

JUDGES' COMMENTS

"The Curse" defies expectations at every turn, glorious in its foreboding and sparing in its joy. The story refuses nostalgia and bristles with disappointed life. Utterly wonderful.



FICTION

THE CURSE

That summer, the Woman with the Yellow Hat aimed a crooked finger at Trinity Brophy. A little of her hex reached the rest of us

BY **LISA MOORE** ILLUSTRATION **SPENCER FLOCK**

The woman who cursed Trinity Brophy was a frequenter of Theatre Pharmacy on Long's Hill. At the end of each month, when the cheques arrived, there'd be a line of maybe 20 people waiting for the pharmacy to open. The summer of the curse the woman wore a yellow hat with a floppy brim. She walked up Long's Hill every day and my husband and I started referring to her as The Woman with the Yellow Hat, like the man with The Man with the Yellow Hat in the *Curious George* children's books.

She had a variety of wigs, but her own hair was clipped very close to her scalp, oily, thick and mottled silver like a seal pelt. That summer she wore a bright orange lipstick, a '60s shade. It spread above her upper lip, just enough to betray the tremor in her hands.

I was walking home from downtown on the morning of the curse, passing the line outside the pharmacy, and I saw The Woman with the Yellow Hat reach into her handbag and take out a tortoise-shell compact. She flipped up the lid. An oval of sunshine, reflected from the mirror, shimmered and wobbled over her cheek and settled in her right eye, making her shut it tight and draw her chin into the loose folds of skin on her neck.

I saw her remove the top of the lipstick, and place it on the concrete windowsill of the store. The sill was slanted. The woman put down the little plastic top and her fingers—a giant ring of rhinestones or glass on each finger and even one thumb, it was a mystery how she got them over her arthritic knuckles—hovered, waiting to be sure the top of the lipstick wouldn't roll away and fall onto the sidewalk. Then she spread the lipstick over both lips and rubbed them together, examined them in the compact mirror, moving it up and down to get the right view.

Her faded black leggings, which she wore under all her dresses, sagged at the knees and were pilled with tiny nubs of cotton. The foam soles of her flip-flops had flattened out, become as hard as boards. I'd seen her feet close up one afternoon when she'd fallen asleep on a bench in Bannerman Park. A Frisbee had wafted down on the bench near her and I had retrieved it without waking her. The soles of the woman's feet were split with cuts, crusted with blood; some of the cuts were weeping a clear pus.

I used to see her shopping at the Salvation Army on Waldegrave and she'd try on a lot of glamorous outfits. Prom dresses, or bridesmaids' dresses that she'd buy and wear all day long during the summer.

On the day she uttered the curse against Trinity Brophy, she was wearing a cocktail dress from the '80s. The material was stiff and opalescent, giant puffy sleeves, a skirt of layered flounces. It shimmered and rustled.

I remember it because I had owned one just like it when I was a teenager. I'd bought it when I'd gone to Stephenville to study fine art in a two-year diploma course. I'd worn the dress to the El Dorado and met a guy whose name I don't remember but who called me on the payphone in the hall of the residence every evening for three weeks, to ask for a date. Every evening, after dinner in the cafeteria, someone would knock on my bedroom door to tell me there was a call. Most times I didn't answer. Sometimes I asked them to lie. They were willing because they were waiting for calls from their boyfriends, so they didn't want me hogging the phone. My opalescent dress had an ink stain on the third flounce, just over the knee.

TRINITY WAS SEVEN YEARS OLD when The Woman with the Yellow Hat cursed her. The day was already heating up, though there were still gentle gusts of a mineral-smelling cold coming off the icebergs outside the harbour. Trinity came tearing around the corner of Livingstone, onto Long's Hill with a water balloon.

She was being chased by my son, Joey, who was also seven, and a girl named Jessica, maybe eight, and Jessica's little brother, Cory, who was probably four.

They each had water balloons raised above their shoulders. The

effort of holding the wobbly balloons in the air waggled their gaits as they turned the corner. They were running lopsided. All three of them aiming for Trinity Brophy's back, but she was too fast. Her long, straight, gold-brown hair flapped between her shoulder blades.

Without warning, she faked to one side and threw her water balloon at The Woman with the Yellow Hat.

Three water balloons splatted on the sidewalk at the heels of Trinity's new white sneakers. She stopped so fast her sneakers squeaked.

The other kids had spent their arsenal.

Trinity still had her balloon.

