

SUPERMARKET BABY



WINNER OF THE
2019 PERCY JANES
FIRST NOVEL AWARD

SUSAN FLANAGAN

“It was just a run-of-the-mill, garden-variety trip to the supermarket. But everything changes when middle-aged, luck-starved Henry Puddester finds a baby in his shopping cart. Naturally, he panics and bolts, preferring the fire to the frying pan and an odyssey strewn with wild scenes and wacky characters. Award-winning writer and masterful storyteller Susan Flanagan has penned a memorable tale filled with humour and heart.”

TERRY FALLIS, TWO-TIME WINNER OF
THE STEPHEN LEACOCK MEDAL FOR HUMOUR

“*Supermarket Baby* has excellent comic timing. I wonder if the author has worked in sketch comedy. Excellent grasp of narrative structure and how to keep a story moving along. . . . I often hooted with laughter while reading.”

ADJUDICATION NOTES FOR
THE 2019 PERCY JANES AWARD

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SUPERMARKET **SUSAN** **FLANAGAN** **BABY**

a novel

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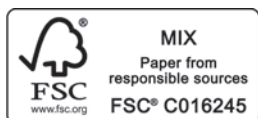
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For Terry Kelly, who believed in me before I believed in myself

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Henry Puddester Goes to City Hall for the Last Time

Henry Puddester turned heads. Had been doing so since the moment he slid out of his mother's womb. All present in the case room were goggle-eyed. "Have you ever seen such a perfect baby?" they asked one another. They all agreed they hadn't and warned the Puddesters that their son would grow up to be a "real looker."

By the time Henry began studying business marketing at Memorial University, students and profs alike could be seen appraising his looks. His perfect features, perfectly arrayed across his perfectly shaped face, sat on a well-seeded head atop a lean torso, forever trim. Women coveted his thick dark lashes and olive skin, and men felt inferior in his presence.

Henry himself, however, was oblivious to the power of his looks. He failed to notice the steady stream of girls who, between classes, slowed to a canter in the crushing throngs that scuttled their way through the tunnel system below the university buildings. It was in this underground maze that relationships were cemented, notes slipped into air vents, kisses stolen by locker doors, dates made in the ten minutes of freedom between classes.

"Isn't he to die for?" one girl asked.

"Yes, but I heard he's taken."

"Who's the lucky girl?"

The lucky girl, it turned out, was Millicent Pearlstein, a dark-haired firecracker of a woman who took one look into Henry's ocean eyes after he mistakenly trod on her foot outside the remains of the burning Thomson

Student Centre and fell under their spell. It was a crisp day in late September 1979. Maple leaves, not yet transformed into the gold and red hues of autumn, danced in the light breeze. Henry Puddester had been on campus for three weeks and was chuffed that he had successfully managed to find his way from class to his locker and then the Thomson Student Centre, where he located the microwave and placed his burrito on the thick glass plate, shut the door, and watched for a second as the flour tortilla rotated inside.

Spying a piano, Henry left the burrito for a moment and sat on a dented stool to pluck out Billy Joel's *Piano Man*. Just as he finished the last chords, water began spraying down on his head, as well as the heads of hundreds of his fellow students, who were now stampeding toward the exit. Henry paused to find the source of the acrid smoke that had begun stinging his eyes and noticed flames leaping out of the microwave and onto countertops and floors.

Henry joined the throng of students pushing through the doors into the quadrangle just as the first fire trucks arrived, and men in bunker gear ran into the burning building.

Outside, Henry stood transfixed with the crowd as the flames spread throughout the entire structure, licking the siding and nearby bushes. A fireman urged them back, roping off the perimeter as firefighters smashed windows and uncoiled thick grey hoses from the backs of trucks. A team mounted a ladder with an axe to cut a hole in the roof.

It was when a huge man in a haz-mat suit pushed by Henry that he took a step back, crushing the dainty feet of a female student standing directly behind him.

"Sorry, so sorry." Henry's heart raced like it did every time he came in contact with an attractive girl.

