The Chimney

Right from its birth our town fed its men and boys into the paper mill. When smoke unfurled in twisting, oily banners from the top of the chimney that towered from the midst of the mill, my classmates and I took it as a sign of bad luck. Although we were only in the sixth grade, the smoke was a reminder that the mill consumed the lives of our fathers and brothers and uncles, and that when we were old enough it would consume ours too. Because the smoke had come to be regarded by every sixth grader as a sign of unavoidable doom ---exemplified by the long, thick leather strap swinging from the waist of every nun who taught us -- we shrank into cramped and silent postures of submission and obedience, keeping an eye on the smoke, waiting for it to stop.

The mill was located near the waterfall that gave the town its name. I still remember the first time my father took me down behind the mill to see the falls, and I recall a feeling of disappointment that the falls was less grand than I had imagined. Perhaps I had been expecting something to rival the misty, thundering grandeur of Niagara, or the long drop of Angel Falls in distant Venezuela, one of the destinations of the paper produced by the mill. The disappointment was nonetheless edifying, because it was an early lesson in learning to buffer the sting of subsequent disappointments ---of which there have been many ---by tempering expectations.

The mill itself consisted of an assemblage of offices and machinery, warehouses and repair shops, control rooms and loading bays. Incomprehensible networks of pipes, conveyor belts and electric cables connected all its parts and fed it with the energy it needed to devour both pulpwood and lives. Clanking jack ladders snagged logs from the Exploits and built pyramids of pulpwood on the riverbank; chimneys belched clouds of smoke and steam night and day; cavernous pipes spewed streams of turbid grey wastewater into the river. Whenever the wind was from the south or southwest, the odours of sulfur and pulp and rotting bark permeated the

town's atmosphere. If my mother complained of the stink, my father always had the same reply: "That, my dear, is the smell of money."

The mill complex occupied the northern bank of the river and harnessed its muscular waters behind a dam to keep its machinery whining and roaring for three shifts per day, every day of the year. The rest of the town grew outwards from the mill site, becoming over the years a kind of living accretion of roads and houses and shops that depended entirely on the mill for both sustenance and meaning.

By far the most prominent feature of our mill was the smokestack that arose like a gigantic admonitory finger of sooty red brick from a cluster of subordinate structures that surrounded and paid homage to it. It soared above this profusion of lesser buildings, dwarfing even the jack ladders and piles of pulpwood. It did not merely dominate the skyline. Its tapering height stabbed through the clouds and its smoke defiled the very blueness of the sky itself. From miles into the evergreen forest that stretched away on the southern side of the Exploits the stack was visible, thrusting above the horizon to mark the town's location.

From every quarter of the compass observers could see the smokestack. Visitors who were unaware of the paper mill must often have been puzzled by the chimney's seemingly solitary presence, for when you approached Grand Falls by highway, the first thing you noticed from afar was a tapering column of reddish-brown brick, its top smoke-blackened, its base swathed in billowing steam. Only when you got closer could you see the jumble of outlying buildings and humbler smokestacks crowded in an obsequious huddle about its foundation, which must have thrust roots of brick and concrete deep into the earth.

So enormous was the chimney that I was certain it was indestructible. No earthquake or hurricane could topple it, no imaginable or foreseeable cataclysm sunder it into a heap of shards. The chimney would always exist, long after I had grown up and left, long after the mill had

closed and the town itself been abandoned. It would endure until the earth itself was scorched by the dying sun; it would poke the eye of God Almighty on Judgment Day. It would awe the local resurrected dead when they arose confused and gibbering from their graves; distract them while they awaited the Almighty's determination of their eternal destinies.

Its solid umber brickwork was impervious to the wind and rain and frost that would inexorably reduce the rest of Grand Falls to dust. I pictured the smokestack in the distant future, rising far above the tops of the spruce and fir that would have reclaimed the town site and erased all other traces of its history. Nothing beside the smokestack would remain: gone would be the last trace of the mill itself, every girder and rivet and block of concrete gnawed to dust by time.

