The White Boats

Brian Moore

Insomnia has been creeping up on Curtis for years, without fanfare or diagnosis, grinding him down with the same corrosive patience as wrinkles around his eyes and the pillow of fat circling his middle. To knock himself out at bedtime, he swallows capsules of melatonin, a cup of chamomile tea, and generous shots of cough medicine. He keeps the cough medicine bottles, his square little soldiers, tucked between the clock radio and the slabs of chirpy self-improvement books that Tess lays out for him on the dresser like new clothes to be tried on.

Tess is full of suggestions. She takes care of him, gives advice, makes thoughtful, practical adjustments. She's banned alcohol from the house, and Curtis agrees that it's a sensible precaution. Lots of guys turn into alcoholics as soon as they retire. But he explains to her that the cough medicine is different, just to settle his nerves in the evening. He purchases the bottles from three

different pharmacies downtown so that he doesn't get funny looks from the cashiers. You can't buy it by the case at Walmart anymore. Some regulation.

Why don't you go to the doctor? Tess asks. Get some pills.

He's not going to any goddamned doctor. He'd be an addict in a week. She tries hard not to nag him, but her worrying wears at him. He appreciates when she leaves him alone, and tells her so.

Part of the insomnia is from bad dreams. Tonight he wakes in the pre-dawn, and the boy is beside the bed, yanking at his arm and begging Curtis to *run, run*. Curtis needs several minutes to convince himself he is still in his own house, that he's safe. He forces his heart rate back down, wipes the sweat from his face. While he waits, he listens for sounds that don't belong, whispers and footsteps and that pregnant absence you feel when someone is holding their breath in the dark. But there is only the wind banging on a loose shutter, the distant whir of the refrigerator, and the air conditioner huffing through the ductwork.

Once his head is clear, he pads to the living room in his boxers, plucks the twenty-sixer of Crown Royal out from behind the encyclopedias, lifts a fingerprinted tumbler from the coffee table, and slops it to the brim. He collapses on the couch and stacks his hairy man-feet on the coffee table.

He's gotten through another night. His brain unclogs, like a drain clearing. He relaxes and closes his eyes. The dreams are getting quieter, less urgent with time, which gives him hope. He's handling it.

When dawn breaks over the neighbour's garage, Curtis puts the Crown Royal away and rinses out the glass so that Tess doesn't smell the alcohol. He crosses to the picture window and parts the drapes, his fuzzy white belly peeking between the shears.

The woman on the lawn is still there.

Tess shuffles into the living room, slippers shush-shushing across the carpet. She will be wearing the robins-egg nightgown under the maroon bathrobe with the lace collar. He does not see her, not directly. Hasn't seen her in years. His own fault, but not such a bad one and not uncommon. He knows that his blindness to how she looks, what she says, and what she's thinking is driving her crazy with frustration.

"Any change?" Tess asks.

"Looks like she's dozed off."

The woman on the lawn slouches in a collapsible chair. She's a lean knife of a girl: bony legs in jeans sliced to threads at the thighs, an open leather jacket, and a t-shirt with the words *No More* spattered red over her breasts.

She looks like a scarecrow someone left out for pickup, except she's pointed at Curtis's house and not the street. Her name is Amelia Henry.

"We can't go on like this," Tess says. "It's been over a week."

"What am I supposed to do?"

Her eyes droop on him. They have been arguing in short, staccato bursts for days. She can't understand why he is putting up with a stranger camped in their front yard. He's the man of the house. He should show some authority.

"I'll talk to her," he says.

"Again."

"Yes, again."

"She better not be here when I come home from work. Do you hear what I'm saying, Curtis? I won't put up with her anymore. I've had enough."

"I said: I'll talk to her."

Tess returns to the kitchen. He hears her opening a cupboard, shaking cereal into a bowl, clinking a spoon on porcelain.

From a distance you could be fooled into thinking the woman is a teenager: high, smooth cheek bones, a wide nose, and Asian eyes. A cardboard sign leans against her knees with a splotchy photocopy of an eight by ten photo taped to it. The caption blares: *MISSING, DENISE HENRY 1996*.

After breakfast Tess asks him if he is okay.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Why?"

"You can tell me. Whatever it is."

"You better go. You're gonna be late for work. I'm not the one earning a living."

After Tess drives away, he flops back on the couch. Amelia is still there, tapping on her phone. He is pretty sure she can't see him through the window, but what does it matter? He's in his own house.