"It's okay," she answered. "I can always walk on my hands." Her eyes twinkled, and Henry saw that she was sexy in black tights and a short skirt, a cotton T-shirt with David Bowie's Aladdin Sane face stretched across her chest.

"What was that guy holding in his hand?" she asked.

"Geiger counter," said Henry, swallowing. "For measuring radiation."

"Radiation? You mean from the microwave?"

"I guess." Henry felt his stomach knot. *How did she know about the microwave?*

"Should we be moving farther away?" She blinked up at him, her dark hair falling over one eye.

"No, there's not enough radiation to harm us out here."

"Are you sure?"

Henry smiled. "I'm sure. You'd have to be mighty close to a microwave for it to cause damage."

The girl smiled and put a hand on Henry's arm, sending short electrical shocks to his heart and causing the hair to stand up, not only on his arm but all over his body.

"Can you believe some idiot put his burrito in for twenty minutes?" She removed her hand.

Henry shook his head, the electrical currents dimming and the hair flattening just as the last timbers collapsed and the building fell in on itself. A collective gasp rose from the crowd, and police began ushering the students away from the quadrangle.

"Come on, I'll walk you to your locker," she said, taking his hand and pulling him toward the tunnels.

Millicent—Millie Pearlstein—should not have been in the cafeteria at that time. She should have been in class discussing propositional probability and logic, but philosophy had been cancelled. Millie's analytical mind concluded that the odds of her meeting up with this impossibly attractive man were one in a billion, or maybe one in a trillion. Who knew? It surely had to be a sign that she and Henry were a perfect match. Perfectly compatible.

After the day the Thomson Student Centre burned to the ground, it seemed every time Henry went to his locker, there was Millie Pearlstein, fresh and lovely and sweet-smelling. His heart turned somersaults each time he laid eyes on her. She was so . . . clean. People would think this weird if Henry ever said it out loud, but he valued hygiene. There was a girl in his stats class who paid a lot of attention to him. She expressed intelligent views and had a wicked body and an amazing smile, but she dressed like a punk and her hair resembled a wasp nest. She once asked Henry to go to the Breeze-way for a beer, but he declined. Millie Pearlstein, however, was unsoiled.

Their first official date was the Friday before Halloween, when she asked him to accompany her to a Doug and the Slugs concert, which had to be moved to downtown, seeing as the Thomson Student Centre no longer existed. For the rest of their years at Memorial University, the pair were inseparable.

Even years later, when Millie went off to law school in Nova Scotia and Henry stayed in St. John's to do his MBA and start a job at City Hall, he remained smitten. Despite the fact he knew she was dating other men while she was away, he stayed faithful to her.

And Millie, realizing that Henry was her true soulmate—he "completed" her, she said—always made her way back to him.

Henry couldn't quite figure out why she chose him. What Henry didn't realize was that for his entire life, he enjoyed the privilege of the intolerably attractive. What he hadn't grasped was that Millie overlooked his ineptitude and, despite her insight, could not see beyond his steely blue eyes, aquiline nose, and six-pack abs. What she saw was a perfect physical specimen and, she imagined, a perfect personality to match.

Now here they were, several decades later, she a criminal defence lawyer and Henry a househusband. Following thirty-five years of exemplary service, Henry Puddester had just given up his Director of Marketing position for the City of St. John's to be home after school for their ten-year-old son.

How this happened had blindsided Henry. Dash's after-school program announced in January that they'd be closing their doors the first week of April. There were no other facilities taking kids within a fifty-mile radius. Henry's mother had agreed to move in to be there for Dash after school, and Henry and Millie tacked an extra line of credit on their mortgage to rip out a section of their yard and build on a granny flat. Things went sideways after that. Just before she moved in, Granny was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and five weeks later she was dead.

Thinking there would be some equity in his mother's house, Henry gave up his job to let a young hire get his foot in the door and began performing his obligations of stay-at-home dad and executor of his mother's estate, only to find out, too late, that instead of being worth money, his mother's estate, and thus Henry, was on the hook for twenty years of back taxes, thrusting the couple into dire financial straits, their only real asset a brand new vacant mother-in-law suite that they would, no doubt, end up having to rent.

