



DOMINANT
TRAITS

STORIES

ERIC FREEZE

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BY ERIC FREEZE

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WRONG TIME FOR CAUTION

The gas station where I work is a 7-11 that sells Slurpees even in the middle of January, which, if you don't know Crowsnest, can be cold, 60 below with the wind chill. We have customers all day and we're open 24 hours and the night till only carries 50 dollars as a policy, although I've never had occasion to suspect we needed caution much. Past midnight, the only people passing through are truckers and skiers, and sometimes Benny the Indian comes in for a plug of Chattanooga Chew. Benny goes to the Mormon Church in town because they will pay his rent if he says he'll stop smoking. He hangs around the pop machine and fills a small Gulp with ice that he sucks on with his mouth open until we tell him to find some money or get out.

Put Crowsnest Pass anywhere urban, Vancouver or Toronto, or even Calgary for that matter, and what you have is a four-lane road, a freeway, but without the traffic. Here it's just a road for hikers or skiers or loggers to make their way up into the mountains. My station is past Frank Slide near Blairmore, just after the limestone boulders that cover the valley, at the mouth of the Pass. I work regular hours during the winter and then take off time during the summer to volunteer at the Frank Slide Interpretive Centre where I tell folks, kids, or senior citizens mostly, about when Turtle Mountain shed its limestone face and crushed the mining community of Frank below. In the winter, the

center is closed and the boulders are covered with snow and the valley looks like a huge lumpy blanket. Only on the side of the road where the plow trucks spray salt as they pass can you see the boulders underneath.

Fender lives just up the road from the station in a hut not much larger than an outhouse. He's my assistant, has been for the past ten years. Every night I take all the cash and leave Fender with fifty bucks. During the night, he has customers, but they usually pay at the pump, swiping their cards fast as magicians. Fender has a Hells Angels tattoo on his arm though I've never seen him ride a bike. He takes his truck everywhere, a 70s-era Ford with monster wheels. I have him park the thing in back so there's room for customers. Fender's girlfriend is my cousin Annabel who works nights at the Day's Inn. She was a sprinter in high school and has calves the size of footballs. One summer she told me the only reason she's with Fender is because he's the only guy awake when she is.

The first time I caught a shoplifter, I called the cops and made the kid cry. He was a 14-year-old dropout who had to dump rock salt on the store's walk for community service. Now he's a cop, full-blown RCMP, but I still watch him whenever he comes in. Maurice is his name and he has a wife who works from home stuffing envelopes and a kid with an enlarged cranium and a woman who comes daily to help from social services.

Fender's an alcoholic and I've warned Annabel but she says that drink mellows him out. I tell her that his liver's going to rot, that he'll have to piss in a bag before he's fifty. My wife told me that every time I took a drink for the seven years we were married. After we divorced, I quit out of spite and now I can't stand the stuff. I enjoy a beer now and then, but gin, vodka, whisky, rum, the hard stuff I can't stomach anymore.

Maurice says he's had it with vandalism at the slide. People painting over rocks like they're subway walls. Benny says the slide has spirits that roam the rocks looking

for their homes. I used to go cross-country skiing in the winter up at Allison Creek but I stopped on account of all the yuppies. Maurice runs the tracks on the weekends, carving grooves in the snow for the yuppie cross-country skiers from Lethbridge and Calgary and Fort Macleod. You don't think "yuppie" in southern Alberta, but every town's got them now.

On weekends I drive down to see my parents in Lethbridge at the new condos near the Lethbridge Lodge. The condos have a pool that's reserved for residents only. Since ninety percent of the condos are owned by octogenarians, most of the time the pool stays empty. Just a glassy surface. Put a few ferns and plastic roses around and people would think the pool was only for decoration. You go in the front door, and boom, there it is, a window looking out over the pool, with another window in the background so you can see the coulees.

Mom says I'm cynical because I won't live in the city. She has liver spots on her hands and last month she broke her collarbone from falling on ice. Her arm is in a sling, her hand limp as a dead fish, the spots front and center, impossible to miss. "Every time I change, it's a huge production," she says. Dad's La-Z-Boy has plastic cup holders in the arms. He grunts and changes to the weather channel where a hurricane blasts the coast of Florida.

One weekend Fender and Annabel invite me skidoing on my skidoos. We got almost 2 feet Thursday so we suit up and take my skidoos to Alison creek. Annabel is pissed about something and won't talk the whole way up and Fender makes it worse by commenting on everything he can think of about the weather and what he's going to do. "I'm going to get in some jumps," he says. "Snow is fucking sweet." I'm driving and have to pull over to put on chains before the switchbacks up to the trailhead. The trailer is heavy and my V6 Ranger can't take it. I tell Fender to give me a hand so he's not stuck with Annabel and her PMS.

