



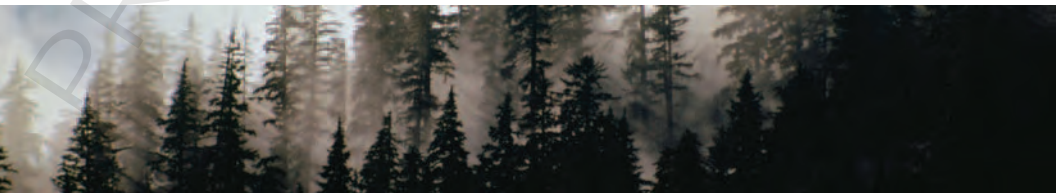
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# Thomas Trofimuk

DOUBTING YOURSELF TO THE BONE

A Novel

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Thomas Trofimuk

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*Cormorant Books*

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*for my lovely girls — CL (my first reader)  
and Mackenzie (my first daughter)  
for Leah, closest friend, who pointed me  
in the direction of the title*

*and*

*for WTT senior, my dad, who truly loves the game of hockey*

*one hundred fifty-eighth day:*

*the creek is clear and cold  
laughing her wet face all along the stones  
I stop and plunge my aching wrist  
pray that the medicine therein bless the pain  
wash me and mine*

*at first I thought it was because I would not let go  
then know, no  
it is after the weight lifts  
that we feel her heaviness  
the absence of weight can be disconcerting  
all this is the letting go*

— PAULETTE DUBÉ



## I

# LEAVES

**R**ONIN JAMES BRUCE looks at his wife, who ardently believes in the activity of raking leaves. A woman who loves to tell stories. A woman who is barely holding onto a secret.

“I’m not trying to be argumentative.”

“Yes, you are,” Moira says.

“Well, help me to understand this obsession you’ve acquired for leaves,” Ronin says. “No one ever rakes up leaves in a forest, and all over the world they seem to survive.”

“This isn’t a forest. This is the city. People rake up their leaves in the fall. They pick them up. It’s what’s done. It’s what we’re going to do. And I’m not obsessed.”

Ronin and Moira are standing on the front porch of their house, at 47 Larch Way, in Edmonton, looking out at their narrow yard covered with leaves. A heavy, wet snow had come at just the right time. The leaves fell straight down — no fluttering to the ground

for this crop. There were few survivors. The street and yard are thick with the remains of summer, and these leaves are frozen into place. A cold front had dropped down from the Arctic following the snowfall, and anything that might have been wet snow was frozen solid.

“I really think it can wait until spring,” Ronin says. “The world will not end if these leaves spend the winter. Besides, how are you going to rake with everything frozen?”

“It’s supposed to warm up on the weekend. That’s when we’ll do it.”

“Did you say *we*?”

Moira almost smiles and sits on the front step. Ronin sits beside her and can feel it coming — one of Moira’s stories.

“Imagine this,” she says. “What if there were these two people who loved each other a great deal and fall was their favourite time of year. Each fall they rejoiced in the cool weather that flowed into the city from the underbelly of the mountains. The clouds hung above the city like dusty grey blankets and the temperatures hovered around zero. They would revisit favourite sweaters and leather gloves, corduroy trousers and sturdy boots. For them, there was a melancholy inside this season that was not connected to any life experience. Perhaps melancholy isn’t the right word. They didn’t feel sad exactly, more like a crystallized understanding of the movements of life.”

“I can see where you’re going with this.”

“No you can’t,” Moira says. “Wait. Listen. It was their favourite time of year. And leaves! How they loved to rake the leaves.”

“I’m actually smelling leaves right now. Rotting leaves. Fertilizer and a big pile of ...”

“... wit is just educated insolence. Let me finish. They would take turns. While one raked, the other followed and read from collections of poetry. They would read their favourite poets and new ones as well. One year they memorized ‘The Love Song of

J. Alfred Prufrock.' Can't you see them? He's raking and she's reading 'Prufrock' ..."

"Please don't recite the entire poem, I like this poem, I'd need to have a decent drink in my hand. And really, isn't this scene just a bit precious? Poetry while raking leaves?" Ronin looks at her. She's a gorgeous mountain woman. Big old woollen socks, bought by the dozen at the Army and Navy are bunched and fallen at her ankles. Pale-green long johns and an oversized fleecy. Her eyes are a ferocious hazel colour. She's pushed her glasses up into her hairline, something she does when she's arguing because she thinks it makes her look more serious.

"But isn't it a beautiful fall poem?" Moira pushes her hands deep into the pockets of her fleecy.

