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The Donkey Prince

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A Thesis

In

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Canada

Abstract

The Donkey Prince

Tom Bauer

The Donkey Prince is a novel in progress about a year in the life of a high school graduate who embarks on a series of adventures in a quest for security, truth, love and meaning. It is a Canadian novel about coming of age in the early 1980s, and takes place in Montreal, Toronto, and British Columbia. The narrative intentionally echoes the dramatic first person voices of hard-boiled American fiction and the French nouvelle vague, though it adheres to the facts of experience and is therefore a form of memoir.

The goal of the thesis is to show the discontinuities that can occur between perception and reality as it follows the protagonist's search for answers to questions that cannot be answered; to show the disconnection between knowledge of the abstract and knowledge of relationships; to explore differing varieties of awareness and reveal the uncertainty of self-knowledge through dramatic fictional representations.

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THE DONKEY PRINCE

BY

TOM BAUER

One

I'd just finished high school a year older than the other grade elevens, and I'd fired my psychiatrist. That was the beginning of my adventure year, the start of summer, 1981, my year of love and other journeys. I was celebrating by smoking up with Kris in the basement of his Mom's house. Kris, my best friend, who was German like me, or rather, whose Dad was German like my Dad, except my Dad was dark, short, and scowling, and his Dad was tall and blonde, and scowling. We didn't scowl, Kris and I. East or west, we got stoned and grinned.

One thing Kris knew how to do was roll a joint, even in the dark. And it was dark down in his Mom's basement at three am. All we had was a strip of light coming under the door at the top of the stairs and the light from the street lamps coming through the small windows along the back wall. We sat under the windows in a couple of old kitchen chairs and Kris managed it all in the palm of his hand. It was like a magic trick, fluffing the hash, wrinkling the tobacco out of the tip of a cigarette, mixing it into a paper and rolling it up, sniffing his fingers for the pungent sweetness of the residue of the hash.

He sparked it and took a toke, and passed it, and said:

"Then, that's it with your therapist? You're done?"

"That's it, I'm done," I said.

"I thought you had a court order."

"It was only for six months." I took a big hit. "I'm done."

I held it in and passed the joint back, and said:

"Though he didn't think I was done."

"No?"

"Thinks I still need his help."

"But you worked hard. I saw you."

"Thanks," I said. "I think I did. I figured out a lot of shit."

Kris coughed, then held it and took another hit, and passed it back.

"I had that dream," I said.

"About the lion," he said.

"But he didn't believe that's what did it."

"Doesn't matter."

I frowned, toking, and said:

"But what kind of psychiatrist doesn't believe in dreams?"

"I don't know," Kris said. "I don't. Not that way. I think it was important though, and it helped."

"It stopped me stealing," I said. "I couldn't do that until I had the dream."

"I just don't believe the spiritual stuff, you know? Psychologically you needed it, so you made it up and it told you how to do it. I don't know how it works exactly, but it's something like that. I just can't believe that other stuff."

It was the first time he'd ever said it. I guess I always knew on some level. He thought I was a little nuts. I guess I was. I was the one reading Castaneda. I was the one who'd been hospitalized when I was fourteen. Kris listened to what I had to say, but he didn't go there. He liked the movie *Altered States*, and our favorite bands all wrote songs about getting stoned and seeing things differently, but he wasn't into that side of it.

"What about *The Doors Of Perception*," I said. "Isn't that one of your favorite books?" I passed the joint. "And why do this?"

"This? To get high. It feels good."

"But you like me talking about all this stuff."

"I'm interested to see what you find out about it, but I don't believe in it."

"Okay. What about Stephanie Marsden."

"What about her?"

"She told me she left her body, in the sauna."

"What do you mean left her body? What is that?"

"Some guy talked her into deep relaxation and she left her body."

"I wonder what he did with her body when she wasn't in it. But that's impossible.

People can't leave their bodies. This is what we are. All that other stuff—" he tapped his head "—happens up here."

"What about me? The time I flew around the living room?"

"You were how old?"

"Three. It was in Winnipeg."

"It's a memory," Kris said. "You imagined it. Because you were young it felt real."

"How can you say that?"

"I'm an existentialist."

"Okay. What about the other night, after I left. I went into deep relaxation at home and almost left my body."

"What is that relaxation again?"

"I told you, it's yoga. You should try it. I learned when Dad went through his yoga phase, when I was a kid."

"But what is it?"

"You lie down and tense your muscles. It relaxes you more than anything. It's like magic."

"So what happened the other night?"

"After I went home the other night—"

"Stoned—"

"Fucking wasted! I went into deep relaxation and I swear to God, man. I thought for sure I was going to fly out of my body."

"But you didn't."

"I felt like it. It's happened before, that I get that close. Used to happen in the hospital."

"On medication..."

"No. I mean, yes, but that had nothing to do with it. It happened before that, and after that. It still happens. I get into it, and it feels like I'm going to fall out of my body. Then I get scared."

"But you've never actually done it."

"I get scared, I come out of it."

Kris didn't say anything, just smiled.

"Okay. What about this. When I was a kid Dad told me about one of his students. This guy was like a genius. Dad spoke of him very highly. Thing is, this guy was dying of cancer or something. Remember, he was a genius. Dad said he was studying out-of-

the-body stuff. How to leave his body. Astral travel. Dad said he was brilliant. He was in one of his psychology classes."

"Did your Dad believe him about astral travel, or whatever you call it?"

"No. He said he felt sorry for the guy. But why would a genius believe in something like that?"

"He was dying. If I was dying I'd believe in it too."

I stopped talking after that. The joint was done and my head felt stuffed with cotton. I stared at the shadows on the floor, tiny shapes of dust and rubble, pockmarks, little stones here and there on the surface, like a moonscape. Time slipped by like pudding on a slowly tilting plate.

Suddenly Kris jerked his head to stare at the door.

"What is it?"

"I think it's my Mom," he said.

"We should have gone out."

"Yeah, we could have left our bodies."

We listened but there was no sound of anything.

"You going to the party on Saturday?"

"I can't," he said. "Caroline wants me to come over to her house."

"No. I thought we were going."

"I can't."

"Fuck," I said. "I need a girlfriend."

Suddenly the door swung open and a rectangle of light poured down the stairs like spilled paint and Kris's Mom was standing at the top, yelling for us to get out.

Two

I woke up in the afternoon with a headache from over-sleeping. I'd left Kris' as soon as his Mom showed up, but couldn't sleep for hours. I was still awake when the birds started singing and there wasn't much left of the day when I got out bed. I splashed cold water on my face and went out. It was hot. Fiery darts of sunlight bounced off the cars in the gas station across the street. I went along Sherbrooke towards the park. It was Friday, last chance to get my grades before the weekend, but I wanted to stop first.

At the edge of the park stood the Westmount library, a stately Victorian building made of smooth red brick. A tower flanked the main entrance and on the wall beside the door a red clay plaque had the words: *tongues in trees, books in the running brooks*. I went inside.

I was in luck, the librarian I wanted to see was at the desk. I went right over. She looked at me with dark sexy eyes, and said:

"Can I help you?"

I was a little embarrassed because I'd had a crush on her since I was fifteen and I was sure she knew it.

"Do you have anything on mythology?"

She stared for a moment. I wasn't sure. Her eyes were bright, but her lips pressed tight gave her an almost angry look. I was used to that. Then she stood, and said:

"Mythology. Of course we have stuff on mythology."

She came around and I followed her over to the card catalogue.

"Did you check in here?"

"No," I said.

I gawked at her round pretty face and soft pink lips. I wanted to grab her and kiss her. She was older, and it was exciting to want her. An older woman. Almost forbidden.

She pulled out one of the drawers and pinched about an inch of cards between her thumb and forefinger.

"Everything we have on mythology is on these," she said. "But it might be easier to browse the stacks."

She must have noticed the confusion I was feeling. The stacks. Where in the stacks. How did I find the books. If I found one, used the number of one, would I find the others.

"Shall I show you?"

"If it's not too much trouble," I said.

"Trouble? It's my job."

She went through the main room to a door at the back that lead to the basement. She had a way of walking that was quite determined, with her back straight and her chin high, and her forest green dress, tied in the middle with a white belt, flared out, emphasizing her hips the way dresses did in the fifties. In the basement we went along a narrow hall until she turned left into one of the alleys between the shelves. She waved her hand at a section, and said:

"This is what we have."

Most of the spines had the word myth or mythology running along them.

"Unless you want children's books?"

"No," I said. "Adult. Joseph Campbell, actually. You know, on TV."

"Oh yes," she said.

For a moment neither of us spoke and I felt the silence of the basement.

"Mythology was my favorite when I was a kid," I said.

She smiled, and said: "I see."

"I write poetry, actually, so I have to know about mythology."

"Most of these are about mythology, but the myths as collected by Robert Graves are also here."

"I'm mostly interested in Joseph Campbell."

"I'll leave you to it then," she said.

She stepped past me into the aisle and started back towards the stairs.

"Thanks," I said.

She glanced back, and said: "You're welcome."

She reached the bottom of the stairs and a moment later she was gone.

Three

It only took ten minutes to get to Westmount High from the park. I went in the main office and told the secretary I was there for my grades.

She rose wearily from her desk, and said:

"Name?"

"Fischer," I said. "Stephen."

She went over to three cardboard file boxes that sat on the counter. She pulled an envelope from one of them, then showed me a clipboard and pen.

"Sign," she said.

I signed on the attached sheet and she gave me the envelope. In the hall I took a look at the report, then shoved it back in the envelope.

On the way out I saw Mr. Fogarty, my English teacher, climbing the steps. He had light brown hair and high cheekbones and moved slowly, I gathered because of what he told the class earlier in the year, that he'd had a triple bypass. He stopped when he saw me and exhaled. His eyes were bright, and he had a way of looking at a person as if he could see everything there was to know inside that person.

We said hello and I waved the envelope, and said:

"Thanks for the grade."

"You earned it," he said. "Are you going on?"

"I don't know. I guess so."

He took out a pack of Rothmans. "Smoke?"

He climbed the last few steps and we stood in front of the center doors on the top landing, which is where everyone stood when they smoked.

"I never thought I'd be smoking a cigarette with you," I said.

"You're not in high school anymore," Mr. Fogarty said.

"Can I tell you something, now that it's over?"

"Of course."

"When I first saw you I thought you looked like Van Morrison."

He laughed. "Really?"

Almost exactly like the cover of *St. Dominic's Preview*.

"Do you know his music?" I said.

"Yes, very well," he said.

"Really? Have you heard *Astral Weeks*?"

"I have."

"I listen to that one all the time. I always hear different things."

"He does that with every record," Mr. Fogarty said. "I think he gets into something, one teaching or another, then writes a record about it. He even says thing only a Ba'hai would know. It's really quite amazing."

"That's your religion," I said. "Someone asked you about it in class."

"Yes," he said.

"What was it again?"

"I'm a Ba'hai."

"Is that like a Christian?"

"No, although we believe in Christ."

"I've had some experiences," I said. "I remember that day you told that guy that everyone has to come to terms with God at one point."

"The question of God," he said.

"I've had dreams and visions, things I can't explain. Just running into you today means something, I don't know what."

"I agree," he said. He offered his cigarettes. "Would you like another?"

"I like what you taught us about heroes and hubris. Have you been watching Joseph Campbell?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. I have."

"I love what he says. I think something big is happening."

"It is if you go by prophecy," Mr. Fogarty said.

I thought about that for a minute, and said:

"You know what happened to me in school one day? I was reading a book called *The Art Of Love*, by Erich Fromm."

"I don't now that one," Mr. Fogarty said.

"I always get a sense of the future, you know? Like this meeting. Anyway, he talks about the essence of being human. It's kind of like this other, *The Master Game*. I was reading it at lunch time, and he was talking Universal Love. Something like that. And I was sitting on one of the tables and I looked up at the people going back and forth in the foyer, and suddenly there was this white light flowing over everyone, connecting everyone. It was incredible."

"I don't know what that light could have been," Mr. Fogarty said. "But as far as can tell, everything's about connection, and until we understand what that is, we won't know anything."

"Connection," I said, trying it out.

"You may not believe this," he said, "but a few years ago everyone talked about stuff like this. Now hardly anyone talks about it."

"By years ago you mean the sixties?"

"I suppose, although it started earlier. Have you ever heard of this book called *Meetings with Incredible Men* or something like that?"

"Isn't that Gurdjieff?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"I think my Dad had a copy. Is it good?"

"They're all the same, as far as I'm concerned, in some way. I have my thing, but the point is, at one point everyone was reading that book."

"Like *The Teachings of Don Juan*," I said.

"I think so," he said.

"Have you ever heard of a book called *The Findhorn Garden*?"

"No."

"It's all about this commune in Scotland where they grow giant vegetables. A bunch of scientists went over and apparently it all checks out. They shouldn't be able to grow giant vegetables because it's all in sand. It's very strange, but can you imagine?"

"This is what I mean. There was a time when everyone was reading a book by Gurdjieff or talking about giant vegetables. My question for you is, what are you planning to do?"

"Like that," I said. "I'm going to be poet."

Mr. Fogarty chuckled.

"I'm not surprised," he said.

"Why?"

"That's what all the people who were reading were going to do."

"I was ten when I decided I was going to be a poet," I said. "That's what I told Dad. He used to play me records by T.S.Eliot and eecummings. And Ginsberg. When I wrote my first poem he carved it in clay, because he had a pottery in the basement. That was in the old house."

"What does your father do?"

"He's a psychologist," I said.

"That makes perfect sense," Mr. Fogarty said.

"Ha-ha," I said.

"What I mean is, it's fine to be a poet, but who's your audience?"

"My audience?"

"Where's the audience for poetry? A writer needs an audience."

"I guess I'll get one by writing."

"I don't think it works that way. Most write for a specific audience."

"I don't know," I said.

"It's not very practical," he said.

"You sound like my Dad. He always says I can't make a living as a poet."

"Maybe he's right."

I felt my face get hot.

"I'm sorry," Mr. Fogarty said. "I'm not trying to disappoint you."

"It's okay," I said. "I know I can be whatever I want."

He took out his cigarettes. "Another one?"

I took one gratefully.

After a minute, he said:

"I want to say something you might not want to hear, but it's worth thinking about."

"It's okay," I said. "The more challenging the better."

"There can be no peace without making peace with the father first."

I didn't like it when he said that. What kind of peace. What peace.

"I don't know," I said. "I can't believe I can't find peace on my own."

"It is simply that you will probably have to make peace with him in this world before either of you moves to the next."

Suddenly I noticed the cigarette butts that littered the wide steps in front of the school, and the area in front of the steps, and the worn paths that went through the lawns on either side.

"Forget I said it," Mr. Fogarty said.

Finally I looked at him, and grinned.

"It's okay," I said. "All I know is I'm going to be a poet."

"No you're not," he said. "Go sit on your throne."

Four

The next day was Saturday, the day of Nadia's party. Dad was out shopping on the Main when I woke in the afternoon. I got a coffee and brought it back to my room. I had time so I smoked half a joint and read a book, then wrote some poetry which wasn't very good. I tried not to think about what Mr. Fogarty had said about poetry. People needed truth, and poetry was about truth. Someone had to do it.

I crawled back in bed and slept some more.

When I woke a second time it was almost five. The radio was louder in the kitchen. Dad was back. I took a bath and got dressed in my best pair of jeans and denim shirt. Blue shirt and blue jeans with blue eyes.

I was downstairs and almost out the door when I heard Dad calling for me to come to the kitchen.

He was sitting in his armchair with his legs across one corner of the kitchen table. As usual he looked like a mad scientist, bald on top with a fringe of white hair sticking out all around which he rarely combed or brushed. He was in a white undershirt and rumpled jeans, reading a fat omnibus of mystery novels. He peered over the rims of his glasses when I came in.

"Sit," he said.

I sat, and one of the dogs, the big collie-husky, got to his feet and put his head on my lap. I stroked his face while he looked at me with slow-blinking eyes. I'd swear he was human.

Dad reached for his yellow coffee mug that always held beer. I fished a pack of smokes out of my breast pocket.

"Want one of mine?"

He sipped his beer, and said:

"No thank you."

He set the mug down.

"Now," he said. "Where are you going?"

"Party."

"Where?"

"Remember Nadia?" He thought for a moment.

"Orange hair," I said.

"Oh yeah. She's nice."

"She's having a graduation party. I told you about it."

"What have you been up to?"

"I got my grades."

"Yeah?"

"I did well."

"What else?"

"Not much," I said.

Pinpoints of light flashed deep in his eyes.

"What about a job, like I asked?"

The dog backed off and went to his corner.

"I'm going to get one," I said.

"I told you a long time ago, I'm not putting up with this crap. Sitting around smoking dope all summer."

I slide my chair back, getting ready to go.

"I know," I said.

"Just wait," he said. "I'm still talking. Have you even looked for a job?"

"Not really," I said.

"What the hell have you been doing?"

"Writing. Stuff."

"You have to get off your ass, man."

I examined my cuticles.

"I wanted to get my grades first."

"That's just an excuse."

"I wanted to know I was graduating."

"You knew. Come on. It's time to shit or get off the pot. Money doesn't grow on trees, you know."

My face felt like it'd been slapped by a big man with tiny hands. He'd been saying that since I was a kid.

"I know it doesn't grow on trees," I said.

He swung his legs off the table and lit a cigarette.

"You don't have a fucking clue what it takes to run a house and pay bills. People work, you know? They have jobs. Do you have any idea what things really cost? Just what I pay in taxes every year?"

"I've been practicing my violin," I said.

"It's too late for that. I told you. You had your chance. Anyone serious about that has to do it when they're young. You're already over the hill."

All because I quit. At least I started again.

"This is not a hotel," he said.

"I know it's not a fucking hotel," I said.

"You better," he said.

Five

After watching Dad drink his, I wanted beer of my own. That's why a mere hour after arriving at Nadia's party I was already floating sideways nicely. There was plenty of beer at the party, and I'd been drinking with two fellows named Paul and Raphael.

Raphael was the arrogant-looking blonde maestro who I'd formed a secret society with as soon as I learned he played the cello and his parents were from Europe.

"We know what's going on," I said.

"It's all about being European," he said.

"Raphael," I said. "Isn't that the name of an angel?"

"Raphael was a painter," he said.

"But also an angel."

"Yeah. A fallen angel."

"We're all of us fallen angels," Paul said, raising his bottle. "Who knew you were so wise?"

We all drank.

Paul slammed his empty on the table.

"Great party," he said.

He had fair hair and a boyish face and I'd known him from when we were kids and I lived in the neighborhood, but he was one of the older kids so we'd never become friends.

From what I could tell, Paul was Nadia's new beau and Raphael was the old. They seemed to be getting along just fine.

Nadia came in and gave us the eye, and said: "How's it going in here?"

Along with her bright orange hair and freckles, she had a happy sing-song voice that sounded like a big bird whenever she let loose with one of her loud laughs.

"Your party's a success," Paul said.

Raphael and I agreed and Nadia smiled sweetly at each of us in turn. "Thanks," she said. "I'm glad you all came."

She started rubbing the back of Paul's neck and shoulders.

He sighed and leaned back, and said: "Need any help out there?"

"It's all under control," she said.

She continued rubbing his neck while Raphael stared into his drink.

A girl with coffee-colored hair came over and sat next to me on the window seat. Her name was Nicole and she had dark almond eyes and a prominent nose and a very wide mouth with full lips. We'd spoken earlier and now she was back and purring like a cat.

"So?" she said.

"So what?" I said.

"How are you?"

"Fine. Good."

"Oh yes?"

Paul tugged Nadia by the arm. "Come sit," he said.

She sat on his lap and he leaned his head against her shoulder. Raphael watched everything while staring at his drink.

Nicole patted my arm. "Your English teacher is a riot," she said.

"My English teacher?" I looked at Nadia.

"Didn't I tell you," Nadia said. "I invited Mr. Fogarty. I'm so glad he came."

"I have to go say hi," I said.

"You're lucky you had that guy for a teacher," Nicole said.

"Where is he?" I said.

"He's so funny," Nadia said. "He's staying close to the food."

I was about to go when we heard a knock and saw two figures at the back door.

The door opened and a girl named Louise stuck her head in, and said: "We're here!"

She came in, followed by a girl with shoulder-length brown hair, bright blue eyes and high cheek bones. It was Amy. My heart stopped for a moment, then started again twice as hard. The last time I'd seen Amy was in Westmount park playing Frisbee in jeans and leather sandals, and a white cotton blouse that showed off the tops of her breasts. She was wearing the same jeans but the cotton blouse was salmon pink and embroidered.

She saw me and smiled, and an idiot's grin crawled onto my face.

Nadia hopped off Paul's lap with a shriek and gave Louise and Amy big hugs and kisses. The newcomers said hi to the guys at the table, then to Nicole, then me.

Then Amy was standing in front and facing me.

"Hi," she said.

I felt like a kitten stuck up a tree. I grinned, and said: "Hi." For one agonizing minute I tried to say something else.

She put her hands on her hips, and said: "You don't write back when someone writes you a letter?"

Nicole looked from Amy's face to mine, and back to Amy's. She stood, and said: "You better sit here."

"Thanks," Amy said.

Amy sat next to me on the window seat and we grinned at each other like fools. She jabbed my arm with her elbow, and said: "Eh?"

"I don't know," I said. I jabbed her back. "I didn't know what to write."

She'd sent the letter after we met in the park, in the fall, and it included an invitation to visit her in Toronto, to stay at her Dad's place and stay in her bed. I'd read it several times but the last part always left me tongue-tied, and eventually I put it out of my mind and forgot to write.

"So you got my letter?"

"Yes."

She jabbed me again, and said: "Ah ha!"

She was close enough for me to smell rosewater.

"What?" I said.

"Sounds like I scared you off."

My face felt hot enough to toast marshmallows.

Nadia came to my rescue, tugging Amy to her feet and pulling her and Louise towards the hall.

"I want to introduce you," she said.

"See you later," I said.

"You will," Amy said.

And she was gone.

Six

"Is she your girlfriend?" Paul said.

I looked at the label on my bottle and started picking at it.

"I only met her once," I said.

Girlish laughter rose above the music and I glanced towards the hall. Then I noticed Nicole was gone. She must have left after giving up her seat. I downed my beer.

"I think I'll mingle," I said.

In the middle of the dining room stood a long narrow table dressed in a white paper table cloth. It was set with platters of cheese and cold cuts, bowls of potato and macaroni salad, and a few green salads. There were different kinds of bread and some condiments, and at the far end a large clay tureen filled with paella, Nadia's specialty. At the front end stood two stacks of paper plates, some plastic cups, napkins, utensils, and about ten bottles of beer for anyone who wanted one.

Mr. Fogarty was holding a heaping plate of paella and seemed to have the rapt attention of two guys. I recognized them from class but I'd never gotten to know them. I looked around. There were about a dozen people in the adjoining living room, but I didn't see anyone I knew.

I went into the front hall. A couple sat on the stairs going up to the second floor. The girl looked over, and said: "Do you need to get by?"

"No thanks," I said.

I went to the front door and looked out. People were smoking on the steps. I thought I smelled rosewater behind me and turned, glancing at the stairs, the hall, and living room. I headed through the living room back into the dining room and took one of the beers off the table.

"Hi Mr. Fogarty," I said, interrupting.

The two guys he was talking to gave me looks, but Mr. Fogarty didn't seem to mind.

"Isn't this wonderful?" He raised his fork, laden with rice and bits of vegetable and seafood.

I raised my bottle.

"I'm enjoying myself," I said.

"As I was saying," one of the guys said. "In Calgary I'll work in Dad's firm for the summer, just to see how it goes. He wants me to learn the business."

The other guy, somewhat proudly dressed in a dark blue blazer, leaned forward on his toes, and said: "I'm going to college."

Mr. Fogarty took another bite of rice.

"I figured out what I'm going to do," I said. They waited, and I said:

"I'm going to be a hero."

"I believe you will," Mr. Fogarty said, smiling as well as he could with food in his mouth.

The guy from Calgary said: "That's not a job. No one decides to be a hero."

"I am," I said.

The guy in the blazer made a face.

