

Proof of Loss

by Jaime Forsythe

Andy is secured under sheets with hospital corners and a duvet splashed with roses. It's a time for counting sheep; he counts his possessions instead. This is an easy game. The lights are out but he knows what lies scattered over the carpet of his mother's guest room. A picture frame, a stiff knapsack, a ceramic whale with a blowhole where a toothbrush may be inserted, and a soup ladle. Sale items his mother has picked up to help him get back on his feet. Things for holding other things. The room is crammed with much more, of course, down to the bed skirt frilling the mattress and the crocheted doorknob cover. His mother likes to decorate. Andy pictures himself setting off down the sidewalk, knapsacked, holding his whale and his ladle, the empty frame hanging around his neck. He doesn't doubt that all the housewares his mother will continue to buy for him will seem just as absurd, just as cold, just as unfriendly.

He was forced to move back home two weeks ago. Each evening he isn't working, his mother has sedated him with mashed potatoes, followed by rum and Thirty-one's. The cards slapping softly on the

vinyl tablecloth make Andy think of luck, or lack thereof. When the cuckoo clock shrieks twelve times, his mother kisses him on the cheek and they both go to bed. She takes a certain delight in his being here. A widow's loneliness is part of it, he supposes, although they've always lived in the same city. He suspects that his mother sees this as an opportunity for her son's life to form a different kind of story. How else would one be able to start over, bake a life with ingredients from scratch? The way his mother sees it, Andy's been dealt an ace.

He can't sleep. The shape of his days has been violently obliterated. The way he visualized a week had always mirrored his coil-bound planner: neat, identically sized blocks lined up in a row. Saturday and Sunday shaded in grey. Monday and Friday had their edges, a sharp breath in, a breath out. He was afraid his hours and thoughts would spread and bleed without a mold to constrain them. It was satisfying, like concrete being poured into a steel grid to form distinct squares of sidewalk and then drying—something to walk on. The systems in his apartment were containers to keep things that might otherwise evaporate or escape. His shoebox system, his bookcase system, his filing system.

The time before the fire, along with the exact contents of each system, is no longer clear. Andy cannot name the things he was saving in any precise list. It is possible there were ticket stubs, cartooned napkins, polaroids or paper cranes, but he cannot be sure. Each item is like a word stuck on the tip of his tongue.

On the night of the fire, Andy made his way home in the wee hours, suspicious his steps might be forming a swerving line. His voice was next to gone from talking above the pub noise. His legs and lungs ached after the climb up the steep incline to Gottingen street. He aimed himself towards his home, near the MacDonald Bridge that spanned the murky harbour separating Halifax and Dartmouth. There had been mention among Andy's co-workers this week of a bridge jumper, but he hadn't read anything in the newspaper about it. Disaster is ubiquitous enough at the hospital where he is a porter that it doesn't usually warrant lengthy discussion.

The nature of a disaster, Andy figures now, head on his pillow, is that it is not predictable. That night, he had admired the graffiti stenciled

on the sidewalk. He saw floating smoke, like grey wool being pulled apart, against the dark sky. Banjo strings plucking brightly through an amplifier still pattered in his head. Earlier, when the evening was just beginning, Andy had walked towards the bar feeling pretty good. He'd passed a cabbie leaned on his parked vehicle and gazing up at the silver bursts of Canada Day fireworks. Andy had felt almost sacrilegious for not stopping, for ignoring the spectacle. Maybe the smoke was residue from those fireworks, he thought, resisting a wave of vertigo.

Time seemed to slow down as Andy walked. It was about three a.m. Friday morning. He would sleep hard for a few hours, and then get up to look out his window at the group waiting for the 8:11 bus with their zippered laptop cases and travel mugs. This sight always comforted him. He worked irregular hours, so it seemed important to have some footing in the nine to five day most others seemed to operate by. If he were to soften, succumb too much to his own liquid comings and goings, he might lose touch with the outside world completely, might find himself swallowed up by the fog hanging ghostlike in every pocket of the city. The trees thickened and the smoke faded in and out of sight. Andy looked forward to drinking his coffee when he woke up. Maybe go through some of his old drawings, linger there.

The burning stench didn't fill Andy's nostrils until he turned onto his street. Even then, he didn't imagine it might be coming from his home. The evening he had just passed had been so familiarly round, looping around to blend seamlessly into other evenings like it, that a plot twist did not seem possible.

Beams from the fire truck glowed long in the air. Andy's neighbours, most of them strangers, stood in socks or bare feet on the street behind yellow tape. Their eyes zeroed in on Andy as though he carried an answer. The liquor inside him leapt and rushed to his head. He saw no red or orange, only black and grey and streams and streams of water flying from the firefighter's hoses. Andy recalled the words "No Pets" from his lease while observing the ferret, the cat, and the Chihuahua clutched in tenants' arms. He hated knowing strangers' small indiscretions. He felt the exhilaration and dread of everything falling away. A scrap of burnt paper drifted lazily to the ground.