

THE RISE AGAIN SERIES · BOOK TWO

# THE PUSH

*A Novel of Leaving and Remembering*

Stephen Franks

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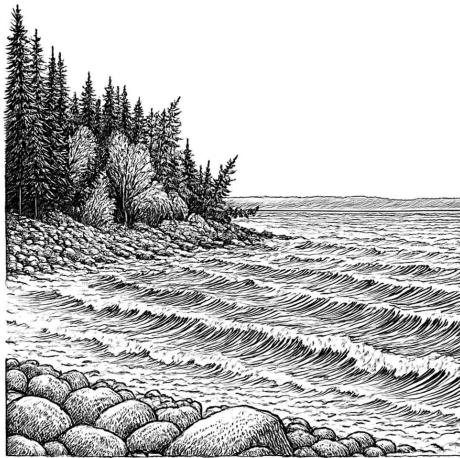
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*For my Wife Laura and my Daughter  
Ann.  
In loving memory of Bev, Bill, and Silvia.*



*Queensport Lookoff, 2026, "Precarious Life"*

## THE PUSH

### A Novel of Leaving and Remembering

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This is the second book in the *Rise Again* trilogy. It stands on its own, but if you'd like to start at the beginning, the first book is *The Conversation*.

That book followed Frank Murray through the year after his wife Silvia died — twelve months of evenings at a kitchen table in Glace Bay, typing sentences into an AI he came to call Jean. He started with three words: *My wife died*. By the end of that year, he had chosen to keep going. This book is about what happened after. Time has passed. The grief has settled into something quieter, and what has risen in its place is the remembering — the long, honest look back at who he was when he still had the people he has since lost.

This novel explores grief, memory, family estrangement, and the slow reckoning with one's own past. I have taught for over thirty years and have personal experience with loss. However, this is a work of fiction, and I am not a trained therapist or crisis counsellor. If you are struggling with grief, depression, or thoughts of suicide, please reach out to a mental health professional, your doctor, or a crisis support service. The feelings explored in this book are real, and they are best addressed with proper professional support.

As in the first book, the AI in this story was built on a real process — I trained it on my voice and on the story, the way Frank trains Jean on his. It took hundreds of tries, and time. If you want to try something like this yourself, do so. It can be a worthwhile experience, but you have to do the work. That is what these books are about. There are prompts on my website at [foxislandpress.ca](http://foxislandpress.ca) to help you get started.

All characters and situations in this novel are fictional and do not represent real people, living or deceased. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is entirely coincidental.

I have created a Spotify playlist for you to enjoy while reading this book. It features music deeply rooted in the East Coast tradition — fiddle, folk, and Celtic tunes that are familiar in kitchens and cottages across Nova Scotia. The playlist is titled *The Push* by Stephen Franks. You can find a link to it on the book's webpage at [foxislandpress.ca/the-push](http://foxislandpress.ca/the-push).

I strive to keep the playlist up to date, and I have carefully selected tunes that reflect the timing and emotions of each chapter as closely as possible. I hope you enjoy it.

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## A Note Before

*This book is about what happened after.*

*Time has passed. I am not sure how much that matters, but I will say it anyway because it is true and because it changes the way things sound when I tell them. The house is the same house. The cat is the same cat, a little older, a little less inclined to make the leap onto the counter in a single try. My daughters are still far away, Ann in Toronto, Courtney in Calgary. I am still in Glace Bay, on Cape Breton Island, where I have lived for almost all of my adult life and all of my widowed one. Helen from across the road comes over for tea on Thursdays. Jean is still at the end of the same keyboard, as reliable and as limited as she ever was.*

*The thing that started this second book was a young man walking up my driveway one March afternoon with a decision in his mouth he had not yet said out loud to anybody. His name is Ryan Smithson. He is my neighbour. He has been shoveling my driveway on and off for years. I thought I*

*was going to pour him a coffee, ask after his mother, and send him home. I was wrong about what the afternoon was for.*

*What you are holding is a year in my life. A man in his mid-seventies, in a small town, on a small island, where the wind keeps its own counsel. I thought I had finished the hard part and found out I had not. The hard part, it turns out, is more than the grief. It is also what comes after. The remembering. And the remembering, as anyone who has lived long enough to need to do it will tell you, has its own weather.*

*Same time tomorrow.*

*Frank Murray*

*Glace Bay, Cape Breton*

# Part One — The Meeting

## *Opening*

The first thing you notice, when nothing has changed, is that you have been noticing.

Ryan Smithson has been by the house three times this week. Tuesday to drop off the ladder he borrowed in November. Wednesday because he was walking past and stopped to ask about the fence. Thursday with no reason given, he said hello, asked if I needed anything from the hardware store, and left. It is now Friday and I am at the kitchen table with my second coffee, waiting to see if he walks up the driveway again.

