

Kevin A. Couture

The Cartographer

“HE’S ON THE LOOSE, Del, coming at you like a case of mange!” Jerry tells me. He shakes the newspaper and his double chin quivers as if it’s full of baby mice. It’s no surprise he’s the first to sniff around; to Jerry, everything’s a game of hide and seek.

“Is that right,” I say, twisting the cash register key to the *on* position.

“It’s more than right. It’s a fact.”

Jerry’s a huge man, the kind of person they have to build special coffins for. He’s got the thin red hair and landmine freckles of a Scot and his accent, thick as fence-paint, gets even worse on days like this when he’s excited. He looks around the shop for something to buy, settling on a box of construction-grade staples.

I don’t tell Jerry, but I read the paper this morning too. Usually it only runs articles about off leash dogs at the park, the need for an increased snowplough budget, ads for the *Sub-Shop* or my place, *The Good Little Hardware Store*. But today the front page had something different and I knew it before I even got out of bed.

Jerry digs in his pocket for money while I put the staples in a paper bag. “Well, thanks for the sale,” I tell him. He waits for something more but I don’t give it to him. Finally he turns to leave, stumbling on the mud-rug by the door. He catches himself, swings back around and says, “If Satan was *my* brother, Del, I’d sleep with a gun for a pillow. I’ll tell you that for nothing!”



Marler and I aren’t brothers. We’re identical twins, yes, but not *brothers* in any real sense. I haven’t seen or heard from him in years, not since he left home at fifteen. Back then, Mom and Dad pleaded with me to figure

out where he went. They thought being twins automatically meant we had some special connection. A mental link we could use to zero in on each other.

“Where would you go,” they asked, “if you ran away?”

“I wouldn’t run away,” I said.

“But if you did?”

“Why would I run away?”

Mom started to cry. Dad rubbed his hands over his eyes like he was trying to erase everything he’d ever seen. “I thought the two of you ... I don’t know. Don’t you share the same thoughts or something? He’s your brother for Christ’s sake. Can’t you at least try?”

I shook my head. “We’re too different,” I told them. And I said nothing more.

It was months before they gave up and accepted he was gone. And though I had nothing to do with it, I don’t blame them for hounding me. When we were young, Marler and I played this game with the *National Geographic* map on the wall in our room. We called ourselves cartographers as if we had control over the lines in front of us, as if we had the power to draw our own paths. One of us would approach the map and pick out a city or a lake, a bend in a river, anyplace at all. Then the other would guess where it was. I chose places like the Great Wall or the big island of Hawaii. Marler would go for the Kalahari Desert or the top of a huge, desolate mountain. Nine times out of ten, both of us, we’d guess each other’s pick dead on. Something like that seems impressive on the surface like the link Mom and Dad were hoping for. But when you know each other’s natures as we did, it was really only educated luck. There was no way I could have actually tracked Marler down. No way on earth.



“Hey Del,” Roger says. He hits his head on the brass bell hanging from the doorjamb. He’s in full uniform this morning and I notice he’s displaying his gun in clear view. He comes over to the counter, a small island that holds the cash register, a UNICEF tin, and a jar filled with liquorice for the kids. I move the box of stock I was going through off to the side, fold my hands together and wait for him to speak.

Roger’s been with the RCMP as long as I’ve been in town, ten years now. In a place like this, the most strenuous duty he’s called to do is pour out open liquor at the Winter-fest. He has his business face on today though, square and impenetrable as a cinder block.

“Can I sell you a flashlight, Roger?” I say. “Cut a key for you?”

He takes his hat off, leans his elbow on the counter. “No,” he says.

He stands there, the space between us about the length of a tire iron. He’s brought a copy of the paper with him, same as Jerry, and he plunks it down on the counter. The photo of Marler under the headline is an old one. A mug shot from when he first got arrested. There’s a fresh scab along one cheek and his eyes are dark as a slaughterhouse floor. Since this picture was taken he’s been in and out of jail a bunch of times. Career thief, the papers called him. Small-time lifer. But then after that last robbery, the one that went so badly, murderer is what they call him now.

“Del,” Roger says, finally. “I’m sure he ain’t coming. You know Jackson, he can’t get the story right about which pair of jeans he put on this morning.”

