Men o f Stone

by Gayle Friesen

Kids Can Press

For my parents, Peter and

Martha Neumann, with love

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, Alison and Christy, for the many, many

readings. Thank you, Charis, particularly

for clarity this time. I'd also like to thank David

Giesbrecht at CBC for giving me the

Mennonite "thumbs up."

Many people served as inspirations for this book.

My aunts and uncles — especially David Neumann

and Margarete Huebert — who carry the stories

of Russia with them, and the Mennonite traditions

deeper still.

And also Nick — for dancing.

**1**

The lines on her face were like earth that had gone

too long without rain. It was a face that told a

story, but not one I wanted to hear. She was a hundred

years old if she was a day.

"Aunt Frieda would like to come for a visit" was

the way Mom had opened the family conference a

week ago.

"Aunt who?" my sisters and I asked simultaneously

"You know," Mom insisted.

No we didn't.

"Your father's aunt ... your great-aunt," Mom

prodded. "She's asked if she could come and spend

some time with us."

"Why?" Again, the question was more or less unanimous.

Unusual too, since we hardly ever agreed

on anything.

Mom shrugged and poured another cup of coffee.

Her chin had twitched the way it did when

something was bugging her. "She said she was old."

"That's her reason?" I asked.

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"I guess so, I really don't know her that well. I

haven't even seen her since the um, funeral."

The um-funeral. My dad. He died ten years ago.

I was five.

"It's not the best time for me, between marking

papers and working on my thesis, but I didn't know

how to say no. It will only be for a few weeks."

"A few weeks?" Joni said it, but we were all

thinking it. "It's hard enough to get anything

done around here as it is. Where'11 she stay in this

matchbox?"

"I thought the den," Mom answered almost

timidly. Joni scared her, I think. Hell, she scared all

of us.

"The den?" Joni shrieked. If there had been birds

in the trees, they were flying south after that.

"That's where I paint."

"It's where I rehearse," Mad, the aspiring

actress added.

Beth was calmer, but determined. "Mom, I have

exams coming up too — pastries and dainties in

less than a week! Dad had a ton of relatives. Can't

she visit them?"

"Apparently she wants to visit us. You girls are not

making this easy. I'm sorry if you're not happy with

it, but I've told her she's welcome.Your father would

have wanted me to do diis." Mom drained her coffee

like it was a shot of whiskey and left die room.

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The girls kept on grumbling, but no one asked

my opinion. It was accepted that I had no opinions.

This was okay because, after fifteen years, I'd

figured a few things out. For most of my life I'd

known I didn't quite fit. But one day on the

Discovery Channel there was a show about a tribe

of Amazons. This mythical tribe was completely

female — no guys allowed. All male children were

either exiled to live with their fathers or killed. It

made sense to me, considering my household.

Anyway, now Mom and this Aunt Frieda person

were standing in our kitchen.

She was about five foot nothing with snowy

white hair under a plastic rain kerchief, which she

untied and tucked away in neat folds inside her

purse. She shook each girl's hand formally and

repeated each of their names. She stood straight,

looked right into their eyes.

"And you're Ben! Of course you are."

She gave me a big hug. I looked over her

head — she only came up to my chest. My

sisters' mouths were hanging open, and they

were speechless. I was thinking that anything

that made my sisters speechless couldn't be a

bad thing, when she let go as suddenly as she'd

taken hold.

I laughed nervously. "Hi, er, Aunt ... uh," I said

finally.

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She took one of my hands and covered it with

hers. I was trapped.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you for a

very long time."

"I, uh, thanks," I said, feeling my ears go red.

*"Nah yo"* she said, looking around the kitchen,

taking us all in with her keen brown eyes. "Thank

you for letting me come. I promise not to get in

the way."

"Not at all, Frieda. It's nice to have you," Mom

offered, a polite lie.

"Well, now, I know it's a little odd ... my coming

here and all, but one day I woke up and thought to

myself, Frieda, you're not getting any younger. It's

time to stretch these old legs while they still work!"

Mom smiled an uneasy smile. "Of course."

"And I wanted to get to know Neil's family. He

was my favorite nephew ... Maybe I shouldn't say

that, but he was such a wonderful man. I still have

the postcards he used to send me — painted those

pretty pictures himself!" She smiled around the

room. If she'd been a comedian, she'd have tapped

the microphone and said, Is this thing on?

We hardly ever talked about our dad. Only Joni

would occasionally refer to him as "our father who

art in heaven." And here was this old lady throwing

his name around like loose change.

"Why don't I show you where you'll be staying,"

Mom finally said. She picked up the luggage and

they left.

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"Well," said Beth.

"Huh," said Mad.

"Lucky us. We have ourselves our own personal

Mary Poppins," Joni said, and clomped up the stairs

to her room. My sister wears army boots.

Beth elbowed me in the stomach. "You should

have seen your face when she hugged you, Benny."

"I thought you were going to pass out," said Mad.

"Poor Benny," they chimed together, like the

identical twins they are.

I went to my room, closing the door behind me.

Nobody would barge in. It was an unspoken rule.

I sat down on my bed and wondered what I'd

done to deserve one more female relative. It already

felt like a boarding school for girls around here.

When I was little I'd wanted to go to that

school. Dress me up? Sure. Put me in one of Mad's

backyard plays? Why not? My last official performance

was in Mad's production of *Peter Pan.* You'd

think my being a boy might have given me a shot at

Peter Pan, but that role went to Mad. Beth was

Wendy, of course. How about Michael? John?

Nope, both parts went to Joni. And me? I was

Tinkerbell! Enough to seriously screw with my

precarious male psyche.

Eventually I figured out that I was different — I

think around the time Mad chased me through the

house trying to get me to wear a dress because,

"How else can we play *Little Women* if you're not

Amy?" Then I knew it was a question of survival. If

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I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in a dress,

I had to run for it.

It became really obvious around puberty —

mine, not theirs. Theirs was cause for celebration

throughout the land, with Mom congratulating

them on "becoming women." But when my voice

started to crack and my hormones showed up,

you'd have thought it just occurred to them that I

wasn't a girl. What I remember about the one

talk Mom tried to have with me wasn't the

words, just the different shades of color that traveled

over her face. When she got to "nocturnal

emissions," it was like watching a sunset. By the

time she broke out in a sweat, handed me a book

and left the room, I figured I had a couple of

months, tops, to live. Thank goodness for books

is all I can say.

Mom took me fishing once. Just the two of us.

We rented a rowboat and all the equipment up at

Salmon Lake. We spent most of the morning

untangling line and trying to put poles and reels

together. I was eight — what did I know? By the

time we got everything out on the water and

managed to get the motor running — someone

from the bait shop had to help us — the fish were

down at the bottom of the lake to avoid the midday

heat. I don't think I even got a nibble, but the

thing is, I had a great day, a really great day. We

ate our sandwiches and drank iced tea straight

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from the thermos. We didn't have to talk or anything

... just sat there. I dove into the water when

it got too hot and said maybe this was something

we could do every weekend. She nodded, but she

didn't say yes and her eyes were sad.

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"Hey, Ugly, wait up," Fish called as I was about to

cross the street to school. I had left home early for

volleyball tryouts.

"Hey, Fish ... whew, what's that smell?You still

sleeping with your hamster?"

"Dad's after-shave," he said, rubbing his broad

chin, underlining the fact that he shaved regularly

while I had as much need to shave as an orange.

"And we all know how important personal

hygiene is to you, you big macho stud."

He grinned. "As much as this mixed volleyball

thing sucks, you have to look for the opportunities."

"Yeah, I know. Melody Schneider." I checked my

watch. "Two point two seconds into a conversation

and you haven't even said her name yet. True love

fading?"

"Shut up." He grinned again, showing off even

white teeth, die smile known to attract any girl within

eyeshot. The smile that had set his parents back at

least three thousand bucks. "I saw Kat checking you

out at volleyball die other day, so don't go all monk

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on me." He grabbed me in a halfhearted headlock. If

it had been wholehearted, I'd be dead.

I shook him off. "The only thing she's ever said

to me was that I was out of position. She doesn't

even know my name."

"Small detail." He shrugged.

"Right." I opened the heavy door to the gym.

Fish bulldozed ahead of me. I followed him to the

locker room where we stowed our stuff. Stan was

already there, doing the laces up on his Queen

Mary sneakers.

"What's that smell?" he asked, sniffing as Fish

opened the locker beside him.

"Success," Fish answered.

Stan nodded. "I heard Melody's sick today," he

said, with no trace of emotion, but I knew he was

lying even without the wink he gave me.

Fish sent up a howl before charging into the gym

to see for himself.

Stan watched him go, shaking his head. "He's

such a putz."

I laughed, but more at Stan than Fish. His last

recorded smile was in Grade 5, and his deadpan

face always made me laugh.

"How's Great-Auntie? She came yesterday, right?"

I crammed my bag into a locker. "Late."

"So you haven't been through the cheek-pinching,

my-how-you've-grown, come-here-and-give-me-ahug

routine yet?" He was still tying his laces

methodically.

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"I don't think she's the cheek-pinching type," I

said, brushing over the fact that everything else

he'd said was dead on.

Stan finally finished tying his shoes and stood,

towering above me like a giraffe on steroids.

"Coming?" He half turned. "Your lady awaits."

Stan always talked like that, like dialogue out of

those dusty old books he was always reading.

I kept my face toward the locker so he couldn't

see it turn red. "In a sec," I answered, and he left.

I'd been so careful not to tell those jerks how I

really felt about Kat. I had the worst luck with

girls, which was like this huge irony considering I

was surrounded by them at home. All those years

of being used for kissing practice, and I knew more

about makeup and feminine hygiene products than

any male on the planet — none of it counted for

anything.

The first girl I liked was Janice Helger — Grade

7. All year I just stared, working up the courage to

talk to her. She had this nose that flipped up at the

end, and it totally bowled me over. I actually had

dreams about it. In art, all the girls I drew had the

same nose. I was obsessed. Finally one day I walked

up to her at recess and said, "I like your nose," and

I made this little gesture with my finger, this little

flipping gesture on my own nose.

Later that day I got hauled into the principal's

office for a big lecture on ... I don't know, respect

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or something. Mr. Jefferson gave me a detention,

and for the rest of the year the girls treated me like

gum under a desk.

In Grade 8,1 went to a new school and I figured,

like an idiot, I'd try again. But not with Janice

Helger, who hates me to this day.

Alicia Nadeau. She had long black hair and skin

the color of caramel. But I didn't say a thing about

any of that because I'd learned my lesson. I was

wise now. Instead, I used all the listening skills I'd

picked up at home, and Alicia and I actually had a

few conversations after math class. One day she

asked me to have lunch with her. It was a nice

spring day and I was pretty happy, thinking I was

making great progress. We were sitting there

outside — me chewing my burger — when she

started to talk about her hips, and the warning bells

went off.

"I hate my hips," she said. "All the women in our

family have them ... they're so wide and gross. I

hate them."

Then she looked at me, and I knew this was my

cue. I took my time, I swallowed my burger and tried

to recall everything I'd learned. Finally, I was sure.

"But hips are like, natural, right?"

I swear this was ALL I said. End of picnic.

*That's* when I gave up on women. It was as if they

spoke another language. I might be able to speak

"sister," but "girl" was another thing entirely.

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Fish stuck his head through the open doorway.

"Ben, you coming?"

I slammed my locker door and followed him

into the gym.

"Hey, hey — it's Ballerina Boy!" Claude shouted

from across the cavernous room.

I ignored him and crossed over to Stan and Fish.

But the clod didn't stop.

"How about a nice pirouette or a *pas de deux?"*

Claude yelled.

I figured it wouldn't help my case much to shout

back that a *pas de deux* was actually a dance involving

two people.

"Want me to, um, talk to him?" asked Fish, his

meaty fists clenched by his side.

"Leave it," I said, volleying a ball over to Stan.

"It's not like you still do that stuff," he said in a

low voice, as if the stuff I used to do was run drugs

for the Mafia.

I quit dance just after I came to this school, but

my past still haunted me. The sad truth is that I

really am a pretty good dancer.

Claude was in a particularly bulldog mood

today. He crossed the floor with a couple of his

goon-squad buddies.

"I need some culture today, Miss Ben Conrad.

Pretty please ... just a little spin around the floor?"

"Why don't you just piss off?" Fish growled

menacingly.

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"Ooh. Ballerina Boy has a bodyguard," Claude

said, and his two sidekicks laughed at his wit.

Before I could say anything, Stan had stepped up.

He wasn't as meaty as Fish, but he was tall, and

with his non-smile policy he could look pretty

intimidating. He moved within an arm's length of

Claude's smirky face and stood there for at least

ten seconds without saying a word.

Claude was starting to look uncomfortable

when Stan spoke softly. "I think you're aware that

my friend Fish has a short fuse." He gave it the long

pause. "My suggestion would be to move your

sorry butt out of here."

Claude backed up a step, forcing a smile onto his

face. "Later, Ballerina Boy." And he walked away,

flanked by the goons.

Fish laughed and tried to high-five Stan, but

Stan's hands remained at his sides. He isn't big on

touching. "That guy watches too many gangster

movies," Stan said. Then he tossed a ball into the air

as if nothing had happened.

I'd spent six years at Miss Fleur 's Academy of

Dance, learning tap, jazz and, yes, even ballet. My

sisters went, and I, being young, thought all that

jumping would be more fun than sitting in a corner

waiting for them to finish while my mom had her

head stuck in a book, so I asked if I could join. I had

to ask more than once. Finally my mom said that if I

was really sure, I could give it a try.

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Here's one more interesting fact. All three of my

sisters are as graceful as a traveling troupe of leftfooted

bears. Joni danced the way she painted — full

of fury. For Mad it was just anotiier role that she

played, and not one she particularly liked. And Beth

treated it like a recipe — one part this, one part that

and a teaspoon of salt. But it was different for me. I

was the one with the talent. Another gruesome bit

of trivia — I actually enjoyed it. When I went to my

first class it felt right, familiar. Like the inside of me

could finally stretch all the way out.

The kids at elementary school didn't seem to

care one way or the other. It wasn't a big deal. By

Grade 7, it was about to pay off— there I was, one

of two boys in the whole dance school, surrounded

by girls. Pay dirt was around the corner.

But when I started high school, someone caught

wind of my dirty little secret, and suddenly I was

Ballerina Boy. All those stupid jokes and whispers.

One particularly witty kid said he was going to go

as me on Halloween, dressed in a tutu. That finally

got to me, so I quit. My sisters were disappointed,

but I think my mom was relieved. We never talked

about it.

As I bumped the ball back to Stan, I caught sight

of Kat, lost IQ points and completely forgot that I'd

given up on women. That happened whenever I saw

her. It wasn't as if she was the most beautiful girl in

the world, or even the school. Probably Melody

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was prettier, like one of those girls in a magazine

with everything in the right place.

Kat had this kind of angular thing going on with

her blunt, shoulder-length hair and sharp features

... long, lean torso and really great legs. She was

good at track, fast and smooth. And — this sounds

stupid, but — she always seemed really clean. She

just shone. The whites of her eyes were so white

they were almost bluish and so clear you felt you

could just walk inside them and it would feel like

a sunny day. I'd only talked to her once. I lasted

four seconds before elastic bands inside me were

popping and fraying.

Mostly I watched her from far away. That's

why I wanted to be on the volleyball team. I just

wanted to be in the same room with her. How

pathetic was that?

The coach called us to form teams. I walked to

the middle of the floor and took a position. Kat

was on Claude's team. Just on the other side of the

net I could see the muscles on her face tighten as

she got ready. And I got to thinking about what it

would feel like to touch the side of her face. I wondered

if the muscles would relax and how her skin

would feel ...

Then, crash, right in my jaw. A meteor shower

burst in my head, and I went down on my knees.

"Ever hear of calling 'service'?" Fish yelled, as I

struggled to my feet, holding my jaw.

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"Maybe Conrad could try watching the ball

instead of Kat's T-shirt?" Claude yelled back.

As I straightened up, I saw Kat's already flushed

face brighten to the shade of Mad's favorite lipstick.

She stood totally still for a second and then walked

off the court.

As she passed, I tried to explain, "I wasn't ... uh,

er, ... I ..." My throat tightened as though a noose

had been pulled.

"Guys are pigs," she hissed, yanked the girls'

locker room door open and disappeared inside.

"Somebody just shoot me," I muttered to Stan.

"I'd say, for all intents and purposes, buddy,

you're already dead."

Claude and his laugh-track friends howled on

the other side. The coach yelled for us to play ball.

Fish turned around and grinned. "Look at the

bright side, Ben. She knows your name now!"

I leaned forward with my arms outstretched,

waiting for another serve, but all I could see was

Kat's embarrassed face, and it made me feel like

a slug.

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Stan was waiting for me outside the school gates at

the end of the day with an unlit cigarette hanging

from his lip.

"Where's Fish?" I asked.

Stan cupped his hands and lit up. "Who knows?

Probably with his lady fair."

I nodded and followed him. "He's got it bad."

"It's going around," he said, offering a rare

half smile.

"I think I pretty much blew any chance I might

have had today," I said.

"You know what they say — the course of true

love never did run smooth," Stan said, taking a

long drag.

"Well then, I'm in excellent shape," I said,

climbing into his beat-up truck. "Shepherd asked

me why you weren't in history today."

"What'd you tell him?"

"I said you were probably out in the quad smoking."

I grinned.

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"That's helpful." Stan gunned the engine, leaving

a stream of black exhaust in his wake. "You take

any notes?"

"Yeah," I answered. "They're right here ... color

coded and double spaced ... somewhere ... Now

where did I put them?" I pretended to look through

my knapsack, which was empty except for an old

lunch bag that smelled like seventh-grade tuna fish.

Stan and I weren't exactly on target to make the

honor roll.

His truck made conversation difficult, so when

he pulled up at my house, I just yelled, "See ya!"

and he drove off.

It startled me when I walked through into the

kitchen to see an old lady sitting at the table. I had

forgotten she was here.

"Oh, uh, hi," I said, knocking over a chair with a

loud bang.

She jumped, and as I scrambled to right the

chair, I hoped I hadn't given her a heart attack. She

looked so tiny and shriveled — like an apple that

had been left in the sun too long.

"It's me — Ben," I said loudly.

She winced slightly and managed a small smile.

"They say my hearing is good for an old lady."

"Oh, right. Sorry,"I muttered quietly, growing red.

I stood there like an idiot, not knowing what to

do or say. It was like meeting a long-lost relative

who lived on ... Mars. What do you say to a Martian?

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"Would you like some tea?" she asked, getting

up slowly.

I waved her to sit down. "I'll get a cup," I offered.

She sat down again. "My legs work pretty well

too. They're the last to go."

I smiled a little. I handed a mug over, and she

filled it with dark black tea. I hate tea, but I took

the cup and added a couple of tablespoons of sugar

and lots of milk.

"Where's everybody?" I asked, still standing and

holding the cup awkwardly.

"Sit down," she ordered, sounding like a tiny

general. "Your sisters aren't home yet and your

mother's gone to her university ... the library,

I think she said. Imagine a grown woman still

in school!"

"Part-time. She teaches the rest of the time," I

said. "She's working on her master's, uh, in administration,

Aunt Frieda." I tried out the name for the

first time.

"Well, good for her," she said. Her eyes were

warm and shimmerv, tucked in behind a map of

wrinkles. *"Ach,* Ben, you've gotten so big."

I shrugged. The last time she'd seen me I would

have been five. I wondered if she was going to pinch

mv cheek. But her hands were folded in front of her.

"I used to be bigger," she said.

I drained the tea in one final gulp, burning my

throat in the process. "I've got lots of homework,"

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I said truthfully. What I didn't say was that I had no

intention of doing it.

"Yes, your mother was telling me that you've

been having some trouble with your schoolwork."

"I'll bet she was," I muttered. Better grades were

my mother's answer to everything. Not that she

ever seemed to wonder what the question was.

"She seems worried about you," Aunt Frieda

continued.

Okay, now I was getting twitchy. This was moving

into none-of-her-business territory. What did

she think she knew about me, anyway?

"She wants me to get into a good university," I

tossed back, checking out the doorway. Just four

big steps and I'd be out of the room.

"And what do you want?" she asked, looking into

my eyes unflinchingly.

I almost answered, I don't know what the hell I

want, but the door opened and Joni and Beth

poured in. They came to a dead halt when they saw

us, as if they'd also forgotten she was here.

"Oh, hi," Beth said.

Joni just stood there, wearing her regular allblack

ensemble and half snarl.

Physically, all my sisters took after my mom, and

when they were little, people mistook them for

triplets. That stopped when the girls discovered hair

dye, though. Mad changed her color and style for

every new part that came her way. Beth mostly stuck

to her original blond ... with occasional highlights

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when she was feeling adventurous. For Joni, bluish

black was the most consistent choice. She rarely let

her light roots show and the effect was ... sobering.

"Hello, girls. How was your day?"

I leaned back in my chair and watched the

scrutiny shift.

"Good, pretty good, thanks." Beth sat down

beside me. She and Mad had graduated last year,

and now Beth was at some cooking school.

Joni mumbled something about homework,

which was a joke since she hadn't cracked the

spine of a book since junior high. How she was

going to graduate this year, even from the alternative

program, was one of life's big mysteries. "It's

not relevant" was her usual battle cry. Personally, I

appreciated her stand, as it helped diffuse some of

Mom's pressure on me. Now Joni just pulled a

juice box out of the fridge and left the room.

"She's an artist," I said to Aunt Frieda, by way of

explanation.

"Like your father," she said.

Not really. Dad painted landscapes and people

with actual faces ... recognizable things. But I

didn't say anything. Mostly I was thinking how

weird it was to have someone here who had no

clue how abnormal a family we were.

"Would you like some tea?" Aunt Frieda asked

Beth.

Beth shook her head. "I really should get supper

started," she said.

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"I could help," Aunt Frieda offered.

Beth's smile froze. The kitchen was her territory,

and nobody ever dared intrude. Not that anyone

really wanted to.

"That's okay ... you're our guest," Beth answered.

"Now, now ... none of that. We're all family. I

don't want any special favors. Just give me a job."

She waited, and I smiled at the quiet stubbornness

on her face.

"Um, well, I suppose you could ... uh ... chop

the zucchini for me," Beth said, shooting a "help

me" look across the room. I shook my head ever so

slightly, and Beth's eyes narrowed.

I knew I'd probably be shot for insubordination,

but I was enjoying the way my sisters' perfectly

organized world was crumbling. Take it from

someone who's been bossed around his whole

natural-born life — this was an event.

Girls ruled here. Period. It would be fun to see

this hundred-year-old woman shake things up. For

now, though, I got up to leave.

"Tell Joni I need her for something," Beth called

out to me.

"Uh-huh," I said, still smiling at the look on

Beth's face.

Taking the stairs two at a time, I paused at the

top. The upper floor was the land of the Amazon

women, and I hardly ever visited. I'd learned, soon

after my tenth birthday, that this was where they

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walked around in their underwear. Wastepaper

baskets were filled with wrappers and tissues that

told me more than I wanted to know about the

female body, and multicolored strappy things hung

in the bathroom. I remember using one of their

bras as a slingshot once — with the underwire

ones you can get great distance — but nobody

appreciated my ingenuity. Mostly I stayed away.

I stood outside Joni's door. The sign was up.

DO NOT DISTURB. Underneath was scrawled in

scarlet ink, *Already Disturbed.*

I knocked anyway, but softly.

"What?" she called out.

I took this as an invitation and stepped inside the

dumpster she called a room. Directly across from

me, above her bed, was her masterpiece to date, a

huge mural painted on her wall. It was mostly dark

shapes and vigorous crimson squiggles. She called

it *Cramps.*

, "Beth wants you," I said, turning to leave.

"Close the door," she ordered. I did. "She still

down there?"

"No, she went back to Saskatchewan. She said

you scared her."

Joni didn't even crack a smile. "She's so old,"

she said.

"Yeah."

"How old do you think she is?"

"Really old," I said.

**31**

*Gayle Friesen*

"Yeah." Joni reached under her bed and pulled

out a pack of cigarettes. She lit one.

"Mom's gonna love the smell of cigarette smoke

in the house."

She waved the smoke out of her face and opened

a window. "I'm stressed, okay?"

"So, this is more stressful for vou than the rest of

us?" I dared to ask.

She gave me a long, Joni glare. "I feel things that

the rest of you are afraid to feel," she answered,

blowing smoke into the backyard.

There was no place to sit without moving a pile

of laundry, so I stood beside her chest of drawers.

It was littered with beauty products, mostly for

hair. I picked up a long slender cylinder and read

the back instructions.

"This one says, 'Do not smoke until hair is dry.'

Doesn't that make you nervous at all?"

"Very funny."

"Well, it is, kind of— using a beauty product that

could, like, explode into flames. Wouldn't that ruin

the whole effect?" I tried to keep a straight face.

"You guys have it so easy," she said, shifting to

face me.

Here it comes.

"You can put a T-shirt and jeans on, swipe a

comb somewhere in the vicinity of your head and

you're ready to go out —"

**32**

*Men of Stone*

"I know, I know." Why had I started this? I looked

around the room for something white to wave.

I surrender.

"And as far as self-immolation is concerned —"

"Huh? Self-immo ... what?"

"Lighting yourself on fire."

"Were we talking about that?"

She ignored my question. "Women all over the

world have resorted to self-immolation as a way to

protest how unfairly women are treated."

"That's, uh, horrible," I admitted, wondering

how we'd gone from Aunt Frieda and hair spray to

burning women. But at the same time not really

wondering.

"You men rule the world," she said with finality

and another long exhalation of smoke. I was being

dismissed.

I exited quietly, closing the door behind me.

Rule the world. Funny, you'd think that was the

kind of thing I'd have noticed. I was lucky if I got to

use the bathroom before noon.

I went downstairs and peeked into the kitchen.

Aunt Frieda was sitting at the table peeling and

chopping zucchini. Beth was at the sink. I tiptoed

past the open door and made it to my room

unnoticed.

I didn't come out again until I heard Mom enter

the kitchen.

**33**

*Gayle Friesen*

"Smells good," I said, sniffing deeply. "What is it?"

"Greek phyllo vegetarian pizza with seasonal

greens," Beth answered. Ever since she'd started

cooking school, she talked like a menu.

Stan and Fish would have scoffed, saying that

unless meat was present, and large bloody chunks

of it, it wasn't a meal. But in this house you ate

what you were served. And, to be fair, Stan would

have eaten it too, because he was madly in love

with Beth. But afterward he would have raced

directly to the nearest burger joint.

"Where is, uh, she?" I said carefully. The teapot

and cup were gone, leaving no trace of her.

"In her room, reading," Mom answered. "Did

you have a chance to chat with her?"

"Oh, sure. After school we chatted ..."

Mom looked suspicious. "She'll take a while to

adjust, I guess."

I nodded, stuffing down one of Beth's biscuits,

hot from the oven. It would take more than a few

weeks to adjust to us.

"Try some of the papaya spread," Beth insisted.

