

STOLEN SILENCE

They carried the body in a blanket, using the four corners as handles. The body was heavy and Albert and Fency's boy adjusted their grip every few seconds to prevent dropping it. And every time they did this, the body bounced and made the blanket seem even heavier.

Albert Apetagon was at the back end of the blanket, and his position forced him to look down on the body. The light from the stars and the half moon gave the grey skin a pale glow. Albert tried to look forward at the boy's back, but every time the blanket slipped, he had to look down to adjust. Albert knew Fency's boy had the awkward position of carrying the blanket with his hands behind his back, but he also knew it was better to have him at the front so he didn't have to look at the body. Bringing him along on this project

was one thing; asking him to look down on his father's body while he was carrying it was something else. It was difficult enough for Albert. Barry Fency had been his friend since those years on the *Keweeetan*, but he couldn't subject the man's son to stare down at him as they carried him to the lake.

The constant jerking of the body and the shifting of the weight drove sharp biting pains into Albert's arms, back and shoulders, and he considered asking the boy to stop and rest for a few minutes, but then quickly dismissed the idea. They had to get the body out to the boat and then out to the lake before anybody realized it was gone. And Albert knew if they stopped for even a second, it would give them time to think about what they were doing, and they might change their minds. Even now, Albert was questioning his motives.

Their footsteps creaked across the old, worn wood of the company pier and despite Albert's increasing fatigue, they walked in sync, two pairs of feet sounding like one. When they arrived at the spot where the company boat was moored, they stopped and then Fency's boy quickly turned to face Albert, crossing his arms in front of his chest to keep his grip on the blanket. He looked down on the body and froze for a second. Fear and dismay came over his face. Tears welled up in his eyes and he looked up at Albert. Albert nodded once and said softly, "If you want I'll call Sol and we can take it from here."

The boy stared down at his father's body for a couple more seconds, sniffed once and shook his head. "I'm okay. Let's get him in the boat."

As if choreographed, they each put one foot on the gunnel; the boat dipped slightly in the water, but they adjusted their weight to compensate. They swung the load over the rail and stepped up, briefly balanced on the gunnel and then moved onto the deck. The boat rocked back and forth as they set down the load. Albert's arms responded by drifting upward on their own.

"I DON'T WANT TO GET YOU INTO MORE TROUBLE," ALBERT SAID.

"I APPRECIATE YOU HELPING ME CARRY THE BODY DOWN, BUT WE SHOULD HANDLE IT FROM HERE."

"I'll cover him up," Albert said. "Don't want him to get cold." He bent down and folded the exposed ends of the blanket over the body. He lifted up the feet and tucked the ends underneath. He repeated the same gesture with the upper body, but kept the head exposed. He brushed off the blanket to smooth out the wrinkles. Sol Jacks, another fisherman, and Barings, the company buyer, came from the weighing area to the boat. Barings used to be like them, a fisherman who spent the day out on the lake in his Lund boat tossing out nets, pulling in piles of fish and storing them in those styrofoam coolers that anybody could get at the Northern store. But a few years ago, Barings sold both his boat (engines and equipment included) and his licence to the company. After a week of orientation in Winnipeg, Barings became the buyer for the northwest coast of the lake. He was a stubby man, his gut expanding further since he became buyer. He combed his hair over his bald spot and wore thick, horn-rimmed glasses that kept slipping down his nose.

Barings laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. "It's better if you go home," he whispered. "No need for you to hang

around here anymore."

Light flared from a match as Sol sparked a cigarette. He extinguished the match with a quick flick of his wrist and tossed it into the water. "Yeah it's better if you go and let them handle things from here," Sol said. Smoke escaped from his mouth as he spoke. Like Albert, Sol's face was weathered and wrinkled like an old wallet, and he constantly squinted, the result of spending hours on the lake without the help of sunglasses. Only the younger fishermen wore sunglasses. Albert, Sol and a few others couldn't be bothered; sunglasses took away all the depth and made the shifting colours of the lake—signs pointing to or away from a school of fish—difficult to spot. The younger fishermen had all the electronic and expensive equipment—depth gauges, fish sonars and the like—so they didn't need to rely on the shifting shades of blue on the lake. Of course, that didn't mean they caught any more fish than Albert and the Jack brothers, just that they could wear sunglasses on the lake.

