

As if I don't feed him, walk him, play with him! Now what? Who do I call? The pound? The police? What if he gets hit by a car? What if he gets to the edge of town and just keeps going? What am I supposed to do then? "Trouble!"

Dark. Catsmells close by. THERE! After the tumbling splash of hair, chasing to GET but the Cat opens its pawteeth, sweeps them down and HURT HURT spills from the face to the grass under a tree with the sticky balls and the pin floor. Big Ones crashing by. The Cat saying *eeyow yow yow*. No treats. No warm. Just hurt hurt hurt.

Probably lying in a ditch somewhere by now, hit by a car, thinking about me in those last breaths. Feeling guilty. Guilty and dying in a ditch. Serves him right. I'm not going to cry. I am not going to cry.

A ball in the dark, glowing. So bright, so big, tugging from the belly owoooooOOOOOOO WOOOOOOO. Wanting Drink, wanting Treat. Looking for smells, smells, Shesmells? THERE? Running. Hurt but running. Smells of Mine mixing with smells of She. Knowing Here, knowing Others by their trees, closer now to She She She. The diamond wall. On the grass street now beside the wood bands, everything still and bright, no Him anywhere. Is she THERE? THERE? Quiet, far away, *here here*. YES! Scut the ground, scut scut, stopping only to answer HERE HERE HERE.

That's him. That's got to be him. Two in the morning, the little turncoat comes crawling back. I'll kill him. Shoes, shoes. Keep it down, catch him off guard. What he doing? Trying to get into the McLeod's?

"Trouble!" Hands on the back. Him! Bite? YES! HURT HURT SORRY SORRY. Pulled up and back, flying away from She, away from the running spaces, rocking and flying all the way inside, straight to the Dark Place, the Bad Door, falling hard on piles of His feet and sorrysorry, closing dark, hurting loud and badbadbad. Quiet now. Smells of Him only. Cry? YES. CRY CRY CRY. The dark. The pictures. And in the pictures She is nowhere.

## ANYTHING FOR A FRIEND

Tim Lehnert

Lang called me two months after moving west to run his in-laws' Mining Concern. The town was depressing and he felt trapped. He needed a buddy, but work and his young family kept him too busy to make friends. Moreover, a friend only becomes a friend over time, years really. Lang needed someone now. He offered me a salary, moving expenses, and a signing bonus if I'd come join him.

My work on Lang's behalf would not be difficult: meeting for lunch, watching hockey, going for beers, maybe even trying our hand at ice fishing. Occasionally, we might go to the Modest Prairie City (an hour's drive from the mining town) for some casual ogling of university girls at a coffee shop or bar. I didn't respond to Lang's offer at first, thinking perhaps he was joking, but he quickly filled the silence by noting that my duties as paid buddy would occupy me only several hours a week. The timing of his call was perfect—I was frustrated and bored with my job managing a sporting goods franchise in Toronto and wanted to make a change. I'd been Lang's friend ever since we'd stumbled through our BAs together at U of T fifteen years ago; now it would be my vocation.

Lang found me an apartment in the Glenmeadows, one of the town's more fashionable complexes. The rent for a two-bedroom was less than half of what I'd paid for a much smaller place in a slapdash high-rise in a marginal area of Toronto. My next door neighbors were a couple in their 20s, he a salesman at the Ford dealership, she a preschool teacher. Across the hall was a single 30ish woman, a secretary in the local government office, who habitually wore a Winnipeg Jets jersey. She was amazed that I'd come all the way from Toronto to live in the Glenmeadows.

I officially began my duties as a consultant to Lang in early February. On my first day we met for lunch; midway through my grilled chicken sandwich and Molson Dry, I remembered that I was in fact working—this was what I did now. Lang told me that he wanted our relationship to remain the same as it had been before, even though now he would be paying me. I wasn't to act differently, or think that I couldn't tell him he was full of shit if I thought it the case. He wasn't buying a friend—he was paying someone who was already a friend to relocate.