"No thanks," I said with my mouth full. Even I

*3 j*

had my limits.

Suddenly the door flew open, and I knew without

looking that Mad had arrived. Madeleine — Mad —

the younger (by twenty minutes) of the twins, never

came into a room. She made an entrance. She was

wearing her secondhand black cashmere cape

draped around her shoulders. As she closed the door

**34**

*Men of Stone*

behind her, she pulled the cape off, flinging it across

a nearby chair so the red satin lining provided a

perfect throne for her to perch upon.

"It's unbearably cold out there," she breathed

into her hands. "Unbearably." Then, "What's for

supper, Beth?" This was said in her regular voice.

"Greek phyllo vegetarian pizza with seasonal

greens," Beth answered.

"Sounds heavenly. Guess what, everyone?" Mad

paused meaningfully. (All her pauses were meaningful.)

"I think I have a shot at the commercial!"

There was a squeal of excitement from Beth. I

managed to contain mine. Mad's been trying out

for plays, commercials, movies — you name it —

ever since I can remember. Sometimes she even

snagged a part.

"Excellent! What's the part?" Mom asked.

"It's only a commercial, but it would be a foot in

the door."

She should be a centipede for all the feet she's

had in doors over the years.

"What's the part?" I asked, moderately curious.

"Well, let me set it up for you. It's the dead of

winter. It's cold ..."

"Unbearably cold?" I guessed.

She frowned, shaking her head slightly.

"Everyone's ill ... colds, influenza ... strep throat.

Oh! It's set in a pharmacy. I'd be, 'hacking cough

desperately in need of relief.'" She stood and

her cape slid to the floor in a crumpled heap. "I

**35**

*Gayle Friesen*

walk — stumble, really — into the store and

make my way to the prescription counter." She

gave an agonizing bark, her face contorting with

pain. "'Please,' I say, 'don't you have something to

relieve my scratchy throat?'" She added another

meaningful pause and then bent to the floor to

retrieve her cape. When she straightened, her

voice was back to normal. "I think I really have a

crack at it. You should have heard the other actors,

with their pitiful 'ahems.' I think I really

impressed the casting director."

"I'm sure you did," said Beth loyally. "I almost

wanted to give you a spoonful of cough syrup

right now!"

"How much money would you get for it?" Mom

asked. She didn't like to talk much about our

finances, but I knew she worried.

Mad shrugged. "I'm not sure." She tore open a

biscuit and dumped the papaya goop on. "Mm,

good stuff, Beth."

"Thanks. When do you find out about —"

"Next week, I —"

"You'll definitely get — "

"Thanks."

That's the way they spoke, as if they were on the

same frequency most of the time. I think it made

Joni — Miss I-feel-things — jealous sometimes,

but I figured it was just a twin thing.

"What's up?" Joni asked, coming into the room

wearing her paint-flecked overalls.

**36**

*Men of Stone*

Mad reenacted her drugstore scene, only this

time she laid it on even thicker.

"That's great, Mad." Joni smiled.

I paid attention. Joni rarely smiled. Mad caught

it too.

"But?" Mad waited, head tilted forward.

"But nothing." Joni shrugged.

Mad shook her head. "You've got that look on

your face."

"It's just that, well ..." Joni leaned back on the

heels of her boots. "Wouldn't you feel you were

selling out?"

I thought I heard Mom sigh, and then she left

the room.

Mad's shoulders stiffened, and her head poked out

from her neck like a turtle's. "What do you mean?"

"Well ... a commercial? It's not exactly

Shakespeare, is it?"

I could hear Mad's quick intake of breath and

Beth's backup gasp. The gauntlet had been thrown

down. This could get interesting.

"Besides," Joni continued. "The whole point of

coughing is that it's a sign that something is wrong,

so cough suppressants are really dangerous ... as

if they're disguising the truth. Philosophically,

I'm opposed ..."

She was entering what I called the blah-blahblah

stage, and I could see Mad begin to boil. I

settled back to see what would happen next. As

dramatic as Mad could be, she needed a script —

**37**

*Gayle Friesen*

words weren't always her best friends. I figured it

came from having a twin who always finished her

sentences. Mostly she just changed inflections,

turning everything into a big performance.

"Can't you ever be positive about one thing,

Joni? Does *everything* have to be ... I don't know,

*have* to be ..."

She was way behind on verbal artistry. But she

might do better in the technical scoring. I liked to

judge these fights the way adjudicators scored my

dance performances. Mad tended to be stronger in

the screaming and hitting department — what I

called the technical portion. Joni usually excelled

in the artistic category — strong on verbal assault.

"Fight, fight, fight," I chanted under my breath.

Oops — tactical error on my part. Now they

had a common enemy.

"Shut up!" they both bellowed.

"You guys ... cool it," Beth said quietly. If I was

the judge, she was the referee.

That's when I noticed Aunt Frieda standing in

the doorway. I wondered how much she'd heard. I

thought maybe she'd bawl us out or something,

but she smiled and walked to the middle of

the room. The little munchkin just looked at

each of us, then she came and stood beside me.

"Now this reminds me of Russia, when I was

growing up," she said, and sat herself down at

the table.

**38**

*Men of Stone*

Mom came back into the room just then, so I

couldn't ask her what she meant. But it sort of

intrigued me. What could our house and all its

weirdness have in common with her life?

As Beth pulled the pizza from the oven, I

grabbed a couple of pieces and headed for the TV

to watch my dinnertime shows.

"Not tonight, Ben," Mom called me back. "I

want us to have a family dinner."

Family dinner? I stopped in my tracks. Since

when?

I returned to the table.

Aunt Frieda didn't talk much during dinner.

Mostly the girls and Mom talked around her. I

think the phyllo pizza mystified her a little, and

she only nibbled at it, like a rabbit at the edge of

the garden.

"Ben," Beth said suddenly. "Did you make the

team? I ran into Stan on my way home."

I shrugged. "We find out tomorrow, but I doubt

it. Most of the —"

"Hey! Attitude, Benjo. You gotta have faith," she

said, before I could finish.

"That's right, a positive mental attitude —" said Mad.

"— is what you need to succeed —"

"— in this world."

I lost track of who was saying wrhat. I really

missed my dinner-in-front-of-the-TV routine.

"Anyone who dances like you, Benny, could do

**39**

*Gayle Friesen*

any sport you wanted. Although why you gave up

dance —" said Mad.

"I'll never know," finished Beth.

"He was so good, Aunt Frieda. Even when he was

a little guy. Remember that *Arabian Nights* piece,

Beth? That girl — what was her name?" said Mad.

"Kelly Robertson?" supplied Beth.

"Yeah, Kelly Robertson. She injured her foot

right in the middle of their duo and had to leave

the stage. Ben didn't even blink, just finished on

his own —"

"Even improvised some stuff. He was in his

own world!"

"The crowd went crazy ... standing ovation.

How old were you?" asked Mad.

I grunted and slid lower in my chair.

"Nine," Mad decided. "Only nine years old."

Then a small, reedy voice joined in, and somehow

I heard it above the brass band.

"So then, why did you stop?" Aunt Frieda asked.

The room went quiet and even Joni looked up

from her plate for the first time.

"I just, uh —"

"He quit," Joni said, taking her plate over to

the sink.

"There's nothing wrong with quitting something

that you've outgrown," Mom added, probably

trying to be supportive.

**40**

*Men of Stone*

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it.

Sometimes it's just too much. You give up. Stuff

happens ... people die or leave and ... that's just the

way it is," Joni said over her shoulder.

"We were talking about Ben's dancing." Mad

looked perplexed.

"Joni, really," Mom interjected, rubbing her

left eye. "Can't we have just one simple dinner?"

"Absolutely. Be my guest," she said, leaving the

room.

Mom looked embarrassed and asked Aunt

Frieda if she'd like to have a cup of tea. Aunt Frieda

nodded.

It didn't take long for Beth and Mad to fill the

kitchen with noise again, but fortunately the

conversation stayed away from dance. For that, I

was grateful to Joni. I didn't think anybody else

really understood Joni, but I did, even when I

didn't want to. She'd been the one with all the

questions after the funeral.

"Why is he in that box?"

"Where is he now?"

"Why isn't he coming home?"

Horrible questions. But more horrible still was

the silence afterward. As unprepared as we were

for our dad to die, we were just as unprepared

to discover that our mother didn't control the

universe.

**41**

*Gayle Friesen*

My dad colored the world with his paintbrushes.

He was fun and loud, and there was

always a fleck of yellow or blue in his hair. He

smelled like paint thinner.

My mom held us together. She was the frame,

narrow and solid, around our edges. None of us,

especially me, expected her to fall apart. And

except for that one day, she hadn't.

**42**

Stan showed up the next morning before school.

He did this about once a week, to remain low-key

about his crush on my sister. But the truth was, the

nearest he came to a smile was when he saw her.

He made me swear not to say a word to Beth, but I

suspected she knew and kind of enjoyed it.

Normally she wouldn't look twice at a "younger

man" but Stan had taken kindergarten twice, so he

was sixteen and had his license.

"Hey, Stanley, how's it going?" Beth chirped

from behind the morning paper.

Beth was the only person on the planet allowed

to call him Stanley.

His lips went perilously close to being

upturned. "What smells so good?"

"Scrambled-egg wraps made with hand-pressed

tortilla shells and a mildly spiced salsa," she

answered happily. "Want some?"

I knew his head was hoping for bacon and eggs,

but his heart answered. "Sounds fantastic."

"We're gonna be late," I grunted.

"Relax," he hissed, and I could see the back of his

**43**

*Gayle Friesen*

neck turn red. In the interest of my own safety, I

said nothing.

"No prob. It's a breakfast designed for a guy on

the go," answered Beth, efficiently rolling the wrap

in tinfoil, fluffing out the top end artistically.

Stan took a man-size bite and I could tell from the

sudden look of pain on his face that a chunk of foil

had hit a filling. But he recovered quickly. "Delicious,"

he said, looking directly into Beth's eyes.

"Good. I'm presenting in brunch class tomorrow."

"A-plus," Stan said, as I pushed him toward the

door. "Thanks."

"What is your big hurry?" he growled once we

were outside.

"A-plus?" I mocked him.

"Can I help it if your sister is an angel?"

I made a gagging noise, covering my mouth with

my hand.

He ignored me and ate the wrap solemnly, the

last lingering reminder of my sister.

"What do you think my chances are of making

the team?" I asked.

Stan used his full mouth as an excuse not to

answer. But the look on his face said it all.

Sure enough, when we checked out the list posted

beside the gym doors, my name wasn't on it.

"It's a short season," Stan said, by way of

consolation.

**44**

*Men of Stone*

He went to his locker and I went to mine,

picking up the pace as I walked. Who cared anyway?

I knew I hadn't given it everything during the

tryouts. I hadn't given anything everything since ...

for a long time.

Fish was waiting at my locker. The look on his

face said either his dog had been run over by a semi

or he'd heard about the team.

"Man, that sucks," he said, punching me on the

shoulder. I hid my wince as his steel knuckles made

contact. "I was pulling for you."

"No big deal," I said, rubbing my shoulder once

he'd turned to his own locker.

"It was pretty competitive ... so many guys tried

out. Besides, if they weren't including girls this

year, you'd have made it for sure. I mean, they had

to include a certain number of girls so —"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." I didn't want him pretending I

was good at volleyball. I knew how it felt to be good

at something. Sometimes I wanted to go back to it —

dancing. But then I'd remember all the razzing and it

just didn't seem worth it. Like Joni said the odier

day, sometimes it's too much and you just give up.

To make my day a complete write-off even

before the bell, Claude appeared behind me.

"I'm so disappointed you didn't make the team,

Ballerina Boy."

Fish slammed his locker shut and faced Claude,

but I shifted myself between them. "Let's go, Fish,"

I said.

**45**

*Gayle Friesen*

"Maybe you could make the cheerleading squad.

You've got the moves," Claude called after us.

I saw Fish's entire body tense up. "Just say the

word."

I kept walking, shaking my head so Fish had no

choice but to follow. I knew he wouldn't attack

without my say-so. I also knew he was wondering

why I didn't take care of Claude myself.

"What's his problem with you anyway?" Fish

finally grumbled once we were out of earshot.

"I dunno. His sister went to the same dance

academy as me, so he's seen a few shows. Maybe ..."

I trailed off.

"You didn't really like that ... stuff, did you?"

I didn't answer right away. "My sisters all went,

so ...

Fish looked heartened. "Yeah. I took piano

lessons for two years." He said "two years" the way

you'd say, "life sentence." "I used to bang away like

it was a set of drums. Drove my mother crazy. You

shoulda tried that with dance — stepped on a few

toes, forgot how to count."

"Good idea," I said, smiling, but not at what he'd

said. Both Fish and Stan had the same idea about

what dancing was — either some leaper in tights or

else a geriatric couple trampling all over each

other's feet to big-band music.

They had no concept — the strength, agility, the

focus ... the athletics of dance. The balance, the

**46**

*Men of Stone*

control you needed to hold a position without even

the faintest muscle tremor. The way you got to

hearing the music inside you even when there was

no music being played.

Fish's beefy elbow brought me back to the present.

"There's Melody," he whispered in a voice

reserved for NFL players and his beloved. "She

really is ... you know, like a song. Hey! That's pretty

good. Melody ... song? Maybe I should, like,

write a poem, huh? Girls love that stuff."

"Go for it, big guy," I said, laughing.

"Hey, I got a soul." Fish pretended to look hurt,

tripping me at the same time and almost sending

me headlong. I twisted around and pushed him

into the bank of lockers and just about had

him pinned, but where I had agility, he had bulk.

He pushed me back into the middle of the

hallway, where I felt my heel connect squarely

with someone's toe. A sharp scream punctuated

the moment.

I knew before I even turned that with my mythic

bad luck, it had to be Kat, though I couldn't

remember having heard her scream before.

Sure enough. Those milky whites were smoking

with rage, and probably pain.

"Could you watch where you're going?" she said

through her teeth.

I figured I had three to four seconds before I

turned stupid ... maybe more if I didn't look in her

**47**

*Gayle Friesen*

eyes. I lowered my head. Bad move.

"Try looking at my face for a change," she said

sharply, crossing her arms across her chest. I felt

myself redden, but I looked right into those eyes.

And I was lost.

"Did I turt your hoe?" I asked.

A tiny smile flickered on her lips, which she

almost immediately squelched. "Pardon?"

I shook my head. "Hurt your toe ... hurt your

toe?" I said carefully, trying to focus somewhere in

the safe vicinity of her nose.

"My hoe will be fine." She finally smiled. "What I

want to know is this — are you as much of a pig as

that Claude creep?" Her voice was soft, as if she

wasn't trying to let everyone in on our conversation.

I shook my head back and forth, reminding myself

suddenly of a wet dog. I stopped and tried to make

everything inside me slow down. My palms were

sweating and a vein was thumping in the side of my

neck. Could she see it? "No," I answered in as deep a

voice as I could manage. Sometimes it still cracked.

"I'm not quite as much of a pig," I finished weakly.

She nodded and walked away, joining a group of

girls and Fish, who'd apparently forgotten all about

me.Then she turned just enough so that I could see

that she had a little smile on her face. I decided this

was a good thing.

"I'd say you're making real progress there, young

Ben," Stan said, suddenly at my side in that undercover-

cop way he had of just appearing.

**48**

*Men of Stone*

"She did smile," I said.

"Oh, yeah, you're in," he snorted.

As we moved up die hallway, I noticed someone

else had witnessed die entire episode. And from the

look on his face, Claude had heard the whole exchange.

Great. One more reason for him to hate me.

First class was history. I made my way to the back

of the room, avoiding paper airplanes and outstretched

limbs without incident. Stan had ducked

out for a quick smoke, and I wondered if he'd make

it to class. He spent most of his time — free and

class — out in the courtyard, leaning against the

stone wall in a cloud of white-blue haze.

The first time I saw Stan was in the playground

at elementary school. It was Grade 2. He had a

long stick in his hand and was waving it around like

a pint-size Zorro. He had this bandana wrapped

around his head, bandito-style, and his foes were

imaginary because all the other kids were avoiding

him. I'd watched for a while, edging closer, mesmerized

by his fancy footwork.

After one really impressive flourish, I'd finally

said, "I think he's dead."

Stan lowered the stick, cocked his head to the

side. "I'm just practicing. To be ready."

I nodded as if I knew what he meant, which I

didn't really, and suggested we play California

kickball. And we've been friends ever since.

**49**

*Gayle Friesen*

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your

ears," Mr. Shepherd began, talking even as he entered

the room. The classroom noise subsided marginally.

Aside from seeing *Dead Poets Society* one too

many times, Mr. Shepherd was okay for a guy

who had dedicated his life to reminiscing about

the past.

"I'm sure you're all abuzz with the prospect of

beginning our unit on Russian history." There was

no response except for the odd groan.

"Believe me, when it all sinks in — the glory of

St. Petersburg and Moscow, the horrors of the

Revolution, the drama of the czars ... Russian literature

— you will not be able to contain your

enthusiasm."

He paused, it seemed, for some sign of life

from the class, but receiving none, moved on. He

went on about the glory of Russia for most of the

class. I was checking my watch to see if it was still

working when the bell finally rang, cutting him

off in mid-sentence as he was blah-blah-blahing

about how "there are no dead people in history ...

their stories remain —"

The volleyball team was practicing after school, so

I walked home alone. When I arrived at the back

door, I paused, steeling myself for another "chat"

with Aunt Frieda.

**50**

*Men of Stone*

To my surprise, Mom was there, sharing a cup of

tea with the old lady. It was early for her to be here,

and I thought she looked relieved to see me.

"Ben," she said, rising to give me a kiss. "You're

home early."

Usually I hung out with Stan until close to dinnertime

because he hated going home. "So are

you," I said.

"Aunt Frieda baked today. Try one of her cookies.

They're peppermint." Mom's voice sounded

cheerful enough, but her eyes were sending warning

signals powerful enough to avert a shipwreck:

Try one or die.

White, pasty lumps of cooked dough smeared

with varnish-like icing gleamed from the kitchen

counter. They reminded me of the provisions

nuclear-war survivors were reduced to in sciencefiction

movies. But I could see from the crumbs

on Mom's plate that she'd had one and was

still breathing.

I took a small one. It was surprisingly light. "I

had a big lunch," I said, laying the groundwork for

being too full for more. I took a cautious nibble and

met with a twang of sweet peppermint. Not bad. I

popped the whole thing into my mouth.

"Hey," I said, grabbing three more. "These are

great."

Mom looked relieved, and Aunt Frieda's eyes

sparkled. "I'm glad you like them," she said softly.

**51**

*Gayle Friesen*

"Really great," I repeated, going to the fridge for

milk. "You should give Beth the recipe."

"I don't have a recipe. It's all up here," she said,

tapping her forehead with a long, bony finger. Even

her hands were wrinkly.

Her skin looked like a sheet that had been left

in the dryer damp and scrunched, and as much as

you tried to shake the wrinkles out, you finally

had to resort to the iron because you'd promised

you'd take the laundry out as soon as the timer

went off.

"I said, how was school, Ben?" Mom asked slightly

impatiently.

"Oh, uh, same. But I got tons of homework." I

started to leave the room.

"Which subject?" Mom persisted, and I finally

clued in that she wanted me to stick around.

"History," I said, leaning against the doorjamb.

"Russian. Boring."

"Russian? Aunt Frieda lived in Russia for ... how

long?" She turned to the old lady.

"Many, many years," Aunt Frieda answered.Then

a faraway look came over her. "A lifetime."

"Maybe you could help Ben with his studying,"

Mom suggested.

I couldn't help shooting Mom an "are-youcrazy?"

look.

"Nobody wants to hear an old lady's story," Aunt

Frieda said, gazing out the window.

**52**

*Men of Stone*

"Of course we do," said Mom, adding quickly,

"and you're not that old."

Aunt Frieda faced us with a hint of a smile. "I'm

not so old I don't know how old I am."

Mom looked a little flustered, but I knew what

Aunt Frieda was saying. She didn't want anyone

talking down to her. She said something about taking

a little nap and left the room.

"I feel as if I'm always saying the wrong thing to

her," Mom said, as soon as we heard the den door

click shut.

"She's Dad's aunt, right?"

Mom nodded. "I'd only met her a couple of

times, and then when your father died, I ... we lost

touch."

"Was he, like, close to her?"

"I don't know ... I think so. His parents and

Frieda's son, Jacob, helped bring her over when your

father was little. She'd been separated from her son

for quite some time before she was allowed to come

to Canada. He — Jacob — was about your age ...

maybe a little younger ... when he left Russia. It

took years for them to find each other again."

"How do you just lose someone?"

Mom shrugged. "She's had a difficult life." She

rubbed her eyes until I thought she'd rub the eyelashes

right off. She always looked so tired. "She

was kind to me, though."

"Huh? When?"

**53**

*Gayle Friesen*

"I went to Saskatchewan to meet your grandparents

just after Neil and I were engaged. The aunts,

the formidable aunts" — she smiled — "threw a

shower for me. After I opened all the presents and

said my thank-yous — very politely, I thought — I

started to clean up. I picked up the paper, you

know, to throw it away. Suddenly the room went

deathly quiet." Mom actually laughed out loud.

"What?" I asked.

"Well, it wasn't the Mennonite way to be so frivolous

with perfectly good wrapping paper! I'd

shocked the lot of them! But Frieda pulled me

aside later and told me not to let it bother me."

I smiled uncertainly ... I didn't want to be a

party pooper. "The, uh, Mennonite way?"

"Your father's family, Ben. They're Mennonites.

You know that." She said this with her brows knitted

together.

"I don't think so."

"Of course you do," she insisted. "You've forgotten."

Then she looked at her watch. "I should get

some studying in before dinner ... I have a class at

eight." It occurred to me, as 1 watched her leave, how

often she did that. Just when things started to get

interesting, she'd walk out. It was as though all the

parts of her were never in the room at the same time.

Aunt Frieda didn't come to dinner that evening.

I wondered if she'd caught wind that feta omelettes

with sundried tomatoes were on the menu. Mom

**54**

*Men of Stone*

made some cream-of-chicken soup out of a can —

Beth looked personally insulted — and asked me to

take it in to Aunt Frieda. I'd noticed earlier that

Beth had scowled when she saw the peppermint

cookies too, but she tried one and finished the

whole thing.

I banged on the door with my elbow, holding the

tray awkwardly. When there was no answer, I put

the tray down and opened the door quietly.

She was sitting on the chair in the corner. I

placed the tray on the coffee table. There was no

movement of any kind, or any sound ... not even a

snuffle. Just wax-museum stillness. I tapped the old

lady's hand gingerly. No response.

Then I remembered something I'd seen on a

television show. I looked around the room and

found a small mirror. Carefully I held it in front of

her face, angled below her nose, to see if it would

fog up with her breath. I stood behind her and

watched the mirror closely. At first all I could see

was her reflection from the nose down. No breath

fog. I was thinking about calling 911 or my mom

when Aunt Frieda awoke with a start, letting out

a yip of surprise to see the mirror dangling in

front of her.

I raised it quickly and came out from behind

the chair. "It's only me. I didn't mean to scare

you ..." I was hot with embarrassment. I couldn't

tell if she was mad or what. "I didn't know if you

**55**

*Gayle Friesen*

were okay ... if you were sleeping or ..." I felt like

a complete idiot.

"Never put a mirror that close to an old

woman's face! The wrinkles alone might give her a

heart attack!"

"I'm sorry," I said again, but she chuckled, quietly

at first, and then it turned into a rolling laugh until

finally I had to join her. It really was pretty funny.

Eventually our laughter pulled the others in

from the kitchen and they piled up in the doorway,

peering in with worried expressions. This made us

laugh even harder.

Aunt Frieda put her hand across her mouth.

"I'm going to lose my teeth," she said, which of

course made us laugh until tears were falling down

our faces.

Eventually the others walked away and we sat

there, recovering.

"Your soup's getting cold," I finally said, handing

over a tissue for her running eyes.

As she took the tissue from me, her hand

touched mine for a brief moment. "Thank you."

"No problem," I said. "You're okay in here?"

Joni had done one of her murals on the walls —

all gray and black with splashes of burnt orange

— faces you could barely make out, with empty

eyes and gaping mouths.

Aunt Frieda followed the direction of my gaze.

She shrugged. "It's a little bleak, isn't it?"

"Yup ... that's Joni." I shrugged. "A little bleak."

**56**

*Men of Stone*

"I've noticed. It's quite different from the cards

your father sent me."

I nodded. Dad hadn't sold many of his paintings.

They were just starting to catch on when he died.

Now most of them were piled up in the attic.

Sometimes I went up and looked at them. They

were watercolor landscapes mostly — recognizable

— you knew what he was seeing.

"Still, she reminds me of him," Aunt Frieda said.

"And so do you. Do you know how much you look

like Cornelius?"

"Cornelius?"

Aunt Frieda smiled. "Neil. That's what your

mother called him. We called him Corny."

I winced. "Corny? Oh man, poor guy." I sat

down again. "I look like him?"

"Oh, very much. Especially your strong jawline."

"Huh. What, uh, what else?"

Her silver eyebrows knitted together in concentration.

"You have your mother's build, I think. But

the way you walk ... the way you move across the

room — that's from your father. He could enter a

room without anyone knowing he was there. I

used to think it came from having no brothers and

sisters, but that's not the case with you. Very

graceful, he was."

"So you knew him pretty well?"

She nodded and her eyes drifted away from

mine. "When I came to Canada, he was seven or

eight years old. His parents sponsored me."

**57**

*Gayle Friesen*

I nodded. My grandparents had died before I

was born, so I'd never known them either.

"Did you and he, well ..." I coughed to loosen

the tight feeling in my throat. "Mom doesn't talk

about him a whole lot ... I don't know that much

about him."

"Well, perhaps that's why I'm here," she said.

But before she could say anything else, Joni was

at the door carrying a teapot. I could tell from the

look in her eyes that it wasn't her idea.

"Come in, child," Aunt Frieda said, with a wave

of her arm. "We were just admiring your work,"

she said, casting a glance at the wall.

Joni put the teapot down on the table. "Really?"

she asked, then she looked embarrassed, sorry that

she'd said anything. "Oh, thanks."

"Why don't you tell me about it?"

I took my cue and left the room. I was a little

relieved. Even though I wanted to know more

about my father, a part of me just wanted to leave

him, like his paintings, up in the attic, leave all the

old sadness up there.

That night, right in the middle of a great dream

about Kat, I woke up to the sound of "Lice, lice

... no, lice." At first I just lay there, waiting for

Mom to come downstairs to see what was the

matter. But there were no sounds of life in the

**58**

*Men of Stone*

house except for those whispers next door. I put

my pillow over my head to block the sound. But I

could still hear the word echoing inside my head

... lice, lice.

Finally I threw off the covers and went to the

den. I pushed the door open. It took my eyes a

while to adjust, but eventually I made out her small

shape on the bed. Asleep, she looked even smaller.

She whispered, "Lice," again.

