

# A Rhinestone Button

*A Novel*

GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ



VINTAGE CANADA

*A Rhinestone  
Button*



*as novel by*

GAIL ANDERSON-DARGATZ



*Vintage Canada*

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*For Floyd*

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**O**nce upon a time, in the land of Uz, there was a man named Job. He was a man of perfect integrity, who feared God and avoided evil.

BOOK OF JOB

## One



Job Sunstrum *felt* sound, and *saw* it. He held the hum of a vacuum cleaner in his hands: it was an invisible egg with the smooth, cool feel of glass. A sensation so real he followed its curve with his finger. He left the vacuum sitting in the kitchen, running, occasionally for hours at a time. Listened to the vacuum's whirr with his eyes closed and smoothed the glass egg in his hands. He rose from these sessions calmed, refreshed, clearheaded. Untroubled, for a time, by the fear and guilt that dogged him.

Others might have called this pastime meditation, but not Job, as contemplation of nearly any kind other than prayer was discouraged in the circles he travelled. "It's not good to leave the mind empty," said Pastor Ludwig Henschell from his pulpit at Godsfinger Baptist. "An unoccupied mind is the playing field of the devil."

The voices of the congregation as they sang a hymn produced, for Job, concentric rings of colour, like the rippling circles falling rain created on the surface of a slough. His friend Will's voice was the deep blue-green of a spruce tree. Stinky Steinke's was the blue-black of a crow's wing. The sopranos' circles were small and brilliant, in dazzling whites, yellows, peaches, pinks. Penny Blust's was the colour of pink lemonade. The altos tended to the purples, like Barbara Stubblefield's, the blue-violet of flowering borage. Circles of colour that rippled outward, blended with one another. A vision Job experienced *out there*, projected a half foot in front of him, as if onto a transparent screen through which he saw the world around him.

Job sometimes stopped singing, lost his boundaries of self to the pool of colours, in the same way that he expanded, then dissipated, into the expanse of prairie and arching sky as he drove the paved roads. He startled awake to his shrunken self when the hymn came to an end, just as he did while driving when he met an oversized stop sign or rumble strips, a series of bumps on the asphalt that warned mesmerized drivers of an upcoming intersection. But when he was submerged in the congregation's singing he also felt a certainty, a thrill of recognition as if he had unexpectedly seen a beloved on a strange street in an unfamiliar city. The passion of *aha!* Of *eureka!* Though what it was he knew, what it was he had discovered, he couldn't say. It was a feeling that lasted for just a moment after the song was over. A *knowing*. At these times he knew God was real with the same instinctive confidence with which he knew how to breathe.

It was a phenomenon he kept to himself. He had tried telling his best friend, Will Stubblefield, when they were still children. Job and Will waited

for the school bus together at the Sunstrum mailbox. Sang with each other in the junior church choir. Competed against one another with their 4-H calves at Whoop 'er Up Days. Visited each other's homes after school, slept in each other's bedrooms, and once when they were twelve they spent the night out in the field together, though Job's mother had made Jacob, Job's older brother, join them to make sure they didn't get into trouble. Plagued by mosquitoes and smelling of insect spray, they snuggled in their sleeping bags and, with Jacob snoring beside them, waited for a show of northern lights.

Just before midnight the adventure took a turn. "I'm cold," whispered Job. "Mosquitoes driving me crazy." He wondered at his brother's blissful sleep, how the mosquitoes' whine and bites didn't wake him. At fourteen, Jacob had grown stinky and large with burgeoning manhood. Job watched his step with his brother, anticipating his moods as he did his father's. Just as his father would inflict the strap, Jacob would trip him up or wrestle him to the ground, twisting his arm behind his back.

"Let's zip our sleeping bags together," said Will.

Job listened a moment to hear that his brother was still asleep. "I don't know."

"It'll be warmer."

Job, who was used to doing as he was told, or merely asked, zipped his sleeping bag to Will's as quietly as he could for fear of waking Jacob, who, he sensed, would put an end to this sleeping-bag business. Jacob rolled over, snorted. The boys eased their way into their bed and Job pulled the edge of the sleeping bag over his face, to warm his nose, to ward off the insistent mosquitoes.

