the KISSING FENCE

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This novel is dedicated to the Doukhobor people of Canada. The stories I have drawn on—while changing identities and creating drama and fictitious characters for literary purposes—are largely true. Some are drawn from first-hand accounts spoken directly to me by those who experienced them. I am grateful to both the orthodox Doukhobors and those from the Sons of Freedom for their generosity, for inviting me into their homes, and trusting me with their stories. The contemporary storyline is entirely fiction.

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Perry Siding, BC, September 9, 1953

GERRY FLANAGAN LOOKED OVER THE WOODEN BRIDGE INTO THE CRYSTAL cold water of the Slocan River. It reminded him of his time in Ireland as a boy. Thirty pairs of police-issue boots rattled over the bridge but the sound of water over stones could still be heard. Ahead, on the west side of the bridge, more men waited. A group of them turned to watch their fellow RCMP officers arriving. Just three years had passed since the provincial police in BC had been disbanded, and many officers from the old guard neither understood nor accepted the takeover by the RCMP. Their resentment lingered. They huddled together, inspecting the arrival of the outsiders. As the groups joined, the trundle of boots on boards gave way to the mournful sound of singing from the next field, south of the road.

"You failed the first test. Late and missed the briefing," Sergeant Benson, a small and wiry man something over fifty, said in greeting.

"Sorry, Sarge. Bus was late."

Benson reached into a crate. "It doesn't matter. Here," he said, offering Flanagan a brown bottle of beer.

"No thanks, Sarge. I don't drink." Flanagan saw bottles in the hands of his colleagues and wondered what was going on. None of the men made eye contact and a few muttered quietly like embarrassed schoolboys.

"You'll need it, son," said the sergeant, holding out the bottle. His thick Borders accent made it sound like an order. The tilt of his head suggested any man who would not drink with him could not be trusted.

"Not for me, thank you," said Flanagan. He knew it was a mistake not to take it. He had failed the first test, and the second.

"Suit yourself." The sergeant tossed his empty into the field and took a long swig from the fresh bottle.

"What's the plan, Sergeant?" Flanagan asked.

The sergeant eyed him. "We're going into that field," he said, pointing with the nose of the bottle toward the singing, "and we're going to arrest every one of these Russian protesters, because they think the laws in Canada don't apply to them." The sergeant stared into Flanagan's eyes. "That's the plan, son." He paused to lift the bottle to his lips and continued to watch Flanagan.

Both men could hear the singing and each knew what the other was thinking. Flanagan asked, "What resistance are we expecting?"

"Whatever they offer, we'll deal with."

"What are we arresting them for, Sarge?"

"The protesters are naked. That's the complaint."

From across the field Flanagan could see nothing. "Someone complained?" he asked.

The sergeant studied him again. "You're the new boy from Ontario, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir. I've been here a week."

"Irish?"

"I am, Sergeant."

"Republican or Loyalist?"

"Irish, Sarge."

The sergeant's question said everything of the past that Flanagan's family had tried to escape. His family had left Ireland for Canada because of turmoil, but history would always follow them. He had not been alive when his father was interred by the Black and Tans, who marauded unchecked through the streets of his homeland, searching, beating and arresting anyone who looked part of the Republican Army,

and every Catholic did. It had embittered his nation, his community and his family. The question also told of the sergeant's past. A soldier, certainly, but his connection to Ireland was less certain. Maybe he had felt the spitting contempt from one side or the other, or seen too much of the war.

The sergeant eyed him with more suspicion. "Well, 'Irish,' either way you won't know much about what's been happening here, will you? In this province, nudity is a serious crime. Punished by three years in prison."

It was too late for Flanagan to prevent his eyebrows lifting in surprise. The sergeant approached to within a few inches of his face. "Is that a problem for you, son?"

"It seems a long time, sir. That's all."

"That's not our concern, is it?"

"No, sir."

"Your job, if you expect to get to the end of your second week, is to follow the orders I give you."

"Yes, Sarge."