I knelt beside the bed and took her hand cautiously.

Her skin was as dry as paper. I felt her

clench my hand, but she didn't wake up. What was

going on in that dream?

Then her grasp relaxed. Her lined face turned

smooth and the word fell away.

**59**

When I arrived at school the next day, I found a

pair of worn pink ballet slippers dangling from my

locker. I tore them off quickly and looked around

for the nearest trash can. As I stuck them inside, a

hand reached out, trapping my wrist between the

swinging door and the bin. I didn't have to look up

to know it was Claude. I could feel his dragon

breath over my shoulder. I twisted my arm free,

scraping it bloody.

"Hey, is that how you treat a present? You could

use them in your next performance," Claude said.

Arnie and Jeff, the goons, provided background

chuckling.

I avoided looking at my arm, knowing that the

sight of blood would only encourage these sharks,

but I could feel it, warm and sticky, clinging to my

ripped shirt.

"Yeah, well, they weren't my size, but thanks for

the thought," I said, trying to brush past Claude.

His arms shot out, pushing me against a wall of

lockers. Somebody's combination lock dug into

my back.

**60**

*Men of Stone*

"Listen, I went to a lot of trouble to get those,

and I want you to try them on, Ballerina Boy."

I tried to wrestle free, but Claude had

twenty pounds on me. I was pinned and my arm

was throbbing.

"What is your problem?" I muttered.

"I don't have a problem. You have a problem. So

why don't you just stick your hand back in there

and get ... the ... slippers, okay?"

My stomach heaved and I felt suddenly nauseous.

Puking on his chest might be an effective

way to escape, but I willed my breakfast down.

Claude loosened his grip and pushed me over to

the garbage can.

Then Jeff whispered loudly, "Teacher," and Claude

sprang back like a hyena catching sight of a lion.

"Lucky break," he whispered, and the three of

them were off.

Mr. Shepherd turned the corner in time to see

them leave. His eyes traveled immediately to my

bloody arm.

"What's going on here, Mr. Conrad?"

I held my arm across my chest. "Uh, garbage-can

accident, sir."

"Let me see."

I drew my arm closer. "I'm fine."

But he insisted that I go to the nurse's office,

even walking with me to make sure I went.

"Listen, Ben, I know that kid is trouble. But I can't

help you if you don't tell me what's going down."

**61**

*Gayle Friesen*

Going down. Like in a drug bust or a gangster

hit. Why did teachers try so hard to be cool? If

Shepherd had a clue about what was "going down,"

he'd know that ratting on Claude would be like

wearing a sandwich board reading "Smash my face

in with a wrench, please."

"There's no problem here, sir."

"Screw the ' sir,' " he said suddenly and angrily. I

admit it — I was a tiny bit impressed with this

response. For a millisecond he sounded like an

actual person^ not a data bank.

After we connected with the nurse, Shepherd

hung around at die door. "If there's any more trouble,

you come see me," he ordered, and then he was gone.

Nurse Shapiro disinfected my arm and wrapped

it in gauze, muttering something about how I was

lucky that I was up to date on my tetanus shots.

When she was done, I thanked her and bent to pick

up my knapsack with my good arm.

"These are dangerous times, Ben," she said seriously.

"Don't be heroic."

I tried to laugh it off. "Tell the custodian to

install safer garbage cans then."

But Nurse Shapiro just looked at me sadly.

At lunchtime, I paused outside the cafeteria

before entering. Don't let Claude be there, I

thought, then wondered where I was directing the

thought exactly.

**62**

*Men of Stone*

I felt a hand on my back, and my heart lurched.

I spun around.

"Hey, Ben." It was Fish and Stan.

"Whoa, judo move." Fish moved back a step,

arms in the surrender position. "What's with you?"

"You surprised me," I mumbled, pushing the

door open with my shoulder. I tried to hide my

bandaged arm. "I'm starving."

I avoided showing my arm until it was time to

carry the tray. It wobbled under the weight of my

food, with my wrist unable to balance it. I managed

to shift the food to my strong side, but by then Stan

had noticed.

"What's with the arm?" he said, as soon as we

found a table.

"I, uh, scraped it this morning," I said shortly.

"How?" He was staring at me, making it tougher

to come up with a plausible lie.

"I don't know how, exactly ... It was an accident."

Stan placed a finger on his temple. "An accident

you can't quite recall ... you blacked out right after

... can't remember a thing ... that kind of accident?"

"Exactly." I glared.

Fish waved his hands in the air. "The point is,

guys ... the point is, who cares? You should have

seen me at practice today." He spent the next ten

minutes talking about his near-Herculean efforts

on the volleyball court. Finally Stan broke in.

"So, basically, Fish, what you're saying is that

you're freakin' amazing?"

**63**

*Gayle Friesen*

Fish smiled broadly, exhibiting portions of meat

in his incisors. "Pretty much. But there are a few

other decent players ... like that Kat. Whew, she's

got some kind of serve. I can see why you like her,

Conrad."

"I don't like her," I protested.

Fish's grin threatened to split his face. "Man,

that's a load of crap," he sputtered.

"Geez, man, could you try swallowing some of

your lunch," Stan complained.

"Sorry," Fish said good-naturedly.

I had a study and then photography after lunch,

so I decided to ditch school and head home early.

At least I'd have the streets to myself. As I left the

chain-link gates of school behind me, a thought hit

me. It's funny how some things can come on you

suddenly and it's maybe the first time you've actually

thought it, but it's like something you've

known all your life. The world, I discovered, was

not a kind place.

On the outside it looked okay — tulips pushing

their way through the dirt, new leaves on trees. But

just under the surface, the truth was, I lived in a

world where a person could appear out of nowhere

and shove you into a garbage can.

The kitchen was empty, and I was relieved to have

the place to myself. Mom had left the stereo on, her

surefire method to confuse potential burglars. I

turned it off, preferring the silence. I decided to

make myself a snack. The leftovers in the fridge were

**64**

*Men of Stone*

of the Beth variety — roasted squash stew, curry

lentil soufflé and something covered in goat cheese

that had overstayed its welcome. I snapped the lid

back on quickly before more toxic fumes could

escape and stuck it back in the fridge.

Then I noticed something on the far counter.

Fresh buns. Only not Beth's fancy creations. These

looked like little two-part snowmen: one large bun

on the bottom topped by a smaller one, baked

golden brown.

Such simple baking could only be the work of

Aunt Frieda. I popped one into my mouth. They

were delicious — not a seed or a speck of wheat

germ to be found.

"They need butter, my boy," Aunt Frieda said

from behind me.

"Good luck finding butter in this house," I said.

"These are great."

Aunt Frieda frowned. "Let me see. I found some

when I was baking the buns." She opened the fridge

door to see for herself.

"It must have been prewar. Trust me, if it's saturated

fat, you won't find it here. House rules."

*"Nahyo,"* she said under her breath, closing the

door. "Is there a store close by?"

"A couple of blocks."

"Just let me get my purse."

Well, I was going to the store. I could imagine

Mom's reaction if I let Aunt Frieda out on her own.

I put my jacket back on with a sigh.

**65**

*Gayle Friesen*

While I waited, I popped back a couple more

buns. When she returned, Aunt Frieda was bundled

up in a wool coat and little ankle boots, with a tarn

perched on her head and carrying a purse that must

have been all the rage forty years ago. Lucky for me

school was still in.

"You won't mind being seen with an old lady?" she

asked, reading my mind. Man, she had sharp eyes.

"Of course not," I lied, but I made sure she

couldn't see my face. I opened the door for her.

"What a polite boy you are," she said, as we

walked out into the crisp, almost-spring air.

"Yup, that's me," I muttered. I was prepared to

amble slowly alongside her, not for the quick pace

she set.

"Uh, this way, Aunt Frieda," I said, pointing in

the opposite direction. She spun around and

marched up the sidewalk. I tried to think of somediing

to talk about. Something we might have in

common. Right, me and a hundred-and-ten-yearold

lady.

"So, did you sleep okay last night?" I figured we

had that in common, at least. Then I remembered

her nightmare.

"Like a baby," she answered.

So, she didn't remember. I wondered if I should

say anything, but I didn't want to upset her. It made

me curious though. Why lice?

***66***

*Men of Stone*

She stopped walking. "Aren't you supposed to be

in school?"

"I, uh, I'm taking the afternoon off."

"How nice for you," she smiled, and I could've

sworn there was a tinge of sarcasm there. Nah.

Couldn't be. Not with that hat.

"I had to quit school when I was ten years old.

My father thought I'd learned enough for a girl,"

she said.

"Really?"

"My mother needed me to care for the babies."

"The babies?"

"I had five younger brothers and sisters."

"Wow! Six kids under ten?" I let out a whistle.

"And I thought we had a big family!"

She looked at me strangely. "And then there

were my six older brothers and sisters."

I did the math. "Twelve ... twelve kids?"

Aunt Frieda nodded. She pushed the crosswalk

button, and we waited for traffic to slow down.

"And the three babies that didn't survive."

My brain was shorting out. "Fifteen kids? You've

got to be joking. What was she — a rabbit?" Oops.

But Aunt Frieda just chuckled. "Your father's

father was my brother Benjamin. You were named

after him." She smiled up at me. "He called me

Fritzy."

"Was it too weird?"

**67**

*Gayle Friesen*

She looked at me quizzically.

"Having so many brothers and sisters, I mean.

Three sisters is bad enough."

"Sometimes my mother would stand at the end

of the table — I never saw her sit at mealtimes —

and I imagined her thinking, How on earth did this

happen?" Aunt Frieda laughed out loud, and the tinkling

sound made me smile.

"But we were never all together, of course. By

the time the youngest had arrived, the older ones

had already left home. Still, once you added the

horses, cows and — oh, geese and chickens — we

were quite a crowd."

"Horses and cows?" I asked. Was the old lady

losing it?

But she nodded. "The family lived in the end of

the house closest to the street and the animals at

the far end. Sometimes, if a door was left open,

you'd find a cow or a chicken in the living room!"

I laughed. "Guess there weren't too many health

inspectors around, huh?"

"I remember one day finding a horse in the

pantry eating *zwiebach,* those little buns I made this

morning."

"Interesting."

"I didn't think you were interested in 'boring'

history?" Her eyes twinkled.

"This isn't history ..." I started to say, but then I

realized it was.

**68**

*Men of Stone*

"Is that where we're going, *mein bengel?"* she said,

pointing to the strip mall a block up the street.

"Beg your pardon?" Had she called me a bagel?

*"Mein bengel?* It means ... someone who is

between a boy and a man, I suppose."

"In what language?"

"It's *pladeutsch.* You don't know any *pladeutsch?"*

I shook my head. "What is it?"

She seemed surprised. *"Ach!* Low German. Your

father used to speak it quite well." She smiled.

"Especially the vulgar words."

"Huh."

"It's the language spoken by some Mennonites."

There was that word again. I tried to look

knowledgeable, but her next question nailed me.

"Do you know much about the Mennonite

people, Ben?"

I decided that Mom's story about the wrapping

paper probably didn't count and shook my head.

"Well, your father's people are Mennonites ...

part of the religious movement started by Menno

Simons?" She looked hopeful, but I shook my head.

"We began in Holland, then we lived in Prussia

— that's Poland now — and eventually our people

emigrated to Russia ..." Her hands were waving

around as she spoke, and then she laughed. "This is

clear to you?"

"Oh yeah, kind of like the horses and cows in

the kitchen."

**69**

*Gayle Friesen*

*"Nahyo!'* She smiled. "When you are young, you

care little about the past."

"No, actually I am interested," I said, and I was. I'd

never thought of myself as belonging to "a people"

before. I had a hard enough time seeing myself as

part of a family.

"Well, my own story is not so large," she continued.

"I grew up in a small village in the

Molochnaya." Her gaze drifted away from me. "It

was a beautiful place ... Our streets were straight

as pins and lined with mulberry bushes and acacia

trees. Our orchards, while we had them, were

lush. We worked the land and we had prospered."

"I always thought ... huh," I stopped.

"You think of Russia as wartorn and chaotic?"

"Yeah, I guess." Vodka, I could have added, and

leaking nuclear submarines, but I didn't.

"It is a beautiful country, Ben — my home for

many years. But we kept mostly to ourselves. I suppose,

deep down, we Mennonites are a wandering

people ... never completely at one with a country.

Our beliefs keep us separate."

"Beliefs?"

"We agreed to come to Russia because

Catherine the Great promised that we would be

able to keep our identity and speak our language

— and worship our God. We would not be forced

to fight in any wars."

**70**

*Men of Stone*

"So, what ... you just sat on the bleachers and

watched?" Maybe I didn't know much about

Russian history, but I knew they'd never backed

away from a fight.

"Oh, my boy, you're getting ahead of me."

Sorry.

*"Nein,* I see your father's spirit." She reached up

and ruffled my hair. "The peaceful years were short

enough ..."Then she stopped, and I realized we'd

arrived at the supermarket.

As I pushed the cart, Aunt Frieda dropped in

items that hadn't seen the inside of our fat-free

household for years: butter, whipping cream,

sausages and bacon and a big bloody bag of chicken

necks and backs. At the checkout, she pulled a

worn change purse out of her World War Two handbag.

Carefully she unfolded a twenty-dollar bill and

handed it to the cashier.

The clerk leaned closer and bellowed, "And

fifty-four cents!"

Aunt Frieda nodded and handed over the

change. The girl bellowed, "Have a nice day!"

Aunt Frieda smiled politely, but as we left the

store she said with a shake of her head, "You know

why old people go deaf?"

I shrugged.

"Because once you turn seventy, everyone yells

at you."

**71**

*Gayle Friesen*

We were crossing the parking lot when I caught

sight of Claude and his friends standing outside a

convenience store at the far end of the strip mall. I

didn't think they'd seen us, and I casually turned,

steering Aunt Frieda in the opposite direction.

She pointed up the street. "I thought we came

from over there?"

"How about we take the scenic route home?"

"Nothing doing. If I don't get my bearings, I'll

never find my way back here," she said.

I was going to have to come clean. "There's

someone over there I'd just as soon not run into."

Her keen eyes peered into mine. "Are you in

some kind of trouble, Ben?"

"Actually, I'm trying to avoid some kind of

trouble. It's kind of complicated. You wouldn't

understand."

Aunt Frieda followed along the not-very-scenic

route. She was silent until we were on a side street,

away from the main drag.

"I do, you know," she said abruptly.

"You do what?"

"Understand trouble."

I nodded, but I couldn't quite see it. She looked

as if she belonged on a commercial saying that her

soup was better than "store-bought." She was from

another planet, and its orbit had no chance of intersecting

with mine.

**72**

This "family dinner" thing was turning into a

routine — choreographed, I figured, for the

illusion of normalcy. The hot topic: Mad had

scored her commercial. She was flying, practicing

her Oscar acceptance speech as she put food

on the table.

"And I'd like to thank my family ... well, most

of them" — she paused to glare at Joni — "without

whose support I would not be here." She sat

down, smiling.

"You'd better thank me," Beth said. "All my

creativity is channeled into the food that keeps

you going."

"Not to mention the loins that pushed you forth

into the world," added Mom.

"Please, not the loins," I pleaded. "Not at

suppertime."

"Oh, Benny's blushing." Mad ruffled my hair.

I pushed the hand away. "I'd just like to get

through one meal without some bodily function —"

**73**

*Gayle Friesen*

"That reminds me," interrupted Joni. "I'm going

on a colon cleanse tomorrow. Who's with me?"

At first there was no response. I mean, who in

their right mind would volunteer for something

so disgusting?

"Come on, you guys. Even as we speak, your

colons are seizing up ... choking under the pressure

of straining out the poisons and toxins of

our diet."

"Hey," said Beth indignantly. "My food does not

poison anyone."

Joni held up one finger. "Just a figure of speech,

Beth. It's all the preservatives. Not your fault."

Beth looked slightly appeased.

"So, who's up for it?" Joni looked around the table.

I kept my head down over my food, shoveling

it in.

But Mad, Beth and even Mom finally gave in. It

was always easier to give in to Joni's demands than

to fight her.

"How about you, Ben?" Joni persisted. "Your

loins could use a little cleansing."

I shoved my unfinished dinner away. "A day of

pureed spinach and wheat grass? Oh yeah, I'm in."

"Come on, Ben. I know you eat hamburgers and

French fries at school," Beth added accusingly, like

I'd been caught sniffing glue.

Thankfully the telephone rang.

"I'll get it," I said, leaping up from my chair.

**74**

*Men of Stone*

I picked up the phone. "Yeah?" I saw Mom

wince as I skipped the proper phone etiquette.

"Hello?" I added.

There was no sound.

"Hello?" I repeated.

"Stay away from her."

"Who is this?" I demanded, knowing the answer.

"See ya at school, Ballerina Boy."

I put the phone down with a bang.

"Wrong number," I said.

Nobody questioned it, and soon the kitchen was

throbbing with high-pitched voices. But I couldn't

finish my meal, and as I carried the half-full plate to

the sink, I felt Aunt Frieda's eyes follow me.

I spent the rest of the evening in my room, trying

to do homework. I read from the history text

Shepherd had assigned, but the facts and statistics of

the Russian Revolution blurred into a meaningless

fog. I kept thinking about Claude. He wasn't the

type to make empty threats. He had the kind of

physique that made it easy to believe in evolution:

thick, strong and hairy. It was rumored that he

didn't own a neck.

So why was he picking on me? I was certainly no

threat to him. Obviously he had a thing for Kat ...

but that wasn't it, not completely. Ballerina Boy.

My past coming back to haunt me.

**75**

*Gayle Friesen*

I picked up an old photo of me, dressed in my

Spanish matador costume. I'd been pretty excited

about that dance. It was my first solo. And I'd

danced well. I'd known it before the applause,

before the judge's adjudication. I'd known that

something amazing was about to happen as soon as

the lights went down. Before I even heard the

music, I felt it directing my movements. My body

had known what to do instinctively, as though

something was conducting me from the inside.

A sharp knock at the door broke through

my thoughts, and I quickly hid the photo under

my pillow.

"Yeah?"

"May I come in?" It was Aunt Frieda. I groaned.

She was the last person I wanted to see.

"I'm, uh, studying," I said.

But the door creaked open anyway.

"You left without your dessert," she said, carrying

a fluffy-moussy Beth creation. "I thought I'd

return the favor from last night."

I wondered for a second if she'd known that I'd

come into her room during her nightmare, but

then I remembered the soup. "Oh, thanks."

Please go away — my brain tried to transmit

a psychic message to her. But I was on the

wrong frequency. She stepped into the room and

sat down.

"That phone call after supper ... You looked pale."

**76**

*Men of Stone*

Old Lady with Sharp Eyes. Stan and I used to

play the naming game. We thought it up after we'd

seen one too many John Wayne movies. I'd been

Burps Good, for obvious reasons. Stan was Boy

Who Never Laughs. Lately I called him Smokes

Too Much.

"Just somebody from school," I said, loosely

inside the truth.

"Some kind of trouble?" Was she playing the

naming game? Then I remembered our earlier

conversation.

"No, nothing like that," I lied.

Aunt Frieda nodded and stood. I thought she was

going to leave, but then for a scary second I thought

she was going to hug me again. But she reached

down, picked up a book and held it at arm's length

as she read the title.

"Russian history? You like this?"

"I don't know. It's just all so ... long ago, so

ancient, you know?"

She flipped through the pages. "I was born just

before the revolution."

Oh great, now I'd called her ancient.

"I, uh, didn't mean —" I started to say, but her

laughter stopped me.

"What's history to you is for me ... a walk down

memory lane. Isn't that something? Stalin is just a

name to you — like Julius Caesar. But for me, he

was a part of my nightmares for many years."

**77**

*Gayle Friesen*

Nightmares. Lice. Could I ask her now? "Is that

why ..." But then I chickened out. "Was it hard?" I

asked instead. "The revolution, I mean."

"Everything was turning upside down. Our land

was taken away. But that was also when I met my

Henry." Her eyes softened when she said this name.

My eyebrows asked the question.

"My husband," she answered. "He was ten years

older than I. He was with the White Russian Army,

and he came home one time to visit his family. He

walked past our house, and I thought he was so

handsome. But too proud. He didn't even turn his

head to look at me!"

She so anded so put out it made me laugh.

She smiled as well. "But years later — I'd just

turned sixteen — he returned to the village to live.

Now he was an official with the Red Army. I was

working with my father when he stopped by to pay

his respects. But Father was called away, and Henry

stayed behind. He told me how grown-up I had

become. But his look was far too bold — and I told

him so!" She lifted her chin to a determined point.

"Do you know what he did then?" she asked, but

didn't wait for an answer. "He picked a blossom

from the cherry tree and placed it in my hair!"

She was obviously expecting a big reaction.

"And?" I asked.

"Oh, *mein bengel,* young men were not supposed

to visit a young girl without a parent present! And

**78**

*Men of Stone*

such vanity — to wear a flower!" But she smiled at

the memory. "I took it from my hair and gave him

such a scowl. He walked away then, whistling, but

at the gate he looked back and saw that I still held

the flower in my hand."

Right then, it wasn't hard to see the girl she

must have been.

She added quietly, "We were married the following

year," and left the room.

As I ate my dessert I thought about what she'd

said. In my mind, I could almost see the village: the

straight streets, the trees in blossom, the barn that

was part of the house.

Later, when I heard her cry out, "Lice," I was

surprised that she was having nightmares again, and

I knew I'd heard hardly any of her story.

I went to her room and held her hand.

**79**

**7**

I considered contracting a disease the next day as a

way to avoid school. Nothing life-threatening, just

serious enough to require home tutoring for the

next three months. A cold or a flu would only buy

me a week at most, and something told me

Claude's vendetta was not the quick-dying type.

"Stay away from her," he'd said. Or what?

I knew what Mom would say if I told her about

it. "Why don't you talk to him — ask him what his

problem is?" As if. Sometimes I thought that my

mother believed that all of life's problems could be

handled like the papers she graded. This one's a B

problem, this one's a C-minus. Sometimes I didn't

think she lived in the real world with the rest of us

— it was that frame thing. She preferred to patrol

the edges.

Finally, I just got ready for school. There was no

courage in my actions, but I knew if I didn't show

up Claude would find his way to my house — and

I didn't want him anywhere near my family.

**80**

*Men of Stone*

I checked my back all the way to school. Every

time a kid on a bike rode past or a dog barked, I

jumped. I was relieved when I finally saw Fish and

Stan at the front gate.

I'd been in one fight in my life. Grade 5. Horatio

Jones had come up behind me and grabbed my

Slurpee. I asked him to give it back, but he'd just

pushed me down onto die gravel playing field. (See

how well talking works, Ma?) Before I could even

make a move, Stan had come steaming across the field

and sent Horatio flying, Slurpee and all. He never

botiiered me again, but as I watched die cherry

juice sink into die ground, I'd felt deeply ashamed

tiiat it hadn't been me who'd knocked him down.

Stan never mentioned the incident. That's the

kind of friend he was, but I knew I couldn't tell him

about Claude's phone call. Something in me would

fizzle out if I handed my fight to him.

"Hey, Conrad." Fish waved me over.

"Practice over?"

"Yup, I was —" he began.

"Amazing?" I guessed.

"We are so lucky to hang with him," Stan said.

Fish grunted.

"No, really, Fish. It's like a privilege even knowing

you.

"Yeah, yeah," Fish grumbled.

As we moved closer to the school, I looked around

to see if Claude and his death squad had arrived.

81

*Gayle Friesen*

"What's with you?" Fish said, poking me in the ribs.

"Me? Huh, nothing."

Stan looked suspicious. "Since when don't you join

me in harassing Fish? It's one of our favorite things —

like raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens."

I smiled tiredly. "I didn't sleep that well," I said.

After Aunt Frieda's lice rap last night, I hadn't fallen

back asleep properly. Visions of black eyes and

bloody lips had been dancing in my head.

"Hey, Fish. Nice serving today."

I recognized the owner of those smooth vocal

cords immediately.

Kat walked up and joined our circle. I breathed

in the smell of soap and something tangy — a

citrus grove, I decided, on a hot summer day.

"Hey, Kat. Yeah, thanks. You too. You got a wicked

spike," said Fish, straightening his shoulders. If he

could have pulled off flexing his biceps without

risking Stan's attention, he would have.

Kat just shrugged at the compliment, and her

molasses-colored hair swayed slightly. I resisted the

overwhelming urge to brush it with the tips of my

fingers. I thought, if there'd been a cherry tree

nearby, I might have plucked a blossom and put it

in that hair.

Then I caught Stan checking me out. "You might

want to watch your jaw. It's scraping the ground,"

he whispered.

"Shut up," I hissed.

**82**

*Men of Stone*

Kat turned her attention on us. "Did you say

something, Stanley?"

A wisp of smoke escaped from Stan's ears.

"It's Stan," he said tersely. "I was just having a

private conversation here with my buddy Ben. It

had entirely escaped me that I should ask your permission

to speak. I do apologize."

Kat looked surprised at the sudden tirade. But I

knew Stan well enough to know that anything

could set him off, and he really did hate being

called Stanley.

"Hey, how's your foot doing?" I blurted out.

Okay, maybe it wasn't as smooth as Henry's blossom

move, but I was trying.

It paid off. She actually smiled right at me.

"Well, I don't think it's broken," she answered,

but her voice was higher than normal, registering

at least moderately on the flirt scale. I recognized

the tone from years of trying to make a telephone

call and hearing Mad on the extension, midromance.

She swished her hair, another good sign. Then

she turned and left.

Stan watched, then nodded slowly. "Huh. I think

you are making progress, young Ben."

I grinned. Suddenly the world looked a half a

shade brighter.

"No thanks to you, Stanley. You practically

scared her off," said Fish.

**83**

*Gayle Friesen*

Stan's eyes narrowed. "At least I wasn't making

a play for her." He straightened his shoulders like a

soldier, an obvious parody of Fish's earlier move.

"I wasn't making a play for her, Ben," he said. "I

wouldn't do that to you."

"For the last time, there is nothing happening

with me and Kat."

"I think you got a shot," Fish said, coming up

beside me.

"It's true," said Stan. "You really are a likable chap."

"Why do you talk that way?" asked Fish, frowning.

"It's called reading," Stan explained with exaggerated

patience. "You should try it sometime."

Fish rolled his eyes. He hadn't read a complete

novel since Grade 4 and was proud of it.

"Philistine," Stan muttered, and left to go to

his locker.

"Wacko," Fish said, as we watched him weave

through the crowded hallway. "What's the Philippines

got to do with anything?"

I smiled and slapped him on the back. "Absolutely

nothing."

As we neared our lockers, I caught sight of

Melody flipping her red locks in Fish's direction.

"Go get her, boy," I said, and he was out of the gate

like a greyhound.

I was still smiling when I got to my locker. The

day was looking brighter — and that thing with

Claude? Maybe he was blowing smoke. Maybe the

**84**

*Men of Stone*

phone call was just a stupid prank. But when I

opened my locker door, a note fell out.

Claude was inspired this time — and artistic.