I nodded to Mr. Fogarty.

"See you later." I said.

I checked the kitchen long enough to see that Paul and Raphael were still going strong. I went back to see the couple on the stairs.

"Anyone go up in the past few minutes?" I asked.

The girl shook her head.

I looked out the front door again, and this time I noticed the lights across the street. Suddenly I felt like going home. Nothing was going to happen anyway. At home the house would be dark, except for the kitchen. I could go to bed and be alone.

Then a hand touched my arm and I heard a soft voice:

"Want to go for a walk?"

It was Amy.

Seven

I took her along Prince Albert street. This was my old neighborhood and I was in my element. I knew exactly where I wanted to bring her. We turned onto Somerville. It was a marvelous night for a kiss.

I pointed at the second house from the corner.

"I lived in that one," I said. "Moved in when I was five, after we came from Winnipeg."

"It's nice," Amy said.

"The door's still the same yellow after eight years. There's a park at the end of the street. Want to go?"

She smiled.

It was a fenced-in square of concrete, almost the entire corner of a block, the number one destination when I was a kid.

"It's a nice park," she said.

I opened the gate and we went in.

"They used to lock it at night," I said.

We sat on a bench beside the large swing set, in the shadows of a tree whose branches hung over from one of the back yards that ringed the park. I lit half a joint and we smoked it. I peered at the outlines and shapes of my childhood playthings, the monkey bars near the entrance, the metal rocket in the middle, the rings and the trapeze beside the swing set. The only thing different was the concrete sandbox.

"The original was square and made of wood," I said. "The edges were like benches and people could sit on them. We ran around and played some kind of game on them. I can't remember."

"They don't make as much out of wood anymore," Amy said.

I shrugged.

"The corners were dangerous anyway."

"More dangerous than concrete edges?"

"I don't know," I said. I turned a little so I could look at her. "I'm sorry I didn't write back."

She laughed. "It's okay."

I looked at the rocket that stood in the center.

"I can't believe I'm sitting in the little park," I said.

"I like it here," she said.

She looked at the leaves above, then pointed at a part of the sky beyond the roof line of an adjacent house.

"Look at the color of the sky," she said.

"There's a star in it," I said.

"Two," she said.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No. I don't get along with most of the guys in my class. There's one I'm kind of friends with, I've known him for years. I think we're curious about each other. We're meeting up with him this summer when Dad takes us to Europe."

"You're going to Europe?"

"Yeah. It's going to be so great. Dad's family has a farm on one of the Greeks islands."

"You're Greek?"

"My Dad is. Mom's Canadian. They're divorced."

"Mine too. I always wanted to go to Greece."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No," I said. "I've been saving it."

"Me too. I think it's worth the wait."

I grinned, and said: "So you're a virgin?"

"Sort of," she said.

"Sort of?"

"I kind of took care of it."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, I did it myself. Are you?"

"Yes," I said. "I fooled around a bit, but only fooled around."

"Most guys your age aren't virgins anymore."

"How did you do it?"

"I don't want to tell you."

"Come on."

"Promise not to laugh."

"Okay, I promise not to laugh."

"I used the handle of my hairbrush."

We both laughed.

"Ouch," I said.

"No kidding," she said.

After that, silence. I felt prickles of heat along the side of my body. She was right beside me and I didn't know what to do or say.

"It's nice out, eh?"

"It is," she said.

I offered her a smoke but she didn't take it. I lit one and while I smoked, I planned and promised to myself that I would kiss her when I was done, but when the cigarette burned to the filter I tossed it away and I didn't kiss her. Instead I gripped the edge of the bench for a few seconds, then I let go and ran to the rocket.

"Watch this," I said.

I climbed all the way and sat at the top and rocked the metal frame back and forth. The rocket groaned and shifted its base in the sand.

"We used to all pile on and one of us would sit here and shake it."

I rocked it back and forth a few more times. Then I sat still. After a few minutes I saw ghosts of children chasing each other below.

"I can see kids," I said.

"What?"

"Kids I knew, and me. I can see them. It's weird. Right there, like after images."

"I better get back," she said. "I have to get the bus early."

"You're going back already?"

"I just came in for the party. I have to hand in a paper and start my job on Tuesday. You know what? You could visit. My Dad's away until Tuesday. We have

plenty of room. You could even stay in my sister's room, she's still at school. I could show you around when I'm not writing my paper."

Amy was inviting me to Toronto. How could I go? I couldn't.

"How would I get there?"

"Take the bus. With me."

"I don't have money." I jumped off the rocket. "Dad wants me to find a job."

I stood and waited, not knowing whether to stay or go. She took a step towards the gate.

"Come on," she said.

I walked slowly on purpose. I wasn't trying to annoy her, but I wasn't in a rush. I wanted to linger, to stay, go back and take my chance. I'd already lost it.

But at the corner, before we got to Nadia's house, Amy stopped, and said:

"I want to kiss you."

"You want to kiss me?"

She smiled.

"Yeah I do," she said.

"Okay," I said. "I want you to."

She stepped forward and kissed me. It went on and on and I wanted to feel it forever. Then we paused for air, and we both murmured "Wow."

"I thought you were going to kiss me in the park," she said.

"I was," I said.

"Why didn't you?"

"Pressure. Guys always have to make the first move. I wish girls would do it more."

"I did," she said.

I held her face in my hands.

"You did," I said.

We kissed again and I didn't want it to stop, this kissing. Like kissing stars in space or sunny days.

"I'm staying in Nadia's guest room," she said. "Maybe you can stay too. We could sleep together."

"That would be great," I said.

Eight

The next morning I opened my eyes and saw a landscape of fuzzy rolling hills. The landscape resolved into a blue sheet covered with fabric pills. I was lying on my side in a bed. I rolled onto my back and blinked at the ceiling. I had drunk a lot of beer. I sat on my elbows and recognized the room. It was the spare room in Nadia's house where I'd spent the night. With Amy. But Amy was gone. I remembered her getting out of the bed, but I thought it was a dream. I swung my legs over and sat on the edge.

We got back from walking and I drank a bunch of beers. We kissed in the bed and talked. We tried some sex stuff. Didn't work. She pushed me away because she needed sleep. I rubbed my throat, thirsty. My eyes stung and my head throbbed. Not much for sleeping together. No room. I looked at the bed. No wonder. It was a very narrow bed. No wonder we'd barely had sex, and barely slept.

I stood and the floor swerved around a corner. I almost fell. My head felt like it had lost some fluid, but I was smiling. Amy was out there, through that door, in the shower, in the bathroom. I could hear the water. We'd spent the night together and now she was taking a shower. And if I remembered correctly, I told her I loved her.

I managed to get my underwear on without falling on my ass. Not a good idea to go out there naked, just in case. All the doors were closed. I went to the one with the sounds of a shower inside.

I opened it a crack and put my mouth to it, and said: "Hello?"

I heard Amy's voice above the water. "Hi," she said.

"Amy?"

"Yes?"

I stepped in. "Can I come in?"

"I already missed the first bus."

I shut the door and pulled off my underwear. I pulled back the shower curtain.

Amy raised her arms to cover her breasts.

"Wait," she said.

"Can't I come in?" I put one foot in.

"I'm almost done," she said.

I'd always imagined that taking a shower with someone you loved would be the best. I stepped in all the way and pulled the curtain.

"Just so you know," she said. "I'm almost done."

I put my arms around her shoulders and she allowed me to kiss her forehead. My penis, half-hard, brushed against her leg. She moved away from it and went under the water to rinse.

"Are you upset?" I said.

"I'm just in a rush," she said. "I've already missed two buses."

She finished rinsing and opened the curtain and stepped out.

"I'll be out in a minute," I said.

"I can't wait," she said.

A few minutes later I was drying off in the bedroom, then digging around the covers for my clothes.

Nadia was at the table.

"Hi," she said. "Want a glass of OJ?"

"Sure," I said. "Where's Amy?"

"She just left."

"She's gone!" I sat down like I'd just heard crushing news.

Nadia handed me a glass of orange juice and I drank.

"She said she had to go, something about missing her bus."

"Damn," I said. "I got dressed as fast as I could. I thought I'd see her. I didn't even say goodbye."

Nadia was smiling. "Did you have fun?"

"The best night of my life," I said. "I'm in love, I know it."

Nadia's smile went away. "Really?"

"I have to see her."

"I don't know when she's coming back," Nadia said.

"I have to see her now."

"But she's gone."

"I have to go see her in Toronto. I have to."

Nadia wore an unhappy expression on her face.

"Is that a good idea?"

"She invited me," I said. "She wanted me to. I just don't know how the hell I'm supposed to get there."

Nine

I went home and slept some more. Some time after twelve I woke and called the Voyageur Bus Terminal. There were buses to Toronto from Montreal until midnight, every hour on the hour. I packed a pair of jeans and a couple of T-shirts in my backpack, along with some socks and underwear, and some notebooks for writing and books for reading. I packed as many books as I could, including Collins' *Albatross Book of Verse*, an ex-library copy of *The Incomplete Folksinger* by Pete Seeger, a copy of the *Norton Anthology of Modern Verse*, and a Penguin paperback edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves Of Grass*, which I'd never read but always wanted to. It seemed like the right thing to take on a road trip.

All I had to do was talk to Dad.

It wouldn't be easy. He was in the kitchen with his legs up and the classical music playing on the radio, drinking beer from his coffee cup and reading his fat book of mysteries. He seemed relaxed when I went in, but his face was cloudy with seriousness. He was in a mood, for sure, but that was normal. He was always in a mood. Trick is, it was impossible to put across anything positive when he was like that, and he had that look on him, exhaling smoke like a hawk, shooting looks at me like I was a criminal. I'm sure it didn't help that I was vibrating like a tuning fork with nerves. I hated asking him for anything. I knew how he could get.

He lowered his book, and said: "Out all night?"

"Yeah," I said. "Got in this morning."

"There's leftover stew in the fridge for supper."

He went back to his reading and I waited a minute, lighting a cigarette and just watching. I had to handle this a certain way.

Finally, I said: "Can we talk for a second?"

"What is it?"

"I wanted to tell you, I met a girl last night."

"Good for you."

I did my best to ignore his mocking tone, but it stung and I know he saw it.

"Remember the one from Toronto who sent me a letter?"

"Not really."

"Back in the fall."

"No."

"She was there."

He waited, staring me out to see where this was going.

"She invited me to visit her in Toronto for a few days, while her Dad's away."

"You're going?"

I nodded, and said: "I'd like to."

"Fine." He went back to his reading, proving that he didn't care if I stayed or went.

"The problem is I don't have any money for a bus ticket," I said.

"No way," he said.

"Dad, please—"

"I said no, and that's final."

Then there was that electric feeling in the air, like it was fried, like he'd crisped it. I felt the pulsing in my chest, the heat in my face. I could have blasted him. I wanted to scream, but I had to keep it together. I had to hold on to what I wanted. If only I could make him understand, see it my way, maybe he'd get it.

"I just want to say something."

"No," he said.

"I just want to say this is really important. This could be love. I swear when I get back I'll get a job. And I'll pay you back, I promise."

"You always promise things. Now just get out."

"But I mean it. I do.."

"You phony," he said. He swung his legs off the table and reached for his cigarettes. "All you do is use people for when you want something."

"No."

"Yes you do. Now get out of my house. This is not a hotel that you can come and go as you please. I mean it."

He had a way of doing that. The thing that didn't bother him at first came around later, turned out it bothered him more than he'd let on. By that point I wanted to crawl out of my skin.

"This is important. If you don't help me—"

"What? What will happen? Don't you threaten me, you bum."

"I wasn't threatening, you didn't let me finish."

The problem with him screaming was it got me screaming, some kind of chemical reaction, and at that point all was lost, and for some reason I never learned that over the years. For some reason I always pushed on.

I stood up and started yelling: "You never do what I ask. All you ever do is what you want to do, when it suits you."

"I gave you money at Christmas," he said.

"That was at Christmas, I need this now."

"Get out!"

I ran up to my room because I had to go. I couldn't stand his shrieking. If I didn't go we would fight. The last time we did that, just after school started, he'd been needling me, calling me names, and after three hours of drinking I lost it, threw him on the floor and pinned his arms under my knees. I was yelling at him to stop it, which was kind of ironic since I was the one wrestling him, but as far as I was concerned what he was saying was worse than any physical violence, calling me names like that.

In my room I started pacing, muttering to myself. I knew I shouldn't have asked, it was a big mistake, but he could have helped. He could have been nice. I went through all the times in my head he was never helpful, all the times he'd ever called me a name or implied I was bad or sneaky or manipulative. All those accusations and put-downs over the years, and as I thought about those I felt the chemicals going higher, my muscles jumping, the urge to scream and smash almost overwhelming.

I had to do something, something big, but I couldn't hurt him, not like that last time. I couldn't throw him on the ground and pin his arms again, because if I did I

couldn't guarantee how far it could go. That was the problem in grade school, not knowing my own strength, and I still didn't.

Instead, I flipped open the violin case and grabbed the violin by the neck and ran back to the kitchen.

"You see?" I said.

I held it high in the air and it felt light as a feather, and Dad's eyes were wide, surprised and waiting. I glanced at the table, gauging the distance, and he saw my eyes and knew what I was doing.

"You see? This is what I feel. This is what you make me do."

Then his eyes went cold and I brought it down on the edge of the table as hard as I could. It was special, that violin. Even my violin teacher said it had a beautiful sound. One shot and it became an explosion of wood, a million varnished pieces flying everywhere, except for the neck still in my hand, and the strings dangling from it, and the bridge and tuner attached at the other end.

"You see?" I said, shouting. "You see?"

I tossed the neck on the table and ran.

Ten

Nadia let me in after I banged on her door. Her kitchen was so clean I couldn't tell there'd been a party the night before

"You should have seen his face," I said. "He knew. He knew why I did it. He knows what it means. It's over. I cut all ties. I can't take it anymore. I can't do it."

Nadia frowned sadly.

"What are you going to do?"

Her voice was soft with concern. I was grateful for it. I could always count on Nadia. She didn't always approve of everything, but she never said it. She only said good things, about how much she liked my poems and my violin playing. She was one of the only people who seemed to take my poetry seriously. No one in my family said anything like the things she said. Certainly not Dad, though he's the one who started me on everything. I could never please him. And now it was over.

"I have to go to Toronto," I said. "I have to go. I can't stay here anymore. I need to be with Amy."

"I can't believe you smashed your violin. Is it totally smashed? It was such a nice violin."

"It was," I said. "But he gave it to me under difficult circumstances. This is very meaningful. I can't go home again."

"It had a nice sound," Nadia said.

"It could have been worse. I might have done something worse."

I could tell she didn't approve. It was irritating, in a way. She would never say it, but I could tell. At least she maintained neutrality. Not everyone did that well.

"I hope that doesn't mean you'll quit playing," she said.

"No," I said.

"Good," she said. "Because you really have something, a gift. When you play. My mother always said that about you when she saw you."

I laughed. "Those Suzuki kid's concerts."

Dozens of kids on stage, everybody down up. Nadia laughed too. "I remember you when you were just a boy up there."

Until I got sweaty fingers and too scared.

"I won't quit, I promise—"

"Good."

And ran.

"But I need to get to Toronto," I said. "I need bus fare. I'm desperate. You're the only one who can help."

"What will you do there?"

"I have to see Amy. I have to. She's the one, I know it. After what happened I know it for sure."

Nadia thought about that for a second, then she went out and came back a few minutes later and handed me fifteen dollars.

"It's all I can spare," she said.

"You've saved my life," I said. "It might take a while for me to pay it back."

"It's okay."

"I'll mail it, because I don't think I'm coming back."

"Can't you stay with your mother?"

"With her and my sisters? No way. She wouldn't let me anyway, no room. And she doesn't want me."

"Don't say that."

"She doesn't, I'm too wild. Last time she kicked me out. I don't know, it's all fucked up. I just hope Amy's glad to see me."

"When's your bus? When do you have to go?"

I looked at the clock.

"Now."

Eleven

I hadn't slept much by the time I got to the underground mall connected to the Toronto bus terminal. I was sitting in one of those molded plastic chairs attached to a tiny plastic table in a food court. It was six in the morning and the smell of coffee and muffins was making me sick. I'd hardly slept and my ass was sore from the bus ride, but I had no choice. It was too early to call. I figured I could call Amy after eight. I just hoped she was still glad to see me.

I wrote poetry to pass the time, poems about Amy, how much I loved her, how beautiful she was, and rambling thoughts about the people in the mall, for as the morning progressed more and more people were sitting at the plastic tables of the food court. It was a narrow space and I began to feel closed in, trapped, and the people kept coming through doors in endless numbers, and I sensed the underground trails going on for miles, imagining I could travel them forever without coming up for air.

The crowds passing through the doors grew larger and the plastic tables overflowed, at first with the disconsolate ones who seemed to move without direction, the starving and hungry and discharged, living on the streets, a fellow with bags, a woman with a cart, then the over-worked and over-tired, people barely seeing with their eyes as they consumed their coffees and over-sized muffins and digested the morning news. One woman seemed infinitely sad and after looking in her eyes I wondered if I would ever relate to the world.

By eight the chairs were full and a steady flow was passing through. I didn't understand. They were all going somewhere, some job, a life that wasn't mine. I imagined how many people there were in the world, in just one city, passing through one mall in that one moment. I couldn't properly conceive, couldn't grasp the idea of millions, not really, and I was the alien in the crowd, a misfit among the freshly-showered and deodorized, apart from, and yet connected. I rejected them in my mind, and felt rejected by them, thinking I would never be good enough for them, or that I was too special to be one of them, two sides of the same coin, that I didn't want to fit in with the crowd, just as the crowd would never allow me to know the mysteries of its being.

Soon I had to call, to get away from the mall. I had to find Amy. I had to find a place to breathe before I started to scream and tear my clothes off.

I looked up her number and dialed. As it rang I imagined her answering and getting mad because I'd showed up without warning, that she'd changed her mind about wanting me there, but the machine answered. I hung up. There was a large map of Toronto on the wall beside the phones. I found her street on the map. It was near Yonge and St. Clair. I knew about Yonge Street, one long avenue running through Toronto, kind of like Sherbrooke in Montreal. All I had to do was take Yonge to St. Clair.

Yonge was easy to find. Downtown Toronto was the same as downtown Montreal. Strip bars and sex shops and fast food restaurants. The further north I went the more commercial everything became, all shopping centers and boutiques. At Yonge and Bloor I saw the reference library and its unusual slanted architecture. I'd never seen buildings like these. Oblong and modern, a city of the hastening future, not the past.

I walked along Yonge for a long time and it gradually became less commercial. At one point I crossed a short bridge that spanned a ravine. I passed a corner bar and wished I had enough money for a beer. At the corner of St. Clair I turned right and entered a residential neighborhood that reminded me of Westmount, many nice-looking homes, side by side, and corner parks, and trees lining the streets. It didn't take long to find Amy's house, on a street like my street, a house like Dad's, perhaps bigger, nicer, but the same. I realized then that she and I came from the same kind of world.

I was too scared to ring the bell. I didn't want to see disappointment on her face if she answered, and I didn't want someone else to answer. I went off and found a bench and wrote her a note, then I tore out the pages of poems I'd written and went back and stuffed the whole thing in the mailbox and left.

On my way back I came to a small library that I'd passed on the way. I figured I could wait there for an hour or so before calling to see if she had come home. I went inside and asked about using the materials. I explained I wasn't from Ontario and I just wanted to sit and read for a while. I was surprised to learn that it was easy to join and I didn't have to live in Ontario to join, and so I joined, after which I browsed around and discovered an audio-visual section with carrels equipped with headphones and a catalogue of records and cassettes.

I decided to listen to a cassette of Mahler's Symphony No.1, which I chose because Dad had taken me to see a movie about Mahler when I was younger and I thought it was intense and interesting. Before settling in I decided to call Amy to see if she was home. I used the payphone in the library entrance and after a couple of rings she answered. Something erupted in my chest when I heard her voice. She was glad I'd come.

"I loved your poems," she said.

I wanted to run right back to her house but she was heading out to the big library downtown to work on her final paper.

"I could meet you there," I said.

"Better to meet me back here," she said. "I'll be home by one. I can't wait to see you."

I floated back to the audio-visual section. I replayed her words and the sound of her voice through my thoughts. She'd sounded rushed and breathless, and happy to hear from me. I felt like I'd become two people, myself and an invisible electric self. This electric self was directly connected to Amy. He stood beside me, attached to me, a perfect outline of the real me, the helpless fuck up, yet he was radiant and strong, made of light, and he knew exactly what to do. I liked being him. He suited me just fine.

I put on the headphones and the music began, low notes, eerie and portentous. They sounded ominous and forbidding, like distant echoes of evil murmuring in a deep valley of overgrowth, or the horns of ruthless hunters sounding over a forest of doom. Then the sun came out in the music, morning or spring time, and birds sang and the air filled with the scent of wildflowers and the noises of small creatures. My breathing slowed and I put my head on my arms and closed my eyes, and soon I was asleep.

Twelve

By one o'clock I was sitting on Amy's steps. I'd come back in plenty of time but she wasn't home so I lay back on her balcony and stared at the sky. It was a beautiful day. After a while I sat up gazing in the distance of the street, waiting to see her, waiting for that first glimpse.

It didn't take long. I saw her smile from blocks away. She waved and I grinned and waved back. My skin tingled. I wanted to jump in the air. I went to stand at the end of the walk. Then she was close and we said hi and her hands were on my arms and I could smell her scent, the rosewater she sprinkled on herself.

"I'm so glad you're here," she said.

Then she kissed me and relief flooded through me and I kissed her back.

"I don't know what's going on," I said. "You're so beautiful. I think I love you, or something. Is that okay?"

She laughed. "Of course it's okay. Come on."

She pulled me up the stairs and into her house, nice house, clean and big, nicer than Dad's by far, and quiet, empty, just her and me.

"Dump your stuff," she said. "I'll go put on a record."

I dropped my backpack near the shoes in the hall and kicked off my running shoes.

"My feet might smell a little," I said.

A needle scratched against vinyl and music started, and a woman sang with a piercingly high voice.

"That's okay," Amy said, coming out of the living room through the big double entrance.

"Who is that?"

"Kate Bush," she said. "There's a song on there that reminds me of you. Come on, I'll show you my room. My bed."

She grabbed my hand and dragged me upstairs.

Her room had a window that looked out the side of the house with a clear view of the sky above the neighboring house. The mattress on the floor was covered in a thick puffy cover with paisley patterns. There was a bookshelf and a small table beside the bed, and a desk, and a closet and a bureau between the closet door and the room door. A poster of a pair of dance shoes was on the wall above her bed, and on the other wall a poster of "The Embrace" by Gustav Klimt.

I sniffed the air. "What's that smell?"

She opened a round glass bottle filled with clear liquid. "Rosewater." She held it under my nose. "It's my favorite."

"But what's that other smell?"

"Maybe this." She opened a tiny bottle and waved it under my nose, pungent and sharp.

"Yes," I said.

"That's patchouli oil. Sometimes I put it in my bath."

We left the door open and lay on her bed and kissed and rolled around. Soon our clothes were off and I was kissing her breasts and laying my cheeks on them. I felt like a baby. Every touch was an explosion in my brain. I wanted to merge with her body, to

hide in it, to glue myself to it forever. I touched her everywhere and murmured promises and appreciations. I kissed her a thousand times on every spot I could find. She held my head against her breasts and patted me and said sweet things. I was a lost child who had finally found his way home.

The room darkened and I drifted, soaked in the scents of rosewater and the exotic sensation of being stoned on touch.

I looked in her eyes as she looked in mine, and I grinned. I billowed the cover in the air from underneath.

"What is this?" I said.

"Isn't it great? It's a duvet."

"Duvet?"

"They're from France. They're made with real down. Warm in the winter and cool in the summer."

I inhaled the odors in the duvet, the smell of her skin and the musk of patchouli and the perfume of the rose.

"It's nice," I said.

Afterwards we took a shower and this time she kissed me in the water.

"Maybe we're soul mates," I said.

She looked at me, staring while the water streamed back along her face. "I've never felt anything like this before," she said.

