

CATHERINE HUNTER

Calling You

SUE SWEEPS THE METAL DETECTOR IN AN ARC before her as she walks beside the train tracks, and it boops in excitement every time she gets too close to the steel rails. The grass and thistles here are higher than our knees, and the hidden ground is uneven. I'm following her, armed with a hockey stick, hooking up every shiny thing I see. But all I've caught so far are tin cans, a rusty thermos, and about a hundred bottle caps. Sue stops and bends forward, hands on her thighs, to stretch her spine. I stop too, lean back as far as I can, look at the sky. Grey clouds, no different from the grey clouds every day this week. On both sides of the tracks, beyond the two wide strips of yellow prairie grass, stands a long row of high wooden fences, separating us from the backyards of this new, or new to me, suburban development. We're in a long, deserted corridor.

Sue lets out a low groan. She drops the detector and lowers herself until she's lying down. Right down flat on the railway ties.

I pick up the detector and continue where she left off. The double fences stretch ahead of us to the horizon, with no exit visible. It's April, chilly and grim. No buds on the trees. But someone, somewhere behind these fences, is barbecuing meat.

Rich is confused. He has some kind of infection that's affecting his brain, and he thinks he's still in the room where he was last fall. He keeps turning his head toward the wall where the window used to be, wanting to find the sun. Still, he's better than he was when I brought him in to Emergency in the middle of the night. At that point, he could barely open his eyes.

Rich is blond, or he was blond, a deep golden hue that was only beginning to lose its shine when the radiation eradicated every strand. Lately, two scrubby patches have bubbled up, one above each ear, bright red, stiff and curly as steel wool. He looks demented, unloved, and this scares me. When I rushed him here last night, he wasn't making any sense. But with that clown hair, and without his dentures in, nobody thought his behaviour was unusual. The young female nurse who examined him in the hallway asked him how he was feeling. I shook his shoulder, saying, "Rich, talk to the nurse." He opened his eyes halfway and gazed at her from somewhere far in the distance.

"Aww," she said, as if looking at a puppy, "he's sleepy."

She had him pegged as a crazy old man, albeit a cute one, and I had to tell her, had to insist to the paramedics and the ER staff and the intern and all the medical students who trooped through, that he'd been fine when he went to bed. That he was an intelligent, friendly person, and always alert, never groggy, no matter how sleepy. That something was horribly, horribly wrong. If he'd been alone, I think they would have let him die.

I often go back to that moment when the resident—she looked like one of my college students—leaned in and listened. People don't, as a rule, actually listen. But she leaned forward across the bed—she even touched my arm while she listened, as if she could get more information that way—and stayed still as I described, for the seventh time, Rich at the dinner table the night before, less than eight hours ago, eating spaghetti neatly with a fork, explaining Carl Sagan's theories of planetary exploration, calculating the odds of the Jets winning the playoffs, and reminding me the house insurance was up for renewal next month. He was perfectly fine.

Well, not fine. He was in the fourth stage of a vicious lung cancer that was eating him alive. He was down to a 112 pounds and dealing with symptoms and side effects that came and went and came again: back pain, sore ribs, bleeding fingernails, an infected toe, sores in his mouth, sores all over his scalp, nausea, fatigue, muscle cramps, weakness, blurred vision, and inexplicably, every once in a while he'd go stone deaf. But last night all he said was he had a headache. It was the first time in twenty years he'd complained of a headache, and I should have done something, I don't know what, about it.

"It's possibly bacterial," the resident said. She had sent his blood to the lab, but didn't expect the results for hours. I pictured a clutch of scientists in white coats holding a vial of Rich's blood up to the light,

conferring with each other, long arguments in scholarly whispers. The resident said, "I'm going to prescribe the antibiotic that's most effective against the type of bacteria I think this might be. Given what you've told me."

I hang on to this moment of diagnosis, hoping it's true. It's a common bacteria, she says. We all come in contact with it every day. But it only affects us if our immune system is compromised.

If her guess is right, Rich will get better and come home. He'll come home for a month, maybe six months, maybe a year.

Every hour or so, I stand at the sink in the hospital bathroom, washing the germs off my hands.

Stay in the moment, Rich always said. There is no other day except today.