I was trying to see if there was an ink stain on the third flounce of the woman's opalescent dress. I know the clothes at the second-hand stores on the island shuffle through all the small-town Salvation Armies and even end up as far away as Labrador.

I know this because I'd once donated a Grenfell coat in Stephenville, and a decade later I found it at the Salvation Army in St. John's on Waldegrave.

They shut down that Sally Ann and replaced it with a gourmet hamburger restaurant that lasted less than a year. The building has been vacant ever since. I'd ordered takeout once, and the burger was undercooked.

When I found the Grenfell coat on Waldegrave, I'd put it on and stood

in front of a mirror. I licked my index finger and reached into the pocket for the seam that ran along the bottom. I used to steal a sesame seed bagel from the cafeteria in Stephenville every morning by slipping it in my coat pocket, wrapped in a paper napkin. Fifteen years later, I was standing in front of a mirror, and I pressed the wetted tip of my index finger into a little pool of sesame seeds in the lining. Then I put my finger in my mouth.

I had just turned 17 when I'd bought that coat. The age Trinity and Joey are now. The guy who would call me on the payphone in the hall of the residence was 10 years older. He had a car and when I was walking downtown he'd crawl along beside me, clamping an elbow to the outside of the door and hoisting his shoulder and head out the window. He'd get as close to the curb as he could, sometimes causing the traffic behind him to bunch up; two or three cars swerving into the opposite lane of oncoming traffic to pass him. Asking me when I thought I'd be free. Shouting: How about Friday?

When the weather got cold, which happened overnight, I'd bought the Grenfell coat with fox-fur trim around the hood. That September I'd written a radio play. By some miracle, the CBC had purchased it. The fee for the play, along with my student loan, meant I had a lot of money. It would have been strange for a student to own such an expensive coat. It looked too old for me.

The boutique was on the main strip of the town of Stephenville, a few stores down from the traffic light. I put up the hood and raised the collar of my turtleneck so it came up just under my eyes. The price tag, hanging on a thread from the cuff, was hand-written.

It was the most I'd ever paid for an item of clothing. The fur around my face tickled. The coat was wool and mid-thigh in length, the two big pockets were embroidered with Inuit hunters carrying spears. It was bright red and the lining was pink.

I also bought a black vinyl purse like my mother might have carried, and left my army surplus knapsack, with the ballpoint pen peace signs all over it, in the drawer under my bed in the residence. On the second day I wore the coat I saw the guy's car in my peripheral vision, but he didn't even slow down.

TRINITY SAW THE WATER STAINS from the broken balloons spreading on the sidewalk near her new white sneakers and came to a halt. Even at seven years old, you could see she would be a beauty. Her eyes were the kind of blue that's very pale, the iris rimmed with black. Freckles, over the bridge of her nose, her cheeks tanned gold, her eyebrows golden. She was the first kid to dye her hair blue in her elementary school, and she was ridiculed for it.

What erupted on the face of that woman was equal parts anguish and hatred.

Nobody spoke about her birth parents, but at least one of them had to be tall. By the time she was 12 she was head and shoulders above me, and taller than her third foster mother, who was my next-door neighbour.

Trinity was doing the kind of fast growing that leaves a body without an ounce of fat and robs a child of energy very suddenly so that you come upon them in odd places at odd hours, sound asleep. The kind of growing that kept her constantly hungry.

She'd lick her finger and stick it in my sugar bowl and put her finger in her mouth, no matter how many times I said other people had to use that sugar too.

The sort of love I feel for Trinity Brophy is nothing like the love I have for my son, which is stable and uncomplicated. The love I feel for Trinity is inconvenient and random. But it's also intractable, brutish. She's just a neighbourhood kid who caught my attention. We don't choose who we love. Lots of kids came and went on that street. I love her as if she were my own.

I was coming back from a board meeting on the day that Trinity was cursed, and maybe something of that foul storm ricocheted, hit me and Joey too.

Each of the children was stuck to the sidewalk, the skins of their burst water balloons shrivelled. Adrenaline and food colouring from the Mr. Freezies had paralyzed everyone.

Joe's lips and tongue were blue. There's a psychology test or a party trick, where they ask you to say "blue" every time they show you a red card. They show you several red cards in a row, and you say "blue," then they show you a blue card and you say "red."

I thought his blue mouth and tongue meant my son had been caught red-handed.