I kissed her lips and tasted water and skin.

"I love you," I said, watching her eyes as we kissed.

Thirteen

Later we went to a movie called *Quest For Fire*, her treat. At one point in the darkness there was only a single campfire blazing on the screen. I looked at her in the dark theater and squeezed her hand.

After the movie we decided to walk back. There were so many thoughts and feelings flying around inside me I didn't know where to begin. We were talking about the movie, about the journey in the movie and the ideas, and finally I started letting things out, saying the things that were coming to me.

"Let's do something like that," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Go on a quest, cross-country, something. Just go hitching across Canada"

"I'd love to do something like that, but I can't. I can't just go."

"Of course you can. We can just start and see where the road takes us."

"But I can't," she said.

I had this vision in my brain, a stretch of land, maybe road, and we were on it, me and Amy, and we found our way, a small town, some place where the people were nice and helped us get started, a place to have a kid, like I always wanted, a family of my own, a loving family, and we were together, always together, and I was safe.

"Yes you can," I said. "You can do anything. Together, we can do anything."

"But I'm starting my job at the bookstore."

"You'll find other jobs."

"What about my trip to Europe? And college in the fall?"

"I don't know. What about life? That's the real education. The open road."

"I'd like to do something like this with you, but we'd have to do it properly."

I knew what she meant. Save money, make plans, be responsible. I couldn't think about that too much. That kind of thinking got me thinking about Dad and school and going home, and I didn't want to do any of that. Amy's dad was coming back in a couple of days and I didn't like to think about that either. I had to do something and I didn't want to do anything except run away.

"Let's go to Findhorn and grow giant vegetables," I said. "I belong on a commune. They'll take care of us. We can get married and have kids, start a family of our own."

"What? I'm not getting married yet. I have school and my art and dancing."

"We could go right now, together."

"Maybe next year," she said. "Maybe we can save money and go next year. I've always wanted to go to Scotland. I'd like to see Findhorn. I'd love to travel with you."

She smiled tenderly and I knew her words were meant to reassure me, give me hope, or something, but I didn't feel good about them. Some feeling was urging me, some wild desperation. I wanted to go back and pack and start walking with our thumbs out, go anywhere, as long as it was together and we were doing it. Maybe it was crazy, or irresponsible, but that's what I wanted.

"If you'd love to travel with me, then let's go," I said. "Be daring, be different, be brave."

She seemed really sorry when she shook her head, and said: "I can't. I just can't do it like that."

Crossing the bridge on St. Clair I stopped to gaze out at the tops of the trees.

"So different from Montreal, these ravines."

"I like that there's a mountain in the middle of your town," she said. "Not as scary at night."

I looked at the shadows under the bridge.

"A world below," I said. "How many are there?"

"They're all over the city."

I wanted to ask her again to go with me. I figured if I kept at it she'd give in, but at the same time I knew she wouldn't. I studied her face as she stared at the ravine. I knew, somehow I knew that it would be her way, next year, in a practical way, not impulsively the way I wanted, or not at all. I didn't think I could wait, and maybe Dad was right, like he'd said so many times, maybe I had no sense of delayed gratification. It was true, I wanted to throw my fates to the wind, so to speak. There was no way Amy would do that.

Back at the house we kissed and listened to records, but our lips were sticky and it wasn't as smooth kissing as before. I asked for a drink and she let me pour something from the cupboard where her dad kept his liquor. I made a glass with a bit of everything, a drop or two from every bottle. She wrinkled her nose when she smelled it.

"What is that?"

"Jungle juice," I said. "A bit of everything, so your dad doesn't notice any missing."

She'd set up the living room with candles and tossed some pillows onto the floor. Soon we took off our clothes and lay down. I kissed her face, her smile, the glow of her skin in the candle light.

"I love being kissed by you," she said. "It's so sensual."

But our lips were sticky and we couldn't seem to get into a comfortable position where one of our arms wasn't pressed, or one of us wasn't jabbing the other with an elbow.

"I'll be right back," she said.

She ran upstairs and I heard the water run in the bathroom sink. I went in the kitchen and poured another glass of booze. When she came back she noticed I'd been at her Dad's liquor again.

"Did you take more?" she said.

"Just a bit," I said.

"Well don't," she said. "He'll get mad if I take too much."

It was the first time I'd heard an edge in her voice since the shower that morning in Montreal.

"It's just a bit from each bottle," I said. "See? He won't notice."

"I don't care," she said. "I don't want to risk it."

I looked in the glass and tipped it forward and drank.

"Anyway, you're drunk again," she said.

"No I'm not, just tipsy."

She leaned forward and brushed my hair away from my face and kissed me. "I think I love you," she said.

We kissed some more but it was awkward, and for a minute I was scared to do anything except kiss, because I didn't want her to notice my discomfort, but after a minute she pushed me away.

"I'm tired," she said. "I'm going to bed."

I thought about it for a minute, and said: "I think I'll stay downstairs for a bit, read a bit and write a poem or two. Is that okay?"

"Come up when you want," she said. "But I'll probably be asleep."

After she left I moved to the couch and read for a while. I'd never read Whitman until the bus ride and I liked what he said. I liked the idea that my body was an expression of my soul and that all life was spiritual in some way. When I read his poems I felt them moving inside me. I felt I knew exactly what he meant. I didn't know how I knew, I just knew, like he had all the answers and was giving them to me directly through his poems, sneaking the secret in underneath the obvious meanings of the words. That's what being a poet meant. That's what I had to do, find the answers and write the truth.

After a while I tried writing one but I didn't get very far. I got bored and my drink was empty and I wanted another, but I felt I had to write something, anything, about the city and the people and feeling lost. It seemed to be the only thing I could think about, people bustling past each other, flinching at small collisions going through doorways, looking at each other in malls, flowing by and ignoring each other, yet aware. I wrote a few lines, some stuff about globes of hate and energy, but it all sounded like Whitman.

I went in the kitchen and ran the cold water. With the noise from the running water I opened the liquor cupboard. I opened one bottle and added a drop to my glass, opened another and added another drop. Then I heard a noise on the stairs. I capped the bottle and put it away and downed what was in my glass. Then Amy came in wondering what the noise was, whether I was coming to bed.

"I'm coming right now," I said.

I swirled cold water in the glass and drank some, then left the glass empty in the sink and followed her. We went back to her room and lay beside each other. We kissed for a minute, then lay there in silence. At first I couldn't sleep. In the dark with Amy's soft breathing beside me I thought about Findhorn, imagining the coast and the sea, a perfect garden stretching for miles, with happy people welcoming us, making room for us, and lots of children. In the middle of these thoughts I was interrupted by an anxiety about the immediate future, about where to go next and what to do, not wanting to think about Dad, and with a conscious effort I reminded myself of Findhorn once more, and eventually I went to sleep, though I dreamed no happy dreams.

Fourteen

The next morning when Amy got out of bed I stayed, drifting in and out of sleep. Then I heard the doorbell and Amy answering, then voices that sounded like Amy and another girl. Then I heard footsteps on the stairs and Amy came in followed by a girl with long straight blonde hair and high cheekbones. She wore a long cotton dress and stood tall and angular, yet feminine.

Her name was Lisa and she was Amy's best friend. I wasn't awake yet but I smiled and propped myself up on my elbow and said hello. Lisa shyly ducked her head and smiling said hi, and I felt instantly at ease, perhaps because she was such a hippy, like Amy, and I could see right away why they were friends, even though they looked totally different.

"Are you coming down for some café au lait?" Amy said.

"Café what?"

"Coffee," she said, laughing.

I grinned at them both and moved to the side to get off the mattress and the cover, pinched under my hand, stayed put. The duvet came away and I lay fully exposed. Lisa's eyes widened and she laughed.

"Sorry," I said.

I tugged the duvet over.

"We don't mind, Stephen" Amy said.

"Not at all," Lisa said.

I looked from one to the other, grinned and pulled the duvet away.

"He's so relaxed," Lisa said.

"He's comfortable in his own skin," Amy said.

I didn't know if that was really true, but I liked the way it sounded.

We sat on the back porch and drank coffee. It was a warm bright morning. The corner railing went around a large tree that grew at a low angle over half the back yard.

The back garden was bordered by flowers and a tall wooden fence.

"He wants me to run away with him," Amy said.

"That is so cool," Lisa said.

"But he wants me to hitchhike across Canada."

"Even more cool," Lisa said.

"See?" I said.

"But I can't go now, with no preparation or anything."

"No," I said. "We should just go."

"Without money?" Lisa said. "Or a place to go? Don't you start your job soon?"

"He wants me to miss my trip," Amy said.

They both looked at me.

"I don't want you to miss your trip," I said. "I just want to go."

"But how would we support ourselves?"

"Life itself would support us," I said. "Whitman tramped across America. He found his way and became a great poet."

"But I don't want to tramp," Amy said. "What does that mean? Sleeping in ditches? When did he do that?"

"I think it was around the turn of the century," I said.

"It's not the same today," Lisa said. "You can't just walk around the country."

"I know," I said. "But why not? We'd find our way. We'd end up somewhere."

"Yeah, murdered," Amy said.

"You don't want to conform," Lisa said.

"No," I said. "Why should I? I don't like the system."

"I don't like it either," Lisa said.

"Things have got to change," I said. "I want to do great things."

"I don't think the best way to change things is by running away from them," Lisa said.

"I'm not running away," I said. "I'm searching for something, the truth. I'll change things by writing."

"I don't know," Lisa said. "Did you ever think of changing things by conforming first? Then you can change things from within."

"That's a great idea," Amy said.

"You mean get a job," I said. "Join the nine-to-five world, work in an office."

"Or whatever," Lisa said.

I shook my head and stared into space, and soon I was staring at the tree.

"Stephen?" Amy said. "Are you okay?"

"Can I climb that tree?"

She told me that everyone in her family had climbed that tree since she was a kid, and of course it was fine if I climbed it too, so I went over to the porch rail and used it to get onto the trunk of the tree. The trunk was curved and low and easy to use to reach a

spot where the trunk forked into two and provided a comfortable spot to sit in. The spot between the two trunks was so spacious I was even able to sit with my legs crossed.

"You look like some guru or something," Lisa said.

"Don't tell him that," Amy said. "He already thinks he knows everything."

It was just a joke, she was laughing, but I knew she meant it, that I sounded like it sometimes, and I felt it in me, the excitement and my swirling thoughts, and the gushing energy in my chest that almost hurt, and I was thinking about Findhorn and hitching, knowing for sure that we could do it, and I didn't know why she wouldn't say yes, why she wouldn't trust the idea and just go, because I knew it was safe, that it would work, I just wanted to test out what I knew, to prove what I knew with my very life.

"I think I know God," I said, suddenly.

I stared at the leaves around me, dappled by the sunlight.

"Really," Lisa said. "You know God?"

I smiled. "Yes," I said.

"So tell us," Amy said. "What's God."

I waved my hand. "This, everything. Like the Good Gray Poet says. The stars and the blades of grass, and this—" I pinched a fold of skin on my arm. "It's all...I don't know. Some great big thing. I just know. I know it. I feel it. It's in my fingertips. We can go if we want, we really can. I know it. We just have to trust life and it will carry us."

But they laughed, and Lisa winked at Amy, and said: "I like him."

Fifteen

Later we all went in the living room to listen to Simon and Garfunkel. Amy reminded me that her Dad was coming back the next day and I couldn't stay.

"I don't want to go," I said. "I can't leave you."

Lisa said: "You're going back to Montreal?"

"I can't go back," I said.

"Why not?"

"He had a bad fight with his Dad," Amy said.

"I can't," I said.

"I know what that's like," Lisa said.

"My Dad's bad," I said.

"Believe me," Amy said. "She knows."

"So does my Mom," Lisa said.

'Kathy's Song' came on and a gloom settled on the room. I sat with my arms wrapped around my knees and my ankles crossed.

"I really don't want to go," I said. I clenched the wrist of one hand tightly in the fingers of the other hand, squeezing and turning. "I really don't want to be away from you."

Amy looked ready to cry. "He'll be back," Lisa said to her. "Right? You'll be back?"

I didn't say anything. I wasn't going to go. Somehow I had to stay. I watched Amy smile and wipe one eye. I went over and knelt before her.

"Maybe I can stay," I said.

"You have to go," she said. "That's the problem. Dad's coming home. You have no place to stay."

"I don't care," I said. "I can't be without you. I'll sleep in the park if I have to, anything. I don't care."

Lisa said: "He could sleep in the park behind my house."

Amy made a face.

"I'll sleep there," I said. "I'll sleep in a park."

"It's perfect," Lisa said. "You could sleep there and after Mom goes to work I could give you some food."

"I could do that."

Amy was shaking her head. "It's crazy," she said. "You'd get arrested."

"It's such a small park," Lisa said. "If anyone came he could just come into my house. The only reason to sleep in the park is so Mom doesn't catch him. In fact, he could sleep in our basement, as long as she didn't catch him."

"Really?"

"It's okay by me," Lisa said. "It's my Mom who wouldn't let it. I wouldn't want my sister to know either, although I'd probably have to tell her, get her to help me keep it a secret."

"I'm staying," I said. "I'm staying."

Sixteen

The next afternoon Amy took me upstairs to the fourth floor. The house was renovated, the attic a modern office with an elegant old desk. The ceiling was low and sloped over to a set of glass doors, which opened to a balcony that looked out on the backyard. The sun was shining and the room was bright. Breezes came in through the open doors and pleasantly stirred the air in the room. Soon we were naked on the floor basking in sunlight like sea creatures washed up on a shore. Afterwards I lay on my side with my head resting in my palm, gazing at her as she stared at the ceiling. She was thinking of something, her eyes moving, a smile playing with the corners of her mouth. I ran my fingertip from the point between her eyebrows lightly along the bridge of her nose and across her lips, along her chin and neck, and in-between her breasts to her stomach, where I spread my hand like a lily pad.

"I can't believe we just made love in my father's office," she said.

Afterwards we went to Lisa's. Her house was bigger than Amy's, a stand-alone affair beside a small park. The basement was large and cool and there was a natty couch at one end with a rolled up sleeping bag.

"You'll sleep there," Lisa said. "But you'll have to be quiet."

It was early yet, so we went back to the park and sat in a circle and talked for an hour, smoking cigarettes and drinking a bottle of wine that Lisa had taken from her Mom's cupboard. We talked about Findhorn and astrology and out-of-body experiences,

and I told them about the time I flew around the living room when I was three years old, back in Winnipeg, and about the dream that cured me of stealing.

"I have incredible dreams," Lisa said.

"Oh my God," Amy said. "You have the most amazing dreams."

"I write them all down," Lisa said. "I'll show you sometime if you want."

"I'd like that," I said. "I'd like to read your dreams."

Amy said: "Do you think it's true that if you dream that you die, that you really do die?"

"I don't know," Lisa said. "How would we know?"

"I don't know," Amy said.

"I never died in my dreams," I said. "But I fell off a building once all the way to the ground, and at the last possible second I started to fly, whoosh, and zoomed away."

"Flying dreams are the best," Lisa said. "I have them all the time."

Afterwards Amy went home and Lisa brought me back to her basement, and I took off my socks and shoes and unrolled the sleeping bag and covered myself.

"Comfortable?" Lisa said.

"It's fine," I said.

"It's an lumpy old couch," she said. "But I've slept there more than once."

She sat on the edge and I tugged the cover over my chest. For a minute neither of us said anything, then Lisa started telling me how much Amy loved me, and how I better be nice to her because she's her best friend, the only one who's ever understood her weird ideas, and her drawings, and stuff, and how she's the only one who was nice to her after she tried to kill herself.

Then she held out her wrist, and said: "See?"

I looked closely but I couldn't see anything.

"I didn't get far," she said. "The knife hurt and I stopped, but Mom found me bleeding and freaked out."

"I tried killing myself," I said. "After my parents got divorced and I was living with my mother. I think I did it mostly for attention. Took a bunch of pills. Got put in a hospital for a while."

"I think I'd like to show you my drawings sometime," Lisa said.

There was a noise on the stairs and we waited while a girl with dark hair came down.

Lisa groaned and gave me a look. "My sister," she said. Then she said: "Phoebe, what are you doing here?"

She was younger than Lisa, maybe by a year, and petite.

"Who's that?"

"This is Stephen, Amy's boyfriend. I told you about him."

"Oh yeah," Phoebe said.

She came over and Lisa explained the situation and Phoebe looked at me from time to time, frowning, although her eyes were sometimes amused. While the two of them talked I noticed how different she was from Lisa, not just smaller, but softer and rounder with a pixie-like face and cool dark eyes. I found myself noticing her small nose, slightly turned up, and small mouth with curved feminine lips. Once when she was turned towards me our looks lingered, and she smiled faintly, and I realized I was turned on, but

she seemed otherwise unaffected, focused on the fact that she had her sister over a barrel and threatening to be a bitch about it.

"Please Phoebe," Lisa said. "Don't tell Mom."

"But he can't stay here," Phoebe said.

"Mom doesn't need to know."

"I don't like it," Phoebe said.

"I'll owe you," Lisa said. "I promise."

A few minutes later they left to sort things out. An hour after that Phoebe came back, quietly. I was reading. She came down the stairs and right over to stand near the edge of the couch. She was wearing striped pajamas and a slice of her black hair hung over her eyes. She smiled shyly, and said: "Am I bothering you?"

"No," I said.

I didn't know what else to say, except it was true that I was glad to see her. She asked if she could sit, and I told her that was fine and she sat on the edge of the couch. She said she was curious about me and wanted to talk, ask me a few questions about Montreal. We talked about Montreal, but after a few minutes she started asking about Amy and how I met her, and whether I loved her and all that stuff. The whole time we talked I couldn't help noticing the warmth from her hip against the side of my leg. I also noticed that her pajama top was unbuttoned, and though I couldn't see her breasts, I saw the shadow that ran between them. I also noticed she wasn't wearing a bra, and when she moved I saw the free movement of her breasts under the thin cotton of the top. I wanted to open her shirt and see them swaying in front of me.

She kept speaking in a hushed voice, and as the conversation went on I found myself completely distracted by her breasts and her face, and her warm little body sitting next to mine.

At one point she placed a hand on the back of the couch and turned more to face me, leaning closer, showing more of the shadow between her breasts. Her hair fell forward around her eyes and she smiled. My hands tingled.

"You have such an interesting face," she said. "Can I touch it?"

"Okay," I said.

She put her hand against the side of my face, then trailed her fingers to my chin, then wiped them along my forehead, pushing back my hair so she could see my eyes better. "You have beautiful eyes," she said.

Her black hair shone with reflected light and seemed to enclose her face like a picture, and I realized she reminded me of the librarian, same color hair, dark eyebrows, intense gaze and small pointed mouth.

"I want to kiss you," I said.

I dug my hands in her hair on either side and pulled her towards me, but she resisted.

"Wait," she said. "What about Amy?"

"I don't know," I said, and I didn't. I felt hot all over my skin and my breathing was shallow. Nothing mattered in that moment except the girl in front of me.

"But you love Amy," she said. "You have to be faithful."

"I know."

"So you can't kiss me."

I tugged her head forward and she allowed herself to come closer, close enough that I could almost smell her breath, but she resisted again.

"Don't do something you'll regret," she said.

"I won't regret it," I said.

I was convinced of that part, but there was a noise on the stairs and Phoebe pulled away, sitting straight and brushing back her hair. Lisa came down mad, furious even, whispering accusations at her sister, telling her to get away. She glared at me, then Phoebe, then back at me, shaking her head.

"Nothing happened," I said.

Phoebe backed away with her arms crossed.

"We were just talking," she said.

"Yeah, well you better," Lisa said.

They went upstairs hissing at each other and for a while everything was quiet. Then I heard noises on the stairs, and loud voices, shouts even, and their mother came down, a woman who looked like an older version of Phoebe, but heavier, and with a blood-angry look on her face.

"Who the fuck are you?" she said.

The girls crowded behind her explaining as much as she would let them, but she only half-listened. She was staring at me like I was some kind of dangerous animal or something. And after all was said and done she told me to get out.

"But Mom," Lisa said.

"There's no fucking way I'm letting some man sleep here with you two in the house. You must think I'm out of my fucking mind. You better move fast, buddy. I'm sorry but there's no choice in this matter. None whatsoever."

Lisa kept begging, and even Phoebe joined in, although I gathered it was her fault that their Mom found out about me in the first place, and they all went back upstairs arguing. I held out hope that maybe their Mom would change her mind, but a few minutes later Lisa came back and told me I really did have to leave.

I got dressed and she gave me the sleeping bag and I went out to the small park out back of Lisa's house. I found a spot under some bushes and unrolled the bag and lay on top of it, but even with the cover the ground was hard and I couldn't get comfortable. I lay with my hands crossed behind my head and stared through the bushes at the dark night sky. Insects whirled in the light of a nearby lamp. The discomfort to my back grew worse. I tried lying on my side but it wasn't any better than my back. Finally I sat up and tried to read, but the light wasn't close enough and I didn't want to move and risk exposure, so I stayed where I was and waited for sleep, which was a long time coming.

Seventeen

Birds were singing.

"Shut up," I said. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

I tried turning over to get away from it and I felt something like a metal chain dragging through the small of my back. I curled into a ball and groaned, trying to pop out the kink, and I noticed I was covered in a layer of cold wet dew. I opened my eyes and saw daylight, painful daylight. Something crawled across my neck and I wiped it away. Things had crawled on me all night. I'd been eaten alive and tickled by bugs, soaked to the skin and wakened by birds. So much for sleeping under the stars.

I crawled out of the bushes and staggered across a stretch of grass to a bench. At the other end of the park stood a playground but the place was empty. Too early for normal people to be out. Only the poets and the proto-humans were in the parks at that time of day. It was so early the sky was only half blue. The ancient ones called it Dawn. I called it damnation.

I lit a smoke and opened my trusty notebook. All I had to do was wait for Amy's dad to go to work. I would write poems. She'd told me it would be safe by ten. At her house was food, shower, and a bed to rest in. Then my stomach grumbled. I figured the time must be about six. Maybe it was only five. Either way I was looking at four hours before I could go to Amy's house. Four hours without food or coffee. I wasn't going to last another twenty minutes.

I did the only thing that made any sense, I went downtown.

I didn't much like Toronto at six in the morning. Most of it looked like a barren wasteland of steel and glass canyons overrun with newspaper tumbleweeds, like any city at six in the morning, I guess. The closer I got to the center the more activity I found. The traffic was busier, the storefronts were opening, and muzak squeaked out of speakers in the awnings of fast food entryways. The air around Yonge and Bloor smelled of eggs and coffee, but it was too much and I felt ill. I went along checking doorways, looking for some quiet place, until I came to the entrance of a tiny mall that was empty except for a row of seats along the center. It was more like a wide hallway with storefronts leading out through some doors to a larger mall and a food court.

In the food court I got a coffee and muffin, spending almost all my remaining money, and went back to my little mall. It was still empty. I had the place to myself.

I put the cup and muffin on one of the seats beside me, took out my cigarette pack, almost empty, and put it on the seat beside the cup. Then I took out my notebook and pen and put them on the empty seat beside me on the other side. Then I ate the muffin. After that I lit a cigarette and opened my notebook and began re-reading the poems I'd written so far, disliking all of them, embarrassed, actually, that I was the author. Only one thing to do. I poised the tip of my ballpoint over a fresh page and thought for a moment. I puffed my cigarette, squinting and thinking. I looked around the mall. I wiggled the pen between my fingers. I swirled the pen in the air about the surface of the paper, trying to stir up some magic, stimulate flow, but nothing came.

I thought about love poems I could write about the girls I'd met in the past few days. I thought about Lisa's long blonde hair and Phoebe leaning over me. I thought about Phoebe, her breasts pushing against the inside of her striped pajama top, the outlines of

her nipples and how I wanted to slide my hands under her shirt and pinch them between my fingertips and kiss her. I lit another cigarette and re-read the poems I'd written on the morning I arrived. I'd written Amy's name over and over into a kind of song, then written about feelings of eternal love and how things were supposed to be, were always meant to be. I re-read them and turned back to the blank page and readied my pen, but still nothing came. I remembered making love in the attic and I wrote Amy's name at the top of the page, then wrote over it, marking each letter heavily with double lines.

