

**The Push
The Pull** &
a novel

DARRYL
WHETTER



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This one's still alive. Another smashed bird tossed onto the roadside gravel. Behind, beside, now past the twitching bird, the spokes of Andrew Day's touring bicycle continue to slice the fat light of sunset. The tall black centaur of his shadow stretches out behind the right rear pannier and spills onto dry gravel, ditch, strokes the circling bird. He stops pedalling and brakes, feels the wounded bird without looking back.

No traffic smirks in front of him or snarls in the little disc mirror dangling off his handlebar so he shoves the cumbrous touring bike into a full two-lane circle. The sharp turn forces one of the plump red front panniers back until it nearly touches his dusty grey shoe. Two days out of Halifax and he still isn't used to the weighted panniers, how they gulp in every turn.

Turning again he re-approaches the grounded bird. Stops, unclips his shoes from the tight grip of the pedals. He climbs off the bike for the first time in hours. Heat, sweat, thirst and ache leap at him as soon as he stands. Tipping back head, shoulders and ribs, he tries to unstring his bowed spine, temporarily reverses the fall of sweat. Nova Scotia valleys dip and run in front and behind, incised by the endless Trans-Canada Highway. His metal cleats crunch on stones as he approaches the bird. It moves but travels nowhere, crawling around and around in a small radius of injury.

The roadkill is constant, much more than you see from a car. Five birds yesterday. Porcupines. A skunk, two coons. Closer to Halifax there'd been cats. Wind, rain and sun, or another fast run of the tires flatten these dark mounds into puddles then finally just bumpy stains, road scabs. The bodies last longer over on the gravel, the rips and smashes almost preserved by the dust.

The side of the road. If not dead animals or fast-food litter then blown truck tires — black, shredded strips strung out for half a kilometre or more. Pedalling steadily in the recurrent backdraft of the

trucks, shiny Lycra tight on his skin, Andrew needs to know how high and wide the flak of each blown tire can reach. When the trucks roar past him, he can feel his organ donor card tucked into the compact tool kit beneath his saddle.

He rests the bike's warm top tube against a humming thigh while leaning over the ruined bird. A truck thunders past, and the bird's fine, mottled breast feathers ruffle in the blast. More than a wing hangs broken. Part of the beak and, worse, an eye are so wrongly pulled. In a car he'd let the speed rationalize, anaesthetize, spirit him away. Touring now at one-quarter of that speed, he'd feel the quivering bird tethered to him on the roadside for valley after valley, share every fading tremor. He straddles the top tube without mounting the bike and raises the front forks like the plunger on a blasting box. Aiming the tire between the swollen panniers etches the bird more deeply, sews that tiny bead of an eye forever into his memory. Looking away he shoves the laden front forks down to crush the twitching bird. The bird, at least, he puts out of misery.

2

Stan was driving and Pat was in the passenger seat, both parents together, so Andy could only have been six or seven. Summer in the early 1980s. He and Mitch were in the back seat, cousins fighting over Big Jim, a large plastic action figure. Most of the doll's hard back had been cut out to form a tombstone-shaped button that drove a feeble but televisable karate chop in one arm. Countless times at home Andy had slid off Big Jim's zippered track suit top to run a thumb or fingertip over the narrow gap that surrounded the impassible button on Big Jim's toffee-coloured back. The large button was the shape of a piece of toast and constituted almost all of the action figure's smooth back. Andy half expected the button to fall out into his hands. Mystery aside, Big Jim was currently in contest. Andy and Mitch yanked, pulled and twisted the half-naked plastic man.

They'd been driving in the summer heat for two hours, Andy and Mitch fighting nearly that long. Pat had bribed, reasoned, yelled. She'd already confiscated an India rubber ball and two Micronauts. Her molars churned with the certainty that these two would fight over air so long as they had an audience. Called it. Did not. Her window was already down, so no one saw it coming. In a flash she turned and dug her hand between the boys, wrestling the undressed doll from their surprised grip. Uncoiling back through the car, she hauled Big Jim in front of their startled faces, past Stan's curved shoulder and across her own fuming chest to fling him into the wind.

The two-pitch drone of tires and engine flooded the car. Tinny AM music returned. Stan glanced once at his wife. Each of them knew red splotches were flooding the unseen plain of her chest. Stan could feel them pulse and spread as he braked. The drop of tires onto gravel was the banging of a gavel, the car's halt the verdict of a stern jury. Raising his right hand up for the gearshift, he needed to wedge the top of his left under what remained of his right triceps for extra lift. Finally, he turned his head as far as he could, not past his shoulder like Mitch's

father or even Grandpa. Instead, the reach of Stan's head stopped just before his shoulder. Only his eyes could reach past the lock of bone, and they tried to ignore the tight line of his wife's compressed lips.

Even with his seat belt, Andy turned owlishly until both shoulders were parallel to the window. *Diagonal*, he kept thinking, *diagonal*. Stan, Andy and Big Jim in the distance behind him, they were a *diagonal* line. If he just rode the syllables, he could block out the rest. *Diagonal*. He could see each of three unevenly spaced points on this line.

"Where?!" Stan barked, accelerating the reversing car more and more.

"Farther," Andy mumbled, "farther."

3

Nearly two decades later, Andrew and Betty were in Stan's old bedroom, his parents' ex-bedroom. Andrew said, "My father's body went crazy," after Betty's one night in his Kingston house had become two, four, five and growing. But Stan's wasn't a body he could just talk about. He had to show her.

Andrew and Betty, each of them twenty-two years old, students. Their bodies becoming their own. Their minds finally beginning to soar.

Although Betty was okay with Andrew imitating Stan's half-paralyzed arms, she suddenly wished he would slip back into some underwear for this bit of family theatre. For the first time in their heady, intoxicating week, Betty thought this might not be the best moment for Andrew to be naked. She lay in Stan's old room and in his bed as the healthy son tried to show her the body of the sick father.

Andrew stood beside the bed where she lay prone, switching between director and fellow actor. "At times he could barely get the arm off the bed," Andrew clarified. "He only had this little bit of strength on the underside of his shoulder. You try. Use just enough muscle to get your arm above the hip. That's right. I'd say, *No cheating. Think shoulder.* Really he'd be cheating like crazy, throwing it from the hips, twisting the ribs, whatever he could. Pucker up the right hand. Pull the knuckles back toward the forearm. And roll the thumb and pinky toward each other. Feel that little pouch in your palm? *Okay, and up.* I'd have to tow the arm up, and for weeks he couldn't hold it there himself. Stiffen your arm. He had some strength in the shoulder but not much in the biceps. Picture the whole arm in a plastic pipe perpendicular to the shoulder. Forget about your elbow. Yeah, you can hold that. *Okay now, Stanner, give me some disco.*" Andrew held his own arm out stiffly and swept it back and forth from the shoulder. "*C'mon, Daddy-o, cut a circle into heaven. Bigger. Bigger.*" Accelerating her circle one minute then slowing it the next, he asked her, "Feel how