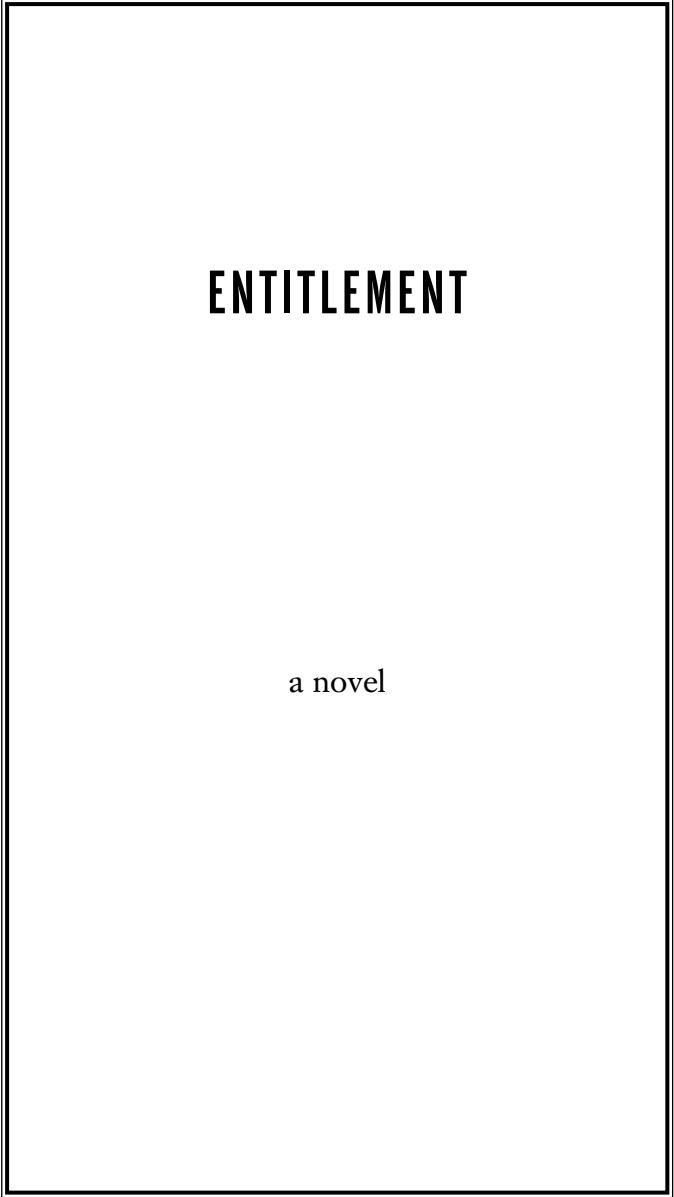


ENTITLEMENT

A NOVEL

Jonathan Bennett



ENTITLEMENT

a novel

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POETRY

Here is my street, this tree I planted (2004)

ENTITLEMENT

a novel by

Jonathan Bennett

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*For my father Vernon Bennett,
and my son Thomas Morgan.*

“Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
 And a pond edged with grayish leaves.”

— *Thomas Hardy*

PART ONE

BACK IN THE FALL ANDY KRONK ESCAPED north to this cottage on Broad Lake. At the time of purchase he'd brimmed with renovation plans and enthusiasm, levelling the foundation, painting, and calling a local contractor to come by and quote on installing a new septic tank. He had been in no hurry for this last expense. The trudge to the outhouse was onerous, not unbearable. Rustic charm. He'd planned on doing it in another year. But then, in the winter, his needs abruptly changed.

When can you begin work? he'd asked the man on the phone.

Good few more weeks yet, said the contractor. The ground's frozen pretty deep out by you. Lots of rock too. Be hard going if we don't wait.

To Andy, the gruff man sounded bearlike, not yet willing to emerge from hibernation. Please, said Andy, as soon as you can.

Freezin' yer arse off, eh? said the contractor. Andy let the weak joke stand.