In the summertime one saw workmen carrying out repairs on platforms suspended from the top of the stack. I imagined these platforms being jostled by the wind and bumping against the sides. I imagined the workmen creeping around the rim and gazing into the sooty depths of its hot Stygian throat. Sometimes I used to picture them plummeting through searing vapours into the inferno that I imagined roiling in gigantic subterranean boilers far below. Occasionally I varied this hellish scenario by imagining a vast pit of seething acid instead of boilers; as the imaginary victim plunged towards his grisly fate, a caustic miasma rising from below dissolved his flesh in mid-descent. When the corpse reached bottom, it was a jumble of smoking bones, purified and cleansed of every last shred of flesh by fumes concentrated to a fatal intensity by the depth of the stack and the constriction of the space inside it.

In the fall of 1964, the grade sixes at Notre Dame Academy had an excellent view of the mill beyond the copse of birch and aspen bordering the convent grounds alongside the school. The soaring immensity of the chimney compelled covert viewing and vengeful fantasizing. Sometimes when I was bored I took refuge and pleasure in horrible but frustratingly implausible daydreams in which I would stand at the top of the chimney and shove my enemy du jour down

into its hellish depths. I invited the nuns' wrath by staring at it when I should have been paying attention to them. Frequent glances out the window often led to an inattentiveness that was invariably detected and always punished.

Sharing my fascination was my new friend Nathan, who had moved here from Ontario with his parents earlier that summer. Nathan's father was a surgeon, recruited by the local Hospital Board to replace a doctor who had drowned while salmon fishing in the river some months ago. His mother seemed to be a serious, quiet woman who spent most of her time at home. Occasionally she could be glimpsed hanging out clothing in her back yard or weeding the geraniums in the garden, but mostly she lived in a kind of reclusive seclusion that seemed to be impregnable to any sort of overture to conversation or invitation to friendship. Once in a while you could see her shopping in the supermarket on High Street, selecting apples and oranges with a peculiar studious intensity that intimated disbelief in the reality of such fruit rather than a preoccupation with its quality. It was reported that if you spoke to her or greeted her she would flinch and turn away without speaking, and she thus acquired a reputation for oddity and unfriendliness that did not bode well for her social life as a newcomer in a small town.

Nathan himself was a bit of an oddity. He did not go to church, nor did he take catechism, which meant that he was ignorant of the catalogue of redemptive certainties about sin, the sacraments, and church ritual contained in the *Baltimore Catechism*. During religion one of the nuns came and took him to an empty classroom, where he did sums from the *Caribou Arithmetic* or read about the adventures of Tom Swift or the Hardy Boys. He described these stories as *banal*, a word then absent from my own vocabulary. His pronunciation stressed and lengthened the second syllable with an emphasis fed by a scorn that was as unanswerable as it was excoriating: "Ba-nawwlll. Those stories are so ba-nawwll." When I mentioned his use of this word to my mother, she remarked that Nathan was probably brighter than average, "like all the

Jews," and said that I would have to work harder if I wanted to beat him on my Christmas report card.

Reading made Nathan an inexhaustible supplier of facts. He knew the names of the longest rivers and highest mountains, how the Egyptians had mummified their pharaohs, and how the hydrogen bomb worked. I admired his knowledge of nuclear weaponry, for not long ago the planet had been "pushed to the brink, the very edge", as my father had said, of a nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Even though I was unsettled and a bit frightened by the composure Nathan displayed in describing what would happen if, say, the Soviets decided to detonate a hydrogen bomb over Grand Falls, I nonetheless envied his powers of description and the cool, sadistic relish with which he could summon and speak of catastrophe. Occasionally I would dream the things he described, and in my dreams of apocalypse a small bright speck would drop from space, through the upper atmosphere, plunging like a silent, silver meteor through the sky until it exploded right above the heart of our town. When the fireball had faded and the roiling clouds of dust had dissipated the only thing left would be our brave chimney, rising up in stolid defiance from the dust and rubble. When I described this dream to him he would snort at any notion that the chimney could survive a nuclear explosion: "I doubt it, Jackman, I doubt it. Even the chimney would be obliterated."

Anybody else – myself included – would have said *blown to smithereens* instead of *obliterated*. *Obliterated* – that was Nathan.