So, it was on a soulless spring day that Henry Puddester trudged up the steps to City Hall for what he knew would be the final time. The sun over Newfoundland had gone into hiding sometime in January and had not poked its face out since. Instead, a slate-grey sky had taken up permanent occupancy, tainting all enjoyment of life on the Avalon.

The northeasterly wind whipped off the water and cut through Henry's peacoat, and he struggled against its brute force to open the heavy glass door of City Hall. Henry didn't want to pick up his record of employment. He wished he could wind back the clock and still be employed.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the double panes. What he saw did not please him—a dishevelled version of what Millie kindly called his aging matinee-idol looks. She was forever telling him how handsome he was, but the face he saw this morning was weary, more chiselled old man than

movie star. His nose was chilblained and his cheeks flushed. It was the grey hair that peeked out from under his Boston toque that never failed to shock him. Ever since the day Millie's new receptionist referred to him as the silver-haired gentleman, he had developed a complex. He ducked inside, pulled off his hat, wiped the rain off his horn-rimmed glasses, and did his best to sneak past the commissionaire, who was hammering away on his keyboard, index fingers pecking like two hens.

Don't look up. Don't look up, thought Henry.

"Henry Puddester, what're you doing here?" Wiener, who got his name after swallowing a dozen hot dogs at the staff barbecue, came out of the glass-encased booth and took in the windblown shape of his former colleague. "Man, you look like hell."

Henry blew out his breath, turned around, and smiled, showing all his teeth. "It's a bit blustery."

"I'll say. Wind's strong enough to blow Jesus Himself off the Cross." Wiener clapped Henry on the arm. "I can't believe you retired. One day you're there like always, slathering on that hand sanitizer, and next day I send old man Bates up to see you, and he comes back and says you're gone." Wiener paused to take a breath.

Henry eyed the concrete stairs and fingered the portable Purell in his pocket. He would wait until he was out of Wiener's sight to apply it, although thoughts of the germs on the front door made his skin crawl.

"How many years you have in? Gotta be over thirty."

"Two weeks off thirty-five."

"That's more years than I been on this earth. Good on ya, I say. You need to kick back, take life as it comes, know what I mean?" Wiener placed his crossed hands behind his head and stretched his arms as if he were sitting back in a chair, except he was standing up. "Mayor Jones always said you were too high-strung."

Henry gave a faint nod. Apparently, the mayor wasn't the only one who had this opinion. Millie was always telling him to relax, to be happy with what he had.

"Thought you'd be hitting the greens in Florida with the boys from Marketing." The phone rang in Wiener's glass booth. He raised his hand to Henry and made his way back inside.

No golf for Henry this spring, but he did hope to sneak away for a motorcycle trip . . . the Spring Tune-Up Ride from Montreal to St. John's to honour his deceased mother. He had yet to convince his wife of the merits of this idea. She argued that he could honour his mother in other ways that cost less money and were closer to home. As he made his way up the con-

crete stairs, her attorney voice entered his head. “Henry, we don’t have two beans to rub together. Plus, you retired to take care of Dash, and you can’t do that very well if you’re on some highway between here and Quebec.” She’d kissed him then and patted the top of his silver head.

Henry had long accepted the fact that he would never win an argument with his wife. So, while he adjusted to his new position of househusband, Millie continued to lead strategic planning sessions with her legal team and host power lunches for the jet-setters she worked with down at the Supreme Court of Newfoundland.

Henry waited until he was outside the opaque doors of Marketing and Communications before he pulled out the Purell. He inhaled as he rubbed in the alcohol-based sanitizer and then swallowed before going in. He liked his old co-workers—he just didn’t want to see any of them. Luckily for him, what Wiener said was true, and the majority of them were now on the Boca Raton golf green while Henry was stuck in St. John’s, enduring the most appalling spring on record. Make no wonder he had this vicious head cold.

Henry didn’t really want to be golfing, though. All he wanted was to be out in his shed with his 1970 Triumph Bonneville, preparing for the Spring Tune-Up, rather than preparing after-school snacks for Dash.

