

STRANGER WILL

by

Caleb Ross

"This is an original-unlike anything you've ever read before."
-Rob Roberge, Author of *More Than They Could Chew and Drive*

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A Novel by
**CALEB
ROSS**

Chapters 1 and 2

William Lowson had seen a homeless man once before. This was back in Herman Essex, before moving to Brackenwood, before the pregnancy. Before meeting Julie, even. William figured him to be just a man with different tastes in clothing, a man like F. Lowson, William's father, with his thin shirts and pants painted in oil and puddle water. But for that assumption, William was corrected. "That's not a man," F. Lowson said. "That is a bum."

The bum threw a dime and connected with F. Lowson's neck. He beat the bum, cursed him even as the ambulance drove away, for making his taxes pay this dirty man's impending hospital bill. Tiny William learned that day that some people are fit for fatherhood, and some aren't.

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An army of homeless claim the streets of Brackenwood.

They march in Salvation Army boots to the tune of secret voices, and chew MREs found in trash bins. They beg for change like their lives are judged at the end of bayonet. But all with white teeth. Clean hair, too. The bums of F. Lowson's age barely had teeth or hair at all, and here these people were, like catalog model homeless, not an honest stereotype among them.

William moved his fiancée to Brackenwood just months ago citing its high death rate as promise to a more lucrative life, and with their child on the way it made all the sense they needed. He removes stains for a living, those left by dead bodies; from roads, from homes, from ditches. From schools, from church pews, from benches. Just the dying homeless alone—encouraged by disease, cold winters, and neglect—William thought would be enough to keep his growing family fed. Though food wasn't his initial concern after learning of his expanding family. Instead, he worried about contamination.

The phenyl lacquered into his fingerprint crevasses warps every bite of food into fire. Julie, she makes a strong goulash, but onion and paprika don't match the taste of chemicals used to absolve blood and skin from highways and dashboards. She can ferment a stiff sauerkraut, but even cabbage brine tastes like water when chased with bleach.

He's read every book available at the modest Brackenwood library, searching for a reason to think that this child could survive beyond these chemicals. The olfactory lobes—the scent glands—form as early

as six weeks, he's read. He didn't know this until week ten when Julie finally revealed her pregnancy. By that time he'd already been inadvertently bathing the fetus in fumes he'd neglect washing from his clothes, instead letting them contaminate the air, fall into Julie's mouth, down her throat, and into the amniotic fluid flowing through the fetus's oral and nasal cavities. Biologists used to believe that smell depended on access to air. Now they could blame William should anything happen. They could blame the bodies he cleans from the road as the source of his child's imperfections.

"Stay away," Julie says when William steps into the living room. "Your clothes could change it. They could take years off its life." He smells chili on the stove, seasoned with the Virex TB cleaner wafting from his shirt.

With each chemical breath William dreams the inhaled fumes *were* formaldehyde, solidifying his insides; making him capable of just a few more years, a reason to think he could mutate his genes to give any children a few more days than God could.

He loves the baby already. He's a realist, though. The child, he loves. The idea of a child, he's beginning to understand, is where everything will go wrong.

He sleeps on the living room couch next to the phone. People seem to die a lot in the middle of the night.

William saunters through the mudroom door, the engine of his cleaning van still ticking in the driveway. He flicks the spent cigarette filter deep into the weeds overtaking the house's north wall. Seen through romantic eyes the abode could be a cottage, but William suffers from universal practicality, a detriment he acknowledges, but only in private. It's a home, just a building, a refuge maybe, inside which he sleeps and eats.

The cold living room air around him bends by the fumes from his clothes. He removes his shirt, kicks off his shoes, and pulls wet socks from his feet. He tosses the entire bundle into the corner of the living room just feet from Julie's contorted face. "The bathroom," she says, needing no other direction. William has dropped his chemical soaked clothes on the floor enough times to bypass this daily confrontation, but he remains convinced that, yes, changing the routine this late into their pregnancy might subdue guilt, but only for the passing breath. With resentment, he collects the soaked clothes and carries them to the bathroom, his discontent disturbing his already arrhythmic pulse. *Slow breaths*, he tells himself.

He returns to the living room and drops to the couch. The ancient fumes imbedded within the fabric cool his skin enough to raise goose bumps and a shiver. Julie tosses him an accusatory glance, dismissing his drama. He absorbs the look and returns with a cold stare straight into Julie's womb.

It has no face, no permanent name. No morals, no beliefs. No idea. It exists tucked inside Julie's skin, already a malcontent. *Preconception*, he calls it. The word makes him laugh. Even pre-conception the child has no chance. Julie pulls a red-threaded needle through a white cloth, humming a dirge lullaby.

Seven months and twenty-six days and already Julie has decided against adoption. Though no child at all was William's first choice, adoption would at least pass the burden to a capable couple.

"No eyes?" William says. "Or what if it has extra parts?"

Needle in. Needle out.

"What if it, within the first few weeks, shows interest in pointed objects and knows how kitchen cabinets work?" he asks. "You are a deep sleeper," he reminds her, but she continues to handle her needle and thread with precision.