The sergeant tossed the second bottle after the first and caught the attention of the officer behind Flanagan. "You stay with our Irish colleague with the fine sensibilities, and make sure he does his part."

"Yes, Sergeant," came the reply, as the sergeant walked off.

Flanagan looked over the hedge toward the white tents in the next field. The prayer songs drifted toward him on smoke from their fires. The images were too far away to see what was going on. There was movement. Children played, and he could see a few larger pink figures.

The voice from behind said, "You'll see plenty in a few minutes, and you'll not want to remember any of it. None of us will."

Flanagan acknowledged the man standing behind him. "I don't see any protesting." There was no response. "What are we waiting for?"

"Transport's coming to take them away. Adults head to the railway line on the trucks; children without parents and mothers with babies go north to New Denver on the buses."

"What do you mean? Are we arresting the children?" asked Flanagan.

"Just the adults. The children won't have anyone to look after them, so we pick them up."

"Christ!"

"Anyway, it's not our responsibility. We've had orders from Victoria just to round 'em up and get them on the transport."

There was more Flanagan wanted to know but the group began stirring. Officers muttered about the buses arriving. Bottles flew over the hedge and men began arranging their gear.

"Form up! Form up!" shouted the sergeant, and men arranged themselves in rows. When they were roughly settled, he said, "You'll cross into the top field at the first gate. Move right along the hedge and stay in two ranks."

The troop moved sluggishly.

"Move yourself!" the sergeant shouted, and they stepped up. "I expect everyone to do their part," he said, fixing on Flanagan. "No exceptions. There'll be no shirkers here today. You'll do what you're fucking told."

Flanagan moved off with the others. The momentum had started and whatever was going to happen could not now be stopped.

Two lines of officers arranged themselves loosely inside the hedgerow, across the grassy field from the tent village. Behind them a smaller number were armed with rifles. The phalanx of black uniforms started walking toward the tent village, where people scurried back and forth, alarmed at the advance. The Russian harmony got louder as they approached. Large, naked, pendulous women and tall, thin, naked men began watching them.

Flanagan felt a push in the back. "Your baton, get it out. Get it out!"

"We don't need batons—they're naked for Christ's sake."

The officer behind jabbed Flanagan hard in the shoulder with his stick. "We're all in this. All of us," he said.

Flanagan scrambled for his baton and saw the others gripping theirs. He looked again at the naked people in front of him. They were helpless and unarmed. Then he scanned the taut faces down his rank. Faces of men steeling themselves, as one sporting team would brace

against the impact of another. *Why,* he wondered, *are they angry with these people? It's madness. They must all know this is madness.*

A lean naked man, bearded and fierce, stood his ground and the lines of police hesitated. "What do you want?" he said. An officer stepped forward and struck him on the side of the head. His scalp opened as he fell. A woman ran screaming toward him but fell from a blow to the back of her head. Shrill screams of terror emerged from the children who ran for cover into the tents. A few men emerged and were knocked to the ground, some broken, others unconscious within moments. The right flank of RCMP advanced into the prayer tent and the left rushed into the others. Batons swung, thudding on flesh and bone, bringing terror to adults and children.

Inside the prayer tent Flanagan saw children huddled as far from the entrance as they could be. Mothers stood defending them with pleas of mercy, but the advance of his colleagues continued. Parents fell, twisting to escape the blows, freezing the children. The black threshing line came ever closer until the children understood only the danger they were in, scampered under the skirt of the tent and ran for their lives toward the tree line.

Flanagan followed under the skirt and shouted after the children. "Stop! Stop! I won't hurt you," he said, and then understood running added to their fear. In any case, he remembered, they did not speak English and would not understand his reassurance.

Thirty feet away a little one tripped on the path as Flanagan pulled himself out of the tent. She was five or six years old, and the older girl helping her could only have been nine or ten. She looked back at him as the little one scrambled to her feet. He flapped his hands after them and they disappeared into the forest.

Another policeman came round the tent and gave chase.

