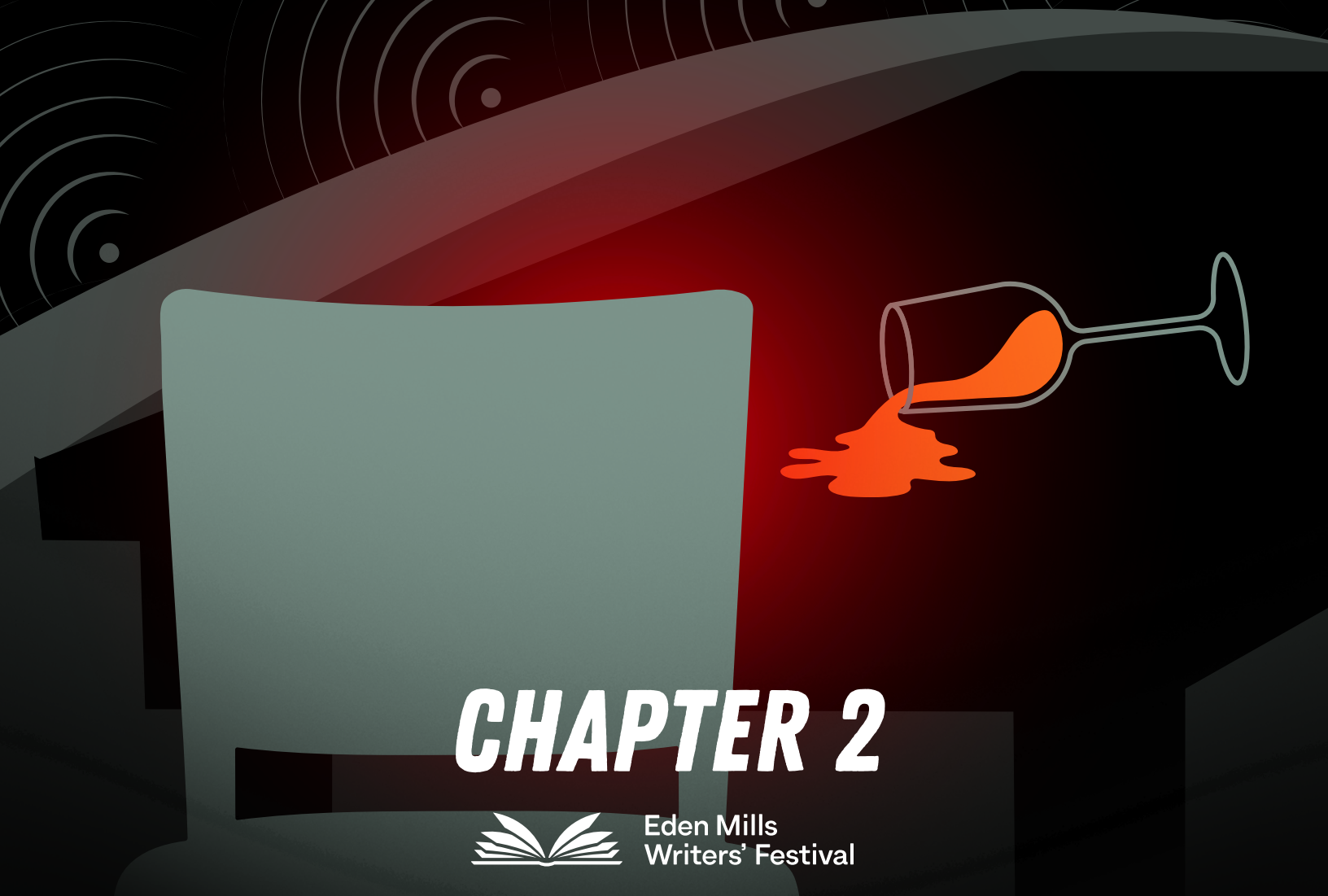
DEAD AIR

by Greg Rhyno



CHAPTER 2

Eden Mills Writers' Festival

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It took longer than usual to put Jake to bed that night. He was still excited about listening to the walkie-talkie.

"What if we hear a crime being committed?" he asked.
"We'll call the police."
"But what if we could get there before the police? We could save people."
Holly wondered if he was thinking about his father.
"Your breath smells funny," Jake said.
"What does it smell like?"
"Like strawberries. But kind of mean."
"Mean strawberries?"
"Yeah. It always smells like that now."