I was wondering if that was the only poem I could write, a single word, when the door opened off the street and a very tall man stepped in. For a moment he stared at the seats where I was sitting, and I stared at him. He was a street person with a maniacal look in his eyes. His clothes were dirty and hung heavily over his spindly legs and arms. His eyes were sunken in dark folds of worn skin, and his face was grubby and unkempt, with several days beard. His chin was tiny, almost a point, and his cheeks pinched inwards and tight. His eyes were glassy and unfocused and his hair was oily and salted with flakes.

His lower jaw was moving rapidly back and forth and I realized he was grinding his teeth. I could even hear them squeak. He moved forward and sat in the seat beside the one I was using for my cigarettes and coffee. He made some noise with his voice, glancing at me in shots, eyes flicking back and forth. Even sitting he seemed tall, hunched over with his face drooping off the end of a long neck, turning to stare with eyes colored a washed-out blue, a blue that had been drained and mixed with white, so it almost wasn't blue at all.

He held up a clawed dirty hand. "Got a cigarette?"

I gave him one and offered him a light but he shook his head and put the cigarette somewhere away in a pocket inside his filthy old jacket. Nothing could stop him from grinding his teeth.

I said: "How are you?"

He looked at me, nodding and grinding, nodding and grinding.

"No meds today," he said. "No meds. Not going to stand in line. No way. Not today. Ran out yesterday. Ran out. No. No meds."

I'd known guys like him in the hospital. I wanted him to know that I knew where he was coming from. I wanted to sound like I knew what I was talking about, make him comfortable, give him comfort and make him feel okay, like he was human and he was loved.

"What are they giving you," I said. "Largactyl? Mellaril?"

He stopped grinding for second, then blinked and started again, grinding, grinding, like a machine, like he had a mission.

"I know what it's like," I said. "They gave me largactyl after I tried to kill myself, except I wasn't really trying to kill myself. I just took some pills because I wanted attention."

He looked at me sideways, grinding, looking. I stopped talking and just stared, amazed, like he was performing some extra-human feat.

Suddenly he snarled, and said: "Fuck you."

Then he grabbed his jaw to hold it still. For a moment he breathed, just breathed deep breaths, staring, haggard.

"I need to get my pills," he said, letting go of his jaw.

"Yes," I said.

"Got any pills?"

"No," I said.

I lit a cigarette and offered him another but he waved his hand. He started grinding again, then stopped. He took several deep breaths.

"I don't need pills," he said. "I've got Christ. That's all I need." He was grinding again. He looked at me. "Believe in Christ."

I shook my head. "No thanks," I said.

"Believe in Christ!"

"No really," I said. "I mean, I like what he said—"

"You have to. You can't do it alone. You need Him. You need to believe."

I shook my head. "No, I don't. Not me."

"You'll see. You need God. You need Jesus. We all need to believe in God."

"No," I said.

"You have to!"

"I don't. I believe in what I want."

"If you don't turn your life over to Christ..."

He grabbed his jaw again and bent forward so far his face was almost between his knees, then he leaned back inhaling a deep breath and moaning.

"You can't sit on a fence," he said. "You can't sit on a fence about God."

"Yes I can," I said. "God gave me permission."

For moment he just shook his head slowly staring with wide, wild eyes, as if I was one of the damned.

"You can't," he said, almost whispering.

I tried offering him a cigarette again but he stood up and started backing away. I thought of saying something else, trying to explain, but nothing came out, and a minute later sunlight was flashing on the doors as they closed and he was gone.

Eighteen

When I got to Amy's I rang the bell and waited, then rang again before going in. The door was unlocked, like she said it would be. In the front hall I yelled a couple of times but no one yelled back. I showered first, then wandered around looking at Amy's stuff and sniffing her underwear. I lay on her bed and closed my eyes and breathed in the smells of the duvet. My stomach grumbled, but I was tired and wanted to stay in her smell, so I lay there and I slept.

Then I heard someone come in downstairs.

"Hello?"

It was Lisa.

She'd brought her dog, a medium-sized mutt with brown and blonde fur on the end of a red leash. In her other hand, a picnic basket.

"I was thinking we could take Sandy downtown," she said. "Eat outside and wait for Amy to get off work."

I leaned in for a closer look at Sandy and he put his forepaws on my legs and licked my chin.

"He's so cute," I said.

We went in the kitchen and I ate a piece of toast with peanut butter and jam while Lisa dug around in the fridge and the cupboards for picnic food.

"It's kind of late for a picnic," I said. "Don't you think?"

"We can call it an afternoon snack," she said.

When I finished my toast I opened the cupboard with the booze in it.

Lisa raised an eyebrow. "What are you doing?"

"I was just going to make a drink before we go," I said.

"No you're not."

"It's no big deal."

"Yes it is," she said. "Amy made me promise not to let you."

"Oh, okay," I said.

"Come on, it's a nice day," she said. "Let's get out of here."

Lisa went upstairs and came down with a guitar case and a blanket and I got my backpack and we left. She paid for me to ride the bus and we went downtown. I was amazed they allowed Sandy on the bus, something I'd never seen in Montreal unless it was a seeing eye dog. We got off at Yonge and Bloor, the center of Toronto as far as I was concerned, and started west along Bloor. It was a hot day and the surrounding buildings, rising tall and shining in the sun, seemed to make everything hotter.

"Sandy needs a drink," Lisa said. "Wait here."

She went into a McDonald's with the picnic basket while I waited on the sidewalk. I leaned the guitar case against my feet and lit a cigarette. Sandy sat near the restaurant entrance, eyeing the doors and waiting for Lisa. Swarms of people moved past.

"Hey," a big guy said, catching my eye. "Got a cigarette?" He was a gorilla of a man. Behind him stood a thin redheaded guy who was peeping over his shoulder. For a moment I stared into the giant's eyes. I was sure he was hammered or on serious drugs. He opened the fingers of one brutal hand into a V, and said: "You know, a smoke?"

For some reason I shook my head, and said: "No."

I don't know why I said no, it went against the smoker's code of always sharing your smokes with a smoker in need. There was just something about the meanness in his eyes, or something. He was surprised, as if perhaps he sensed the very same violation, he peered at me beneath dirty brown bangs, as if getting a better look. For an instant his face twisted into a snarl and I realized he did not like that I'd said no to him, not one bit, but his look melted into a sudden and unconvincing ingratiating smile.

"That's okay," he said. "I'll just have to take this."

Swiftly he grabbed the guitar case by the handle.

"Ha-ha," I said. "Very funny."

I expected him to put the case back and laugh along, but he started walking. The redhead sneered when he passed and I waited a moment, thinking the giant would turn and come back and tell me he was kidding. Then I realized that maybe he was serious, and I ran after him and reached for the guitar. My fingers actually closed on the handle, and for a moment I had it, but the giant whipped around, and this time his face was distorted fully by anger, or something beyond it, some kind of primal rage.

"What the fuck do think you're doing, you fucker? What are you doing with my guitar?"

"It's not yours," I said.

The crowd swarmed around us, and people noticed us, stared even as they passed, but everyone kept on moving.

The giant came towards me.

"This is my guitar," he said. "Why are you trying to steal it?"

"What? Please just give it back," I said.

He raised the case and shook it. "But it's mine."

"Yeah," the redhead said. The redhead was close, leering in my face, and now I could see how pale and blotchy his skin was, and how much he reeked, as if he'd been drinking non-stop for a week, and I doubted he could see clearly with such unfocused eyes.

"Come on," the giant said, turning. The redhead followed.

I ran a few steps, and said: "Please give it back."

He waited for me to get close then spun around and slapped me across the face. I cried out and he tossed the case and shoved me against the side of a building with both meaty hands. I could smell the skin of his knuckles and he was shouting for me to show him some ID. I wasn't speaking clearly, telling him I was from Montreal, which seemed to excite him more. He claimed he was an RCMP officer and wanted to see my ID. For some reason I was scared to show it, then I realized he just wanted me to take out my wallet, and I said I didn't have any ID. He loosened his grip on my shirt for a second and I bolted, tearing away. He ran after me and kicked me right in the ass with pointy leather boots, and I howled. He grabbed me again and held me, and the whole time the redhead was cackling, repeating everything his big friend said.

I tried making eye-contact with the people who kept flowing past. "Help me," I said. "Please call the police. I need help."

No one stopped or seemed to listen.

I tied appealing to the giant. I was fighting back tears as I asked him why he was doing this, why me, but he wouldn't answer any questions, just kept demanding my

wallet, shouting and shaking me, and I kept begging him to let me go, to give me back the guitar and let me go.

"I'm a human being," I said. "Doesn't that mean anything?"

Apparently it didn't for it seemed to enrage him even more and I realized he was crazy, really crazy. He didn't smell of booze but his eyes weren't right, and they blazed like the look of hell, of evil, perhaps, and I expected at that point anything could happen.

He began pushing me back along the sidewalk, walking forwards and walking me back, and I kept looking back, stumbling over my feet, and I noticed a door open ahead to my right. I kicked him as hard as I could, as close to his balls as I could, and ran for the door, which was closing. I felt a surge in my chest, a sense that I had to make it, that everything would be okay, but I reached the door just as it closed. I grabbed the handle and yanked it, but there was a guy on the other side who'd just turned some keys. It was a bank and just two minutes past three. I banged on the door. I screamed for the guy to unlock it and let me in. Then I felt the hands of the monster on my shoulders.

The giant spun me around, shouting. I saw Lisa in front of the restaurant begging passersby, but everyone just kept moving. Then I noticed a man watching, and the giant saw him too, and we looked at him. He was well-dressed in a grey suit with neat hair and friendly face. He was not a tall man, rather slim and medium-built, and he carried a leather satchel in his hand, like a purse. Unlike everyone else on the street that day, he looked me in the eyes.

Nodding, he said: "Is that your girlfriend?"

"Yes," I said.

"That's your guitar?"

"Yes."

"Do you know this guy?" He nodded at the giant, who'd released me and taken a step away from me towards the man in the suit.

"I've never seen this guy before a few minutes ago," I said. "He's just doing this to me, I don't know why. Please help."

"Okay," he said. "Take your guitar and go."

Lisa shouted a thank you just as the giant shouted and ran at the man, swinging hard with a booted foot, but the man in the suit deftly jumped out of the way and backed off a few steps. That's when he opened his leather pouch and revealed an assortment of combs and scissors. The pointed steel laid out like that looked like weaponry, and he selected the biggest pair of scissors and yanked them out and held them towards the oncoming giant.

"I swear to God I'll stick you with these," the man said.

The giant roared with rage and ran at the man, threatening to kill him, and the man, seeing that the big man was now intent on catching him, turned and ran. He was fast, and in seconds he'd gone around the corner with the giant and the redhead following.

A few minutes later the police showed up to ask me questions. Lisa told them everything she'd seen. She had the guitar, the basket, my bag, and the dog. I had the shakes. I tried to recall what happened but I couldn't think of any details.

"Relax, you're in shock," a policeman said.

More police arrived, then the man in the suit. I was astonished to see him, my savior. He revealed he was on his way home from hairdressing school when he saw the assault. I saw the giant and his redheaded friend in the rear of one of the police cars,

scowling, with their hands behind them. A police man asked me a few more questions but I couldn't recall much. The man in the suit agreed to make a statement and I thanked him again.

Then Lisa tugged me aside, and said: "Are you okay?"

"I think so," I said.

I was feeling somewhat apart from the scene, from the two police cars, the man talking to the policeman who was writing out a report, the two guys in the back of one of the cars, and people all around watching and talking. Now the crowds were stopping because everyone wanted to see.

One of the police came over and asked me to sign a paper attached to a clipboard. As I was signing I noticed a familiar face in the background looking on. I didn't know who it was at first, only that I recognized him. I was glad to see a friendly face and I smiled and raised my hand to wave, then stopped. Suddenly I knew him, the man from the mall. He was not glad to see me, in fact he was frowning, giving me a look as if he knew all along, as if this was his doing, even smirking, like I'd received exactly what I deserved, and he knew it all along.

"That guy," I said.

Lisa looked, and said: "What about him?"

"I talked to him this morning. He told me not to sit on a fence. I told him a lie to get rid of him because he was getting on my nerves, but he knew. The bastard knew."

I looked around at the scene once more, the police, the crowd, everyone watching.

"My God," I said. "I brought this on myself."

Nineteen

Amy made me sit at the table while she washed my face. Through the window I stared at the tree growing over her back yard. When she finished she tossed the washcloth in the sink and came and sat with me.

"Your head must hurt," she said.

"It does," I said. "Can I have a drink of your Dad's booze?"

"No," she said.

I was sure he wouldn't mind under the circumstances but I didn't push it.

"Do you want some more aspirin?"

"Not yet," I said. "I'm sure it'll kick in."

"I can't believe no one stopped to help you," she said.

"You should have seen him that guy from the mall. He was warning me. I shouldn't have lied to him like that, claiming that God gave me permission to do something. What if God sent that crazy guy to get me?"

"That is crazy," Amy said.

"Something's going on," I said. "There's a reason that guy was standing there. And the way he was looking at me. It was this total I-told-you-so thing going on."

Amy listened, concerned, but not agreeing or disagreeing. I wanted her to understand, or believe me, or something, and said: "What do you think? Do you agree?"

"I don't know," she said.

Then I knew she had something on her mind. "What is it?"

"This isn't working out," she said. "You sleeping in the park. Lisa's Mom was really upset. She called my Dad. He's not thrilled that you're hanging around."

"He doesn't even know me."

"That's what I said, so he agreed that you could eat with us tonight."

"Oh."

"And you can stay the night in my sister's room, just for tonight."

"Really?"

"But you have to go home tomorrow."

"What?"

"It's not that you have to go home," Amy said. "You have to do something, go somewhere, get a job, something. You can't sleep in parks."

I protested of course, the usual about not wanting to be apart from her, and how I could never go home, how I could never face Dad, but all the time I was doing it she was being patient, which wasn't a good sign, just waiting, and by the time I ran out of steam I knew she was right. I had to go somewhere, do something. I was running out of time.

Amy smiled cheerfully.

"I've got a plan," she said.

I couldn't even smile back.

"What," I said.

She told me her idea, that I get a job for the summer and save a lot of money, then in the fall we do our year and next summer we could travel, to Scotland, or anywhere.

"I'd like to go to Eastern Canada," she said. "I've heard it's so beautiful."

I couldn't even agree it was a good idea. All I could see was facing Dad and the drudgery of some menial job, living with Dad and being harassed all the time, going to school and being miserable.

"It won't be so bad," Amy said.

"You don't think so," I said. "I can't face him, not after what happened. I'm sure he hates me."

Even as I said it I knew I was wrong. He might hate me for a minute, or blame me for anything, but I knew he loved me, and he was probably sad more than anything by what happened. It wouldn't stop him from getting angry and reminding me what a jerk I was, but I felt bad, all of sudden, sad that I might have hurt him too deeply.

"I'm going away in a month," Amy said. "I'll be gone for six weeks. Even if you stay here until then, you'll still have to find somewhere to go, something to do. If you go home we can make plans for next year, it'll be great."

"I wish I could go with you to Europe," I said.

"Dad would never let you. It's all been planned, down to the last minute. He's been planning it for years. Besides, Roberto's going to be there."

"So? I thought there wasn't anything between you?"

"There isn't on my side, but I know he wants to. To be honest, I was thinking of trying it, just to see."

"Fucking Roberto?"

"Just to see, to get it over with, in a way. I love you, Stephen, nothing can change that, but before I met you I planned to try Roberto out while I was over there. It wouldn't be love if I did."

It didn't bother me at the time to think about Amy fucking Roberto. All the communes I'd read about were experimental in some way. I believed in free love, probably because of all the poetry I'd read. I believed that as long as people acted from their own best judgments, and were true to themselves and their word, then nothing was right or wrong when it came to sex. This seemed like a good idea to try out the philosophy.

"Doesn't bother me," I said. "The more love we make, the more love there is."

"I knew you'd understand," she said.

I was more concerned about calling Dad anyway, and I'd been imagining the call, hearing his voice in my mind, picturing him answering the phone in the way he always did, his German accent on edge because he distrusted the phone, regarding it with suspicion until he knew who it was, that they were okay.

"I know Dad will let you stay if you call home and make arrangements," Amy said. "If he lets you stay we can make love, staying up late downstairs, or at the least tomorrow morning. I only have to go in for the afternoon, so we spend the morning doing whatever we want, once Dad leaves."

"I don't have any money to get home," I said.

"I'll pay for your ticket," she said. "You can pay me back when you get a job."

I didn't want to do it. All my ideas were suddenly reversed and I didn't like it. I wanted to run away, grab Amy and run, and now I was running back home instead, like a dog with a tail between his legs.

Then she kissed me and stroked my hair. "I love you," she said. "Everything's going to be fine."

We kissed for a few minutes, then she went upstairs, agreeing to leave me alone. I sat at the table, looking at the phone. I could hear her moving about in her room above. I looked out the window again, at the tree, then I picked up the phone and dialed.

Twenty

Dad took me back, though he was tough about it. Warned me he wasn't a hotel and didn't like being used. The usual harangue. Then he got drunk and laughed about it.

"The prodigal son returns," he said.

I got a part-time job with the city tending the shuffleboard area in Westmount park. It wasn't much but it kept the old man happy. It was an outdoor job. I had the keys to a wooden shed that contained the playing equipment, and all I had to do was hand out the pucks and sticks and sweep the playing area once in a while, and make sure no one misused the facilities. Hardly anyone ever played and I spent a lot of time sitting on the benches and writing poetry, reading the works of Carlos Castaneda and similar books, with titles like *The Master Game* and *Supernature*, and *The Aquarian Conspiracy*.

I talked with Amy on the phone as often as I could without getting Dad pissed off about the long-distance charges. I'd hoped to see her before she went to Europe, but as the time drew near it became clear that it wasn't going to happen. I learned about Katimavik around that time, and we talked about it and I decided to apply. If I got accepted I'd go in September, instead of to college, and at the end I'd come out of it with a thousand bucks.

"We could use that money for traveling," Amy said. "We could go see Findhorn."

I liked the idea but I wasn't hopeful. She was about to go away for six weeks. We wouldn't be able to talk, and I hadn't seen her in almost a month. Katimavik was a nine-

month commitment, a long time to be apart, especially after hardly seeing each other all summer.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "It'll pass quickly. I'll be back before you know it, and I'll send postcards regularly."

"I'm going to miss you," I said. "I already do."

"I know," she said. "Me too."

About a week after she left the postcards started coming in like she promised. The first was a picture of Michelangelo's David. It arrived on my birthday. *He reminds me of you*, she wrote. She also wrote about the museums and how ecstatic she was about all the art she was seeing, and she mentioned the farm of Roberto's family, and the view of Florence from the hills. There was nothing else about Roberto, and this continued with subsequent postcards. I was surprised because I expected her to tell me either way, as she'd promised she would. As the weeks went on and more postcards arrived the question grew. I regretted ever agreeing to the experiment, not that the choice was mine, and I consoled myself with the idea that she wasn't writing about it because she decided after all not to do anything about it. This idea appealed to me, and it occurred to me she would probably find it difficult to cross the line and actually make love with someone else, given how we felt about each other and the plans we'd made. But then I received a blue airmail letter, sealed. It arrived a week before she was supposed to arrive home. Most of the letter described parts of her voyages, the Greek islands where her father's family had a house, the beauty of the sea and the sky, much like the postcards, except near the end, as if she'd run out of things to describe, she wrote:

"I'm going to finally reveal to you the news you have probably been waiting for; my affair with Roberto. We became very intimate after our first few days in Florence, maybe too much so when traveling with a group, for my sister and her friend got really pissed off. They threatened to not let me travel with them, however I finally got my act together and cooled down. Sex seems to be all that draws us together. We made love – once. It hasn't changed at all the way I feel about you. My feeling of contentedness with you is very strong, and I feel it will not change for a long time. It seems like ages ago since I've been with you. It seems like I am writing a letter to someone who I know I love, but don't really remember. I wish I could stay here and live by the sea myself, in solitude."

A few days later I decided I had to be in Toronto for when Amy arrived. It wasn't because I was anxious about the letter. I was glad she said she loved me, and I believed her, but I guess I was hung up on the idea that someone else had made love with her, in a beautiful setting, on a beach in Italy, and I wanted to see her as soon as I could.

I got into Toronto in the late afternoon and took the bus up Yonge and went straight to the park. I found Lisa's house and knocked and she came out and I asked her to phone Amy and tell her I was there and I wanted to see her.

"I'll be in the park," I said.

I went over and sat on the bench and a few minutes later Lisa came over.

"She only got back today, you know. She's annoyed that you're here. She hasn't even had time to unpack."

"I know," I said. "I knew she'd be pissed, but I couldn't wait."

"She said she'll come see you after supper, but she can only come for a few minutes."

Lisa came back with sandwiches and beer and we ate and talked and waited. It got dark, turning eight, then nine, and finally Amy came. She said hi to Lisa and gave her some hugs, then Lisa left and Amy sat across from me in the grass. She was tanned and her brown hair had lightened at the edges, and she looked different than I remembered..

"I forgot what you looked like," I said.

"This feels so weird," she said.

We hadn't even kissed.

She started talking about the trip, about all the things she saw, the museums and how much she had to tell me, and I told her I got all her postcards, and her letter. After I mentioned her letter there was silence.

"Is it true," I said, finally. "What you wrote?"

She looked at me defiantly, and said: "Is what true?"

"Did you...fuck Roberto?"

"Yes," she said, quietly.

When she said it I felt an acute pain in my gut, so strong that I almost doubled over, groaning.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know why it hurts so much."

"We agreed to this," she said. "And I wrote and told you about everything that happened."

"I know, but for some reason it hurts. I didn't expect this."

"But I love you," she said. "I disliked Roberto afterwards. He's so vain. I could never love him or anything."

I was breathing heavily and holding my stomach, like I was in a panic or something.

Amy said: "What's the matter?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know. I'll be alright."

I breathed and held my stomach, and after a minute Amy grew calm, waiting for me to finish.

"Are you done?"

"I think so," I said. "I think it's okay."

I told her about being accepted into Katimavik, and where I was going for each of my three-month visits, how many others would be in the house, when I was leaving, all the details I could remember, but I wasn't thinking about Katimavik. I was imagining Amy in Roberto's arms under the stars, near the ocean, imagining her laughter and smiles, the light in her eyes. I felt like a cheater, like I wasn't supposed to care and here I was caring, but I couldn't help it, it seemed. I couldn't think about anything else.

"You are far away," she said, finally. "Farther than when I was away."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's not your fault. This is just going to take some time, that's all. We haven't seen each other in two months."

"And I'll be going for nine months," I said.

"We just have to remember that when the program's over, you'll have money to travel. And with my savings and your thousand, we can go anywhere we want. Findhorn, if you want. I can't wait to travel with you."

I searched her eyes for a memory. She smiled, but her face seemed different, the color of her cheeks different. She was changed, or else my perception was changed and she seemed altered by it.

She touched me, and said: "Can I kiss you?"

I wanted to, but I also wanted to pull away, reject her, make her beg, make her want me or need me, because I felt helpless, and really I was the one who wanted to beg and be rescued, to be held and saved by being swept away. She kissed me, but her smell was different, suitcases and soap, not rosewater or patchouli.

"I love you," she said.

I was trying to remember what I wrote in those poems, looking for that which I couldn't find that moment in myself, but I couldn't step out of myself, even though I sensed the truth underneath, that being stuck in my immovable self, afraid to let go, was the problem and not what she had done. She kissed me again, but it didn't matter. She'd become a stranger, if only for a moment, and even after shoving the moment away, I couldn't pretend I hadn't felt what I'd felt.

Twenty-One

Katimavik was the brainchild of Jacques Hébert, a former journalist who was a close friend to Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau. Together they founded the League of Human Rights in Canada, which became the Civil Liberties Union, and they also created Katimavik, a youth volunteer service. The idea was for young people to live communally in different parts of Canada, learning to function as responsible individuals in a group context within an established community. When I first told Amy about it she said it was the perfect thing for me, being about as close to a commune as I was likely to find in Canada. It was the only commune I could think of where the government provided condoms.