He'd cut out a picture — probably mauled some

dance program of his sister's. The male dancer held

the ballerina high above his head in a lift, her arms

opened in an arabesque. Claude had used a black

felt marker to cross out the face of the male

dancer. Subtle.

I pulled out the book I needed, slipped the note

down as deep in my locker as I could and slammed

the metal door shut so hard that the tips of my

fingers went numb.

**85**

**8**

I skipped history and got home early, checking

behind trees and jumping at shadows. By the time I

walked up the cracked cement stairs to my front

door, I felt about as brave as a fox on the day of the

big hunt.

Aunt Frieda was in the kitchen doing dishes, and

the smell of something good helped put Claude out

of my mind.

"I have to say, I'm getting kinda used to this,"

I said, walking up to the pot, taking a peek. Sure

enough, a bone that could've come from a small

dinosaur bubbled amid a heavy sea of onions

and vegetables.

"Meat!" I yelled.

Aunt Frieda jumped.

"Sorry, it's not exactly a familiar sight."

"I've noticed," she said, returning to the dishes.

"How do they expect a boy to grow without meat?"

"Huh, lack of meat — maybe that's my problem,"

I said, picking up a tea towel. "You know, Aunt

**86**

*Men of Stone*

Frieda, we do have a dishwasher."

*"Nahyo.* I like to keep busy," she answered.

I dried for a while, watching her ropy hands in

the sudsy water. "What does that mean, *nahyo?"*

She dried her hands and moved over to the soup,

adding bits of torn parsley and spices. "I'm not quite

sure. 'Now yes,' I suppose, or, 'Well, yes.' It has a

few meanings."

"Kind of like *aloha?"*

She laughed. "Maybe."

As I finished drying the dishes, my mind traveled

back to the note.The ugly black marking was etched

on my brain. You'd think a person would need a

really good reason to hate someone as much as

Claude seemed to hate me.

"How was your day?" Aunt Frieda's voice pulled

me from my thoughts.

"Okay."

"Just okay?"

"Parts of it were good," I hedged, remembering

Kat's smile.

"And the other parts?" she continued, undaunted.

But I didn't want to go into the other parts, not

now and not with her. "Tell me more about Henry,"

I said instead.

She seemed surprised at this, but she turned

off the element under the soup and sat down at

the table.

"You're interested in an old woman's stories?"

**87**

*Gayle Friesen*

"I have some time to kill," I teased, and she gave

me a half smile. But it faded, and I could tell she

was drifting back in time.

"Our wedding day was lovely. I wore my mother's

dress. And carried violets. The political situation

made it difficult — in the old days the entire village

would have been invited. We would have cooked

for days! But now things were different. Still, I felt

very special. And the next day when we cleaned

up, everyone said how much they had enjoyed

themselves."

"The next day? What, no honeymoon?"

"An afternoon off work, perhaps."

"Oh man, you guys knew how to party!" I

laughed, and she pushed my hand with hers.

"You have much to learn before you're a good

Mennonite," she said.

I still couldn't get a handle on that one. The

word made me think of farm plows and long

black beards.

"We were happy, Ben. Henry continued his work

as a government official, but it became more

difficult for him. There was pressure from his

comrades to join the party, but this he couldn't do."

"The party? Like, as in the Communist Party?"

"Yes. But to do so would have meant renouncing

his beliefs."

"So why did he work there?"The look in her eyes

made me wish I'd paid more attention to Shepherd's

latest monologues in history class.

*Men of Stone*

"At first he thought he could help our people

more with an official position. There was such

chaos — the land was being redistributed, and our

people were not happy to give up what they had

worked so hard for."

**t i l *V***

1 guess.

"But others said we'd grown rich on land that

was never ours to begin with. It was a complicated

time. Finally Henry decided he must resign ..."

"So, he was unemployed?" I tried to fill in the

gap as her pause lengthened.

When she spoke again, her voice was low. "One

night I made borsht for him and fresh buns. I had

good news. We were expecting our first baby. He

was so happy, Ben. I'd never seen such a light in his

eyes." She stopped again. I waited. "They came for

him at midnight — stormed in through the doors.

We were in our bedclothes."

"Who came?"

"Stalin's men. They took him to prison. Men

with no faces, no eyes, no expression at all. Men of

stone came. I did not see Henry again for years."

Her lips formed a tight, narrow line.

"Why?" was all I could muster.

"Anyone with religious conviction was suspect.

But there were no answers ... no questions either,

in such a state."

"What did you do?"

She looked at me as if she was considering her

answer. I saw her take a breath. "I did not accept

**89**

*Gayle Friesen*

this, Ben. I wanted to tear at the soldiers with my

hands. If I'd had a rifle I would have shot them right

there in my kitchen. But Henry was shaking his

head. He whispered to me, *'Liebchen,'* and his eyes

were so full of love.

"They held him — he was across the room, but

he touched the side of his head, the spot where he

had placed the cherry blossom in my hair. And I

could feel that touch. Then he was gone. I

watched them take him away. I thought my life

had ended right there on that night."

There were tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to —"

She looked up at me. "No, no ..." She patted my

hand. "It was a long time ago. But if you want to

remember ... then you must relive the past."

It struck me when she said this, how feelings and

memories flowed through her like a river. It was so

different from my mother, who kept her memories

wrapped tightly around her.

"I'm going to rest before dinner," Aunt Frieda said.

A thousand thoughts crowded into my mind as

she left the room: horses walking into living

rooms, chewing freshly baked buns; twelve

laughing and crying children in one small house;

tree-lined streets; men in army boots storming

through doors, taking people from their warm

beds. Men of stone, she had said. Men with no

**90**

*Men of Stone*

eyes. Strangers with no reason to hate, who hated

all the same. Claude.

The phone rang, but I let the machine pick up.

I waited as Mom's neutral voice explained that

we weren't available ... please leave a message at

the beep.

I didn't realize I was holding my breath until

I heard Stan's voice. "This is the truant officer.

We've had reports that young Ben Conrad has

been skipping —"

I grabbed the receiver and shut off the machine.

"Hey."

"What's the big idea? You're cutting school more

than me."

This was not true. Some of Stan's teachers

wouldn't be able to pick him out of a police lineup.

"What can I say? You're a bad influence."

"You didn't miss much," he said, and in the background,

I could hear yelling. Probably Stan's mom.

She has the voice of a drill sergeant.

"Just a minute. I gotta move ... some guy's

power raking outside my window." I could tell the

hold button on his phone was being pushed. Stan

didn't like to talk about what went on at his house.

It got pretty ugly at times, that's all I knew. When

he came back on the line, his voice had changed —

quieter now and harder.

"Wanna grab a doughnut?" he asked.

**91**

*Gayle Friesen*

"Yeah, sure." He needed to get out of the house.

And I needed to avoid explaining why I was home

so early. "Fifteen minutes."

Stan was waiting in the corner booth of the smoking

section at Danny's Dunks when I arrived. The three

butts in the ashtray told me he hadn't wasted any

time getting there.

"What's up?" I asked.

He shrugged, lit up another cigarette. "Nothin'

much."

"Éclair?" I asked, throwing my jacket on the

ripped fake-leather bench.

He shook his head.

I bought two anyway, and a large chocolate milk,

which I drained in two gulps. "Beth's having a coronary

right now, and she doesn't even know why," I

joked, taking a bite of one of the cream-filled

doughnuts. But Stan didn't respond. Things must

be bad for him not to want to talk about Beth.

For the next ten minutes we just sat there saying

nothing at all.

"You sure you don't want it?" I finally asked,

pointing to the remaining éclair.

"Nah," he said, blowing a long stream of blue

smoke above my head.

I coughed. "You know, the nice thing about

secondhand smoke is that it saves me the bother

of having to take up the habit myself."

**92**

*Men of Stone*

I didn't even get a half smile, but he did butt out

the cigarette.

"They should just get a divorce," he said suddenly.

"All she does is complain that he's never home,

then when he shows up, she rags on him for never

being there."

I'd only been to Stan's house a few times. The

last one, we were sitting in his room, and his mother

burst in without even knocking. She started in

on him about his room, yelling as if I wasn't even

there. It was the only time I'd ever seen him embarrassed.

He never invited me after that.

"You think they might?" I asked.

Stan passed a cigarette between his hands but

didn't light it. "Nope. They're stuck together. You

know what they say — Love is war." He bared his

teeth in an approximation of a smile, and I knew the

conversation was over. "So, why'd you cut history?"

For a second I was tempted to tell him about

Claude, but I knew he'd love to take it on. It wasn't

that I was so thrilled to have a fight on my hands,

but lately Stan's anger seemed to burn red through

his skin. He had his own stuff to deal with.

"History's a drag," I said instead, although after

the conversation with Aunt Frieda, this felt like a lie.

"I'm thinking of quitting."

"History?You can't change courses midsemester."

"School."

I didn't know what to say, so I finished the second

doughnut. Stan looked dead serious. You're

**93**

*Gayle Friesen*

kidding? I could've said, but he wasn't. Why? I

could've asked. But I knew the answer.

"Don't," I finally said.

"Why not? Give me one good reason." His eyes

bored holes into mine.

Because I need you there, I almost said, but a

guy didn't say that to another guy.

"What would you do?" I asked instead.

Stan's eyes moved down to the speckled Arborite

table. He blew some stray ashes off. "Travel. You

want to come? We'll go down to California or

something. Maybe Mexico."

"Are you serious?"

"Ben, if I stay here, I think something bad's

gonna happen. Something really bad."

"You can come live with us," I blurted out. I

was crossing the line, but I didn't know what else

to do. Stan's face slammed shut. He leaned back

against the booth, lit another cigarette, drew

in deeply.

"Forget I said anything." He shoved the pack of

cigarettes in his pocket and stood. "I'll drop you."

We drove home in silence. All the way I tried to

think of something to say, something that would

make a difference. But what could I say that would

change the fact that once he left me, he had to

return to the battle zone. Love is war.

Stan's mom was wacko, my dad was dead.

Stan's dad was there, but not really there. Kinda

like my mom.

**94**

*Men of Stone*

Fish had a happy family. If they were a sitcom,

they'd be called that — the Happies. And like most

people with happy families, he didn't even know it.

He complained all the time: his mom didn't give

him any privacy, his dad was too loud at soccer

games. Stuff like that. It's kind of funny — people

like Fish don't know what they've got and complain

all the time. People like Stan and me ... we know

something's missing and we hardly talk about it.

"Come in for supper," I said, once we'd pulled up

to my driveway. "The girls are grazing but my aunt

made this great soup. You'd like her."

"Thanks, Ben, but I have stuff to do. See you

around." He gunned the engine and tore off before

I could even say good-bye.

I stood there until his car was a speck at the end of

the street, thinking about how scared his eyes looked

when he asked me why he should stay. Scared because

maybe I couldn't give him that one good reason. And

I couldn't, or I didn't. I knew I'd let him down. I knew

it as soon as I'd seen his eyes turn blank. "No eyes, no

expression at all ... men of stone."

At first it seemed Aunt Frieda and I were going to

have the borsht to ourselves. Joni and Beth had

blended die colon-cleansing concoction — beets,

cabbage, spinach, carrots, not to mention unidentified

herbs and "purifying spices" — and despite being

in long, elegant glasses, it looked revolting.

**95**

*Gayle Friesen*

Mad was the first to glance longingly at our

steaming bowls.

"How are your grass clippings?" I asked cheerfully.

Mad's eyes grew slitted and she took a gulp.

"Yum."

"It's ... invigorating," Mom said bravely, but she

was checking out the tender piece of beef balanced

on my spoon. I admit I held it out a little longer

than necessary before putting it in my mouth. I

groaned audibly for effect. Joni glared.

"There's plenty for everyone," Aunt Frieda said

hesitantly, completely baffled at their meal of

pureed compost.

"There *are* a lot of vegetables in it," Mad said

quietly.

"Maybe just a little taste," Mom said, dipping her

spoon into my bowl.

"Hey," I said, pulling it out of reach. "What about

your colon?"

She ignored me and went to the cupboard for a

bowl. Mad followed, and the two of them helped

themselves to "a taste" — a full bowl each.

"Hmm, this is wonderful, Aunt Frieda. You

should try it, Beth," Mad encouraged.

"I do have a soup class coming up ..." Betii hesitated,

looking at Joni. "Maybe I should try some ... professional

courtesy." She jumped up and filled a bowl.

Joni kept drinking her compost stubbornly until

she'd finally drained the glass, then left the room.

Aunt Frieda looked concerned.

**96**

*Men of Stone*

"She's not happy unless she's suffering," I said.

Mom's spoon stopped midway to her mouth.

"That's not true, Ben."

"Okay, whatever," I said.

There was an awkward silence around the table.

Truth will do that.

Finally Beth spoke. "Could you give me the

recipe r

"She doesn't do recipes," I said.

"But I could show you," Aunt Frieda offered.

"That'd be great."

I spent the rest of the evening in my room actually

doing homework, but I kept thinking about Stan.

Then I got to thinking about how Aunt Frieda's

husband had been taken away, and I wondered,

what made somebody turn to stone? I flicked

through my history book and looked at the pictures

of all the statues of men on horseback, men holding

rifles, men sitting on rock-slab chairs looking

down from great heights. Great men ... war

heroes. What made a man a hero? Did all heroes

end up carved out of great blocks of stone?

**97**

I had a hard time falling asleep, and after a couple

of hours of tossing and turning I decided that

grilled cheese was the answer.

I made the sandwich, added a couple of pickles

and took it into the family room. Maybe there was

a good late show on.

It took me a second to realize I wasn't alone.

Sitting in the ratty leather chair was Aunt

Frieda. Her head was bent over one of our photo

albums. She hadn't noticed me enter, so I whispered,

"Can't sleep either?"

She didn't seem particularly surprised to see me

and motioned for me to join her. The radio was

playing something by Beethoven, I thought, recognizing

not so much the tune but the sudden vivid

picture of a dance routine I'd done once.

"Is this you?" She was pointing to a picture of me

in my first dance costume, a pinstriped suit, a violin

case beside me on the stage. Me as a seven-yearold

tap-dancing gangster. I could feel the redness

creep up my neck.

**98**

*Men of Stone*

"Uh, yeah. Long time ago." I reached for the

book, but she shook her head. She flipped a few

more pages, pointing to another photo. Me again.

This time in the Spanish getup, my first ballet

piece. *Carmen.* I'd done it at the festival — came in

first. I could still hear the music, feel the beat.

I picked up my sandwich. "Want half?"

"No thank you," she answered, still gazing down

at the pictures.

"Do you mind if I turn on the television?"

She didn't respond, so I turned off the radio and

flicked the television on. *Gilligan's Island.* Flick. A

detective show. Flick. An infomercial. Flick.

Another infomercial, but this one featured beautiful

women, so I stayed for a while. "He'll never

know they're not the real thing ..."A woman held

up what looked like a small, transparent beanbag,

and inserted it into her bra. Flick. I turned but

Aunt Frieda was still looking at the album. I

switched off the television.

"Why did you dance, Ben?"

"My sisters went, and Mom and I were always

waiting for them. One day the teacher suggested I

join in a few classes. Or maybe I asked if I could

join. I don't remember."

"But why did you continue? There are so many

dances, so many pictures here."

I shrugged. "I dunno."

"These pictures are so ... I'm not sure," she said,

inspecting them closely. "I was reading about how

**99**

*Gayle Friesen*

some cultures won't have their photo taken —

they're afraid that their soul will be captured and

... Look here." She pushed the book across the coffee

table, pointing to me, midleap. I was grinning

because I couldn't believe I'd nailed it. "I believe

that's true in your case." She looked up, right into

my eyes and I looked away.

"I should get to bed," I said.

"I always wanted to dance," she said, stopping

me in my tracks.

"You mean, like on stage?"

Aunt Frieda looked shocked. "Oh, my. *Ach."*

Then she laughed. "Imagine that. No, I meant, I

wanted to try ... just try."

"You mean you've never danced?" My turn to be

shocked. "As in ... never?"

"When I was growing up, dancing was a sin."

"Kinda like how my sisters dance," I joked, but

she was serious. "Really, like an actual sin?"

"Oh, yes. Along with card playing, smoking and

drinking. All tools of the devil."

"So what did you do for fun?"

"Well." She stopped to think. "We played games

and laughed with one another, but fun wasn't an

everyday occurrence."

"Huh."

"Look at this picture here. Look at your smile."

I peered over her shoulder. I was twelve in that

photo. It was my last year of dancing. I was

100

*Men of Stone*

dressed like Aladdin, and sure enough, a big grin

stretched across my face. "Seems like a long time

ago," I said. "I was just a kid."

"So many costumes. You must have been very

good. Why did you stop?"

"I outgrew it, I guess."

She closed the book but kept it on her lap with

her hands folded on top. "When I was young, at harvest

time, the Russian peasants would come to our

village to help gather the fruit. At night there would

be bonfires and music. I remember sneaking out of

my room one night — just little, I was — drawn by

the firelight. I stayed in the shadows and watched as

they played music and danced. There was one couple

— a man and a woman — singing together with

such feeling, I was filled with ... longing. As though

I was grasping for something that was in my soul

but beyond my reach."

Part of me just wanted to slink out of there

while her eyes were closed. But the other part

knew exactly what she was talking about. The difference

was, I had known the thing that was inside

of me — and I 'd pushed it away.

"How come I wasn't invited to the party?" Mom

asked, entering the room looking bleary-eyed.

"Insomniacs only," I answered. "Did we wake

you up?"

"I was looking at some of your photo albums,

Catherine. I hope you don't mind."

101

*Gayle Friesen*

"Not at all, Frieda. We want you to make yourself

at home here," she said, but her voice sounded stiff.

"You've been so kind to me — all of you, to let

me into your home."

Mom didn't say anything, so I did. "We like having

you here. Right, Mom?"

Mom snapped out of her daze. "Of course we

do. Of course."

Aunt Frieda's keen eyes narrowed, but all she

said was, "I'm going to take this old body to bed.

Good night ."As she passed by, she stooped and gave

me a kiss on the top of my head. It surprised me,

but I didn't mind.

Mom watched as she left.

"She's very fond of you, Ben. I really appreciate

the time you've spent with her."

"Actually, I like her."

"I can see that." Mom put the photo album back

on the shelf.

"Are you glad she's here?" I asked.

"Of course."

"You don't sound sure," I persisted.

"Sometimes it's difficult, Ben."

"What is?"

"The past."

"You don't talk about it ..."

Mom looked away. "I think about it, about him ..."

she began, but then blinked twice, hard. "I've tried

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*Men of Stone*

to keep things together, Ben. It hasn't been easy."

She sat up straighten "There wasn't... a lot of money

after he died."

"I know," I said, disappointed at where the

conversation had gone but hardly surprised. "You

should go to bed," I said. "Don't you have a big test

or something?"

She squeezed my arm, the one Claude had

mangled, and I winced.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Tennis elbow maybe."

"You're playing tennis now? That's good," she

said absently. "Are you okay here?"

"Yeah. I'll go to bed soon."

She bent down and kissed my cheek, and then

she was gone. The house was still.

I flicked the television back on. A rerun of

*The Brady Bunch* flashed up. Six, eight, nine

smiling faces popped onto the screen, each in

a neat box. Cheery singing broke the silence of

the room. I couldn't stomach the peppy music,

so I turned it off when they got to the part

where they were "living all together, but they

were all alone."

I could relate. All alone in a house full of people.

Joni probably felt that way too. Even Mom.

Ever since Dad died, it was as if a big hole had

been blown into the side of our house, and

103

*Gayle Friesen*

nobody could figure out how to fill it. I wondered

if Aunt Frieda had felt that way when they'd taken

Henry away.

It was noon by the time I even considered crawling

out of my blankets on Saturday. Then Mom came

into my room holding the telephone. She had her

hand over the receiver.

"Ben, it's Mrs. Belado. She wants to know when

you last spoke to Stan."

I sat up. "Yesterday afternoon. Why?"

"Did he say where he was going?"

Mexico. California. I shook my head. "He didn't say."

"I'm sorry, Marion." Mom spoke into the phone.

"Ben hasn't seen him since yesterday afternoon.

No, he didn't ... I'm sorry.Yes, well, let us know."

"What's up?"

Mom sighed. "Stan didn't go home last night.

They have no idea where he is. Are you sure he

didn't mention anything to you?"

"Not really."

Mom straightened like a golden retriever catching

sight of a bird. "Not really or not at all?"

I pulled a sweatshirt over my head. "You know

how things get over there. He was bummed ..."

"And?"

"He said something about Mexico, but he wasn't

serious. At least I didn't think he was."

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*Men of Stone*

Mom was already punching numbers into the

phone pad. As she left the room, I could hear her

telling Stan's mom what I'd said.

I went to the kitchen and poured myself some

cereal. Mom sat beside me.

"Things really are quite bad over there, aren't

they?"

I nodded.

"Marion and Alan have some problems to work

out, Ben."

*"Some* problems?" I stared at her.

Mom looked uncomfortable.

"I've known them since Grade 2, Mom. They

fight all the time. They throw things."

"You'll call them if he contacts you," she said. It

was as if she hadn't even heard what I'd said.

"Sure."

"I have to get to school. I'm running late." But at

the doorway, she stopped. "You know, Ben —

maybe it isn't the best time to say this, because I

honestly hope that Stan is all right ..." She looked

uncertain about continuing.

"Yeah?"

"It's just that I don't think Stan has been the best

influence on you." The words came out quickly.

"What do you mean?"

She scratched her forehead. "He's just so troubled

... always has been. Of course I've let you

choose your friends, but ..."Again with the pause.

105

*Gayle Friesen*

"But?" I prodded.

"He seems like a loose cannon, okay? As if he

could go off at any moment. And I don't want you

to get hurt."

I took a breath, a deep one. "He's unhappy, Mom,"

I said slowly. "Some people can admit they're

unhappy." I looked right at her.

She blinked a couple of times, and she might

have swallowed, but other than that ... nothing. "So

you'll call his mother if you hear from him."

I didn't even bother to answer. She left the room

for her world of facts and figures and grade-point

averages, where everything made sense. But the real

world didn't make sense. You'd think that she, of all

people, would know that. And maybe deep down

she did. Maybe she'd just given up when Dad died.

I decided to walk over to Fish's to see if he'd heard

anything from Stan.

"Go on in, Ben," his mom said at the door. "He's

still in bed. Can you believe that?"

"Disgraceful."

Sure enough, Fish was sawing logs when I crept

into his room. I pulled the pillow slowly out from

underneath him and watched his beefy head slide

onto the sheets. I stood back, having shared

enough sleep-overs with him to know what would

come next.

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*Men of Stone*

His eyelids fluttered, then he groped around for

the pillow. Suddenly he was wide awake, flapping

his arms like an overweight duck trying to take

flight. "Huh, what ..." He sat upright, flung his legs

over the side of the bed and blinked. Then he saw

me, grinning down at him from across the room. I

flung the pillow at him.

"Geez," he groaned, falling back down on the

bed. "What are you doing here?"

I slid down the wall to the floor. "Stan's mom

called this morning. He didn't go home last night."

No sooner were the words out than Fish's mom

came in, holding the phone, doing a repeat performance

of my morning.

After we'd established that no one had heard

from Stan, Fish's mom left.

"Where do you think he went?" Fish asked,

pulling on some clothes.

I told him about our conversation the night

before. "You don't think he meant it, do you?"

Fish shrugged. "You never know with him. He's

always been a little crazy. Remember last year

when he spent the night in my tree house and I

found him in the morning?"

We looked at each other, then headed out.

But the tree house was deserted. We climbed up

using the weather-beaten rope ladder and onto the

platform — "the lookout" we used to call it. But it

barely held the two of us anymore.

107

*Gayle Friesen*

"Seems like a long time ago when we used to

come up here," Fish said.

But it had only been a couple of years. Stan and I

had met Fish on die first day of Grade 8. A trio of

shrimps, scared to death of a big school after the safe

smallness of elementary school. Since then we'd

grown a foot, didn't fit the old places. Still, I could

imagine what brought Stan back here last year.

"I kinda feel we might not see him again," I said,

looking out across fences, garbage cans and the horizontal

line of the backyards of Fish's neighborhood.

"He'll be back. He just needs some space. It's

not that bad over there, is it?"

As far as I knew, Stan didn't talk about his home

life with Fish. Just me, once in a while.

"It's bad."

Suddenly the cramped tree house felt creepy,

and we left. We spent the rest of the day checking

out places he might have gone: the arcade where he

was reigning king of the universe, the bowling alley

where he liked to smoke and jeer at bowlers — the

ultimate loser sport, he called it — and Danny's

Dunks, but with no luck.

It was dusk when we sat down on the curb, neither

of us saying anything. The streets were dull with

the changing light. We'd grabbed lunch at the bowling

alley, and it was still sitting there in a lump in my

intestines. I couldn't even remember what I'd eaten.

"Where next?" I asked.

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*Men of Stone*

Fish shrugged, checking his watch. "Melody said

there was this party down at the lake. Want to

check it out?"

"Maybe," I said, unsure.

"There's nowhere else to look, Ben."

**HT »**

1 guess.

"I think Kat's gonna be there."

I pretended to ignore this. "I just hope he doesn't

do anything stupid."

Fish got to his feet. "He's a big boy."

We walked over to the sky-train station a

block down the street. Luck was with us — a

train was pulling up as we climbed the steps to

the platform.

"You know where you're going?" I asked.

"Always," he said, stepping into the half-empty

train car.

Typical Fish. Even if he didn't know exactly

where he was going, where he ended up was where

he'd say he meant to be. It was an art form, really,

the way he got through life.

"Who's going to be there?" I asked, sitting across

from a guy who smelled like he'd last bathed

Tuesday of the previous year.

"Some of the guys from the soccer team, I think.

Don't sweat it, Conrad." Fish smiled over at the

guy, who offered him a piece of the cantaloupe he

was eating with a plastic spoon. Fish just shook his

head pleasantly.

109

*Gayle Friesen*

Fish, unlike Stan and me, had about five or six

groups of friends that he bounced back and forth

around. Everybody liked him. And I could tell he

was eager to be around more people right now. He

was like a dog that way — liked to move in a pack.

But anytime I'd been included with his other

friends, I felt out of place. I could see him change

like a chameleon. It didn't matter when Stan was

around — we'd just drift off and catch up with Fish

another day. But Stan wasn't here, and I didn't feel

like going home yet.

At the beach there was only a handful of people,

but Fish scoped out the ones he knew. I tagged

along as he rushed to greet them, moving tall and

sure across the pebbly beach.

"You guys remember Ben, right?" Their eyes

skimmed me quickly, blankly. "Andrew ... Jamil."

I nodded, grunting hello.

"Care for a beverage?" Andrew moved to the

edge of the woods where a cooler sat, cleverly disguised

as a molting shrub.

"Great camouflage," I said, taking a can of soda.

Fish grabbed a beer, downed it in one stream and

crushed the can, tossing it into the trash can.

"I hear you're a ballerina," Andrew said, smirking

sideways at Jamil.

