

FRANCES
GREENSLADE

SHELTER
A NOVEL



virago

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For David, who told me stories.

F O O D

I ONE I

JENNY WAS THE ONE WHO asked me to write all this down. She wanted me to sort it for her, string it out, bead by bead, an official story, like a rosary she could repeat and count on. But I started writing it for her, too. For Mom, or Irene as other people would call her, since she abandoned a long time ago whatever “Mom” once meant to her. Even now there was no stopping the guilt that rose up when we thought of her. We did not try to look for our mother. She was gone, like a cat who goes out the back door one night and doesn’t return, and you don’t know if a coyote got her or a hawk or if she sickened somewhere and couldn’t make it home. We let time pass, we waited, trusting her, because she had always been the best of mothers. She’s the mother, that’s what we said to each other, or we did in the beginning. I don’t know who started it.

That’s not true. It was me. Jenny said, “We should look for her.” I said, “She’s the mother.” When I said it, I didn’t

know the power those few words would take on in our lives. They had the sound of truth, loaded and untouchable. But they became an anchor that dragged us back from our most honest impulses.

We waited for her to come to get us and she never did.

There was no sign that this would happen. I know people always look for signs. That way they can say, *we're not the type of people things like that happen to*, as if we were, as if we should have seen it coming. But there were no signs. Nothing except my worry, which I think I was born with, if you can be born a worrier—Jenny thinks you can.

Worry was stuffed into the spaces around my heart, like newspaper stuffed in the cracks of a cabin wall, and it choked out the ease that should have been there. I'm old enough now to know that there are people who don't feel dogged by the shadow of disaster, people who think their lives will always be a clean, wide-open plain, the sky blue, the way clearly marked. My anxiety curled me into myself. I couldn't be like Jenny, who was opened up like a sunny day with nothing to do but lie in the grass, feel the warm earth against her back, a breeze, the click of insects in the air. *Soon, later, never*—words not invented. Jenny was *always* and *yes*.

As I say, there was no sign of anything that might go wrong in the small, familiar places that made up our world. The bedroom Jenny and I shared was painted robin's egg blue and the early morning sunlight fell across the wall, turning it luminous,

like an eggshell held to the light. I watched how it fell, and after a while tiny shadowed hills rose up and valleys dipped in the textured lines of the wallboard. Morning in that land came slow and slanted with misty light, waking into the glare of day.

Our house in Duchess Creek had a distinctive smell that met me at the front door: boiled turnip, fried bologna, tomato soup, held in the curtains or in the flimsy walls and ceiling or the shreds of newspaper that insulated them. It was a warm house, Mom said, but not built by people who intended to stay. The kitchen cupboards had no doors and the bathroom was separated from the main room by a heavy flowered curtain. Electricity had come to Duchess Creek in 1967, the year I turned seven and Jenny eight. A saggy wire was strung through the trees to our house a few months later. But we had power only occasionally, and only for the lights.

The small electric stove had been dropped off by one of Dad's friends who found it at the dump in Williams Lake. It was never hooked up and Mom never made a fuss about it, though her friend Glenna asked her about twice a week when she was going to get the stove working. Glenna said, "Hey, aren't you happy we've finally joined the twentieth century?" Mom said that if she wanted to join the twentieth century, she'd move to Vancouver. Glenna laughed and shook her head and said, "Well, I guess you're not the only one who thinks that way. There's people who like it that Williams Lake is the biggest town for miles and miles in any direction."

In the Chilcotin, where we lived, there were the Indians, the Chilcotins and the Carriers, who had been here long before the whites came. Their trails and trade routes still crisscrossed the land. And there were the white settlers whose histories were full of stories about pioneering and ranching and road-building. Then there were the late-comers, like our family, the Dillons.

Dad had left Ireland in 1949 for America and ended up in Oregon, then had come north. Others came to avoid marching into wars they didn't believe in, or ways of life they didn't believe in. Some came from cities, with everything they owned packed into their vehicles, looking for a wild place to escape to. They were new pioneers, reinventing themselves following their own designs. Dad had a friend named Teepee Fred and another named Panbread. When I asked Dad what their last names were, he said he'd never bothered to ask.

Mom didn't care much about the electric stove because she had learned to cook on the woodstove. She cooked out of necessity, not pleasure, and stuck mainly to one-pot stews that she could manage without an oven. We didn't have an electric fridge, either. We had a scratched old icebox where a lonely bottle of milk and a pound of butter resided.

There was a pump in the backyard where we got our water. Someone before us had made plans for indoor plumbing. There was a shower and sink in the bathroom, and a hole in the floor, stuffed with rags, where a pipe came in for a

toilet, but none of these worked. We pumped our water and carried it in a five-gallon bucket that sat on the kitchen counter. We had an outhouse, but at night we set a toilet seat over a tin pot and Dad emptied it each morning.