And while the long nights still assuredly fell below zero, last week he opened the side door of his cottage after lunch and in the air there was a change. The sky was light blue, the sun fragile but warm. There was no wind. He stood still enjoying the peace. Then faintly, he heard a sound. He waited. There, again. And again. He walked toward it. From the corner of his cottage, through a small hole in the eavestrough, a single drop of water slowly bulged then dripped. The temperature was above freezing. Soon the contractor could begin work.

Were he still in Toronto, weather like this would be cause for celebration. After months of truculent winter, this advance taste of spring would prompt him, along with several other lawyers, to go in search of a restaurant with a patio. There they would join the swell of rapt Torontonians heading outdoors. They would loosen their ties, roll the cuffs of their white dress shirts a turn or two, put on sunglasses, sit under gas-powered heaters, and sip at tall glasses of blond beer. They would not speak much. Instead they would drink, watch the streetcars rumble past, and, occasionally, one of them would angle a pale face directly at the sun, grin broadly, and say, Oh, right fuckin' on.

The backhoes and workmen were at it within the week — their first job of the season. Over several days they dug the primary hole and trenches. They laid pipes, installed a toilet, sink, and shower stall, replaced plumbing underneath the cottage, and debated where to put the drain field. The huge concrete tank had been ordered, Andy was told, from a reliable supplier, and would be delivered and lowered into place tomorrow, next Tuesday at the latest.

You'll have yourself a flush toilet in days there guy, the contractor had said yesterday with a slap on Andy's back.

Pushing his hands up under his armpits Andy countered with, Cold enough for you?

They were quiet for a time.

Be able to do away with that outhouse soon for good, said the man. No more putting on your Kodiaks when you need to go to the shitter, eh?

Andy smiled.

Need the name of a honey wagon?

I will, I suppose. Yes, said Andy. The man took out his wallet and gave Andy a business card.

That's my brother-in-law. Knows how to take shit alright — married my sister, didn't he?

The man revealed his generous, gap-toothed smile before

walking off. Andy watched for a bit after his truck had pulled away.

At first Andy's dreams had come at night spawning horrors. He woke gasping for fresh air. Then, bolder, the dreams broke through during the day, creeping into the bathroom mirror, the lid of a pot, a knife's blade as his thumb passed over it rinsing off suds under warm running water. The images took over, vivid and loud. They ran together making complex stories. Andy believed he was inside them, experiencing a kind of authentic life so tangible that it was difficult to be unable, upon awaking, to discuss it in concrete, sane terms — especially with those who had appeared in them alongside him.

Most often he was with Colin in the dreams. When they were young, together out on the lake in a boat, then years later in New York City in an elevator, and then in a park where Colin hovered a foot off the ground, a spectre wearing a cape. The dreams were fantastical, intimate, absolutely true.

Colin, he whispered into the air. What should I tell her?

Soon it would be spring. The biographer would arrive.

Were it not for the dreams, Andy might have been able to tell the biographer that he had left the Aspinalls and Huntington House long behind. Those years were like the thrum of his own inner ear, the pulling of the ropes of blood that guaranteed him no silence, even when he was most alone. Without Colin, Andy had been alone. Huntington House was his only home, and Colin was whom he meant by the two words — full of pride and loyalty — best friend.

Drip. Drip. As a teenage boy, Colin Aspinall had long and tanned legs and a fine line of blond hair tracking a path up his flat stomach to his chest, where it fanned out in lighter, golden swirls.

Back at their boarding school, Lord Simcoe College, they'd once cut last class and headed down through the woods to the lakeshore on a similarly warm, late winter's day. At dusk they kicked at preserved crabapple husks frozen during their

autumnal rot. Aiming away at the distant lighthouse blinks, they thought not much beyond the moment itself. They were young men on the shore of a large, lead-grey lake. They were confined at boarding school but that day Colin Aspinall had felt urgently alive.