There were eleven of us in our group, all high school graduates who couldn't figure out what to do with our lives, crammed into a ramshackle house in the town of Huntingdon, Quebec. We had an adult group leader who provided folders of instructions on the nature of group dynamics. We were assigned several volunteer projects, one of which was to design and build a playground toy for a local daycare. We were taught how to shop for and feed a full house, and to budget allocated funds, and to manage ourselves in a group environment and in a local community.

On my first day I met the people I would live with for nine months in three different parts of the country, and all I could think about was if there were any girls I wanted to have sex with, because I'd decided to experiment on my own, as Amy had once suggested. I told her I never would, but without mentioning it I'd changed my mind. After

that meeting in the park I decided I was going to do what I wanted to do and just not talk about it.

There were five girls in our group but the only one I was attracted to was Joanne. She was wild and athletic, with long tangled hair and a strong square jaw. It didn't take long to realize that nothing would ever happen between us, she just didn't like me that way, and I soon saw that she was generally moody, spending a lot of time off by herself, or sleeping extra long hours. Stacy seemed to like me. She was short with layered hair, and sharp eyes and a pointed nose. She reminded me of a falcon, small and bright and pretty, but she wasn't for me. Patty was warm and funny, and attractive, but we shared no common ground, and Amanda, tough and bull-headed, disliked me instantly and that never changed. Kerry-Lynn was the only one who became a true friend. She was the den mother of the group and we shared an instant mutual fondness and talked about anything and everything.

A key part of Katimavik was billeting. Once during each rotation members were individually billeted with members of the host community. In our first rotation I was billeted for two weeks on a Quebec dairy farm. This meant I lived on the farm with the purpose of helping out the farmer and learning what farm life was like. I didn't adapt well. The farmer was a man named André. He ran the farm with his mother, a wiry old woman who cooked me whatever I wanted for breakfast every morning. Every morning I was shaken awake at five to help André with the cows. I learned a lot about cows, about cow feed, the smell of the cow urine at dawn, the warm comfort of their shit and their placid awareness of the human presence. I also learned I preferred to sleep late and leave farming to those who care for it.

With all the free time I had I got back into deep relaxation. I was even becoming interested in astrology because of Kerry-Lynn, who seemed to know all about it. I'd practiced deep relaxation off and on over the years at various times, and over the years I'd improved. I'd also been reading *Man And Time* by J.B. Priestly, and I'd become interested in traveling out of my body, and outside time, which Priestly seemed to think was possible. At night I'd go into deep relaxation, observing my breathing and tensing every muscle until a wave of relaxation rolled through my body. From there I tried to float out of my body, but each time I got close to doing it I would panic and fall back, move an arm or a leg and disrupt the relaxed state, or just shudder and open my eyes. It was the same thing that happened when I was in the hospital and practicing almost every day. I'd reach a point where it felt like I was about to float and darkness suck me in, and I'd feel a sudden fear and open my eyes.

Amy arrived on the bus one afternoon near the end of the second week. She could only stay one night and André and his mother had given permission, as long as she stayed in the guest room. The next morning André woke us and we milked and fed the cows, and after that I decided to spend the remaining time with Amy, since she had to catch an evening bus.

After lunch we went to the hayloft in the barn. I pushed two bales of hay together and laid down a blanket and we took off our clothes. The barn was warm but otherwise it wasn't very conducive. The air was dusty and the bales were hard and prickly and the blanket didn't do much to protect us from discomfort. After a few minutes of trying to make love we stopped. I told her about the relaxation I was doing, the books I'd been

reading and my goal of leaving my body. She didn't seem all that interested, only vaguely, perhaps because it was interesting to me.

"I don't know how something like that would be possible," she said.

"I can project out of my body," I said.

"What does that mean?"

"That means my point of perception is just outside. It happens as soon as I say it."

I pointed to a spot in the air a few feet away. "I'm right there as soon as I think it. In my mind's eye I can see us as if I was sitting over there, instead of here where my body is."

"But you're not out of your body," she said.

"No, it's something else," I said. "It's like I'm half-out. Can you do it?"

She thought about it, then shook her head, and said: "No."

"Try," I said. "Just imagine you see us from over here."

"I can't."

"Are you even trying?"

"Yes, but it's not working."

I didn't think she was really trying very hard, because it seemed so easy to me, not complicated at all, and not mysterious.

"I'm sure you can do it," I said.

"I don't think so."

"Can you sense my presence over here?"

"No," she said. "Nothing."

I was certain she could experience this kind of perceptual shift. It seemed so simple an act of imagination to me, and once experienced the idea of an actual out-of-body experience seemed more plausible, although, as I was finding, not as easy.

I noticed that Amy didn't seem too glad about my interest in the mystical. She didn't say it but she showed it in little ways, the way her expression changed when I started talking about it. Her resistance to participating, as I saw it, in the exercise was just one aspect of a full position.

When I tried talking about astrology it really came through.

"It's fun," she said. "I know I'm a Scorpio, and those qualities seem to show up, but I don't think I believe it."

"I never believed it before," I said. "But I'm starting to wonder."

But I felt like my interest was ignored and she often retreated into silence when I started talking, letting me ramble on about the aspect of an idea I wanted to discuss, waiting until the end to reveal that she wasn't much interested in that topic, or didn't believe in it all that much. The more this happened the more I seemed to want to convince her, to explain all the reasons why I was finding the topic compelling, and the more she seemed to regard the whole range of topics as my own peculiar fixation that she didn't share.

The result was that we seemed to have enough of each other by the time she had to get the bus in Huntingdon back to Toronto. André drove us into Huntingdon and dropped us off at the house and I walked over to wait with Amy for the bus. I was unhappy she was leaving again after such a short visit, but there was another mood

between us, one of uncertain strangeness brought on by my compulsive need to talk about all these topics that seemed to absorb me.

"I wish you could stay longer," I said.

"I know," she said. "It's like we barely had a chance to get to know each other again. And I can't come see you between now and Christmas. I think you'll be able to visit on New Year's. Dad's going to a party in the country so you can stay at the house."

"That's only one day. The flight to Vancouver's on the third."

"I know," she said. "It's not a lot of time."

We sat in a small square with benches across from a park. It was cold and most of the leaves had fallen. Soon there would be snow. I stared at her, wanting her to stay.

"I almost wish you hadn't come," I said. "A short visit like this is almost worse than no visit."

"I'm sorry," she said. She looked at me, puzzled perhaps, uncertain. "Maybe you're right. Maybe I shouldn't have come."

For some reason I had a crazy urge to slap her.

I said: "Can't you stay one day longer?"

"I can't," she said. "I could hardly even get away for this long."

I didn't really believe her, but I didn't argue. Instead I glared at her, thinking if I stared hard enough into her eyes I could mentally transform her view, control her, make her stay longer.

"Stop looking at me like that," she said.

I said: "Like what?"

But I continued staring, and next thing there was a flash, like a discharge of energy. I felt my face contort by itself, as if something had shot through it on its way out. Amy saw it, because I could see in her face that she was completely startled. I'd seen her face distort into an expression that was almost horrific, because it seemed alien, as if for one moment someone else was looking at me, that Amy's face had been replaced by another face inside her, a horribly angry-looking face, like an old witch, or a demon.

"Did you see that?"

"Yes," she said. "What was it?"

"I don't know." I thought for a moment and started pulling ideas out of my ass. "It felt like pure energy, pure emotion."

"Yes," she said.

"It was pure emotion, raw emotion without filters, or something. God, it was intense. Let's do it again."

"God no," she said. "It was horrible."

"Please let's do it again," I said. "Just look into my eyes again."

"No," she said. "I don't want to do that."

"Come on, please?"

She didn't want to, but she did, she allowed herself to be stared at in the eyes, but after a minute she shuddered, and said: "Ugh. I don't like it. You don't look like you when I do that. It's creepy."

I liked it, it felt intense, and I liked that I liked it and Amy didn't.

"Come on," I said. "Keep doing it."

"No, anyway here comes my bus."

And she was right, it was rounding the corner.

"Don't leave," I said. "Please don't leave. You can stay one more night. Go tomorrow."

"I can't." She tried to stand but I wouldn't let go of her hands. "Let go."

"I won't," I said. "I won't let you."

"I'm not joking," she said.

She pushed me away and went over to meet the bus. I followed, and said: "I'm sorry."

She put her hand on my face and we kissed.

"I'll write you when I get home," she said.

Then the doors opened and she got on.

Twenty-Two

"Things don't always go as we planned," Kerry-Lynn said.

She handed me a cigarette. I leaned over for a light then propped a foot on the balcony railing and exhaled.

"It went okay," I said.

"No it didn't," she said. "I can tell."

Kerry-Lynn and I spent a lot of time smoking and talking on that front porch of that run-down house.

"Do you still love her?" She asked it in a soft voice, almost as if she were afraid of the answer, or afraid of asking and seeing me answer it before I spoke.

I didn't answer at first, just took a drag and exhaled slowly.

"Of course I still love her," I said. "But it's fucked up."

"Why?"

"It just is. I mean, I want to fuck around, you know?"

"Isn't that going to ruin everything?"

"She did."

"You should go back to Winnipeg sometime," Kerry-Lynn said. "It's a different world out there."

Kerry-Lynn was fond of reminding me that I was born in Winnipeg.

"Have you ever seen the Northern Lights?"

"No," I said.

"You have to see the Northern Lights."

I started telling her about how I flew in the Roslyn apartments when I was three years old. How I climbed on the couch and jumped off and instead of falling floated into the air and flew twice around the living room. How I landed back on the couch and ran into the kitchen yelling all about it to Nanny, who didn't believe me, and how she gave me a cookie and sent me away, and when I went back and tried to fly again after eating the cookie, I fell on the floor.

"Do you believe me?"

Kerry-Lynn was leaning forward with her hands on her knees, contemplating the darkening shadows of the street in front.

"No," she said, decisively. "I mean, I believe you have that memory, but I don't believe you really flew."

"But isn't it possible that I flew because I didn't know I couldn't? And when Nanny gave me the cookie and frowned at me, she telepathically communicated to me that people can't fly, which is why I couldn't after I ate the cookie?"

"It sounds like a dream more than anything," Kerry-Lynn said.

I had to admit it did sound like a dream.

"But maybe the world trains us to believe certain things," I said. "And we don't notice that other things are possible."

"I believe that," she said. "But I think that applies to a lot of ordinary stuff."

"I guess so," I said.

After a minute, she said: "Soon we'll be in BC."

"In a few weeks."

"Did you know our new groups leader's a woman?"

"A woman," I said.

"It'll be quite a change," she said.

A breeze went by and I stared at the evening sky, as if I was reading it, deriving some meaning or message from it.

"I get the feeling I'm going to have an affair with her," I said.

"With who?"

"The group leader."

"How can you know that?"

"I don't know," I said. "I just do."

Kerry-Lynn laughed.

"You can't know these things," she said. "You don't even know what she looks like. Anyway, it's against the rules."

"I know," I said. "It's just a feeling."

Twenty-Three

I arrived in Toronto the afternoon of New Year's Eve. It was cold, but not as cold as Montreal, and the snow was melting as it hit the ground. Amy's dad was at a party in Peterborough and he'd given permission for me to stay at the house, just for that night, something I'd been looking forward to for weeks, to seeing Amy at home and sleeping in her room, with her, in her bed. After all it would be our last chance before I went to BC. I'd be gone for three months, and three months after that in Northern Ontario, until the end of the program.

Her house looked different in the winter, especially without snow on the dead lawn and the tree out front standing barren of leaves. I rang and waited, and when I heard footsteps I felt the smile on my face, the tingling in my lips, the readiness, but it was Lisa who opened the door.

"You're here," she said. "Come in, take off your boots. It's great to see you."

"Is Amy here?"

"She's not," Lisa said.

I followed her into the kitchen and she ran water for the kettle.

"Want tea?" she said.

"Okay," I said. "But where's Amy?"

She explained that Amy was at her mother's, that they were having dinner with her grandmother and her mother wanted her to be there.

"I was expecting her," I said.

"She'll be calling," Lisa said. "She got tickets from her Dad for a great New Year's Eve party, VIPs only, and we're all going."

I hadn't planned on going to a party. I felt shy and wanted to stay in, to kiss Amy and make love, perhaps have a fire and sit naked in front of it. Lisa made the tea and asked about Katimavik and I talked about that for a while, told her a bit about what it was like to live in a house with ten other people, described the dairy farm and told her about Amy's visit and the faces jumping out at the bus stop.

"Amy told me about that face thing," Lisa said.

"What did she tell you?"

"That you freaked her out by staring in her eyes and making faces come," Lisa said.

"I didn't do it," I said. "It just seems to happen. Want to try?"

"I don't think so," Lisa said. "That kind of thing freaks me out, too."

Then the phone rang and it was Amy, and Lisa passed it to me, and when I heard Amy's voice, I said: "Where are you?"

"I'm sorry I'm not there," Amy said. "I couldn't get out of this, but you'll see me soon. I'll call when I'm ready and we can meet at the bar. And go ahead make yourself a drink, you know, that weird kind you like."

While Lisa and Amy chatted some more I discovered that Amy's dad had added some new bottles to the cupboard. I picked out a few and poured some of each into a glass. Then I noticed Lisa watching me, having finished on the phone.

"Amy said it was okay," I said.

"I know," Lisa said. "She told me. Let's go sit on the couch."

We listened to music and Lisa talked about her school, and I talked some more about Katimavik. She was interested in communes, and I told her she should apply, that it might be her kind of thing.

"I think it's great that you're doing it," she said. Then she moved closer, and said: "I'd like to kiss you."

I was surprised, not because I hadn't noticed an attraction between us, but because I never expected anything to come of it. I liked Lisa, and I liked her body, tall and angular with small breasts, and I liked that I could be comfortable with her because she was Amy's friend, but I always thought she was out of bounds for that reason.

"Don't worry," she said. "Amy said it was okay."

"Amy said it was okay for us to make out?"

"As long as we don't go all the way."

"But why did she say that? Why would she say that?"

"Because I told her I wanted to kiss you," Lisa said. "Because I like you, and though Amy loves you, and you love her, that doesn't mean I don't want to kiss and see what it's like. She asked me and I told her, and she said it was okay. If you don't want to that's okay too."

Kissing Lisa was not like kissing Amy. Her lips were thinner and harder, her jaw was longer, her nose a different size, and she smelled like soap, which was nice but it wasn't the way Amy smelled, and when we hugged her shoulders were broad and bony. I wanted to let go, but I felt like I held back. We kissed, and we even took off our clothes and lay on the floor, but I kept thinking that Amy would know how it went, and she'd

know I acted. I found myself detached, almost uninterested because of this, and after a while we stopped.

Lisa said: "It feels like you don't want to."

"It's not that," I said. "But I was hoping to see Amy. I kind of miss her."

"I understand," Lisa said.

We talked some more, and I made another drink for myself, and after a while the phone rang and it was Amy, calling to tell us where to meet.

Twenty-Four

Amy said: "Isn't this a great party?"

We were downtown in a large restaurant on the ground floor of a major hotel, with big windows all around looking onto the street. The place was comfortably crowded and at one end of the room a stage had been set up. The band was The Nylons and the partygoers loved them. Waiters and waitresses circled the room with platters of potato skins and glasses of champagne. I couldn't get enough.

"It's great," I said. "A great party."

Lisa had gone to find the bathroom.

Amy grinned knowingly, and said: "Did you two fool around?"

"We started to."

"Actually she told me. But you stopped..."

"Because I love you," I said.

"But I wanted you to have fun," she said.

"I am having fun," I said.

And I was. Endless glasses of free champagne like ginger ale and an uncountable number of potato skins filled with mushrooms and cheese and slices of onion. Soon I was riding the pulse of the room like a wave, whirling around in front of the stage with each new song. The band was laughing and I was laughing, and Amy and Lisa were twirling in and out of focus, laughing, kissing me and dancing around me. I never danced in public,

but there I was, flushed as if fresh from a sauna, champagne-drenched and the need for motion working its way through me like a fever.

The Nylons were part way through their second set, singing *Up On The Roof* for the second time, when they broke the song and one of them started counting down to midnight and the whole room erupted into Auld Lang Syne and streamers flew, and Lisa and Amy kissed me and the band resumed, and we all started dancing again, and I was as close to the speakers as I could get.

At one point I felt a tug on my arm and saw a woman beside me, an attractive blonde with short-and-sassy hair. I didn't realize she wanted to say something, I just smiled and closed my eyes and kept dancing. But again I felt a tug on my arm.

I opened my eyes and she leaned forward to speak above the music, and said: "Hello...can I ask you something?"

"Hi," I said. "Go ahead."

"This might sound funny."

"What?"

"I said, this might sound funny," she said, louder.

"Okay," I said.

"What I want to ask is: are you a modern day prince?"

"A what?"

"Are you a modern day prince?"

I stopped dancing and we moved a few feet away from the speaker so we could talk better.

"You want to know if I'm a modern day prince?"

She nodded, and said: "Yes."

I didn't really know what she was asking. I searched my thoughts for what it might be, found nothing, then suddenly remembered Mr. Fogarty telling me to go sit on my throne and I thought this was one of those moments, a single moment where things that don't make sense come together and make some kind of sense after all, a part of a puzzle. At least that's what it felt like. The woman was waiting, smiling, and her eyes were clear. She wasn't drunk and she didn't seem to be putting me on. She seemed calm and serious. I didn't know the answer, except what Mr. Fogarty had said, and the feeling that I wanted it to be true, that I wanted to be special for this woman.

"Why yes," I said. "I think I am."

"I'm so glad," she said.

"Why?"

"Because there's so few of you left. Can I kiss you?"

"You want to kiss me?"

We were both laughing, and it seemed like she understood every possible reason why I might find this all so funny.

"I know it sounds silly," she said. "But I'd like to."

I noticed a man off to the side who was watching us.

"Don't worry," she said. "That's my husband. He knows."

"Your husband."

"We just got married. Really, it's fine. He won't mind."

The man raised a glass and smiled, nodding. She was waiting. Maybe she was watching the idea climb through my thoughts to reach that simple point where I was able to say: "Yes."

When I did, she kissed me on the lips, chastely, and said: "Thank you, and bless you."

I wanted her to stay, of course. Far as I was concerned I was just getting started. A little more kissing, maybe grab her ass, but she moved away, turning from my hands like she knew what I wanted, didn't mind, but had other ideas, and it was all okay. She went over to her husband, who put his arm around her, mission accomplished, and they smiled goodbye and left, and the crowd closed around them.

Amy and Lisa came over, and Amy said: "What was that all about?"

I said: "Did you see that?"

"We were watching," Lisa said.

"She was really into you," Amy said.

"It wasn't like that," I said. "At least I don't think it was."

Later going home along St. George or Spadina, I don't know which, Amy and Lisa raised their shirts at traffic and cars honked, and I walked between them with my arms around them, the luckiest guy in the world. Farther north the traffic thinned, and I tried explaining about the woman and what Mr. Fogarty said, but I was drunk and the world was a blur and it didn't make much sense.

"She was teasing you," Amy said.

"She wasn't," I said. "Really she wasn't."

We came to an overpass and I ran off one of the paths that led into a ravine and the girls kept calling out from above.

"Come on, Stephen," Lisa said. "We have to go."

"We're going to leave you here," Amy said.

I skulked behind a patch of bushes, peering through branches at their shadows as they looked over the edge, but when I looked a second time they were gone. I waited a few minutes, then I started to cry. "No, no, no," I said, rapping my knuckles on my forehead. Then I ran out, in a panic to get back to the street. They were already on the next block away. I ran, calling out. One of them looked back and saw me, but they just kept walking, and I ran, calling out for them to wait, begging them not to leave.

Twenty-Five

When my group arrived in Vancouver our new group leader was there to pick us up at the airport. As soon as I saw her I forgot my idea of having an affair. She was a small woman with shoulder-length curly brown hair and a plain oval face. Her body was pear-shaped with small breasts and her half-moon eyes drooped somewhat, like she'd been up all night. Her name was Lucille and she was twenty-six, quite a bit older than me.

She drove us to Abbotsford in a big white van, talking all the way while we marveled at the mountains that ringed the horizon. She told us she came from a small town in BC and was new to being a group leader. She told us the last group did things that she wanted to do differently this time around, so there would be no smoking in the house and no parties or drinking, all of which was fine by me. I didn't have money for booze and I didn't mind smoking outside. As she talked I began to get a sense of something, a philosophy in her that went beyond Katimavik. She talked about group dynamics, her expectations, people's differences, even mentioned astrology. I found myself making eye contact whenever she looked in the rear view mirror, and soon I felt the urge to tell her everything I knew and everything that had happened to me, to get her views on things, and to impress her.

Abbotsford was a city of fifty thousand located about an hour outside of Vancouver. Our house was a modest two-story bungalow on York avenue. Within an hour of arriving I noticed the guitar that stood in the corner of the living room. I pulled

my thumb across the strings and Lucille asked if I knew how to play. I told her I could play a little and she said I could use it anytime. I picked it up and strummed a few chords and plucked a few notes. She went out and came back with a song sheet, and said:

"Can you play this?"

It was *Pour Un Instant* by Harmonium. The chords were easy, and as soon as I started Lucille joined in singing the words.

"Sing with me," she said.

I blushed, but sang along while the others watched.

Lucille was like that, impulsive and idealistic, believing in the good in others, in sharing meaningful moments. She had plenty of ideas and opinions about all kinds of subjects, but especially metaphysical things. When I told her about the strange characters who attacked me on the street in Toronto, she said:

"Do you really think God was punishing you?"

"I don't believe that God punishes people, if there is a God," I said. "But something happened. I felt it. It was like I crossed a line or something."

"Maybe you called it onto yourself," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe subconsciously you wanted to punish yourself for what you said."

"How would that affect the real world so that some guy would attack me?"

"I don't know," she said. "God speaks in mysterious ways, if there is a God."

I told her everything I could think of to tell about everything that had happened. She knew about Findhorn already and agreed it would be an amazing place to visit, even

accepted the explanation that people at Findhorn had somehow learned to speak telepathically with plant devas.

"I think miracles are taking place everyday," she said. "We are coming into a new age on earth."

She introduced me to numerology and told me things about astrology I'd never known, and showed me her bookshelf, which had works by Edgar Cayce and Jane Roberts, and Carlos Castaneda, and one book by Nadia Montgomery.

"That's a strange one," she said. "You think the others are strange, in that one she says that extra-terrestrials inhabit our bodies and live our lives."

"Extra-terrestrials?"

"They come into our bodies at certain times and take over," she said.

"That's when our lives go in new directions."

"I don't think I can believe that," I said.

"You never know," she said.

She had a rosary on her wall, draped out like a wall-hanging that she said was her grandmother's, the only thing of hers she wanted after she died. I asked if she believed in God or went to church, but she didn't.

"I don't think I can go back to that," she said.

The first week of February was her night off. Each group leader got two nights off during every rotation, including the billeting phase. The night before we had one of our usual passionate talks at the kitchen table and I decided to push things a bit. I was feeling more enamored than I'd felt when I first saw her in the airport. For one thing we'd all gone swimming one day and I'd stood behind at the ladder leading up to the diving board.

A good look at a woman in a wet bathing suit is enough to tell me how I feel, and I was embarrassed to be so close to her that day because I was sure she felt the heat from me. Since that time we'd talked every night and I felt a certain pressure growing, like a question in the air between us. I was especially playful that night, perhaps on edge knowing she was going away the next night, leaving me, abandoning me.

"Did you know that I know everything," I said.

Her eyes flashed. "No one knows everything," she said.

"I do," I said.

"You can't," she said.

"I do."

"Prove it."

"Alright, I'll explain. Remember I told you about the mathematical structure of Bach's music."

"Of course, the divine property of numbers."

"Once you understand the underlying structure of a fugue, you can understand all fugues. You get inside the music of Bach through one piece, and you get inside all of the other pieces."

"I think I follow you," she said.

"There's an invisible world, right?"