The town in which the Mining Concern is located has a comical two-word name fusing a part of the body with a wild animal. The faint exoticism of this moniker is quickly dispelled by the sheer ordinariness of the place: its utilitarian downtown streets, dowdy mall, and commercial stretch on the outskirts replete with fast food restaurants and budget motels. The region's chief entertainment is hockey, and the local junior team is held in high regard. As for "culture," there isn't much: a small museum devoted to mining and western heritage, a struggling theatre group heavy on retirees, and a pedestrian art gallery. Film means the latest Hollywood disaster or cartoon epic. Finally, the topography of the place is uninspiring—this is not the West of snow capped mountain and evergreen valleys; rather, the town is situated in that dull brown mass of country handed out free to immigrants a century ago as incentive to settle the Dominion. The landscape is flat, rocky, and filled with half-formed trees, gnarled bushes and occasional boggy lakes.

In Toronto, I was used to strolling Queen Street on my day off, poking my head into a bookstore or used CD shop, checking out the pierced eyebrow crowd, stopping for an overpriced *café au lait* if I felt like it. I discovered few of these modest entertainments in my new surroundings. My first foray away from the Glenmeadows was a failure: I visited the spiritless downtown, traversing its length on foot in seven or eight minutes before doubling back and stopping in a Tim Hortons to get out of the cold. I installed myself by the window and eyed the unattractive people in bulky coats bracing themselves against the freezing wind. The crowd of old timers and witless teenagers at the surrounding tables depressed me, and I wanted to leave before I'd finished my coffee and donut.

During my second week on the job, I went over to Lang's for dinner. I wasn't sure if his wife knew the terms of my employment and this made me uncomfortable, as if I were a mistress being invited round by the unsuspecting lady of the house. I'd already justified the position in my own mind—people pay therapists, and at least I had been spending time with Lang before money began changing hands. Still, I wasn't keen to discuss my arrangement with Lang's wife, nor with anyone else for that matter, and was relieved that she never brought it up during that or subsequent visits to the house. After dinner, Lang and I went to the bar of a shabby downtown hotel for some darts and the last two periods of the Leafs game.

Our activities over the next few weeks were simple: we went for beers, we put on skates and passed the puck around on the frozen pond behind Lang's house, we went to Memorial Arena and watched hockey, we took a road trip to the Modest Prairie City to see an 80s band on a comeback tour,

we sat around drinking coffee after dinner while Lang's wife put the kids to bed. I had my own modest life as well—my daily routine usually included a quick trip to the downtown Tim Hortons (which I'd found myself warming up to), the mall, or the library, and then return to the apartment, where I watched TV, read, and spent too much time on-line. Occasionally, I'd see the Winnipeg Jets woman in the Glenmeadows hallway and say "Hello." She thought it fascinating that I was a consultant at the Mining Concern, and I did nothing to discourage this view.

When I talked to friends in Toronto, I told them I was involved in management at the Mining Concern. Big city provincials, most of them couldn't imagine life outside of Toronto, Montreal or Vancouver. For them, even the Modest Prairie City was the end of the earth, never mind the town in which the Mining Concern was located. But my life didn't displease me: I was saving money and had left the sporting goods store and my overpriced Toronto high-rise. I began to see myself as a pioneer, a rebel in a sense, someone who had broken free of the self-important megacity to forge my way in the West. I'd always had the vague idea I'd see the "real" Canada sometime, get beyond the 416 area code and go north or west; now I was doing it.

I also had lots of free time and took up photography in a semi-serious way, going to the Modest Prairie City for supplies and developing of the black-and-whites of farm implements that I took at dusk. I fantasized that one day I would become a famous photographer whose work was featured at the AGO and sold in Yorkville galleries. In addition to my photographic efforts, I began keeping a journal, in which I have recorded these thoughts on my time spent working for Lang. I decided that my assignment in the mining town was an opportunity for growth and reflection, following which I would return to Toronto inspired and energized.

Every two weeks, a check from the Mining Concern was deposited into my account. Lang and I never talked about money as this would spoil things. Nonetheless, when we watched a hockey game or met for lunch, I was getting paid. And because of this, when Lang called and asked if I wanted to watch the Leafs on television that night, I couldn't say I was feeling tired and wasn't up to it, or that I'd made other plans. And while it is true that I had no other plans to make, and nothing to tire me out, nonetheless these options weren't open to me. As the employer, Lang could, however, abruptly call to cancel just before I was to come over, or, if we were out somewhere, leave early if he felt like it. In our case, as in all relationships between boss and employee, there was an asymmetry present in which even amidst the pleasant banter of ostensible equality, the one

being paid is always obliged in a way that the one writing the check never is.