"You ever kissed a girl?" said Will.

Job weighed his answer briefly, and decided to answer truthfully. "No."

"Me neither. Let's practise. With our pillows."

Job felt a queasy warning in his stomach that he felt each time he was about to step into unknown territory. The whole of Job's sexual education, as provided by his father, had been delivered in two sentences: "Keep that thing in your pants," and, after Abe had shot a feral tomcat dead just as it was mounting a barn cat, "That's what you'll get if I ever catch you screwing around." He knew his father suspected that he had begun to abuse himself. One cold night, Job had taken his mother's blow-dryer from the bathroom cabinet and used it to warm himself under the blankets. The warmth was a relief, but it was the hum of the blow-dryer he enjoyed most. It generated a smooth cylinder in his hand, one he could run his hand up and down. It had the feel of glass, as if he were holding his mother's clear glass rolling pin, one of the few wedding presents that had survived the years. He closed his eyes and stroked the cylinder, visible only to him, enjoying its smoothness, thrilling at the *knowing* that came along with it. He didn't hear his father's knock and Abe walked in on him, blow-drying his thighs under the covers, stroking his invisible cylinder, his knees making a tent of the blankets.

"Stop that!" said Abe.

Job pulled the blow-dryer out from under the covers, turned it off. "What?" Abe waved a great paw at him. "Whatever it is you're doing."

"I was just warming up."

"That's your *mother's* blow-dryer, for God's sake. It's just *sick*." Abe slammed the door shut behind him.

As Will rolled on his belly and nuzzled his pillow, Job watched in the half light, listening to his brother's breathing, hoping Jacob was still asleep. He felt Will's hand on his thigh. "It's okay," said Will. "If we're just pretending."

"Pretending?"

"Like you were a girl."

"I'm not a girl."

"No, I mean like if you were a girl, and I was a boy. Or if I were a girl. See?"

Job didn't see. A familiar fuzzy confusion descended on him. Here was another thing he couldn't fathom. It was as though everyone else, at school, at church, in town, was operating under a different knowledge than he was. For reasons he was unsure of, but were certainly his fault, he had been left out. He stared up at the sky, the muscles of his legs and arms held stiff as Will touched his private place. It didn't occur to him to object, say no, and after the first wave of fear, Will's touch felt good. He relaxed a little, lifted his nose from the flannel of the sleeping bag for fresh air.

"Look at that," said Will, as if his hand weren't someplace private, as if he were scratching his leg. "Beautiful."

Above them the sky breathed ghostly northern lights. At first the greenish-white lights hung like draperies between him and the night sky. But soon the corona moved directly overhead. Job was no longer facing the curtain of light; he was under it, as if he were lying beneath the draperies, gazing at the swirl of fabric from below.

"They're all right," Job said, to deflect what was going on in the sleeping bag. "But I like the colours of the dishes better."

"Huh?" said Will.

"The dishes? When you wash them? That squeaky sound? The colours are better, like in an oyster shell." Job loved doing dishes, the wash of transparent colours very much like those his mother's voice produced. If he'd had things his way, Job would have spent all his time in the kitchen. As it was, his mother, Emma, snatched Job in from outside chores on the pretence of helping him with his homework and they baked together, then ate whole pans of cinnamon buns by themselves, on the sly, before washing the dishes to hide the evidence. Job found reasons to help Emma out in the kitchen to listen to her voice, the sheen of colours sliding across his view like the shifting gloss of northern lights but in the pastel colours of blue, pink and yellow found in soap bubbles or in Emma's opal ring. A vision almost exactly like the one Job enjoyed when running a wet finger around the rim of a glass.

Will stopped his fumbling under the covers, moved his hand away. "What

are you talking about? What colours?”

“You know, when you run a finger over a dish when you’re washing it? Or around the rim of a wet glass, and it rings? I like those colours better.”

“Colours?”

It was at that moment that Job realized others didn’t see the world as he did, didn’t feel and see sound. Once, when his mother asked why he liked washing dishes so much, when she couldn’t even bribe Jacob to do them, he fumbled for words to describe the wonder of the colours he heard, the feeling of *aha!*

His mother ignored him, as she did when she thought he was talking nonsense, and went on chopping carrots.