“Okay,” I say.

In the article, Jackson wrote, *There’s good indication escaped killer, Marler Wayne, will be heading to the Hardy Lake area where his twin brother owns and operates the local hardware store.*

He doesn’t explain the *good indication* part. There is no good indication.

“You do realize Marler and I haven’t seen each other in ...”

“I know, Del. You’ve told me.” He puts his hand up to block the rest of my sentence. “But still, let me know if you hear from him. The brother-connection thing can be pretty close.”

“The moons of Saturn are closer,” I say.

Roger plucks one of the liquorice pieces from the jar and pops it in his mouth. He takes a long look at me, a look someone might give a fellow chess competitor. Then he nods and goes back out in the cold, jingling the bell again as he leaves.



At five o’clock I flip the *closed* sign around, take the money from the till, and slip it into a brown envelope. There’s a room in the back with a table and chairs, a microwave to heat up lunches and a small but clean washroom. I put the envelope in the cupboard strongbox and tidy up. The newspaper’s on the lunchroom table with Marler’s face staring up at me like a juror. On a whim, I head back into the main part of the store.

There’s a rack of maps set up beside the gardening section, mostly for fisherman passing through town to hit the river for steelhead. I grab one with the entire province on it and spread it out. It resembles a desiccated heart, the road and rail lines pieced together like dried blood vessels. Everything connected to everything else. I run my fingers over the whole thing in slow

circles, giving special attention to the area around Hardy Lake. But I can't feel a thing. No quivers, no intuition. Nothing. Just a slight tingling in my right hand, a bit of a cramp from a long day's work.

Someone knocks on the door.

"Hello? " I say. "Who's there?"

It takes a second to recognize the face through the frosty window: Jackson from the newspaper, peering in like he's standing in front of a whale tank. I fold the map, put it back where it belongs, and let him in.

"So, did you read the piece or what?" he says. His glasses fog up immediately. "Front page and everything."

"What can I do for you, Jackson?" I say. "Sell you a hammer? Cut a key?"

"No, no. Just a few questions for a follow up."

Jackson takes a fuse from the shelf and studies it absently. I can tell he's getting ready to give the big pitch he's been working on all day. I do feel sorry for him. There's a gap between his front teeth that could house a Tic-Tac and he's got a scar under his nose from a lousy cleft lip repair. Not to mention the most obvious thing—Jackson really is a terrible journalist.

"I've checked into your past, Del. You're part of the neighbourhood Block Watch, you sponsor a foster child in Sri Lanka. You've never even had a parking ticket, nothing."

"Go on," I say.

"Okay, so tell me—how does it feel to have a killer sitting on your own, pristine branch of the family tree?"

I sigh. "Marler and I are hardly even related. We're totally different people, we chose totally different paths. We even had separate placentas you know, in the womb."

Jackson nods his head. "I see," he says. "And when did Marler develop his taste for blood?"

"I don't think he... I don't know how to answer that."

He writes in his notebook, scratches his nose, and says, "And you're not worried he'll come after you?"

"What?"

"You know, out of spite?"

"That's crazy."

"You're probably right," he says. "Why don't you tell me about your childhood?"

I lock up and walk to *The High Country Food Store* for groceries. The place is gloomy and it takes a second for my eyes to adjust from the twilight brightness of the snow outside. The rug at the door has slush stains and a chalky halo around the edge from the sidewalk salt. I wipe my feet and head to the produce aisle, something Marler never ate when we were kids, choosing instead to sneak his vegetables onto my plate.

That's one of the things I told Jackson. Along with having to do Marler's homework for him when he was failing Grade six. Returning all the stuff he shoplifted. The pyromania phase, the gasoline-soaked tennis balls, the "borrowed" car. The Grade Eight pregnancy scare that kept us both up for nights. I talked about having to pray extra loudly in church so no one would hear Marler messing with the words. *Holy Mary, blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the Fruit of Thy Loom, Jesus.*

I almost smiled at that last one, at how I looked after Marler as though he was the next-door neighbours' mildly retarded son. Then I came back to reality. Marler is a criminal. He and I aren't brothers, we're not neighbours. We're as unlike as two Arctic snowflakes. And no matter how you slice it, nothing about his current situation is my fault.