Trinity was the kind of person, by the time she was a teenager, that the Johns who regularly circle our street wouldn't bother. She'd beat the face off them. Or maybe they did bother her. But if they did I was certain they'd regret it.

I said unassailable love, but it was blinkered, too. Trinity, by the time she was 14, say, or 15, had a life that was entirely a mystery to me. She wasn't much of a talker.

But seven years old, on the sidewalk by the pharmacy, after the other kids' water balloons had been thrown, Trinity pivoted to stare down Joey with opened-faced glee, and then without warning, like the boys do on the basketball court, she faked to the side. She threw her water balloon at The Woman with the Yellow Hat.

The balloon was red and wobbled in the air and burst noiselessly on the old woman's shoulder. The others in the line for Theatre Pharmacy unpeeled from the brick wall with the badly painted mural of a chemist in a white lab coat, a pestle and mortar in his outstretched arms. The line was jostled. The other people, mostly unshaven men, were more disgruntled than surprised. The medications they took quelled anxiety, but robbed them of erratic, inconsequential emotions, like being startled. They were humourless and bug-eyed and unstartled.

They were, by that hour, in need of whatever the pharmacist was going to hand out.

The few women in the line might have been going up the stairs to a dingy office to suck the cock of the doctor, and they were humourless, too. The doctor's pills-for-sex practice made the headlines for the entire summer that year.

The face of the Woman with the Yellow Hat had flared a mottled purplish red under the sickly puce shadow cast by the brim of her hat.

The impact of the balloon had knocked one of her giant Velcroed shoulder pads askew. She plucked at the wet fabric of the dress that had suctioned to her skin, lifting it so it caught a bubble of air and the

shoulder pad was dislodged and dropped onto the sidewalk.

She snatched up the pad in her fist. It looked like a sanitary napkin. The shoulder pad caused the men in the line an embarrassment that made them look away. Denuded of just one of the gronky, football player's shoulders made The Woman with the Yellow Hat a hunchback. It revealed a vulnerability so raw it was a hazard to behold.

But her eyes were bright and narrowed.

She was short of breath, and pulled a puffer from her purse and, putting it to her mouth, inhaled so deeply her eyes bulged. I'd bent to pick up the shoulder pad, but she got there first. When I stood up I saw that the ivory-coloured puffer was smeared with the orange lipstick. And the curse came out with her next breath.

The Woman with the Yellow Hat frequently berated people on the street. Kids from the private school, still in their uniforms, on their way to Moo Moos, walked past her in noisy, skipping groups but didn't pay her much attention.

What Joey believed was that you had to outwit what lay in wait.

It was during those moments when she was talking to the dead, or the invisible, people who seemed to come at her from decades past, from her childhood, that you could get a good look at her. Her voice could

carry all the way down Military Road, despite the breathing difficulties. The things she said were accusations, one half of a conversation, though she also paused to listen to what the ghost had to say. Her cheeks sagged, and were speckled with age spots the size of dimes. Her cheekbones were two hard juts beneath deep-set eyes draped with papery eyelids, soft as Kleenex.

She spat on the sidewalk, and pointed at Trinity Brophy.

You will pay, she said. By the fuck, you will pay for that. You're going to burn in hell. You mark my words. You will burn.

Then she swayed her finger so that it took in not just Trinity, but Joey and me. Jessica and her little brother Cory had taken off back up the road and had already turned the corner.

All of you, she said. You'll burn for this.

My son, Joey, who would do concrete grooming at the college in Seal Cove, straight out of high school, had his Mr. Freeze clenched in his teeth and it flipped up and down as his jaw tightened. The Woman with the Yellow Hat, snarling; her pointed, trembling finger with all its jewels.

After Seal Cove, Joey got a student loan and did heavy equipment in Stephenville, and then welding. He stayed in the same residence where I had stayed. He was hired at Muskrat Falls on the dam, for the summer, and on to Fort Mac. Then he got a job with the city ploughing snow in winter, collecting garbage. He works outdoors and makes upwards of 60, with benefits.

But long before all that, Joey had the incident with a shopping cart and it altered him irrevocably. This was when he was 12.

Joe and his friends found a supermarket cart by Churchill Square. They were in the middle of a basketball

tournament, on a lunch break. The cart was a long way from the supermarket. The metal casing for the front wheel was bent out to the side, making the cart useless. The boys leaned it against a fire hydrant to bang the wheel straight with a rock.