He tried explaining to his father how he knew the cows were in heat, often before the bulls knew, by listening to their bawls. “Their bellow goes really dark when they’re in heat,” Job told his father, “like chokecherry.” He meant the colour of chokecherries when they were ripe, near black and shining.

“Chokecherry?” Abe asked, his voice prickling on Job’s arm.

Job nodded. “Its shape changes too. It’s more like a flag. Don’t you think?” This making perfect sense to Job, that a cow would want to advertise when it was time.

Abe shook his head, wandered off chuckling.

His parents’ reactions were strange, but it hadn’t occurred to him until this moment, lying in the sleeping bag with Will, that they didn’t see the world as he did, that they didn’t hear colours. The best his parents and Will could hope for was this night sky, stars flickering through the greens and reds of the northern lights.

The aurora twisted, pulsed. At times seemed close enough to touch. He found himself relaxed, lulled, drifting, asleep.

After that night Job never invited Will for another sleep-over, and their friendship began its slow decline. In past summers he and Will had run down the coulee hill on the Sunstrum farm to the lake below, thrown off their clothes and swum naked in the muddy water. One Halloween they stuck a pair of rubber boots into one side of a round bale in the Sunstrums’ field by the side of Correction Line Road, a stuffed shirt and John Deere cap out the other, a reminder of the nightmare farmers faced of being pulled into the baler and rolled into a bale themselves. Together they had filled a mayonnaise jar with moths, then smuggled the jar into the Leduc movie theatre and let the insects loose to flutter up to the projection booth, their huge, flickering shadows cast upon the screen.

When Job’s prettiness earned him the nicknames Pansy and Fairy, Will wouldn’t have anything more to do with him; he avoided Job at church and ignored Job’s stilted stabs at friendly chatter as they waited for the school bus in the winter dark. He stood several yards away and kicked snow so those riding on the bus could plainly see he and Job were not friends.

Job’s mother, Emma, was killed when Job was thirteen, as she and Abe tried

to pull-start a tractor. Emma was on the 730 Case, pulling the 930 Case that Abe was riding. When the tractor was rolling at sufficient speed to get it going, Abe took his foot off the clutch, and the tractor skidded for that moment it took to turn the engine over. The chain between the two tractors went suddenly taut and snapped. It whipped back and hit Emma in the head. She was dead before the ambulance arrived.

Godsfinger women brought casseroles, cookies, squares and sausages; they filled the fridge, then the freezer. Godsfinger men took turns harvesting Abe's second hay crop, then his grain, and stood kicking dirt beside him. They didn't expect talk. Abe felt blessed by friendship the first week, sick in the gut the second, took to bed the third week and shot Barbara Stubblefield's dog the fourth. Everyone, even Barbara, understood. The dog had been killing Abe's bantam chickens that ran loose around the yard. You can't break a dog of that once it starts.

Abe cried at night, and his boys heard him through the thin walls of the house, but he didn't tolerate their tears. When Job, smelling the cinnamon buns the church ladies brought, began sniffing in the kitchen, Abe slapped the table and demanded, "Quit that or I'll give you something to cry about."

Job learned to hold the tears in, raising his eyes to the ceiling and biting an indent into his lip that took months to heal. But the tears still came, at odd times, as he worked his numbers in math class. Or struggled to concentrate on what Mrs. Walsh was telling him in English. Not thinking of his mother. Kids sniggered. Teachers led him by the arm into the hall and patted him on the shoulder, then left him alone with his perplexing tears. It felt like punishment. The shame of being singled out and left in the hallway, the embarrassment of having to return.

He was plagued by a series of illnesses: stomach aches and sore throats; rashes and a spotted tongue. A speeding heart that woke him sharply from sleep, or brought him up short as he strode to the house. Heart palpitations that left him feeling faint and weak, afraid for his life. He cooked and baked to calm himself. The pans of almond squares and cinnamon buns he had made with his mother when she was still alive. His mother was still here, in the kitchen. Her presence in the tidy, childish handwriting on her recipe cards, the Band-Aid she'd stuck over the word *devil* in the devil's food cake recipe in her *Joy of Cooking*. Her smell in the apple pies he made, loaded with cinnamon. Her voice in the squeak of the dishes he washed, the sheen of pastels though which he saw the kitchen.