"Used to be," Fish said, attempting, I guess, to

defend me.

"Male dancers aren't called ballerinas," I informed

diem, resenting having to explain myself ... again.

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*Men of Stone*

"Sorry. My mistake/'Andrew said, wandering off

with the smirk plastered on his face.

I felt my skin twitch across my face as I tried to

keep a neutral expression. But it reminded me too

much of Claude, and I wondered if I'd always be a

target for idiots.

"Mel's here," Fish whispered excitedly. "And

Kat. Let's go over there."

"In a minute. You go."

"You sure?" he asked, but he was already on his way.

Someone had cranked up the music. I moved

over to a log and watched from a distance. Fish's

lope turned into a swagger the closer he got to the

girls. Something about the magnetic force field, I

figured. He really was something to see. You could

throw him into a tank full of sharks and he'd have

them synchronized swimming within thirty

seconds. He was charming. He fit. I'd never seen

him flustered during the entire time I'd known

him, except maybe with Stan.

I had a good view of Kat. She was wearing jean

shorts and a rusty-red sweatshirt with bright white

socks that stood out against her long, tanned legs.

She was so pretty it made my teeth hurt.

People were starting to dance. It was a good

song, and I could feel myself respond to the music.

It should be so easy to walk over to Kat, ask her to

dance. I mean, that was one thing I knew how to do.

So do it, I told myself. Ten, twelve steps and I'd

be there. I could ask her ... or maybe just take her

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*Gayle Friesen*

elbow, and lead her to the clearing. I could take her

in my arms — it was a slow dance now. The moon

was almost full, a dimpled path of silver light

spread out across the water.

*You're such a good dancer,* she might say.

Maybe I'd move into one of those Fred Astaire

routines we'd learned at the academy. The girls

always said I was easy to follow.

*Where'dyou learn those moves?*

I wouldn't have to say anything ... just let our

bodies follow the beat, my hand on her back.

Maybe I'd try a dip at the end — or would that be

overkill? Maybe I'd try to kiss her ...

Mid-daydream, I noticed she was looking back at

me. How long had I been staring? She probably

thought I was stalking her. I lifted the can up, drank

long until the soda was gone, except for the part

that splashed up to the bridge of my nose. Very

cool. I wiped my face with my sleeve and when I

looked again she was gone.

I craned my neck, standing to see where she

was. Then I saw her. She was dancing. At the edge

of the group, by herself, it seemed. Her body

moved slowly, unselfconsciously, and the wind lifted

her hair, blowing it softly across her face. She

pushed it back with one fluid motion, smiling.

I looked around but there was no one behind me.

It was entirely possible then, that she was smiling at

me! As coolly as I was able, I let my eyes find her

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*Men of Stone*

again. Now her back was to me. I wondered if she

knew I was watching. I should go to her — I knew

that. But I also knew I wouldn't. What if she laughed

at me? She wouldn't. What if I tripped? I might.

What if I just got over to her and somebody else

stepped in — somebody a whole lot better looking.

Somebody a whole lot more cool. Highly likely.

Her body moved with the music, and she looked

directly at me. She smiled again, but it was more

tentative this time. As if she wasn't sure. And I

turned — turned and walked away.

By the time I reached the trees, I felt someone

behind me, and then a hand brushed my shoulder. I

checked hopefully, but it was just Fish.

"Where are you going? The party's just starting."

"I'm not much in the party mood," I said. "You

want to come to my house?"

Fish squirmed. "Man, everybody's here."

"Yeah, you're right. But I'm gonna go."

"You sure?" Fish asked, but I could tell he was

itching to get back to the action.

"Yeah."

I watched him rejoin the group. Within seconds

he was dancing jerkily, like a guy who forgot his

sandals on the hottest day in August. He really

looked out of place on a dance floor, but it didn't

seem to matter. Then it occurred to me that it

wasn't wrong for a guy to dance — just to dance

well. It was okay to dance, but not to be a dancer.

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*Gayle Friesen*

Or maybe it was more personal than that. Maybe

it was just wrong for me. Maybe there was a big

red cosmic arrow pointing at me: attack.

As I watched, Fish moved in his distinctive style,

closer to Kat. He said something to her, and she

laughed. He made it look so easy. My stomach

clenched like it was about to be hit, and I could

taste something bitter, metallic, in my mouth. I

couldn't watch anymore. I walked back through the

darkening woods up to the street.

Fish was ... Fish. Fun to be around and living

proof, in a way, that I wasn't a total loser. But he

was like one of those imaginary friends you have

when you're little — it had more to do with what

you hoped for in a friend than what actually was. If

I tried to picture him and me twenty years from

now, just shooting the breeze together, I couldn't.

Fish was a now friend.

But Stan was the real thing — and he was gone. I

could still see him in Grade *2 ...* with that bandana

around his head and his tree-branch sword. He was

still out there somewhere, fighting invisible enemies.

I was at the kiosk, buying my ticket for the sky train

when I noticed a guy, maybe a year or two younger

than me, hunched over in the corner with his back

to me. I had to pass him to get to the escalator, and

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*Men of Stone*

when I did I could hear him breathing really heavily,

as if he was crying. I almost ignored him but turned

back before my foot hit the first moving step.

"You okay?"

No answer.

"Buddy, you okay?" I moved so that I could

see his face. It was red and blotchy, even in this

shadowy light.

He cleared his throat. "Some guys ... they, uh,

took my money. I can't get home," he managed to

get out.

He was really scrawny, dressed only in a pair of

shorts and a T-shirt that looked like it had been

through a couple of older brothers.

"They took my jacket, too." Then he stopped

and took another deep breath.

I dug through my pocket, pulled out a crumpled

five. "Here, take this."

He looked down at the money, reaching for it

slowly. Then he put it into the machine to buy a

ticket. He offered to give me the change, but I

shook my head.

"You might need to make a call. Don't worry about

it." I stepped onto die escalator and he followed.

"I, uh, got these allergies, you know?" he said

quietly.

"Yeah, pollen's bad this year," I said, not knowing

if the pollen was good, bad or nonexistent.

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*Gayle Friesen*

The guy sniffed once more, but he seemed to

be getting it together. Before long a train pulled

up and we walked inside. He sat beside me until it

was his stop.

"You okay?" I asked, as he stood to leave.

He looked uncertainly out to the cheerless

platform but nodded. "I live close by. Hey, thanks."

"No problem," I said, as the door closed behind him.

I saw my reflection in the window, blue and

transparent ... like you could almost see bones and

muscle and blood moving around.

The guy just got mugged, and he tried to pretend

his allergies were making him cry. I tried to

remember the last time I'd cried. I couldn't.

Probably back when I was a kid and stubbed my toe

or something. Something small, but crying always

seemed to make it just a little better. At least it was

a way to say, Hey, getting hurt really sucks. Hey,

look at this, I'm wounded here ... I'm suffering. I

wondered what I'd do if some guy grabbed me,

took my money, my jacket. Would I pretend I had

allergies? Probably.

As the train sped along toward the narrow

bridge that spanned the river, all you could see

on either side was an expanse of black sky and

below the even darker water. It was as though we

were moving headlong into nothing, and suddenly

I was angry.

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*Men of Stone*

I was angry at the faceless guys who'd beaten

that guy back there. At Fish for dancing — *dancing*

with Kat when I couldn't. Angry at Stan for taking

the easy way out and angry at myself for having to

go back home where I wasn't needed.

The train reached the end of the line. If I didn't

move, I'd just end up back where I'd already been.

117

**10**

I spent the rest of the night channel surfing and

hoping Stan would call. But there was nothing.

Then at eleven o'clock the phone rang.

"Hello?"

Silence.

"Stan, is that you?" I sat upright in the chair.

"Yeah."

"Where are you?"

"Outside town. Some truck stop."

"What are you doing?"

"Driving, mostly ... thinking about coming home."

"Do it."

"I need a reason, Conrad. Just one."

"It's just" — I struggled for the right words —

"better when you're here, Stan. Honest to God."

More silence, then a chuckle. "Gosh, you miss me."

"Somewhat," I said, and he laughed. "Call your

mom, Stan. She's been phoning all over town." I

felt a bit bad about saying this, since as far as I knew

she'd only made two calls, but still.

"Really?" he asked. He sounded like a kid, hopeful.

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*Men of Stone*

"Really," I answered.

"Maybe I'll do that."

"And call me when you get home."

"Sure."

I mean it.

"Yeah, okay ..."

"Okay."

"Conrad?"

I waited.

"Thanks," he said, his voice barely a whisper. And

then the phone went dead.

I felt as if somebody had just rolled a boulder off

my chest. I flicked the television off and went to

tell someone. The girls were all out. Saturday

night, what did I expect? Mom was still at the

library, according to a note on the table. I peeked

inside Aunt Frieda's room, but she looked like she

was dozing over her big black book. I went back to

the living room.

I turned on the stereo, and music filled the

corners of the room. All those years of dancing

had made it impossible for me to listen to music

without my body responding in some way —

that's why I didn't much listen to music anymore.

But now, it was like somebody had given me a

shot of adrenaline, and I could feel the Latin beat

right down to the soles of my feet. "The sole of

your foot," Miss Fleur would say. "The *soul,"* she'd

repeat, in that irritating way she had, to make

sure you hadn't missed her amazing pun.

119

*Gayle Friesen*

I pushed the sofa to the side of the room and,

using it as a substitute barre, did some hamstring

stretches. As the muscles warmed up, I wondered if

I could still pull off a triple pirouette. "A dancer's

limbs ... extend into infinity ..." Miss Fleur must

have said that a million times. I reached as die words

echoed inside me. "Always up." I reached higher and

turned ... once, twice ... and remembered that

place that was in between time ... the place that

extended to infinity.

In the middle of the third turn, I felt someone's

eyes on me. Aunt Frieda, in her slippers, stood in

the doorway. She clapped her hands and grinned.

I stopped, suddenly awkward.

"Oh, no, keep going. It looks wonderful."

I hesitated, but the sparkle in her eyes inspired

me suddenly. "Actually, Aunt Frieda, I hate to dance

alone and, I think" — I leaned into the music —

"that this is our song."

Now it was her turn to look awkward. Panicked,

actually. "No, *nein,* I couldn't," she said, backing up

a couple of steps.

"It's easy. I'll show you."

I did a couple of simple steps. Your basic slowslow-

quick-quick routine. She didn't move, but

when I reached for her parchment-paper hands, she

didn't resist either. At first she moved like a plank

of wood, straight up and down.

"Find the music," I urged.

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*Men of Stone*

We did a slow foxtrot, but she moved stiffly, as

if she was on the bow of a boat in rolling waves.

"Just climb right into the music and stay there

until you feel it."

Gradually I could feel her fragile form relax, and

I knew the beat was penetrating. I heard Claude's

taunting — Ballerina Boy. What would he say about

this scene? But then Aunt Frieda laughed.

"I'm dancing," she said, awed.

I pushed Claude out of my head.

"And now the corner step," I said. "Just follow

my lead." I moved forward a step, then back one and

we did a half turn. Aunt Frieda followed without

missing a beat.

"You're pretty good," I said, impressed.

She smiled but didn't say anything. She was

concentrating on the steps. When the song was

finished, I bowed. "Thanks for the dance."

"Oh, my," she said, moving over to a chair and

sitting down. "My, my. That was ... fun."

"Yeah." And it was.

"You need to keep dancing, Ben," she said, suddenly

stern and grandmotherly.

"I thought it was a sin."

But she didn't smile. "Perhaps in your case it

would be a sin not to dance."

That's when I noticed Mom standing in the

doorway. I wondered how long she'd been there.

"Oh, Catherine, come in. Your son was just

121

*Gayle Friesen*

teaching me to dance — could you ever have

imagined such a thing?"

Mom walked over to the stereo and turned

down the music. Not off, just down. Her face was

creased with tiredness. She smiled limply. "You

don't mind?" she said, pointing to the stereo. "I've

had such a day. I think I'll go straight to bed."

Aunt Frieda started to get up. "I've baked some

strudel. Why don't I make you a nice cup of tea

before you go to bed."

Mom's eyes crinkled up at the corners. "That

would be lovely." She sounded grateful.

I tried to remember the last time anyone offered

to make her a cup of tea and I couldn't.

Then the door flew open, and the twins piled in,

chattering in tandem, as usual.

"Ooh, good song," Mad said, flinging her cape

onto the couch. "I must dance. It is in me. C'mon,

Benny Twinkletoes." She held her hand out.

I shook my head. "Uh-uh."

Aunt Frieda looked at me, a question in her

eyes, but I looked away.

I couldn't dance. My sisters'd just nag me to take

it up again. What happened tonight wasn't about

that. I was just being nice to an old lady who'd

never danced before. That was all. It had nothing to

do with my life.

"I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

The twins looked disappointed. Until Beth

yipped as she spotted something in the kitchen.

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*Men of Stone*

"Strudel!" she yelled. "Aunt Frieda, you didn't."

She sounded as excited as if one of her Firemen

Calendar men was sitting on the counter waiting

for her.

"I need to know how you did this!" she hollered

from the kitchen.

"I'm coming," Aunt Frieda answered. "You'll be

all right?" she said to me.

"I'm fine."

The noise in the kitchen rose as both Beth and

Mad tried to out-twin each other. My feeling of

lightness slipped away.

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**11**

Sunday morning arrived earlier than usual. Maybe

not technically, but the smell of fresh baking

pulled me out of bed long before I was used to

getting up. As I grabbed a pair of sweats, it occurred

to me that it had been years since I'd seen 8:30 on

a weekend.

I felt like one of those cartoon characters being

dragged along by an aromatic waft in the air as I

made my way to the kitchen. But the sound of

voices stopped me before I entered.

"... such a good dancer, Catherine. The look on

his face last night was so —"

"I'm not saying he's not talented, Frieda, but I'm

a little surprised to hear you championing the

cause of dance. I didn't think dance was big with

Mennonites." That was Mom.

Aunt Frieda said something that I couldn't make

out. I leaned forward.

"I suppose," said Mom. "It's just that I worry

about him. He needs to focus on his grades. He

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*Men of Stone*

can't throw away his future. It hasn't been easy to

be both mother and father, you know."

"I know, dear. And you've done a wonderful job."

A clatter of coffee cups and then, "I don't know

about that ..." More clatter of dishes. What were

they doing? Playing Frisbee with them? How was a

guy supposed to eavesdrop with so much noise.

"He's still a boy, Catherine."

"It's different now. Things are different. You

don't know how much he was teased for being in

dance. It hurt him, I think. And it's dangerous out

there ... Kids carry weapons to school." Her

teacher voice.

"Men have always carried weapons."

There was a silence.

"I know you survived a war, Frieda. But this is

different. Ben is different. He's ..."

I could hear my heart in my ears.

"He's sensitive," she finally said. "He's not a

fighter, and that's what you need to be to survive."

My appetite disappeared. I didn't stick around

to hear Aunt Frieda's response. I went back to my

room and closed the door tightly behind me.

My own mother thought I was a wimp ... a

weakling ... that I didn't have what it took to survive.

Like she was some big expert. Why did she

even think she knew me? I felt the anger uncurl

inside me. She was always in the library or teaching

or grading papers. She didn't have a clue who I

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*Gayle Friesen*

was. Plus, me living in this dormitory for women

— what did she expect?

I pulled a T-shirt on and changed into running

shorts. I needed to get out of here.

I almost made it to the front door.

"Ben, can you come here for a minute?"

"I was just going for a run, Mom."

"Perfect," she said. "That's a good idea."

"Yeah, figured I could use some toughening up."

But she didn't flinch, didn't make the connection.

"Would you mind walking with Aunt Frieda to

that church at the corner of Pine and Sixteenth?

It'll only take ten minutes or so."

Did I really need a ten-minute walk with Eyes

That See Everything? "Whatever."

"Ben."

"It's okay, Catherine," Aunt Frieda interjected.

"It's not far. I'm sure I can find my way. If not,

I'll just wander around, and hope someone takes

pity on me. I'll take my medication with me just

in case."

I couldn't help it. I had to laugh. "Okay, I give up."

Her eyes sparkled. "I'll just get my purse."

Mom sipped her coffee thoughtfully. "You two

have an interesting relationship."

I shrugged. "She says what's on her mind. I

like that."

"Yes she does." An expression I couldn't read

crossed her face. "Ben?"

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*Men of Stone*

"Yeah?"

"I, um ... we could ..." She stopped and cleared

her throat. "Thanks. I appreciate this."

"Okay." I wondered what she'd really been about

to say.

"Well, I'm ready." Aunt Frieda appeared, coat

and hat on, with her purse dangling on her arm.

As we left the house I told her that she looked

good.

She tossed her head with a look something like

disbelief, but she seemed pleased. "I used to be

considered quite nice-looking," she said.

"Wow, that's probably a big compliment in your

circle, isn't it?" I teased, thinking about the vanity

of putting a flower in her hair.

She patted my arm. "You're learning."

"So, what did you want to be when you were a

little kid?" I asked, making conversation. It was

what adults always asked kids. I figured I'd turn

it around.

But there was no answer. Unusual for her. I

looked down at her snowy hair. "Aunt Frieda?"

"Oh, I was just thinking." She sounded puzzled.

"I don't know if I ever thought about that, Ben.

What I would be ..."

"It's okay. Dumb question."

"No it's not. I suppose I knew I would marry

and have children. But I did have questions about

who I was. I remember once, when I was very

127

*Gayle Friesen*

young — oh, I told you about this, didn't I? When

the workers arrived to help with the harvest?"

I nodded. "The music and the dancing."

"Yes. The Russian workers always did things

differently. I thought they were quite romantic,

the way they dressed and spoke. On the night I

crept down to the orchards, I couldn't keep my

eyes off that young couple. They were so free with

their feelings ... I suppose that's what I heard in

their music, even though I couldn't understand

the words. It was as though it had touched their

very souls."

We walked along the sidewalk. I found myself

avoiding the cracks the way I did when I was a little

kid, thinking about that young couple.

"Do you believe in God, Ben?'

Okay, major turnaround. "Huh?"

"God," she repeated quite loudly.

"Yeah, I heard you. Where'd that come from?"

"I'm old," she said, as if this were explanation

enough. "Well?"

"I guess, yeah, probably ... in theory, anyway." I'd

never given it much thought but sometimes —

when I looked, say, at a tree or a really great-looking

girl — I figured, yeah, probably.

"Well, I thought that night as I listened to the

beautiful music that God must be listening as well ...

but differently, because he would understand their

language."

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*Men of Stone*

I tried to follow her.

She looked up at me. "You see, he didn't only

understand our German language, he understood a

thousand languages." Her eyes searched mine

before she continued. "I'd always thought that the

Mennonite people were special somehow, chosen

by God. But that night under those bright stars, I

knew He was much bigger than I'd ever thought.

And I was happy to know this."

I could see the church a block away. I slowed

my pace.

"But what about the bad stuff?" It probably wasn't

fair to her, but it was what I thought about sometimes.

Where was God when the music stopped?

"Oh, I was angry with God for a long time, Ben.

Very angry. After Henry was taken, I prayed every

night that God would deliver him back to me. I

thought if only I had enough faith ... My family

wrote to me from Canada reminding me that God

would be my refuge and strength. And for a time

these words and my prayers kept me warm at

night. But time wore on, and I had no idea where

they had taken him. I prayed, but there was no

answer. I felt no refuge in God, and my heart began

to freeze. I had my son and I loved him, but I felt so

alone. We were very poor, and we lived in ...

squalor. Every night Jacob would cry himself to

sleep because of the lice ..."

*Lice?* My eyes widened. "Keep going."

129

*Gayle Friesen*

"He was so uncomfortable and hungry — and I

could do nothing for him. The letters from my

family urged me to hold on to my faith, that good

things would happen to those who wait. But I was

so tired of waiting, Ben."

It was when she stopped talking that I noticed

the traffic was moving quickly beside us. I felt as if

it should have been horses and mud roads, prisons

and soldiers.

"Then one day I received word from friends that

Henry had been located, and he was being transferred

to a prison not far from where we lived."

"So you got to see him?" I could actually feel my

heart pumping blood.

"You're as impatient as I was." A faint flicker of a

smile danced on her face, but then it vanished. "I

left Jacob with friends, and I walked to the place

where Henry was being held. It took me two days.

I went to the man in charge and I asked to see my

husband. He told me it was impossible. Impossible.

I cried that whole night, and in the morning I

returned to the prison, but the warden would not

see me. I had failed — myself and Jacob. You see,

I'd brought a photo to show Henry his son — ten

years old. I walked beside the prison wall. There

were men, soldiers, posted at every corner with

their rifles."

"The men of stone."

130

*Men of Stone*

She nodded. "At one end there was a fence, and

through it I could see the courtyard. As I passed,

prisoners were being led into the yard for the midday

sun. I took hold of the fence and pressed my

face to it, hoping to get a glimpse of my Henry.

Then I saw —"

"Henry? You saw him?"

Aunt Frieda shook her head. "A guard. He was

my age, perhaps younger. He walked toward me,

his face stern and angry, his rifle pointed in my

direction."

"I thought, at first, he was going to shoot me. I

pulled myself tall, and God forgive me, I wanted

him to pull the trigger. We looked at each other for

a long time. But then his eyes changed. It was as

though a veil was lifted. He jerked his head toward

the prisoners. He walked away. I knew he was

allowing me to look." Her face transformed as she

smiled. "And that's when I saw Henry."

My fingernails dug into my palms, but I couldn't

seem to unclench my fists.

Her voice was a whisper. "He was thinner and

the hair that was left was almost gray. But I saw

him ... our eyes met, and in that look was ten

years of love I had missed. We couldn't speak,

but that didn't matter. I'd seen him. I could

touch him with my eyes." She grew teary. "And it

was sufficient."

131

*Gayle Friesen*

"It was sufficient," I repeated. "So what about the

nightmares you have?"

She seemed jarred by my question. "The nightmares?

How did you ..."

I hesitated. "Sometimes, at night, you have

nightmares about lice, Aunt Frieda."

She shook her head sadly. *"Ach,* those nightmares.

No, they had not even begun. When I returned

home, I found that Jacob was gone. There had been

trouble in the village, and families were forced to

flee. My son was gone."

"Gone? Where? Who took him?"

"I heard he had left with the Rempel family. They

were good people, but I had lost him. After my

grief came anger. I was angry at God. I turned my

back on Him, and I was alone. But Ben, no one can

survive being that alone."

By now we'd arrived at the church, and people

were milling around, smiling and shaking hands. I

suddenly felt out of place in my running clothes.

"You won't come in?" Aunt Frieda asked.

"I'm gonna go for a run ... over there at the

track." I pointed across the street. "I'll walk home

with you, if you like."

"That will be fine," she said with a nod. "I'll see

you in an hour."

I watched until she was inside the building, then

I crossed the street and made my way to the track.

"No one can survive being tiiat alone," she had said.

But I had. Even tiiough I had Mom and my sisters.

132

*Men of Stone*

I had just started kindergarten when Dad had

the accident. Mom had come home from the

hospital alone. The girls had screamed, shouted,

"No!" I covered my ears and ran to my room, hid

in the closet and waited for my dad to tell me

that my sisters were teasing me again. Finally

Mom coaxed me out and held me. "He's not

coming home" was all she'd said.

I hated this memory, hated that it had blocked

out all the other memories I must have of my father.

I picked up my pace and kept running, three, four,

five times around the track, and then I lost count.

Pretty soon the ache in my chest was replaced by

my lungs pulling for air. But I just ran faster.

I'd been alone since that day but I had survived,

hadn't I? Frieda was wrong.

When I couldn't run any more, I collapsed on

a bench and listened to the blood thumping in

my ears.

By the time I was breathing normally again,

people were pouring out of church — nicely

dressed people who didn't look as if they had any

problems. But then, Stan looked normal on the

outside. So did I. Even Claude the Demented

looked sort of normal.

I crossed the street and waited in the shade of a

cherry tree for Aunt Frieda. As soon as she

emerged from the building, I waved, and she made

her way through the crowd.

"So, how was it?" I asked.

133

*Gayle Friesen*

"Very nice. The music was a bit loud — guitars

and drums nowadays. But there were one or two

hymns I recognized."

Her face looked rested.

"Such a young pastor," she continued, as we

moved up the sidewalk. "He preached a good sermon,

though, even if he couldn't have been more

than forty!"

"Just a baby."

She cuffed me lightly on the head. "Rascal."

"Can I ask you something?" I said after a bit.

"Of course."

"How did you do it? How did you ... stand it

when you came home — that day — and he, Jacob ..."

Suddenly I wanted to pull back the question, but

she didn't flinch.

"Where we lived, Jacob and I, there were

terrible lice. It didn't matter what we did ... we

washed, scrubbed with kerosene, even burned

some of our things, but they kept coming back.

Many nights Jake would cry himself to sleep from

the pain of the bites, but there was nothing I could

do except hold him."

My scalp actually felt itchy, but I resisted the

urge to scratch.

"Once he was gone, what I held on to was the

hope that where he was, there were no lice — and

someone to hold him."

I felt my eyes prickle and I blinked hard. I hoped

she hadn't noticed.

134

*Men of Stone*

She didn't look at me, but she took my arm. I

could feel the weight of her, slight as it was, pulling

as though she needed the support. "Years later, when

he was grown and sent for me, he told me that the

day they had left the village, the lice disappeared."

She smiled up at me, and in the sunlight, I could see

that the lines on her face had been made as much by

laughter as by sadness.

135

**12**

Later that afternoon, I phoned Stan to find out why

I hadn't heard from him. His mom answered.

"He's not here."

"But I spoke to him yesterday. He said he was

going to call you."

"He did. But he isn't coming home." And the line

went dead.

All night I tried to figure out what could have

gone wrong. One reason, he'd said, was all he

needed. And I'd given him one.

The next morning I met up with Fish at the school

gates, but it felt different.

"He sounded like he was coming back, right?"

Fish asked.

"Something must have happened after I talked

to him."

"You should've traced the call," he said.

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*Men of Stone*

I punched him on the arm, which hurt me, I'm

sure, more than him. "Yeah, I shoulda pulled out

my handy-dandy junior detective kit and put a trace

on the call."

"Okay, okay." He rubbed his arm.

Inside the school, everything looked normal, which

really pissed me off. Didn't people know everything

had changed? Did anybody care that Stan was gone?

Would anyone even notice?

Melody fluttered up to Fish at our lockers. I

noticed Kat behind her, but I kept my face inside

my locker to avoid saying something stupid.

Soon Fish had been pulled into Melody's orbit

and was floating down the hall behind her. It was

safe to turn, I figured, but when I did, Kat was

standing directly in front of me.

"Whoa," I said, backing up a step and finding

myself smushed against the metal bank of lockers.

She smiled and moved back — to give me room,

I guessed.

"Hey," I said. Brilliant. My heart was racing and I

wondered if she could tell, with those superhuman

powers girls seemed to have.

"I heard your obnoxious friend skipped town."

In a millisecond, she went from being Supergirl

to utterly ordinary. Even my heartbeat slowed.

