Benjamin Hollo

The Debt

The Laines had to accept that their parenting style was no longer working. Since their only son Luka's first playdates, they'd decided to let him solve his own problems, and they'd stuck to this approach for thirteen years. There'd been no texts to other parents, no emails to teachers, no helicoptering. Yet here they were, Anton and Ada Laine, being the very sort of parents they'd always loathed: walking into the Rose & Crown to meddle in Luka's life. They were about to meet the parents of his best friend.

Sam's parents were already there, sitting side by side at one of the window tables. Anton knew it must be them, as there were no other middle-aged patrons in the pub. This couple, Zack and Zoe Pink, were either completely ignorant of what had been going on between the two boys or they'd chosen to ignore it. Certainly they didn't seem burdened. Such was suggested by their open body language, the way Zoe Pink lounged in her chair, how they both stood up enthusiastically when the Laines approached them, and how Zack Pink shook Anton's hand heartily, big grin across his face.

The Pinks were likely under the impression that this was going to be some friendly meet-and-greet, the parents of two best friends finally getting acquainted. Anton had identified them in the grade eight parents' WhatsApp group. "It'd be great to get together and chat," he'd written in a private message. What else could he say? They didn't know him, and accusations from a stranger coming out of the blue—that would never go over well.

After the four adults finished their introductions, the couples sat facing one another at the table. Some general chitchat ensued as to the nature of the Rose & Crown—how quaint and cozy it was, what drinks were on special. It was an odd place, this pub. Despite its interior of velvet booths, polished wood, and dim lamps, the Rose & Crown was located in a crummy suburban strip mall, which included a discount supermarket and a 7-11. Something about this juxtaposition unsettled Anton. He regarded the pub as fake, deceptive even. But he'd chosen it as a matter of convenience,

having deduced from his internet sleuthing that the Pinks lived nearby and might thus be more inclined to accept his invitation.

"The parents of the famous Luka Laine!" Zack Pink boomed. "He's all Sam talks about. Luka this, Luka that. Our guys are inseparable, aren't they?" This outgoing demeanour was in line with what Anton knew of the man, based on Luka's limited reports of his best friend's dad. Zack Pink, local realtor, was apparently always in a good mood. Luka said that Mr. Pink handed out sodas and popsicles to the boys and let them use the hot tub whenever they wanted.

Zoe Pink tossed back the last of her white wine and started to scan the pub for a server. Her eyes were rendered so tiny by her glasses that it was impossible to see what colour they were. Unlike her square-jawed husband, she had tired, almost drooping, skin, and lifeless hair. She looked nothing like the profile picture on her dental practice's website, in which she displayed her radiant teeth between a bright smile of ruby red lips.

The Laines' mineral waters arrived, and Zoe ordered a second glass of white wine. Zack Pink was still half-way through his pint. There was some chit-chat about jobs and where everyone lived. It would go on like this forever, Anton feared. It was up to him to get things rolling, as he'd been the one to instigate this meeting. "Thanks for coming," Anton raised his tone slightly to signal a transition to the matter at hand. "We're getting pretty concerned about what the boys have been up to." Pausing to catch his breath, Anton felt a pulse beating in his neck. He drew his gaze across the Pinks' perplexed faces, and he looked to his wife, who nodded back as though he were a child needing encouragement. "We just wanted to connect and see if we can find a way forward," Anton said.

Zoe Pink scanned the room, evidently impatient for that second glass of wine she'd just ordered. "You actually want to know what they're up to?" She muttered, still looking around. "We're talking about teenagers here!" She let out a dry laugh.

Silence grew between the four adults. Anton stayed quiet, worried now by Zoe's evident opposition to having a frank discussion. He hoped that his wife Ada might take it from here.

Ada had initially opposed Anton's idea of this sit-down, though as their son could barely sleep anymore and had stopped going to school, she agreed in the end that the adults should meet. As a union steward at the

local community college, Ada was a seasoned negotiator. On the drive over to the pub that night, she told Anton that in situations as delicate as these, successful resolutions required restraint. "Parents don't handle accusations well," she said. "And once a conflict kicks off, nothing gets solved."