"I'm going out," Fency's boy said, nodding towards the lake. Fisherman wrinkles were just starting to show near the boy's eyes, but the rest of his face was unblemished. He had a short, flat nose and his eyes, slightly slanted, seemed only half open. His hair was short underneath his Lund ballcap, and soft, dark stubble grew down his face and under his nose and chin. A slab of scar tissue peeked under the left side of the stubble, ran down the side of his neck and then disappeared into his shirt.

"You sure? You don't have to stay, 'cause I don't want to get you into more trouble," Albert said. "I appreciate you helping me carry the body down, but we should handle it from here. Sol will take you home, won't you Sol?"

Sol nodded but the boy waved the suggestion away. "I'll get the ropes," he said. He jumped off the boat onto the pier and it swayed underneath him.

"What 'bout you, Barings? You coming?" Sol asked.

"With you? You staying here aren't you?"

"Boat's pretty crowded now that the boy's going along."

"So?"

Sol took a nervous puff of his smoke. "So I figured you might want to come with me," he said.

"What the hell gave you that idea?" said Barings.

Sol shrugged but said nothing. Albert climbed out of the boat and stood next to Barings. He whispered, "I'm going to ask you to leave, Barings. It's not necessary for you to go. You'll only get in bigger trouble if there's any problem."

"It's my boat," Barings declared.

"It's the company's boat," Sol said quietly.

Barings stared at Sol for several seconds and then took one step forward. The anger seethed in his eyes, but the rest of his body was calm. "I'm the company in this town, so that makes it my boat. Without it, none of this



would be happening.”

Sol took a step back, his hands raised in appeasement. “Take it easy, Barings. No need—”

Barings cut him off. “You fuckin’ asshole, Jacks. You really piss me off. I fished on this lake with you independents for over ten years and just because I decide to pack it in for something a little more relaxing at my age, you treat me like an outcast. But when you need something from good old Barings, I’m your best friend again, until, of course, you don’t get the right price for your fish, or you bring in a bad load. Then it’s all—”

Albert placed his hand on Baring’s shoulder, stopping the tirade. “We’re just looking out for you, Barings,” Albert said, his voice serene and smooth. “You’re in enough trouble already and we—I mean I—figured that if you stayed here, you could say you knew nothing and that the boat was stolen, if anything happened.”

Barings twisted away. “You piss me off, too, with this, Albert. You think you were Fancy’s only friend, just because you fished a few years longer together than I did.”

“That’s not it, Barings.”

“We worked for two years on the *Keweetan* till you came along, Albert. Two years loading and unloading that barge while Jerry Harrison screamed his fucking lungs out at us. Two years before you, Albert. Two years. That makes him just as important a friend to me as to you.”

“I never said you weren’t his friend, Barings.”

“Jesus Christ!” Fancy’s boy shouted, surprising everyone. “This is my old man here, so show some respect and stop bickering!” Albert, Barings and Sol watched in silence as the younger man finished untying the bowlines and tossed the ropes on the deck. He pushed between Albert and Barings and climbed into the boat. He went over to the wheel and started the engine: a roar in the silence and a cloud of black diesel blew out of the exhaust. In seconds the engine was pounding with healthy chugs. The boy walked to the centre of the boat and stood with his hands on his hips. He gave his head a quick upward flick and pursed his lips towards Albert. “Me and Albert will take Dad out. I’m sorry, Barings, I appreciate you letting us use the boat, but that’s the way it’s going to be.”

Barings began to speak, but the boy cut him off. "I know you were his friend for a long time, Barings, and he knows it too. He didn't mind when you went over to the company—he figured it was the best thing for you—but the fact is, Dad asked Albert to do this for him. And even though this is your boat, with Dad aboard there's only room for one more and I know you wouldn't mind if I went along."

Barings said nothing for several seconds and then finally nodded. "At least I can say good-bye to him then."

"Nobody's stopping you from doing that," the boy said and he and Albert stepped aside. Barings looked like he was carrying a heavy load on his back as he slowly lowered himself to his knees. He bent forward until he was a few inches away from the face and whispered something. He nodded as if listening and then kissed the forehead. He gave the body a friendly slap. He started to push himself up but stumbled. One of his arms reached out for balance and Albert grabbed it to steady him. The two

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men looked at each other for several seconds before Barings, with Albert's help, pulled himself to his feet. "Thanks, Albert," he said. Albert nodded, gave Barings's arm a quick squeeze and then let go. Barings wiped some tears from his eyes and slowly stepped out of the boat to stand on the pier next to Sol. Albert climbed aboard just as the boat jerked away from the pier.

"You guys be careful," Sol said. "It's pretty dark out there."

"We'll be alright," Albert answered back. "Not as if we haven't been on the lake at night."