Julie is proud of her role as the tough Lowson, always has been. Diets don't work for William. Pacing himself with indulgences always ends in a countdown: *two weeks and I can eat a brownie. Three days and I have proven to Julie that I don't need a cigarette.* Once, after an argument over his smoking Julie decided to start only to prove that she could quit. Three years and one ambitious addiction later she stopped mid-cigarette, staring at William for effect as she flattened the butt into an ashtray, knuckles white, her grin stretched. William admires her will power, though he could do without her drive to use it against him.

"What if it's born with seven fingers?" he asks. "Jutting from its face."

"Then we'll love it even more," is always her answer. Spoken in the collective *we*, the way a teacher might speak to first grade students that cannot be trusted with independent rationale.

Julie has settled on keeping this child and nothing William could say would convince her to avoid clothes shops and garage sales. Nothing could close her book of names—Regis for a boy, Sarah for a girl. Once, William asked her about neutral names, hermaphroditic possibilities; her cheeks flexed. William braced himself for contact, hoping for a punch hard enough to provoke legal questions regarding his ability to care for a child. In his head the option gained better traction each day. But, she calmed.

This was after a failed meeting with an adoption agent Julie agreed to only if it would settle William's concerns. He continued, however, using magazine articles, newspaper headlines, tabloid clippings, medical journals, and bar graphs all supporting his theories regarding the eminent turmoil associated with "bringing a child to term in a world like ours."

"We can't do this," he told her. "Someone else can. *We shouldn't* do this."

After seven months and twenty-six days Julie displays her mastery of composure with confidence: "We will."

She was a waitress when they met, well acquainted through Sunday afternoon buffets and Monday night breakfast platters. He would watch her flirt with truckers. He believed she had a plan. She would fill her apron with tips and phone numbers, filtering the latter into a small wastebasket below the cash register. After weeks of fabricated attempts he finally managed eye contact like it was accidental. They pretended brief touching didn't mean anything. They ate meals at rival restaurants. They fell in love. They got pregnant.

"Seven months and twenty-six days," William says to Julie. She sits in their abused family heirloom recliner, cross-stitching, the same as her mother and grandmother did before her. "That's not enough time

to make up your mind about something you've never seen." He grabs a clean shirt from a pile at the foot of the couch.

"It wouldn't make any difference, William." She starts the final stroke of an "M." "It's inside me. We've bonded."

This is an every morning routine. Having quit her job in quality assurance along the factory line of Merling Auto Parts, citing the move to Brackenwood and back problems—the combination of her pregnancy and large frame—Julie sits at home and collects money. Not enough, but William's smoking and her entertainment for the now lax afternoons are covered. They call her disability checks "the vice fund." One of the few inside jokes they still have—the only they share with equal enthusiasm.

"Remember Paul," William says. "He was in me. I thought I liked him."

"Paul was a tapeworm," she says.

"And ugly. But you can't say I'm not better off without him."

"The comparison makes no sense," she says.

"We needed each other, Julie." William pulls on clean pants.

"You didn't need that thing. It was a parasite."

"It used me and I couldn't have imagined life without it."

"Parasite," she reiterates starting the second stroke of an "E." "Your need was a mental thing."

"And the child?" he says.

"What about the child?"

"Just a parasite, Julie," he takes a sip of coffee, cold but he keeps his face straight. "Tapeworms, children, we could all use fewer of them."

"Ungrateful shitheads," she adds.

When Julie first moved in, William's house shifted from *his* heaven to *their* starting off point. Julie would talk about his home as though it existed only as temporary; that them living there was a way to save for something bigger. "A home we could grow into," she had said. Now in Brackenwood they live in a second home, one Julie still refers to as a starter.

It was William who cared enough to fake optimism. It was William who pretended to care about the color of the nursery, who smiled when Julie smiled as her stomach grew through t-shirts and

waistbands. And it was William who cared enough to reveal his cynicism, to admit that a child doesn't deserve what little they can give it. Julie didn't care.

Seven years and coffee still comes cold because a new coffee pot is not in their budget.

Julie finishes the "E," snips the string and ties it with a knot nurtured by these months of dedication. She turns her work out and smiles. *Bless This Home* it says bordered with a floral pattern and what William thinks might be bunnies playing leap-frog, but he isn't sure enough to comment.

"It's time we call this place a home," she says and already William conceives of places to hide the piece once he takes it down from the wall. The sentiment, however, he agrees with.

He agrees that a blessing is a fair request considering the hostile nature of a life—where birth and death are the only guarantees. Faith embodies a certain level of helplessness and what if not helpless is he? He accepts that a blessing might be appropriate—he's extinguished every other possibility for Julie's conversion. She is a mother already, happily stitching plans into white fabric so that they can be hung, adored, and regarded as the end result of love.

Though William acknowledges the desire for a blessing, he knows the impossibility of one. He sees it every day, working the attempts free from the streets with scrub brushes and tired muscles. He cleans the dead from the world and what's one more child? Just another body that someone will one day have to clean from the road.

William lights a cigarette in the living room. "It's not going on the wall," he says and leaves before yelling starts, slamming the door behind him. Engine heat still cracks and wheezes from his van. He climbs in and tries to clean his mind of the child.