As the months passed, I began to develop a more favorable view of life in the mining town, but a less generous one of Lang. Spring had come and as I spent more time out of doors, I saw how new and fresh the Canadian west still was. The place is not so much barren as it is open—the air clear, the water clean, and people's relationships to each other and the land more direct and honest than in Toronto. In this area of the country, people live modestly and many still make their money from livestock farming and drawing minerals from the earth, things you can put your hands on. Entertainment means hockey at the Memorial Arena, a drafty place with no luxury seats or corporate boxes paid for by money made in financial services, software or advertising. It occurred to me that the town's hot spots—the Golden Dragon Palace (featuring "Chinese & Canadian Food"), the downtown Tim Hortons, and the Memorial Arena—were no more provincial or insular than Toronto's trendy bars and bistros. The town had a blunt honesty to it, and its isolation and scraggly plainness ensured that it would never become a big city or boutique town of tourists and condos. I began to feel that by rights the town, and others like it, shouldn't be seen as marginal outposts, but deserved acknowledgment as the engines that had driven Canada's development as a country. I started documenting the place, moving beyond taking pictures of farm machinery by bringing my camera with me on my daily visits to the Tim Hortons.

Lang was also warming up to the town, but mostly because he was beginning to recognize himself as a powerful man in his role heading up the Mining Concern. I'd always liked Lang's modesty and open mindedness, but now that was vanishing and he was becoming too sure of himself, too quick to condemn and to judge, a self-satisfied know-it-all. He met my disagreements about politics or other matters not with anger but with dismissal, as if my comments were impossibly simplistic and wrong headed. Because of my position, I didn't disagree when he began to pronounce on some topic or other. I wanted to tell Lang to shut up—as he'd once told me I could—but more often than not, I would mollify him with platitudes until the conversation returned to safer terrain. Lang had also become a master dissembler and a person who has begun to believe his own bullshit. Once I overheard him saying that he had moved west for the benefit of his wife and daughters, selflessly leaving behind the pleasures of the big city as he thought a small town would be a healthier environment for his family. He had even started this line with me, and I hadn't challenged him. The reality was quite simple: Lang had been pressured by his wife and her parents

to come out and run the Mining Concern, and now had come to enjoy the income and power that went with the position. Before the move, Lang had never expressed any desire to leave Toronto. Was I not getting paid, I just might have upbraided him for his duplicitous self-congratulation on this point.

It was not only Lang's pontificating that had begun to irritate me, it was also his elastic definition of "friend." Several weeks after I started, he had me come over to help clean out the junk-filled barn he had inherited from the house's previous owner. This seeming one-time request turned into a regular weekend assignment of separating the few curiosities we found worth keeping from the piles of moldy carpets, scrap lumber, and broken appliances we hauled out to the town dump. It was a tedious ongoing project, and hardly one that a friend could be expected to participate in every weekend. During cold afternoons spent moving bulky objects back and forth across the barn, Lang lectured me on various topics, including the state of mining in Canada, the "Native Problem," and terrorism. He would punctuate his discourses with occasional asides about how easy I had it in my position as friend, that I had really lucked out. After finishing with the barn, we moved on to cleaning gutters and chopping down diseased trees.

Lang's ramblings and the monotonous yard work notwithstanding, it couldn't be denied that I was drawing a better paycheck than most in the town, and furthermore working no more than ten hours a week. Calculated on an hourly basis, I was earning a shocking amount of money. And most of my "work," of course, was hardly work at all: drinking beer, watching sports, hanging out—all activities I previously had done for free. Yet it was also true that the relationship between Lang and I had deteriorated: I resented him, and he was beginning to feel that he no longer needed me. When Lang had offered me the position as professional friend, he had felt very isolated in the western town. Eventually, however, he began to develop a network of colleagues at the Mining Concern, chiefly the head engineer and the operations manager. When I went into the mining company offices, I would see them engaged in casual kidding banter; sometimes they left in the engineer's car at lunchtime. Lang never invited me along, and introduced me only cursorily, as if we were mere acquaintances. In my third month on the job, Lang began to discourage my appearances at the Mining Concern altogether by meeting me elsewhere, instead of having me pick him up. I continued to drop by the office occasionally, but when I did, I rarely spoke to Lang and the Mining Concern was chiefly a place where I could fax and photocopy free of charge.