"Right," she said.

"We go there in our dreams, or when we meditate, or pray, right?"

"I believe that," she said.

She licked her lips and for a moment I forgot what I was saying.

"When you get inside that world, you have access to everything. You can know everything. That's how I know everything."

"That's different than what I thought you were talking about."

"Maybe," I said.

"You don't really know everything."

"Yes I do," I said.

"You're so full of yourself," she said. "I agree there's all kinds of connections between things, especially numbers. Numerology is the divine pattern of numbers, so I agree with that. But I still say no one can know everything. There's too much to know."

"It's not just numbers," I said. "It's myths. It's like we're living in a myth or a dream, like this life really is a dream, a kind of dream. What happens if we look at it and ask what it means?"

"Exactly," she said. "You know, I really feel fortunate to know you, Stephen. I like the way you explain things so clearly."

And I liked being able to eye her breasts at will across the table, and I felt such a stirring in my loins that I wondered if it was possible at this point for something not to happen. Is it possible to reach a point of lust where sex is avoidable? I didn't know what to say, but I wanted to keep it going, so I said:

"Have you ever read the I Ching?"

"Is it Chinese astrology? I love Chinese astrology."

"No, it's a book, and you ask questions and get answers from it."

"Oh yes, you throw coins and ask it questions, right?"

"Yeah, but there's more to it than that. It's all based on the yin-yang, the eternal male-female balance that runs through all life, like a mathematical pattern."

She paused, thinking about it while she looked at me. I could see the thoughts going through her eyes, her considerations of what I was saying. She licked her lips again and swallowed and I felt an urge to put my hand on hers.

She smiled, and said: "Is that how you know everything? You go off and ask a book?"

"I was talking about the yin-yang."

"I know that," she said. "But what does that have to do with mathematics? Unless you mean multiplication."

She raised her eyebrows, triumphant.

"If I had a copy of the book I'd show you," I said.

"Get one," she said. "I'd like to know more."

Twenty-Six

Lucille left the next morning and I went out to find a copy of the I Ching by Carl Jung. It was a cloudy wet day and the smell of cedar hung in the air. There were a couple of bookstores in town but after checking around I decided my only chance was to find it second-hand. I found a second-hand bookstore with a bell above the door that jangled when I opened it and a floor that was wooden and worn. The interior was spacious and smelled of smoke and incense, and was just a bit dusty. At a counter at the back sat a heavy man with thinning hair and a bored expression. He was propped on several cushions in a captain's chair reading a book that lay open on the counter. When I entered he raised his head to see who it was while he slowly turned a page, then went back to his reading, steadily moving his eyes back and forth, right to left.

Every inch of wall space was crammed with bookshelves filled with books.

I went over to the counter and asked if he had a copy of the I Ching. He looked at me with heavy-lidded red-rimmed eyes, and leaned back, pushing away from the counter slightly.

"I don't think so," he said. "I've had them, but I think I sold the last one."

"I'm looking for the one by Carl Jung."

"The Wilhelm Edition. Jung wrote the introduction. If I have it, it's over there, on the back wall. But I don't think I have it."

"Thanks," I said.

He nodded and licked his finger, preparing to lift a corner of a page, and returned to his reading.

I went to the back and noticed a scruffy-looking man in the corner with a book in his hand. He glanced over as I passed, turning his shoulders slightly, as if he wanted to hide the book he was reading.

"In the philosophy section against the wall," the man at the counter said.

I moved along the wall from one section to another. *Psychology* became *Religion*, then *Philosophy*. In the Philosophy section I found Bertrand Russell, many books about Christianity, and I found Zoroastrianism, but no I Ching.

"You won't find it," the scruffy man said. He glanced over his shoulder as he turned a page. "Hasn't been one in a while."

I looked at him for a minute and he turned so I could see his face better. It was a round face, and he had short dark hair, thinning on top, and heavy dark eyebrows. His nose was small and covered in blackheads, and he had a thin black beard and moustache that barely covered a large round chin. His clothes were shabby and loose, utilitarian. He seemed like a crank, a hermit or some kind of nutty professor, a person who did not spend a lot of time around other people.

"Thanks," I said.

I started looking through the philosophy section again.

"I'm telling you," he said. "You won't find it."

"I'm just making sure."

After a minute, he said:

"You ever read Castaneda?"

"Of course I've read Castaneda," I said, without looking around.

"Oh yeah?"

"Teachings Of Don Juan, Tales Of Power. Others."

"That's good," he said.

I'd stopped concentrating on the titles in front of me because I'd become aware of how annoyed I was at this guy, which puzzled me because I usually loved talking to cranks and weirdoes in places like second-hand bookstores.

"How about this," he said. "Ever read this?"

He was holding out a book about Edgar Cayce, which I didn't take. I shook my head without looking directly at him and went back to my important business of scanning the philosophy section for the third time, but not really reading the titles.

"Forget the I Ching," he said. "Read something else."

"I like the I Ching," I said.

"It's okay," he said.

He moved some books around on the shelf in front of him, then lit a cigarette.

Then he said:

"You should read these."

I pretended not to hear him.

"You really should read these," he said again, but softly.

I exhaled noisily and looked. He was pointing to the section of books by Jane Roberts. Lucille had one of them, *The Seth Material*. That was the one he pulled off the shelf. He held it out so I could see the cover.

"This one's important," he said.

His cigarette was hand-rolled and looked like a joint.

"This is the most important book here. If you read only one of these, read this."

"Isn't that written by a spirit or something?"

"Something like that."

"That's a bit much," I said.

"Try it, you'll see."

"I'm pretty happy with Castaneda," I said.

"Not to knock Carlos, but this is the real deal."

"Uh-huh."

He put the book back.

"You know you can't do this stuff with just the intellect."

"What do you mean?"

"You can't do it with your just mind," he said, tapping his head.

"I do pretty good with my mind. I understand the things I read. I get it."

"No you don't, you only think you do. There's a difference between knowing with your mind and knowing by experience."

"I have a good imagination," I said.

I chose that moment to say goodbye and thanked him for his help, and I headed back to the counter. I thanked the guy at the counter and told him I couldn't find it, and he shrugged, and said:

"Hardly ever comes in."

He went back to his book and I thanked him again and turned to go, but the scruffy man was there, waiting. I ignored him and went for the door.

"I want to ask you something," he said.

I stopped and turned and gave him a look that said he better not waste my time. I hated the smile he gave me in return.

"You know, you don't know everything," he said.

The hairs on the back of my neck ticked, and I said:

"What?"

"You don't know everything. You might think you do. In fact I can see you do. But you don't. You don't know everything."

"And, so what?"

He took a step. "So...you might want to consider what you do know, and ask yourself what you want to know, because some things are hard to know. You might want to ask yourself if it's worth it."

"I know that," I said.

"Nice, but let me ask you: what are you going to do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't ask me a question. I told you it doesn't have anything to do with this." He tapped his head. "Try to feel the question instead." He tapped the middle of his chest. "There's more going on than you know."

I opened my mouth to say something, then closed it. He nodded.

"That's right. Did you know that Carlos Castaneda admitted that he made up everything he wrote?"

"He did not."

"He did. He said that Don Juan was a literary invention and he made everything up, that none of it really happened."

"I can't believe that," I said.

"Wasn't that the fun of reading it? Believing for a moment that something was real that you knew, on some other level, was not?"

"He lied?"

"Does it make a difference?"

"I don't know," I said.

"I don't know either," he said. "The question is always the same."

"Which one?"

He came closer and brought up his hand intently, with his forefinger and thumb poised as if pinching something.

"One day you're going to die," he said.

I giggled and he raised the finger, and said:

"Wait!"

I shut my mouth.

"One day you're going to die. It could be tomorrow. It could be next week. Could be ten months or ten years." I felt time flowing away from the moment and panic tickled at my belly. "You see? You don't know."

The ticklish beginning of panic became certain, a palpable uneasiness. I wanted to get away from him now. This was more than irritation. This was insult, abuse. And he was enjoying it.

"That's right," he said. "And since you don't know, the question is: what are you going to do between now and then?"

I giggled again. It seemed like such a stupid question. The kind of thing I might have read on a greeting card or a magazine in a supermarket. Then he hissed, and his finger shot forward to within an inch of the midpoint of my chest.

"In fact I could kill you right now," he said. "Just by touching you right there."

His fingertip quivered and I jerked back.

I reached for the door knob behind me.

"I have to go," I said.

"No you don't," he said.

"Yes I do."

He laughed.

"Go ahead then," he said. "Run."

Run? I stopped. Who did he think he was to talk to me like this? Like I was some idiot who knew nothing? Mr. Fogarty told me to sit on my throne for a reason. That woman wanted to kiss me for a reason. Even this prick was talking to me like this for a reason.

I stuck my chin out, and said:

"Do you know who I am?"

And it came out all wrong, like I was the one who didn't know, like I was asking for help, like a bird looking for his mommy.

And he saw it, he knew exactly what had happened, and he laughed, and said:

"Yes, I believe I do."

Bastard. I yanked open the door, and he said:

"Wait!"

And he came towards me, and his elbow rammed a rack of children's books. The rack wobbled and a single book fell off, face down on the floor with a soft slap.

We both looked at, and he grinned and picked it up. His smile got bigger as he turned the book around, and said:

"I think this explains everything."

On the cover was a picture of a donkey dressed in royal robes with a gold crown on top of his head and a very sad look on his face.

It was called *The Donkey Prince*.

The scruffy man laughed, and I bolted out the door and down the street, running for a block and a half before I stopped to catch my breath.

Twenty-Seven

Lucille came back the next day and let me know right away that she had something to tell. Something had happened in Vancouver. And since I had quite a story of my own we decided on an after supper walk.

It was a beautiful evening, cool but clear. We walked around the neighborhood, new houses surrounded by cedar woods. The sky above was mellowing and dark and the stars were beginning to show.

I told her everything, and I got quite excited. Every word the guy said came back like a tape playing in my brain. I was waving my arms and breathing so fast as I told it, that Lucille said:

"Relax, you're here now."

"I think I want to borrow your Seth book," I said.

"Your story is incredible," she said.

We talked some more about it, trying to fit the pieces together, Mr. Fogarty, the blonde at the concert, the attack on the streets, and now this guy, this scruffy man.

"Someone is trying to tell you something," she said.

"But what?"

"Let me tell you what happened to me. I saw a tarot reader in Vancouver."

"That's just a gimmick," I said. "Tarot, and all that stuff."

"She knew everything. She knew what I'd been thinking, what had been happening in my life." Lucille looked away at the trees as she talked. "She knew about

our conversations. She knew the questions I'd been asking myself, the things I wanted to know. I didn't have to tell her. She already knew. I was impressed. I was skeptical going in, but she impressed me."

"That's good," I said.

"Then she told me about someone. Someone in my life I'd been thinking about for a while." My heart was pounding and I looked at her, but she was still looking at the trees. It must be some guy she'd never mentioned. She hadn't told me much about her life. All this time I'd been fantasizing I'd never thought she had a life outside Katimavik, this little project, this group. I'd had no idea.

"She told me I would be involved with this person," Lucille said. "When she said that I was really surprised, but I'd been thinking about it. She said it was important for me, that I was learning a lot."

"Who is he," I said. "Is he in Vancouver."

"No," she said. "He's here. It's you."

For a minute I listened to the sounds of our feet walking. She was still looking at the trees. There was a voice inside me making a noise like hand-clapping, or cheering. It was a small feeling, like a tiny colorful geyser of emotion. I kept it small because I was afraid of it.

"She said it was me?"

"Yes. I already knew it. I'd been feeling it for some time. There's something between us. I don't know what it is."

I thought about that night on the porch with Kerry-Lynn. These things do happen. At least things seem to happen, whatever they are, they are something.

After a few more minutes we'd come full circle, back to the house. I was calm, carrying the knowledge inside me like a light. Something would come of this, I knew it. I was ready. I just didn't know what. I opened the basement entrance and we went in. It was dark and I fumbled around the ceiling for the chain to the light.

"There's something I want to do," Lucille said.

I turned and leaned on the top of the freezer, and said: "What?"

"This," she said, and she leaned forward and put her hand behind my head and pulled my face close to hers and we kissed.

I almost collapsed. It was like I'd been hit by lightning. A static zap. A buildup suddenly released.

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know," I said.

I was leaning on the freezer to support my weight. My legs weren't working well. She grabbed my hands and pulled.

"Come on," she said. "Stand up."

She dragged me over to the couch and we sank onto it, and I pushed my mouth against hers.

We kissed for a long time. I saw dozens of faces in her face, glowing eyes in her eyes when I stared into them. I was in a trance, some kind of devil trance, stoned on the closeness of her mouth.

"I can see your soul," I said.

She didn't say anything, just kept kissing me and touching my face.

Twenty-Eight

The next day I started reading Lucille's copy of *The Seth Material*. It was about Jane Roberts, a science-fiction writer who experimented with a Ouija board and started receiving messages from a spirit called Seth. Soon she was channeling Seth directly, dispensing words of wisdom about things like reincarnation and alternate realities, and psychic powers. I would have put it aside except as soon as I started reading I found myself strangely gripped by the ideas in the book, as if the words of this Seth character were bringing out thoughts and feelings I'd always had, but never managed to express. With each turn of a page new feelings of identification erupted within me in totally unexpected ways.

At one point I became aware of Lucille in the kitchen talking with Norm. Norm had a way of getting on people's nerves. He had a whiny voice, and he'd had a crush on Joanne from the beginning and wouldn't let up. I didn't hear everything Lucille was saying, but she'd tried explaining at other times that Joanne really didn't want Norm following her around and talking to her all the time. I tried focusing on the book instead of Norm's protests. Then the phone rang and Patty came to tell me it was for me.

I went in the other room to take the call. It was Amy. She sounded sad.

"Are you okay," I said.

"Not really," she said. "I miss you."

"I miss you too," I said.

"I had terrible dream last night."

"What was it about?"

"I'd lost you to someone else."

"You're not losing me," I said.

"Feels like it. I was so angry at you after you left. You kept pestering me when we got back to the house. Do you remember? I was happy to see you go."

"I don't remember that," I said.

"What do you remember?"

"Chasing you guys after I ran down the ravine."

"We thought you were being so childish."

"Nobody believed me," I said.

"About what?"

"I don't know. That woman."

"It was a party. People say all kinds of things."

"I know," I said.

"I was glad to see you go and now I miss you," she said.

"I remember begging you for something," I said.

"You went in the bathroom and threw up."

"I remember that."

"Then you tried to kiss me."

"Sorry."

"It was gross. You kept accusing me of all kinds of stuff."

"Like what?"

"You kept saying I didn't care and that I had no idea what you were talking about."

"I know you care," I said.

"It's like it wasn't you. I don't like it when you drink. And I haven't been able to shake this feeling."

"What feeling?"

"That I'm losing you."

"You're not losing me. Stop it."

"Are you seeing someone?"

"No. But what if I was? What about you and Roberto?"

"I didn't fall in love with Roberto, Stephen. You know we just fucked once."

"I know," I said.

"I love you," she said.

She asked about Katimavik and I told her what I'd been doing, teaching English to Cambodian refugees, reading all kinds of interesting books, things like the Findhorn book. Mentioning Findhorn got us talking about our plans for the summer.

"I've saved almost eighteen hundred dollars," she said. "Six hundred for tuition, the rest for our trip."

"How's school?"

"You know, me and January. Usually I get it worse."

"It doesn't even snow here in winter."

"I know," she said. "You're lucky."

"I miss you," I said.

I did. Amy, my love. I missed her.

"I guess I better go," she said.

"Alright," I said.

"You sound far away," she said.

I was.

Twenty-Nine

After I hung up I just sat there. I wanted to go read my book, or go out on the porch for a cigarette. Instead I rocked back and forth on my crossed legs with a pulling ache in the middle of my chest. I wanted to see her and touch her, feel her kisses on my face. If she could put her arms around me and smile with her eyes on fire with happiness, she could save me. The sounds of the house around me, voices in other rooms, footsteps, all receded as if water was filling my ears. I knew I was on a track, going somewhere. Maybe it was the wrong thing. I felt something in my gut, maybe that's what it was. But I was doing it. I was going that way. I knew that.

Suddenly loud voices came from out back and the back door banged open and there was running and tearful pleading, something about the phone, and Lucille saying yes of course, and Stacy ran in.

"I need that phone right away," she said.

I handed it to her and got up and stepped back while she dialed frantically.

Andrew came in and I asked him what was going on.

"We were just walking along and she suddenly started shaking and getting scared."

Stacy, waiting for someone to answer on the other end, stared at me with wild eyes, and said:

"I saw my baby brother getting hit by a bus."

"She got upset out of the blue," Andrew said.

Stacy held up a trembling hand for silence as someone answered the other end,
and she said:

"Hello? Mom?"

That's when she learned that her brother was fine because the police had brought
him after he'd come within an inch of being hit by the bus on the way home from school.

Stacy started screaming: "Oh my God! I can't believe it! I knew it! I saw it! I saw
it happen!"

For several minutes after hanging up she couldn't stop crying or manage to calm
herself.

Thirty

Two weeks later I was billeted on a goat farm. On the second day Lucille came to get me and we went back to the house. The plan was to stay the night at the house and go to Harrison Hot Springs in the morning. A motel room at the hot springs was Lucille's idea. We hadn't been able to be free with each other at the house with everyone around. Relationships between group members were against the rules. Between group members and group leaders was even more forbidden. Everything was a big secret.

The house seemed empty. For the first time we were able to do whatever we wanted. Lucille set up a blanket in the living room and we got undressed. We sat and kissed and I kept thinking of Amy. After a minute, Lucille said:

"Is everything alright?"

"I'm just self-conscious," I said. "I don't know."

"Just relax," she said.

Easier said than done. To help I drank more of the wine she'd bought, an entire gallon box. After a glass and a cigarette we tried again, then again. An hour later we tried again. I drank some more, we talked some more, I assured her I wanted to do it. We tried again. Eventually it happened, we made love. We'd been trying for six hours.

Lucille took me out to a family-style restaurant in town called Tony's. She bought me dinner and drinks, and I drank several drinks, and we went back to the house and made love some more, then slept. The next day Lucille drove us to Harrison Hot Springs. On the way we bought some groceries and cigarettes. Lucille paid for everything and it

felt good that someone wanted to spend money on me. It probably would have been perfect if I hadn't been thinking so much about Amy, if not thinking, then feeling, as if some part of me inside was connected, a space reserved for her, and it was throbbing with awareness. I wondered if she felt what was going on, what I was getting up to three thousand miles away.

Harrison Hot Springs is located on the bank of a pretty lake ringed by snow capped mountains. It was used by aboriginals as a destination for bathing in the hot springs, for health and rejuvenation, but of course settlers, invaders, turned the place into a money-making operation.

We checked into our motel and I flopped on the bed.

"Isn't this place beautiful," Lucille said.

"It's like a postcard," I said.

I rolled off and went over to the kitchenette and poured a glass of wine from the carton, then sat at the table against the wall and lit a cigarette.

"We should go out for a walk," she said. "It's such a beautiful day."

We went out and walked around, and after we looked at the mountains and admired the view, we went back and made love, though I was again becoming half-hearted about it. I rolled away after a silence and got myself more wine and lit another cigarette. For a while we didn't say anything. It was like we didn't have much to talk about. We tried talking about spiritual stuff, but I was getting cantankerous. She had glowing notions of enlightenment, or something. I felt more cynical the longer we talked, and kept drinking the wine.

"We're almost out," I said.

"This isn't exactly what I had in mind," she said.

Eventually I finished and crawled onto the bed and lay on my stomach. I was breathing heavily and I felt drool coming out of my mouth onto the cover. Lucille touched the back of shoulder from behind, and said:

"Are you okay?"

"I don't know," I said. A bubble of sadness seemed to be growing in my chest, expanding to include my throat, squeezing it, then my eyes and the top of my head.

"Do you want to leave tomorrow?"

I rolled onto my back and wiped my chin and stared at the ceiling.

"I think so," I said.

She moved close to me with her hand on my chest.

"Okay," she said.

The next morning we left, packing our stuff into bags and getting back into the van. Once we were on the road we started talking. Lucille said:

"Maybe it was too much for you, too fast."

I turned to stare out the window.

"Maybe," I said.

For a while Lucille drove without talking and I stared out the window.

"I just have to say something," she said, finally. "I planned this to be something special, something nice."

"I know," I said.

"I think you ruined it. Last night you just got into such a bad mood. I don't know why."

"I'm sorry, I don't know either. It just came over me."

"Maybe this isn't a good idea, this whole thing."

I stared out the window at a steady rhythm of passing sights, fields and trees and the side of the highway. The flow seemed to catch my heartbeat, and I felt nervous, perhaps even stifled, but I had nowhere to go.

"Don't fall in love with me," I said.

"What did you say?"

"I'm saying don't fall in love with me."

"What are you talking about."

"I don't know," I said. "It's just a feeling. Promise me, okay?"

"Okay, I promise. I won't fall in love with you."

Thirty-One

I went back to the goat farm for a few days, but I didn't like it. I complained to Lucille on the phone and she came to get me. I stayed at the house after that. Sometimes we made love. Most nights she took me out to Tony's. I hadn't had anything to drink for over a month, and now I was drinking every night, and I discovered Lucille liked to drink too. She even smoked my cigarettes once in a while. One night Tony, who'd started talking to us, gave us a joint. We went back to the house and smoked it and lay in bed, making love on and off, talking about telepathy and past lives until we drifted to sleep.

One evening we were having one of our intense discussions, and I was attempting to articulate what I understood God to be. I'd been read the Seth stuff and I had this idea of God being in and of everything, that everything was made of consciousness, and that just as I was the self who said "I am" at the sum total of however many billions of cells, God was the self who said "I am" at the sum total of everything in existence, this world and any others.

"I can agree with that," Lucille said. "I don't think God is this old man with a beard. It's more like an energy, something abstract."

"But it's still an identity," I said.

"Maybe," she said.

"I am God," I said, finally.

"What are you saying?"

"I am God. If everything is made of consciousness, and every component is made of God, is a form of God, then I am God."

"No, I can't accept that. If God is the creator of everything, then God is something else."

"I'm not saying I created everything, but it's kind of like a hologram. The act of creating everything has to be in me somewhere, because I am God. There are no limitations."

"You're taking it too far for me," she said.

"You are God too," I said. "And this is the problem with religions. They took all that away from us. Priests that stand in the way of us experiencing what we really are, Gods, emanations of God. They committed this crime against people. Those fuckers. And it's all a lie."

I rapped my knuckles on the table. "This is God," I said.

I rapped my knuckles on my chest. "And this!"

After a minute, Lucille said: "I'm sorry, I can't accept that right away. I have to think about it."

Thirty-Two

Sometimes there are things a person does not know. There were things I did not know. One thing was why at the apex of understanding I seemed to descend into my worst state of feeling. I did not know why, all I knew was that something wasn't working. Nothing seemed to fit in my mind. The world outside me, the world of people especially, wasn't making sense anymore. And I didn't understand why no one seemed able to make it clear for me.

When everyone came back Lucille and I had to turn things off, to go back to pretending we weren't lovers. But I couldn't do it. I don't know why. I wanted what I wanted and I wanted to have it when I wanted it. I read books and spouted high ideas, and I got into plenty of discussions with everyone about reality and God and the meaning of life. They were battles, even. Attacks. Enjoyable attacks, but attacks nonetheless. I reminded myself of my father, berating the others with what I knew, telling them what it was all about. To further my sense of advancement I practiced deep relaxation with a new passion, going into meditative states several times a day. Perhaps it was a sign of development, or perhaps it was simply the amounts of time I was spending in those states, but I discovered a new level of relaxation, a second stage that sometimes arose after the first, in which it felt like my body filled with light. I couldn't stop talking about this with Lucille when it happened.

"It starts at my toes," I said, "and flows up my legs all the way to my head. It's like a white light. It's like my body turns to light, all except for this one black spot in the

middle of my head, the death button. I know it. I know if I fill it with light something's going to happen, and I always get scared, the way I used to get scared."