In addition to his esoteric vocabulary and cornucopia of general knowledge about wonders historical, geographic, and scientific, he had garnered from the clandestine study of his father's medical textbooks a comprehensive and enviable knowledge of the anatomy of the female genitalia, a knowledge displayed and amplified with a kind of lewd pedantic commentary about the role various structures played in what he always referred to as *the act of coition*:

"Now the clitoris," he would say, "is designed purely to provide sexual excitement. Did you know that, Jackman? Did you? Remember this in case you ever get lucky."

His scientific leanings were combined with a propensity to lecture and correct, a quality that elicited both admiration and resentment. He once thrilled our entire science class by pointing out to Sister Marian that the word *gestation* was not pronounced with a hard initial g. The reward for this presumptuous bit of learning was a pair of stinging palms, but the stoicism and poise with which he held out his hands to take the strap earned him considerable admiration, even from those whom he annoyed. He could be prickly about matters of fact. Once we argued about the greatest depth of the Marianas Trench, souring our friendship until the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* confirmed that we were both wrong. But because my estimate of its depth had been more erroneous than his, he revelled in my error, gloating over the *blatant stupidity*, as he called it, of my miscalculation. Sometimes, at moments like this, when his pride seemed to batten on the humiliation of another person (especially if it was me), Nathan was the one I fantasized about casting into the depths of the chimney.

Once in a while, though, the chimney revealed within him a sensibility at odds with his cocky public persona and confident intellectual temperament. He had agreed with us that smoke indicated imminent bad luck in school, and at the first wisp we became especially vigilant, particularly if we were being taught by Sister Patricia, who was both fearsome and fearsomely unpredictable. Although Nathan's participation in this charade of boyish superstition accorded with the class consensus, it was inconsistent with the probing mind that mocked irrational beliefs and derided those who held them. When the chimney vented its baleful clouds, he sank into the distance and sad abstraction of reverie, and to rouse him I would poke him with the eraser end of my pencil.

One day the chimney spewed a thick stream of dense smoke that curled downwards, coiling slowly around the upper brickwork until the wind seized it and shredded it into skeins of lacy filaments that stained the blue sky before drifting into invisibility. So transfixed was Nathan that he sank into a brown study of such depth and duration that he was oblivious to Sister Patricia's terse summons to attention –"Mr. Stein!"– and was startled into awareness only after she had whacked his desk with the flat side of her yardstick, causing him to jump with an intake of breath so sharp that we all knew he had been truly frightened. His arm dislodged his reader from his desk and it fell to the floor with a bang that echoed the report of the stick. Cringing, we bowed our heads and studied the scarred surfaces of our desks, waiting for further retribution, but Sister Patricia turned and glided slowly back to her desk.

"Pick up your book, Nathan," she said, "and pay attention. You degrade your intelligence by wasting it on daydreams."

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One day late next spring Nathan announced that he was moving back to Ontario, where his father had been hired by a hospital in Toronto. This news dismayed me, since we had forged throughout the winter a bond based on a friendly competition for marks and a shared interest in science.

When I asked why, he hesitated.

"It's mainly my mom," he said finally.

"What's wrong with her?"

"She's not happy here."

"I suppose this place is too small, " I said. "Too boring."

He said nothing for several seconds. We were downtown, underneath the marquee of the Popular Theatre. Now showing was *Mary Poppins*, a movie he thought preposterous.

"It's hard to explain," he said.

"Is she lonely or something?"

"No. It's the train."

It was my turn to pause.

"The train?" I repeated.

"Yeah, the train. When it wails at night."

"The whistle, you mean."

"Yeah. It wakes her up, keeps her from sleeping."

I was baffled. The train? When I heard the train at night I imagined it rumbling through the woods loaded with newsprint destined for some freighter in Botwood harbour. Its mournful voice summoned my imagination to places far beyond the little town where I lived, exotic places where palm trees waved in warm breezes and the sun shone all year and people sang to the stars in a language that rippled with liquid syllables. Nothing was more comforting than lying in a warm bed on a summer night with the window open, listening to the distant clackety-clack of the train as it wended its way through the night, announcing its loneliness in a voice aching with a desolation and grief so piercing that you could not help feeling sorry for it.