Once the cart was operational, the plan was Joe would get in it and the boys would push it to the first steep hill they could find and let him go. They would all push him up Bonaventure, past Brother Rice and Holy Heart, where the tournament was happening, and let him go at the top of Garrison Hill. Joe would abandon the cart at the last second, throwing himself onto the asphalt before it smashed into the railing that protected the war memorial at the foot of the hill. Or he might somersault over the spear-tipped iron fence that surrounded the memorial, or be impaled on it.

On the day of the shopping cart, they left the tournament during the lunch break and had headed to Subway in Churchill Square and they'd made a mess. The boys were loud and they'd dropped the wrappers from their sandwiches all over the floor, smeared mustard over the tables on purpose.

One of the team was rude to the girl behind the counter, had mimicked her when she told them to leave.

They'd taken fistfuls of drinking straws and tore off the paper sleeves and joined each straw together by fitting one end into the next, until they had fashioned flimsy swords, maybe seven or eight straws in length.

The manager appeared from the back and kicked them out. They rose from the table slowly, trying to stab each other with the flaccid swords, banging into each other in the porch, blocking the entrance, until they burst out all at once into the parking lot.

They were almost knocked over by a car emerging on a conveyor belt

from the car wash at the back of what used to be the supermarket and a dry cleaners. Those buildings have brown paper over the windows now and the eavestroughs are rusted out and hang off one end of the building, clanging when it's windy.

The driver of the car coming out of the car wash was an elderly woman who believed the boys were throwing things at her vehicle and she called the police.

A cruiser circled the block while the boys were beating the broken wheel of the shopping cart with a rock, trying to straighten it. The boys saw the cruiser and took off through the valley. They were back at the school for the second half of the basketball tournament, already on the floor when two cops busted in and stopped the game.

Joe, my Joey, had not been the one with the rock, nor had he touched the shopping cart. He had been standing to the side, like a driver at the Grand Prix who waits for the mechanics to go over the engine before the race. But the coach insisted Joe had been the troublemaker. He had a gut feeling, the coach said. He told the cop that he knew with certainty that Joe was to blame for whatever had happened in Churchill Square.

Joe left the gym and ran all the way home, banging on the front door, crying hard, believing the house was about to be stormed by a SWAT team and that he would be dragged away in cuffs.

He collapsed in his bed exhausted by the force of the false accusation. He was accused by his coach of creating havoc in Subway, being rude to the girl behind the counter (for me this was the worst of the alleged crimes), vandalizing an old woman's car, damaging a fire hydrant and destroying a shopping cart, which was private property, according to

the cop. Joey was kicked off the team and the coach was demanding the principal suspend him from school for at least a week.

He had also been the cause, according to the coach, of the team losing the tournament (the worst of the allegations for Joe, it was the first loss of the season).

They would be coming for him, the coach promised. He'd pointed a finger at Joey, and said his days of causing trouble were over.

Joe, my Joey, had not been the one with the rock, nor had he touched the shopping cart.

After the coach singled him out, Joey had run home and went to his room, passed into a deep sleep almost at once, and he seemed to have developed a fever. He was shivering, and his cheeks blazed. He made noises in his sleep, spoke to people, called out for me.

I woke him up the next morning to say I had gone to the fire hydrant and taken pictures, which I had already emailed to the coach and the principal of the school and the police. There had been no damage, not a single chip or scratch, in the eye-smarting red paint of the hydrant.

I'd phoned Subway and spoken to the girl who had been behind the counter and to the manager, and I got a physical description of the boy who had been rude and gave them a description of Joey. They both confirmed Joe didn't fit the description.

I told Joey I had been speaking to one of the officers who had busted into the tournament. He was an obnoxious asshole, but I didn't tell Joey that.

The cop said he was going through surveillance tapes from four different businesses in the areas: the gas station across the street from the fire hydrant; a camera on the back of the car wash; a camera on the dining area inside Subway; and another on the rear exterior of Subway.

It's taped? Joe asked. The whole thing is taped?

All of the fear left his face.

You're not worried about the surveillance tapes? I asked.

I told you, he said. I didn't touch that shopping cart. I didn't touch it. He fell back onto the pillow and slept until late afternoon.

I HOUNDED THE POLICE OFFICER with phone messages, as did the other parents who had a kid on the team. Demanding to know the progress he was making with viewing the surveillance tapes. I told him I knew my son was innocent.

How can you know that? the officer asked.

Because he told me so, I said.

The officer said, Really? Boys lie to their mothers all the time, I certainly did.