Kick. Laugh. Kick. They were young and arrogant. Laugh. Kick. They were beautiful and naive. All thoughts were original and right; their lives were as vital as heat from the sun. Other people — the ones they ignored in shops or movie theatres — must have looked back at them with awe and envy. Even when he and Colin became adolescently philosophical, or grave, they remained convinced of themselves. Regardless of their moods, Colin would tell Andy whatever flashed through his impulsive mind.

Hey, he'd said motioning across the darkening lake, that light comes from America. Kick. Laugh. Kick. Colin's voice, high and roused, had the effect of dressing up his youthful words as insightful. Just over there, he continued, now pointing at the probable haze of New York State, I am *nobody*. My last name counts for nothing. Live free or die. That's what they believe.

How was the moment recovered? Did he remember or did he dream that day they'd kicked crabapples at the faraway lighthouse? January in the mid-1980s and the weather was severe about them, toques pulled down over their ears, loosened ties and fashionable Sun Ice ski jackets were zipped over their tweed sports coats. Colin had spoken then to Andy so quietly it was almost lost to the wind. At fifteen years old, on the dark winter shoreline of the lake, Colin had mouthed to Andy the words *I love you*.

Andy had looked down at his penny loafers, and back up. The lighthouse blinked away the moments in awkward measures. Colin had uttered the obvious, gripping bond that passed electrically and, until then, silently, between them. But tucked up inside three quavering words there was more than

simple tenderness, honesty, and heartache. Why can't I be normal like you, Andy? Why can't *you* be different, like me? Andy could hear this subtle counterpoint in Colin's voice now, but not then. Years and disappointments would have to mount before he was burdened with nuance.

Andy would come to wonder why, right then and there, he hadn't just punched Colin in the face and called him a cruel name he could never take back. Or else thumped Colin hard on the shoulder, and laughed, flipping the declaration into a playful joke. Either response, though false and ignorant, would have made everything that was to come so much easier. But Andy stood reliable and firm and with a fierce reluctance to exhale unless he disturb the moment before it set hard. Out of loyalty, out of a kind of fraternity, he had said nothing.

How could he speak to the Aspinalls' biographer, of all times now? He mustn't. The Aspinalls were his only family. Yet, when the biographer contacted Andy, she had put an idea in his mind. By explaining it all, telling what he knew of the Aspinalls — Mr. and Mrs. Aspinall, Colin, his older sister Fiona, and his own years spent at Huntington House — he might finally, publicly, sever himself. Was this not what he wanted?

But what right did he have to speak out? His claim was only the memory of a friend, the sound of a word. Colin. A name that called to everything else and explained it all as far as he knew it. The five letters of another's name contained a whole story, his story.

When the three labourers and the contractor returned several days later, they were too busy with their morning coffees and donuts, and lighting cigarettes without removing their work gloves, with keeping themselves warm, to notice much of anything. Soon enough the crane lowered the pre-formed concrete tank into the hole, the heartbreaking weight of it settling and pressing downward.

Yep, yep, yelled the contractor to the other man operating the crane. Give 'er. Yep, Yep. Easy now. He raised his hand. The chains slackened.

Nice fit, said Andy, forcing himself to talk.

The rest of the day was spent hooking up, laying gravel, filling in, and spreading out top soil. By sunset, the rakes were packed up in the truck and the job was complete.

Just the inspector, who'll be by any day to check our hook-up at the house, promised the contractor. He's a friend of mine so you're golden. Here's your invoice.

Alone again, Andy looked out across Broad Lake. The biographer would arrive with her questions. He pushed air out his nostrils. This was over now. Completed. And before long, spring would open out and the world would be renewed: leaves on the birch trees, large-mouth bass jumping in the lake at fishermen's twitching, shiny lures, trillium flowering over the forest floor behind his cottage. Winter, and its necessary confidences, was gone.