"Don't bother," shouted Flanagan, but his colleague continued into the woods. "You'll never find them."

"Orders," said the colleague. "We have to round 'em up."

NINA PULLED AT THE HANDS OF HER YOUNG COUSIN ARINA AND HER friend, one on either side of her, dragging them along as fast as they could go. Over her shoulder a uniformed man squeezed himself under the skirt of the prayer tent, just as the children had done, and was getting to his feet. The policeman was shouting to stop, and something else about not hurting them. Her mother's lessons had taught her to understand English, and her father's lessons had taught her to distrust all the English had to say. She would keep running. Her lungs burst with new effort. Arina stumbled, but Nina did not let them stop. She pulled the child up with all her might until her bare feet made contact with the ground. Another glance back and Nina thought she had misunderstood what was going on. The policeman had stopped. Their eyes met. He pushed his hands forward, as if shooing her away, until another officer appeared at a gallop. Gathering the children in each hand, she pulled them into the forest.

They would be caught. Surely they would be caught, thought Nina. Without explanation she scrambled the two little ones into the thicker undergrowth and followed them in. The children had played in these woods. It was their one advantage. The den was just tall enough for her to lie flat on the ground, while the younger ones sat cross-legged.

Touching her mouth, she whispered, "Be very quiet, just like mice." The boots and legs of police officers were on the path and near them. They watched through the sticks and stems and from under the leaves of their den. The men were panting and pushed into the undergrowth, first one side of the path and then the other. Now they stood quietly, waiting for the sound of frightened children.

Nina felt her foot being nudged and froze. Then again she felt it and peered down the length of her body toward the path. The dark leg of a policeman could be seen. The boot swivelled on its heel and tapped her bare foot sticking out of her hiding den at the edge of the path. Quietly she drew her leg up.

A voice said in English, "We're wasting our time out here. Let's get back. There's more to do in the camp."

IT HAD NOT TAKEN LONG. THE MORNING WAS NOT YET OVER. THERE WERE still children on the run but most had been gathered, as had the adults. Children were bundled onto buses. The parents moaned and nursed themselves carefully up wobbling boards onto the open trucks. Flanagan held the hand of a shaken woman balancing up the plank. She was twisting to see a child getting on a bus.

"Pavel!" she shouted, followed by something in Russian. It must have been final guidance or reassurance, or whatever message a mother would give to a child at the moment of separation. Perhaps, Flanagan thought, it was a simple statement of love. He imagined saying something to his children about taking care of themselves and also that he would find them. Whatever she said, he knew it would not be enough.

He felt the heat of his tunic and wanted to fall into the Slocan River to cool and soothe himself. As he reached for the next person in line, his attention was grabbed by a bus leaving for New Denver. All the children and some of the mothers with young ones were heading there. Flanagan caught sight of a particular boy on the New Denver bus whose nose was pressed to the window. He traced his stare to the woman he had helped onto the flatbed a minute before. The boy must have been the Pavel she had shouted for. With all of these parents looking at all of these children, each connection was unmistakable.

When Flanagan was a child, his mother would say to her children that they should not worry because the sun would shine and the sky would be blue in the morning. Whatever troubled him no longer mattered when it was said. For these children, Flanagan thought, the sun would shine, the sky would be blue and even the Slocan River would ripple over rocks, but nothing would ever be the same. It would always matter.

A rough grab lifted his sleeve and turned his hand.

"There!" said the sergeant, twisting Flanagan's arm to inspect the outside of the palm. Both saw the dried stain of blood smeared from his cuff along his finger. "There's no one to look down on now, son. Is there?" The sergeant glared in triumph before returning Flanagan's hand to him with a shove.

Flanagan wiped the stain on his trousers but it would not budge. In desperation he licked his fingers and rubbed furiously at the stain. Without thinking he again put his fingers to his mouth and tasted the Doukhobor blood on his hands. It was enough to make his gut convulse, and in a moment he was helpless, leaning against the truck, heaving his bitter breakfast onto the grass.