"And it's not just the train, Jackman. It's the chimney, too," he continued.

"The chimney? Jesus, that's the strangest thing I've ever heard."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"She was in one of the camps during the war."

"What camps?"

"You ever heard of Auschwitz?"

“Auschwitz?” I repeated. “Sounds like a German name. What kind of camp was it?”

“A special place for people Hitler didn’t like,” he said. “Jews, for instance.”

“What happened there?”

“Like I said, it’s kind of hard to explain.”

“Why?”

“Jackman, have you ever heard the joke about Jews and Volkswagens?”

Nathan’s sense of humour sometimes fused self-mockery with the macabre, but nothing prepared me for what followed.

“Jackman, how many Jews can fit in a Volkswagen?”

Me: “I don’t know, Stein. How many?”

“Five hundred and four: two in front, two in back, and five hundred in the ash tray.”

This mystifying punch line drew from me what I hoped was a suitable snicker. It was a tribute to my powers of dissimulation that my response elicited from him the sardonic little grin he reserved for the elect who were capable of appreciating his banter and wit. But in truth I was somewhat unsettled by the implications of his joke. The punch line made no sense and I could not see the humour of it.

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When I got home that day I found my mother at her desk in her bedroom. She was writing a letter to her sister in Brooklyn. I knew she did not like being interrupted when she was writing letters, but I had to ask her to explain why Mrs. Stein didn’t like living in our town. I had to ask her about the place Nathan had mentioned. Both my parents read books about history. They had grown up during the war, and were always telling us stories about it. They would know.

“Mom,” I asked, “have you ever heard of Auschwitz?”

She put down her pen.

"What makes you ask?" she said.

"Nathan said his mother was there during the war. He said they're leaving because she doesn't like the sound of the train at night. Or the chimney."

"I see," she said. She picked up her pen and began tapping the table with the end of it.

"Well," she continued, "it's somewhat hard to explain."

"That's what he said. He said Auschwitz was a place for people Hitler didn't like, people like Jews."

"Well, he's right about that."

"What the hell happened there, then?"

"How many times have I told you not to use that expression?"

"Okay, what happened at Auschwitz, then?"

"As I said, it's a bit hard to explain right now."

"Why?"

"Because it just is, that's all. You're not old enough to understand."

"You and Dad always say that."

"Look," she said. "The Nazis did terrible things to the Jews during the war. Someday you'll be old enough to understand. All you need to know right now is that terrible things, some very terrible things, happened at Auschwitz. Mrs. Stein was lucky to survive."

"Okay then," I persisted. "What were the terrible things that happened there? Nathan told a joke about how many Jews could fit into a Volkswagen. He said something in the punch line about five hundred Jews fitting into the ashtray. What the hell–"

"What did I just say about using that word?"

"Okay, okay. What was he talking about, then? What did he mean?"

“We’ll talk about it later, maybe in a year or two, when you’re old enough to understand.”

“Cripes, I’m not stupid, you know. My marks are as good as Nathan’s.”

“When you’re old enough, I said.”

“I’m old enough now,” I answered.

“No, you’re not.”

“Why not?”

“Because nobody understands, that’s why.”

“Well, then...”

But she turned away and bent to her letter. And that was all the explanation I got then and for quite some time after.

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Except for school and a few trips to the library together we didn’t see each other again; he was gone by the end of June.

One day before the Steins left, though, my mother sent me down to the Co-op Store on High Street to buy a bag of sugar.

It was on this occasion that I had my first and only public encounter with Mrs. Stein. Whenever I had been to Nathan’s house, she had not been around, and I had surmised, rather presumptuously, that her absence on those occasions was a concession to boyish camaraderie.

I had just turned the corner of the aisle where the sugar was when I saw her coming towards me. She was leaning on her shopping cart, head cocked at an inquisitive angle, studying items on the shelves as she trundled her cart along. Occasionally she would stop, select something, pore over it as carefully as an archaeologist examining a curious artifact, and then either return it to the shelf or place it carefully in the cart.