Anton agreed with his wife to some extent. Peaceful collaboration between the four parents might yield the best outcome. Nevertheless, he also wondered if a showdown wouldn't offer its own benefit: everyone ending up so furious they'd forbid their sons from hanging out, breaking up the pair for good.

As Anton contemplated which direction the conversation would go, his wife Ada spoke up. "How are you two handling teenagehood?" Ada laughed to herself, and the Pinks' faces softened. Ada continued. "I wish we could just let them sort it out themselves," she said. "It's just so unfortunate—everything that's happened."

Zoe's tiny eyes disappeared into slits behind her glasses. She made a hand gesture, as though cutting the air. "I don't want to go there." She shook her head. "You're not about to ask us to intervene in something, are you? Please don't. You can't control anyone else's kids," Zoe said. "You can only control your own."

Zack Pink, meanwhile, inflated his cheeks and blew out a stream of breath.

Ada tried to diffuse the tension. "Our parenting style was precisely that—let the kids sort themselves out. We've never done anything like this before, honestly."

"What is it?" Zoe snapped. "Shoplifting or something?" She didn't wait for a response and rose abruptly, evidently tired of waiting for her glass of wine to arrive, and headed over to the bar.

"This is nice." Zack exhaled. "But, maybe let's just keep it light, hmm?"

"That's exactly what we want." Anton muttered, and the table turned silent.

Zoe returned with a full glass of white wine but didn't say a word.

A collaborative path forward now seemed a dim possibility, so Anton tapped Ada's wrist, signalling that they should move things along. Evidently in agreement, Ada reached into her purse and removed an envelope. "I'm so sorry to have to do this." She slid it towards Zoe.

The Pinks stared at the envelope, which bore the name "Sam" across the front in Luka's handwriting.

"How's it going guys? You all good for drinks?" The server's voice was baritone yet cheerful. The Pinks couldn't take their eyes off the envelope.

Anton shook his head at the waiter, who headed off.

"What's this?" Zoe tapped her index finger on the envelope.

"Luka owes Sam some money," Anton said. "A lot as it turns out: $325."

"I don't think so." Zoe pursed her lips.

"Please give this money to Sam." Anton bit his thumbnail.

"We just want to draw a line under it," Ada continued.

Zoe Pink stared at the envelope, her lips turned down.

The two fathers made eye contact, but in an instant, both averted their gazes.

"We don't want any more trouble," Anton said, looking down at his hands.

"Trouble?" Zoe laughed. "What are you two doing here except causing trouble?"

Zack Pink placed his hand on his wife's shoulder. "Whatever it is, I'm sure we can work it out."

Zoe met her husband's eyes and shrugged, evidently pacified by his optimism, and Anton hoped that they'd stumbled into a turning point. Perhaps Zoe had just needed to get outraged for a moment, some kind of coping mechanism while she prepared to learn who her son really was.

"Luka's basically got himself into debt with Sam," Ada began. "It built up bit by bit. And now we're paying off the full amount."

"Alright," Zoe said tentatively. "Even if any of this were true, which I have a hard time believing, what are you two doing here? Let the boys figure it out!" She downed half of the wine remaining in her glass.

Ada gulped. "Luka did try to give Sam the money last week. He dropped it in your mailbox, but Sam told him that someone stole it. So, now Luka has to pay up again. We're here to make sure that the cash doesn't go missing a second time."

Everyone sat very still, as though the four adults were in a video on pause.

"You think Sam is scamming your son?" Zoe grimaced.

"He is, actually," said Anton. There were things he needed to say before the Pinks stormed out, which he estimated might occur any moment now.

Zoe scoffed, but Zack sat quietly, looking into his pint of beer.

"What is this money supposedly for?" Zoe crossed her arms.

Anton placed his palms flat on the table. "A while back your son began to gift Luka a number of things, all of which were supposed to be free. Everything from snacks at your house to tickets to the trampoline park to a pair of Sam's old running shoes. Can you remember what else?" He turned to Ada.