When Holly finally went downstairs, she finished the bottle of Zinfandel she'd left open on the counter.

The microwave in the staff kitchen dinged and Holly pulled out her lunch. Inside the sweating Tupperware, her burrito looked pale and damp. No way would it retain its structural integrity. Holly selected some mismatched cutlery from the drawer and sat down at the table. Tara was already sitting there, working at a plate of noodles in chunky red sauce.

"Ooh, burrito," Tara said.
"Your pasta looks good."
"Leftovers. From Rosmarino's."
Holly knew Rosmarino's. She and David used to go when they could find a babysitter.
"Had dinner there with my new friend." Tara winked.
"Dessert back at my place."

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Holly tried to balance a smile that was equal parts knowing and neutral. It was widely suspected that Tara's 'new friend' was Denny Devlemere, a fifty-four-year-old divorcee from the marketing department.

"So, when are you getting back out there?" Tara was asking.

"Out where?"

"You know what I mean. It's been over a year now. And that new guy in finance has been asking about you."

Holly was readying her defenses when her phone tickled her thigh. The display said it was Jake's elementary school.

"It seems we had a little incident with Jacob," the principal told her.

"Okay?"

"He's fine. Nothing to worry about. But it seems he hit another boy in the mouth, and he's quite upset about it."

"Jake is?"

"Both boys are okay, but we've got Jake here in the office with us. I think it would be best if he spent the rest of the day at home."

She sighed though her nose so the principal wouldn't hear. "I'll be there as soon as I can."

Holly parked her car in a residential neighbourhood near the school. For security reasons, the building kept its doors locked during instructional hours. Holly called the office as she walked up the front steps, and the principal himself opened the door. Jake squeezed around the man and waited on the other side of his mother.

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"It seems we have something of a pugilist on our hands." The principal smiled.

"Well, I can assure you, Mr. Lawrence, we don't believe in using violence to solve our problems, and believe me, Jake and I are going to have a long talk when we get home. Aren't we, Jake?"

She directed a pointed look at her son who slouched at the bottom of the steps, kicking at a chunk of ice with the toe of his boot.

"I can imagine it's been a tough year for you and Jakey."

Jake hated being called Jakey.

"And listen, I just wanted to let you know that if you need anything, we're here to help. Our social worker is always willing to talk about mental health issues whether it pertains to your son, or—" he let the unfinished sentence complete his thought.

"Thank you, Mr. Lawrence. We appreciate the support."

The principal nodded and began to turn back inside the building, but stopped short. "I almost forgot," he said, reaching into his sportscoat pocket. "I believe the fight was over this."

He held out the lime green walkie-talkie to Holly. "Just a reminder that we discourage students from bringing toys from home. They have a tendency of causing problems. Save it for show and tell, okay Jakey?"

Jake nodded, his eyes fixed on the ground.

Holly buckled Jake into his car seat and circled around to the driver's side.

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"I can't *believe* you," she said. "I had to leave work to come and get you."

Jake looked at her in the rearview, his eyes liquid with remorse. "I'm sorry."

"You want to tell me what happened?" Sometimes these conversations were easier to have in the car, when they didn't have to look at each other.

"Omar took my walkie-talkie and wouldn't give it back."

Holly put her bare hands on the steering wheel. The rubber felt cold. "You shouldn't have had it at school in the first place."

"I know," he said, "but I wanted to listen to it during nutrition break. I"—he paused for a moment—"I heard someone on it."

Holly thought of the familiar voice she had heard earlier. "Someone you know?"

Jake was quiet for a moment. "I'm not sure."

In the mirror, she watched the boy's expression. Holly wasn't sure she believed him. She picked up the device where it lay on the passenger seat and clicked it on. There was a high frequency wail and then, nothing.

"What channel?" she asked.

"I don't remember."

She twisted the knob through a number of silences, and then, she heard something.

"… just a couple minutes ago."

"Was that the voice?"

Jake shook his head again.

"I feel bad for her," the voice continued. *"With everything that happened …"*

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Holly felt like she recognized this voice as well. Was this the nature of eavesdropping? Did all private conversations sound somehow familiar?

"She's not really equipped to care for that boy," the voice was saying. "I'll call Angela tomorrow and see what she thinks."

Holly turned off the device. She turned in the seat and patted her son on his leg. "Let's go home, okay?"