

Excerpt from **FROM THE ASHES**

"Look here," Dad said as he broke open the bag and an avalanche of cigarette butts spilled onto the floor. He grabbed my brother's arm and placed him in front of the butts beside the TV. "Jerry, you roll the best. Take my Zig-Zags and do like last time."

Jerry peeled out a rolling paper and set to work ripping open the largest butts onto a sheet of paper. The smell of mouldy smokes filled the apartment. Dad then poured the contents of the tin onto the carpet. The coins were like falling treasure and Dad looked like a pirate, like Captain Hook in the Peter Pan book Mom used to read us before bed.

"Josh, count 'em up," he said. "Jesse knows what pennies are. Just let him pick them out before you get started."

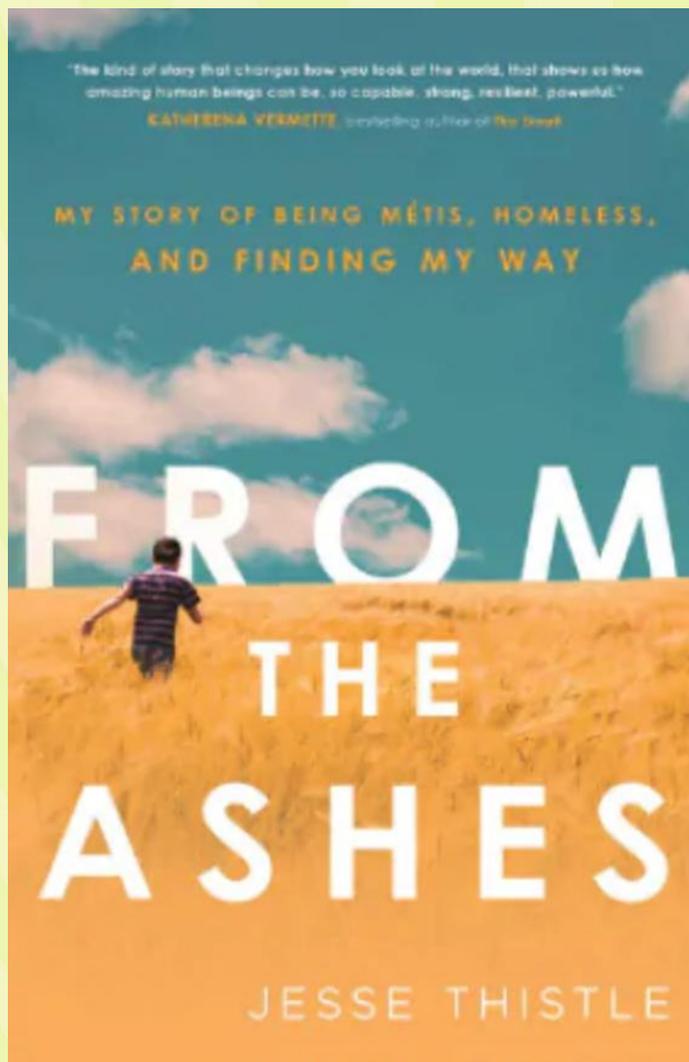
Josh nodded and got my attention. "Like last time, Jesse. Remember?" He held up a penny and told me to dig. I shoved my hand in the pile and began picking out what looked to me like nuggets of gold.

"Dad," Josh said before we got too far. "We haven't eaten since yesterday morning and it's nighttime now. We're hungry. Did you bring anything?"

"Shit. I forgot. Count it up. We'll go to the store and get something after. Promise."

I watched as he pulled a small Baggie filled with white powder out of his jean jacket pocket. He held it up to the light and flicked it, then made his way to the washroom and slammed the door.

Josh sighed and began helping me. My stomach gurgled. He looked over at me. It was Josh's job to feed us. Sometimes he'd leave Jerry and me alone for a while and walk to the convenience store to beg for money to buy food. We'd seen Dad do it and knew how to do it, too. It usually took Josh a couple



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of hours, but he always came back with chips and pop and other goodies. He was my hero, my chief!

Sometimes, when we got really hungry, Josh even took Jerry and me over to ask for change in front of the hockey arena around the block. It was the best spot because we could buy gigantic hot dogs there. We shared bites. The hot meat burst with such

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flavour that my jaw would ache up around my ears, and my tongue swam in pools of saliva. Drool would sometimes spill out of my mouth onto my shirt before I even took a bite.

Dad's treasure shimmered in front of the TV. The wildlife program was still playing, and a whale drifted through blue water, calmly scooping mouthfuls of food, as Josh and I rifled through the silver and gold pile, and images of those hot dogs piled high with ketchup and mustard and relish and everything else floated through my head.

I noticed light peeping out of the washroom. Dad must've slammed the door so hard it bounced open a crack. I dropped the gold pennies I had in my hand and crawled over quietly to see what he was doing. Josh trailed behind.

Dad was on the toilet, hunched over with a spoon in one hand, a blue lighter in the other. Red flame licked the bottom of the spoon and bubbles spit droplets into the air. Dad's forehead was wet, sweat dripped onto the tile floor, and that see-through thingy I'd found one day underneath the sofa was by his side.

Dad had told me it was a man-made hornet, and that kids shouldn't play with it because they'd end up getting stung by accident, and the medicine it carried could make young boys so sick they could die. The black stripes on its see-through body looked scary, like the blue-and-black hornets I saw flying in the prairie roses, the kind that stung me when I went to see Kokum Nancy.

Dad picked up the hornet, put it near the spoon, and it sucked the medicine into its belly. Then he wrapped his leather belt around his arm and held one end in his teeth, pulling back with his head like my uncle Paul's dog did whenever we played tug of war. I could see green veins on his arm and hand. He jabbed himself with the hornet and red shot into

the hornet's body. I pushed my face right up against the crack trying to get a better look, as bad butterflies swam all through my guts.

It looks just like the red ink that the octopus shot into the ocean right before it escaped the shark, I thought. I wondered if my dad could run away, or if a shark would get him. The softness of Kokum's voice whispered in my ears, as the smell of sweet Saskatoon berries filled my nose. The butterflies flew up my body and out the top of my head.

Dad let go of the belt, moaned, and toppled off the edge of the toilet. I pushed the door open and ran to him. He didn't move, and his eyes were closed. I looked back at Josh. He stood in the arch of the doorway, a dark river spreading down the front of his brown corduroys.