Job, like Emma, was slender and possessed a white-blond head of curly hair that cascaded past his ears in ringlets. His delicate, heart-shaped face gave him an angelic prettiness. Farmers in the area called him Pretty Boy or Princess.

Abe avoided looking Job in the eye because he saw his wife there, in Job's sweet face, in the curls that framed it. He forced crewcuts on him. Job stared at the sign above the barbers mirror that proclaimed *You won't find a better barber until you reach the next world*, and ground his teeth, but said nothing.

In high school, he had endured nipple twists from boys who danced circles around him with limp wrists or called down the hall, “Hey, Princess, where’s your purse?” In the locker room, after scoring a goal on his own net, Job even took ribbing from the guy named Chuck with the harelip. “Look at this guy. There’s hardly a hair on his body. What do you do? Shave your legs?”

Job felt a kinship with his biblical namesake. Perhaps God, in a fit of pride, had been tempted into another wager with Satan over the faithfulness of a good servant and was testing him. But instead of the boils He’d inflicted on the biblical Job, which could, in these modern times, be cleared up with lancing and antibiotics, God had imposed on Job Sunstrum this prettiness. Anywhere else Job’s good looks might have won him friends and his choice of wife. But Job lived in big-farm country, where many men lost a finger to a sickle on a mower or to a spinning auger by the age of thirty-five. They wore baseball caps, given to them by farm-implement or bull-semen salesmen, with promotional slogans like *Western Breeders* or *Snap-On Tools*, or simply *Case*. Men were not pretty in Godsfinger, Alberta.

Job felt like the gimpy calf in his father’s herd. Some congenital failure of the ligaments had made the calf walk awkwardly upon its knuckles, to fall to its knees when standing still for any length of time. It hobbled behind the herd, never keeping up, and called plaintively to its mother when left behind. It couldn’t compete at the grain trough or at the round-bale feeder and was bunted out of the way by the other calves. It learned to eat alone. To live apart.

Jacob left home to attend a Saskatoon Bible college, set on becoming a preacher, and Job spent his late teens and early twenties nearly cloistered on the farm. He didn’t drive much because he found the effort fatiguing. The steady rumble of gravel hitting the undercarriage of his father’s Ford created a tumble of shimmering blue spheres, rolling and bouncing like lottery balls. He knew the balls weren’t really there but found himself batting them away as he fought to concentrate on the road.

Trips to Edmonton or Wetaskiwin or Leduc were painful, overwhelming. The roar of passing vehicles filled his hands with rough shapes, one barely registering before another took its place. Car honks exploded in blinding white light, like the flashbulbs of cameras aimed at him. The shrill whine of an ambulance siren drove needle points into his cheeks. Music thumping from car stereos or blasted from cafés threw rings of colour at him. All of it blinding, expanding, like balls of cookie dough flattening in the oven, obscuring his view, grabbing his attention. He came home from these few trips exhausted, swore to shop in Godsfinger, if at all.

In winter, Job loaded up the silage wagon from the pit where the silage was stored and dispensed it into the feeders. On very cold days the tractor often wouldn’t start and he’d spend hours fiddling with the machinery. It was sometimes a day or two before he could feed the cattle.

If he could bring the cows to the feeder, rather than the feed to the cows, it would save a lot of work. So that's what he did. He converted the rectangular silage pit into a feeder by placing steel feeding panels at one end. The silage in the pit was ten feet deep and usually fell towards the feeding grate as the cattle ate away at it, replenishing the supply.

The feeder worked, though Abe argued it shouldn't. Daily. When he came to Job once again complaining that the stack of silage was about to topple over and crush the cows eating with their heads through the feeding panels, Job said, "I'll get right on it." But didn't. He went into the house to put on morning coffee.

He was standing on the stoop to call his father in for a cup and a warm cinnamon roll when he heard the *woomph* of silage falling and the screech of twisting metal that shot out fingers of lightning in all directions. He ran to the feeder and found the tractor still running. Abe had been about to knock the wall of silage down and was chasing a cow from the feeder when the silage overhead collapsed, crushing him under the feeding panel. Job pulled Abe out from under it and ran to the house to call for an ambulance. He returned with a blanket that he lay over his father.

