

from RUPERT'S LAND

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Cora doesn't want to go to Judge Rupert's house. Doesn't want hot feet in hot oxfords on hot sidewalk in hot dust out to the edge of town. C'mon all a ya, Hodge Wagoner calls from the hall, let's get a move on, give yr mother some rest. On the other side of the wall, Gus and Dougie bang shoes and argue. Hands off my sling-shot. Shut-up or I'll tell. Tell what, baby. That cat.

Cora takes her time unbuttoning her Sunday-best dress, sliding its sleeves off her arms, looking over her shoulder into the propped-up hand-mirror to see a brown island floating on her shoulder-blade. Once you had angel wings and that's where they were attached, Mom said when Cora was little. Did you have angel wings on your arm? No, darling—mine's just a birthmark. A mark of birth. Someone wrote on you when you were born. Maybe it was the hospital. Or maybe it was an angel. Or maybe it was just being born. You were damaged. You were marked. You were chosen.

Once I was Indian, Cora thinks, all that's left is my brown island.

C'mon girls, yr not going to Buckingh'm Palace.

Elaine sits cross-legged on their bed, carving an end of lumber into a bird.

You're getting wood chips all over the bed.  
So! I'll brush them up.  
Well don't let them end up on my side.  
Don't worry, Miss Moods.  
I got a sliver in my arm last night.  
Must've been the kindling.  
No. It wasn't.

Hot bloomers cling to Cora's legs under her school skirt. She holds her wavy hair away from her neck, and twists from side to side, then, squeezing between apple-crate shelves and the bed, lies down on the floor in her camisole and skirt. If only they could go to Buffalo Lake. She props her feet on the wall, making the skirt and bloomers puff out and slide up her legs. She would dive under water away from the upside down trees. She would swim far out from shore till the others became pebbles on the beach.

What are you two doing in there? I'm coming in.

We're changing.

Well hurry up.

Lying on the floor, Cora buttons up her clean-for-the-week blouse. Pearl buttons, picked out in Edmonton, made out of glass, not real pearl like the seed pearls on Mom's wedding dress. Even those not real pearls—just something that might grow into pearls if you planted them and watered them and weeded them.

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How come we're going to Judge Rupert's again; we went last Sunday.

Elaine put that knife away when we're walking along.

Elaine folds the pen-knife and buttons it with her bird into a pocket. Then runs up the street and turns a cartwheel in front of the Bond's house. I'm doing one too. Dougie charges after her, holding chubby arms over his head. No Douglas. Hodge grabs. Dougie bounces past, dives down onto his hands, pushes his short legs up in the air, and flops onto the ground. Ow. Ow.

I told ya not to do that. Elaine, young ladies do not show their bloomers to the whole street.

Dougie lies on his back, scrunching his eyes shut and loudly saying Ow.

C'mon get up. Next time remember how much it hurts.

Dougie rolls over—his pants and shirt covered with dust.

Look at ya. Know how much time yr mother spends washing and ironing your clothes? Hodge sweeps his hand over his son's clothes slapping off clouds of dust.

Aw dad. Gus bumps a stick along the top of the Bond's wire fence. Let's go out to the coal mine and shoot gophers.

Judge Rupert's a smart man. He's from England, he's traveled all over the world, and he's read whole libraries of encyclopedias and books. Yr darn lucky he shows his collections

to ordinary folks like us.

Cora drags behind her father, placing her feet exactly where he puts his, on a tuft of weed or a crack in the sidewalk. Step on a crack, break your mother's back. She makes herself step on the cracks, keeping exact pace with his flapping pant leg. Step on a crack, break your father's back. Hopscotching along, she steps only on cracks, breaking vertebrae in her father's spine from his neck to his tailbone. Humans have tails like cats and dinosaurs, but nobody sees them.