I picked up my bag of sugar and continued on up the aisle, wondering whether to greet Mrs. Stein as I passed by her. The stories and gossip surrounding her shyness and the shield of her impenetrable demeanour had created a quandary regarding the protocol to employ when greeting her in public. Some people wished her good day; others simply nodded if they caught her eye; and some just walked on by, having given up on the prospect of drawing her out of the cage of privacy in which she seemed to have immured herself. As I approached her I was aware of an acute sense of discomfort, for I was in this very quandary. She knew I was Nathan's friend, so I felt that I had to say something; but I did not want to seem forward or bold with a person who never spoke to anyone in public.

So you can imagine my surprise – indeed, my dismay – when Mrs. Stein stopped and smiled when she saw me.

"Hello, Mrs. Stein," I said. I felt shy and somehow diminished by her attention. I glanced up just quickly enough to notice that her eyes, like Nathan's, were almost black, and that her dark hair was covered with a blue bandana.

"Ah, yes, Nathan's friend. Of course." She spoke with an accent I had never heard before, as if the syllables were dense and heavy on her tongue.

"I see you are buying sugar, yes? Your mother is perhaps making some treats?" she continued.

"Well," I said, " maybe."

"Maybe," she repeated.

"She puts it in her coffee," I offered.

"Coffee," she said. "Of course."

"And tea, too. And we put it on our porridge--"

"My brother was sold to the Nazis for a kilo of sugar," she said.

I looked towards the end of the aisle. I felt a jolt or a shiver inside myself, as if an entirely new and inexplicable dimension of time and history had fractured the familiar present world or turned it inside out. I did not know what to say.

"In Poland, in 1943," she continued.

I forced myself to look at her again. I could not read the expression in her eyes, and it would be many years before I would begin to understand what she was telling me. The bag of sugar I was cradling assumed an embarrassing, alien weight that made me feel an odd guilt, as if the knowledge she had bestowed upon me carried with it the stain of some unforgivable and inexplicable sin.

"Nathan will miss you," she said. "You have been for him a good friend. He will miss you, I am thinking."

"Yes, well, I'll miss him too."

"So, good-bye then."

And she gave me a fleeting little smile and moved on.

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In September I was in a classroom on the opposite side of the school. This year we would have to seek distraction in a view of the cathedral adjacent to Notre Dame Academy. The mill was no longer visible, so I did not see the chimney as often as before.

Now I was in grade seven. This would be my last year at Notre Dame, a year of preparation for high school. Mr. Coffey, our home room teacher, began the year with a lecture in which he reminded us that we were no longer boys but young men, and that the sooner we gave up our childish thoughts and habits, the better. I resolved to comply with his advice, and one of my first resolutions was to abandon the superstitious belief about the chimney and its portentous black smoke.

But sometimes I could not help myself. When the smoke spewed out in a dense, ropy stream that unravelled in a thick shroud that settled over the school, I could not help thinking about my friend. I recalled my conversation with his mother, parsed my memory of it for revelations about fate and suffering that were threaded through the narratives of lives I could never know. For a while I gave up sugar, as if this sacrifice were expiation for the knowledge that Mrs. Stein had bestowed upon me as both gift and burden.

And I dreamed. Sometimes I dreamt that I was climbing up the chimney, gripping the iron rungs stapled into its sides, pulling myself up and up and up. But the higher I climbed, the further the top would recede from me, and I would know that I was destined never to arrive. Sometimes Nathan would be with me, climbing just above me, and he would stop and beckon me upwards with teasing little gestures of mocking encouragement.

Most often, though, I would dream that Nathan and I were standing high up on the windy rim of the chimney, peering into its depths. The upper courses of the sooty brickwork would always be spiralling down into perfect darkness. Leaning forward to study the mystery of it, I would lose my balance and yield to the allure of the darkness. And I would stumble and fall in. As I cried out Nathan would reach in to save me. But there would never be any chance of rescue, and I would know that I would be falling, falling for the rest of my life, forever falling.

As I fell I would look up and see his silhouette impressed against a dwindling circle of blue sky, shrinking and shrinking until he was gone forever.