Outside of Lang, my world was very small; I socialized only with the Winnipeg Jets woman across the Glenmeadows hall. She and her brother (a frequent guest at her apartment when hockey was on), smoked and thought living in a big city like Toronto must be very complicated, not to mention dangerous. Our friendship began when the brother, having noted my Leafs cap in the hallway, invited me in for an NHL playoff game on the big screen. It was good fun watching hockey with them—they became genuinely upset at the referees, and did not mar the game with discussions of real estate, the carbs in beer, or the direction of the TSE. I soon began drifting over to the Winnipeg Jets apartment (so designated in my mind because of a Jets decal on the door) whenever a game was on. The informality and quick friendship of the place reminded me of a university dorm.

On the first night of the Stanley Cup finals, I was installed on the Jets couch trying to move away from a stream of cigarette smoke when I heard my phone ring. I ran back to my apartment; it was Lang - he wanted me at the mining company offices at nine the next morning. I returned to the game puzzled; we never met that early, and his request would disrupt my usual morning schedule of sleeping-in and lounging around the apartment with my coffee and *Globe and Mail*.

I arrived at the Mining Concern at 9:15. Lang noted that I was late and handed me a manila envelope. His intercom buzzed, and while he talked on the phone, I retreated to my office. The envelope contained a performance review, the same as was used for regular employees at the Mining Concern. Under some of the categories, such as "Demonstrates Knowledge of Company Policies and Procedures," and, "Is Respectful of Coworkers," Lang had marked "N/A," while under others he had entered a score. Lang knocked, entered, and said that he realized that much of the form wasn't relevant, but thought that the process was important for us both nonetheless. Following the ten performance categories was a final one, a summary entitled, "Overall Job Performance," under which Lang had checked the box, "Meets Requirements." Lang said he had an appointment at ten; I took the evaluation and left.

When I got home, I looked at the review more closely. I couldn't believe that in our era of grade inflation I had merited the perfectly mediocre "Meets Requirements," rather than the top ranking, "Exceeds Expectations." How could this be? I spent time with Lang whenever he wanted, provided witty asides and good conversation, and was sympathetic to his problems. I could discuss serious matters when needed, yet wasn't always trying to get heavy, probe too deeply, or talk too much about myself. I was stunned; even though the evaluation wasn't terrible, after all, I "Met Requirements,"

evidently I had not risen above the level of ordinary. I realized that I had, in the last few months, reflected much on Lang, the mining town, my aspirations, and my position, but little on my actual performance in the role of professional friend. Perhaps I had hung back too much, had not been enthusiastic enough. I usually waited for Lang's call; maybe I should have been more proactive in that there should be a rough parity in how frequently friends contact each other. I'd thought it best to make myself available, but not make demands on Lang or have him feel obligated. I felt chastened and a little ashamed; for the money he was paying me, I should exceed expectations, not perform adequately.

I went to the Tim Hortons and took my customary seat by the window, avoiding the small talk I usually engaged the girl behind the counter in. It was a conundrum: how to improve my performance given that friendship is not something typically judged with a grade or ranking. I sat for an hour or so, and by the time I left the Tim Hortons, my feelings of inadequacy and guilt had begun to wane, and I started to resent Lang's imperiousness in using the Mining Concern's evaluation sheet to review me. I wondered if he was setting me up to fail—he wanted me to be "natural," to act as if he weren't paying me, and so had given me no job description, no specific list of duties, and no indication of how often he wanted me to call him. It was classically unfair: don't tell someone what you want, and when they don't do what you expect, blame them for it. I wondered what Lang had thought about my performance as a friend before I was on the payroll; presumably I had "exceeded expectations," and that was why he had hired me.