It's true, thought Flanagan. He was part of this, just as every British hand that had confounded the politics of home was responsible for all that had happened to his father and his people. There would be consequences for this too. When he came to account he could only say he had caused no injury and, adding to the inventory, he had prevented three children from being taken. It was lame and quickly he knew it would not be enough to balance these books. Flanagan wished the children he had left in the forest would be well and find their way to safety. It would be his fault if they did not.

The truck he leaned on came to life, noise drowning out the crying of men and women. Diesel fumes added to his nausea. The buses with children began pulling away from Perry Siding. Children and parents would travel up and down the Slocan Valley, in opposite directions.

If the trauma of their history were not already carved on the hearts of these people, the injustice of this day would stay with them always. It would torment those needing sleep, stand between people at every conversation, erode lives and spew anger into the air at all things easily misunderstood. He had seen his parents embittered, families broken and the weave of his community decay until anger was all that remained. The children would grow troubled and misshapen, just as they had in Ireland. The distrust and hate for RCMP and government officials of all kinds would remain tightly gripped among them like a treasured stone until someone could relieve them of the burden. In a few years the identity of all of them would be shaped around that stone. The injustice would be deified. It would offer purpose in every day, kudos from friends in taking the weight of it and martyrdom when it crushed them.

He hoped an anguished hope that someone would do something.

NINA GESTURED TO THE GIRLS TO STAY QUIET FOR A WHILE LONGER UNTIL the sound of police moving off faded to nothing.

The immediate danger had gone. The sound of shouting, mothers wailing and children crying had ended. In the distance diesel engines of long buses had roared into life and moved off with nearly everyone they knew. Now, with just the sounds of birds, whispering trees and the ripple of water, it was strange to be alone in the forest. Nina shuffled out of the den and brought the little ones with her. Some of the tents were still up and they walked carefully toward them.

"Don't worry," she said. "We'll have to do some walking to find our parents." It was untrue, but it was all she could think of to say. The closest place she knew of was Krestova, if only she could remember how to get there.

The prayer tent was standing but leaned awkwardly. Under the canvas, the late summer sun brought the temperature up. Nina and the two little ones kicked through the debris of clothes and shoes on the ground. They were clothed well enough for a summer day, but they searched for something to wear when the sun fell. On the little table that had stood between women and girls on one side and men and boys on the other as they sang, the symbols of faith remained undisturbed: a small round loaf of bread, a jug of water and a small cup of salt. It was all that had not been unsettled and all that Nina would need to keep their spirits up on the way to Krestova. She bundled the bread into the tablecloth and gave the children a drink of the fresh water before setting off.

"We better get started," she said, offering her hand to Arina. "Don't worry. We'll be all right."

Krestova, BC, January 18, 1955

AUNTIE'S HOUSE AND WHAT REMAINED OF KRESTOVA COSSETED NINA LIKE the blanket she pulled over her shoulders against the morning chill. There was a familiarity to everything in this communal house. It was

identical to hers in all but detail. Just the push and shove between characters was new. Two brick houses in mirror image stood forty feet apart. Behind them a row of buildings, bathhouse, barns, workshops, spanned the width of both houses and the gap between them, creating a courtyard and a sense of function and purpose. There was nothing here without function. Outside of the courtyard, orchards and fields for planting had been established. Everything, bricks and bread, had been created by the endless toil of the Doukhobor people.

Through the back door of either house were two rooms. On one side was a dining room with a long wooden table and benches, enough to seat twenty people. On the other side was a kitchen dominated by a bread oven standing five feet high, creating a platform between it and the ceiling, where the old and very young sometimes kept warm at night in deep winter. Past the dining room was a larger parlour that opened into the hallway, where stairs led to a wide corridor with bedrooms on either side. Everything was here for a peaceful life. “Toil and a peaceful life” was the mantra of all of these Doukhobor communities.