The field behind the school is mostly covered with a thicket of low-lying juniper shrubs with a tall Jack pine in their midst. When I pull back one of the lower pine branches, it's like peeking inside a tent. There's a hidden little space in there, where lost, abandoned junk has accumulated. A frisbee, a soccer ball, a mitten. No plants grow in the dirt circle that surrounds the trunk, but I see signs of other life. There's a nest of filthy newspapers and flattened cigarette packs. Empty bottles of Jamaican rum and lemon gin. Homeless people? Partying high-school students? Dozens of squashed beer cans and empty tins of Copenhagen snuff elicit loud but ultimately disappointing boops from the detector.

I work outwards from the Jack pine, in widening orbits, sweeping the long stick of the detector—the wand, they call it—over the juniper and the overgrown lawn, laden with snow mould and dead leaves, all the way to the chain-link fence around the school.

Beyond the fence is a whole soccer field. But the sun is low in the sky. So I just run the wand across the flower beds quickly and then head to the parking lot, where Sue is waiting in the car. She has fallen asleep, but wakes when I open the back door and slide the metal detector in. I expect her to say, "Any luck?" But she just turns the key in the ignition.

I wonder about the snuff. Is that a teenage thing?

We drive back to the hospital without talking. All the way through downtown, the high-rise office buildings have signs in their windows. *Go Jets Go.*

At first, we don't even realize the phone is missing. We assume it's somewhere in the hospital room, in a drawer or under the newspapers stacked on the bedside table or under Rich himself. He's misplaced it several times simply by falling asleep while he's holding it, and it ends up under the pillow or hidden among the tangled bed sheets.

"I need your phone," I tell Rich. It's his phone that has the long-distance plan, and I need to call my aunt in Idaho. She's already left three messages for me at home, and she'll be worried. But Rich just pats his chest, looking for a pocket. I untangle the IV lines and remove everything from the bed—the candy, the tissues, the newspapers, his tablet and ear buds—he's been listening to Carl Sagan again. I take off the covers and shake them out quickly, before he gets cold, then smooth the top sheet over him, add the two flannel blankets, tuck them under his feet the way he likes. "Where'd you put it?" I ask, but he's asleep again.

From the last pay phone left in the hospital, I call my aunt and reverse the charges.

"You're lucky," she says. She can't believe Rich is staying at the hospital for free. Even his drugs are free, while he's in here. Her husband's heart disease has cost them their house, their travel plans, the savings account they intended to leave for their children.

We swap family news for a while. She and her husband have three sons and a pregnant daughter-in-law and a couple of poodles. I have Rich and his sister, Sue.

"Maybe you can come visit," my aunt suggests. "We'll go to the galleries."

"I can't," I say. "Rich—"

"I meant after," she says. "I mean later."

The head of the bed is raised, so Rich can sit up and see people and drink his tea, but he keeps sliding down the slope and isn't strong enough to get himself back up. Every hour or so, we have to shift his body. This takes two people. The nurses keep a thin folded blanket laid sideways across the bed beneath him. A nurse grasps one end and someone else, usually me, grasps the other, and we haul him up. While we're doing that, I check underneath him for the phone. It isn't there. I run my hand over every inch of the sheet, look inside the pillowcase. Search the closet, the entire room. It's gone.

Last fall when Rich was stuck here for a month, we kept in constant touch by phone, talking and texting. I'd call him between classes. He'd text me in the middle of the night. When he started getting his

appetite back, he sent me lunch orders. I'd bring deli sandwiches or mushroom soup, whatever he was craving. His sister, Sue, brought donuts and cookies every day. Rich, who ordinarily never touched sugar, had suddenly developed a sweet tooth.

"Shouldn't he eat more vegetables?" I asked his dietician.

"I wouldn't worry about that right now," she said.

Back when Rich was in his early twenties, he got mugged and ended up here with a broken jaw and all his teeth knocked out. We didn't have cell phones back then. How did we handle it? I can barely remember. My memory has been wiped clean. It's a huge empty field in here, nothing but space, and a few *Hamlet* quotations that float to the surface when I need them in the classroom.

"How are you?" asks a friend at work.

"I'm here," I say.

Before I go to work, I tie the call button cord to the side railing of the bed, so it can't slip away. I show Rich where it is, within easy reach, but he doesn't seem to recognize it. True, it's an odd-looking thing. The button is at the top of a black rubber cone, about the size of an ice-cream cone. You're supposed to hold it in one hand and press the button on top with your thumb to call the nurse. Rich has done it many times in the past. But now he acts as if he's never seen it before.

"It's the call button," I say. I place it in his hand.

He looks blank.

"The call button," I say loudly, pointing at it.