His suit's the same kind as Judge Rupert's—a wool tweed, his shoes the same kind of brogues, polished every day except Sunday. No work on Sunday. Except cooking. Last time, Judge Rupert showed them his raccoon cage. Bandit masks crouching on a shelf against the wall, staring wide-eyed at the humans on the other side of the chicken-wire. Cora put her fingers through the mesh and pulled—stretching its holes.

Tooth marks gouged the wood struts of the porcupine cage, one of them almost chewed through. That fella was the first in Alberta to be born in captivity, the Judge told them. The animal was chewing its way along the bottom rail holding the wire. The judge went into another part of the shed and returned holding a rope. Let's see if the young lady would like to walk with Lady Mountbatten. He handed the rope to Cora. On the other end was a little leather harness holding a skunk. No one moved. Dad, is he going to spray, Dougie whispered. Don't worry, I took the scent sacks out, the Judge laughed.

Lady Mountbatten skittered out of the shed waving her black tail. Cora let her go where she wanted. Past the shed toward a bed of orange and purple dahlias. The rope pulled tight. She opened her hand. The end of the rope disappeared into the leafy shade under the flowers.

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Claiming her father's footprints, Cora's toe catches the back of his heel. He tells her to quit walking right behind him, what does she think she's doing, walk properly, and get your sister and brothers back here. Half a block ahead, Elaine, the show-off, walks nimbly along the top rail of a fence; Gus and Dougie pelt each other with spruce cones. Hey, wait up, she calls to them. Her voice disappears into the front porches and windows of clapboard bungalows with pyramid roofs poking up chimneys from their squared-off peaks. Hodge's strides get longer, faster. Focused on the grain elevator at the end of the street.

Her father and the Judge both wear banded hats. But Judge Rupert has a natty straw panama, whereas Dad's is a light gray fedora with valleys in its crown. She thinks of grasping the brim, holding the crown by the band and clapping it on her head, the way he does.

He's on a trajectory—she learned this in Physics. An object moving through space like a bullet from a rifle. His path toward the elevator has velocity and acceleration, such that his hat, if it met with an inert object, such as her hand, would stop, while he continued, hurtling along his vector. Energy transferred from one body, a hand, to another body, a hat.

Force times displacement of hat from its line of action equals work.

Is cooking the roast work, she asks him.

He doesn't answer.

Why don't we eat just raw things on Sunday.

Yr mother mostly gets it done Saturday.

What about doing dishes, what about eating – is that work?

Hodge looks at his watch.

Or walking—why don't we just stay in bed and sleep on Sundays?

He keeps his eyes fixed ahead. Giving her the silent treatment. His jaw juts forward above his pulled-up chest, his neck, tightly enclosed in shirt-collar and tie, is anchored to his back as though to a fence-post.

They turn onto Alberta Avenue near the Telephone Exchange and the Church of the Nazarene.

When're we getting a telephone? Gus asks.

We're not.

The Wellmans have one.

They can afford it.

Why do they have to exchange telephones?

Hodge tells him not to ask silly questions. It's to do with switching between wires, Cora answers. Someone calls on one wire but they want to talk to someone with a telephone on another wire, so they have to get the exchange to connect the wires.

Why isn't everyone on the same wire?

Dougie sounds out Naz Naza—church of the nazzarena. Do they have flesh in their church—like Reverend Crawford talks about in ours? Dad, what is flesh?

Flesh is meat, silly. Gus stuffs a cone down Dougie's shirt.

Flesh of the Lord, Elaine says, you eat that at communion, and you drink his blood.

It's just bread and grape juice.

God's flesh is sky.

Yr are all talkin nonsense. Don't talk about what ya don't know.

So what is it?

Pay attention in Sunday School and you'll learn.