Just at the edge of the bush behind the house, Dad had rigged up a heavy, old claw foot bathtub especially for Mom. Underneath he had dug a hole and in that he'd make a small fire. He ran a hose from the pump to fill the tub. The water heated nicely and Mom sat in there on a cedar rack he'd made so she wouldn't burn herself. Some evenings we'd hear her out there, singing to herself, her voice lifting out of the dark on the steam that rose from behind the screen of fir boughs he'd wound through a piece of fence. Sometimes I sat on a stump beside her, trailing my arm in the hot water. Bats wheeled and dipped above us, just shadows, a movement in the corner of the eye. Stars grew brighter and as thick as clouds of insects while the water cooled. I thought that if she needed any proof that Dad loved her, that bathtub was it.

There must have been a time when I sang myself awake, trilling up and down a range of happy notes as a beetle tracked across the window screen and cast a tiny shadow on the wall. But I don't remember it. I can't remember a time when I didn't look at the world and feel apprehension chewing at the edges. It wasn't our mother I worried about, though. I felt lucky to have a mom who took us camping,

wasn't afraid of bears, loved to drive the logging roads and what she called the "wagon trails" that wandered off Highway 20 and into the bush. We found lakes and rotting log cabins and secret little valleys; it felt like we were the first people to find them. Our measure of a good camp was how far from other people it was. "No one around for miles," Mom would say, satisfied, when the fire was built. She was the constant in our lives, the certainty and the comfort. It was Dad I worried about.

He had to be approached like an injured bird, tentatively. Too much attention and he would fly off. If he was in the house, he was restless. He would stretch, look around as if he was an outsider, and then I'd feel the sting of disappointment as he went for his jacket by the door.

Sometimes he whistled, made it seem casual, putting his arms into the flannel sleeves. Then he'd go outside, chop wood for a few minutes, like a penance, then disappear into the bush. He'd be gone for hours. Worse days, he'd go to his bedroom and close the door.

I listened with my ear against the wall of my room. If I stood there long enough, I'd hear the squeak of bedsprings as he turned over. I don't know what he did in there. He had no books or radio. I don't think he did anything at all.

When he came back from his working day in the bush, he liked to sleep in the reclining chair by the oil drum that was our woodstove. I wanted him to stay asleep there. If he was asleep, he was with us.

But sometimes he pulled the chair too close to the woodstove. One afternoon, I tried to get him to move it back. "Don't worry, Maggie," he said. "I'm not close enough to melt." And he fell asleep with his mouth open, occasionally drawing a deep breath that turned to a cough and woke him briefly.

I wasn't afraid that he would melt. I was afraid that the chair would burst suddenly into flames, as the Lutzes' shed roof once did when Helmer got the fire in the garbage bin burning too high.

At the counter, my mother stood slicing deer meat for stew. I watched, waiting for his eyelids to sag, flicker, and drop closed again. Mom peeled an onion, then began to chop. Jenny and I had our Barbies spread on the sunny yellow linoleum. Jenny's Barbie wanted to get married and since we didn't have a Ken, my Barbie had to be the husband. I tucked her blonde hair up under a pair of bikini bottoms. Mom turned to us. Her eyes streamed with tears. For some reason, we found her routine with the onions and the tears very funny. We put our hands over our mouths so we wouldn't wake Dad. Mom never cried. Maybe that's why we found it so improbable that something as ordinary as an onion could have this power over her.

She moved to the woodstove. The sweet smell of onions frying in oil rose up and then Mom dropped the cubes of deer meat into the pot. A pungent, wild blood smell that I didn't like filled the house. But it only lasted a minute, then the meat and onions blended to a rich, sweet fragrance and Mom sprinkled in pepper and reached for a jar of tomatoes.

She struggled with the lid and turned to look at Dad to see if he was awake. She wouldn't wake him. She wouldn't break the spell of all of us being there together by asking him to open a jar. Instead she got out a paring knife, wedged the blade under the rim and gave it a twist.

Smoky fall air spiced the room, drifting in through the kitchen window that was kept open an inch whenever the woodstove was going. The warm yellow linoleum heated my belly as I stretched out on the floor and Mom stood solidly at the counter, her auburn hair curled in a shiny question mark down the back of her favourite navy sweater. She wore her gingham pedal pushers, though it was too cold for them, and well-worn moccasins on her bare feet. Her calves were strong and shapely. Something about the knife and the jar made the easiness radiating through me begin to crumble. Mom had tacked up cloth decorated with brown Betty teapots under the sink to hide the drainpipe and garbage. This became part of my worry, the flimsiness of it. Maybe it meant that we didn't intend to stay, either.

Near the woodstove, black charred spots marred the washed yellow of the floor. Jenny teased me whenever I rushed over to stomp out the embers that popped from the stove when the door was open. Dad would tell her not to bother me about it. "Mag's like me," he'd say. "Safety first."