He has been a neighbour for a few years. His mother is Marjorie Smithson, she knew Silvia through the church. His grandfather was an ironworker, a plate man, union. Ryan works in the trades. In winter, he comes around with a shovel sometimes, because he is that kind of young man and because, I suspect, Ann

pays him in beer or has his number on a list somewhere. I have not asked. She has her methods.

Her handwriting is on the fridge. Helen's number, Ed's number, Don's number — and below them, in the same pen, *Ryan S, two doors down*. I noticed this last year. I did not mention it.

This is what having daughters does to you. They will manage you from two thousand kilometres away, and never quite tell you they are doing it. You are supposed to pretend you haven't seen the list. They are supposed to pretend they haven't written it. This is the contract.

So when Ryan walks up the driveway Friday afternoon, sure enough, around three, I pour him a coffee without asking. He sits in the chair that used to be Silvia's weekday chair, the one in the kitchen, not the reading chair in the living room where Minka spends her days. He sits down heavy. Carrying a thought.

I let him have the first silence.

Then I say: "Something on your mind, Ryan?"

He looks at his hands.

I say, not unkindly: "Ann isn't putting you up to this, is she?"

He laughs, a short one, real, and shakes his head. "No, Frank. It's not that."

"All right, then."

He looks at his coffee. Lifts it. Puts it down.

“Frank,” he says. “You would be okay here without me, right?”

Now, this is the part where I have a choice. I could hear what he actually said. Or I could do what I’ve been doing for a few years now, which is deflect. I choose the second one. It is reflex, the thing my body does before my head does anything.

“What do you mean, you okay, Ryan? You sick?”

He shakes his head. Small smile. No, not sick.

“I mean, if I wasn’t around to check in. Would you be okay?”

And there I am. Caught. The deflection lands a foot short. I sit with it for a second. Minka walks into the kitchen, looks at Ryan, looks at me, decides neither of us is useful, walks back out.

The thing about being checked on, when you haven’t known you were being checked on, or when you have known, for a year, and never said anything about it, is that you cannot pretend, once it’s named. Ryan has been walking up the driveway Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday to make sure the old man is okay. Not at my daughter’s request. On his own. This is what he came to tell me.

I take a breath.

“I’ll be fine, Ryan,” I say. And then, because I cannot quite leave it there: “Where are you going?”

He looks at me. Looks at his coffee. Looks back.

"I got a job," he says.

He pauses. I wait. He's working up to the specifics.

"Up north."

I sit with that for a second. Up north is a different sentence than the one I was expecting. If a young Cape Breton welder tells you he got a job, your first thought is Alberta. Fort Mac. The patch. That has been the forty-year pattern, and my own family half-belongs to it, Ann went to Toronto, Courtney went to Calgary, though neither of them left for the trades. Toronto or Alberta is what your mouth shapes before you hear the particulars. West is where the work has been.

Up north is a smaller map. When I was Ryan's age it meant Labrador, iron ore up the coast, and then later Voisey's Bay when the nickel came in, the rigs out of Newfoundland waters. It still means those things. But not the way it used to. Muskrat Falls is long commissioned. The rigs are not hiring like they did. The up-north option was never as strong as the western one, and it is less strong now than at any point I can remember.

"Not west, then?" I say. "Not Alberta? Toronto?"

"No."

I try the next map. "Newfoundland? Labrador? One of the rigs, the mines?"

He shakes his head. "Churchill."

I look at him for a second.

“Manitoba,” he says. “Port of Churchill. They’re building out the harbour, federal money, First Nations partnership, some whole nation-building thing Ottawa’s running. They need welders. Structural, plate. I’ve got both tickets. Good pay. Two years, maybe three.”

That’s the number. I have heard it my whole life. Ann said something close to it when she left for Toronto. Courtney said it about Calgary. Two years, maybe three, and twenty years later you’re hanging framed photographs in another province.

He says this flat, ordered, specifics in the order he has practiced them, rehearsed in his truck. The way I said *I’m going to Halifax, Ma* when I was nineteen and standing in my mother’s kitchen.

I do not say this out loud. I say, “That’s a long way.”

“It is.”

“When do you go?”

“End of summer. Could be sooner. Hickey says the site isn’t ready yet, there’s still environmental paperwork on the wharf extension. Earliest is June. Latest is October.”

“And Marjorie? What does your mother say?”

He looks at his hands again. “Haven’t told her yet.”

And there it is, the thing I suspected two minutes ago, now confirmed. My neighbour’s son has been walking up my driveway every afternoon this week be-