Amelia runs a women's shelter in town. She is always circulating petitions, writing letters, yelling from the gallery in city council meetings, and just being a general pain in the ass. Her mother, Denise, was First Nations, but the father is uncertain. Her mother disappeared when Amelia was eight. Curtis was the lead investigator with the Ontario Provincial Police before being reassigned. He always dreaded dealing with children, as if any question he asked might be too sharp or too heavy, leaving unseen cuts and bruises. He recalls squatting down to Amelia's height and forcing a smile that he hoped was non-threatening. She clutched her aunt's skirt, hanging on for dear life. Ponytails and frowns and scabbed knees. A serious, sealed mouth.

Then, twenty-three years later, she marches into the front yard as if no time has passed, complaining that the OPP had stopped trying, that they said she was interfering, not letting them do their jobs. Decades evaporated, and now, suddenly, she's demanding answers. She said she had no one else to turn to.

You still have no one, he said. But in his quiet voice instead of his cop voice, as if he is a distant relative at a funeral.

He didn't call the police to evict her. Tess asked, why not? Can you imagine, he asked Tess, if someone I used to work with drove up in a cherry top to answer the call. Curtis? Is that you? What happened? You can't even handle a skinny girl in a lawn chair?

But that isn't why.

At lunchtime Amelia leaves, but her junk is still there. Curtis dresses quickly, double-checks all the locks, and walks down the street. It's Wednesday. On Wednesdays he visits his dad in the retirement home. Curtis carts in two boxes of Boston Creams and Long Johns from Tim Hortons, feeling as if he's smuggling contraband. These are long afternoons. His father suckles on the doughnut fillings and watches the weather channel, his Christmas gift slippers dangling over the footrest of his recliner. Between silences the old man

complains that the news is all fake. People have too many rights, he says. They expect everything to be done for them, like children who won't pick up after themselves. Curtis nods and picks at dirt under his nails. His dad never talks about Curtis's mum, who died in ninety-seven, six years after the divorce.

Curtis remembers nights sitting at the top of the stairs when he was small, bare toes curled into the carpet on the lip of the step, listening for fighting and crying from the living room below. The arguments started after he went to bed, screaming, banging furniture, and then nothing, as if all the anger had stampeded off a cliff. Hockey cranked up on the television. The clock ticking solidly in the hall. His mother slapping a pan against the stove.

On a few nights, his parents threw parties, and the laughter and shouting and the music from the stereo swelled up the stairs like a balloon full of sparks and light. If he stayed up too late, his mother caught him, swatted him on the behind, and sent him back to bed. He liked to be caught. He didn't like being alone.

When Curtis was six his mother woke him in the dark and peeled away the blankets. She stuffed his pajamaed arms and legs into his snowsuit, snugged socks and winter boots on his feet. She smelled of whisky and lipstick and smoke.

Curtis asked where they were going.

The movies, she said.

Isn't it too late?

I'll buy you buttered popcorn and licorice twists and Cracker Jacks. All the bad things.

A night light glowing in the kitchen. A counter full of empty forty-ounc-ers and spilled-over ashtrays. Her red mouth exhaling a wet, hot kiss in his ear.

She unlocked the side door, slow and quiet, as if they were playing spy, sneaking out of enemy headquarters with the secret plans. Past the garbage cans and the gas meter and the snowman they made yesterday. She shook keys loose from her purse. As she started the car, he saw his father standing on the front veranda, warding off the sudden burst of headlights with his arm. He looked like a superhero, all lit up, poised to leap. He threw a bottle that splashed glass and beer over the windshield. His mother reversed with a bump into the street.

She was lying to him about the movies, but he was already old enough to not ask why. They crested the west hill, turned past the bowling alley and the supermarket and the car dealerships, and sped into the country, the space be-tween towns. He had never been out so late. The wind creased the highway

with meringue snowdrifts. Farmhouses huddled out of sight. There was no one else in the world.

Is there blood on my face?

Curtis leaned over as far as he could to see.

I don't think so.

We're going to Southampton first. Maybe Aunt Gloria is still up. Oh shit, shit.

Red and blues bounced through the car. She eased carefully into the slush on the shoulder and parked with the motor running. They waited for the policeman. She clutched Curtis's wrist with her right hand, as if warning him not to say anything, squeezing so hard that he felt the sprint of her pulse through her palm. She wiped something off her cheek and rolled down the window.

Hello, Miranda.

Hello, Gary.

Late to be out for a drive.

The boys didn't leave until midnight. You know how Bob's friends are on a Friday night. Letting off steam.