“What did you do,” I say.

“Come on,” Fender says.

“You got issues? Did you knock her up?”

Fender kicks snow. “There’s some things you shouldn’t ask.”

One time I covered for Fender on the night shift so he could take Annabel to Calgary for the weekend. He had won 500 bucks on Lotto 6/49 and was going to blow it all. Benny the Indian was there Saturday night telling me how to beat those machines in Walmart. He’d been to Lethbridge with his cousins, went to Iggy’s until they got thrown out. There was a Checkstop on Mayor Magrath, so they took his cousin’s truck to the Walmart and parked it there at three in the morning. At six in the morning, hung over and leaning on his cousin, Benny wakes up and there’s a guy filling up the machines with stuffed animals. Benny can see him through the glass and the guy does a couple rounds on the machine and nabs one each time. Benny lost five bucks imitating the guy before he figured it out. “Got a whole closetful of Popples to prove it.”

Mom can’t get Dad to talk, calls me on the weekends to complain. “He just sits there watching the boob tube,” she says. “And when I say something he snaps.”

“Not your fault, Mom.”

“Would you treat a normal person like that?”

My mother has asked me this before, several times. She repeats the question because she knows I don’t listen either. It’s during Stanley Cup playoffs, for Chrissake. I’m watching the tube too. “I don’t know Mom.”

“I think that he loves me, but he just doesn’t like me.”

Jagr is skating a good game, but Lemieux is in the box and the Leafs are on a power play.

“I said he doesn’t like me.”

Jagr battles along the boards with Sundin for the puck. He gets possession and ices it. The power play ends and the Penguins take a line change. I breathe out through my mouth. “Sure he does,” I say.

My wife, before we divorced, wanted a child. She had charts of her cycle and would tell me all the signs of peak fertility: luteal phase, heightened temperature, cervical mucus. She used a thermometer daily, checked her signs, and wrote everything down in a scribbler that she wouldn't let me see. During the five peak days of fertility, we had regimented sex and she would speak to me in whispers, *come to me, fill me up, I want you hard*. She pulled and groped and lifted her hips up to mine and groaned and groaned when she came. Then she'd roll up in a naked ball, her hands around her legs and bum to the air so my semen worked its way in, my job as the sperm donor done.

During the summer once, Benny tells me about what really happened after the slide. The textbook story I've learned has the group holed up for fourteen hours before they dig their way to freedom. All seventeen survive. There are other miraculous stories: the Leitch family whose house is demolished and yet all three young daughters make it. The brakeman for the CPR who races across the rocks and stops an approaching passenger train. The Bansmer and Ennis families, miraculously surviving the destruction of their homes. There was another story about a horse that lived four days in the mine without food and water before people found him and let him out.

"They always tell the story of the survivors," Benny says. "They never tell about the ones who don't make it."

So he begins to tell me another story, not the one I'd memorized and carefully rehearsed. This one, all the Indians left the valley. There's a half-breed, a Métis who tries to tell the miners something's not right. The Indians believe shit like this. Like the rocks that used to dot the prairies, the Blood tribe's god Napi taking gobs of mud and breathing on them to make buffalo. Always an explanation. Benny tells me they knew a month in advance that the town would die.

"The miner told them to fuck off. The Métis guy, he told him the mountain would move. If he didn't get out of

the way,” Benny smacked his hands together, a horizontal clap. “Like a pancake. Guy didn’t listen, never saw him again.”

So they warned the town and the mountain moved. Now Benny says ghosts haunt the valley. They walk among the rocks but the landscape has changed and they don’t recognize anything. “Imagine looking for home but there’s no home to go to,” he says.

The day we go skidooring, a big conversion van crowds the parking lot. You can see the lines crunched into the snow where their chains had been. I know we’ll have to be careful that we don’t plow anyone over, especially with the way Fender drives, taking jumps and whatnot. They are my skidoos after all. Annabel slams the door and heads to the port-a-potty, a green plastic box with about two feet of snow on top, piled high so you can see the layers like strata in rock.

Fender pops open a couple Exports and we clink them and drink to PMS. He downs his fast and meets Annabel halfway to the port-a-potty. They pass each other like two kids in junior high wanting to rough each other up.

“Guy’s an asshole, what can I say,” I say. The beer feels good, loosens me up.

“I should lock him in there,” she says.