~

Fiona Aspinall reached a hand up from beneath the covers. She felt her forehead. I am hot, she said aloud, weakly. I am sick. I must be sick. I have a temperature. I'm going to be sick. She wrestled herself free from the blankets, the colder air cutting right through her T-shirt. She stumbled into her ensuite. Collapsing at the toilet, the porcelain cool on her palms and wrists, she vomited. Acidic, fiery, total.

Last night she had arrived home from a party late and feeling drunk. She had not removed her makeup — as she would normally do. Rather she stripped clumsily, climbed into an oversized T-shirt, and fell into bed. As she'd laboured toward the open toilet, she'd caught a glimpse of herself: two dark eye sockets shot into a ghostly complexion. The idea of toilet bowls close enough to smell, was normally sufficient to bring on a dry retch.

I am sick, she said again, as if this were the proof she'd needed to be convinced. Fiona controlled her breathing. With the back of her hand, she wiped at the hot tears now in her eyes. She felt calm. Is this the flu? I am cold. The tiles on the bathroom floor had a heater underneath them. Radiant warmth, the estate agent had told her when she'd bought this condo last year. Were they working? I was not drunk last night. She felt relief at this. Of course she hadn't been. I had a glass of wine with dinner and only a single cocktail beforehand. Why had she thought she'd been drunk? She had been sick. She is sick.

Fiona pulled the T-shirt over her head, mopped her mouth with it and turned on the cold water. The granite countertop felt hard. She leaned in and ran warm water over the pearls that drooped around her neck. They'd flopped down into the toilet accidentally. She sloshed the water over them, rolled them about in her fingers rinsing them off. Can stomach acid hurt pearls? She filled her mouth with water, gargled, and spat. She repeated this several times then washed her face, drying it hard with the towel leaving two mascara marks and

a smudge of lipstick, the towel taking on the loose semblance of a shroud. She let it fall to the floor and went back to bed.

It's Wednesday, she thought suddenly. That woman comes today. She had not bought new vacuum cleaner bags. She was out of J cloths. Her cleaning lady did not speak English. Instead, the woman left empty packages of what she needed on the counter. Fiona was left to extrapolate.

It's Fiona, she said into her bedside phone. Dad, I'm sick.

Goodness. Do you need a doctor?

I need vacuum cleaner bags. And J cloths.

I can't come over today Fiona. I'm flying to Montreal this afternoon — for the foundation board quarterly. I have yet to read all the proposals.

I'm fine.

I might have another suit made at the shop with the French name near the hotel. You liked what they did the last time, remember?

I'm going to get some sleep.

That sounds a sensible decision.

Fiona hung up pleased. She had called Huntington in the hopes her father might answer. Her father had been the one who had cared for her and Colin when, as children, they'd been ill. Colin had often had an ear infection or tonsillitis; he had pneumonia twice when he was twelve. Through it all, their father had stayed at Colin's bedside. Sick people had repelled her mother. The woman had had no nursing instincts.

Bringing her knees up to her chest, shivering a little, Fiona recalled the way her father would read books to Colin, or play checkers with him, chess if he was up to it. She pictured Colin as a boy: fragile, slight, sickly.

Her mind drifted and she fell away: she is three years old. They are in the kitchen at Huntington — before it was renovated. The stove and refrigerator are the colour of avocado. Light illuminates the window behind her father's head. She has had this dream many times.

You have a baby brother! her father is saying. Here's a photograph. Her dad's voice is soft and nurturing. He'll be home tomorrow. His name is Colin. He's only four days old now.

Daddy?

Yes, Fiona.

I want a baby sister.

I know, sweetheart. But baby brothers are just as fun.

Really?

Really.

They drink a glass of milk together. The thick taste of it is in her mouth. She uses her own big-girl cup. This is where the dream ends. She always wakes with a start, and the images linger. Fiona did not remember Colin coming home from the hospital; she had only her father's words and cold milk. To remember Colin as a baby, her imagination took over, animating a black and white photograph of a newborn's swollen head.