He nodded. He let her talk. Something you learned as a policeman.

I'm going to my aunt's. For a visit.

The policeman was OPP, same as Curtis's father. They patrolled the highways between the towns, up and down, black and white Crown Vics with massive hemi engines and steel-belted pursuit tires. The men all knew each other. Went to the same weddings and picnics and hockey tournaments, drank the same brand of beer.

He was sorry to tell her that they were closing the highway from the County Line all the way to the Lake. It's just not safe to be out. We're turning everybody around.

She understood. She thanked him. He waited beside his cruiser while she u-turned and started back for Ballyhaise. They didn't have shelters for women back then. You stayed with relatives, caught a bus out of town, or went home.

Curtis must have fallen asleep in the car, knocked out by the warmth from the heater. He must have been carried up to bed, stripped out of the snowsuit and covered up in sheets and quilts. In the morning, his mother heaped steaming scrambled eggs and sausage on his plate. They made plans for the afternoon. It was Saturday. Everything was normal. His father had already gone in to work a weekend shift.

A dream, she said. It was all a dream.

When he was still a patrolman, Curtis had been called to dozens of domestic assaults. They were always messes with no clear solutions, full of startling stupidity, and alcohol and petty bickering and sometimes men so out of control they looked like dogs that needed to be put down. Or so deliberately sadistic that you couldn't see any light in their eyes at all.

For a long time Curtis had worried that it was an inherited gene. He read articles on the Internet. He deleted the search history from his browser to cover his tracks.

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Curtis is in charge of cooking. At four o'clock he starts supper and keeps it warm on the stove. He watches television, waiting for Tess to return. Amelia is in her chair again, her feet in sandals and propped on a picnic cooler as if she's at the beach. He's forgotten to talk to her.

When Tess returns she throws her briefcase on the hood of the car and crosses the lawn. She picks up the cooler and flips it across the grass, spilling out juice bottles, baggies of fruit, cups of yogurt. Words pelt the living room window like clods of dirt. *You have no right! You have no idea what he's been through!* Neighbours come out to watch. After ten minutes, Tess opens the front door and whips it closed behind her.

Curtis braces himself.

She has no words for him.

She storms through the house, slamming more doors, dissipating.

Amelia rises slowly from her chair, folds it up, and glances toward Curtis in the window. In that moment she reminds him of his mother before the divorce, truncated, withered. He watches her struggle down the street with her cooler, her thermos, her knapsack, and her chair.

He goes to bed early after supper and doesn't hear when Tess comes in.

After only three hours he is all slept out and staring at the ceiling, exhausted. Tess snores beside him, raspy and deep as a child with a cold. He gets up, dresses, turns off the patio door alarm, and ventures into the yard.

The stars are very fine tonight, sprayed all over the sky. He lies on the lounge chair clutching his emergency bottle from the shed, piecing together constellations, tracing the dust of the milky way through the silhouette of the maple tree. If he seals out the murmurs of traffic and the splatter of street lights, he can imagine he is up north in the bush, hiking into old growth forest, shedding the house and mortgage and car behind him on the grass like a trail of abandoned clothes until he's naked.

He's been rolling downhill on this path since retirement. He doesn't know where he and Tess are going. There have been nights when the sheets are wrung into a knot at the foot of the bed, and Tess is wedged into a corner of the room shouting Curtis Curtis Stop For God's Sake What's Wrong With You? She has bruises on her shoulders and scratches on her thighs from where he has hit her in his sleep. They consider separate beds. They consider more doctors. She wonders if he has PTSD, but he tells her it will pass, just give it time to mend. No point in opening wounds.

At dawn Tess calls his name from the edge of the patio stones.

"What?" he replies, coming up from below.

"Curtis, please, *please*."

"What is it?"

"Please come inside. I can't do this by myself." She stands tip-toe on the stones, as though she is perched on a large rock above the chop of a deep, cold lake, calculating the shock if she dared to dive in. "Please stop fighting me."

"I'm not fighting you. What the hell are you talking about?"

She crosses the flower beds and the rock garden and navigates between the shrubs. She takes the empty bottle out of his hand and cups his forehead, the way you check a toddler for fever.

"Is it loaded?"

He doesn't understand her. He shifts on to his side. It's his brain. There were always things he was forgetting. Sinkholes in his memory. Somehow she has gotten the upper hand in their marriage, become the responsible one, the tough, courageous wife, and he is drifting further into fog, landmarks shrinking out of sight.