She didn't say much about it, and she never seemed interested in trying it. Behind every look she gave me now was the question. I'm not sure what the question was, whether I loved her, perhaps, or whether I was intending to expose our secret, whether my impatience would force the situation, for I wanted sex and I wasn't getting any.

One day I lay on the couch in a huff and closed my eyes. An image flashed in my thoughts, myself as a pregnant woman in Africa, giving birth on the ground in a hut of some kind, howling my bloody head off in pain.

"I have another life in Africa," I said, shouting to Lucille in the kitchen. She looked up from the table and gave me a blank stare. Everyone else who was near had stopped to stare at me.

"That's nice," Lucille said.

"What, you don't believe me?"

Her lips tightened and she got up and came over suddenly, and said: "Could you not shout, please?"

"Why not? What the fuck is wrong with shouting?"

Lucille walked away, and when I turned towards the back of the couch someone behind me said: "Be cool."

Thirty-Three

Then Lucille decided to tell everyone about us at our next group meeting. No one was surprised. Patty said:

"Does this mean I can sleep with André now?"

"Yes," Lucille said. "I'm changing the rules."

Suddenly we were living like what I thought a commune ought to be. I slept with Lucille, Patty slept with André, and Andrew and Stacy slept together. All the secret couples, who weren't really secret, slept openly, kissed openly, and a new freedom came into the group. I stepped out of Lucille's room in the morning and felt like a king. I'd married The Queen of the house and I was boss.

Except things didn't stay that way for long. By the end of the week there were grumblings. Norm was coming onto Joanne too strong and the others who weren't in couples were feeling left out, or pressured to become a couple. In the Katimavik book there was stuff about couples draining energy from the group, and that's what happened. Agreements and disagreements were funneled between mini-groups of different couples, each for themselves and against the others.

But Norm was the worst.

"I'm kicking him out at the next meeting," Lucille said.

That was a group leader's prerogative, to kick out any member who was disrupting the balance of the group.

"No one likes him," she said. "He's difficult. His tantrums and complaints take up everyone's energy, and he won't stop harassing Joanne. I can't let him stay."

And a curious thing happened. Perhaps it was his discontent I identified with, or him being the outsider, but I did identify. Suddenly I saw Norm as a kindred spirit, and when Lucille said she was kicking him out, I thought that wouldn't do. We were the enlightened ones, after all. I'd seen the trouble start from the beginning, the complaints about him, and how the complaints got worse and how he got worse.

"We created him," I said. "All of us. It's not fair to kick him out."

"But he's impossible to deal with."

"I know, but there's got to be another way."

"I don't see it."

"If we talk about it," I said. "Confront him, all of us, and confront ourselves, stop saying bad things about him when he's not around, stop focusing on all the bad stuff."

"You see what he does to Joanne," she said.

"Yes."

"You're taking his side because he's a man."

"I'm not. It's something else. I don't know. I know we can work on this, make it bearable. I know it. I can feel it."

"Give me something I can work with," she said.

"Maybe if we all agree to stop saying stuff about him."

"I've heard you complaining," she said. "You say bad things about him."

"I know," I said. "It's almost impossible not to. Like a bad habit."

"Well?"

"I'm thinking!"

But I couldn't think of anything except some group effort, a kind of group hug acknowledgment. I knew I was right. We'd created it together. All the times we put him down, complained about him, called him names, and the things we said to his face, the way we spoke, the tones of voice. It was sad the way he went after Joanne and she rebuked him. It was her right to rebuke him, and he wasn't right to push her, not at all, but there was something about it, like he was trapped in himself and didn't know how to get out.

"I just can't believe that kicking him out is the right thing to do," I said. "If you kick him out, then I'm going too."

Perhaps it was stupid, one of those things I didn't know. Everything seemed so confusing. No one in the house was happy anymore. Everyone kept talking about bringing back some rules. Everyone was cranky, ever since we changed everything and got rid of the rules. After two days of happiness the group got cranky and stayed that way. And I guess I got stupid.

"Are serious?"

"I have to take a stand," I said.

"I really wish you hadn't said that," Lucille said.

Maybe I was hoping she would back down.

The next group meeting was a somber affair. There were several motions to bring back some or all of the original rules, and several new ideas for new rules. The new rules were similar to the old rules. We voted them in. At the end Lucille announced that Norm

was leaving, that she was kicking him out. Joanne walked out. Stacy looked satisfied. Everyone else just looked glum.

Then Lucille looked at me and took a breath, and said:

"Stephen is leaving us as well. He doesn't agree with my decision to kick out Norm. He's decided to leave in protest."

They hadn't expected that. Even I was surprised.

"You can't be serious," someone said.

"He is," Lucille said. "And he knows the consequences, that I must inform my coordinator the minute he leaves. He knows he won't be allowed back if he leaves."

It's funny, but when she said it, it sounded like she was talking about someone else, not me. I guess there really are two kinds of knowing. I knew the consequences, but perhaps I didn't believe them.

Thirty-Four

It took three days for the train to roll across Canada from west to east. I watched the view like a movie screen, the story of the mountains and the plains. I wasn't in great shape. I'd started drinking the three mickeys I'd brought as soon as I got in my seat and within twelve hours I had the shits. I found two guys to keep me company, shadow men with names and faces I couldn't remember no matter how many times they said them. Two fellow drunks who passed out near me when I passed out, who matched me drink for drink and talked and laughed so loud the conductor had to separate us. We found each other again crossing the prairies when I went up to the observation car. I saw so many stars it gave me a headache. I sat with my head back and the train thundered through the night and I was sure I was falling into space. When I opened my eyes one of the shadow men was there in the seat beside me. I touched my pocket. The money was there. Nine hundred and fifty left. I imagined him following me off the train in Montreal and slitting my throat for it.

Lucille said she admired the way I thought and the things I said. She was in my dreams on the train, looking at me with a well-meaning expression and her hand on the side of my face. I only wanted to see the stars, but I kept seeing her, and Patty's feet up on the chair on the balcony watching us. My commitment to my ideals, Lucille said. I'd heard a little voice in me begging, wanting, asking, finding it's way to say what he wanted, what it wanted, like a mouse squeaking for a piece of cheese. So easy to play that Findhorn song, that special place where I belong. But it was true. I wanted what I wanted,

that was all. Anyway, she offered. She said she would help. I didn't make her say it. She offered. Three mickeys in the bag, all gone by the second day.

I woke and my nose hurt, bone dry in the vinyl air. Three days of vinyl air. And the sunlight hurt my eyes. Washing my face in that coffin of a bathroom I decided to get off. Those two shadow men had shifty eyes. They were bad as the two in Toronto. Crazy drunks. If I was scared of Montreal, I had to get off. Take the bus from Toronto. Nothing wrong with that. I could see Amy. Amy. Like a bell pulling inside. I had to see her. I was carrying a lot of dough. I couldn't take a chance. I knew they'd kill me for it.

Amy wasn't glad to see me when she opened the door.

"What are you doing here?"

"I need a shower," I said.

Three days in smoking cars with vinyl air on a whisky diet and nothing but the shits. I needed a shower and a proper sleep on a real bed. But she wasn't smiling. I guess it'd be crazy to think she would. They're all like that, aren't they? Didn't I read that somewhere? Who taught me that? I'm sorry. Truly. No, I mean it. I'm at your mercy. Don't leave me, don't go. I don't want to cry. I need you, Mommy. I need you.

"Please take a shower," Amy said. "You know where it is."

What a serious face. A school marm face. I took the stairs one at a time. Maybe I crawled. I smelled rosewater at the top, but it was flat. For some reason I didn't like it. It didn't let me in. That perfect scent refused me that day. It smelled like having my nose against the outside of a rubber balloon. I closed a door, pulled it behind me and stood in the steam and the heat. I needed it like I'd ever needed anything.

Afterwards I lay naked on her bed. I felt the shaking of the train. Three days of shaking and it wouldn't stop. The smell of microwaved ham sandwiches and train coffee won't leave my brain. I was soaked in it, among other things.

Amy sat on the bed and I told her everything. I tried to touch her but she moved away.

"I want to hear it," she said. "Why did you leave Katimavik? Where did you get that money? Who is this woman?"

I tried to tell her. I thought it was good news. I got the thousand, I was going to Findhorn. I'd found the meaning of life. These books. Truth in the palm of my hand.

I really didn't understand why she wasn't happy. I guess I forgot to tell her how much I missed her when I was kissing Lucille, how I had a gaping hole in my guts from where I ripped her out. Silly me. Silly stupid me.

The bell rang and it was Lisa and they were both in the room and mad, even Lisa and all her flower power, mad as hell.

She said:

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"What do you mean?" I said.

"Who's this Lucille woman?"

"I want to know," Amy said.

"She's just a friend," I said.

"Why the hell is she giving you this money? This is a lot of money."

"She wants to help me, that's all. She wants me to go to Findhorn."

"You're crazy," Lisa said. "Do you realize Amy's been saving money to go in the summer? With you?"

"I had to leave," I said. "You don't understand. I had to. I couldn't wait. I had to."

I took out the Seth book but they didn't stay to listen. Amy came back later and kicked my legs and woke me.

"I want you to leave," she said

"What?"

"Right now," she said. "This minute."

I tried to argue and Lisa came in from the hall where she'd been listening.

"Don't you understand," she said. "Leave now."

Amy, I was surprised Lisa could raise her voice like that.

Thirty-Five

Winter in Montreal. Never got that cold in BC. Dad's house was dark. I'd called from Abbotsford to tell him I was stopping in before flying. He didn't say much about it. And he didn't say much when he opened the door and there I was. I dumped my stuff and went out and bought a six-pack. I tried to share but he didn't want one of mine. I sat in the kitchen for an hour. He didn't talk much. Didn't even look at me. Next day I reserved my ticket. I wasn't drinking much, but I felt sick. Kept thinking about a jagged shoreline in darkness and waves crashing on the rocks, and an airplane flying low.

"I got my ticket," I said. "I'm going in a week."

"Where did you get this money?"

"Lucille gave it to me."

"This is your group leader?"

"Yes."

"You like to take advantage of people, eh?"

I tried to tell him it wasn't like that. He listened, sort of. I showed him the Seth book.

"I can't believe you're reading this shit," he said.

"How do you know it's shit?"

"Come on, use your head."

"You don't know what I've seen," I said. "You don't know what I know."

"I don't care," he said. "Get out. Just get out."

I'd heard it a hundred times.

I tried calling Kris but he wasn't around. I bought some more beer and I slid along, one day to the next, Dad slamming doors, sitting up late, drinking, not talking, even when I sat there drinking with him, not a real word, except to ask when I was leaving. And every night I saw the sea rolling over me, sucking me in, dark green and bubbly, full of seaweed and serpents with sharp teeth.

I called Lucille from the pay phone on the corner one night. Told her I wasn't doing well.

"Dad's being a bastard," I said. "He thinks I conned you or something."

"It doesn't matter what other people think," she said.

"I know," I said.

"I miss you," she said.

I squeezed the receiver so tight my knuckles went white.

"I miss you too," I said. "I think I love you."

She breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief. I tapped my toe on the ground and pinched the bridge of my nose.

"I want to come back," I said.

The problem was she'd already told the coordinator I'd left. I couldn't go back to Katimavik. That was the rule. We had to work something out. I called back. She'd made a few calls. There was a trailer in the woods. The first group had done some volunteer work out there. An old camp ground. The owner was a nice man. I could stay in the trailer if I watched the place. It was miles away, deep in the woods.

"I'll be able to write poetry," I said.

"I just want to see you," she said.

I changed the ticket and flew back. No one at the house was glad to see me.

"He shouldn't be here," someone said.

"It's only one night," Lucille said.

The next day she took me shopping and told me to use the rest of the money to live until I got a job. We drove along a highway and turned onto a winding dirt road that went up and around a development site, and sloping down into a clearing in the woods. The trailer sat in the middle of the clearing. The only other structure was a long wooden building with bathrooms and showers. One day the campground would be turned into something more. In the meantime at least it had running water.

"There's not a lot out here," Lucille said.

"It'll give me a chance to write," I said.

"I won't be able to visit often," she said.

She unpacked the shopping and put the bottle of Bailey's on the table.

"I can't believe you never tasted this stuff," she said. "It's my favorite."

I put the kettle on and made sandwiches while Lucille made the bed. Soon we were eating sandwiches and drinking Irish coffees. Afterwards I made more coffee, then some more.

"I knew you'd like it," she said.

I opened the window and the smell of fir trees came in on a breeze.

"There was so much garbage here when we started," she said. "The owner was very grateful for what we did. He's a Christian. I think he believes in doing good deeds. That's probably why he agreed you could stay."

"It's perfect," I said.

"At least you have electricity."

"I could live here forever."

"You need a job," she said.

"I just want to write poetry," I said. "This is my chance."

"There's a bike in the shower building," she said. "Maybe you can ride into town and find work."

"Sounds far."

"I can't give you any more money. You're going to run out."

"I can live a long time on rice and beans," I said. "And I can grow stuff. I can eat mushrooms too. I know how to find them. When I was a kid Dad took us mushroom hunting every year. They grow in the fall, but out here it's damp all year round. I might find some."

I lit a cigarette and watched the smoke claw through the screen.

Lucille pushed her empty cup to the side.

"Better if you got a job," she said.

Thirty-Six

The next afternoon she left and I loaded my backpack and went for a hike. I found the base of a mountain at the other end of the clearing and decided to climb it. I worked my way through bushes and small trees until I got to a rocky summit. I spread out the blanket I'd brought and took out everything else from my backpack: books, notebooks, rum, cigarettes, and a kite Lucille brought from the house. I found some rocks for the corners of the blanket and sat and stared at the view. I was just above the tops of the trees, high enough that the entire valley was visible. Directly across lay a long ridge, the one the dirt road crossed and wound down on the other side to the highway back to town. Behind me lay forests and hills, and in the distance, larger mountains. It was a beautiful day with a crystal blue sky and the occasional white cloud.

I cracked open the bottle of rum I'd bought the other day and took a sip. Then I opened my notebook and took pen in hand, preparing to write. I had to write something, and it had to be great. I gazed at the sea of green tree-tops and waited, but nothing came. I exhaled and waited, and nothing came. I took another slug of rum then flipped open the Seth book. I read a few random pages on the subject of how thoughts form matter, how particles of mind form atoms and molecules. I had another book with me, a small Bantam paperback called *The Universe and Dr. Einstein*. It was supposed to explain his theories clearly and easily but I'd read it a few times without understanding much. I liked the cover, a drawing of Einstein against a background of constellations. I stared at the picture of Einstein, then squinted into the airspace above the trees. I imagined I saw swirling

particles and motes of energy. Then I felt an impulse and pulled the notebook onto my crossed legs, and wrote:

I am willful wavicle.

A wavicle, a combined particle and wave. I wanted to write more but nothing came. I stared at the page but it remained blank. Blank page, blank page. I didn't like that blank page, and I didn't like that line. I disliked it. It wasn't poetry.

I drank more rum. It was sweet, but it burned. What the hell was a wavicle anyway. Nothing. Nothing that made any sense. Gibberish. Crap. I looked at the air above the trees. If I could float like a dot into the sky above the valley. I looked at the page, and wrote:

I am a wavicle. I float like a dot.

I hated it. Hated it. I drank more rum. Oh, I liked the rum. But the sun was getting hot. What a headache I was getting. I shoved the notebook aside but kept the rum in my lap, sipping it and staring into nothing.

After a while I stood and went walking around my small mountain top picking up rocks and throwing them as far as I could into the trees below. If anyone was down there they'd be in trouble. Rocks crashed through trees and thudded as they hit the earth. No one cried out. That would be something.

"What the fuck," I said.

I took off my clothes and yelled like Tarzan. Then I sat cross-legged on the cover and drank more rum.

Then I had to fly the kite. Fly the kite. I took it out of its plastic, unfolded it, stuck in the rods and there it was. I tied the string and stood up and held it out to catch the

wind, though there wasn't much. I went over to the edge of the slope and tossed it in the air as far as I could and a little breeze caught it. I ran back, pulling it but could only run so far without falling right off the edge. The kite rose and I let out some string and it drifted low over the trees. I tugged it and let it out, and tugged it some more and let it out some more, but there was no wind. I ran back again, tugging it, tugging it, and it twirled and sank, and I pulled it and ran, and it rose once more then spun around and sank again, sticking into the top of a tree. The string settled and there it was.

I wound the string around the handle until it went taut. I gave the kite a pull. One wing turned over like a fin in the water, and then the whole thing was stuck. I tugged and tugged, but it was stuck as stuck could be. I swore and pulled until the string snapped and I fell back scraping my ass on the rock. I yelled and pounded the ground. I crawled over to the blanket, drank more rum, lay back, stared at the sky. Everything turned, was turning faster. I sat up and it all went around. I hadn't brought water and I was dying of thirst. I muttered about the water. I smoked a cigarette and bugs started crawling in my eyes and my ass.

Then I stood up, which was a mistake because something hit me.

Something hit me and it hit the side of me and sent me flying, and I fell back scrambling to grab hold of anything I could. I slid right down towards the end of the slope to where the ground dropped, tried to stand and something hit me again, sent me down through bushes towards the drop, the edge, that big long drop. I grabbed and grabbed and my fingers scraped along the ground and held. I yelled and howled and moaned and begged as every inch of skin scraped on rock, but I held, scratching. Then I stood and started back, trying to stay upright, waving my arms, and the whole world

turned around, and it hit me again, broadside, some angry spirit, I thought, my punishment for being such a jerk.

I fell hard, backwards, into bushes with thorns, naked, scratched to hell. I managed to save myself one more time and started crawling back, though it killed my knees, stones and rocks digging into them. I didn't care. I wanted that blanket, that little square patch on the rhino's rocky head up there at the top. I could see it, even though it was falling on top of me again, swinging over my head and throwing my stomach out the bottom. I could see it, and if I could see it, I could get there. I could do it. One hand in front of the other, dig in, pull, one hand at a time. One hand at a time.

Thirty-Seven

Later I crawled backwards down the mountain with my fingers digging in every step of the way. I made it to the trailer and passed out. Then I waited. Two days went by. Then another. I drank everything and ate most of the food, except the rice and beans. I had no phone, no way to call. I tried riding the bike but the road was long and I was tired. I was tired of a lot of things. Tired of sitting in a trailer in the middle of the woods. Tired of wondering if Lucille would come.

Then one day the van came grumbling down the road and Lucille took me shopping. I went up and down bright supermarket aisles and bought more rice and beans, onions and carrots, bread and peanut butter. We stopped and I got a case of beer and another bottle of Bailey's. The money was almost gone but I needed beer and Bailey's. We drove back, laughing and talking, but Lucille was mostly serious for long stretches as she concentrated on her driving, lips tight, eyes straight.

"The new group comes in tomorrow," she said, finally.

"What? Already? When did the others go?"

"Yesterday."

"I didn't even get to say goodbye."

At the trailer I filled a pot with water and put it on to boil. I took away the tea towel that covered another pot that was filled with beans.

"They were soaking all night," I said. "They shouldn't take long to cook. White beans, with garlic and oregano."

"Sounds good," she said, sitting at the table.

I grinned and held up the Bailey's. "Want a coffee?"

"I can't, I have to drive back. You go ahead."

I put the bottle down.

"You're driving back tonight?"

"They're arriving in the morning. I have to be at the airport. The house is a mess.

The coordinator's coming. It's too much."

"But we haven't even seen each other."

"I told you this would happen."

I sat on the edge of the bed.

"I want to see you some more," I said.

"I'll be back in two days to spend the night," she said.

I cooked and drank beer instead of Bailey's. Funny. Dad always drank beer while he cooked. Soon the trailer filled with the sweaty odor of boiled beans. I salted and peppered them, added olive oil and butter and everything else.

"You like to cook," Lucille said.

"Dad's the cook in the family," I said. "He's always making some kind of stew."

I opened another beer for supper.

"These are good," she said. "Very tasty."

"They seem bland to me," I said.

"I have to go soon," she said.

I put the kettle on and opened another beer.

"Have a coffee," I said. "Stay. Let's make love."

"I really have to go."

"But I miss you," I said.

"I know," she said. "I wanted to come. I couldn't get away."

I made myself a coffee and opened the liqueur.

"How can you do that," she said. "Drink that and beer at the same time?"

I grinned and downed the beer, and said:

"What beer?"

And we laughed.

"Come on, have a coffee," I said.

"I can't, I'll be up all night, and I have to drive."

I stood and took her hand and pulled her towards the bed.

"Come on," I said.

"Half an hour," she said. "Then I really have to go."

We got undressed and hugged and kissed, but nothing happened. She gave me a couple of questioning looks, and I answered her with kisses each time. And still nothing happened. No hard-on. No passion.

I went over to the table and lit a cigarette. I opened another beer.

Lucille reached for her bra.

"Don't go yet," I said.

She snapped it on.

"I have to," she said.

By the time she got her underwear on I'd downed the beer and was reaching for another. Plenty left in the case. I could put back a few more. I could live it up. Party.

I leaned back and belched.

"That's nice," she said.

"I don't care if I'm nice," I said.

I watched her put on the rest of her clothes.

When she finished she rubbed her knees, and said: "So?"

I raised my voice, and said: "So?"

"What's the matter?"

I swallowed more beer, and said:

"What's the matter with you?"

She sighed and wiped her face.

"Okay," she said. "What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on," I said.

She patted her knees and stood with finality.

"Then I have to go," she said.

"Fine," I said. "Go."

She exhaled and sat down.

"What can I do," she said. "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know," I said. "What do you think I want?"

"You seem angry right now, I think I should go."

"I'm not angry."

"You sound it."

"Well I'm not," I said.

"Then what is it?"

"I don't want you to go."

"But I have to go."

"I know, so go."

She stood again.

"Wait," I said.

"What?"

"You don't understand. You don't know what it's like to be out here and try to write poetry. You don't know what it's like to write poetry."

"You're right, I don't," she said.

"No, you don't," I said.

"And I don't know what to think right now," she said.

"That's the problem," I said. "You don't think."

"That's not nice."

"Not nice. I told you everything. You know all about me. You know my whole fucking life."

"Yes, you've told me a lot," she said.

"But you don't know anything," I said.

"Whatever you say," she said. "If you want to believe that."

Whatever I say. That's how it was. I could see what was going on. I knew. I raised my voice and told her. I said:

"Is that how it is?"

She said she didn't know, but it felt good to shout. Just a little. To let it out in my voice. To feel that music, that old song. To start hammering away with things I said,

moving objects around on the table, keeping her attention, accusing her of every little secret thought she might have had and never said. Hitting her with every memory I found inside myself, every crime I did or had done to me, every injustice, my Dad, all that shit.

Soon every object on the table was in its place, equidistant, proportionate.

"I really have to go," she said.

I opened another beer.

"I want to read you something," I said.

"It's late," she said.

"A poem. So you know what a poem is. So you know how great it can be. You don't want to stay ignorant of these things. I'm tired of ignorance. These are the most important things in the world. Works of genius. These aren't little songs about love. These aren't little things. These are fucking major shit, you know? You know?"

She didn't say anything, just stayed sitting on the edge of the bed. I knew what was going on. It was like being in two places at once. I went over there, to the bed, leaning past her, brushing against her, and grabbed my *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* from the shelf. I slammed it on the table when I sat. I opened it and started turning pages, scanning, reading headlines and names.

"You'll see," I said.

I could see her feet on the floor out of the corner of my eye as I looked through the book. I could feel a face sitting on my face. That serious face. Face of my old man. Serious shit. I'd show her some serious shit. There were things going on she had no fucking clue about.

"I really have to go," she said.

"Wait a minute," I said, shouting. "Just wait. Just a fucking minute won't kill you.

It doesn't take long."

I kept turning pages, pausing, turning, until I found something.

"There," I said. "There it is."

I slapped my hand on the book.

"This is the one I want to read to you. This is it. This is the one. This is what it's all about. This is what it's all about. The fucking truth. This is fucking reality, man. I was listening to this when I was just a kid. My father played the record for me. I've heard the poet himself reading it on that record."

Lucille didn't say anything. I lifted the book, and said:

"Can I read it to you?"

"Will you let me go when you're done?"