In the next aisle, I run into Jerry examining a burlap bag of potatoes. He drops the sack to the floor and rushes over, much faster than you'd expect from such a huge man. Before I know it, I'm trapped in front of a row of boxed mandarins.

"Ah! Del," he says. "You're alive. That's good."

"Hi, Jerry."

He snoops in my basket. Then he puts his thick arm around my neck. "My friend," he says. "You should be buying bullets not broccoli."

"Thanks for the advice," I say. I grind my teeth together, hard enough to split a finger bone. Jerry doesn't notice though, he just keeps talking.

"I just don't know what gets into a crazy-man's mind, Del. I can't read crazy-men minds. But your brother's been stewing a long time. Thinking about all the things you did or didn't do. I've seen it before on TV," he says, pointing back and forth from one eye to the other. "Then there's the other issue, of course."

"And what issue would that be, Jerry? Can't wait to hear it."

"Well, you and Marler are *identical* twins."

I don't respond.

"Doesn't that mean you have the same genes? The same killer-instinct, just waiting to come out?"

"Hey guys," Roger says, popping out of nowhere. As if he's been watching us—no, watching *me*—the whole time. "How's it going?"

“Fine. Good. I’m good,” Jerry says. He takes his arm from around my shoulders and backs away. “But not him. He doesn’t even know the devil’s coming and ...”

“Why don’t you go finish your shopping, Jerry?” Roger says. “And leave Del to his own.” He puts his hand on Jerry’s shoulder and I see the veins flex in his forearm, pushing up the skin like worm tunnels.

Without another word, Jerry spins and walks off. He reaches down and jerks the bag of potatoes from the floor as easy as pulling a Kleenex from a box. He turns his head to give us one last look before disappearing around the corner.

I give a little thank-you nod to Roger and force out a smile. Truth is though I want to grab a pineapple from the display and smash it against the wall, right beside Roger’s big, fat, meddling head.



It’s cold on the walk home. My hair, still damp with sweat from my neck, freezes into tiny ice-pick points. I pull my collar up and hope to God the street stays empty; I’m not in the mood for any other encounters with anybody tonight. And another thing I think as I stomp along, I never should’ve done that interview with Jackson. He’s only going to twist things around the way Jerry and Roger did. Except in Jackson’s case, the whole town gets to read it. I’ll tell you this much, I don’t feel sorry for him and his cleft fucking lip anymore.

Maybe the thing to do is craft a letter of my own. Send it off to the editor of the paper. “That’ll put a stop to it,” I whisper. “And then the final touch, when Marler gets arrested and put back in ...”

I stop dead, two feet from the hardware store. Somehow I took a wrong turn and ended up here. A shiver goes down my back like a fuse. I scrape the frost from the window, unlock the door and go inside.

It’s dark. I put the grocery bags on the ground and flip on a light. The cash register is untouched, the merchandise undisturbed. Everything seems normal. That is until I look down. On the floor in front of me there’s a scattering of small dirty puddles. Footsteps of melted slush.

He’s here. Right here in the shop.

I follow the trail through the store into the back room. It’s empty, but there’s a large puddle under one of the chairs. A carton of milk from the fridge sits open on the table. And I notice the bathroom door is closed. I try the knob. It’s locked.

I take a couple slow breaths to calm myself and lean my ear against the door. Carefully, I spread my hands out on the wood but I can't hear or feel a thing. No quivers, no intuition. Nothing.

I concentrate harder and this time I do feel it: a slight tingling in my palm, like holding onto a jar of dragonflies. He's behind the door, I know it. And I see him in my mind listening against the wood the same way I am. I feel his hands—calloused and full of tiny cuts from a lifetime of running—moving over the surface. His breath, his heart, both racing in precise rhythm with mine, as fast and earnest as light from a distant star. I want to speak, call out to him. There's the irrational urge to apologize but I don't know what for. I can't decide which feeling is strongest. Which emotion to act upon.

Then I hear a noise.

The bell from the front door. And the heavy thump of footsteps in the main part of the store. I back away and head into the shop, closing the lunchroom door behind me.