“Do, and I’m sure he’d dig out the bottom to get back to you.”

“Didn’t some prisoner escape that way?”

“Escape from shit-ca-traz.”

Annabel does a drill sergeant about face and leaves me there holding my cold one. When she moves, she kind of sashays, a lot like my ex-wife. Everyone is reminding me of my ex-wife lately. The girl in the new GM commercial or Sandra from the bank. The GM girl has the same all-enamel smile and shoulder-length brown hair. She probably doesn’t look anything like Jenny at all. The first time I took Jenny to see my parents, my mom took me aside and told me she was plain.

Once Benny came in with an open bottle of whisky and Maurice pulled up in his patrol car. Benny hung over the counter asking for \$3 Scratch-and-Win Rummy. "I'm feeling lucky," he said. His hair was stringy, stuck to his face. His legs wobbled. Maurice turned on his lights and hitched up his pants before coming in. Benny didn't resist, just followed Maurice out and got in the back. Then Maurice came in for a pop, said, "I'll take him in until he dries out." Said it like he was real concerned. Maurice's lights blinked red and blue a couple times before he pulled out heading west into town. I bought the next Rummy ticket and won fifty bucks.

Mom tells me I need a hobby. "Skidooing's a hobby," I say.

"You need to meet a nice young woman."

"I'm not that young anymore."

Mom crochets while we talk. She's doing an afghan for her sister who is dead. Aunt May who died before her birthday, Mom's arbitrary deadline for the project. "Your father is not a nice man," she says. "But he's dependable. He's here. I don't have to worry about falling down and not having anyone there to help me up. You could have a heart attack, you know. Nobody would find you for weeks."

"Fender comes by," I say.

"A woman," she says.

"Only women are in bars," I say. "I hate bars." Which I do. Ever since I quit drinking the places drive me crazy. Benny sent the Mormon missionaries to my house once and we talked for an hour about drinking, the cycle of alcoholism. That's who will come by when I die. The Mormons will come and knock and see me lying on my floor, my face the color of chalk. They'll pound and pound and break the door down and baptize me now that I'm dead. Or have someone baptized for me—they explained it to me once. One of the missionaries was Elder Finch and he had a Bob Hope ski-jump nose and was from the UK. Blond

hair the color of straw. He did the door approach: "We're from the chuhch of Jesus Chrahist, the Mooohmons." An accent to beat all. Jenny would never let them in on account of a Mormon high school boyfriend who was always trying to get in her pants.

The day Jenny left me she said, "You are self-destructive."

When Jenny wanted children I was addicted to gambling. Would do anything to get in a game, drive to Fort Macleod or Lethbridge or Calgary if I had a mind to. Sometimes I'd leave for the whole weekend and come back piss poor. Or rich. Whichever it was, I would go back to try again, up the stakes, get in a better game. Texas Hold 'em, Omaha, 7 Card Stud, even Blackjack. I'd count cards, work out probabilities in my head. The probability that I'd be broke and sober by Monday morning.

"You don't act like you want children," Jenny said.

"But I do."

"Children are a big deal for me. It's my body that changes, my body that carries the child. I need the support."

"I support you."

"How?"

Benny doesn't come around anymore on account of Maurice who watches the place, drags him to the tank even if he's not drunk. He's home so infrequently now he says he's solved the problem of his rent.

On the skidoos I feel like Evel Knievel, like I've got lit gasoline in my veins. I love opening her up as I'm cresting a hill, the feeling when the carriage leaves the ground and my seat is up in the air. I fling my body into the turns so I can cut hard and snow flies in my face, misting my goggles in the moonlight. I'm following Fender as he zigzags through the woods around Allison Creek. Annabel is still pissed, won't even talk to Fender and drives straight like she's just waiting for us to get worn out and cut our engines, pack up, and go. At the ridge we wait for her to catch up and Fender says, "Why can't you just

have a good time?” Annabel calls him a son of a bitch and guns her engine past him and down into the valley. From the ridge we can see the lights of Blairmore reflected against Crowsnest Mountain, a faint glow on the rock face. Snow clings to the rock like frosting. We’re miles in now, high up, where the trees start to thin out and the trail widens, the snow deep and light. My skidoo hums in the deeper snow, the chain digging in, sending up a spray that fans out behind me like a tail, a goddamn snow white wedding train. Fender and Annabel are still sparring, weaving in each other’s wake, cutting each other off. They’re gunning for an accident the way they are driving, and it makes me cautious. Like I don’t know a couple of drunks on snowmobiles in the backwoods of Crowsnest Pass aren’t a recipe for disaster. I told Jenny once how much a kid costs from infancy to university before we jumped in the sack again to try and procreate. There is a wrong time for caution.