"Sure. But I think this might tell you something about me, you know?"

"Okay," she said.

"It think this is important."

"Go ahead, I'll listen."

"Right," I said.

I smoothed back the pages.

"It's a little long," I said, grinning. "I'm not trying to keep you here with it. But it is long."

"That's okay," she said. "I'll go afterwards."

"Just let me finish." I drank back the beer.

"Okay," I said. I lit a cigarette and opened another beer.

"Right, I'm ready," I said.

I cleared my throat.

"This is called *Howl*, by Allan Ginsberg. He started a whole movement with this poem. A whole fucking movement."

Then I began, delivering each line like a slap in the face.

Thirty-Eight

She came back two days later, like she said she would. I was doing deep relaxation and I heard the van. I got out of bed and put the kettle on and went outside. She pulled up and I waved. She didn't smile or wave back, just parked and got out.

"Hi," I said, cheerfully.

"Hello," she said. I kept smiling, but she didn't smile back, not really. She stood looking at me for a minute, then said:

"Can we go inside?"

I made us each an herbal tea. I chattered about deep relaxation and vivid dreams.

"I'm really making progress with the relaxation," I said.

She listened without listening.

At one point I started to apologize, but she cut me off.

"It doesn't matter," she said.

"But I am," I said. "I'm sorry."

I had to say something. I knew what had happened. I didn't remember it, but I'd felt it. I'd become someone else. Or I'd gone somewhere. I didn't remember where, but I remembered the feeling, and I saw it in her eyes and the way she was with me. She hadn't even kissed me yet.

"It was like I was possessed by my father's demon," I said.

"Your father's alive," she said.

"His energy," I said. "It's like it came in to me from thousands of miles away."

"I don't really understand," she said.

"He's exactly like that," I said.

"Then your father's not a very nice man," she said.

A few minutes later, she said:

"I don't know what to do. This is new for me. You said some things. I don't think you even remember."

"I don't. Just believe me, it wasn't me. I wasn't there."

I wanted to tell her I loved her, but it felt like I didn't have the right, or it was the last thing she wanted to hear.

"I can't handle this," she said. "You, this. I can't concentrate on the new group. They can tell something's on my mind. I'm not happy. This is affecting me, knowing you're out here, waiting for me to visit. I could manage the other stuff if I knew you were doing something and you were okay."

"I'm doing things," I said.

"I don't mean those things," she said.

"I don't know what else to do."

"By the way, I didn't like that poem. I don't agree with it. It describes a life I don't want to know about. I want to live in the sunshine. I want us to work together. Do something great. I want you to do great things."

I picked at my fingers while she talked. She wanted to know what we could do when she was done, when the program was over. She didn't plan on being a group leader. She wanted us to do something together, if possible. She wanted me to do what I wanted, but she wanted us to go in a direction together. She said she'd been trying figure it out,

what to do with me stuck in the woods. She couldn't let me stay at the house, and she couldn't afford to rent a place. The only solution was for me to get out of here, somehow. Get a job for when she finished.

"Then we could plan something together," she said.

I could sense my mind shrinking away from the idea, and I couldn't hold off, I had to light a cigarette.

"How am I supposed to get into town," I said. "I tried riding that bike. It's too damn far. I almost killed myself on those hills."

"I think I figured it out," she said.

Thirty-Nine

She took me to Tony's and we ate veal parmigiana. She talked about how easy it was to learn to drive.

"I hardly ever use the van," she said.

I'd never driven a vehicle in my life, except one time when my Uncle Peter let me steer his 4x4 for about six feet of road, and another time when I got drunk with a couple of friends and we jacked a car for a joy ride in the city.

"I can't drive," I said.

"You'll see. I'll show you. You'll drive us back tonight. It's safe on the roads at night this early in the week. It's probably the best time to learn."

Tony made a big deal out of saying hello to us at our table. He liked Lucille. He gave me a complimentary glass of white wine. After we ate he sat with us, gave me a pack of cigarettes and more wine. Lucille was concerned about my state. Tony gave me a pill to wake me up. I wasn't asleep, I wasn't even drunk.

"He'll be fine," Tony said.

I complimented him on his restaurant, on how fine it must be to own such an establishment. He invited me to drink as much white wine as I wanted from a carton behind the bar. Not the red wine, but as much of the white as I wanted. I drank a few glasses, felt myself getting merry, but at one point, he said:

"Better stop, she's not happy with me."

"Exactly right," Lucille said.

Tony gave me another pill.

"Don't worry," he said. "This'll wake him up."

Lucille was determined. We left soon after and got in the van. She took it out of the parking lot and parked on the street and we switched sides. I was able to follow her instructions well enough. She kept telling me to brake, then ease off. At one point she got excited. I took a few breaths and focused.

"I don't think this is going to work," she said.

She was getting unhappy and we hadn't even gone half a block.

"It's okay," I said. "I can do it."

"Alright," she said. "Slowly take your foot off the brake."

I started to, then she told me to stop, and I saw what she was staring at. A police car had pulled up beside us.

"Brake and put it in park," she said. "And let me do the talking."

A cop came over and talked, but the world was turning by then. I don't know what he said, or what she said to make him go away, but afterwards she came around and shoved me into the passenger seat. I leaned my head against the door and closed my eyes. Then the van was bumping and I opened my eyes. I looked over and Lucille was driving. Outside it was pitch dark, except for the headlights.

"Where are we?"

She might have answered me but I didn't hear. I closed my eyes again because the world was whipping around me. Must have been the dirt road. From the way the van was bouncing we had to be on the dirt round. I hadn't even noticed the drive out.

"It must be the pill," I said.

I didn't hear myself because the engine was too loud. I leaned against the door. It didn't bother me that my head was banging against the window.

"I think I'm going to be sick," I said.

Lucille said something about opening the window because she couldn't stop. I held my stomach. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to notice the way everything bounced and turned.

Then the van stopped and the moment came into focus.

"We're here," she said.

I opened my eyes and saw trees. The forest at night. The trailer.

"Oh God," I said.

I opened the door and fell out. I crawled, then half-stood and stumbled, then fell on my knees again.

"Oh God," I said.

Everything came out of me, all the food and the sweet wine. On and on until nothing was left. I crawled away as best as I could, then fell on my face. I cried and yelled and begged the earth to stop turning around, begged Mother Earth to hold me, to help me.

"Save me," I said.

I dug my fingers in the ground and opened my eyes. I saw the van with the open door, Lucille, and I had to close them again. I had to press my head to the ground. I had to take the turning in my thoughts and hold it. It had to stop it. If only it would stop.

After a while waves crashed over me and I was asleep.

Forty

I moved and heard the rustle of leaves. I opened my eyes and saw the forest upside down, and in it an odd-shaped white blob. I rolled over and my face pulled away from the ground. The world turned back around and the blob became the trailer. The van was gone. I managed to get to my feet. I made it to the trailer and got a towel and went to the shower building and took a cold shower. Cold because the hot water didn't work. Then I went back to the trailer and passed out.

I opened my eyes sometime in the afternoon. My skin was covered in greasy sweat. I sat up and wiped my face and felt sick all over, even in my bones. The night that followed was a long night. I wanted to sleep but I couldn't. Sometimes I cried. Sometimes I hit my knuckles against my head and screamed. Later, I stared into the dark forest and smoked cigarettes. I started sleeping before dawn. I'd fall asleep, then wake trembling. I sobbed and trembled, fell asleep and woke.

Then it was day and I felt better. Like I'd wakened from a stifling dream. I cleaned the trailer and made some food and read through my notebooks. Memories drifted in my thoughts, each one triggering a sense of longing, a pain I couldn't soothe. The memories passed but afterimages remained, the footprints of sorrow.

After a day I felt well enough to want to drink. I thought about riding the bike into town. It would take all the money I had to buy what I wanted. It wasn't worth it. I went for walks, and when I got tired I read books, the same books over and over.

And I dreamed.

One night I dreamed I was standing on the edge of a cliff. It was a mesa. The desert was below. I could see everything ultra-clear in the moonlight. The sky was filled with stars and a bright full moon. Along the desert floor a river snaked its way. I noticed someone standing beside me, a woman in a spacesuit. It looked like a spacesuit, but it was more like a motorcycle suit, black and shiny, like leather. She had a black helmet with black glass. It felt good to be near her. I knew she was a friend. I wanted to see her face. I knew she was the most beautiful woman in the world, and since she was mine I wanted to see her face. I sent her a message with my thoughts, but she raised her arms and flew into space.

"It's a flying dream," I said.

I knew that meant I could fly, so I raised my arms and flew. Ahead of me I could see her, a tiny point of white light, the one moving star. I willed myself to go faster. I knew I would catch up eventually. I woke crying because I knew I was not alone, and I would never be alone, at least not in my dreams.

I decided to go mushroom hunting the next day. When I was a kid Dad took me into the forest for wild mushrooms. We gathered baskets full from the woods of the Eastern Townships in Quebec. Chanterelles, boletus. We fried them with bacon and ate whole meals of chanterelles. I loved finding chanterelles. Delicious orange mushrooms that grew in clusters. I went out looking and found none in the woods around the trailer. It wasn't summer yet. Mushroom season was in the fall, even in BC. But as I walked through the woods I thought about all the fun I'd had with Dad when I was a kid. He would have loved these woods, the Douglas Firs, and the mountains. On my way back I

saw the largest tree trunk I'd ever seen. It was old, cut down long ago. Out of it grew another tree, a young tree with its roots spilling over the outside of the old one's trunk.

Later in the trailer I went into deep relaxation and within minutes my body filled with light. My thoughts filled with faces, crowds of people on the street, walking and walking. I flew over them, saw them as clearly as in a vivid dream, each face distinct and unique. It felt real, like I was seeing real faces, not faces in a dream, but somehow seeing a moment in time somewhere in a city on earth.

Perhaps I missed being around people.

That night I dreamed of an old book with painted picture pages, images of a warrior in feathers and paint, and when I looked at the picture he came alive and spoke to me. He told me things. There were other pictures that moved. I looked through the book for hours and learned secret things, all of which I forgot.

Days went by. I was restless. I moved from one seat to another, to the bed, then outside, walking in circles around the trailer. I'd lost interest in the woods. I needed a visit from Lucille. I tried to imagine what she might be thinking, and I imagined the worst.

I meditated everyday, and everyday the same thing happened. It had been happening for months. I entered the second stage of relaxation and my body filled with light, all except for a little black spot in the middle of my head. It made me anxious, the same way I got anxious in the hospital whenever I swam too close to the darkness in my meditation. I knew it was the death button. The little black spot that would switch me off if I filled it with light. Eventually I stopped sleeping, sliding in and out of dreams without losing consciousness at night. The hours turned into moving panels of states of mind.

One night I smoked a joint I'd found in the cigarette pack Tony gave me. He'd said he had some Thai stick, real smooth stuff. I'd found it the next day and decided to save it. It was all I had and I thought there might come a perfect time. It was a cool evening and I wanted to relax. I smoked the joint and discovered that it was as smooth as Tony said. I hardly felt high at all. I went into deep relaxation, lying on my back, tensing my feet first, then my legs and buttocks, my hands and arms, then chest. Then I squeezed my face into a knot and scrunched my shoulders, and let go. The sense of relaxation spread through my body and I felt numb all over. The joint helped things, and soon my body filled with light, starting in my feet and expanding upwards to the top of my head. Except for that one black spot that I'd never filled with light, that funny, scary black spot. I guess it was the grass, because a sense of whimsy came over me, and I said:

"What the hell."

And I filled it with light.

The moment I filled the black spot with light I found myself flying down a tunnel. I was the size of a single point of light. If it was a dream it was the most vivid dream I'd ever had. As I flew down this tunnel I noticed markings on the walls, and the more I noticed the designs the more I slowed down, until I could see them clearly. They looked a lot like Egyptian paintings, and as I stared at them they moved. I felt energy flowing from my gaze to the images, making them come alive, acting out scenes I recognized as archetypal patterns, my patterns. Oddly, because I was so familiar with them, they held no interest.

"I want to fly down the tunnel," I said.

As soon as I expressed that thought I started flying down the tunnel again.

"Faster," I said. "Faster!"

And I flew faster and faster.

I heard a buzzing sound. The walls of the tunnel zoomed past and the sound grew louder. Something was coming, something was going to happen.

Then it did.

I reached the speed of light and hit a wall, a sudden and absolute stillness in the center of a wheel, and I heard a loud "Pop!" I was out, out of my body, out of the whole damn universe, because I could see the universe and I was on the other side of some kind of one-way glass, outside the full frame, the entire system.

It was the best feeling I'd ever had in my life.

I looked around to see where I was, and a voice said:

"This is death."

"It's beautiful," I said.

And wham! I was slammed at the speed of light back into my body on the bed, where I opened my eyes.

Forty-One

The next morning everything looked new. The chrome strip along the edge where two of the beige vinyl walls of the trailer were joined in a corner shone like no other chrome I had ever seen. The vinyl walls of the trailer glowed with life in the sunlight. The scratches on the surface of the chrome strip were fascinating, and each grubby smudge on the vinyl told its own story. I admired the sink and the Formica table, the small fridge, the glass slats of the window at the top of the door.

I made coffee and lit a cigarette and opened my notebook. My arm tingled, I started to write:

"I am a spirit of joy."

I hesitated. A fresh urgency ran through me, a quickening in the blood. I wrote another line, and another. I wrote for an hour. Seventeen pages.

A few minutes after I stopped I heard the van coming.

It would be okay. It had to be. I felt good. I remembered being fourteen and thinking I was crazy and they would never let me out. I saw a vision of myself as an adult, happy, sane. He smiled and told me I would be okay, it would all work out.

Lucille knocked, and said:

"Hello?"

In a single mad rush I told her everything as soon as she walked in. I told her every dream, all my dreams and visions, every thought, and all about the tree trunk and flying out of my body, and I even read her my poem. All in a rush, a wild eager rush.

"I'm sorry I didn't come sooner," she said. "But maybe it was good that I didn't."

"You're timing is perfect," I said.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," she said.

"It's a good thing I didn't drive that night," I said.

"Oh my God, you would have gotten us killed," she said.

So he became thoughtful and serious.

"I've been thinking about what to do," she said. "You've been very special to me, but I don't think I can do this anymore. Nothing seems to work."

"I've realized something important," I said. "I think it's because I flew down that tunnel. I think you'll like it. When I got up today I realized I have to learn to live in the world. I have to find out what it means to pay the rent. "

"That's interesting," she said.

"I think I have to go home."

"To Montreal?"

"Dad told me when I was ready to go back to school I should call him, and I've been thinking I should. I don't know what else to do."

I waited for a reaction.

Lucille smiled.

"It's really quite a coincidence," she said. "I've been thinking the same thing."

A coincidence. Was it that? A coincidence, or thought? Nothing remarkable. We were just thinking the same thought.

Forty-Two

It only took a few days to arrange for me to be on the bus back to Montreal. I'd even stayed one night at the house, and we'd made love one more time. Dad wasn't happy to get the call, until I mentioned coming home and going to school. He sounded relieved, almost, though he didn't let on. Lucille didn't cry or anything, and neither did I, although by then the mood had changed and we were more subdued, maybe even depressed. Maybe we both felt like we'd failed, or something. I tried not to dwell on it. I was going home.

Talk about a long ride, the bus from Vancouver to Montreal. Talk about a sore ass. But it was filled with incident, funny dreams and conversations with strangers. The best was the time we stopped in Alberta at a rest stop and I stood at the side of the highway and smoked a cigarette. On the other side stood a large mountain. This was a big mountain and as I stared at it I became convinced it was aware of me. I said hello to it with my thoughts, and I felt something come back at me. Maybe it was just my imagination, but I felt something, like a slow-moving, all-encompassing intelligence.

"Thank you," I said, whispering.

It was the last mountain I saw before we reached the prairies.

Forty-Three

After I got back, I got a job, or several jobs, painting houses, stuff like that. Irregular work but it paid enough to keep me in cigarettes and other things. And it kept Dad happy enough that he didn't grumble when I slept in. I called Amy after I got back but she was going to summer school in New York. She told me a bit more about how disappointed she was, and I did my best to apologize, but we didn't talk long. Lucille eventually sent me a letter that sounded hurt and was filled with biblical quotations and advice on how to sort myself out. I hadn't realized she was so hurt. At the time she seemed glad for me to leave.

I kept doing my deep relaxation every day, and reading all kinds of weird books, and sometimes it was all I could talk about. After a couple of weeks everyone was fed up with me on that level. They didn't really believe the stuff anyway. Like I'd joined a cult or something. Dad especially couldn't stand it. In the beginning he listened, then he began getting angry, raising his voice, even shouting and calling me names. Eventually I stopped talking about it altogether. There was no point.

The only one who seemed interested to keep hearing about this stuff was Kris. One afternoon in the middle of that summer I was sitting on the steps, relaxing after a hard half day of washing the windows of some big house in Westmount. Kris came along, looking like he had something on his mind. When he came up the walk and propped a foot on one of the steps, he said:

"You'll never guess what happened."

This was important, I could tell.

"Okay," I said. "What happened?"

"Something happened I can't explain. I don't even believe in these things. All that stuff you've been talking about. I think it's getting to my brain."

I could feel my sense of irony coming on.

"You see, I told you it's true," I said. "This shit is real."

"I don't know about that, but listen. I woke up at three in the morning from this dream about Jake getting in a car crash on the 40. I remember because I looked at the clock. I was sitting right up in bed, freaking out because it was so real."

"Okay," I said.

"Jake called me today. Guess what happened? He got in a crash on the 40 last night around three. He's okay, but it was intense."

"I told you," I said. "This shit is real."

"I can't explain it," Kris said. "I don't believe this kind of thing, but I have to admit what happened, happened. I have to admit it, because it really happened. It's impossible."

"I don't know what's going on," I said. "But I think nothing's impossible."

Forty-Four

That evening after supper I tried one more time to convince Dad. I thought I had a pretty good case. Dad didn't like Kris too much. He complained about him because of all the trouble we got into in the past. I think he didn't like his dad and that kind of rubbed off. But I don't think he mistrusted what Kris had to say. He wasn't a liar. He wasn't making it up, I knew that. I was pretty sure Dad would agree with that.

Dad just made a sour face, and said:

"It doesn't mean anything."

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything."

"But he had the experience."

"Why don't you stop this shit," Dad said. "There are other things to think about.

This is magical thinking. It's not real."

"But he woke up from a dream about something that was really happening."

"So what? There's no way of knowing that it happened the way he said it did."

"Kris wouldn't lie, you know that."

"I'm not saying he lied."

"Okay," I said. "You don't have to raise your voice."

"Then stop putting words in my mouth."

"I'm not," I said.

"I'm just saying there are other explanations."

"Like what? What else is there except what happened? He dreamed about it at the time it was happening. It means he was there or something, he got a message. I don't know."

"You see, this is what I'm trying to tell you. There are other ways to explain something."

"Okay, like what."

"First of all there's too much to explain. There's things about the brain and memory that I can't tell you all about it in just a few minutes. You have to go to school to learn some of this stuff. I don't have time to tell you everything. But there are things that happen with the brain. You know, the brain is an amazing thing. It's very complex. We're only beginning to understand how it works. Memory is very complex. We have memories that feel like something else. He could have wakened up from a dream and gone back to sleep. Then when his friend told him about it he created a memory. His brain created a memory of the dream. This way it felt like what you say."

"No. He says he remembered looking at the clock because the dream woke him up, and the dream was so intense. It wasn't an ordinary dream."

"I know. I'm telling you, there are other explanations. Things you don't understand."

"Okay. What about what happened in BC, with Stacy, the girl in my group. She comes home in tears because she sees a vision of her brother getting hit by a bus on his way home from school. She calls home, Ontario, thousands of miles away. Her mother answers, she's in tears because little Timmy, whatever his name, has just come home and

was almost hit by a bus. I saw it. I saw her, other people saw her. We all saw her coming in upset as hell. There."

I slapped the table and Dad blinked, and said:

"So what's your question?"

"How do you explain it?"

"Have you ever heard of coincidence?"

"Oh come on, you can't tell that was a coincidence."

"I'm not talking about just coincidence, I'm talking about the theory of coincidence."

"What's that?"

"Basically, if you flip a coin enough times, the statistical probability of a certain sequence occurring increases with the number of times you flip the coin."

"I don't get it."

"Basically, anything is possible because eventually the least likely possibility can occur."

"Okay. This wasn't a coincidence. I don't believe that. She was upset. She'd had a vision of some kind. Something told her what happened. She even got the details about the bus. He wasn't hit, but everyone was upset. She was so upset. I saw it. Why can't we assume that what happened is what happened, and make a theory about how something like that would work?"

Dad shook his head.

"Because I don't believe that anything happened."

"How can you say that."

Now he slapped the table, but hard.

"Because it's my training," he said. "Now leave me alone!"

It was time to back off. When he started shouting it was time to back off. I'd learned that much.

Forty-Five

The next day was Saturday, family day in Westmount Park. I got high with Kris and we went over to walk among the people. It was one of those perfect sunny days in Montreal, a blue sky, white clouds, warm air with a few breezes to cool it down. And everyone smiling, glowing in the perfection of the moment, the feeling-tone of the day. We walked around in a happy daze, recollecting memories of previous family days, some of them with our own families, when our families were still families. There were kids everywhere running hilariously from one activity to the other. All the challenges and prizes, the petting zoo and the donkey ride, the piped in music. It was all the same as other years, yet new, different.

"It's so much smaller than I remember," Kris said.

"Yet so much more," I said.

And we giggled.

We were making our third circuit when I saw Mr. Fogarty. I waved and called his name and he smiled placidly and ambled over. I introduced Kris and Mr. Fogarty pulled out his cigarettes and offered us one and we all lit up. I wanted to tell him everything all at once.

"So much happened," I said.

"I'm sure it did," he said.

"It's all your fault," I said.

He laughed. "Me?"

"You told me to go sit on my throne, remember?"

"Of course I remember. I gather you found your way."

"I don't know," I said.

We smiled, and a silence grew.

I looked at Kris, who said:

"I don't know what anyone's talking about."

"You'll have to tell me all about it sometime," Mr. Fogarty said.

"I will," I said. "Are you around this summer?"

"I'm always around in the summer. In fact, I often come here. It's such a lovely park, and so near."

"I'll come find you, and I'll tell you everything," I said.

"I look forward to it," he said.

As soon as we were a little out of the way, Kris said:

"That's your teacher? What a freak."

"He's cool," I said.

We went around the park again and again, looking at women.

"There's that hot librarian," Kris said.

I caught sight of her rounding a bend.

"We have to go around again," I said. "I have to see her. I just dreamed about her.

She was floating cross-legged outside my window. It was very strange."

We went around again and I spotted her coming towards me. I averted my eyes, looking over only to sneak a glance when I passed, hoping not to be seen doing it. Instead

I heard a voice, and when I looked she was coming towards us. She was looking right at me and smiling.

"Don't look now," Kris said.

Then she was right in front of me, saying hello and asking me how I was, and I was awkward, not sure what to say, except to reply "Hello."

"I haven't seen you in the library in a while," she said.

"I've been away," I said.

"I'm going away in a few months, to do my PhD in Oxford. I was hoping I'd run into you. I wanted to talk some more about mythology. It's kind of my specialty. I wanted to talk about it that day, I was just so surprised when you asked."

That day, the way she looked at me when I asked about Joseph Campbell and the hero's journey.

"I thought I was getting on your nerves," I said. "Interrupting your work."

"Are you kidding? Do you know how great it is when someone asks about something interesting? I can't really talk now. I'm here with my son and his father. They're around here somewhere. Can I give you my number? I have an apartment downtown. Maybe we could meet and talk some more. And I'd like to hear about your poetry."

Her number. My poetry. Of course she could give me her number. She fished out a pen and paper and wrote it down. She gave it to me and left, waving goodbye and smiling.

"Wow," I said.

Kris glanced at the paper, and said:

"Let me see that."

I gave it to him.

"This all happened because of a dream?"

I reached to get it back and Kris moved his hand away.

"I'm keeping it," he said.

"Give it back," I said.

He gave it back and I put it in my pocket.