Nothing but another blank look. It's as if he's gone deaf again.

"Can you hear me?" I shout. I point at my own ear. "Can you hear okay?"

Rich glances from the call button to my face, puzzled. Then, very slowly, trusting me, he lifts the rubber cone and holds it to his ear. He listens intently.

The guards at Hospital Security don't seem to care. They write it down in their lost and found book and continue their conversation about the Jets.

When Sue tells one of the nurses, he suggests activating Rich's "find my phone" app on his tablet. I don't have much faith in this idea, but when I turn it on, there it is, a little blue ball on the map. I call Sue. She looks. The nurse looks too. We all stare, mesmerized. According to the map, the phone has left the hospital. It has somehow

travelled over the bridge and through downtown and it's on the other side of the city.

"What the—"

The phone is moving west on Notre Dame.

"Someone took it," says Sue.

"Someone must have taken it home by mistake," I say. "Maybe one of those med students. They'll realize as soon as they try to use it."

"Someone *stole* it," says Sue, "and look, yesterday's sports section is missing. They probably used that to hide the phone and walked right out of here with it."

"Who would—?"

"Kids," says Sue.

Suddenly I can picture them. Mischievous teenagers, chewing gum. Bored with visiting a grandma down the hall, they roam unsupervised. I see them spotting the phone on Rich's table as they pass by. Rich sleeping. It would only take a second to step inside, fold the paper over the phone and walk away with it.

Sue taps the area where the phone has stopped on the map. "What's out there?"

"Nothing good out there," says the nurse. "Drugs. Gang wars."

The teenagers grow a little older and shadier in my mind. They're wearing leather jackets and dusty boots with knives shoved down the sides.

"That's where that girl got shot New Year's Eve," the nurse remembers.

I age the kids a little more. They're young adults now, smoking cigarettes, guns tucked in their pockets. One of them rubs the phone against his chest, shining it on the fabric of his hoodie.

On the screen, Rich's phone is a transparent blue circle, the size of a dime, pulsating like some kind of force field, and inside the circle, there's a smaller blue spot, like the nucleus of an atom. Before I can figure out what to do, it starts moving again. I watch it turn onto Keewatin, heading north.

In the hospital bathroom, I wash my hands for the twelfth time today. My skin is dry and rough after the long winter, and the washing doesn't help. I need to buy hand lotion. I tug at the brown paper towel in the dispenser, but all I get is a small ripped corner, wet from my hands. I turn the crank and hear the roll inside spinning freely, unattached to any paper.

The blue atom comes to rest a little north of Inkster and hovers there, its little blue heart beating all afternoon, beside the railway tracks.

I picture the gang of thieves hanging around the tracks. Imagine myself walking up to them. Unafraid. Maybe I'd better take Sue along. They're misunderstood youth, but we'll get through to them. I'll explain about Rich, and they'll feel compassion. I'll make an argument so compelling they'll confess. No hard feelings. No harm done. I see myself coming back to the hospital, phone in hand, triumphant.

Rich's body is still exhausted but his mind is clearing as the antibiotics do their work. Sue shows him the map on the tablet and points to his phone.

Rich seems to smile a little. "Pale blue dot," he says.

"That's right, honey," I say. I want to encourage him.

But he and Sue are exchanging smiles. "That's the book he's reading," she explains. "*Pale Blue Dot*. That's Sagan's description of planet Earth, how it looks from outer space."

"Ah," I say. Rich is making a joke. I clasp his palm, and he squeezes. There's light in his eyes, mirth. He really is getting better.

"Let's drive out there," I say to Sue. "Maybe we can find it."

The neighbourhood is not what we expected. First of all, the houses are new and expensive, the yards well kept. Recently paved roads are laid out in orderly bays, with rectangular parks and cluster mailboxes at regular intervals. Sue drives, and I hold the tablet on my knees, trying to locate the phone. But it soon becomes clear that the blue dot covers an area too large to pinpoint exactly. Its circumference overlaps too many houses, too much ground. We don't know where to start. We realize we've driven past the same playground three times. We drove out here too late. It's starting to get dark.

"Come on," I say. "We can at least search this playground."

We poke around under bushes. Look for people to question. But it's a cold weekday evening and the place is almost empty. We talk to a teenage girl babysitting a couple of toddlers in the sandbox and a woman walking a Dalmatian. Neither of them has seen a phone.

"Let's go," says Sue. She turns back toward the car. She's tired. She hasn't had any dinner.