I said, You are a very different sort of person than my son.

I didn't mean, of course, that my son was beyond telling me a lie. I meant the cop wasn't as good at knowing when the truth could betray you and when it was your friend.

The whole thing blew over, but as I said, Joey was deeply changed by it. Something hardened in him; he became shrewd. The incident with the shopping cart gave him a heightened perception about the character. Not distrust, exactly, but a tendency

not to expect too much of others. He was ready for people to disappoint him and it made him both distant and easily forgiving.

AFTER I'D BOUGHT THE GRENFELL coat in Stephenville, the biggest purchase of my whole life up to that point, I walked all over town with the hood up, and my old lady purse under my arm. I saw the car go past several times, sometimes more than once on a single day. I knew he was looking for me. But after two weeks went by the phone calls stopped.

Something hardened in him; he became shrewd.

One day I was in the strip mall buying a piece of apple pie and ice cream at the diner and he saw me. My coat was hanging on the back of my chair.

You got a new coat, he said. He asked me to a movie for that Friday night.

I said, Sure, that'd be really nice.

He said he would pick me up at the residence. He'd be in the lobby. He knew he couldn't go upstairs, he said. So he'd be waiting in the lobby.

He took a cigarette pack out of his pocket and tapped it on the edge of my table so one smoke jutted up straight out of the pack each time he hit it. He did it slowly.

I'd join you, he said. But I have to go to work.

That's OK, I said.

I never knew where you were, he said. What window is yours anyway, in the residence? I know the third floor is the girls' floor.

I said I wasn't sure about the window. I'd never thought about it.

I'll be in the lobby, he said. I know which building you're in, because I'm after seeing you go in there. Sometimes I park across the street. Nice coat. I never would have recognized you in that coat. I'll be in the lobby.

The movie was a Clint Eastwood. There were hardly any people in the theatre. My arm was on the armrest, and the guy put his arm there too, so our arms were touching. We were both looking straight ahead. I waited as long as I could and then moved my arm away from his, as if I'd had the unconscious urge to shift my weight.

There'd been a fight about paying at the cashier. I said I would be paying for myself. This assertion seemed to make the guy feel injured and unsure, but I thrust my money at the woman behind the glass. His hand came in through the crescent cut in the bottom of the window at the same time, so that we were cuffed together by it, both of us holding up \$10 bills. The woman behind the counter hesitated.

Take mine, he said. I'm paying.

The woman said: You keep that miss, that's your mad money. You're going to need that.

I wedged my wrist back out of the glass, twisting against the bone of his wrist and I jammed the bill back in my pocket.

BY THE TIME TRINITY AND JOEY turned 15, the neighbourhood had changed, the casual fits and starts of senseless violence, mostly domestic, had mutated to another kind of violence: organized and determined. There were needles all over the ground, especially under the balconies in peoples' backyards.

TWO

We don't get to ask the things we love to come back. They're migratory birds, purple white Icelandic poppies in July in my married friends' backyard, gone by morning. The marriage gone, too. I wish I could go back, sit side-by-side with them in sun on that green deck made of salvaged wood, while they fought, presciently, over a word

one played, with her last letters. *Two?* said her partner, scornfully, pronouncing the dubious word as if it rhymed with woe. *What the hell,* he said, *is two?* You and I played once, too. I rearranged the letters as much as I could, but still they insisted on spelling the end of something.

— Lisa Martin

People complained about their property values. The cops were called every second night.

Once an old man with a sheet of silver hair was circling the neighbourhood in his Oldsmobile and looking at the sex workers and he got stuck in a snowbank. All the neighbours came out with their cell phones and surrounded his car, the phones at arm's length, videoing the old guy.

We're sending this to your wife, Grandpa, one woman shouted at him. He was slumped at the steering wheel, strapped in his seatbelt, trying to cover his face with his arms.

I've seen Trinity when she was

hurt and angry; her eyelids close halfway and she goes dead still. When they were 12, Joey and Trin used to wrestle. I told Joey around that time that he couldn't hit a girl. After that, he refused to fight and she worked hard to make him hit back. Once he came home with a swollen eye and he refused to speak to her again. She'd ring the bell and he told me not to let her in.

I'd still help her with her homework. But Joe would stay in his room. We started to see less of her. Trin never talked much anyway, but she doesn't talk at all when she's hurt. I've seen her lash out with her fists,

and I've heard stories. Doesn't take shit. But the dead look that comes into her eyes when she's scared is, I'm convinced, as accurate picture of what's going on inside as I'm ever likely to see.