Henry knew he shouldn’t complain—he had hours to tinker with his bike while Dash was at school. And Dash was a good kid—a bit too addicted to video games, but all told, he was a fine example of what today’s youth had to offer. Henry wouldn’t trade him for anything.

It was just that Henry was too old to be a father to a ten-year-old. He didn’t have the energy exhibited by the young parents. He didn’t have the mental stamina to keep up with the new trends. In fact, Henry Puddester didn’t have a clue about parenting.

2

Thursday: Two Weeks Later

Henry Puddester blinked at the baby carrier in the grocery cart and wondered how it got there.

He couldn’t piece it together. Why would someone put an infant carrier in his shopping cart?

It *was* his cart. The lemon yogourt was there.

Henry's guts churned audibly. He liked children, but babies and baby-related things always gave Henry a sense of unease. He hadn't even trusted himself to pick up Dash until he was more than a year old.

Henry had felt woozy all morning, but not to the point of hallucinating a floral-patterned infant car seat. He gave the cloth a poke. It was real. But maybe it was empty. Maybe Sundries now sold baby carriers.

He studied his cart to see if anything else had changed.

What was this?

Instead of his hand-chosen pears, there was now a case of puréed baby food. Henry bent down to bring his bread up from the shelf underneath. "What the hey?" His Paradise Bakery loaves were MIA. Instead, there was a case of baby wipes and diapers. This was not good.

Henry came up quickly, and dizziness enveloped him. Good thing Millie said she'd get Dash off to school this morning. He held onto the handle of the shopping cart and took three deep breaths. In and out. In and out. In and out. He wanted to bolt. But at that moment, the carrier emitted a gurgle. He was afraid to look inside.

What on earth was going on?

Could a sleep-deprived mother have mistaken his cart for hers?

Or maybe someone had dumped the baby in his cart. Millie had been talking about an amber alert yesterday. What had she said? Henry wished he could remember. She was always telling him his mind was like a sieve, but this morning it had reached new proportions. Think, Henry, think. Something about an estranged father taking an infant while the mother slept. Police had advised the public to be on the lookout but not to approach the man. He was considered dangerous.

Henry gulped. In front of him, in line, an oversized man in a fedora loaded cases of soft drinks onto the conveyor.

Could it be him? He did not look menacing enough to have stolen an infant. Plus, if he were the one, what would he be doing looking casual at the checkout? Unless he was the type who liked to linger at crime scenes to see how things played out. Henry had seen a movie about that once.

Henry scanned his environs. A lean man with a flat cap, like the ones British cabbies wore, crouched in front of the magazines. Near him was a short, stout man who could lose a hundred pounds. A posse of come from aways was moving up front. But still no one who fit the bill of space cadet mother or dangerous offender.

Henry moved his tongue over his top teeth. It felt like sandpaper. Why was he so thirsty all of a sudden? He licked his lips and rewound his

mind, back through the aisles of the supermarket. For some reason, it was like his brain synapses were not firing. Fleeting images flashed across his prefrontal cortex, like a commercial, the pictures too quick to properly focus on any one thing. A teenager with pink hair talking into her phone when he was in the back of the store searching for the eggs, but she, too, did not fit the picture of a human who had misplaced another human. Akela, the scout leader, in a long red coat with a logo on the chest, a coat that cost more than a month's worth of groceries. Frank's daughter had one like that.

Maybe this was an unsolvable mystery. He would just take his groceries and then ditch the cart and carrier at the door. But he couldn't do that. What about the baby? He had to save it in case the dangerous estranged father changed his mind and came back. Henry knew what to do. He would bring the baby to Millie. She was good with babies. She would make sure it was safe until it was reunited with its mother.