Dad worked with Roddy Schwartz on a Mighty Mite sawmill near Roddy's cabin. Roddy had brought the mill in from Prince George on a trailer. It had a Volkswagen engine

that ran two saw blades along the logs and could cut almost any tree they hauled out. They usually spent a few days felling and limbing trees, then skidded them out to where the mill was assembled. Dad didn't like the skidding, because they couldn't afford a proper skidder. Instead they had an old farm tractor with a chain that they wrapped around the logs to pull them out of the bush. Dad worried about the logs snagging on something and the tractor doing a wheelie.

I had listened to him talking to Mom about the work one evening when they were sitting out on the porch.

"I don't trust Roddy when he's hungover," he'd said. "He gets sloppy like. Says I'm bitching at him. Like an old woman, he says. Claims he knows the mill inside out, could do it with his eyes closed. I keep telling him, it doesn't matter how many times you've done it. You let your guard down, one of those boards'll take your fingers off so fast you won't know what hit you."

"Oh, Patrick," Mom shuddered. "Don't even say that."

"I know, but he's a law unto himself. Cocky bastard, that's what gets me. These are thirty foot trees we're fooling with."

"Don't remind me."

"You don't need to worry about me." Dad raised his voice a little when he saw me standing at the screen door. "Mr. Safety," he said, and winked at me.

It was Dad's nickname. It wasn't just our family who called him that. His friends did too, irritated by his careful checking

and rechecking of his guns, his gear, his methodical testing of brakes before descending the Hill to Bella Coola. The Hill had an 18 percent grade and a reputation for turning drivers' legs to rubber. The local habit was to fuel up with liquor before making the attempt. But Dad was disgusted by that.

"You can't rush Mr. Safety," his friends teased, lighting another cigarette to wait while he put an air gauge to each tire in turn.

Now as he slept in his reclining chair by the stove, I went over to hold my hand flat against the green vinyl. It was almost too hot to touch. I didn't know which I wanted more: to have him stay asleep and with us or to have him wake up and get out of harm's way. I stood behind his chair watching the whorl of his red hair quiver as he breathed. At the crown where the hair parted, a little patch of ruddy scalp showed.

I pulled a kitchen chair over to the counter and got down the biggest glass I could find. Then I scooped water into it from the bucket and, as Mom watched me, took a little sip. I carried the tall glass of water over to the chair where Dad slept and I stood on guard.

A few minutes passed calmly as I pretended to be interested in the top of Dad's head. Suddenly he drew one of his deep ragged breaths and his whole body went stiff, then jerky, with his hands pawing the air and choking sounds rising from his throat.

"Mom!" I called as she dropped her knife and whirled.

“Patrick, wake up,” she said. She knelt by his knees and took hold of his hands. He cried out then, making the most un-Dad-like sound I’d ever heard. Like a baby. Like a cornered animal.

“Patrick!” Mom said again, then, “Give me your water, Maggie.”

I handed her the glass and she brought it to Dad’s lips. “Take a sip, Patrick. Have a drink. It’s nice and cold. There you go, there you go.”

He opened his eyes and coughed as he swallowed.

Mom said, “It’s okay now, girls, he just had a terror.”

“I had a terror,” Dad said. That’s what they called them, these fits of Dad’s. Apparently, his father had had them too—seizures of fear that took possession of his whole body when he was on the edge of sleep. He drank down the water and shook himself awake. His messy red curls were damp with sweat.

“Don’t look so worried, Mag,” he said and pulled me onto his lap. “Nothing’s going to happen to me. I’m Mr. Safety, remember?”

Dad smelled of tobacco and woodsmoke and the outdoor tang of fall leaves. I began counting the freckles on his arms.

“Do you think I have as many freckles on my arms as there are stars in the sky?” he asked.

“Maybe more,” I said. It was what I always said and it was what he always asked. As long as I was counting his freckles, he was my captive.

Nothing bad had happened. It was only a terror. Still I worried.

As I walked to the school bus each morning, shuffling my boots along in the fresh snow to make my own trail, Jenny already a powder blue beacon by the power pole at the highway, I worried about leaving Mom at home alone, about the wild way she swung the axe when she was splitting kindling and the way Dad nagged her to be careful. One of these days she was going to chop off her own foot, he said. And when we got off the bus at the end of the day, just before we rounded the final bend by the bent pine tree and our little house came into view, I worried that I'd see it engulfed in flames, or already a smoking heap. And each time it stood blandly, paint peeling to grey, smoke rising from the chimney pipe, I felt my tight muscles loosen and I broke into a run.

We were a normal family; that's our story. Our days were full of riverbanks and gravel roads, bicycles and grasshoppers. But you think a thing, you open a door. You invite tragedy in. That's what my worry taught me.