

LOST

First published in *Descant Magazine*
CBC Literary Awards nominee

When Glenn Palmer and his brother, Dwight, saw my police cruiser come around the bend of the fifteenth side road they both froze. Glenn was caught straddling the metal gate that leads out of Jim Lloyd's land. As I drew level I could see that all his weight was on one heel that rested precariously on a crossbar. The toe of his work boot stuck out towards me. Glenn's other leg hung loosely behind the gate's steel bars.

Dwight was leaning into the cab of their pick-up truck, his head twisted around to watch me. It wasn't until I stopped and wound down my window that he swung the door shut and strode up to me, grinning. He asked me how I was doing and squatted on his haunches. Dwight balanced himself with a hand resting on the frame of my open window. His knuckles were bruised, and streaked with black-scabbed grazes.

Glenn didn't shift from his perch on the gate. His mouth looked flattened and pale — like a piece of clear glass was pressed up against his lips. If it hadn't been for Glenn's expression I wouldn't have given the situation a second thought. But as it was, I hardly heard Dwight who was chattering on about what a dry Fall we'd had.

Glenn Palmer and I were best friends as teenagers; I spent every hour I could at the Palmer house. "It's like you and Glenn are joined at the fuckin' hip," my Dad used to mutter. There was just my father and me — my Mom died when I was born. When I was eighteen, I left for Police College in Kitchener. Ten years later, after I'd managed to snag a posting back in the town where I'd grown up, I sometimes ran into Glenn on Main Street. But too much time apart had made us awkward; all we could manage were a few meaningless exchanges about the weather.

The chain on the gate began a rhythmic rattling, Glenn's leg was trembling with the effort of supporting all his weight on one heel. Behind him I could see ripples on the surface of the pond that lay just inside the field. Glenn shifted his weight. The leg that hung on the other side of the gate moved and through the bars I could see an oval blood stain, like a patch, covering the knee of Glenn's jeans.

I'd seen similar stains on the pants of men who knelt in the blood-soaked ground next to a deer to butcher it. Dwight had probably been stowing his rifle in the cab of their pickup when I rounded the bend. I hadn't the heart to hassle the two brothers about a bit of out-of-season hunting so I cut Dwight's yammering off with a nod, gunned the car and drove away fast.

A couple of miles farther on I reached a sharp bend where the fifteenth side road turns abruptly towards the village of Webster's Mill where Glenn and Dwight still live with their mother in the ramshackle house where I'd spent so much time as a kid. I eased the car off to one side of the road and turned off the motor. It was around five in the afternoon and the sun was slipping toward the horizon. Great patches of bare grey maples sprawled up the hillside on the other side of the valley.

Webster's Mill was named because a Mr. Webster once built a mill and persuaded some other families to come and live there. The story goes that all the settler's children went for a picnic one day and never returned. They were never found. People said they were eaten by animals, or maybe taken by Indians, but nobody knew for sure.

A couple of months earlier I'd been called to Webster's Mill — the first time I'd been back since I'd gone off to Police College. I was astonished how run-down the place had become. Not one of the dozen or so houses was covered all over with the same material; some walls were rusty metal, others were clapboard. Discarded children's toys lay garishly among the roots of gloomy cedar trees. Shapeless pieces of damp clothing had been draped over a rusty wire fence and forgotten.

Somebody — anonymous — had called to say that Norm Schneider was beating his wife. By the time I arrived it was too late to help. Rose whispered that her split lip was from falling on a wet floor. The time after that she made out she'd banged her eye on a cupboard door. Norm grinned at me, but hostility clouded his eyes.

He probably remembered me from when I was a kid. He often came over to the Palmer's house next door to start an argument about something or other. One day Norm slapped Glenn after he'd answered back. Dwight, who was prone to fits of blind rage, went after Norm. Dwight was big even then, but I managed to pull him off before he did Norm any serious damage. Afterwards Glenn teased me about what a good peacekeeper I'd make.

I wasn't too good at keeping the peace when it came to my wife. The last time I lost it with Debby she screamed that I was fucked up because I never had the approval I craved from my dead father. I wished then that I'd never told her all the shitty things my dad had said and done. Like when I told him I had my heart set on becoming a policeman; all he said was, "You're not man enough to be a cop." By the time I was ready to admit Debby had hit a nerve it was too late, she'd left me.

As I stared towards Webster's Mill the setting sun dropped from behind a ragged line of clouds. I remembered the first time I went to visit Glenn I pedaled my bicycle slowly, feeling uncertain. But as soon as I saw a rusty old rig in the weeds I couldn't wait to play truck-drivers. Then it was pioneers; I was the Ojibwa guide as we floated down the river on an inner tube. I used to cycle reluctantly away at the end of every day, back to the stifling apartment in town where my Dad and I lived.

I realized, sitting in the cruiser and gazing at the shadowy hill opposite, that I'd been wrong in thinking Webster's Mill had altered, it had always looked the same — it was just that when I was young I didn't care about its shabbiness. I closed my eyes and tried to recapture the feeling I had when I used to go there as a kid, but just when that carefree sensation was in reach it slipped from my grasp. I felt helpless, and a little afraid, as if I was out of gas on a deserted road with not a building in sight.

The next day when I was coming off duty the desk sergeant told me there was a rumor around town that Norm Schneider had run off and left his wife.

"Hasn't been into work for two days. Rose claims he went out somewhere the night before last and never came back," said Sergeant Haskell. "I can't think of a single soul who'll miss him — especially not Rose."