I signed the review and gave it back to Lang when we met the following week to watch his daughter's soccer game. We did not discuss the evaluation, and there was an awkward silence until Lang launched into a pronouncement about the Bloc Québécois or the NHL draft, I can't remember which. In my experience at the sporting goods store there are two possible reactions following an unsatisfactory review: either the employee will attempt to remedy deficiencies, take stock and buckle down, or there will be an expanded sense of dissatisfaction, a cynicism toward the employer, the development of a sense that the game is rigged, that the evaluation is a cheap cover for the boss's arbitrary judgments. I had the latter feeling; I felt the sting of Lang's rebuke and was angry with him. The evaluation represented the final breech and fissure in our relationship, and led me to question the direction my life had taken. Prior to the review, I had crafted a picture of myself as a maverick, a person adventuresome enough in his 30s to chuck his conventional job and venture west to engage in a process of self-discovery. I now wondered if I hadn't been kidding myself.

if being a professional sycophant wasn't something to be ashamed of, and if leaving the sporting goods store hadn't been a hasty and ill-conceived move.

The week following the soccer game, I was supposed to meet Lang for lunch, but he cancelled, saying he had business with a client visiting from the States. Two days later, he nixed an outing to the Modest Prairie City we had planned weeks before. Lang said he was going to the Golden Dragon Palace with the client and the Mining Concern head engineer, following which he was indulging the American, who was returning to Denver the following day, by taking him to The Flame, the most upscale of the town's four strip bars. I pictured the three of them carousing: a nauseating trio of boozed up, self-satisfied smart-alecs, the American cramming five dollar bills into the strippers' G-string while the other two cheered him on. I knew the strategy Lang was employing as I'd used it myself: reduce a problem employee's hours in the hopes that they will quit. I didn't bite, and a week later Lang called me in for a Thursday afternoon meeting and fired me.

My termination was, of course, uncomfortable for us both. Lang closed the door to his office and picked up a souvenir hockey puck which he nervously flipped in the air. "This isn't easy, but I want to make a change. Things aren't working out." I didn't say anything and let him continue. "I'm not blaming you, but I need to shore things up, get my house in order." When firings and breakups occur, the parties usually lapse quickly into cliché and don't emerge. I played it cool. I knew it was coming, but it still hurt. It was unfair, it wasn't right; I wasn't garbage to be thrown away. You can't dismiss a friend like you'd stop delivery of the morning paper. I wanted to fight with Lang, remind him that he'd fallen into his position with the Mining Concern ass-backwards as a result of his wife; it was nothing he had done on his own. But I made it a point not to argue or name-call; instead, I told Lang I had given it my best shot and had taken a chance when I'd come out west. I said perhaps his expectations should have been more clearly conveyed, and that I was disappointed that things were ending this way. And then I hit him with my request for six months severance, payable within a week by cashier's check. I was matter of fact, like I hashed-out deals like this all the time. Lang didn't negotiate, he accepted my terms. He asked me if we could still be friends; I said we could, although I doubted it, and am sure he did as well.

In the days following my termination, I sat around the apartment and sent out resumes for positions in Toronto I wasn't qualified for. I received no responses, and instead of leaving, or conducting my job search in a more realistic manner, I used my free time to finish up my various projects. I

submitted my farm implement photographs to several magazines, and put the finishing touches on my Tim Hortons piece, which now consisted of thirty black-and-whites and an accompanying essay. I thought about buying a plane ticket for Toronto, but kept putting it off; I wanted to reserve a few weeks in advance so as to get a good fare, yet couldn't pick a date to leave, and so my departure was continually being deferred.

About a month after my employment with Lang ended, I bumped into him downtown. He looked surprised to see me, and evidently had assumed that I'd be gone once he paid me off. We exchanged quick "Hellos" but nothing more. That night he called me, "There's no reason we shouldn't part on good terms. I can put a word in at McKnight Klempa Katz in Toronto if you'd like." I thanked him, but declined. I'd been tempted to request a further sum as guarantee that I would leave, but didn't. It's not that I was afraid to; rather, I thought he might agree, and then I'd have to quit the town before the time felt right. The Winnipeg Jets woman, Julia was her name, might be interested in baseball now that hockey season was over, and the local gallery might break with their horsy Western theme and consider my Tim Hortons piece. And I had an idea for a new project—a photo essay on the Memorial Arena.