

Filaments

by Paul Hargreaves

It's always dark when Cal and I arrive. We park under the bright sodium lamps, closest to the doors. The lights will probably be off by the time we return, unless the sensors miscue in the uncertain light of early morning. When that happens, the lights sometimes flicker on momentarily.

"Bright lights," Cal says, descending from the van.

"Just be careful stepping down," I say.

"Where we going?" Cal asks, shuffling toward the door.

"For ice cream," I tell him. I do my best to support his trembling hand as he lifts his foot over the curb. "You like ice cream," I say.

"I like ice cream," Cal says. He likes the gleam of the mall floor, the frozen fireworks of reflected pinlight and neon. He barely notices the other walkers, the procession of faces that are only vaguely familiar to me. They say hello and I say hello back while Cal focuses forward, shuffling with great purpose along his painfully slow trajectory. The stores are all closed.

"Look, there's Laura Secord," I say. It's a game we play while we walk.

"Laura," Cal says. I watch his eyes closely but the name doesn't seem to register.

"We know someone named Laura, don't we?" I say, hinting.

"Laura," he says again, but his eyes are like bulbs with broken filaments. He shuffles, stops to look at his unsteady hands, then shuffles some more. "Laura," he says.

"Laura is our daughter," I say. "She lives in Chatham now. With Alex and the kids."

"Alex and the kids," he says.

Cal no longer gets angry. Not like he used to. His former associates at the clinic tell me this is a predictable aspect of the progression, an inexorable pathology that Cal, being a physician, understood all too clearly.

He still recognizes Laura's picture when I pull it from my purse.

"Zack and Kaitlin," he says, seeing the grandchildren beside her in the photograph. They wear bright red running shoes, colourful t-shirts and ball caps. Cal is in the picture too — a grainy figure blurred away in the background, throwing horseshoes with Alex and a few older nephews. Everyone is enjoying the lakeside afternoon.

"Lake St. Charles," Cal says, but the smile wanes.

Cal had so loved the fieldstone farmhouse and the view it afforded from the gentle rise above the bay that he had bought the entire farmstead on first sight. Later, he had carved off the lakefront section and sold the agricultural portion to a neighbouring wheat farmer. The cottage remained his hideaway for almost twenty years, until the fall of '06 when he had gone up to close the place for the winter. He'd decided to make lunch and had placed a deep-fat fryer on the gas stove before absently wandering off for a walk along the shoreline — an oversight we now understand to be an early manifestation of the dementia. The structure is still there, holding strong against the winter blasts off the bay, but it's an empty shell with a gutted roof that rots further away with each passing year. The wheat grower wants to buy the last parcel but none of us has the heart to let it go.

"Where we going?" Cal asks as he shuffles toward the exit.

"For ice cream," I tell him. It's just easier that way.

It's brighter out now. In the summertime the rising sun would throw long shadows at this hour but in the wintertime, the light is generally uncertain, as it is today.

"See where the van is?" I say, pointing. "Under the sign with the big number eight?"

"Number Eight," Cal says.

"That's a special number, isn't it," I say, helping him down from the curb. "Eight is the month of August, in the summertime." He takes my hand, starts shuffling.

"Do you know why August 8 is an important date, Cal?"

"August 8 — wedding day," Cal says, more by rote, I suspect, than from tangible remembrance. Even so, it's encouraging. I grip his hand more warmly and Cal returns the squeeze.

"That's right. Do you remember our wedding day?"

"Red hair and green eyes," he says. He stops shuffling and looks directly into my face, grasping for cobwebs. My hair is no longer red and my skin is spotted and sagging but my eyes are as clear green as ever — if somewhat moistened at the moment.

"Green eyes," Cal says. "My beautiful Barbara."

"You remember our wedding day, Cal?"

"I do," he says, looking up at the sodium lamps. "I still do," he says. And the lights, as they sometimes do, flicker on momentarily.