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*Gayle Friesen*

"He's not obnoxious." I moved past her toward

my class.

I could hear her behind me, and then she

touched my arm. Her cheeks were tinged pink.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That was dumb. Really

dumb." She seemed sincere ... and my heart went at

it again. It was like a lawnmower motor — one pull

and off it went.

"Are you worried about him? Melody says he's

been gone for a couple of days."

I moved to the side of the hallway, out of the

human current.

"I thought he was coming back last night," I said.

"That's what he told me, but I don't know. Maybe

he's off on a road trip — California, Mexico —"

"But you don't think so?"

I shook my head. "I don't think so."

"Well, I hope he's okay." Then she reached out

and touched my arm again, and it felt like a branding

iron, only cool. So cool that when she took it

away, I could still feel the imprint.

She started toward the throng of students but

then stopped. She pulled at a strand of her hair. "So,

uh, why didn't you ask me to dance the other

night?" Now her cheeks were quite red — and

quite, quite beautiful.

I shifted from my right foot to the left. I

mentally calculated possible answers quickly: I had

to leave. Lame. I needed to look for Stan. Lamer

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*Men of Stone*

and, additionally, not true. "But I wanted to ask," I

said finally.

She tucked the strand of hair behind a perfect

ear. "You could have," she said. And then the bell

rang, and she walked away.

I watched her until she disappeared into a classroom.

The halls were getting less crowded. I was

going to be late for history, and with my record of

skipping classes, I couldn't afford that. I decided to

take a shortcut through the courtyard, an area partly

obscured by large cedar trees. I walked quickly, but I

soon realized that I wasn't alone. I looked behind me.

Claude, Jeff and Arnie had followed me. I hurried,

but Claude stepped around and into my path. Behind

me, I could hear his friends breathing.

I tried to sidestep Claude, pretending that he

wasn't there, but he headed me off, placing his

weight-trained bulk uncomfortably close.

"Guess you're not so brave without your bodyguards

around, eh?" he said.

"Actually, Claude, I'm not that brave even when

they are around," I said, looking straight at him.

"But then, I don't see you walking around on your

own much either."

This was probably not the greatest idea I'd ever

had in my life, but I was suddenly tired of wondering

when he was going to strike again.

He pushed me, and I stumbled backward but

didn't fall.

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*Gayle Friesen*

"I saw you talking to Kat." He pushed again. "She's

way out of your league, Ballerina Boy. I don't want to

see it again." He stood, poised to push again, laughing

over my shoulder at his guffawing buddies — like I

was such a no-threat I'd wait patiently for the next

blow. I was instantly furious; I could actually feel die

adrenaline pouring through my body. Aunt Frieda's

warden ... and the men who'd taken Henry away —

all of them must have looked just like Claude. I

pushed hard on his chest. Taken by surprise, he fell to

the ground. Before I could do anything, somebody

pinned my arms behind me.

The first hit landed on my nose, and as the pain

exploded inside my head, I could actually feel the

bone and cartilage crumple. The blows kept coming

— my left cheek, the side of my head, my

shoulder. I could hear myself grunting as the air

was being pushed out of my lungs, but at the same

time I was watching it — this thing — happen to

me. It didn't seem real. This happened on television,

in the movies — in history books. Not to

me. Because it wasn't just my body being pummeled;

with each hit Claude was trying to get his

hands on something deep inside me, something

just out of reach. And I knew I was hanging on.

My eyes were closed, but I could see colors

zigzagging against the inside of my eyelids. And

then black.

I woke up with Nurse Shapiro peering down at

me. I shifted my head in the direction of slow-motion

140

*Men of Stone*

voices. Shepherd and the principal, Ms. Sterne, were

standing in the corner of the nurse's office.

"He's awake," Nurse Shapiro said over her

shoulder.

I tried to raise myself on one elbow, but my arm

wouldn't cooperate. I fell back against the pillow.

"Don't try to move. The ambulance is on its way."

"Who did this to you?" Ms. Sterne's sharp nose

was directly above me. Even in the pain, I wondered

if she'd ever considered investing in a good

pair of tweezers.

"Could I have some water?" I asked.

"I don't think that's a good idea. At least not

right now," clucked the nurse.

"Was it Claude?" Shepherd's face came into view,

and I felt I was going to suffocate. I wanted to

punch the faces out of my way. I couldn't breathe.

"Give him some room. Please." Nurse Shapiro's

decisive bark sent them both scuttling to the side of

the room. Gratefully, I drew in some air.

Then something in the corner of the room

caught my eye, something pink and torn and ruffly.

I tried to focus, but it was the sudden recognition

in Shepherd's eyes, and the way he looked, that

made me feel sick to my stomach.

"What's that?" I asked. My voice sounded like

sandpaper.

"Nothing, Ben. At least not now."

But Ms. Sterne picked it up and brought it

over. Her voice was kind. "We found this around

141

*Gayle Friesen*

your feet, Ben. Please, you have to help us punish

whoever did this to you."

I looked at the pink crinoline — somebody's idea

of a tutu. My head boomed. I felt such hatred burst

inside me that I realized I'd never understood the

word until now.

The ambulance guys poked and prodded, lifting

limbs and pressing to see where I was damaged.

I tried to float away. What a disappointment my

body was — so bloody fragile. I couldn't help

thinking how invincible I felt when I was dancing.

How every part of me responded to my

orders — even as I ached with exhaustion. Now

everything was spinning out of control, beyond

my reach. I closed my eyes, willed the blackness

to come.

I refused to open my eyes until I was in a hospital

bed in the emergency room and some of the

bodies had retreated. Someone was holding my

wrist, so I slowly opened my right eye — the left

one was glued shut. A butt-ugly doctor grimaced

down at me.

"I'm Dr. Balch," he bellowed, as if my hearing

had been affected.

"I was hoping for a beautiful blonde just out of

medical school."

142

*Men of Stone*

"Only on television, I'm afraid," he chuckled.

"I'm glad your sense of humor wasn't damaged."

"Who's joking?" I grumbled, trying to sit up. My

shoulder burned with pain.

"You'll want to be careful with that shoulder,

Ben. It was partially dislocated. Other than that,

there's some bruises and swelling, but that's it.

You're pretty lucky."

"Right. I was just thinking that same thing." I saw

his nose twitch, as if he was tiring of my wit.

"The police are here," he said. "They want to ask

you a few questions."

A uniform entered the room, pulled a chair up

and sat beside the bed.

"Hello, son."

I mumbled hello, even though it is my least

favorite thing when total strangers call me "son."

"I won't take too much time. You look as if you

could use a little rest."

"That's why I checked in, for a rest." He looked

as unimpressed as the doctor had.

"Son, did you see who did this to you?"

"My name's Ben."

He didn't seem to hear, just waited for my

answer. In the blink of that moment, I made a decision.

No one, not even the police, was going to take

this away from me. I shook my head. "They came at

me from behind. It was over too quick."

143

*Gayle Friesen*

"They?"

"It, uh, yeah."

"They didn't take anything — that's what your

teacher said. He mentioned a boy at school who he

thought might —"

"I didn't see anything."

"A voice? Did they say anything?"

I shook my head. "Random act of violence," I

offered.

The officer scribbled something in his notebook,

and I thought he sighed. "Yup ... see a lot of that."

He stopped writing. "I also see a lot of kids who

take on things best left to the police." He gave me a

look dripping with meaning.

I nodded as if he was talking about somebody else.

"Here's my card. Call me if you remember anything,

s—, er, Ben." He placed the white business

card beside the neon-green jello on my tray.

"Yup."

As soon as he left the room, Dr. Balch stepped

forward. "Your mother should be here soon."

Mom? I groaned. Blood and guts were not her

thing. And hospitals? She hated them ... hadn't

stepped inside one since —

"Ben, oh Ben." She walked through the doors

slowly, looking around like she was on the set of a

horror movie. "Are you all right?" She stepped

forward and hugged me carefully.

"Ow!" I yelped, and she sprang back.

144

*Men of Stone*

"His shoulder will be pretty sore," Dr. Balch

explained.

"How did this happen? Who would do such a

thing to you?"

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell her about

Claude, but something held me back. It wasn't

fear, it was something completely new to me —

revenge. Comic-book, science-fiction, movietheater-

with-popcorn, Hollywood revenge. I

wanted it really badly, and I wanted to get it

myself. Seeing Claude punished would not be

enough. My whole body tingled with the thought

of crushing his face.

"I didn't see them coming. Someone grabbed my

arms — they jumped me," I answered, going for

partial truths.

"Maybe you'll remember more after a while,

honey. You're probably still in shock." She turned to

the doctor. "Can he come home with me now?"

Dr. Balch shook his head. "I don't think he has a

concussion, but I don't want to take any chances.

He can go home tomorrow."

Mom looked ready to crawl out of her skin, and

I hated Claude even more for what this was doing

to her. I found a phony, cheerful voice. "I'll be okay,

Mom. It's not that bad. Honest."

"I'll stay with you."

"Mom, it's okay." The last thing she could take

was a night in a hospital. "I'm going to sleep as soon

145

*Gayle Friesen*

as you leave. I'm a big boy, okay? Besides, don't you

have a class to teach?"

She spent the next half hour plumping pillows,

arranging for a television set, buying magazines and

chocolate bars. She looked about to talk a couple of

times, but then she'd just do something to keep

herself busy.

Finally, she was ready to leave, and I was relieved

to see her go.

"The girls will want to visit tonight," she said at

the door.

"No, Mom. Not the girls." That was the last

thing I needed. Mad alone could weep and wail

loud enough to wake the dead, or at least the

comatose. Joni would be painting pain for a

month straight, and who knew what cooking tailspin

this would send Beth into — muffins molded

into fists, pasta shaped like swollen lips? "Please,

Mom, promise me!"

"Okay, okay. You're probably right. They are a

little emotional sometimes."

The first smile of the day reached my puffy lips.

"Just a little."

She left, and I promptly dozed off from the

painkillers. When I woke up, feeling blurry around

the edges, the first thing I saw was Fish's big face at

the foot of my bed. He looked pissed off.

"Claude?"

"Fine, thanks, how are you?"

146

*Men of Stone*

"Yeah, yeah ... you look like crap. It was Claude,

wasn't it?"

I nodded.

Fish jumped to his feet and turned in a circle,

clenching his fists. "I'm going to get him — don't

worry about it."

No you re not.

"You're going to let him get away with this?"

I shook my head. "I want you to do something

for me but not that."

He sat down. "What, then?"

"I want you to teach me how to fight."

147

**13**

A slow smile curved across Fish's face. "I can do

that, but you aren't exactly in condition."

"He won't bother me right away — he's too

smart for that. He'll lie low for a while, till he realizes

I haven't ratted on him."

"We can go to my gym. Use the ring there."

I nodded. "Have you heard anything from Stan?"

"Nah. Nobody has. I tried calling his house, but

his dad didn't know anything. The police are looking

for him."

"He can't run forever, though, right? He'll be

back," I said with more conviction than I felt. Deep

down, I wondered if we'd ever see him again.

We watched some television, and then Fish left. I

kept the tube on for company, but I couldn't concentrate.

I couldn't see anything except the picture in my

head of Claude, crumpled and bloody, at my feet.

I awoke early with an ancient nurse holding my wrist.

Before my vision cleared I thought it was Aunt Frieda.

148

*Men of Stone*

"You'll be able to go home today, young man.

How did you sleep?"

I'd had stupid dreams all night long. Claude's

ugly mug, Stan floating in and out ... my sisters

singing in a choir — that was a weird one — and

through the entire thing, like a cheesy soundtrack,

a chant. "Lice, lice, lice."

"Like a baby."

Mom picked me up at the hospital diat afternoon. She

drove home telling me stories about her students,

mostly rambling on about nothing. I nodded once in a

while to give the impression that I was listening.

"Where's the marching band?" I asked, after

Beth insisted on seating me down on the La-Z-Boy

recliner.

As I expected, the girls had used the "incident"

as an event. There was a "Welcome Home" banner,

chocolate cake, an armload of flowers (what fifteen-

year-old boy wouldn't love that?) and lots of

painful hugging.

It wasn't that I didn't appreciate the thought,

but, "You guys are too much," I said. They beamed

through teary eyes at me.

"Poor, poor Benjo, how could anyone hit —"

said Beth.

"— such a cute face. What kind of creep —"

added Mad.

"The world is full of creeps," Joni muttered.

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*Gayle Friesen*

"We're so glad you're not like that, Benny."

Beth again.

I forced my lips into a smile-like configuration.

"I'm going to my room for a while."

Beth and Mad sprang forward. "Let us help you."

I pushed their flailing hands away and could see

the hurt look on their identical faces.

Aunt Frieda looked small and concerned in the

corner. I couldn't meet her eyes.

As I left the room, Mom was explaining the effects

of traumatic injury. She was good at outlining the

facts, the hows. It was the whys she had trouble with.

Go ahead. Figure this one away, Mom.

I knew they'd chew this whole thing over for the

entire evening. They'd examine the "psycho-sociological

factors" and make it into some big cosmic

thing. (Not that they'd agree on what that thing

was.) But it was simple: Claude beat me up. I was

going to pay him back. Revenge. Finally beat up on

every bad thing ever done to me. Every guy who'd

ever razzed me about dancing. My sisters and my

mom, who didn't have a clue who I was. The men of

stone who'd hurt Aunt Frieda. Stan's parents for

being stupid and incompetent. So simple.

I talked Mom into letting me eat in my room that

night. Mad and Beth brought a tray to me. They

looked unusually small as they entered the room.

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*Men of Stone*

"Sorry about before, Benjo —"

"— too much all at once —"

"— must be tired and you need —"

I held up my hand like a crossing guard. "Could

you ever, in your lives, talk one at a time? Finish

one complete sentence?"

"Well, you don't have to be rude," huffed Mad,

and she stormed from the room.

"She should really consider nursing if the acting

thing doesn't work out."

Beth smiled as she put the tray down. "We're

worried about you, Benny."

"Do you think you could just call me Ben?"

She reached out a hand, I think to ruffle my hair,

but stopped herself. "Sure, of course. We're just

used to you being the ... you know."

"Baby."

She smiled apologetically. "Look what I made,"

she said proudly, lifting the napkin. "Hamburgers!"

I smiled even though it hurt my split lip. "On a

bed of greens," I added.

She shrugged. "I couldn't help myself. Bon

appétit." She turned at the doorway. "Mom said you

didn't see who beat you up."

I grunted.

Her eyes narrowed. "You're not going to do

something stupid, are you?"

"Who, me? Sensible, sensitive me?"

"Benj ... Ben. Don't sink to their level. It's not safe."

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*Gayle Friesen*

"What do you want me to do, Beth? Just lie

down and take it?"

"There are other ways ... look at Jesus ... look at

Gandhi! Violence is for barbarians."

"Gandhi and Jesus? So, what, my options are

assassination or crucifixion?"

Beth leaned against the door. "Enjoy your burger,

Ben," she said in a tired voice and left.

I tried to eat my meal but I wasn't hungry. What

did she want from me? What did any of them want

from me? All my life they'd told me about the man

I should never become: the know-it-all, the brute,

the insensitive goof, the guy-who-never-listens.

What about the man I *should* become? They'd never

said anything about that.

Fish brought my homework by. I heard him

clumping down the hallway, pretty much ruling

out future employment as a spy. He came into

the room carrying two plates piled high with

chocolate cake and ice cream.

"Man, you live in heaven," he declared, handing

me a plate. "And Beth? She's really cute. Why have

I never noticed that before?"

"Maybe because you're supposed to be in love

with Melody?"

"A guy can look, can't he?"

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*Men of Stone*

"Well, don't let Stan see you looking," I

answered, forgetting for a second that Stan was

gone. The room felt heavier immediately. "Why

don't you focus on Joni?" I tried, but it didn't help.

Fish shook his head, his mouth full of chocolate

cake. He swallowed. "Uh-uh, she scares me. She's

so ... ferocious, or something."

"Welcome to my world, buddy."

"Besides, there's something about a dame who

can cook."

We spent the next thirty seconds demolishing

the cake.

Fish shoved his plate under the chair before leaning

on the back two legs, his size-twelve feet on my bed.

"You really look pretty bad," he said thoughtfully.

"Kind of yellow and oozing."

"Thanks."

"Yellow and oozing," he repeated. "That sounds

good. Stan would have liked that."

"We gotta stop talking like he's dead, Fish. We

have to find him, do something."

"I know. But if the police can't find him, what

chance do we have?"

Helpless. The word might as well have flashed

across our chests like a subtitle in a foreign movie.

I could see Aunt Frieda's face pressed against the

fence, watching Henry trapped inside.

Claude.

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*Gayle Friesen*

Fighting back.

"Did you check out the gym?" I asked. "When

can we start?"

"Buddy." Fish pulled his feet off the bed, leaned

forward. "You look like a salmon that just swam

upstream."

"You really are a poet, man. Forget how I look.

I'm ready."

"Listen, I'm the first one to say Claude needs

the crap kicked out of him, but give it a couple of

days, okay?"

"Okay," I agreed reluctantly.

He dug into his knapsack and pulled out a

notebook. He handed me a math sheet and an

English assignment. "Shepherd stopped me in the

hallway today."

I swallowed twice to keep my throat open. He

wouldn't have told Fish about ... the other thing,

would he, what Claude and his creeps had put

around my legs. "He's still on the warpath?" I

managed to get out.

"I didn't tell him anything. He thought I would."

"He's hopeless." I relaxed just a little. Fish

wouldn't be able to look me in the eye if he knew.

"He just wants to help, Ben."

"You don't think I should tell him?" My voice

rose a notch.

"No way. Claude would be suspended for a couple

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*Men of Stone*

of days, get to look like the bad boy. Forget it. There's

nothing they can do."

Good. It was official. It was up to me.

I went to bed early that night, determined to get

the sleep I needed to recover. Suddenly my whole

life revolved around my revenge. Nothing else

mattered — except for Stan, but somehow it all

seemed connected. If I could get Claude, beat him

down, erase him, Stan would come home and

things would be better. Okay, it didn't make sense

in any logical way, but it made sense to me.

*"Stop ...my hands ..."* My hands were tied behind my

back and ropes dug into my wrists. Blood was

seeping around the rope, thickening and congealing.

*"Stop."* My skin was crawding. Something was

actually crawling under it, black and shiny. Hard.

Alive. *"Lice."*

I tried to lift my head, open my eyes, but they

stayed plastered shut ... swollen and full of pus. If

I didn't wake up, I was going to die — the room

was shrinking. And then something warm touched

my hand and the ropes fell away. Something warm

and dry and soft. A hush filled my brain and my

eyelids separated.

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*Gayle Friesen*

Aunt Frieda was beside the bed. Her hand

stroked mine gently. "Shh, *nahyo.* Rest, *mein bengel"*

My head fell back against the pillow and I slept.

In the morning there was no sign that Aunt Frieda

had actually been there. But I could have sworn ...

I maneuvered my aching body out of bed and

dressed for school. One more day of tender loving

care and I'd be ready for the loony bin.

I looked into Aunt Frieda's room, but she was

sound asleep.

When I entered the kitchen, Joni glanced up from

the paper. Beth was posted at the stove, and Mad was

pulling out of some impossible yoga position on the

floor. They all seemed surprised to see me.

"Morning," I said, normal as could be. I tried not

to wince as I sat down.

"Good morning, Master Ben. How nice to see

you up and about this lovely morning," Mad

said in clipped tones. She put a hand to her face.

"My goodness, did I actually speak in a full and

complete sentence?"

I grabbed a muffin from the basket. "Get over it."

Mad stretched her torso along her legs like a

human paper clip.

"So you're 'the man' now, huh, Ben?" said Joni.

"One thrashing and you're ... what, Robo-brother?"

I reached for part of the paper. "Shut up."

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*Men of Stone*

She walked out of the room.

"Where's Mom?" I asked Beth.

"Early class. She thought you'd be sleeping till

noon. You're not going to school today, are you?"

"I'm fine."

"Like we care," Mad said, pulling herself into a

standing position. She grabbed a muffin. "I've got

rehearsal today, Beth. I won't be home for dinner."

"Good luck. Break a leg," Beth called after her.

I kept my head bent over the paper.

When I looked up again, Beth was sitting beside

me. She reached out a hand and brushed her fingertips

on my bruised face.

"Don't touch me." I lurched back like I'd been

burned.

Her eyes filled with tears. "What did he do to you?"

When I didn't answer, she, too, left the room.

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**14**

"... expecting great things from you people,"

Shepherd paused meaningfully.

He liked to call us "you people," as though we

were somehow different, separate from the rest of

the human race.

Max Ton's hand shot up. "I'm confused."

The class laughed, but Shepherd held up his

hand to silence the sniggering. Max, as usual, was

unperturbed.

"Go on," Shepherd said.

"I'm almost finished my research, Mr.

Shepherd."

"Dork," somebody called out.

With one hand, Shepherd ushered whoever it

was out the back door. I didn't even turn to see

who it was.

"Proceed, Mr. Ton," Shepherd said smoothly.

"Well, I can't really figure out who's who. I mean,

there's the Red Army and the White Army ... the

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*Men of Stone*

Czarists — what are they, the Monarchists? The

Bolsheviks, the Communists, die Fascists — who

can keep them all straight?"

"And your question is?" Shepherd asked patiently.

"It all keeps changing. How do you know who

the bad guys are?"

"Why do there have to be bad guys?"

Max had no ready answer.

"Makes it easier to shoot them," I said, surprising

myself more than anyone else.

Shepherd pushed his half glasses up on his nose

as if he wanted to read me. "Tell me there's some

irony in your voice, Mr. Conrad."

I shrugged, sorry I'd spoken. My swollen eye

was pulling with tiredness, and I just wanted to

sleep. "Sure."

Shepherd stuck his glasses into his shirt

pocket. He had his hopeful-teacher look stretched

across his face. "No, really, Mr. Conrad. Elaborate.

Why does it make it easier to shoot them? To

what end?"

"To the end of them. They're gone, erased. Then

they can't hurt anybody," I said, muffled and quiet,

but he was listening.

"And how do we recognize the bad guys?" His

teacher voice was gone. He was just a person now.

"It's in the eyes," I said.

He didn't say anything — for the first time. And

the strange thing was, part of me wanted him to have

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*Gayle Friesen*

a really great, smart response. Prove me wrong, I

wanted to shout. Give me one good reason —

But the bell rang. I picked up my books and filed

out of the room with everyone else.

Two days later I found myself at the gym with Fish.

The room pulsed like it was a living, sweating

organism. Every inch of space was occupied with

guys pumping iron. In the center of the room was

a ring marked by rope, a neat, organized square for

civilized, organized fighting.

One of the trainers, Alec, fitted us with gloves.

He had a medium build and wasn't much taller

than me, but he looked strong and fit. He taught us

the basics.

"Boxing is an athletic contest between two people,"

he started in a low, soft voice. "You use your

fists to try to knock the other unconscious or to

inflict enough punishment to cause your opponent

to quit or be judged defeated ..."

Fish nodded knowingly. He'd had a couple of

lessons last year. But I sucked it all in like a baby

taking in my first lungful of true air. "Knock the

other unconscious." Sounded good to me.

Claude had been suspiciously absent for the past

few days, but he was always with me.

"Maybe he knows he went too far," Fish had said.

"He's biding his time."

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*Men of Stone*

"Sounds like something Stan would say."

Stan. He was with us too. The longer he stayed

away, the more he was with us.

Alec was still talking — something about

ancient Rome when they'd maimed or killed an

opponent. "Remember, though, the emphasis in

boxing is not on strength as much as agility. It's not

about beating your opponent as much as it is about

pushing through your own pain. Pushing yourself

to the limit, that's the point."

I didn't know much about the pushing through

pain part, but I understood agility. This was

encouraging.

I pulled the strings on die gloves tight witii my

teeth. It felt weird wearing diese big, bulbous leather

extensions of clenched fists. Almost cowardly.

Alec left us in the ring. We had on helmets as

well as mouth guards. Protection he called it.

Fish stood calmly as I came out swinging.

"Control," he said. "Wait for the moment."

He moved around me, hunched over, protecting

vital organs. His arms were up, his fists ready. I

watched him from the center, then I began to copy

his moves, circling around him. It was a dance. He

didn't know it, I was sure of tiiat. But it was definitely

a dance. My legs felt less heavy, and I could hear

music in my head — only a beat, but music. I moved

in three quick dance steps without thinking, a *pas de*

*bourrée,* to be precise, not that I'd ever tell Fish.

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*Gayle Friesen*

"That's good. That's right. You're getting it."

My arm, as if spring loaded, darted out, catching

Fish lightly on the chin strap. He hadn't seen

it coming.

"Okay, smart boy." Fish grinned. His right hand

caught me neatly on the side of my helmet, but I

spun away from him. That was easy, familiar. I

moved back to miss his left hook — and then forward

to connect right under his chin. He was surprised

and stopped moving, just watching me as I

came at him again. I stopped in my tracks.

"What?"

"You're a natural," he said quietly. There was

admiration in his eyes — I'd never seen that before.

After each session at the gym, I felt more alive and

in control. My shoulder was nearly back to normal

and the bruises were fading. I was almost my old

self. Except I wasn't. What happened in the courtyard

with Claude had changed me. I would never

again be someone's target.

We still hadn't heard from Stan. The last time I

called his mother, I'd heard desperation in her voice.

Tough, I thought. Much too little and far too late.

One evening as I was practicing jabs in the mirror,

Aunt Frieda walked by. I should have closed my door.

"Who's winning?" she asked, smiling.

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*Men of Stone*

I grinned sheepishly. "It's a draw, I think."

"May I sit down?"

"Sure." I pulled my desk chair out for her.

"I haven't seen you very much lately. I've missed

our talks," she said.

I shrugged. "I've been busy with school stuff." It

was amazing how easy lying was becoming.

"I think your sisters miss you as well."

I laughed out loud at that. "Uh-uh. No way."

"What makes you so sure?"

"That's just the way it is around here, Aunt

Frieda. There's me and there's them. It's always

been that way." Not quite true either. I had a feeling

— and a few photos to back this up — that me and

my dad used to do guy things together. Tossing a

baseball. Kicking a soccer ball at the park. I used to

be part of an "us."

"It works out okay, Aunt Frieda. I give them

their space, they give me mine."

Her eyes looked sad. "You're planning to fight

this boy then? This boy who gave you the black eye?"

Caught by a left hook out of nowhere. "I'm,

uh, just training. You know, getting in shape. It's

dangerous out there," I said noncommittally.

"There are other ways of fighting back, Ben."

"Beth said the same thing," I said, sitting down

on my bed. "Tell me honestly — when they took

Henry away or when Jacob left ... didn't you want

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*Gayle Friesen*

to fight back, Aunt Frieda?" I leaned over, my

elbows on my knees. Maybe it was unfair — I

shouldn't upset her — but I really wanted to know.

"Of course, Ben. Every night after Henry was

taken, I thought about revenge. I was filled with

rage. 'All things work for good,' people told me.