He hefts the handgun up from the grass, slides out the clip, and checks that the chamber is empty. Click. Clean as a whistle. He had always liked the shape and heft of his pistol. The craftsmanship. It fit him like a favourite shirt or a comfortable pair of shoes. He lay the gun in her hand as if it were a trophy, a relic from the centre of the world.

"If you have to go to her, then do it," she says. "But leave me out of it. I don't want to know."

§

The next day, he calls Amelia at the shelter.

"It's Curtis."

"Hello, Curtis."

She waits him out.

"What do you need?" he asks.

She says a friend of her mother's told her about a party in a farmhouse near Drumconnor at the time Denise disappeared. Rumors of an accident. The guys at the party tried to cover it up. The police wouldn't do a search warrant. They said they didn't have probable cause.

"They're right," he says.

But he's not a police officer anymore, is he?

He meets her at the farm. There's no sign of life, no mailbox at the road, no car tracks in the dirt lane. They wade through the yard, weeds up to their hips. Graffiti crawls over the farmhouse, and the windows are boarded up with plywood. Part of the roof has rotted out and caved in.

"What's that?" she asks.

"Something we didn't have twenty-five years ago." From the back of his SUV he hauls out a wheeled cart the size of a baby stroller. He toggles the battery, and a screen in the handle lights up. Ground-penetrating radar. The GPR can map out objects, such as bones, if they are less than six feet underground. You rent it by the day.

He assumes any evidence in the house is long gone, but the earth can store secrets for decades. He plots a perimeter with stakes and yellow poly cord. He rolls the GPR up and down the yard, watching the display screen. They dig up

a rusted wrench, paint cans, a ploughshare, an axe with a snapped handle. Bugs hum through the orchard grass. Amelia marks out more grids and cuts thistle out of his path. They work in silence through the morning, through noon, grasshoppers flicking away from their boots.

"What was your mother like?" Curtis asks.

"Happy." Amelia drags a plastic shopping bag out of the soil, tosses it into a growing pile of debris. "She had no right to be. Left home when she was fifteen to live with her sister. Never got a break her whole life, but she was determined to be happy, like a religion."

"Was she good to you?"

"There isn't much I can tell. I was too young. My aunt was very good at spinning stories but never the same way twice."

Curtis stops the cart and points. Amelia begins digging again. She has no fear. Has she forgotten what they are looking for? Or does she know she won't find anything? The veins in her hands are plumped and fat as she works, like someone much older.

"When I was, I think, five, Denise took me down to the harbor and bought me ice cream. It was a school day, but she kept me home. I think she was lonely. We sat with our legs hanging over the wall, watching the sailboats go

out, white people in white pants and white caps. I remember her kissing the ice cream off my nose. She said don't worry. There's a boat for every girl."

Two feet down she yanks out a tire iron. Curtis wonders if they have stumbled on a garbage dump.

He calls a halt. He sits on the cement step of the house, and from her cooler she gives him a bottle of water and an ice pack that he hoops over his neck. His shoulders ache. He's been sitting at home for a long time since he retired, waiting. It's good to get a sweat up.

"And what about you?"

"What about me?" He rolls the water bottle over his eyes. He leans over to breathe, and the bag of his gut pinches against his belt buckle.

"You never said no to me. Not completely. Like you wanted to be convinced. Were you feeling guilty?"

He wishes she would shut up. It ought to be enough that he's here.

"No, I wasn't feeling guilty."

"Then what is it? What happened to you?"

He isn't going to give her the satisfaction. You can't tell cops about PTSD, and you sure as hell can't tell civilians. The only people you can trust are retired police officers because they don't have to depend on you with their lives.

But who wants to have to listen to someone else's problems, to re-live it all again? You learn in your first year, maybe your first day, that shit is part of the job. Carry it or get out.

He tells her anyway.

"I shot someone."

One warm May afternoon, five years before retirement, a domestic dispute call came over Curtis's radio for an address less than a mile down the road. He turned in a lane and saw a man standing in the doorway of his house. A woman lay on the lawn, arms bent under her head, as if she were taking a nap. She wore a plain blue blouse and a black skirt and glossy heels, like someone in an office might wear. Maybe she had been heading to work, or to an appointment, or even a job interview. Her hair was matted with blood but the blood already seemed dry. A rifle dangled from the man's right hand.

Curtis turned off the siren. He drew his sidearm and hunkered behind the door of the cruiser. He shouted. Couldn't remember now what he said. Probably something standard, right out of the manual. The man didn't pay any attention.