"A used hoodie," she said. "There were also some graphic novels. Luka just thought Sam was so generous. But then a few weeks ago, it all turned upside down. Sam told Luka to pay up for everything." Ada slid the envelope towards Zoe. "Please," she said. "We just want this to end. Tell Sam that Luka has paid up in full. His tab is cleared. Ok?" There was a quiver in Ada's voice.

"I'll do nothing of the sort." Zoe slid the envelope back toward Ada. "I bet your son has told you a load of bull, to shake you down for the money. Who's the swindler, eh?"

Anton took in a deep breath. He'd anticipated this very accusation. It was a reasonable one to make, of course, and he had just the response ready. "Do any of us really know our kids?" Anton looked back and forth at the Pinks. "Luka's no saint—I'm not saying he is. But this debt, it's ruining our lives. Luka's crying himself to sleep every night. He's stopped going to school. He's asking us to move away. So that's why we're here. Don't you see? We've got no choice anymore." Anton's voice grew hoarse, and he began to tear up—hot tears, tears of rage. "Sam's already got the payment in full, the $325 that Luka dropped in your mailbox, and now Sam's trying to get more!" Anton raised his voice, and Ada pinched the back of his neck.

"Calm down!" she hissed.

"We'll just check our front door camera." Zack pulled out his phone, and Zoe pushed his hand down to the table.

The gesture turned something over inside of Anton. It was Zoe's cowardice, how she preferred to stay unaware of Sam's villainy, while his own son's life fell to pieces. "Sam's been threatening to beat up Luka," Anton said. "Sam's turning every kid at school against our son."

"Oh, fuck off!" As Zoe stood, she stumbled, clearly intoxicated now, and as she gripped the table to steady herself, she knocked over her wine glass. "You two need to get a grip. Do you really think Sam needs the 300 whatever dollars?" Her eyes flickered toward the window, scanning the parking lot. "He's got a sneaker collection that's probably worth more than your car." She tugged at Zack's arm. "Let's go."

Zack stood up, joining his wife. "This is no way to solve a problem," he said to the Laines. "We came here in good faith, and all you've done is insult our son!" His voice boomed, and it gathered the attention of the surrounding tables.

Ada looked up at the Pinks. "Please don't tell Sam that we met."

Zoe smirked. "Oh, let me guess, Sam's gonna beat up Luka if he finds out that you two got involved?"

"Yeah," said Ada. "He'll be punished for snitching. That's how these things work," she said. Ada looked sideways at Anton, and he could see in her expression that she was disappointed in him—disappointed that he'd lost his cool and pushed them all past the point of no return.

Now that the battle lines were drawn, Anton realized, details of who did what no longer mattered. "Keep your kid away from our kid!" Anton stood up, grabbed the envelope off the table and tossed it at Zack, who backed up and let it fall to the floor.

"And keep your kid away from our house," Anton added. "I'm sure it was him who graffitied our fence."

When he said that, the Pinks' eyes met for an instant.

"Graffiti?" Zack cocked his head.

"Yeah, that's right. It was a warning." Anton huffed. "To pay up."

"Oh, please." Zoe stormed out, but Zack lingered for a moment.

"Say, what sort of graffiti?" He shifted around on his feet.

Ada, who'd been staring into the table blankly, looked up. "It was the P-word," she said. "Written in cursive script."

Zack opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. His face grew red, and he picked up the envelope from the floor. He bore his gaze into that envelope before stuffing it in his pocket. He left without casting them a glance.

The Laines sat there for a while longer and finished their mineral waters, but neither said a word to one another. After they paid the bill, which

included the Pinks' drinks, they exited the Rose & Crown and emerged once again into the strip mall, its businesses mostly closed by this time of night, the only sound being the passing traffic. They reached their car and entered. Sitting there for a moment, they gazed upon a group of teenage boys loitering in front of the 7-11. The boys stood around in their hoodies, barely interacting aside from furtive glances and swipes on their phones.