They walk along Alberta Avenue past the hospital—a white two-storey clapboard building with green shutters that reminds Cora of Anne of Green Gables. When Cora was in grade one, Mom went here and came home with Dougie. Mom had to have a room all to herself. She stayed in bed in her room for three months. Dad slept in Gus's room. Mrs. McKickly cooked their meals. Mom couldn't sit up. Mrs. McKickly propped her head on a pillow and fed her soup. She couldn't walk. She had to go to the bathroom in bed. Cora had to carry chamber pots out to the backhouse and dump them and rinse them with the outside tap.

One night something fell over. A door slammed. Mom saying, Don't you dare. Little Dougie wailing, in his kind of hickuppy way. Will you shut up, Dad yelled. After that Mrs.

McKickly took Dougie home at night.

They walk along Original Road toward the railway tracks and the edge of town. Graded gravel merges with dust-coated weeds and dried earth, then the edges of stubble fields. Their feet raise small clouds of dust. The air tastes dusty and the tracks smell of creosote. Cora brushes off her white blouse, lifts her hair off her neck. The road stretches far far away, dipping and rising, cutting through field after field of tawny prairie dotted with clumps of trees, until it hits the sky. Like a bullet that will never meet an obstacle.

They arrive at Judge Rupert's gate, and stop to look at the bear he has tethered in his front yard. A stout leather collar runs around its neck with a heavy chain linking it to a post. The bear has worn a circular path into the ground at the limits of its chain, and torn up all the grass within reach. Near a chipped basin of dusty water, it sits on its haunches working one front paw at the tether, snapping its jaws hopelessly toward the collar. Flies land on its nose. It shakes its heavy head, and claws the links, pulling the collar out from its neck with its toe-pads.

In the public library, a brown book with gold letters on the cover had a story about a princess who dressed in a bearskin to escape her father the king. She drove into the forest in a magic wheelbarrow. A prince out on a hunt chased her with his dogs. Stop, please stop, she called. The prince was so surprised at the talking bear, he took her home, where she did all the housework and very much surprised the prince's mother. The prince went off to a ball, but when the bear wanted to come too, he kicked her back. She snuck into the ball anyway. First she dressed in moonbeams, then in sunbeams. The prince tried to follow her home. Each time, she slipped away. The third time, he placed a ring on her finger. When the prince told his mother about the lovely princess at the ball, the bear muttered and laughed. The prince sent her to the kitchen. Keep that bear away but bring me some soup, he told his mother. The bear dropped the ring into the soup.

Yr lucky to git this close to a bear. Hodge wipes a handkerchief across his forehead. He slides his tie knot away from his neck and tries to undo the top button of his shirt.

Is it a boy bear or a girl bear? Dougie squints at the animal.

I don't know, Hodge says.

How do you tell?

I couldn't tell ya that either.

Bear bear over there, Elaine chants, would you like a pear.

Gus throws a spruce cone at it. The bear holds the chain down with one paw and yanks its head back. The cone slides off its oily thick fur onto the ground. Gus runs up to the animal and pokes it with his stick. This time it growls and lurches up. What'rya doing! Hodge yanks Gus away from it. He snatches the stick and whacks his son's legs and backside. Gus walks out the gate back toward town. You get back here. Hodge grabs his ear and pushes him up the driveway. The Judge is expecting us. Gus stomps ahead, kicking along a pebble. Cora drifts behind her father again. She thrusts her legs out straight and clumps her heel down with each step the way he does, squaring shoulders, pressing her chest forward and scowling at the double front door and bow windows at the far end of the

drive. Of course Elaine has to be a pest and copy her, kicking her legs up like batons and swinging her arms straight out like a toy soldier. Accidentally on purpose she bumps Elaine off the drive.

There's bears in the bible, Dougie says, falling in beside his father.

Hodge slides his tie knot back into place and does up his jacket.

They ate 42 children.

Do ya know why they did that?

Why?

Because the children were making fun of the Lord.

Oh.

Dad?

Dad, was Elisha the Lord?

No he was a man of the Lord. Ya don't make fun of a man of the Lord.

What if the bear didn't drop the ring in the soup. What if the bear made the prince follow her into the forest.