Why had she decided it would be a sister? She had felt pure anger when she learned it would be a brother. She always got what she wanted. You don't understand, she apparently said, I must have a baby sister. Her father and mother told her of this exchange in tender moments over the years. She felt like she remembered it, but couldn't be sure.

Fiona woke completely after an hour of dozing. She took two painkillers. Drank water, greedily. She felt well enough to get dressed. The phone rang.

Where are you? It was Kimberly Payne-White. They'd made a plan at last night's event to meet for lunch at Kimberly's house. Fiona had gone to Lord Simcoe College with Kimberly. She didn't see as much of her anymore, Kimberly having had two children: Derek, or Darren, or something, and the eldest — JP.

Why did she struggle to remember the names of her friends' kids? She managed to commit the first to memory. But then they had more. It was the names of all the ones that came after the first Fiona could never keep straight. And the

obligation to buy presents for them all as they turned one, or two, or five. She seemed perpetually late for a baptism or bris. Fiona wondered, occasionally, if the presents she bought were laughed at behind her back. It was unclear to her what is expected or appropriate. She had always known that *she* would not have children.

Kimberly, oh shit I'm so sorry. I'm really sick.

Fiona, language please! You're on speaker.

Then take me off.

I'm trying to make cookies. I need my hands.

What's the time?

Eleven. You didn't look drunk.

I wasn't drunk. I'm sick. I've got a fever.

Oh, sweetie. You want me to come over? I have Daryl, but I could bring soup?

No. Please don't. I just need more sleep.

She let the phone down slowly until she felt it click into place. Daryl, Daryl, she said over to herself several times. Children. They used to be far off — for all her friends. Then, suddenly — as if it were decided wholesale over some long weekend retreat to which she was not invited — they were all pregnant. One minute they were flying to London for weddings, to Nice for dirty weekends, to New Zealand for wine-tasting and cycling tours, the next poaching nannies from one another. Now when they met they talked about breastfeeding (Might be thrush, is she latching properly?) and C-sections (Mine is almost invisible now — he might have been a bastard, but he does nice work) and reliable nannies (Turns out mine lied — she's Indonesian not Filipino. You think that matters?).

Fiona got back into bed. She lifted up her legs and tried to imagine her stomach the size of something as big as a baby. Now, something as big as a baby was to come out of her. No. She couldn't imagine it at all. Not from her body. Besides, she'd mothered Colin her entire life. She was an adult now

and Colin was off on his own — she did not want another needy child.

Yet she'd felt those womanly urges for children. Kimberly, all of them, they looked wonderful at it. Even when they complained — and they certainly did a lot of that — they did so without real malice. She was missing out, but this stage wouldn't last. Give them all ten years. Things would change. She knew enough about being a woman to see that. Her mother's friends had been bitter and gin-drunk by their late forties. They resented the time their kids had stolen from them, the years they'd given up. Now couple that with the careers that some of her friends had chucked. Shit, Kimberly had an MFA and was a hell of a painter. Shows at galleries in Los Angeles. Now what? Crayons and Plasticine? It was all too much like compromise.

She should get up. Maybe she would go over to Kimberly's house after all. She'd call over to Mao's Zest for takeout. They'd sit out back by Kimberly's pool in the glassed sunroom and drink wine. Could she stomach wine? The first glass might be work. If she showed up with a good bottle, she could usually get Kimberly to have at least one glass. She took another painkiller and decided to make a day of it. Besides, she had to get out of here before that woman showed up and needed the cleaning supplies she'd not yet purchased.

I have a small present for Daryl, she said as Kimberly opened the front door.

Fiona, I thought you were sick.

I was, but I'm feeling better. Here, I don't know what it is. I just said I'm in a hurry so wrap a toy up for me; it'll be a surprise for all of us. I woke up and thought I should salvage the day. So I went shopping. I have lunch for us. She made a pout. Please, she said.

Kimberly gathered up Daryl's toys and laid them on a blanket in the sunroom. Outside the weather was cold. She placed

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