Ronin moves his leg against hers. It's a good yard. There are tall, arching elms on the boulevard. Two maples in the centre and lots of flower beds around those trees. It's an older neighbourhood in transition. Young families are moving in as the older folks move away. More and more kids show up on Halloween each year. The Halloween barometer, Ronin calls it. There's a new silver Volvo S80 out in front of the house. It reminds him of a dinky toy he had as a kid. He's not certain when Volvo made the switch, but in his mind the company used to have a very distinct, classic design. A box on wheels that would run until the floor rusted out; cars that seemed to go on forever. Now, Volvos look like any one of a dozen Japanese imports. They don't look like ugly shoeboxes anymore and seem less reliable. Moira can bring home cars whenever she wants. She sells them for a living; Volvos and Jaguars. She's very good at what she does. Moira has an education degree — a master's. She started off in philosophy and floundered into an education career in her second year. She could teach if she wanted, but for now she makes more money and works far less than any teacher Ronin knows. Although selling cars is probably a lot less rewarding than teaching, it seems to be working for her.

He drives a '76 Plymouth Fury, a rust experiment with a rebuilt engine, a new transmission and a very fine stereo. There are rips in the seats and it's been in two accidents in exactly the same intersection and with drivers who inexplicitly went through red lights. He now avoids that intersection. It's tried to kill him twice — no use tempting the fates. But the car is heavy and, with the proper tires, it does all right in snow.

Ronin stands up. "I'm going to bring out the flask."

"Why not the bottle and a couple of the good glasses?"

Moira means the set of four glasses he'd picked up at a discount store for ten bucks. They felt right in the hand; someone took care to design them with that in mind. Narrow and square on the bottom, they flared out at the top. You could really get your nose in there and take in the aromas of the whisky.

He pulls on a thick cotton camp coat before he comes back out. He places the bottle and the glasses on the top step. "I've been thinking about 'Prufrock.' Wouldn't you say it's closer to a winter poem? I mean the guy's contemplating growing old and dying."

"It's a perfect *late* fall poem! You're really starting to bug me. Anyway, these two people would drink wine from huge, fish-bowl glasses and play music as they raked. Mozart and Schubert. Once, they played Mozart's *Requiem* really loud and scared the crap out of the neighbours."

"They had lots of leaves?"

"They had lots of trees."

"I think your story needs some conflict, or tragedy, and soon, or you'll lose your listener."

"Oh, there's a tragedy all right. A chunk of ice falls off an airplane at 32,000 feet and it comes down onto their front step and kills the guy instantly." She giggles like a kid.

"Very funny. Do these people have names?"

"Of course they have names." She cups the drink in both hands

and sniffs at the whisky. “Moses. Moses and Katya. He’s a writer, and she’s a lawyer.”

“A Biblical hero — an Old Testament prophet — something charmingly Russian. And the hunk of ice from the airplane?”

“It kills their cat.”

“Moses lives then?”

“Yes. The cat dies.”

“That’s sad, but not really tragic.”

“It was old.”

“What’s old for a cat?”

“Twenty-five years. Let me finish. This one fall, they’re in their bliss. Katya is raking leaves and Moses is reading some Hemingway short story ...”

“Which one?”

“The Big Two-Hearted River.”

“Part one or two?”

“Both parts. So, the sky is heavy and dull and the uncaring flatness of its steely grey colour stretches from horizon to horizon. It’s threatening to snow. They’re playing Mozart’s *Requiem* and when Moses suggests a glass of red wine, Katya says no. Moses is surprised. Katya loves her wine and this is a particularly nice pinot. He asks if she’s feeling all right. She says she’s fine ... it’s just that she’s pregnant.”



“ARE YOU TRYING to tell me ...?” Ronin looks at Moira and then at the glass cupped in her hands. She hasn’t touched a drop.

She points at him. “Daddy,” she says, then she places a hand on her chest. “Mommy.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Six-and-a-half months, roughly.”

“Oh my God, we did it! We made life! New life! Why are you standing? Shouldn’t you be sitting? Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I’m pregnant, not sick.”

“But shouldn’t you —”

“Just come over here and kiss me.”

“What about the leaves?”

“A clever ruse.”

He is beyond himself with joy. This is unexpected and expected at the same time. He’d been tricking himself by thinking the chances of it happening were faint and it wasn’t a big deal if it didn’t happen. But it has happened and he’s crazy with happiness.

Later, after making love very gently with Moira, he snuggles in behind her. She is asleep — her breathing is luxurious and long. A car door slams down the block. It’s raining. It’s very dark in the room. Ronin is not ready for sleep. He listens to the rain, watches the faint patterns of light and shadow on the ceiling. He begins to worry.



LAURA MARIE IS BORN inside a snowstorm just after midnight on April 15th. Moira insists on a natural birth. “I want to experience it to the fullest. You’ll be with me and we’ll do the breathing exercises. We’ll be okay without freezing the bottom half of my body. I want to feel this — all of it.”

Ronin loves her for this, loves her determination and zeal for life, but he asks the question anyway: “And if something unexpected happens?”

“That’s why we’ll be in a hospital.”

