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opening extract from

Hatchet

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One

Brian Robeson stared out of the window of the small plane at the endless green northern wilderness below. It was a small plane, a Cessna 406 – a bushplane – and the engine was so loud, so roaring and consuming and loud, that it ruined any chance of conversation.

Not that he had much to say. He was thirteen and the only passenger on the plane with a pilot named – what was it? – Jim or Jake or something, who was in his mid-forties and who had been silent as he worked to prepare for take-off. In fact since Brian had come to the small airport in Hampton, New York to meet the plane – driven by his mother – the pilot had spoken only five words to him.

'Get in the co-pilot's seat.'

Which Brian had done. They had taken off and that was the last of the conversation. There had been the initial excitement, of course. He had never flown in a single-engine plane before and to be sitting in the co-pilot's seat with all the controls right there in front of him, all the instruments in his face as the plane clawed for altitude, jerking and sliding on the wind currents as the pilot took off, had been interesting and exciting. But in five minutes they had levelled off at six thousand feet and headed north-west and from then on the pilot had been silent, staring

out of the front, and the drone of the engine had been all that was left. The drone and the sea of green trees that lay before the plane's nose and flowed to the horizon, spread with lakes, swamps and wandering streams and rivers.

Now Brian sat, looking out of the window with the roar thundering through his ears, and tried to catalogue what had led up to his taking this flight.

The thinking started.

Always it started with a single word.

Divorce.

It was an ugly word, he thought. A tearing, ugly word that meant fights and yelling, lawyers – God, he thought, how he hated lawyers who sat with their comfortable smiles and tried to explain to him in legal terms how all that he lived in was coming apart – and the breaking and shattering of all the solid things. His home, his life – all the solid things. Divorce. A breaking word, an ugly breaking word.

Divorce.

Secrets.

No, not secrets so much as just the Secret. What he knew and had not told anybody, what he knew about his mother that had caused the divorce, what he knew, what he knew – the Secret.

Divorce.

The Secret.

Brian felt his eyes beginning to burn and knew there would be tears. He had cried for a time, but that was gone now. He didn't cry now. Instead his eyes burned and tears came, the seeping tears that burned, but he didn't cry. He

wiped his eyes with a finger and looked at the pilot out of the corner of his eye to make sure he hadn't noticed the burning and tears.

The pilot sat large, his hands lightly on the wheel, feet on the rudder pedals. He seemed more a machine than a man, an extension of the plane. On the dashboard in front of him Brian saw dials, switches, meters, knobs, levers, cranks, lights, handles that were wiggling and flickering, all indicating nothing that he understood, and the pilot seemed the same way. Part of the plane, not human.

When he saw Brian look at him, the pilot seemed to open up a bit and he smiled. 'Ever fly in the co-pilot's seat before?' He leaned over and lifted the headset off his right ear and put it on his temple, yelling to overcome the sound of the engine.

Brian shook his head. He had never been in any kind of plane, never seen the cockpit of a plane except in films or on television. It was loud and confusing. 'First time.'

'It's not as complicated as it looks. Good plane like this almost flies itself.' The pilot shrugged. 'Makes my job easy.' He took Brian's left arm. 'Here, put your hands on the controls, your feet on the rudder pedals, and I'll show you what I mean.'

Brian shook his head. 'I'd better not.'

'Sure. Try it . . .'

Brian reached out and took the wheel in a grip so tight his knuckles were white. He pushed his feet down on the pedals. The plane slewed suddenly to the right.

'Not so hard. Take her light, take her light.'

Brian eased off, relaxed his grip. The burning in his eyes

was forgotten momentarily as the vibration of the plane came through the wheel and the pedals. It seemed almost alive.

'See?' The pilot let go of his wheel, raised his hands in the air and took his feet off the pedals to show Brian he was actually flying the plane alone. 'Simple. Now turn the wheel a little to the right and push on the right rudder pedal a small amount.'

Brian turned the wheel slightly and the plane immediately banked to the right, and when he pressed on the right rudder pedal the nose slid across the horizon to the right. He left off on the pressure and straightened the wheel and the plane righted itself.

'Now you can turn. Bring her back to the left a little.'

Brian turned the wheel left, pushed on the left pedal, and the plane came back round. 'It's easy.' He smiled. 'At least this part.'

The pilot nodded. 'All of flying is easy. Just takes learning. Like everything else. Like everything else.' He took the controls back, then reached up and rubbed his left shoulder. 'Aches and pains – must be getting old.'

Brian let go of the controls and moved his feet away from the pedals as the pilot put his hands on the wheel. 'Thank you . . .'

But the pilot had put his headset back on and the gratitude was lost in the engine noise and things went back to Brian looking out of the window at the ocean of trees and lakes. The burning eyes did not come back, but memories did, came flooding in. The words. Always the words.

Divorce.

The Secret.

Fights.

Split.

The big split. Brian's father did not understand as Brian did, knew only that Brian's mother wanted to break the marriage apart. The split had come and then the divorce, all so fast, and the court had left him with his mother except for the summers and what the judge called 'visitation rights'. So formal. Brian hated judges as he hated lawyers. Judges who leaned over the bench and asked Brian if he understood where he was to live and why. Judges who did not know what had really happened. Judges with the caring look that meant nothing as lawyers said legal phrases that meant nothing.

In the summer Brian would live with his father. In the school year with his mother. That's what the judge said after looking at papers on his desk and listening to the lawyers talk. Talk. Words.

Now the plane lurched slightly to the right and Brian looked at the pilot. He was rubbing his shoulder again and there was the sudden smell of body gas in the plane. Brian turned back to avoid embarrassing the pilot, who was obviously in some discomfort. Must have stomach trouble.