I didn't realize until then that Glenn Palmer was still on my mind. Walking home I thought about his mother. She was a bird-like woman who fluttered around us, and handed out peanut butter sandwiches or soft chocolate squares with her fingerprints in them. If her kids — or I — came close she'd grab us and kiss us noisily on an ear or a forehead.

As I changed out of my uniform I thought that what the sergeant had said was probably true — Rose Schneider would be relieved that Norm had disappeared. I turned on TV to watch Jeopardy, which usually took my mind off things. One of the contestants looked tense. It was then it came to me — the first time I'd seen Glenn's lips looking pale and tight like they'd looked when I'd seen him and Dwight the day before.

We were around fourteen years old and were playing explorers in the woods on Jim Lloyd's property — just up the hill from the metal gate where I'd recently come across Glenn and Dwight. I was the leader and went first. I swiped at a stand of huge ferns with a sturdy stick that I was pretending was a machete. After a particularly vicious blow I lost my balance and stumbled. The ground seemed to fall away underneath me; my feet were flailing around trying to find something solid. I clutched a clump of ferns, but I could feel the roots tearing away from the ground. Glenn grabbed me by the shirt at the back of my neck and managed to heave me out of a crack in the rock that, on closer inspection, ran the length of two men and was about as wide as a pair of broad shoulders. Glenn found a heavy stone. We lay side by side on our stomachs with our heads cocked towards each other ready to listen. Glenn dropped the stone. We stared at each other expectantly. The longer we waited the more we realized how close I'd come to disappearing forever. The longer we waited the paler and tighter Glenn's lips became. Eventually, far down, we heard the stone hitting rock, or water, it was hard to tell which.

Glenn jumped up and ran out of the woods into the sunshine. I came crashing down the hill behind him. The pond at the bottom of the hill is spring-fed — deep and clear. It's the one I saw behind Glenn the day before, as he stood balanced on the gate. A wooden plank stretched from the bank to the top of a square brick drain. Glenn and I started to pull off our clothes before we reached the pond. We dived in and sliced through the water to the other side, washing the danger off us. Afterwards we sat on the plank in a puddle of water. The relief of having been saved from certain death was more powerful than any drug. I'll never forget how wonderful the sun felt on my skin. The sky glowed a vivid blue, and emerald leaves shimmered in a warm breeze. Glenn said I owed him big time for pulling me out of the chasm.

We wondered if the crack was where the Webster's Mill children were lost. If they, or anyone, had fallen — or if their bodies had been thrown — down the hidden chasm they'd never be found. Glenn and I promised to keep the place a secret. I never told anyone about it.

Then I recalled Dwight's grazed knuckles, and the bloodstain on Glenn's knee. I thought about his tight white lips and the way he'd frozen as soon as my police cruiser hove into view. I thought about how it didn't make sense that Norm would leave his wife. He had it in clover with Rose, and it was certain no other woman would take him. A spot of early hunting wasn't reason enough for Glenn's bloodless lips and Dwight's nervous chattering after I came along in my cruiser. I turned off the TV in disgust, thinking that years of goddamn police work had warped my mind, but I couldn't stop putting two and two together and making five.

They must have seen the lights of my pick-up truck because Dwight opened the door before I had a chance to knock. He nodded and turned back into the house almost as if he'd been expecting me. When I walked behind him into the living room the first person I saw was Rose Schneider. She stared at Dwight, who went and stood behind her and rested both hands on her shoulders. The smell of the house — apples and motor oil bound up with wood smoke — was exactly as I remembered it. It was there that I first announced my ambition to be a cop. Mrs. Palmer flashed me one of her sparkly-eyed smiles. "And a fine policeman you'll make too," she said.

I suddenly became uncomfortably aware of the three figures standing in front of me. "Where's your M-mom?" I stuttered.

"She's been staying with my sister who's had a baby," answered Dwight. "She should be back next week."

There was no sound but the odd creak of the house's old timbers, as if it was carrying some huge burden. It could have been the sound of my own bones. After what felt like hours I asked if I could have a beer.

Glenn looked a little taken aback but went off to the kitchen to find one. Dwight's shoulders straightened. Rose made a move toward the door. Dwight said he'd see her home, and he hustled her out, muttering good-byes. What were they thinking? If I'd imagined the whole affair they must be asking themselves what the hell I was doing there. I was out of uniform, but why would I drop by, unannounced, after so many years, if it wasn't on police business.

At that moment Glenn came back with my beer. What would he say if I reminded him how we'd discovered the crack in the rock on Jim Lloyd's land? What would happen if I asked him whether he'd kept the chasm a secret, or if he'd ever told Dwight about it? What if I reminded him how we'd figured it was the perfect place to dump a dead body? As he handed me the beer bottle his eyes met mine. There was no hint of fear, no defiance, or pleading either — just his steady gaze.

I felt exhausted, and distressed to find myself close to tears. I felt like I'd been clutching some ferns at the brink of a narrow chasm for months — years — and the roots were beginning to tear away from the ground. If I acted on what I now believed was true, Glenn wouldn't be around to heave me out. I'd be as lost as the Webster's Mill children. Glenn and I looked into each other's eyes for a few more seconds — the time it takes to sign a contract.

I wouldn't breathe a word about the crack in the rock. Then there'd be that awkwardness between Glenn and me. We'd be "joined at the fuckin' hip" again. And then — please God — the sun would feel wonderful on my skin. The sky would glow a vivid blue, and emerald green leaves would shimmer again in warm, soothing breezes.

Glenn lifted his beer bottle like he was toasting me, I did the same to him, and we each took a swig.