AFTER THE MOVIE I ASKED THE GUY to drive me back to the dorm because, I told him, I was tired. I even yawned. But he argued and cajoled.

It's only quarter to 10, he said. Let's get a drink.

I really am sleepy, I said.

OK then, he said.

On the way back to the dorm he told me he'd like me to meet his mother. He said he'd be going to the Codroy Valley, where his family lives, next weekend, and he'd like me to come. I'll have my own bedroom, of course, and I don't need to worry about that. His mother wouldn't have nothing going on under her roof, he said. But he can tell I'm a nice girl. He has a graduation in three months, and he'd like me to be his date. If I knew what colour my dress was going to be he could order a corsage the same colour. Order it early. His whole family would be coming up. His mother and father and 11 of his siblings. He has a brother in Alberta, but the brother was making the trip home for the graduation. He has seven nieces and nephews and they were all coming. Getting dressed up. He knew it was a long time away yet, but did I have any idea what colour my dress would be?

I said, You just passed the residence.

I know, he said. I just want to show you something before we go back there. Only take a minute. There's this view up here. I want you to see it. It's a special place. Not many people know about it.

We were on the highway for about half a mile and turned up a dirt road

full of potholes. Boulders on every side, and a clear cut. Sometimes he had to rock the car back and forth in the potholes to get it out. At those moments he had his cigarette jammed in the corner of his mouth, pointing down, but he was not smoking it. If the pothole required extra work, he would ask me to hold the cigarette, until he had gunned it. When the car was free he grinned at me as if he'd accomplished something big.

A WEEK OR TWO AFTER TRINITY turned 17 she got caught at school with a gym bag full of drugs. It meant, for one thing, that her foster mom wanted nothing more to do with her. She had other foster kids and she couldn't have that going on in her house.

But there were guys after Trinity Brophy now. They wanted her to pay for the drugs that the cops confiscated. If she didn't, Trin told me, they would hurt her.

BUBBLES FORMED IN THE ACETATE pearly-coloured dress, over The Woman with the Yellow Hat's shoulder and along her breast, as she lifted the wet fabric from her skin. The bubbles looked like rising welts, as if she had been whipped or burned. You could see the rough lace of her polyester bra, and the thick strap and even the metal ring that held the strap to the cup, where the water made the dress transparent.

Her appearance mattered so very much to her. The gala gowns and short shiny dresses, the makeup. The astonishment of being soaked conflated with shame. The transparency in the fabric revealed how futile her efforts had been. The effort to look nice, no matter where you had to sleep, or what you had to eat. She was dressing for a party when there was no party. Perhaps she saw how the glamorous dresses marked her

as ridiculous, though she had never seemed that way to me.

I saw a streak of ink on the third flounce. I'd been writing with a fountain pen, back in Stephenville, when I began to work on the radio play. I thought that's what writers did. What erupted on the face of that woman after she was struck with the balloon was equal parts anguish and hatred.

ISAT OUTSIDE A LITTLE ONE-STOREY bungalow in my car waiting for Trinity to come back out. We'd driven to a rural area outside St. John's. It had only taken about 40 minutes. Trinity told me to stay behind the hedge, so they wouldn't see the car. I'd given her the money. It was all the money I'd saved for Joe to go to the concrete grooming course.

I can't remember what he looked like, except that his eyelashes were pale orange and so was his moustache.

AT THE TOP OF THE LANE THERE WAS a ridge that looked down on a river that was mostly overgrown with alder bushes and nothing to see. We made out. Just necking. He attempted to put his hand on my breast, but I stopped him. I think that's what he was expecting. He tasted of cigarettes and mouthwash and he was wearing very strong cologne, or it might have been the air freshener that was hanging from the dash.

I can't remember what he looked like, except that his eyelashes were pale orange and so was his moustache. I could feel the bristles of that

moustache on my upper lip. He was a heavy breather. I knew by then that the whole thing would be over within 10 minutes or so. If I were patient I would find myself going through the front doors of the residence, and up to my room, in no time at all.

What disgusted me most was the smell of his cigarette on my fingers, from when he made me hold it for him.

He'd left the radio on while we necked and I was terrified it would run down the battery and we would be stuck out there. But he'd paused, now and then, in his wet kissing, to restart the engine.

