

Canada

In the slow unravelling of his life, from an introverted teenager with a polyester coat buttoned too tight; riding the bus out of Sandwich to a wider, built-up place in London where he learnt nothing, Mike tried not to remember much. Nothing about his older brother Jack who drove tractors on the farm with a cigarette in his mouth, saluted girls who walked their siblings in prams, and went on to marry one of them.

No, Mike remembered none of that. Faster than the bus took him to London, he got a plane to take him further away to Canada, where he got a job building houses for bronzed newly-weds. They warmed to his accent and that way he had of smiling on one side of his face. He did well, lost it all, got it back, and lost it again. His hands swelled and bent with arthritis when he was only in his forties. He remembered his father the same; one hand gripped loose around the steering wheel as if it were twice the size.

The winters passed very cold in Ontario, and the summers too hot. He walked a good deal, mainly to look at the angular buildings, and the way the late afternoon sun cast a sharp shadow on a sand coloured wall, accentuating the rich, light blue sky. The steering wheel of his jeep was fat and smooth, and he gripped it loose even though he didn't need to.

The fudge cake his arteries grew fat on in Canada reminded him of the earth back home, shiny and wet on a slice, dark brown and solid. He would slide his fork into the thick rich chocolate that way and picture the earth. It was similar to the earth they had in Canada, except his was in a field surrounded by hedges and overhead electric cables where birds sat. Much like the ones in Canada but not so.

He and Jack would turn the fields over with ploughs pulled by shire horses, heads bent toward the deep furrow, the dog trotting behind in the grooves laid to plant cauliflowers. The horses they led along the road to the blacksmith to be shod, past the signpost pointing on to Ham and back to Sandwich. He would take a picture of that now if he was there, the one sign above the other, like a tourist and not a boy grown up that used to go by it.

He wrote to Jack once, Christmas of 1970, to enquire after their father and the farm. It must have been especially cold, or maybe he hadn't got out as much. The urge to make contact otherwise never came to him. He had gone to a multi-screen cinema in Ontario, spilled his popcorn over some kids who had laughed as he apologised, and watched a bad film about a giant tornado wiping out New York. It made him think of the fields at home laid low by the wind, the sky dark in patches where the rain gathered, falling in lumps on the sods of earth, and down the side of hedgerows. He and Jack, and the other boys, would shelter in a barn and breathe the rotten perfume of silage.

You're too late, Jack wrote back, his writing squashed and thin, sliding a bit on the page. The old man died six months before. Mike never replied to ask why he wasn't informed, he just folded the letter and put it under a jar on the shelf where he kept old keys.

He thought about how his father kept a stray dog at the farm, tethered to a chain and fed twice a day. Mike never saw the dog off the chain but hoped that his father would occasionally allow an ugly animal a bit of freedom. He thought about the man his father got to sit by the silos and watch the grain slide down a hole in the ground. Fred Bean, who was tall and thin, and weathered brown on his hands

and face. Don't go near the edge, Fred warned, or you'll get sucked down there too. Mike still got that hot prickle of fear just thinking about it.

Nowadays what made him truly terrified? He didn't know. A heart attack perhaps? A long queue at Dream's Ice Cream, or the thought that one day he wasn't going to remember the way home? That he would wake up one morning and not know where he was.

One such morning, the nasal telephone voice of a woman woke him to say she was Sam's wife and told him he was needed back in England. He had no idea who she was or who Sam was, until she said Sam, your brother's son. Jack was dead and she had had awful trouble trying to locate him, Mike not Jack, she clarified, and that Jack was dead. Did Mike hear her right? He did, she said. Her and Sam had been taking care of the farm these past years.

The farm had wound down before he left, he knew that, the way he and Jack had to always fix the fence and bang nails into the tin roof of the barn. She had probably been told by some financial quack that she needed to find out if this brother in Canada was still alive, otherwise the whole thing was theirs. Probably thought they could retire on it. A few years, his brother had been dead a few years. He visualised the tractor with Jack driving, but he was young and Mike's mind blurred when he tried to think of an older man.

The farm she kept referring to as "the zoo" - that's what it was now, a petting zoo where kids could stroke the animals. Business had slowed, and for a while they thought it might close. Now the best course was a sale; the land at any rate would be good for someone.

It had happened at night, she explained. Jack had disturbed an intruder interfering with animals in one of the barns and fired his gun. The animals panicked and Jack was crushed to death by a herd of cows.

Mike imagined a body lying in the barn, wanted to see Jack one last time, but when in his mind he got close, it looked like his father. He asked Sam's wife about the dog and if his kennel and chain were still there. But she didn't know what he was talking about, and told him about the barn being full of rabbits which didn't interest him. He pictured the cauliflower shoots rotting in the field.

He closed his eyes and lay back on the pillow. He would get a flight home, he told her, next week, rent a car from the airport. She offered Sam to come pick him up. He thanked her, but declined. He could remember the way, every inch of the road, and lay there mapping it in his head. He could see, but not well enough, where the road would bend; then the gates that led to fields where he used to know every farmer.

Eventually he saw the road straighten, and he wanted to see the roofs of the silos but the shape was wrong, how they got slowly bigger then disappeared. He tried the farm, but it was misshapen; the barn became one he had seen in an advert. The clods of earth were as thick as butter cut straight from the fridge, he had that. He had the watery blue sky and the smell of silage and seed dust, Jack's gun stuck in the crook of his arm, but the rest he had forgotten.