Another ridge, miles up now. Bowls of snow covering shale, the Rockies. Fender has his goggles on his forehead, is squinting down the trail into the beam of his headlight. Annabel crosses her arms above her head like she’s doing the YMCA. Someone is out there, at the end of the cross-country ski tracks, skis knifed into the snow. I see them too: six solitary figures in a sort of semi-circle, waving, made more visible by the moonlight.

“Isn’t it a little late for skiers?” Fender asks when I pull up.

“Late for anyone.”

Fender gets another Ex from his pack, drinks it down and hands me the can.

“You’ve had enough,” I say. Fender shrugs and Annabel says, “They’re lost.”

I turn around to look at her, moving my whole torso on account of my suit—a one piece with a hood that’s like blinders for my peripheral vision. “We should help them,” she says.

My father finally died of an aneurysm, quick and silent while he was watching reruns of *Hogan's Heroes*. Mom was in the back, in bed she claims. She had given up waiting for "the man" to come to bed, didn't see the point when she was tired and he had his shows. At the funeral, Dad wore the blue serge suit he bought for my wedding. A yellow tie with blue, pencil-width stripes. Mom insisted on saying a eulogy, even when there was a preacher and my Uncle Joe there to tell the story of his life: how he was the son of Ukrainian homesteaders who settled land near Bow Island. He was alive when the winter of 1906-1907 wiped out half of all the cattle in Alberta. Dad farmed his way into a business, sold his acres to the Hutterites, then started in on the grocery business in Lethbridge with no experience whatsoever. Uncle Joe told the story of Dad's life with selective memory, mentioning the grocery bit like it was pure entrepreneurial gold, like Dad hadn't sold the farm to cover his debts and bought into the grocery business just when chains like Safeway were closing them down. He didn't mention years of insurance sales or vans filled with vacuum cleaners that he'd peddle to retirees. At the end of the speech Mom held me by the arm and put a Kleenex to her nose, Dad's coffin still open from the head up, his face colored with foundation and blush that gave him the florid cheeks of a drunk or a blowhard, a preacher with fire in his lungs ready to raise Hell.

What I thought at the funeral was this: Dad was a man who always felt wronged. Like he'd done everything straight and the world never took notice. A dog who sits and rolls over and begs and plays dead and just waits on his haunches watching a fat man eat a pound of bacon.

A week after Dad's funeral, Maurice took Benny to a correctional facility. It was in the evening, in front of my store. Benny lay slouched up against a window, head lolling like a teenager falling asleep in class. I let him stay on account of the store being busy. It was a ski weekend. Folks were making their way back from Fernie, coming to

fill up, their faces crisped by the sun, white where their goggles had been. A man with a Sun Ice jacket, arms marshmallow puffed, came to the register, said, "There's a drunk Indian on your doorstep." He leaned into me, almost whispered it, the strictest confidence. I nodded thanks, scanned his Snapple and rang up his gas. "Aren't you going to do anything?" He said. "Busy," I said. "Guy doesn't bother anyone."

Outside, I saw the Sun Ice guy on our payphone. Watched him step over Benny like he was avoiding a puddle. I waited for the guy to leave, then closed the till even though there were three people in line, tried to rouse Benny and get him to his feet. "What's the deal mister?" A man's voice behind me as the door swung shut.

"Benny," I said. "You have to get up, Benny."

"No place to go," Benny said. His hair was stuck to his face again, the rest of it matted around his shoulders. He smiled and shrugged, held up his hands like there had been something in them, lost now. "I can walk," he said, gently pushing me away. He stumbled off the sidewalk, pointed north, steady enough. I ran back in the store, resumed my place behind the register, hoping these well-to-do types weren't the kind to be fisting candy bars and pops while my back was turned. The customers kept coming: a 30-something frizzed blond with braces; two teenage boys still clomping in ski boots, toques a mile long down their backs; a family with two girls holding up giant Tootsie rolls like offerings, their dad paying cash, all business. I scanned and made change and rolled out pens and ripped receipts and popped the register, money filling up my coffers when I saw Maurice's blue-and-red lights through the window. Benny had come back, still drunk; he held a gas nozzle in his hand and kept trying to push past Maurice to fill a white Chevette that had pulled up. Maurice grabbed him by the elbow and Benny shook him off. Folks near the register followed my gaze; people in the store crowded the windows. A young man, teenager maybe, held up his hand