A boy stood on the other side of the driveway, next to the garage. His left hand was tucked into a catcher's mitt and a softball white as an egg lay at his feet. He was a good-looking kid.

The man with the rifle raised his hand, waved to the boy, calling him to come closer.

"What are you afraid of?" the man said to the boy. "What's the matter with you?"

Curtis yelled at him to put the gun down, put it down. The sweat streamed into his eyes so that he could barely see. Where was the goddamned backup? He didn't want to do this all by himself.

Curtis squeezed the trigger. Again. Again. Again. His hand was shaking so bad all he could hit was a bit of the guy's clavicle.

The guy turned, mouth open, puzzled. Who the hell are you?

"Just remember," the man said. "Daddy loves you. To the moon and back."

Then he nestled the barrel into his jaw and shot himself.

In Curtis's memory the man is a blur, as if he's been censored to protect his identity, but he can see every detail of the boy, every freckle, every wisp of hair floating in the breeze, the mole at the base of his throat, the sliver of a cut on his lip. He had little, pinprick pupils that jumped around, sky, house,

shoes, ground, never looking Curtis in the face. Curtis knelt, gently grasped the boy's soft, pencil-thin arms, and drew him into a hug. For a couple minutes all the boy did was breathe, and then, with fierce, scrambling hands he clawed into Curtis's vest and wouldn't let go. His heart thumped like a small, wild animal snared in a trap. When the paramedics came, they had to pry the kid away one finger at a time.

Curtis sat on the bumper of his car and answered questions from the detachment chief. He wanted to be sick, should be sick, but nothing happened. He drove back to the station by himself, did some paperwork, and changed into his street clothes in the basement locker room. Someone patted him on the shoulder. After all those years, his first shooting. He drove home, opened the door, and lay his keys on the foyer table. Tess was making supper.

"I'm going to lie down," he said.

"Anything wrong?"

He could smell the kid on his hands. He desperately needed to wash his hands, to rub them clean with soap and water and steel wool and razor blades. He needed to scrape the disease off his skin until it was red and new again. He needed to wipe out everything he had ever seen.

"Curtis?"

"I'm just tired."

"Ok," she said. She would keep his meal warm.

The story has been wadded up in Curtis's throat ever since. He has practiced how he would tell it, whom he would tell it to, how he would stoically accept sympathy. Curtis turns to Amelia without looking at her. Now that he's recited it out loud, the memory has lost its power, washed out in the noon sun. He must look so ancient to her, so helpless.

Amelia doesn't say anything. Doesn't even nod her head. She lays her hand on his, rubs her thumb across his knuckles. Something old and undivided crosses between them.

"You have my mother's eyes," she says. "Like you've been wounded all your life."

They listen to bees humming through clover along the fence. On the horizon, a hawk glides over trees searching for field mice scurrying below.

He gives Amelia the icepack and tosses the water bottle onto their garbage pile. He promised Tess he would be home for dinner, the great milestone of every day.

They work another three hours. There are no bones. He tells Amelia he has done all he can.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But you shouldn't give up. If there's anything else I can do—"

"No. At least now I know."

As he folds the GPR into the trunk of his car he asks, "Do you ever take volunteers at the shelter?"

Amelia eases her face back into a blank.

"We don't allow men in the shelter. Most of the women have been hurt badly. Some of them are terrified and looking for any excuse to leave. And some are lonely. It's better to keep things separate."

"I could be your security guard. I'd never come inside. I know how to negotiate with angry people."

He waits, but she doesn't offer anything. Maybe she has no words for all the things that he doesn't know.

She squeezes his arm. "Fixing other people is addictive. But it doesn't fix you."

She gets into her own car and leaves.

He takes the GPR back to the store and collects his deposit. Then he drives down to the shore road and parks across from the marina.

He isn't going to sleep any better tonight, and as soon as that thought wriggles into him, he knows it's true. He's the one who needs help, and it's cowardly to think that he doesn't. He owes it to Tess. She's been waiting a long time for him to come home, not just the outside shell, but all of him. The alternative is a slippery slide into the dark.

Out in the harbor, the cabin cruisers and weekend yachts are drifting in from their tours of the peninsula. They bear the voices of women on the early evening breeze, their sails snapping brightly, like sheets pegged to a clothesline on a fresh spring day. A child's laughter glitters over the water and lingers innocently in the air. The boats are white and clean, full of the deep, true ache of unrequited promise, returning to their moorings for the night.

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