A nurse makes the assumption that Moira is going for the epidural needle. She starts to explain how the needle works and how pleasant it will be to go through labour numb from the waist down. *No pain*, she says. *You won’t feel a thing*. According to her,

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the vast majority of women in this particular hospital go for the epidural these days. It doesn't go well for the nurse. It's unlikely she will make that assumption again.

Ronin does not remember anything distinct about the snow, does not recall the passing of time. It had been like walking along a river, with big elms and poplars stretching peacefully while the snow scattered itself into the river and was swallowed up. The snow clung to the extended branches. Footprints were almost immediately covered over. A muffled silence. Then his daughter is crying. Moira is crying and shaking. And Ronin is there inside this dream, not thinking, only feeling. Happy and grateful and humbled. All of life contained in this single moment. Snow falls steadily past the window of the hospital room. It snows all night and well into the next day. He begins to consider this falling, frozen innocence as a substantial blessing. This daughter is a careful poem written in shadows on a white wall, early in the morning. Each breath is a stanza. He is in love. New feelings rise up, constantly surprising him. There is a growing sense of protectiveness toward creatures and things that are innocent. He walks around in a state of stunned awe. "How was it, how are you?" people ask, and he says stupid things like "great" or "I'm great" — when what he really means cannot be spoken. Only inside a deliberate silence could he come close to saying the awe-excitement-fear-exhilaration he feels.



THIS IS A DISTILLED JOY. Because there was a time before Ronin and Moira were married when she thought she might be pregnant. Their relationship was in the soupy, before-the-fridge Jell-O stage. Even then, through all the fear and apprehension, through the anxiety and shock, Ronin was thrilled. There was a little man, at the bottom of his being, who was jumping up and down, shouting *Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!* But he could barely hear him through all the fear. At the time, Ronin was not certain he had any fatherhood skills.

Why would he make a good father? He knew nothing about being a parent. Nothing! But who does know this stuff ahead of time?

“Are you sure?” he says from the other side of the initial shock wave. This is an utterly banal and ridiculous cliché. But sometimes clichés are brutally appropriate.

“Well, no, but I’m late.”

“So this is a maybe.”

“Take a breath. I’m just telling you there’s a possibility and we should talk about it.”

“Talk about it.”

“Will you please start breathing? You can’t talk if you don’t breathe. I need you to talk with me about this.”

“Yes, yes ... I’m breathing. But Jesus, Moira, are we through being kids? Are we ready to be parents? Am I?”

“Well, that’s honest.”

“I can’t pretend that this doesn’t scare the crap out of me.”

“That’s honest too.”

He remembers calming down after a few days. It had started to seem less frightening and more interesting. Less disastrously life altering and more just life altering.

But Moira wasn’t pregnant. One consequence of that earlier brush up against parenthood was a profound dialogue that hadn’t been there before. Suddenly, there was freedom and vocabulary to talk about a bigger piece of life.



SARAH JANE ARRIVES, on October 1st, a year and half after Marie’s birth. She’s born three weeks early, on a warm fall day with only sporadic swatches of golden colour showing in the trees on the way to the hospital. There are trees in this city that, with the first hint of frost, seem to turn yellow overnight, and are on the ground a few days later. Others hang on for dear life. Ronin was thinking that, with one birth under his belt, the second would have less of

an impact — that he'd not be as moved. It would somehow be diminished. But it didn't work like that. It was different and just as significant. He decides birth is too massive to be shrugged off as something one gets used to, or something that becomes more common with each repetition.

There is a particularly crisp, verging-on-winter feel to the air as he and Moira walk up the steps to the hospital. Laura Marie is staying with Moira's mother. Moira and Ronin were talking about something stupid. About the movie they'd had to come to the hospital. They'd been speculating on the ending, something about a gangster who'd lost his nerve and wanted out. Ronin had been timing contractions and felt very confident that there was lots of time. "We could probably have stayed at home for another cup of tea," he says.

Moira stops halfway up the stairs. "The baby, is coming, now," she says inside an inhalation. He picks her up in his arms, races up the stairs and bursts through the doors.

"Baby now!" he barks. "Baby! Now!" That's enough for three nurses to move into action. They get Moira into a wheelchair and Ronin runs along behind it into a birthing room; twenty minutes later Sarah Jane is in the world. By the time things settle down it's well after midnight.

At 2:00 a.m. Ronin is walking along the corridors of a sleepy hospital with his new daughter in his arms, introducing her to anyone he can find who is awake. He's in a blissful trance and willing to go with it for as long as it lasts. He's chewing a Cuban cigar — savouring the taste.

Moira is not in this bliss with him. She's tired. She watches with weary eyes, almost sadly, as Ronin cannot help his own joy. Giving birth is hard work. Even when it's short work. And there was no time for Ronin to be supportive. He was not able to help with the counting and breathing. There was no counting. This birth was not a long ordeal. Sarah Jane was in a hurry to enter the world. She

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couldn't wait for her parents to do the breathing exercises and resting and maybe moving into the shower, which is where Moira went through much of her labour with Marie.