Henry bent again so he could peep under the cloth. An oval flap was Velcroed to the canopy, preventing a view of the contents. The flap was made of the same sunflower-patterned material as the rest of the tented area. He was familiar with this configuration from when Dash was born. Henry gently pulled back the Velcro to allow a sightline into the carrier. A whiff of baby powder escaped the cloth walls. The infant inside—a girl, judging from the pink hat and blanket that enveloped it—opened its oversized eyes and started to quiver. Next thing it was whimpering. Henry could tell from past experience that this was the buildup to a full-fledged cry. He had to act fast, survey the scene. Rubber pacifier was attached to the baby blanket by a tether. Henry grabbed hand sanitizer from his pocket, doused both hands, and quickly plugged the dummy into the baby's mouth. The baby looked worried but did what babies are programmed to do—it started sucking.

A fine sweat had broken out all over Henry's body. He felt like he was having one of Millie's hot flashes. Henry wiped his forehead with his sleeve and glanced at the man ahead. He was sliding his bank card out of the machine and packing his cases of drinks into his cart.

The cashier made eye contact, raising her left eyebrow at Henry. A silver ring pierced the middle part of her nose. She looked like a bull. "Sir, you can start loading your groceries on the belt."

Henry felt the presence of another cart pull up behind his. He was trapped. He had to get out of there.

3

Henry Goes Shopping, One Hour Earlier

Henry reluctantly left the half-polished Triumph in the shed and ran through the downpour to the driveway. He felt a bit woozy. He had taken a pill for his cold, something he rarely did because of the intense effect all medicine had on him. But still, he didn't usually react so strongly to cold and sinus meds. His heart was going two-forty, and his mind felt like it was battling its way out of deep fog. He wondered if he should even be driving.

Not only that, but his sinuses didn't seem any better. What was up with that? Usually the antihistamine medicine kicked in right away. Henry had to get out of this freezing wet weather. Under normal circumstances, he would have gone to Florida golfing with the boys. But these were not normal times. Don't think about it, he lectured himself. Instead, he thought about what he had done late last night. He had secretly booked a spot on the May 24 Spring Tune-Up road trip—the trip that his wife said that they couldn't afford. “Buttons or beach rocks?” were her exact words. Strange expression, but it was what Millie always said when they discussed large purchases.

Money was a minor detail to Henry, despite the fact he had none to pay the registration or the plane ticket to get to Montreal, where, come May 24 weekend, his shipped motorbike would be waiting for him. Ah, what a joy it would be to get clear of this foul weather and hit the pavement, feel the sun on his face, the wind in his hair.

He could certainly feel wind when he got out of the warm interior of the Ford Escape. In the supermarket parking lot, freezing rain catapulted sideways into his body, driven by savage earache-inducing gusts. These not-so-gentle breezes that April had been delivering with great glee were the reason Henry's nasal passages felt like they were going to explode. He shivered and pulled down his Boston Bruins toque, the black and gold stripes covering his ears.

A thin sheen of ice covered the parking lot as he scurried toward the cart corral, last fall's leaves whapping him in the face. Henry slowed his breathing and went over his game plan. He did this before entering any store so as not to waste time or come out with unnecessary purchases. His

mind felt a bit like it was underwater, but he persisted. He was here at Sundries to pick up four dozen eggs for Dash's Cub Camp.

But, like every grocery shopping excursion since the dawn of supermarkets, getting in and out with just one foodstuff was virtually impossible. Henry's loving wife, Millie, had provided him with a list. "Just a coupla things," she said. Henry had rewritten Millie's haphazard version. The lined yellow paper in his pocket now neatly listed the products geographically, according to their location in the store. Therefore, Henry wouldn't have to backtrack.

So it was that Henry Puddester, wearing his leather driving gloves and favourite Boston toque, and feeling a bit lightheaded, jogged his way over to Sundries' automatic doors, with no inkling that this trip would change his life in unimaginable ways.

At least it was warm inside, recycled oxygen churning through the air exchange system. He placed his gloves in his yellow and black hat and dropped them in the little section of the cart where Dash used to sit when he was still a tiny human. Henry glanced at his silver wristwatch, a gift from the Marketing Department when he retired from City Hall. Seven thirty-five. Not bad. This time of day, there shouldn't be too many grocery shoppers. He would have plenty of time to make it to his 9:00 a.m. hair appointment at Fogtown Barber. He hoped Big Ernie—he was really big, with multiple tattoos on his tree-trunk arms—wouldn't notice his red, runny nose and send him packing.