Abe's voice was a whisper, but still prickly. It brought up goosebumps on Job's arms. "It hurts to breathe," he said.

"You'll be all right. The ambulance is on the way."

"If you'd built that thing right, it wouldn't have collapsed on me. Didn't I tell you it was gonna collapse?"

At the hospital, all the chairs in the waiting room were taken. Job leaned against the wall and found some comfort in smoothing the invisible sphere that the electric hum of fluorescent lights overhead produced in his hand. He sat in the first chair to come free, then gave it to an elderly woman. Leaned against the wall again until he grew tired. Sat in a kiddy's chair at a table of toys and watched a boy of three drive a car over the stomach of a teddy bear.

His father was on the operating table with an aortic aneurysm. The young doctor had explained how the blow to Abe's chest had caused the blood vessel to balloon out like a blister on an old tire, ready to burst.

Job felt so heavy he thought he'd never be able to stand again. He stayed sitting, even as he felt the touch on his arm and looked into the face of the doctor, her hair hidden under a green surgical cap. "Mr. Sunstrum? I'm sorry. Your father didn't make it."

He hugged his knees and watched the child playing with the toys on the table, and started to cry, though he felt no emotion, nothing at all. The boy, noticing his tears, offered him the teddy. "Bear?" he said.

Job, alone on the farm. He turned down offers of help from Godsfinger men, supper invitations from their wives. He blamed himself for his father's death. Thought everyone else did too.

He felt nothing in his hands when listening to the vacuum. Its hum no longer produced the feel of a glass egg, and Job became less inclined to use

the machine. Weeks of grit accumulated on the kitchen floor. The congregation's singing was muddied and yellow, like the colours of a photograph left too long in the sun, and Job stopped going to church. No one phoned or stopped by to check on him. He walked through his days with the feeling that at any moment he might become lost, and no one would know to search for him, or care.

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It was Barbara Stubblefield who contrived to steer Job back into the fold. A big woman, at least five foot ten. Heavy set. Square face. Bifocals. A taste for sweater sets. She was quick to criticize an unkempt lawn, a messy house. On the other hand, she'd nailed her collection of promotional caps that farm-supply salesmen had given her to the tops of fence posts bordering Correction Line Road. Over the years, kids had painted faces on the fence posts under the hats, so now there was an army of clowns standing at attention along her property line.

The consensus after Emma's death had been that Barbara would end up with Abe. It wasn't often a widow and a widower ended up living side by side like that, both with teenaged sons ready to work the farm. But Abe had never asked Barbara out to a pancake supper, and had in fact avoided her at church.

She believed she'd been healed of her borderline diabetes by a television evangelist who read her prayer request for healing during his broadcast. Members of the church, however, attributed the cure to the fact that Barbara had given up coconut-coated marshmallows in compliance with her doctor's orders to lose weight.

Barbara was a poultry farmer, so she began, as always, with a chicken. Once a week, on Friday mornings, she stopped in on Job before heading to the ladies' auxiliary meeting. She dropped a frozen fowl on the table and announced, "There's your dead bird," and talked of little other than church as Job stared at her red, cracked hands. She wouldn't take money for the chicken, so he had to listen. There was no getting around it.

One Friday morning Barbara brought her son Will over, and dropped him off as she went to the auxiliary meeting. Will had moved back from B.C. to take over his mother's poultry farm. Barbara, now sixty, was moving into a postwar bungalow in the middle of Main Street, and she'd taken on the job of mayor, as no one else wanted it.

Will came sporting a beard and smoking an Old Port cigar and talked animatedly about his travels around British Columbia, working in logging camps and mills. He carried the conversation, a trait Job was always thankful for. They took a stroll to look over Job's herd. The cows ran away when they saw Will coming, a near stampede to the end of the pasture.

"You've got old man's cows, eh?" said Will. "Never see anybody else. Only used to you and your ways."