So this summer, this first summer that he was allowed to have 'visitation rights' with his father, with the divorce only one month old, Brian was heading north. His father was a mechanical engineer who had designed or invented a new drill bit for oil drilling, a self-cleaning, self-sharpening bit. He was working in the oil fields of Canada, up on the tree line where the tundra started and the forests ended. Brian

was flying up from New York with some drilling equipment – it was lashed down in the rear of the plane next to a fabric bag the pilot had called a survival pack, which had emergency supplies in case they had to make an emergency landing – that had to be specially made in the city, flying in a bushplane with the pilot named Jim or Jake or something who had turned out to be an all right guy, letting him fly and all.

Except for the smell. Now there was a constant odour, and Brian took another look at the pilot, found him rubbing the shoulder and down the arm now, the left arm, letting go more gas and wincing. Probably something he ate, Brian thought.

His mother had driven him from the city to meet the plane at Hampton where it came to pick up the drilling equipment. A drive in silence, a long drive in silence. Two and a half hours of sitting in the car, staring out of the window just as he was now staring out of the window of the plane. Once, after an hour, when they were out of the city, she turned to him.

'Look, can't we talk this over? Can't we talk this out? Can't you tell me what's bothering you?'

And there were the words again. Divorce. Split. The Secret. How could he tell her what he knew? So he had remained silent, shook his head and continued to stare unseeing at the countryside, and his mother had gone back to driving only to speak to him one more time when they were close to Hampton.

She reached over the back of the seat and brought up a paper bag. 'I got something for you, for the trip.'

Brian took the bag and opened the top. Inside there was a hatchet, the kind with a steel handle and a rubber handgrip. The head was in a stout leather case that had a brass-riveted belt loop.

'It goes on your belt.' His mother spoke without looking at him. There were some farm trucks on the road now and she had to weave through them and watch the traffic. 'The man at the shop said you could use it. You know. In the woods with your father.'

Dad, he thought. Not 'my father'. My dad. 'Thanks. It's really nice.' But the words sounded hollow, even to Brian.

'Try it on. See how it looks on your belt.'

And he would normally have said no, would normally have said that it looked too naff to have a hatchet on your belt. Those were the normal things he would say. But her voice was thin, had a sound like something thin that would break if you touched it, and he felt bad for not speaking to her. Knowing what he knew, even with the anger, the hot white hate of his anger at her, he still felt bad for not speaking to her, and so to humour her he loosened his belt and pulled the right side out and put the hatchet on and rethreaded the belt.

'Scootch round so I can see.'

He moved round in the seat, feeling only slightly ridiculous.

She nodded. 'Just like a scout. My little scout.' And there was the tenderness in her voice that she had when he was small, the tenderness that she had when he was small and sick, with a cold, and she put her hand on his forehead, and the burning came into his eyes again and he had

turned away from her and looked out of the window, forgotten the hatchet and so arrived at the plane with the hatchet still on his belt.

Because it was a bush flight from a small airport there had been no security and the plane had been waiting with the engine running when he arrived and he had grabbed his suitcase and pack bag and run for the plane without stopping to remove the hatchet.

So it was still on his belt. At first he had been embarrassed but the pilot had said nothing about it and Brian forgot it as they took off and began flying.

More smell now. Bad. Brian turned again to glance at the pilot, who had both hands on his stomach and was grimacing in pain, reaching for the left shoulder again as Brian watched.

'Don't know, kid . . .' The pilot's words were a hiss, barely audible. 'Bad aches here. Bad aches. Thought it was something I ate but . . .'

He stopped as a fresh spasm of pain hit him. Even Brian could see how bad it was – the pain drove the pilot back into the seat, back and down.

'I've never had anything like this . . .'

The pilot reached for the switch on his mike cord, his hand coming up in a small arc from his stomach, and he flipped the switch and said, 'This is flight four six . . .'

And now a jolt took him like a hammer blow, so forcefully that he seemed to crush back into the seat, and Brian reached for him, could not understand at first what it was, could not know.

And then knew.

Brian knew. The pilot's mouth went rigid, he swore and jerked a short series of slams into the seat, holding his shoulder now. Swore and hissed, 'Chest! Oh God, my chest is coming apart!'

Brian knew now.

The pilot was having a heart attack. Brian had been in the shopping mall with his mother when a man in front of Paisley's store had suffered a heart attack. He had gone down and screamed about his chest. An old man. Much older than the pilot.

Brian knew.

The pilot was having a heart attack and even as the knowledge came to Brian he saw the pilot slam into the seat one more time, one more awful time he slammed back into the seat and his right leg jerked, pulling the plane to the side in a sudden twist, and his head fell forward and spit came. Spit came from the corners of his mouth and his legs contracted up, up into the seat, and his eyes rolled back in his head until there was only white.

Only white for his eyes and the smell became worse, filled the cockpit, and all of it so fast, so incredibly fast that Brian's mind could not take it in at first. Could only see it in stages.

The pilot had been talking, just a moment ago, complaining of the pain. He had been talking.

Then the jolts had come.

The jolts that took the pilot back had come, and now Brian sat and there was a strange feeling of silence in the thrumming roar of the engine – a strange feeling of silence and being alone. Brian was stopped.

He was stopped. Inside he was stopped. He could not think past what he saw, what he felt. All was stopped. The very core of him, the very centre of Brian Robeson was stopped and stricken with a white-flash of horror, a terror so intense that his breathing, his thinking, and nearly his heart had stopped.

Stopped.

Seconds passed, seconds that became all of his life, and he began to know what he was seeing, began to understand what he saw and that was worse, so much worse that he wanted to make his mind freeze again.

He was sitting in a bushplane roaring seven thousand feet above the northern wilderness with a pilot who had suffered a massive heart attack and who was either dead or in something close to a coma.

He was alone.

In the roaring plane with no pilot he was alone.

Alone.