Henry wrangled a Smart Car—sized cart from the indoor corral, pulled a wet wipe out of the dispenser, and wiped down the handle. You never knew who had touched the thing.

He went to move inside, but an old woman, four foot two with bluish hair, had come to a dead stop in the middle of the entranceway, causing the automatic doors to open and close, sending gusts of North Atlantic air in and out, negating the effects of the heating system. Henry opened his mouth to tell her to get a move on but then thought of his own mother and clamped his lips shut. She moved a few feet forward, took a piece of paper from her handbag, and stopped again.

Sweet Moses. The only way around her was to go through the flowers. Henry rolled between two banks of roses. He hated roses. They reminded him of his mother's funeral, and despite the fact that his nose was blocked, he could still smell them. Henry tried to squeeze the cart down the aisle but banged into a display of orchids. Two toppled to the floor, their delicate petals fanning out around fragile cracked stems.

"Jesus Murphy." Henry's words came out louder than he expected. Luckily for him, the old woman was hard of hearing and carried on her

way, but other shoppers' heads turned among the perennials—a real estate agent Henry recognized from signs gave Henry a forced smile, her too-bright lipstick smearing her top teeth like a carnivore, and on her far side, Millie's yoga teacher, "Spring," and her daughter, "Tree," pretended not to recognize him. "The sixties are over, people." Shoot, did Henry just say that out loud? He really wasn't himself this morning.

Henry rolled his cart over the ruined orchids to produce, where he rifled through Cortland apples that had just been sprayed with great dollops of water. Henry was so thirsty, he felt like biting into one right there and then, but he could never eat any produce before washing it thoroughly first.

Pears were next. Henry selected six green Anjou, organized them next to the apples, and pushed his cart over to the wall of bread. He liked to look at the bread wall undisturbed, so he waited until a teenaged boy with three eyebrow piercings tossed four bags of hamburger buns into a basket. Once alone, Henry moved into position to perform the spring-back tests on several loaves from Paradise Bakery. He compressed the whole wheat slices and watched as they ever so slowly sprang back at him. He knew they delivered fresh to Sundries on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but you could never be too careful. The spring-back test was necessary before committing. Dash never tired of butter sandwiches for lunch, so Henry loaded the three loaves that had performed best onto the bottom shelf of the cart. Pleased with their arrangement, he headed west for lettuce.

Even though the E. coli outbreak was over, Henry hadn't bought lettuce in weeks. But yesterday Millie said she wanted salad and added romaine to the list. Henry expressed reservation. "Henry, I checked online. The scare is over." Henry had called the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to be certain. The nice woman assured him that Canadian supermarkets were only sourcing lettuce from unaffected countries, not those ones where farmers irrigated their crops with cow excrement.

So, today he decided to risk it and picked out three romaine hearts snuggled in one bag. They appeared crisp. Henry wondered what Sundries did with their lettuce when it wilted. His guess was that limp lettuce was spirited away under cover of darkness to the locked dumpster out back. Henry didn't like dumpsters. He had read a story in the paper recently about a dumpster diver in Vancouver who became stuck and got deposited into the back of a compactor garbage truck. Henry was happy he did not have to dumpster dive.

Yes, things might not be perfect, but they were looking up. This morning when he woke up and got Dash off to school, he had received a confirmation email saying he was booked for the Spring Tune-Up motorcycle

trip. If he could only convince Millie that the registration was worth spending money on. That and shipping the bike, the plane ticket, and hotels and food while he was away. Oh, and babysitting. Millie worked long hours, so he had to come up with a babysitter for Dash. At ten, Dash was still too young to leave home alone after school while Henry rode from Montreal to St. John's on his Triumph.