Pah. These words meant nothing. My thoughts of

revenge kept me warm, kept me company — they

were all I had left."

"So what did you do?" I thought of that rush of

heat when I imagined smashing Claude's face with

my fist, feeling and hearing the bones give way.

"All my life I'd been told how wrong it was to

fight: if you reached for the sword, you would die

by the sword. But this too meant nothing. The men

of stone had taken what was precious from me.

Didn't they deserve to suffer? Night after night I

imagined ways to make them hurt. I concocted

such tortures in my mind that they would beg for

mercy. My mercy."

As she spoke, a light burned in her eyes that

made me uneasy. I couldn't imagine that an old lady

could own such feelings. It didn't fit with the loving

way she acted with my family. I couldn't look any

more. I put my head in my hands.

Gradually I heard a softer voice. "Then I dreamed,

Ben, but not my usual nightmare. I dreamed that I

was standing outside the prison, waiting. Then the

fence — the chains — fell away. And I was in the

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*Men of Stone*

middle of the courtyard. I was walking toward

Henry. He was standing in the sunlight. I reached

out to him, but when he turned, it wasn't Henry I

touched. It was the guard, the man who'd let me see

Henry. His eyes were kind. He was not my enemy.

He was only a man, and all he could do was shoot

me. My true enemy was die hatred inside me, and it

could do far more harm."

"I don't understand that."

"I was exhausted, Ben. Hatred is an all-consuming

master. So much had been taken from me. The only

thing I had left was my humanity. I couldn't let the

men of stone take that as well."

I shook my head, not understanding — not

wanting to understand.

"When you dance, Ben, do you always know

where the music will lead you?"

Her words jarred me into the present. What did

she know about dance? Nothing. Claude or me. It

wasn't about my humanity, it was about survival.

When I looked up, she had left.

After that, I avoided my family even more. It was easy

with Joni and Mad because they were ignoring me,

as if the silent treatment would be too unbearable

and I'd come crawling. Mom tried to figure out

where I "was at," but Psych 100 wasn't enough, and

she gave up as long as I was home by curfew. Beth just

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*Gayle Friesen*

looked sad, which tore me up, but I told myself that

things would get back to normal once I'd had it out

with Claude. Everything would be better and Stan

would come back.

I avoided Aunt Frieda as well. She seemed

to want something from me that I couldn't give.

At nights I felt she sat at my bedside, but I was

never sure. And when morning came, there was

no sign.

After school, I'd go straight to the gym. Sometimes

Fish came with me, but most often I'd go

alone. I burned inside like a chemical fire, sucking

everything living out of the air. I was pumping iron

as well as sparring, building muscles and getting

stronger. I liked the feeling of power it gave me —

to push harder, to feel the tendons and muscles

pulling and straining until I thought they'd pop.

Sometimes Alec would give me a few tips,

mumble about moving through the pain ... and

tell me to take it easy. But I wouldn't take it easy. I

was possessed.

Besides, it helped me to not think about Stan,

lost and wandering around out there.

The other day, Fish and I had stopped by to see

if there was any news. Eventually Mrs. Belado

answered the bell, looking cross and beaten down.

"He's not here," she said through the screen

door. She turned, responding to someone inside.

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*Men of Stone*

"Shut up, I can't hear myself think."

Mr. Belado came up the sidewalk behind us. He

just sidestepped and walked through the doorway

without a glance or a word to his wife.

"Nice of you to drop by," she muttered as he slid

past. "There's no news," she said to us, but this time

her eyes looked sad, and I felt a pang of pity.

"He'll come home," I said.

She looked at me, her eyelids half closed, as if it

took too much effort to open them wide. "He's

always been trouble, that one. I keep a roof over his

head, feed him. Nothing's ever enough."

Fish was already backing away at this point,

embarrassed and tugging at my arm. But I couldn't

leave. I wanted to say something to her, something

about how Stan had always stood up for me, always

been there for me. How he made me feel good

about myself. But I couldn't find the words, and she

just shrugged and closed the door in my face.

I tried to imagine her on the other side of the

door, caring — but I couldn't.

I picked up the weights now and hoisted them

up to my chest. I felt my biceps tremble with

exertion and watched the veins pull just under my

skin. My face was blank — I was getting good at

that. It was completely different from dance,

where facial expression is as important as movement.

But in this place you kept it to yourself —

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*Gayle Friesen*

the pain, the triumph — and let your body tell

the story.

By the time I got home most nights, I was too

tired to do anything except eat and go to bed.

Aunt Frieda was always in the kitchen, often

with one of the girls. I knew Beth was interested in

learning some of her recipes, and sometimes I'd

hear Aunt Frieda's instructions — kneading,

rolling dough, deep frying.

"Come try this, *mein bengel"* she said now,

handing me a bowl of stew. "We need a man's

opinion here."

"You need a man's opinion? That's a first around

here," I said, but I took the bowl and scarfed it down.

She smiled as she watched. I smiled back as I

handed her the bowl. "It was okay." I shrugged, and

she ruffled my hair with her small hand. For a

second, her warmth almost went through me.

Even Joni seemed softer when Aunt Frieda was

around. But I couldn't let that happen to me. I

needed my edge ... to be on my guard. I needed to

be ready.

I backed away. "I'm going to my room."

The next day Fish didn't show up at the gym. But

Alec said he'd fight me. As I got ready, I felt my

muscles tighten with expectation, almost the way I

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*Men of Stone*

felt before a performance. Almost. But there was

no music in my head.

Someone clanged the bell, and we circled, bodies

hunched, guarded against a blow, looking into each

other's eyes.

He threw the first punch. I raised my glove

swiftly and deflected the blow.

I jabbed once, twice ... faking. The third jab

landed on the side of Alec's face. He smiled even as

his head jerked to the side.

"Good hit," he said, approvingly.

I didn't smile back. "Ballerina Boy" bounced

around in my head like a Ping-Pong ball.

We circled some more. The pulse in my ears

provided the beat, steadily increasing as we

exchanged blows. But the refrain grew louder and

louder — "Ballerina Boy" — and Alex became

Claude. And then, for the briefest second, it

seemed as if my father was there, standing outside

the ring. I blinked the sweat out of my eyes and the

image was gone. I was disoriented, lost.

Alec's fist grazed my chin, and suddenly I was

furious — enraged — and nothing mattered

except bringing Claude down. My fists connected

— with his head, his chin, his chest, his kidneys —

and then arms were pulling me away. Claude —

no, Alec — was on the floor of the ring, doubled

over and groaning.

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*Gayle Friesen*

I bent over, sucking in air. I'd won. It was war

and I had won.

But that's not what they said when they told

me to go home. They called my punches illegal and

told me to get the hell out. I apologized to Alec,

told him I hadn't meant to go so far.

But he didn't make it any easier. "You're missing

the point here, Ben."

As I walked home, I waited for the anger to subside,

waited for my old self to come back. But it didn't.

I was missing the point? Damn right I was. What

was the point? Nobody was brave enough, honest

enough to admit that there wasn't one. People like

my dad died in stupid car accidents. Men like Henry

were torn from their beds and taken away. Kids like

Stan and Jacob disappeared, and nobody would just

come out and say that it made no sense.

A car drove fast through a puddle, and I could

feel the mud splash up onto my clothes. I heard a

laugh — maybe from the disappearing car, I

couldn't tell. But it filled me with white-hot rage

— like in the ring but even more intense — and

it felt good because it felt like something. My fist

closed around a rock. It was jagged and cut into

my skin. The next thing I knew I was throwing it

— and then another and another. I could hear

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*Men of Stone*

glass shatter. It felt as if my head was going to split

open. Then there was nothing. Nothing at all until

I felt my arms pinned behind my back.

The back seat of a police car is not as clean as you

might expect. There were chocolate bar wrappers

and coffee cups, and it smelled of somebody who'd

never given deodorant a passing thought.

Officer Ray had wrapped my hand in a bandage,

and decided to take me home instead of the local juvy

lockup. I wasn't sure that a night in jail wouldn't have

been easier than facing my mother. I could see the

look of disbelief on her face as she opened the door

to him. I could imagine her saying, You must be mistaken.

My son would never damage public property.

My sisters would form a chorus. Not Benny. Not our

little brother.

But then Officer Ray returned to the car and

deposited me, still handcuffed, on the front stoop.

Every mother's dream.

Her face lost all color, and for the first time I

felt sick. And sick I was, all over the rose bush.

Officer Ray took pity on me then and removed the

handcuffs. Beth led me to the couch.

It was Aunt Frieda I couldn't look at. It's a

cliché, I know, but I wanted the ground to open up

and swallow me.

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*Gayle Friesen*

Beth was clucking, Mad was questioning and

Joni was scowling when Mom told them all to

leave. Aunt Frieda followed them out the door.

Mom stared, then paced. Finally she sat down on

the couch beside me. I could smell my own vomit

and said I wanted to go clean up. I got halfway off

the couch.

"No."

I sat down again.

"The gym called, so I've been filled in on your

crazed behavior there. Maybe you could pick it up

after that." Sarcasm dripped from her voice. An

interesting choice, I thought.

"I, uh, broke some windows, I think."

"You broke some windows, you *think?"*

"The cop said it was an abandoned building,

Mom."

"Well, that's okay then. What's all the fuss

about? Can I get you something to eat?" Her voice

was frigid.

I considered a joke about ordering in pizza but

reconsidered.

"I'm fine," I said instead.

For the next I don't know how long, she paced,

until I was ready to scream.

"Say something," I finally said.

"I don't know what to say." Her voice was shaking

now. "There could have been people inside that

building ... you could have seriously injured that

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*Men of Stone*

man at the gym. My God, do you realize what

you've done!"

It suddenly hit me — she hadn't asked me why.

She wanted an explanation, something that might

make sense of it. But did she want to know why?

And I think I even wanted to tell her — at least as

much as I was able because I wasn't totally sure

myself. But I could see from the look on her face

that she didn't want to know. It horrified me and

felt familiar at the same time.

"I'm sorry," I said instead. Sorry she didn't want

to know.

"We're both upset, Ben. It's late. Let's finish this

in the morning."

I took a long shower that night. I scrubbed until

the dried blood disappeared from the inside of my

hand and the smell of puke had faded away.

I dreaded the knock on my door, but I knew it

would come. And it did.

"May I come in?" Aunt Frieda asked.

"Um, no." I said weakly.

The door opened. "I know you're tired, *mein*

*bengel.* I'll only be a moment." She sat at the foot of

my bed. "How is your hand?"

"Fine. I'm just really tired."

"I know. Too tired for a boy your age."

"I'm not a boy."

"Yes you are," she said firmly. "And I want to tell

you about another boy."

173

*Gayle Friesen*

I covered my face with my good hand. "Please,

no more stories." I thought this would shut her up,

but she actually laughed.

"Oh, phht, I have a thousand stories. I'll tell you

each and every one of them if you don't be quiet

and listen."

I took the hand away from my face, but I didn't

smile.

"When your father was about your age, maybe

a little older, he stopped coming to church," she

began. "His parents — my brother — were worried

about this, afraid for his soul, Ben. They asked me to

talk to him because they knew that Neil liked to talk

to me. Also I am a very big busybody, as you know."

No other story would have interested me now —

my hand was throbbing and my head felt like a

twenty-pound bowling ball. But she caught me. My

father caught me.

"Sodidhe?Talktoyou?"

"Oh yes. He told me that he was being suffocated

by our ways. Has your mother told you why he

visited home so seldom?"

"Sure. She's very chatty on the subject of my father."

She ignored me. "Your father was an artist,

Ben. He saw the world differently ... as light and

shapes and vibrant colors. Our people's idea of

beauty was order and symmetry and ... black and

white. His parents didn't see an artist's life as

either practical or orderly. How would he provide

for a family?"

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*Men of Stone*

"What has this —"

"Phht," she silenced me. Obviously I was pissing

the old lady off.

"Neil wasn't understood by his own, Ben. He

was deeply uncomfortable in his own culture, and

he refused to be limited by it. For me, I have been

deeply comforted by the Mennonite ways — there

is a richness there and a safety that I feel deeply in

my soul. But this wasn't the case for your father. So

he had to leave in order to save himself."

I struggled to understand. "Are you saying that I

should leave?"

*"Nein, nein,* of course not. What I'm saying is that

you must choose what defines who you are. The

truth of who one is is complex — it is not merely

good or simply bad. I believe that truth is the image

of God in which we were created, but it has taken

me a lifetime of experiences and choices to discover

this. You have to find your own way. Don't let yourself

be limited by the hatred you feel. Don't let it

stop your search."

"Huh."

"What is this, huh?"

"My mom always says that people only have

themselves. That's a big deal with her, self-reliance."

"Your mother has had to handle a lot on her own."

"So did you, but you didn't let yourself die inside."

The words shocked both of us — but she just

sort of nodded. Man, living through a couple of

wars gave her a thick skin.

175

*Gayle Friesen*

"Your mother and father were deeply in love.

You couldn't be in a room with them and not feel

it," she said quietly.

It was too much. I let my head fall against the

pillow. I needed sleep.

When I woke up the next morning, the first

thing I saw was a postcard propped up on my nightstand.

I recognized my dad's style immediately. It

was a picture of a woman wearing a long red dress.

Her chin was raised, defiant almost, but smiling,

and her happiness shone through like the sun. It

was my mom.

176

**15**

The stiffness in my hand brought it all back. It was

still early enough to make it to school, but I didn't

know if I had the energy. I felt like Gulliver —

strapped to the ground by thousands of Lilliputian

ropes. So I just lay there. I could hear the house's

regular morning noises: Joni calling for Mad to get

out of the bathroom, Beth blending sometiiing in die

kitchen, Mom grinding the beans for her coffee.

Maybe if I just stayed here, they'd all leave, and I could

spend die day watching television and pretending

that my life didn't actually suck.

But then Mom poked her head in the door. For

some reason I grabbed die postcard and pulled it

under the covers. I don't think she noticed.

"Don't even tiiink about staying home today, Ben."

"I was just getting up."

She stood there in her teacher's clothes looking

very put together, but it was a costume. She was as

unsure as anybody, when it came right down to it.

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*Gayle Friesen*

And right now there was a canyon of uncertainty

hollowed out between us.

Then Beth called her to the phone. She picked

up in the hall. "I've got it," she called out.

Through the open doorway I could hear her end

of the conversation. I strained to hear, wondering if

it was Mrs. Belado with news. Maybe Stan had

come home.

"Oh, Jim ... hi ... yes, fine," she said. (I wondered

what it would take before she'd say, To tell you the

truth things are pretty rotten.) She just chatted

amiably, and then her voice changed. "Oh no, I

couldn't. I have my aunt visiting and, well, I'm so

busy studying, but thanks for asking."

Had this guy asked her out on a date? At eight in

the morning? From the sudden chill in her voice,

I'd put money on it. This was too weird. She hadn't

dated anyone, ever. It never even entered my mind

that she might want to. Maybe if she'd seemed

interested, it would have occurred to me but ...

She put the phone down, and I thought I heard a

sigh. Regret? Or just tiredness.

As I walked to the bathroom, she was still standing

by die phone.

"Who was that?"

She looked surprised to see me. "How's your

hand?" She sounded concerned.

"Fine. Who was on the phone?"

She looked at the telephone like it might have

the answer on it. "Oh, that — just someone from

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*Men of Stone*

school. It was nothing. I need to get going, Ben, but

we'll talk some more after school, okay?"

I grunted and closed the bathroom door behind

me. If she didn't want to talk about her life, why

should I tell her about mine?

At breakfast, Aunt Frieda said that she needed to start

thinking about going home. She said she didn't want

to overstay her welcome. It jarred me to think of her

leaving — which was funny since I hadn't really

wanted her to come. But now her leaving would add

another hole to our already punctured house.

"But you still need to show me how to make

*zwiebach,"* said Beth.

"And *platz,"* added Mad.

"And those funny-looking peppermint cookies,"

chimed Joni.

*"Pfeffermente kuchen."*

Joni tried out the word, and Aunt Frieda laughed.

"She's teaching me *pladeutsch,"* Joni told me,

breaking her vow of silence.

I kept eating my cereal. They'd all become so

cozy. Aunt Frieda'd been accepted into the club.

She and I had spent all the time together in the

beginning. But now she was one of them. My chest

tightened, and I couldn't get any more food down.

I pushed my bowl away.

"I can stay a few more days, but then I really

must get going," Aunt Frieda insisted.

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*Gayle Friesen*

They offered more reasons why she should stay,

but eventually they left and the house was quiet.

"I should get going too." But I made no move to

get up. "Why did you leave that picture beside my

bed?" I heard myself ask.

"I wanted you to know how your father saw

your mother."

"Well, I figured he must have loved her. I mean,

she can hardly say his name without getting all

choked up."

Her eyes grew sad. "Sometimes I think that type

of love — it's especially hard on the children."

I wasn't even going to pretend that I understood.

"I really have to go — I'm going to be late."

School was a blur of T-shirts and backpacks and

noise. I kept watching faces as I went from class to

class. Who knew what anyone was really thinking at

any given time. I saw Melody with her friends and

they looked happy, but then they always did. Was it

possible that they were always happy? Max Ton's

face flew by with that look of intense concentration,

like maybe there was something more he should be

doing — some other book he could be reading if

only he didn't have to waste precious minutes transporting

himself from place to place. Kat caught my

eye across the cafeteria, gave me a sweet smile, but

it just made me sad about what would never be.

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*Men of Stone*

Mostly I was feeling dead inside. And I could see

how a person might want to stay that way.

I couldn't face history, and I knew I was guaranteeing

myself a failing grade by skipping yet another

class; but I did it anyway. I went to the park instead

... sat there on a bench like a homeless person until

it started to rain.

Beth created a feast of borsht and buns for supper.

"Mennonite Night" she called it, in honor of Aunt

Frieda's many cooking classes.

Aunt Frieda pronounced the meal to be as good

as all the ancestors combined could have created,

and Beth beamed. Mad prattled on about her

commercial, and even Joni seemed happy, eating

farmer sausage without preaching on the evils of

animal fat. Mom kept glancing over at me, but I

mostly kept my head down, dunking the stillwarm

buns in the broth.

After dinner, Mom asked me into the living room.

She started right in. "I spoke with your history

teacher today, Ben."

Shepherd. I froze. Had he told her about the day

of the fight? The details?

"He thinks he knows who beat you up, although

he didn't feel he could divulge that information to

me. Is that what this fight at the gym and the rock

throwing was about? Are you afraid of this boy?"

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*Gayle Friesen*

My mother, Sherlock Holmes. Finally asking some

questions. But I didn't have any answers for her.

"You told me you didn't see who hurt you. I

assumed you were telling the truth. Now I don't

know what to believe, Ben. Help me understand."

Her eyes were pleading, but they didn't move me.

I kept thinking about what Aunt Frieda had said.

About how much my mom and dad loved each

other. About how hard it was on the kids. Maybe

Mom had never loved me, maybe she couldn't.

Maybe she had no love left. So I just felt confused.

Like I didn't know what she wanted from me.

"Ben, say something." It was an order.

Maybe she was just ticked off that I hadn't told

her the truth ... a technicality. I felt bad and I didn't.

Being quiet was the only thing I could do, so at least

it was honest. Maybe I even wanted her to be angry

— yell and scream at me, show something. Instead

she left.

Later that night I went to Aunt Frieda's bedroom.

She was sitting at the window with her big black

book open across her knees. "Come in, Ben. I was

just thinking about you."

I sat down on her bed. I wondered what this

room would be like when she left. Somehow she'd

managed to put her mark on it without changing a

thing. Even Joni's picture looked less scary with the

old lady here.

182

*Men of Stone*

"I haven't told you yet when my nightmares

ended?"

I smiled. Another bedtime story.

"Let me see, I told you about my dream, that I

was in the prison with the guard?"

I nodded, looking into her deeply lined face

... aged by her stories. I thought I could see my

father's features in her face, the same image I'd

seen at the gym the day I'd fought Alec. And I

could hear my old dance teacher's voice. "The

most useful images are drawn from your most

familiar memories." But my father's face wasn't a

familiar memory. I could hardly remember anything

about him.

"Ben?"

"Oh, uh, I'm listening."

"After that dream about the guard, I stopped

having the nightmares about the lice. I was still

alone and still waiting, but the hatred and rage —

they were gone."

"But, Aunt Frieda, you still have those nightmares.

Here in this house you've had them. Maybe

a person can never forget that kind of thing ... or

the hatred." The words spilled out of my mouth.

"Oh, Ben. One never forgets, of course not. The

events of a person's life become a part of who they

are. It would be like forgetting the sound of your

beating heart."

"Then what's the point?" I blurted out, and I

could hear Alec saying, "You've missed the point."

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*Gayle Friesen*

She sighed. "I've had a good life, Ben. Even with

all the horror — or maybe because of it — I've

learned what joy is. The years I had with Henry in

Canada after he was released, finding my brother

Benjamin and his family again. My son. Meeting

Jacob's bride. I've had years and years of happiness."

"Then why do you still have the nightmares?"

"The impatience of youth," she smiled. *"Mein*

*bengel,* you want everything to make sense right

now. But how could I lie to you and say that everything

is good and fine when we both know life is

not that simple?

"When I came here to your home and found a

scattered place — lives wandering in so many different

directions — I went back to a time in my life

when I also wandered. My dreams remembered. I

think I was dreaming them for you."

"But how, why? You didn't even know me."

"We're family. I felt you needed to hear my

story, and I needed to know yours. I know you've

sat beside my bed when I've had my nightmares."

And we both knew she'd sat beside mine.

"Hatred is like a fire, Ben. It warms you at first,

but eventually it burns more and more of you —

your very soul. For years I fostered that kind of

hatred. It filled every part of me — but at such

high cost."

"Why? What did it cost?"

Aunt Frieda stroked the book on her lap in silence.

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*Men of Stone*

"It cost me my son," she said softly. "I thank

God now that he left when he did with the

Rempel family. They were able to raise him with

the love I had no room for. A heart can only hold

so much."

"You were glad your son was gone?" I looked

at her, shocked. She was sticking a knife between

my ribs. Maybe it was me personally she was talking

about.

"Of course not." She shook her head sadly. "It

broke my heart."

"Then how ... what ..." I struggled for words.

"A heart full of hatred is numb. But a broken

heart is felt right to the quick. And a broken heart

can be mended."

"How?"

"I remembered the faith of my people. A faith

that could only fill an empty vessel. And by then,

*mein bengel,* I was empty."

"I don't get it," I said. "I'm sorry, I just don't."

"You will, Ben. Remember when you taught me

to dance?"

"Yeah."

"You told me to find the music? You weren't

talking about notes and melodies, were you?"

"Not exactly."

"You were talking about the rhythm that beats

deep inside you ... the rhythm that guides your

steps, yes?"

185

*Gayle Friesen*

It seemed so long ago that I'd said those words.

When was the last time I'd felt anything was

guiding me?

"Do you ever feel really, really old, Aunt Frieda?"

I asked, but as soon as the words were out, I could

hear how stupid they sounded.

"I have never felt as old as I did when the hatred

ruled my life. These wrinkles are just a disguise."

She smiled broadly. "Some days now, when I watch

a beautiful sunrise — or the day I danced — I feel

as if I've just been born."

I watched her eyes, clear and sparkling and

still young.

Joni walked into the room then, and I just about

fell off my chair. She was dressed in a bright blue

sweater. I hadn't seen her in anything but black for

as long as I could remember.

"Can you sit for me now, Aunt Frieda?"

Aunt Frieda squeezed my hand as she stood.

"Joni's painting my portrait. I'm going to be famous

— like Whistler's mother!" She grinned.

"You're painting actual people now, Joni?" I

asked, surprised.

"Only actual people."

186

**16**

"Ben, telephone!" Mom called down the stairs.

It was Stan's mom. He was in the youth detention

center. He'd busted a guy's jaw. For some weird

reason, Stan's mom told me it was wired shut. I

hung up the phone in a daze.

Stan was back.

Fish met me at my locker the next day after lunch.

"She called you, too?" he said.

"Yeah. Last night."

"He's back."

1 guess.

I don't know why, but Fish looked like a stranger

to me. Everything looked strange.

"Do you know where this place is?" I asked.

"Downtown," he answered vaguely.

"I'm going to visit him tonight. You coming?"

"I don't know, man. I've got this thing with

Melody."

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*Gayle Friesen*

"A thing?"

"I don't know."

"Forget it. I'll tell him you said hi." I slammed

my locker door and walked down the hall. Big,

strong Fish couldn't handle it. I left the school

then. I already knew more than I wanted to know.

Claude and company caught up with me halfway

home. Apart from an occasional sighting at

school, I hadn't seen him since the day he sent me

to the hospital.

"Hey, Ballerina Boy, got any steps you want to

teach me?"

Echoed laughs from behind encouraged him and

he smirked.

"Just say when and where, jerk," I growled back.

"Ooh, tough guy. Your slippers too tight?" he

said, but seemed surprised.

"Yeah, that's it." I leaned toward him. My heart

was booming. My fists were ready.

He looked around to make sure his friends were

still there. "Dance this Friday. Eight o'clock, behind

the gym."

"I'll be there." I left them howling with empty,

stupid laughter.

There was no soup bubbling on the stove, no

smells of cooking meat, no *zwiebach,* golden brown

on the cooling racks. No signs of life. Mom had

said something about going to the travel agency

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*Men of Stone*

with Aunt Frieda to arrange for her trip home.

And our trip back to — what had she called it? —

a place of scattered lives?

I put my head down on the kitchen table. I could

hear the clock in the hallway. I'd never really heard

it before, never been aware of such silence that I'd

welcome a ticking clock. I must have fallen asleep,

because the next thing I knew there was a crick like

a boomerang in my neck. I stretched and looked at

my watch. It was already three o'clock. If I didn't

want Mom asking questions about why I was home

so early, I needed to leave, now. I grabbed a couple

of cookies and looked up the address of the detention

center. Two buses at least.

It took me an hour to get to the formidable gates.

Detention center, nothing. This was a prison. I

beeped the intercom, gave my name and a faceless

person buzzed me in. I was taken to a cold room

filled with metal tables and chairs. Parents or social

workers sat across from their kids with angry,

worried, nervous expressions. A dozen stories. I sat

down and felt a shiver all over. The hall echoed

with hushed voices — the odd shrill word being

quieted immediately.

The door opened, and Stan walked in. He looked

older — decades older — and thinner. But

tougher, too. Sinewy, Joni would have said. He had

a shadowy face now, and in this fluorescent light,

the stubble looked like evidence of every day he'd

been gone.

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*Gayle Friesen*

I half stood, but the guard or whatever he was

glared me back down.

"Stan."

There was no smile, of course, almost no look of

recognition from him.

"I bought you some books on the way here," I

blurted stupidly, not knowing what else to say.

He looked down before sitting. He only touched

the books to push them back across the chipped

tabletop. This was a bad sign.

"Conrad. Good of you to come, old boy," he

said, and I felt an enormous relief at the sound of

his voice, even if it was husky and shadowy like his

face. "Did you bring any smokes?"