"I guess," said Job, thinking of the days, years before, when he farmed with his mother and father. The cows wouldn't run then, even when a semen salesman wandered down to find Job and Abe in the fields, offering caps and

brochures. His cows had betrayed him. Will knew he was without friends.

From then on Will came over on Friday mornings instead of Barbara, bringing a frozen chicken. He drank coffee and offered Job compliments on his baking, and talked farming for the most part, markets and prices, his hopes for the poultry, but he managed to slip in a word or two about the goings-on at church. Whose son had married. Whose father had died. Then, two months after his return, he finally got around to it. "Why not ride to church with me Sunday morning," he said. "Pick you up at nine-thirty?"

Job agreed, recognizing the net that had caught him. But he was surprised at the effect of the service. Friendly, familiar faces greeted him. The smell of the church, of old wood and years of coffee, canned milk, comfort. The singing produced, for Job, that pool of sound, splashed with the individual voices of the congregation. Radiating circles, Will's voice spruce blue-green, Barbara's blue-violet. Rings of colours spreading, blending with all the others. Filling his visual field, projected, out there. Real. With the colours came the excitement, the certainty. God.

## Two



Job accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal saviour. Again. Coffee and hand-shaking afterwards. Mumbles of “Glad to have you back, Job,” and “Good to see you.” Slaps to the shoulder. Community.

At home he found the glass egg back in his hands when he turned on the vacuum cleaner. Saw the pastel sheen when he ran a finger around the rim of a glass or squeaked a clean dish. A remembrance of his mother’s voice. He found a new enthusiasm for keeping house.

He thought for certain that Will would drop him as a friend now that he was back at church. Another fish caught. He was right. Will stopped coming over on Fridays and sat with others at church. Never offered him another frozen chicken. But Job was hungry for a friend. He invited Will for supper, with the excuse that he owed Will a cheque for the barley he’d trucked over the week before. Job started cleaning house at noon. Cooked a dinner of fried chicken, a bowl of potatoes whipped with butter, peas grown in his own garden that he served with fresh baked buns on his mother’s best china and glassware. Candles out, table shining like a candelabra.

He gave up on Will arriving at all by eight. At nine, Will turned up four hours late with an excuse about running into one of his old buddies in Edmonton. The chicken had gone cold and greasy in the fridge, peas to mush. Job apologized, offered to microwave him a plate. When Will declined, said he’d eaten in the city, Job apologized again, made tea and put out a plate of frozen shortbread, then sat staring at it, unable to come up with anything to say. He wished he were adept at conversation, quick with a joke.

“I like your jars,” said Will, pointing at the gallon jars lined up along the tops of the cupboards, in which Job stored beans, dried peas, pastas, flour, cornmeal and rolled oats.

“Pickle jars,” said Job. “I get them from Crystal, at the Out-to-Lunch Café.”

“Ah,” said Will.

They sat in silence for some minutes.

“Well,” said Will. “It’s getting late. Sorry about supper.”

“No, no,” said Job. “I’m sorry it’s cold.”

“All right then. I’ll see you later.”

Will had left the driveway before Job realized he hadn’t given him the cheque for the barley. Will would think him stupid, or he’d think Job was trying to get out of paying him. That Job was holding a grudge because Will had turned up late. Job rolled it over in his mind and didn’t sleep that night; he tossed and turned on guilt and hurt. He got up at five, emptied the

macaroni out of one of his pickle jars, the beans from another, and took them and the cheque over to the poultry farm when he knew Will's hired hand, an acreage kid with pock-marked cheeks, would be doing chores. He handed him the cheque and the jars to give to Will when he woke.

Later in the day Will came over, said Job needn't have gone to all that trouble. He knew he'd get the money sooner or later. Did he really want to give up the jars? Job felt foolish and apologized again. Said sorry when Will insisted there was no need to apologize. Felt stupid for it.

"Look," said Will. "I'm sorry I missed supper. Why don't I make up for it? Come by the house tonight. I'll cook."

It was the first of many dinners. Will made Job sit at the kitchen table as he served beef stroganoff, hamburgers, Beef Rouladen, having completely lost the taste for chicken himself.