Afterwards, he got out of the car and said he had to have a piss. The word—piss—sounded so unnecessarily intimate to me that I felt light-headed and possibly nauseated. I heard his piss pattering the bushes. My Grenfell coat smelled of cigarettes. Then we drove back to the residence.

I BELIEVE THE EXPERIENCE WITH the shopping cart hadn't brought Joey to the conclusion that you might expect: if you are innocent, justice will prevail; the truth will out.

What he had come to believe was that world lay in wait for you. He decided that truth had no intrinsic value and had come to believe that whoever held onto the truth for its own sake was a sucker.

What Joey believed, after the shopping cart incident, was that you had to outwit what lay in wait.

I wondered if he were right. Mothers and sons are telepathic. If this kind of communication were a language it would be monosyllabic and full of guttural spittle, short vowels, harsh consonants. But this telepathy bypasses ordinary language; it's wordless—paradoxically instant, layered and piercing. It shoots through.

My son, I knew, could no longer trust in the innocence of an object or a moment or a causal social exchange. A broken shopping cart could leap up like a panther and drag you away: fresh kill.

All the leftover light seemed to have seeped into the new snow on the lawn.

Joey had been called upon to partake in something old-fashioned or quaint, and without nuance: a duel with fate. He had simply to draw first. Or he could cheat, turn before the paces were up, and shoot fate in the back. In the end the bald unfairness of the situation tickled his funny bone. He developed a sense of humour that was more than just pranks with plastic straws and water balloons. He became wry. He was too young for wry.

He'd had to get a student loan. I told Trinity to make sure they all agreed, whoever they were, that the debt was paid. That she was in the clear. I told her to make sure they knew she was done with them.

She said, They don't exactly hand out receipts.

It was snowing and I was sitting outside in my car for a long time, waiting for her. It was long enough for the sand-coloured grass of the front lawn to accumulate enough snow that it became white.

I took in all the details of the house and garden, the burlap wrapped around a shrub. Two cars in the driveway, a silver Yaris and a red Ford truck. There was a shed and the door was open. I could see stacked fire-

wood and, under a pale green tarp, an ATV. There was also a cardboard box had that held an artificial Christmas tree, leaning against a wooden garbage receptacle at the end of the driveway. A clothesline with what looked like a baby's little white dress on it. It might have been a baptismal dress. But after a moment, I realized it wasn't a dress, it was a pillowcase.

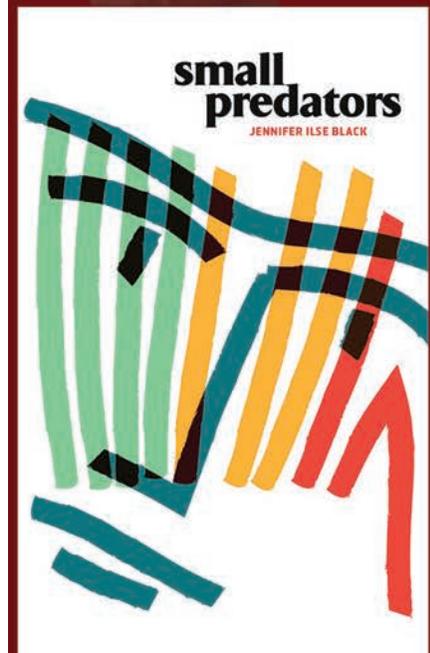
MAYBE A YEAR OR SO AFTER THE curse, The Woman with the Yellow Hat disappeared from the streets. It was an absence that people mentioned for a while and then she was forgotten. The pharmacy came under new management. It was Joe who told me that Trinity Brophy had left the province. He said he'd heard that nobody knew where she was. I asked if he knew anything else. He said he thought Trinity Brophy was just like everybody else, trying to do whatever it took to keep going.

THE DOOR OF THE WOODSHED caught in a wind and slammed and I nearly jumped out of my skin. But nothing else moved and another 20 minutes passed. It had changed from dusk to almost dark. All the leftover light seemed to have seeped into the new snow on the lawn. It was eerily bright.

Finally Trinity came out of the house and got back in the car and we drove back to town. Of course we said things about her schoolwork and how Joe was doing. We didn't often speak about Joe, but on that occasion she asked. She knew it was his tuition that I'd given her.

We came to the difficult intersection on the top of Kenna's Hill, a blind curve, and I asked her if it was clear. I told her I couldn't see. She was looking out the passenger window, avid, silent. Then she told me it was safe to go. ☒

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