"Geez, I didn't think of it. Sorry. Next time."

He lifted one hand lazily. "No matter."

"Where've you been, Stan? What have you done?"

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of

times," he said, quoting again. "No, just the worst

of times."

"What happened? Some guy, your mom said —

a broken jaw? Did somebody jump you?"

He looked at me then, and what I saw sent the

chill of death right through me. Stone, flat and

hard, where his eyes should have been.

"You still dancing, young Ben?"

Was he making fun of me? Him too?

"What?"

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*Men of Stone*

"Didn't you give up, too? Isn't that what this

whole stinking life is about? Hanging on for as

long as you can and then just giving up. Huh,

young Ben? Isn't that what it's about?" His voice

rose above the acceptable level, and our guard

moved a step closer.

Stan put his finger to his lips in an exaggerated

whisper. "Shh, we have to behave or else they might

put us in jail. Oops." He clapped both hands over

his mouth. "Too late. We're already here."

"One more outburst and your visitor will have to

leave ."The anonymous gray person found a voice.

"And that would be such a shame," Stan said

softly. "My first guest, and all."

The gray guy backed off a step.

"Your parents haven't been here?"

"It would cause my mother too much pain to see

me in such a place, so she said. Now my father, he

did show up — to tell me what a disappointment I

was, hardly a guest appearance."

Stan was breathing heavily, but nothing else

about him moved.

"I should've brought some smokes, Stan. I'm

sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Ben." His eyes melted a little

then, just a little. "There's nothing you could have

done. It was coming for a long time."

"What was coming?"

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*Gayle Friesen*

Nothing.

"Stan. What was coming?"

"A big old bus, Ben. And I couldn't get out of the

way." His eyes wandered above my head.

"What are you talking about?"

"I tried to move, get out of the way — how is he?"

His eyes looked panicked.

"Who?"

"The guy ..."

The guy with the wired jaw. "He'll be fine, Stan.

Tell me why."

At first I didn't think he was going to say anything.

He just sat there. But I waited.

"I was in a phone booth, trying to work up

the guts to call home. I just wanted to go home,

Ben. But this guy kept yammering at me to get

off the phone and I ... I lost it. I couldn't stop

hitting him. I was just so ... angry ... at him, at

... everybody." Stan's hands were shaking even as

he drummed them relentlessly on the table. "I

just lost it ..."

"We all make mistakes, Stan." I sounded small

and trite.

"You wouldn't understand, Ben. You're a good

guy, you're okay."

"You'll be okay."

His eyes told me that he didn't believe me. But

before I could say anything else, the gray guy took

him away, saying our time was up.

192

*Men of Stone*

When they finally told me to leave, I picked up

the books I'd bought — some Russian guy whose

name I couldn't pronounce. I asked the man at the

front desk to give them to Stan.

The first bus dropped me off close to the church

where Aunt Frieda had gone. As I walked past it

to the next bus stop, I hesitated. Then I crossed

the street.

Before I knew it, I was at the front doors and

pulling. Wrong. The doors were locked. I kicked

them with such force that they shook at the hinges.

What happened to churches being open all night

for weary passersby, like in the movies? It wasn't

even that late.

A man in a jean jacket and a buzz cut poked

his head around the corner of the building. He was

carrying a computer case. "Can I help you?" he asked.

"I, uh, I'm sorry. I just wanted — never mind."

I went down the stairs two at a time and tried to

walk past without meeting his eyes.

"No need to be sorry. It's a tough old building.

What did you want?"

"Nothing. I'm sorry."

"You know, I might have left my sermon notes

inside. If you want to go in for a bit, that's fine."

He had already taken his keys out and was climbing

the stairs to open the door. I knew he was lying

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*Gayle Friesen*

about forgetting something, and I was so surprised

that a man of the cloth (even in a jean jacket) would

tell a fib, I followed him.

I didn't know what to do when I got inside. I

think I was expecting a big huge space with burning

candles and stained-glass windows. I was expecting

altars. Maybe choir boys. Maybe I needed to stop

watching so much television.

But burgundy carpeting and a coffeepot in the

lobby and evenly spaced padded benches were

definitely a surprise.

"I'll just be in the back for a bit. Let me know if

you need anything?" He looked expectant.

"Ben."

"I'm Matt," he said, stretching out his hand. I

shook it.

"Do you guys give, um, advice or anything?"

He smiled. "Now and then. Not that anybody

listens." He undid his jacket and sat down. "How

can I help you?"

He was pretty young, this guy. By Aunt Frieda's

standards anyway. Early forties. Probably the guy

she had talked about.

"My aunt comes here once in a while. She likes

it." I checked out the instruments and amplifiers on

the stage. "Except for the drums. She could do

without the drums."

"I've heard that before," he said. "You should

194

*Men of Stone*

have heard the complaints when we went from

green to blue hymnals."

"Oh no, I mean, she was cool with it. She's

pretty cool."

"What's her name? I wonder if I've met her."

"Frieda. Her name's Frieda."

"Just Frieda? Like Cher?"

I laughed. "Um, not quite." I couldn't think of

her last name. Actually, I'd never thought of her as

having a last name. "But she's going home soon."

"Sounds like you'll miss her."

"Yeah, I guess. But that's not why — you know,

I should get going."

"Okay, but you look like you've got something

on vour mind."

***j***

"Kinda. It's just that, well, my friend is in trouble."

"Your friend?" he asked kindlv.

It took me a minute. "Yeah, no really, my

friend, Stan. I guess people say that all the time

though, huh? It's their friend, but really it's them?

But, honest to ... well, honest." I was babbling —

and lying. "Okay, me then." That was a relief.

Besides, he wasn't going to tell anyone. It was like

that priest thing. Client confidentiality.

"Listen, you probably want to get home, right?"

I got up to leave.

"Not really." He waved me down. "I just spent an

hour on the phone discussing whether we should

195

*Gayle Friesen*

serve farmer sausage or hot dogs at the next

potluck. Believe me, I welcome something juicier."

I must have looked confused.

"Sorry, Ben. I'm not making light of your

problem. Go ahead."

"No offense, but do you have a clue how things

are, you know, out there?"

"Why don't you tell me," he said quietly.

I took a deep breath. "Mostly it's this guy, this

jerk whose mission in life is to separate my nose

from my face."

"And his reason?"

"Besides being a creep?"

"Besides that."

I was twitchy. I didn't really want to get into this.

What could he do anyhow?

"You know, maybe this was a bad idea."

"Okay, Ben. You've got this kid at school who

wants to hurt you. Maybe he's already hurt you?"

I nodded.

"I could tell you that you should inform the

authorities." I started to object, but he kept talking.

"But you know that. I do know how dangerous it is

out there. God didn't exactly plan my nose this

way," he said, pointing to a bump on the bridge.

"A fight?"

"Well, kind of. Smashed into a door running away

from a fight, actually. There were four guys — and

one of me."

196

*Men of Stone*

I couldn't help smiling. He laughed. "Nobody ever

accused me of being the bravest kid on the block."

"But you can't always run away."

He shook his head. "No. But running isn't the

only option. There are others. Do you know much

about pacifism, Ben?"

I shrugged. "Like Gandhi?"

He nodded. "Well, the Mennonites have always — "

"Mennonites?" I interrupted. I almost laughed.

"What?" He looked surprised. "This *is* a

Mennonite church. You've heard of them?"

"There's a lot of it going around lately."

He looked puzzled but continued. "Well, it's

fairly complicated, in a way. And you'll get all

sorts of definitions. But to me, pacifism means

not running away from yourself."

"Come again?"

"Think about it. In every society at every point

in history there have been wars. It's always been

that way, probably always will be. People fight —

over land, over religion ... over a girl. And it's not

who's right — if anyone. It's usually about

strength. Strong guy, army, country rolls over

the weak."

"I guess."

"That's why it never ends. There's always somebody

a little stronger. Refusing to fight means that

you're saying the fighting ends here. Strength is

not truth." He stopped, scratched his head. "I did

197

*Gayle Friesen*

eventually fight that kid, one on one. We both

ended up with black eyes, but he was the one on

the floor."

"So, did he ever bug you again?"

"No, he didn't. But I'd grown a foot that summer.

He started picking on smaller kids. The point

is, Ben, I lost something that day."

"What did you lose? You won the fight. Maybe

the point is you got the guy off your back."

"And onto someone else's. But I still hated the

guy. And an enemy like that has a lot of power

over you."

I thought of all my days and nights of rage, my

nightmares about Claude. "Maybe."

"I think when you stop hating, you set yourself

free."

"But the other guy goes free, too."

He thought awhile, tapped a book in front of him.

"True, Ben, but you get to live your life bigger."

I sat staring in front of me, thinking about that.

"I hope you'll come back sometime, Ben. And I

hope things work out for you."

He walked me to the doors then, ushered me

through and locked up.

I said good-bye and ran to catch the bus that was

pulling up to the stop. And I almost got on, but

then I didn't. I walked over to the park instead.

Buses made me think of Stan, how he'd said he

couldn't get out of the way. But maybe he could

have. I had to believe that.

198

*Men of Stone*

As I ran around the track, Matt's words pounded

in my head. They sounded really good in a safe,

warm building. But out here? I thought of Aunt

Frieda hiding in the orchard knowing that God was

listening to the songs of a thousand languages. But

could he hear mine?

199

**17**

Aunt Frieda was going to leave on Saturday

morning, and I felt bad about missing her last

night with us, but she insisted I go to the dance.

She said it was important for me to go. It almost

seemed she knew.

She cooked all of our favorite foods for supper,

but they stuck in my throat.

As I dressed for the dance, I was nervous but not

scared. I wasn't thinking I was going to get whipped.

I knew better. I was going to crush Claude.

"I'm glad you're getting out," Mom said. She'd

been pretty decent to me since Stan came back. I

figured she felt sorry for me. Or maybe she was

scared that I was going to end up sharing his cell.

As I was about to leave, I caught Aunt Frieda's

eye. She smiled and then came over and gave me a

hug. In my ear, or as close as she could come to it,

she whispered, "Just find the music."

I looked down at her, tried to smile but couldn't.

200

*Men of Stone*

As I walked to the school, I concentrated on

mustering up the blood lust I'd felt when I'd fought

with Alec, my rage when I saw that t o r n crinoline

in the nurse's office.

The gym was decorated with balloons and streamers,

and the music was cheesy retro disco, of all things. I

scanned the crowd for Claude. There was no sign of

him. Briefly I hoped that he wouldn't show up. It

would solve everything if he didn't.

Kat was there. I saw her immediately. She was

wearing a white dress, off her shoulders, a peasant

kind of thing. She made me think of Aunt Frieda's

Russian couple and their music. No. I pushed my

hands tightly together, enough to feel pain. I wouldn't

think about that now. Only Claude. And Claude's

goons holding my arms while he tore up my face,

split my lip, ripped up my shoulder. Claude's eyes ...

that's what I needed to focus on. He was the bad guy.

"You're a good guy, Ben," Stan had said. Stan,

who'd shattered a guy's jaw so that it had to be held

together with wire. What did that make him?

My body started shaking. I looked for somewhere

to go until it stopped. What if I beat Claude to a

pulp? What did that make me? I pushed my way

through the crowd.

*"Why do there have to be bad guys? Makes it easier to*

*shoot them ..."*

201

*Gayle Friesen*

By the time I reached the edge of the gym, I was

soaked with sweat. A hand reached out and grabbed

my shoulder. I spun, ready to fight.

"Hey!" Kat moved back. "I just wanted to know

if you, well, felt like dancing? I hear you're pretty

good."

I looked at her beautiful face and everything

started to spin.

"Are you okay, Ben? Do you need some water?

Are you drunk?"

I couldn't answer. I was so far from okay I

couldn't even see it.

"I thought I told you to stay away from certain

girls," Claude said, walking up to us. "You look nice,

Kat. How about a dance?" He leaned on her shoulder.

"I'd rather eat dirt," she said, pushing him away.

"Don't tell me you're interested in Ballerina

Boy?" he said, grabbing her waist. He swayed, having

obviously downed a few pints before the dance.

"Hey," he said to me over his shoulder. "It's a dance,

and you didn't wear your tutu."

That did it. "Let's go. Outside."

"Don't give me orders," he hissed.

Suddenly there was a space around us as people

moved back to give us room.The music was blaring.

I could hear it, feel it, *"Oo, oo, oo, oo, stayin' alive,*

*stayin' alive"*

"Wanna dance?" I sneered, moving around him in

our makeshift ring, roped in by curious spectators.

Somebody laughed, which infuriated Claude.

202

*Men of Stone*

He swiped at me, missing. He was bigger but

clumsier. He didn't stand a chance. He was mine. I

ducked easily under a second attempt and bobbed

up behind him, the back of his head well within

striking distance. Badly choreographed, Miss Fleur

would have said — I wouldn't hit him in the back.

"Over here," I called.

He roared and charged me. For a second we

wrestled — an ugly *pas de deux* — and then we hit

the floor. I twisted and rolled and stood again

while he struggled to regain his balance. He was

half sitting and an easy target — but I wouldn't hit

a sitting duck.

I waved. "Song's almost over, big guy. Get on

your feet."

He should have taken time to regain his balance,

and he stumbled. He was so close. But I just kept

moving around. Floating. Claude was snorting like

a bull by this time.

"Hit him," one of his goons stage-whispered

to him.

Claude turned on his friend. "You hit him!"

Claude looked at me then. He could see me. But

I couldn't see anything beyond his dark, dilated

pupils. It was as though they had absorbed all the

light around us. I knew it then. He needed to fight

me. But I didn't need to fight him. If I did, I'd

become him.

It would have been easy to avoid the blow I saw

coming, and I couldn't really say why I didn't,

203

*Gayle Friesen*

except that I wanted to see this thing finished, to

move through the pain, the way Alec was always

saying. Or maybe I saw Stan in his eyes. All I knew

was that I wasn't going to let hatred define me. So

I stood there. As the blow connected with my

cheek, I felt the pressure and the pain, but I held

my ground, my arms hanging loosely at my sides.

Claude stared at me. The crowd grew quiet,

letting the music into our ring. *"Stayin' alive,*

*stayin' alive"*

"What's wrong with you? Fight me." He was

almost pleading.

I shook my head, and ever so slightly I turned my

face toward him. I didn't take my eyes off his. I

wanted him to see me when he hit me again. I

wanted him to know who I was.

But the blow didn't come. Claude just muttered

something like "He's crazy," and he stomped out of

the gym with his confused buddies in tow.

As he retreated, people clapped. That's when I

noticed that Fish was there, smiling — and

Shepherd. He could've stopped the fight, maybe he

should have. But he hadn't. He gave a little nod,

then disappeared back to the chaperon shadows.

I smiled, embarrassed at the commotion. I

thought I could hear Aunt Frieda saying, "Just find

the music." I closed my eyes. And there it was. And

I said, "Thank you."

"Huh?"

204

*Men of Stone*

A voice brought me back to the present. I

opened my eyes.

"What did you say?" Kat asked.

"I, uh, said, do you want to dance? I hear I'm

pretty good."

"Pretty conceited," she said, smiling back.

I took her by the elbow and led her to the center

of the floor. I could feel my cheek swell with

the bruise that I'd have tomorrow, but I didn't

mind, because I was feeling again.

And we danced.

I walked Kat home and sort of lost track of time

after that. At home I stopped by Aunt Frieda's

room, but it was silent inside. I listened for sounds

of nightmares, but there were none.

That night I had a dream that was as clear as a

painting. I was five years old, about to start kindergarten.

I was walking down the street holding

someone's hand. It was a big hand, big and warm. I

was asking all sorts of questions — what was I

going to learn? Would the teacher be nice? What if

I had to go to the bathroom, would she let me go?

I was really concerned about that one.

"Of course," the man said. "Of course she'll let

you go."

Even in my dream state, a shiver ran up my

spine. I recognized the voice. It was the voice that

205

*Gayle Friesen*

had read bedtime stories to me. I could feel the

bigness of his hand, hear the low, soothing bass of

his voice. I could even smell the paint thinner. It

was as though all my senses were remembering

what I'd never forgotten.

As I came out of the schoolyard, I saw my dream

self through the eyes of the man who waited for me.

That's when I woke up. I rushed upstairs. On the

landing I pulled at the attic cord and yanked. Stairs

came down with a groan from lack of use. I headed

straight to the corner of the room, to the paintings

covered with a sheet. I rummaged through until I

found it. Then I leaned back and stared.

It was my elementary school, and children were

coming out of the side entrance. A little kid was

looking at the artist. His face was full of wonder and

excitement and news. It was me. Looking at my dad.

Tears burned in my eyes. Then I heard something

behind me.

"Ben?"

My mom was standing at the top of the stairs

wrapped in her ratty blue bathrobe. She still looked

half-asleep.

I wiped the tears away. "Yeah, I'm ... did Dad

take me to kindergarten that first day?"

"Did Dad take ... well, yes, I think. Yes, of

course he did."

"So he did? He walked with me?"

206

*Men of Stone*

Mom sat down on a crate and rubbed her eyes.

"Neil wanted to be the one to ... How did you

know this, Ben? I don't remember telling you."

"You didn't. I had a dream, and then I remembered

this painting. In my dream it felt really good

... safe."

She nodded. "He was excited about taking you,

Ben. And he wanted to be the first face you'd see

waiting outside the school."

"He was, see?" I pointed to the painting.

"He rushed up here as soon as he came home,"

she said, smiling. "He wanted to capture the

moment." Her eyes drifted away from mine. "He

was always so good at that." Her voice grew wistful.

It was as if I could actually see her begin to disappear,

one particle at a time.

"We're still here, Mom."

"Your father was an amazing man, Ben. He turned

my life upside down and inside out — until I was

dizzy." She sat back, leaning against an unfinished

wall, pink insulation all around her.

"You see, when I was growing up ... my parents

loved me but everything was about being proper

and cool — never raise your voice, don't show too

much of, well, anything." She smiled sadly. "Your

dad would say, 'If you feel it — say it, shout it.'"

Her hand reached out to stroke a canvas. "Paint it.

I married him, loving him with all my heart and

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*Gayle Friesen*

against all good judgment. I knew he'd take me

places I'd never go on my own — and I trusted

him. And then he died." Her voice was a whisper

now and I had to strain to hear. "He was supposed

to help, Ben. He was supposed to provide ... the

color." She looked so sad then, so lost, and I didn't

have a clue how to reach her.

Then she got to her feet. "But I want you to give

me some credit, Ben. Not thanks, just credit. I

have worked my ass off the past ten years for this

family. I've gotten up every single morning. I've

gone to work, and studied, and tried to make

something better for us. And I think I've done a

good job of that." Her chin was raised, and her

words were a challenge.

1 agree.

Some of the wind seemed to go out of her when

I said that.

"You do?"

"Yeah, I do. Now I do."

**"Oh."**

"Don't move," I said, and ran downstairs to my

room. I reached inside the drawer of my nightstand.

Then I raced upstairs again.

I was breathing heavily by the time I got there,

and I handed her the postcard Dad had done of her.

I pointed at the woman in the picture. Chin

raised, arms crossed. Eyes shining with defiance

and humor, love and light. "I can see that person."

Her eyes filled with tears. "You can?"

208

*Men of Stone*

I nodded. "Yeah, when you yell about working

your ass off. I can totally see ... what he saw."

She ran her hands through her hair. "Oh, Ben."

She shook her head, closing her eyes. "Last night

Aunt Frieda told me about her time in Russia."

I nodded.

"I never understood it before. I never realized

how much she'd lost — what a survivor she is.

When your father died, I just accepted that part of

me died with him and the rest has been going

through the motions. I haven't really been living."

"I know."

"You and Joni both. You know me the best, I

think. Maybe it's because you're so much like your

father." She reached out and touched the back of my

hand. "She told me something else last night, Ben."

I waited.

"She told me not to lose you."

I thought about my dream, and how my father

had held my hand. It was so big, almost wrapping

around mine. Now Mom's small hand was wrapped

in mine.

"Somewhere along the way you've become a

man, Ben. I don't want to lose you, too."

Then she leaned over and hugged me. "I love

you," she said. And it was sufficient.

She pulled away and sniffed loudly, wiping away

her tears. "So," she said in her old, matter-of-fact

voice — it kind of startled me. "The thing is, there's

this guy ... from work."

209

*Gayle Friesen*

"Jim?" I guessed, remembering the phone

conversation.

"Jim," she said. "Anyway, he's asked me to this

dance and, of course, I'm a terrible dancer. But

maybe, I wonder, could you ... I mean, if you can

have an eighty-five-year-old woman sashaying

around the living room, maybe there's some hope

for me."

"Maybe. But don't forget Aunt Frieda's a natural."

And I hugged her.

210

**18**

After I showered, I went to call Aunt Frieda to

breakfast. Mom was going to take her to the airport

after we'd eaten the waffles she had made. My

mom, actually cooking. I figured maybe it was some

sort of statement.

I knocked at the door, softly at first, then more

insistently.

Come in.

Aunt Frieda sat in the chair by the window. The

sunlight streamed in, bathing the room in morning

gold. She was dressed in a blue suit: skirt, blouse

and jacket, ready for her trip home.

I had meant to say, Breakfast's ready, but what

came out was "Do you have to go?"

"You know what they say about houseguests and

fish going bad after three days," she smiled. "And

I've been here much longer."

I sat down on the bed. "You know when you came,

like at first? I didn't know if you'd, well, fit in. But

now I can't imagine this room ... us ... without you."

"Oh, things will return to normal soon enough."

211

*Gayle Friesen*

"I hope not."

"My mother used to sew quilts, Ben — beautiful

quilts pieced together with odd bits of clothing that

we'd all worn at one time or another. It was a

wonder the direads even held togetiier after our

brood was through wearing them. But somehow

she'd salvage bits and pieces and bring them together

as something new. Still, every patch, every square

held a memory, a story — a bruised knee, a church

social, a Christmas dress. When I look at your family,

Ben, that's what I see — a beautiful quilt still in the

making. It's taken me a lifetime to follow the threads

of my life. This time witii your family has been very

special to me. It's reminded me that I have a place in

the world, a reason for being."

She sat straighter and sniffed the air. *"Nah yo.* I

smell something delicious."

"Mom's making waffles."

"Your mother is cooking?"

She sounded so surprised that I laughed out

loud. "See what you started?"

The mood was somewhat somber in the kitchen.

But the reviews of the waffles were positive.

"Very good, Mom," Beth announced after two

very thoughtful bites.

Mom grinned. "They are, aren't they? I hope I've

made enough." It was weird, but nice to hear her

212

*Men of Stone*

sounding so much like a mom. I knew the cooking

wouldn't last — Beth would face a firing squad

before surrendering her kitchen. Still, it was nice

to see Mom so ... here.

Suddenly I was starving. I grabbed three waffles

— and the girls hollered.

"It's okay," Mom intervened. "He's a growing boy."

"That's right," I said with my mouth full.

"Just try to keep your mouth closed — maybe

till you've grown," Joni grumbled.

"They're very tasty, Catherine," Aunt Frieda said.

"Thank you, Frieda," Mom answered softly.

After Joni had finished her breakfast, she took her

plate to the sink and left the room without a word.

She returned hugging a canvas to her. You couldn't

see what was on it because she held it so tightly

against her sweater, and her face was pale pink.

Then she handed the picture to Aunt Frieda. "I

want you to have it."

Aunt Frieda held the picture out at arm's length

and studied it. Even from where I was sitting I could

tell it was good. But when she held it up. I knew it

was more than just good, it was beautiful. The grays

and blacks were still there, but Joni had added light.

You could see a picture emerging from the shadows.

Or maybe it was the light emerging — I couldn't

tell. But it was clearly Aunt Frieda in the forefront.

Some of the lines in her face appeared softened by

Joni's brush, but when I looked closer, I realized that

213

*Gayle Friesen*

the lines were still there — it was the radiance in

her eyes that outshone everything else.

In the background was another distinct figure,

fardier away, less defined — our dad. And around

him stood clusters of people, lines and curves

mostly, but definitely people. Aunt Frieda's brothers

and sisters? Our great-aunts and uncles? Strangers,

but now part of us.

Finally Aunt Frieda broke the silence. "It's lovely,

Joni." She had tears sparkling in her eyes. She

passed her hand over the figures, not touching, only

skimming the surface of the painting. "But it's so

precious. You should keep it here with you."

Joni shook her head. "I want you to have it.

Really. Besides, the den could use a new mural, a

new look. Time for a change."

Aunt Frieda nodded. "Yes, it is."

"I think we should propose a toast," I said,

surprising myself.

"Good idea," Mad said, starting to stand.

Joni frowned her down. "Let him do it."

Amazingly Mad obeyed.

I stood, holding my orange juice. I felt awkward

and was tempted to sit down again, but I wanted

to do this, and I wanted to do it right. I coughed to

loosen my vocal cords.

"Well, I'd just like to say, um, first of all ..." I

looked around and almost lost my nerve, but Aunt

Frieda's bird-like posture, head thrust forward,

made me smile. "Well, you're really old."

214

*Men of Stone*

The girls laughed and Mom said, "Ben," with

only mild disapproval. Aunt Frieda nodded with a

glint in her eyes.

"And you're very smart and kind of pushy. You

tell great stories and I think ..." I looked into her

eyes. "I think maybe you stitched us together."

"To Aunt Frieda," we said.

After her bags had been checked, we hovered around

Aunt Frieda just outside die security gate. She looked

up at us, tears flooding the rims of her soft brown eyes.

"I love you all," she said simply.

She hugged the girls one by one, lingering with

my mother, who, it seemed, held on the longest.

Finally she turned to me. *"Nahyo, mein bengel."*

"You ... helped me," I said, my voice cracking a

little. I reached down and hugged her.

"We helped each other."

Then she straightened to her full height, such as

it was, and her many years were apparent on that

face that had lived forever.

"You take care of each other," she said, and then

she was gone.

When we got back home, I told Mom I was going

for a walk.

"Anywhere in particular?" Mad asked, eyes

twinkling.

215

*Gayle Friesen*

"Leave him be," Mom ordered, and I smiled my

appreciation.

I followed my tracks from the night before. My

heart pounded a rhythm that I fell into until I was

almost jogging.

As I approached her house, I made myself slow

down. "Cool it, Conrad," I muttered.

But I wasn't feeling cool. I couldn't keep the

grin off my face.

I saw her before she saw me. She was in the driveway

practicing her jump shots. She was so good.

She was so pretty.

Then the old nervousness appeared, and the

voice that told me that she was wray, way out of my

league. Last night's dance had never happened ... it

was a dream. I was dreaming to think she'd be

interested in me.

I could turn around and she'd never know.

Ducking behind a tree, I took a deep breath. The

blossoms obscured my view, and I knew how stupid

it must look — a kid hiding under a cherry tree. I

pushed a branch out of my way to get a better view.

Then I thought of Henry. I snapped off a blossom

before I could change my mind.

I thought of how it would look in her dark hair

and I smiled. I took a step toward the sound of

the basketball.

*Nah yo.*

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