Already, before the light of day, the house was alive and the smell of bread from the kitchen brought memories of Nina’s home. The clatter of wooden spoons on the large dining table, clanking of steel pans and endless chatter invited her to get out of bed and go downstairs. It reminded her too of her parents, still in prison. She had come to know it was not good to lie in bed thinking of them. In any case, breakfast waited, and then morning jobs were to be done before lessons. She swung out of her bed, reached across the room and jabbed Arina awake through her blankets.

After breakfast there were chickens to feed and eggs to gather for Auntie. Nina and Arina headed for the barn. The morning light was just arriving as they picked their way across compacted snow in the courtyard. At the edges of paths snow piled in shovelled lumps, but against the buildings wedges of snow drifted five feet against windward walls.

The children entered the barn and collected feed for the chickens while Arina stumbled in the darkness. The sound of people running

between the outer buildings toward the communal houses caught their attention. From deep in the barn they watched silent men in black uniforms rush toward the kitchen doors. Some had rifles; others held truncheons at the ready. Nina pulled Arina to the hay piled on the floor of the barn and gathered it around them. There was banging on doors and shouting from inside the house. Women shouted and children screamed. The volume of indignation excited the dogs to bark and the hens to cluck and flap.

From the kitchen door two officers emerged holding a boy wrapped in a blanket. Auntie's father, an elder of the house, wearing only underwear, followed, shouting and grappling to get hands on the boy. An officer turned and wrestled him away, and both fell into the deeper snow against the house. The boy escaped and set off running in his pyjamas and bare feet. One officer chased while the other struggled to get away from the clutches of the elder. A fierce elbow connected with the cheek of the elder, whose body melted before limbs stiffened in spasm. Arina jumped to go to her grandfather but was held by Nina. The officer rose and joined the chase for pyjama boy, leaving the elder to quiver in the snow. Auntie's cries for her father filled the courtyard and others came, soothing, lifting the old man.

One by one children were taken from the houses, some crying, others reassuring their parents to subdue their fear. Nina remembered the turmoil and shouting of Perry Siding and knew parts of what had happened before she was born. Three hundred fifty Doukhobor children had been taken just like this. The children were sent away; some died, while others were never heard of again. They had been taken and lost. Now it was happening again.

Every Doukhobor adult and child lived with knowing English Canadians were capable of this. It was part of the folklore of betrayal, the narrative of English-Canadian entitlement. The recollection was fearful enough, but to see and hear the cries of this new generation of children bundled into cars found instant location in the Doukhobor memory, confirming what was already believed, swelling emotion beyond simple terror.

Nearly an hour had passed. The commotion had ended. Nina and Arina shuffled in the cold, peeking out to see if it was over just as Auntie came to the kitchen door and shouted, “Arina! Nina!” Both children ran into the hugs and warmth of the communal house. Inside, women tended to the elder, now sitting up with blankets draped over him. Others sat inconsolable at the dining table where arms held them tight. Some prayed quietly.

“Where’s Peter?” asked Nina, thinking of pyjama boy.

His mother lifted her head from her hands. “They have him. He’s taken.”

Nina said, “No, he’s not. We saw him get away and run. He had pyjama bottoms on.” The room looked at her. “Nothing else.”

Uncle stepped toward the door. “Which way did he go?”

“I don’t know. We just saw him get away.” Everyone in the room except the elder and the most desolate flooded out the kitchen door and spread out toward the outbuildings, gripped in the new panic of finding the lost boy. A few rounded the corner of the houses and headed uphill toward the forest, everyone shouting for Peter.

A child’s noise surfaced through the shouting. The community was in silence, listening carefully for the quiet sound of one precious boy in danger they might save. From the snowy wedge that had drifted against a wall of the house, sounds of struggling could be heard. Several of the men ran toward it and began digging with their hands. In seconds, Peter was pulled from the snow. His skin was blue. The tip of his nose was white with the first signs of frostbite. Everyone knew what had happened. Escaping from the police, he had managed to be out of sight long enough to jump into the snowdrift and be gone. It was an act of desperation that might have killed him, but the risk saved him from a fate thought worse than that. The men hurried him into the house.