Henry remembered the exact moment he decided he wanted a motorcycle. It was the day his mother rolled into the driveway on a 1972 Honda CB350. He was eleven, and it had been about six months since his father had skipped town. His mother slowed to a stop and passed him a full-face helmet that looked like something Marvin the Martian would wear. She patted the back seat. Henry's eyes were round. This was monumental. He climbed on back and held so tight around her waist that his arms were sore afterwards. Once, she gunned it from a stoplight. The momentum pulled him backwards, making his heart thud like a jackhammer until he realized he wasn't going to fly off onto the pavement. Funny, his heart was thudding here in the supermarket just like that day.

From then on, he dreamed about getting his own bike. His dream came true the day he turned sixteen. His mother upgraded to a Honda Gold Wing, and Henry inherited the '72 Honda four-stroke. After that, Henry and his mother went on rides together.

Millie thought it was sweet when she first met him, but it quickly began to wear thin when Henry would announce that instead of a Saturday picnic with Millie he was going on a ride with his mother. Then, once Dash came along, motorcycle rides took away from his parental duties. "Don't you think that it's somewhat ironic that your mother turned to motorcycles to forget about her husband abandoning her and her child, and now she encourages aforementioned son to accompany her on motorcycle trips resulting in his abandoning his wife and child?"

"I'm not abandoning you, Millie," Henry said. "I just like spending quality time with my mother. She won't be around forever, you know."

How true that was.

In response, Millie poured herself more and more into her work. Took on new clients. Cases that were deemed impossible to win. Yet somehow she always came out on top.

Now in the gluten-free aisle, Henry imagined a long stretch of winding highway. Quebec would be enjoying a real spring by the time he got there—unlike Newfoundland, which skipped spring altogether and just went from winter to summer in one day around mid-July. He pushed his cart toward the back of the store. Thud. He had run into someone in a long

red coat. The cold and sinus pill was really throwing him for a loop. “Sorry. So sorry.” Henry kept his eyes on the floor and put his cart in reverse.

“Mr. Puddester! Watch where you’re going.”

Dagnabit, it was Akela—Dash’s smug old spinster of a Cub leader—looking at Henry like he was an insect she wanted to squash. How dare she? What was she doing just standing there? You couldn’t just linger in the aisle like it was some sort of beach.

“Sorry,” he repeated and scurried away. He had only nudged her, for God’s sake. And here she was trying to make him feel bad. He refused. It was because of her that he was at the supermarket in the first place. It was because of her that he would be spending the weekend with a bunch of ten-year-olds, small humans who knew nothing about the important things in life, things like cleaning a carburetor.

He couldn’t believe it when he found out he was responsible for preparing Ziploc omelets for twenty Cubs on Sunday morning. They had just had a Cub Camp in February. Now they were having another in April. Imagine the gall, springing an extra camp on them just because another group cancelled. Couldn’t they just leave the place empty for one weekend?

That damn Akela. It was because of her he would not spend Saturday preparing the Triumph for the bike trip, and Saturday evening hove off drinking beer and watching the game with his neighbour, Frank. He took one last glance at her bundled in a huge red winter coat that ended mid-calf. She wasn’t climbing Everest, for God’s sake. And what was with those stupid scarves she always wore? They weren’t outdoor scarves, but fifties-woman-in-a-convertible silk scarves. Yet Akela reminded Henry more of a man in a pickup rather than a woman in a convertible.

Calm down, he said to himself. No sense wasting any more time thinking about her—he didn’t even know her real name. Why did Cub leaders take names from *Jungle Book* characters, anyway?

Henry quickly wove the cart through a gauntlet of meat shoppers, his mood soured.

A woman with a wonky hairdo, like a wedding cake on top of her noggin, took his thoughts from Akela. Wedding Cake Woman and a group of about fifteen new Canadians were gathered around an end cooler overflowing with discounted whole chickens. Henry had cooked one last week, but Dash wouldn’t eat anything with bones in. He was strictly a nugget type of guy.

A thirty-something male worker with a buzz cut and a white butcher shirt led the group toward the upright coolers displaying cuts of meat. Although they looked African, they made Henry think of his wife. Last year,

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Also by Susan Flanagan:

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