It's Roger. He takes his cap off and stands by the counter, his gun picking up the glint of the overhead lights.

"Hi Del, he says.

"Hi Roger. How's it going? Cold out there I'll bet," I say. "Can I sell you a wrench? Paintbrush? Putty knife? Cut a key for you?"

Roger turns his head to one side. "You okay, Del?"

"Yes," I say. "I'm okay."

"I noticed the light on in the store. Bit late for you, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well. No rest for the, ah..."

Roger nods and looks around the shop. He walks over to the pegboard in the corner. Runs his fingers across the light switches, gang-plates, and dimmers. Subconsciously his hand moves down and brushes against his pistol.

He wanders towards the back room. "Mind if I take a look?" he says, but he's not really asking. He keeps walking and I see him quietly unhook the strap securing his weapon. He glances back at me, turns, and goes through the doorway into the lunchroom.

I pick up a hammer and follow him.

"Bit messy in here," Roger says. "For you I mean."

I don't answer. The door to the bathroom is still closed. Roger notices it too. He takes his gun out of its holster and reaches for the doorknob. I tighten my grip on the hammer, sizing up the flesh between Roger's neckline and the collar of his coat.

"Locked," he says. He turns around and sees me holding the mallet. He wrinkles his forehead.

Everything is deathly quiet. I take a step forward so we're an arm's length apart. "Yeah," I say. I lift the hammer and use it to point at the door. "I was about to fix that. It's been stuck."

"Why don't I help you," he says. "We can open it together."

He waits for me to make the next move. I don't know what to do but Marler must be able to hear us though the door. Roger switches his gun to his left hand and takes a butter knife from the drawer beside him. He wedges it beneath the hinge-bolt and motions to me with the pistol. "Let's do it," he says.

I walk over, gripping the hammer tight enough to choke a kitten. I look Roger in the eye and start tapping the handle of the knife. The bolt comes free and we do the same with the bottom one.

"Take the door off," Roger says.

I hesitate and Roger lifts his gun so I can see it more plainly. I put the hammer down, take hold of the door and lift it off its hinges.

The bathroom is totally empty.

Roger and I look at each other, the silence in the room as pronounced as a chinbone. I turn away, trying to hide my blood-filled cheeks.

Before either one of us can speak, there's a crash from the front of the store. "I've seen him! I've seen him!" a voice calls.

We race around the corner and find Jerry doubled over, wheezing. He's upended the rack of maps and guidebooks and they're sprawled out across the floor like ink spots. Roger puts his gun away and goes over to him. "Jerry, what's going on?"

"I told you," he says. He waves his massive arm towards the east side of town. "Running like a ferret down by the McKesson place. Your devil-brother, Del, just like I predicted."

Roger stands there for what seems an eternity. "You should probably stay here," he says to me. The two of them go outside, jog down the street and get into Roger's cruiser.



"Why did you come?" I whisper. "Why here?"

There has to be a clue. A letter, a note, a one-word explanation. I check on the lunchroom floor, under the table, in the fridge. I even peek inside the stupid milk carton. Nothing.

I see the strongbox sitting like a casket in the open cupboard and bring it over to the table. The cash envelope is still there. And the money, untouched.

I stuff the envelope in my pocket and head back into the store.

The floor is littered with the maps Jerry toppled. I get on my knees and sweep through them until I find the local one, the one of Hardy Lake. I clear a space and start unfolding right there on the floor. "C'mon, c'mon," I say as the map gets caught in one of its creases. It tears a little and finally opens. I flatten it out on the ground and start rubbing my hands up and down the streets like a madman. I can't sense a thing.

I slow down, take a deep breath and look closely at the map. It's completely indecipherable. As meaningless as a chart of the universe. I reach out again and gently touch it with both hands. It'll work, I know it. If I just concentrate. Follow the lines that brought us here and extrapolate with a line of my own. Find that place where everything connects to everything else. And that's where he'll be.

I close my eyes and wait for a sensation, some sort of sign. The only thing I feel so far though is the slush-water from the floor, soaking through the paper. Smudges of black ink all over the tips of my fingers.