At times, when Will hugged Job goodnight, or laid a hand on his shoulder, asking if he wanted more coffee, another slice of lemon loaf, Job was moved to tears and had to look away. Thankful for his small kindnesses, thinking himself undeserving. He wondered that the friendship endured.

Job tried to grow a beard like Will's and failed, took up cigars instead. He didn't smoke them but chewed on the tip as if he were just getting around to it. He kept a package in the freezer and took them out when Will stopped by for coffee. He believed they made him seem worldly, well-travelled, as Will appeared. But he gave them up, as did Will, when Stinky Steinke, heading the church board, pointed out that the constitution forbade smoking.

Then, one Sunday, a year after Will's return, despairing that her son would never find a wife and give her grandchildren, Barbara Stubblefield invited Penny Blust, the daughter of a friend from Leduc Pentecostal, to come to Godsfinger Baptist. She was a petite girl of nineteen, with blonde hair cut just above the shoulder and held back with barrettes. Clear pink skin and pale blue eyes. A tight, permanent smile already etched into her face. She seasoned her conversation with phrases that few at Godsfinger Baptist would use. "The Lord is leading me into the ministry," she said when Will asked her what she was going to do now that she was out of school. "Not as a pastor, of course, but maybe the youth ministry, or working with children. Or maybe I'll go overseas, into missions. I tried doing home care, you know, helping out cripples, old people in their houses. But I relied on myself, didn't take it to the Lord, couldn't handle cleaning pee off the floor around toilets. So I figured I'd take a year or two off, before going to Bible college. Work at Dad's Dairy Queen until I'm a little more spiritually mature."

Barbara had Penny sit between her and Will and kept Job safely on her left. She invited Penny and Will over for supper. Within a week she had Will take Penny to a movie in Edmonton, and in a month got him bringing the girl flowers.

Job once again spent his Saturday nights alone, listening to the vacuum cleaner, smoothing the glass egg in his hand. He felt dispensable, a friend of convenience.

One Saturday evening Will was at the door, dressed in a town shirt, tugging at his beard, asking Job to chaperone Penny and himself at the movie that night, and for nights to come. “We want to save ourselves for marriage,” he said. “We’re afraid—I’m afraid—if we spend too much time alone we’ll succumb to temptation.”

Job nodded. Given half a chance he would succumb himself.

So it was that Job found himself accompanying Will and Penny on most of their dates. Penny seemed flattered by the attention of two men. She hugged them both when Will dropped her off before driving Job home, and kissed Job on the cheek. In the dark of the movie theatre she often took Job’s hand as well as Will’s. The fact of her hand in his seemed a near impossibility, a hummingbird miraculously caught in flight.

Job built his herd, bid on new blood at the Ponoka auction. Went into pure breeds for a couple of years, for the status; left because of the expense. Finally fell back on the cow-calf operation. He made a fair living and saved a bit. Joined a Tuesday-night Bible study, held in Will’s kitchen, and brought baked goods to church and community dinners, even though, as a bachelor, he wasn’t expected to. He canned crabapples and made saskatoon jam and gave the jars away at Christmas, tied in bows, just like the women of the church did.

He kept to the women, baked alongside them in the church kitchen, made squares, pies and muffins to sell with theirs to raise money for the church. He was told by the women that he’d make a wonderful husband, and if they were younger they would snap him up for themselves. He was told by the men he’d make someone a fine wife. That bothered him. But still, he felt a part of something. Though he did not have a wife and family, at least he had friends.

## Three



Then came a year when his tightly coiled life popped its twine and unravelled like a round hay bale dropped to asphalt from a speeding truck.

First, Jacob. He phoned from the Edmonton airport on a March morning, just as Job came in the house from checking for new calves in the calving pen. “I need a ride home,” he said. His voice prickling across Job’s arms as Abe’s had.

Job tugged at the twisted cord of the telephone, said, “Sure.”

“I’m waiting at luggage claim. See you in half an hour.”

As he drove up to the airport, Job figured his brother was making the trip home by himself, taking time to finally settle the estate. Jacob hadn’t been home since Abe’s funeral three years before, when he brought his wife, Lilith, and their eight-year-old son and stayed a week. Jacob had met Lilith, the daughter of a missionary family posted at Frog Lake, at Bible school. He had brought her to Godsfinger just once before bringing her home to marry. Lilith gave birth to Ben six months later. Jacob claimed he was a preemie.

