

TOWER DOGS

Bluetooth speaker, iPad, rubber iPad case, iPhone X-something, Google Home, Dyson vacuum, a memoir by the First Lady of the United States, a 9-in-1 multi-cooker instant pot, AirPods, a smart TV, an Xbox One, a dollhouse, an American Girl doll you could mistake for the real thing. All laying on the carpet, in boxes, next to rolls of gift wrapping.

“You don’t know what it was like this year,” my wife says.

And she’s right.

A month earlier I’m rewiring a cell tower in northern Alberta. Up there with the tower dogs. Guys whose late 20s look like mid-40s. Their hair already half-grey, their bare hands look gloved.

A 55-hour shift in the dead of November. The time of year when it gets dark and stays dark. We’re 275 feet in the sky with only a sea of black underneath. Can’t see shit.

The starlight doesn’t touch the ground. Our headlamps barely reach an arm’s length. The darkness suggests that we’re not so high up after all. This would be soothing on the nerves if there were any left.

My boots are soaked, and my feet are rotting. I can feel the skin move around and slump off chunk by chunk. Gas station energy drinks are all that has entered our stomachs in two whole days.

The ponchos are useless. Our Carhartt overalls are damp the whole way through—not wet enough to threaten hypothermia, but enough to make existence suck. Like being wrapped in a cold, wet blanket through the night.

If we leave the site, that’s a \$50,000 fine from Industry Canada. Or a year in prison. For causing a 911 outage. Who would serve the time is anyone’s guess. At the least, we’d all be fired.

“Who cares if we leave,” I joke. “Who they gonna call?”

But no one laughs. Because it’s raining now. And we haven’t stopped for days. Not to eat, not to change our clothes, not to shit. And suddenly I feel like vomiting again.

What’s decaying under our gear we do not want to think about. Though we do. A staph boil on my calf is ballooning by the hour. Every zit and ingrown hair need a dose of doxycycline, immune to nothing anymore.

The end of the night announces itself by the tree topped hills visible in the east. That’s when we get the call from Rogers. Their network operations center says the GSM is back online. We can leave for a while. Back to the Travelodge. To get some rest. The guys cheer and holler and curse into the twilight.

Back in the van, the heater blows full blast. We’re sitting in the cab, silent now, either nodding off or rocking in place. Dreaming of home. Like wounded animals, in a monsoon, who’ve found a dry cave at last.

With the arrival of dawn it occurs to us just how long we’ve been awake. When does one day become the other? We hear thunder in the distance. We hear things that aren’t there.

The driver, ex-RCAF, Afghanistan vet, stares into his phone screen. It lights up the cab in a see-through, manufactured white. We hear a branch snap somewhere in the woods. Except it's not a branch. The driver chokes back tears, inhaling violently, trembling against the armrest.

It's his wife. She had just gotten home from Wal-Mart. Emptied their savings account. The man, who weighs 240 pounds, is sobbing. She spent \$3,000 on Christmas presents. He won't be able to pay his mortgage, he says.

His fingers are flying across the screen. He is consumed by his reactions.

The crew, in the back, looks at one another through the silence. Better to be cold than freezing.

Now his wife's threatening to take the kids. He must've really pissed her off. He scrolls up to a message earlier in the conversation and recites it aloud.

"You don't understand how hard it is to raise these kids without you."

In the hotel we sprawl on the beds. Some of us on the carpet. Our bodies are unshowered and naked and surrounded by balled-up breakfast sandwich wrappers. A droplet of sausage grease runs down my chin. I wipe it on the bedsheets.

On the bed opposite one of the guys flips through the rear of the phonebook. Laying on his stomach and turning pages like a schoolgirl. Looking for a hooker. When I wake up the guys are gone. There are two credit cards and a rolled-up bill on the bathroom vanity.

In the shower my skin boils, though the water is lukewarm. I dab myself with soap but dare not reach below the waist. On the toilet I wrap my legs in bandages, slip on two pairs of socks.

They aren't in the lobby. And the van's missing. I pour myself a coffee and take the opportunity to call my wife.

"Do me a favour and call the clinic. Book an appointment for the day I'm back."

"What is it this time?"

"Staph. Not responding to doxy."

"Not again."

"Again."

"What now?"

"I finish the project, and then come back for another shift before Christmas. That's my guess."

"Again, before Christmas?"

"Once more, yeah."

"We can't keep doing this."

"What else is there?"

We get off the phone and I realize the sun is setting. In the lounge, little spears of light are breaking through the blinds. Parting them reveals row after row of evergreens poking at the sky. A doe feeds on the grass between the trees. She stares at a truck pulling into the parking lot, then runs off. As if that's going to help.

Upstairs the room's still empty. There's no telling how long the guys have been gone. How long I've slept. The words on my phone screen feel imagined. Their meaning abstract. I'm unconvinced that the truth of any thing is promised by its physicality. I turn the phone off and lay it on my chest, staring at the stucco above. We're going back up in the morning. Or maybe it was the next.

There are creases in my hands, unmistakable now under the ceiling light. The ragged cuticles, knuckles like plaster.

WHAT'S THE FUSS

She whispers in my ear and I taste cherry cola. She don't drink nothing though. But water.

I laugh.

She's good at jokes, she is.

Knock-knocks, one-liners, two-liners. No threes.

Our backs against the church shingles. I dream of looking out on a plain old sky. But there are mountains, rows on rows of them. Sticking in the way. Rivers between them.

She tells me her momma's asleep on the couch. Has been for days.

I laugh.

That ain't how sleep works.

She reaches in her purse and pulls out a half-empty bottle. And what do you know. Cherry cola.

I thought you ain't drink that.

Momma's.

Oh. You sneak.

The cap twists off. Try some.

Tastes good. I wipe my lips. They're still wet.

It's good to have you here. Just to be here. Ain't a thing one boy can do on his own.

Yeah.

There is a dead rabbit on the ground.

Look. Dead rabbit.

Must be the coyotes. Been coming out at night.

You seen them?

Never. But I know they come.

I ain't seen a coyote before. Only dead rabbits.

And dead fish.

Yeah.

Not many salmon these days.

I ain't seen a salmon all year in fact.

The water's too dirty they says.

I ain't think that's true.

Could be.

I can see right through it. And there's nothing in there water but water.

Good point.

You know. I don't mind the rabbits anyway.

I like them myself.

Yeah.

Poppa's always gone trying to shoot them. Get me to shoot too.

They just like to run. And be rabbit.

And there's nothing wrong in that.

Doing what they like.

Why can't there just be rabbits? What's the fuss about.

Yeah. Why.

I look at her. Sipping from the bottle. A smile like a coin in the sun.

Knock knock.

Who's there?

Hatch.

What's hatch?

You're supposed to say hatch who.

Right. Hatch who?

God bless you.

I don't. Wait. That's funny.

Thanks.

Smart too.

Wind blows. The weeds nod their heads.

She takes a sip. Dries her wet wet lips.

The tide is way in.

Rivers ain't have a tide.

The water's high no different.

That's because it flood.

Maybe that's why there ain't fish. Went out with the flood.

That ain't how flood works.

What's that?

You hear that.

I hear nothing.

That ain't

There is a bear.

There is a bear.

Church door. Locked shut.

Road. Mountain. River.

There is a bear.

There is a bear.

Fields. Fields.

Oh why.

There is a bear.

Blue blue sky.

There is a bear.

There is a bear

There is a bear