"Yeah, but you haven't—" Sol began to say, but then changed his mind. "Just take it easy out there."

Albert nodded, and the boy steered the boat towards the lake. The company boat pushed through the darkness, slicing an invisible line through the black surface. The lights of the town disappeared once they rounded the point, but there were a few scattered lights along the shore to the northwest. A screech came from the shore just as they rounded the point, some bird, likely an owl plucking a rodent from the ground for a meal. But after that, their only companions in sound were the thud of the engine and the slap-

ping wash of the water against the side of the boat.

Albert tried to keep himself busy by first rolling up the ropes and stacking them neatly below the gunnel. Next, he took a few of the lead weights that helped drop the fishing lines into the lake and tied them to the body, fastening the rope around the ankles. Finished, he returned to a seat near the stern and sat down. Fency's boy stood at the helm, piloting the boat. Albert watched him. The boy stood stiff and straight, his face unbending against the wind, doing his best to ignore the body of his father lying on the deck behind him. Albert couldn't bring himself to look at the body either, so he looked up. The Milky Way stretched before him and a minuscule dot of light drifted across the sky. Albert watched the satellite travel across the backdrop of stars and then lost it when he blinked. He searched the sky again but was unable to find the satellite.

Some time later, the engine stopped and the boat drifted forward on the momentum. The silence of the lake, previously stolen by the sound of the engine, returned. Water lapped against the sides of the boat and a slight breeze whistled in the air. Fency's boy pulled a pack of smokes from his pocket and lit one. He took several deep puffs and turned around. Albert stood up and moved to drop the anchor. "Leave it," said the boy. "We're not going to be here long." They stood in silence, staring out at the lake, each in a different direction. Finally, Albert sighed. "Let's get this thing over with, then."

Albert and Fency's boy acted simultaneously, stepping forward and grabbing opposite ends of the blanket. Albert held the feet and the lead weight, the boy held the head and the upper body. They carried the body to the port side and balanced it on the gunnel, each resting a hand on the body to hold it in place.

Albert looked at the boy, but he was staring out at the lake, averting his gaze from the body. Albert took a deep breath and then spoke. "I met Barry Fency when I started work loading and unloading supplies on the *Kewetan* on its week-long run around the lake. I was only seventeen years old and I moved from Norway House because I didn't feel like working on the railroad anymore. The three of us, Barings, Fency and Apetagon, worked together for two years on that boat, with Jerry Harrison, our crew chief, screaming blue murder at us all the time. I almost quit once because of all that screaming, but your dad talked me out of it. He said that Harrison was just a sad old fucker with no family and no friends and the only way he could relate to anyone was either to cower like some pup to a wolf or to yell at them like a magpie. He said that anytime Harrison's yelling got to me, I should picture him in his pathetic, puny cabin sitting all by himself. After that, Harrison never really bothered me anymore.



After Elaine and I got married and I decided to get a boat to do some fishing, your dad decided to quit the *Kewetán* and follow me out. We fished on that lake for about ten years, and then they decided to build the dam, so we got jobs doing that. And when the dam was done, we headed back out onto the lake and started fishing again. But then he got cancer.” The words caught in Albert’s throat. He tried to shake and blink the tears away but they drifted down his face. He glanced up from the body and saw the boy looking at him, a stream of tears below each eye. When their eyes met, Fency’s boy nodded, giving Albert the strength to continue.

“We didn’t do anything real important but we caught a lot of fish. Your dad used to say you got to live a certain time and if you didn’t do anything to change the world, that was fine as long as you did something you liked to do.” Albert went silent for a few seconds staring out at the lake looking for something only he could see.

“I’m done, so if you want to say something, you go ahead,” Albert said.

Fency’s boy shook his head slowly. “He knows what I’d

say, so there’s no point in saying it.”

“Give me a puff of that smoke, will you?” Albert said. The boy nodded and with his free hand, passed it over. Albert took a drag from the smoke and offered it back but the boy declined. Albert puffed once again and then put the cigarette into the mouth of Barry Fency. After a brief silence the ember glowed brightly. A thin moan escaped from Barry’s lips as he puffed on the cigarette. Albert left the cigarette in the mouth and lifted his hand from the body. The boy immediately followed. Barry Fency balanced on the gunnel for a second and then went over. There was a splash, several white capped ripples and the body slipped into the black water.

Albert stared at the spot for several seconds and took a deep breath. “Let’s head back in,” he said. Fency’s boy stood up and went to the front of the boat. The engine roared to life. 🐾

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