The week of the funeral, Jacob and Lilith slept in Abe’s room and Job gave up his bed to Ben. He slept out in the old hired hands cabin on a folding cot. Ben was family, sure enough: pretty face so much like Job’s, on a meat loaf of a body. Oversized hands and feet. His nails were chewed to the quick and he had the nervous habit of plucking the hairs from his arms. When he told a story, waving his hands in the air, Jacob told him, “Look at you, talking with your hands like a Frenchman.” A thing Abe had said.

Lilith spent two hours in the bathroom each morning, came out painted up, eyebrows sketched on, hair glistening with spray. She wore dentures, not because her teeth had rotted, but because she had thought her own teeth ugly and had them all yanked.

Lilith, Jacob, Job and Ben sat around the kitchen table for most of those days, eating sliced meats and cheeses, homemade buns and squares, leftovers from the church-basement reception that had followed the funeral. Around them the kitchen was pretty much the same as it had been when Emma was alive. A metal-legged table sat in front of the window overlooking the vegetable garden. Beside it there was a cabinet with sliding glass doors that housed Emma’s good china and glasses. The only new addition was the microwave sitting on a shelf over the portable dishwasher.

The cupboards, installed the year Job’s grandfather died and Abe took over the farm, were painted white with square metal pulls. On the walls, framed pictures of grain elevators made from wheat, a calendar, a photograph of the

farm taken from the air.

Jacob talked and talked, of the church where he was pastor and his small accomplishments, but not of Abe. Though he'd thought of Abe's safety deposit box straight away and asked Job for the key. Abe had made Jacob executor to his will and had left no special instructions on leaving the farm to Job. He'd made it clear he wanted things split evenly between the two boys, though he had talked as though Job would be the one to take over.

Jacob told Job he didn't want the farm. "I've got my church, and like Dad kept telling me, I'm not farmer material."

Job remembered his father had put it more bluntly. "He's useless," Abe had once said, right in front of Jacob, who stood behind him at the kitchen door, wilting in his rubber boots. Jacob's crime, that time around, was to break the handle of a spade clean in two. He was handicapped by clumsiness, his limbs growing faster than his capacity to control them. But instead of awkwardness, Abe had seen in Jacob the chief reason for the farm's failure to prosper. "You're trying to ruin me, aren't you?" he'd asked Jacob. "Trying to make me go broke!"

Before Emma's death, Jacob might have been his mother's kitchen help, while Job did chores outside with his father, but Jacob had lacked skill there as well: he'd knocked freshly canned jars of saskatoons to the floor, splattering purple berries across yellow linoleum. Dishes slipped from his thick fingers and cracked on the Arborite counter. Emma had thought him purposeful, trying to get out of helping her, and chased him from the kitchen.

Jacob was a copy of his father in build if not in talent. A belly that strained the buttons of his shirt. Hands and feet of a giant on a six-foot frame, giving him the bearing of a troll. A head too big even for that inflated body. He'd been called Moose at school. Meat loaf. Later, after he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and personal saviour at Godsfinger Baptist Camp, he was called Friar Tuck, less for his piousness than the frequency with which he bought candy at the tuck shop. Job had seen strangers on the street stop and gape at his brother.

"You'll have to go to a lawyer and settle things," said Job. "I won't be able to take out a loan until you do."

"You've got cows to sell. You'll be all right."

"What if a tractor breaks down, or I have to buy equipment?"

"I'll get right on it," said Jacob, but didn't. He took on a church in Ontario, then another in Saskatchewan. Always had a reason why he couldn't come home.

As he drove to the Edmonton airport, Job figured he'd finally get things settled. But Lilith and Ben were waiting at the luggage carousel alongside Jacob. Lilith's dress ruffled, cheeks splotched from crying. Ben silent, his pretty face a mask. Beside them a pickup load of luggage: suitcases and boxes of clothes; downhill skis; a birdcage; boxes of Jacob's pastoral files and books; Lilith's sewing machine; the disassembled crib that had been Ben's; photo