

WHAT SHOULD WE CALL YOU

JOCELYN TENNANT

▼ he last time we saw Jake Heely, he was slouched in the middle of the farthest bank of seats in the Departures lounge of our small airport, discreetly spitting amber into a Tim Horton's coffee cup. He was haloed by the dull glow of a backlit poster for a lake cruise that hadn't operated in years, SunCor cap pulled down as low as it could go—still, under the brim, we could see the pulpy mess of his face, the places where Will LeCourt's fists had hit so hard and fast they'd busted his skin right open.

Jake set his spitter on the seat next to him and shrugged out of his sheepskin-lined jean jacket. The smell of him was dense, the stale combination of wintergreen chew and sweated-out booze, badly covered by the same Old Spice deodorant he'd been wearing since high school. His forearms were skinny, roped with muscle, and terminated in disproportionately large hands that trembled as they balled up his jacket and stuck it between his feet.

We watched Jake pick up his cup and spit into it again and tried not to think of the brown-to-black lower incisors we had grown up seeing on our fathers' friends. We tried not to judge him. Instead, we remembered what it felt like when Jake smiled at us in the hallway, when his arm brushed against ours in Accelerated Math, the colour of the shirt he wore to the winter formal in eleventh grade (red, shiny). We remembered the

way he'd get breathless with excitement when he talked about Manchester United and Green Day and the bike jumps he'd built in the lot behind his house.

An electronic whine split the silence and flight attendant stepped up to the counter with a microphone to her lips. The flight to Calgary was delayed—intermittent weather patterns, could be up to four hours. Groans filled the terminal. A middle-aged woman stormed up to the desk, practically spitting, her rolling suitcase dragging pathetically on its side behind her.

It was then that Jake Heely started to cry.



Last night—Friday night—we filled O'Connell's pub to capacity. It was cold outside, double-digits below zero, and the relative warmth of the bar made people conspiratorial and loose. Bulky winter jackets slipped from the backs of chairs to rest on a floor that was perpetually wet with tracked-in snow and sloshed drinks.

Will LeCourt was there in the far corner, as he was every Friday, propped up by a pool cue and reminiscing about high school to anyone who would listen. He was good looking, despite the thinning hair he hid beneath a worn Oilers hat and the way his shirt strained against his midsection. He was in the middle of a rant about an unfairly ref-ed game when the front door opened and in walked Jake Heely.

We watched Will watch Jake walk to the bar and slide onto a stool. Without meeting the bartender's eyes he ordered the cheapest beer and set a worn leather wallet on the bar top. We had heard that his father had passed away. We had heard that Jake had been in town for a while, keeping a low profile, spotted at the 7/11 or the BCL or the Esso on Cook, filling up his Dad's old truck. Some of our parents were at the service, said Jake didn't wear a suit. *That Heely boy*, they said. *Whatever happened to his sister?*

Jake's foot tapped restlessly against the bottom of the barstool. His blonde hair feathered out from under his cap, a bad cut noticeable even from across the room. We waited, all of our human sounds muted until only a tinny pop song remained to fill the silence. Will delicately set down his pool cue, quiet against the felt, and drained his beer. With wet lips he

handed the glass to his friend and crossed the room, body radiant with predatory grace.

We stepped out of his path. We said nothing. We were a gauntlet of still hands, terrible anticipation.

Will draped a meaty arm across Jake's shoulders, almost tenderly. *Been a long time.*

Jake didn't turn, just jerked his body out from under Will's.

Will stepped back. *What are you thinking, coming here?*

Jake again said nothing. Will paused for a moment, anger written in his shoulders, then in one swift movement he kicked the stool out from under Jake, who stumbled but managed to stay on his feet. His beer smashed on the floor, flooding over the tops of his boots. We melted away from him, silent, hearts hammering.

Will stuck his hands into his pockets, but the indifference of that gesture couldn't counteract the tension in every muscle, the readiness that flickered up his arms. Jake's eyes were all but hidden by his hat, but we could see his teeth working away at his bottom lip. He leaned forward and spat heavily on the floor just in front of Will's feet, then pulled a tenner out of his wallet for his spilled beer and headed for the door.

We couldn't hide our disappointment and we made it known. We let our tongues loose, cracked them like whips against the back of Will's neck. He spun on his heel and we cheered. He crossed the room and slammed through the door into the cold and we followed, clutching each other with wide eyes. We stepped outside a moment behind him, just in time to see Jake fall to the ice, nose already bloody. His hat had flown off and his hair was sweat-plastered to the oblong shape of his skull.

Will cracked his neck like a thug in a mobster movie. *Big mistake coming back here, bud.* His words bubbled with a laugh that fell frozen to his feet.

Jake struggled to stand but his boots couldn't get a purchase on the ice. He rolled over and pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. Before he could get up Will kicked him hard in the ribs and he crumpled again.

We found our minds drifting back to high school as we watched Will's body collide again and again with Jake's. The night this stone—now finally finding its target—was thrown. A party at Jake's, parents away. Will got his hands on a keg. Marissa Heely, then only fifteen, permitted to join the festivities provided she stay out of the way. We drank, we puked off the deck, we passed out in the living room in a tangle of limbs. Some

of us saw Jake go up to his room around two. Some of us saw Will lead a stumbling Marissa up the same stairs nearly an hour later. By morning we were gone, and so we saw nothing else. But we know that the boys and Marissa woke to a trashed house. We know that Marissa cooked them breakfast—eggs, over easy. From there the story split in two. There were the things we knew and the things we heard. Over time the things we heard from Will became the things we knew. Marissa disappeared to another city, to an aunt's house, a new high school. We considered the matter settled, but Jake remained, full of scorn, every day screaming our guilt at us in different ways. He wrote it in letters to attorneys, to our principal, to each of us. He wore it in his body, in his eyes. Then, one day at the end of spring, he vanished with the last patches of melting snow. He left about as much behind—the stories and speculation, and the grey smoke of something like guilt that would continue to hang over us, its weight shifting from shoulder to shoulder.



All told, the fight barely lasted five minutes. Long enough for Will to straddle Jake and hammer his face into ribbons. Long enough for first, second, third blood to be drawn. Long enough for us to realize how easy it would be for Jake to never get up off that ice. We groaned and cheered and even whispered *someone should do something*.

Finally someone did. The bartender pulled Will up and pushed him back into the pub. Jake got to his feet, blood coursing from his nose, his mouth, everywhere. Blood, freezing as it dripped from his chin.

He found his hat in a pile of dirty snow and crammed it back over his matted hair, turned and staggered down the street with his hands in his pockets. We watched him go.



We watched him now, ruined face in calloused hands, furiously swiping at the tears that ran down his cheeks. He wanted to be gone. We wanted him gone, too. We didn't like to think about Marissa Heely, fifteen, and what went through her mind as she cooked breakfast for Will

LeCourt. We didn't like to think about what happened after they went upstairs that night. We liked to leave the past in the past.

An elderly woman handed Jake a tissue and he took it. He said thank you. She laid her hand against her breast when she saw his face, *what did they do to you?*

Jake wiped his nose and the tissue came away rust-red. We waited to hear what he would say. We waited, but the intercom dinged and the flight attendant's garbled voice led the Calgary passengers surging to their feet, and Jake Heely took his jacket and his spit cup and his split lip and left us, this time for good.

