed in the show. Scott Thompson, my favourite, was slow-motion-running in front of a blue-screen forest in a Davy Crocket get-up, while Bruce McCulloch and Dave Foley sang. “Running faggot, running free, see the faggots running from the rednecks! Running faggot, running freeeeee...”

I laughed nonchalantly at the skit, crossed my legs. They couldn’t tell. I could do this all night if I had to.

“I think you should go to bed,” my father said. Of course he knew, I realize now. Sitting across from him was someone else, someone who looked just like,

but no longer was, his little girl.

“OK! G’night,” I said, extra politely, and hopped to my room.

I slept in my clothes and Bootlegger jacket until the following afternoon. When I finally got up and looked at my reflection—at the dried vomit cruste-d all through my hair, at the smears of mascara around my eyes, at the dark red stain in the crotch of my jeans after unknowingly getting my period—I was filled with shame. At the sight of myself, at my leap from light to dark, smart to stupid, at having thought I’d fooled my father when he could never fool me.

I still don’t know why he didn’t get mad. Did he see something innocent and natural: a child experimenting, rebelling? Or did he see himself? Maybe he knew it wasn’t his place to raise hell. Or maybe he knew I was just being a teenager and that I’d smarten up and turn out fine; that the daughter he used to share a bathtub with wouldn’t go down the drain like him and Alice. ☒

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