"Just—wait!" I call. At the far end of the park, I can make out two figures sitting on the swings, dragging their feet in the gravel.

"Don't take too long," Sue calls, without turning around. She keeps trudging. She doesn't have a lot of patience for me. She loves me because Rich does. But if it weren't for him, we probably wouldn't

spend much time together. Once I heard her talking to one of her friends and calling me “intense.”

The sun is low in the sky, and the figures have their backs to me. Two boys, I think. All I can tell is they look too big to be playing on the swings. They’re dressed in jeans and parkas, and as I come closer I see they’re holding hands. One is bare-headed, pale hair blowing sideways in the wind. The other wears a yellow turban. They’re swaying from side to side, gently bumping into each other in a sad sort of rhythm as they talk, their heads hanging low, facing the ground.

“Hi,” I say, as I approach.

The hands unclasp. The heads come up.

I walk around in front of them. They’re both about thirteen, or not much older. Good-looking kids. One dark and nervous, the other light-skinned with long hair. He pushes it out of his eyes. They are still, their beautiful eyes watching me, waiting for me to explain myself.

“Have you found a phone around here?” I ask.

They look at each other. Shake their heads.

“It’s my husband’s phone,” I say. “He needs it.”

“Sorry,” says the boy with the turban.

“Okay. Well.” I feel there is much more to say. “Sorry.”

Back at the hospital, the nurse has managed to get Rich into a wheelchair so I can take him down to the lounge to watch the game. Everyone who can be here is here, patients, visitors, and staff together. People smile and shift over to make room for us. They’re excited. The Jets are winning. Somebody passes around potato chips and soda. The usually sombre ward is festive, noisy even. But Rich sleeps right through it.

The next day, Sue and I return to the new suburb, carrying a bundle of little signs I’ve made: *LOST CELL PHONE: GPS shows that our lost cell phone is in your house or yard or very close by. This phone went missing from St. Boniface Hospital on April 2. It belongs to a very ill patient who needs it to keep in touch with family.* Then a description of the phone and a plea to contact me at my own cell number. It’s my idea to get people talking, asking each other about the phone. Somebody must know where it is. We arm ourselves with sticky tape and walk on opposite sides of the street, taping the signs to telephone poles and lamp posts. We even go door to door, tucking signs under windshield wipers and

slipping them into mailboxes. Every house has a mailbox, despite the community boxes.

Searching for the train tracks, we follow a long sidewalk and cut through an industrial area, past equipment supply shops, a lumber yard, and a trucking company, before we find the railway corridor. It's huge. Huge and covered in deep grass and weeds. The phone could be anywhere under all that grass. Sue whimpers a little at the sight, and that's when I decide to rent the metal detector.

Those days all merge together now. All that's left are snippets, a glimpse of my students bent over their final exams, the repetitive hospital routines, the slow pass and repass of the wand, like a pendulum swinging through the grass. To stay in the moment, you need to let the days drift right through you without touching them.

As I'm taping a sign to one of the mailboxes by the park, a burly white man in a black SUV pulls up and climbs out. He's wearing a Jets jersey. He opens one of the boxes with a key. As he pulls out a fistful of envelopes, he jerks his head toward my handful of paper. "What's that?"

I hand him one of my notices. He frowns as he reads it. Turns it over and looks at the back. Looks at the front again. "What is this?"

I explain, basically telling him what he just read. But I sense a chance here to gain some sympathy. Spread the word. I explain about Rich, describe his condition. "He really needs his phone back. I'd appreciate if you could talk to your neighbours about it. Talk to your family."

"Hey!" the man shouts.

He's so loud and sudden, I startle. My feet actually leave the ground. But he doesn't notice. He's looking above my head at someone behind me. "Get over here!"

I turn around and see, halfway down the street, the boy from the playground. The one with the pale hair. In daylight, it's the colour of Chardonnay. He's standing frozen on the sidewalk.

"I said get the hell over here!"

A few doors down, a woman comes out her front door to see what's going on.

"Sir," I say. I'm thinking he's going to interrogate the kid about the phone.

"You got ten seconds!" the man bellows. "Ten! Nine!"

The kid starts shuffling toward us. It's a warmer day, and his parka is open in front. He's scared and skinny. His sneakers are bright red, and his feet look too large for his body. He stops about a metre away. Out of striking range, I think. He looks at me, maybe remembering me. Maybe not. Then looks at his dad.

"Sir—" Why am I calling him *sir*? "I don't think it's necessary to—"

"Where've you been?" the man barks.

His son says nothing.

"You been hanging around with that"—his eyes dart briefly at me—"with that kid again?"

The boy turns red slowly. The blush starts under his collarbone and moves up his neck toward his cheeks.

The father reaches out and grabs his son by the shoulder, spins him around and shoves him off the curb. "Get in the house!" The boy crosses the road and starts up the path toward a split-level. I recognize that gait. He wants to run, but he knows if he does the old man will catch him and it'll only be worse.

The man tries to close the mailbox, but the lock is still engaged, and he has to struggle with the key. He's red in the face now too. He doesn't look at me. I don't exist. He stalks after his son and follows him into the house.

Rich's nephew, a high school senior, tells me no teenage kid would steal a phone.

"Kids are well aware the phone is useless without the passcode," he says. "No. You're looking at a professional thief."

"They can hack the pass code?"

"Nah. They steal phones and sell them to the dealers. The dealers wipe the phones clean and resell them. It's a whole thing. Big business."

My image of the teenagers wavers. They morph into adults. Regular looking adults no one would suspect. They go about their days keeping a sharp look out for those who are careless or forgetful. Those with loose pockets, unzipped purses. Those lying helpless in hospital beds.

In the hospital bathroom I wash my hands again. There are still no paper towels, so I wipe my wet palms on my jeans. Then I put my fist through the plastic casing of the paper towel dispenser.

Sue and I walk through the industrial area of the neighbourhood, taping up signs as we go. I'm slow and clumsy, with the bandage around my knuckles. Sometimes, we enter the businesses and talk to the receptionists. This surprises them. They're not used to customers. At one point, Sue comes out of a building screaming at me.

"Look at this. Just look at this!"

I run over to see what the matter is, and she shows me. The last business in the industrial park, the one at the southern edge of the blue dot, is a storage facility. She makes me walk all around the building, all five long arms of it, to see with my own eyes the hundreds and hundreds of locked doors, like narrow garage doors, each one enclosing a storage unit where any number of stolen phones could be hiding.

I don't know how many hours I've been out here, sweeping the wand across the tall prairie grass under this overcast sky. There's a hypnotic rhythm to it, soothing and numb, crossing and crossing the same tracks, running the wand along the same fences, the same throbbing pain in my right hand. It's so boring here it feels like time isn't even passing. Spring won't come. Even though the sun is setting somewhere behind those clouds, even though I have to take out my phone and turn on its flashlight, so I don't stumble, it's still today.

I'm alone out here now. My sister-in-law has given up. Ever since we saw the storage units, she's decided the search is useless. Tells me not to be obsessive. To let it go. But I want to take one more pass through the schoolyard. There's a whole soccer field I haven't searched, and there's one more day on the rental.

Among the junipers, I hear a rustling. A squirrel? I shine my phone's light in its direction, hoping to scare it away. But all I see is a pair of red sneakers, and one of them is tapping, as if to music.

It's the boy with the Chardonnay hair. He's all alone this time, leaning with his skinny back up against the trunk of the Jack pine. There's a can of beer beside him, and when he lifts it to take a gulp, he sees me standing here with my metal detector, watching him. He takes his ear buds out. I raise the light and he squints, turns away.

"Sorry," I say. I turn off the light. But I've already seen he's been crying. His face is streaked with dirt. "Are you all right?"

We stare at each other.

"Did my dad send you?"

"I don't even know your dad. I just—happened to be there the other day is all."

He eyes me up and down and decides to believe me. It's an odd moment, outside of time, the two of us in the dark as if there's no one else in the world. Then we hear a train approaching.

"My dad's going to kill me," he says. He means it.

"My husband's really sick," I say. "He's going to die soon."

Sometimes I dream about that imaginary gang of thieves. After I invented them and delivered my arguments to them and won them over, they took up residence inside me, solid as any memory. We never did find the phone, or we haven't found it yet. I watched that pale blue dot until it lost its pulse and finally faded right away, became invisible. But sometimes I still dial the number and listen to it ring. It's out there somewhere.

The kid reaches into the knapsack and pulls out another beer. He lifts it toward me, an offering. "Do you want to sit?" he asks.

I'm not giving up. I never give up. But maybe it won't hurt to rest a while.

I accept the beer and pop it open. The kid scooches over and pats the flattened ground beside him. "You might as well sit down," he says.

I settle in, as if I belong here. 🍻