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**The Far Away Home**

**Marci Denesiuk**

**A Thesis**

**in**

**The Department**

**of**

**English**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
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**ABSTRACT****The Far Away Home****Marci Denesiuk**

In this collection of short stories, each protagonist is seeking some kind of home, whether it be a physical location or a sense of belonging. By exploring this theme, my writing develops different notions of “home.” The stories are also closely linked by their realistic style, colloquial voice, and use of outside references such as fairy tales and song lyrics. While each piece can stand on its own, these stories with complimentary themes and styles can be understood as a whole.

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*Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home.*

*Your house is on fire, your children are alone.*

## Just Like Coming Home

My dad gathers me in a brief, bone-crushing bear hug and doesn't stop talking during the entire car ride from the airport to the city. He has more gray hair and is slightly shorter, but otherwise looks the same. His skin is tanned a deep brown even though he hasn't worked a construction job in over five years. His eyebrows are unruly. The laugh lines at the corner of his eyes almost join his dimples, forming two perfect half moons of wrinkles around his face. He has developed a new habit of sucking at his teeth in between sentences, a loud smacking sound like he's trying to taste something at the back of his mouth. "Dentures," he explains when he sees my gaze trained on his lips.

He smoothly changes gears as we stop for a yellow light and continues his commentary on Edmonton's development. *Dead-monton* we called it as teenagers. "That over there, remember? Was a gas station? Now, it's a pizza place. Italian thin-crust." I watch the scenery pass and have the strange sensation that everything is exactly the same as when I left three years ago even though I see evidence of both change and decay. I don't care about the buildings. It is the sky that feels like home. A big, blue prairie sky that covers my eyes like a blindfold.

We cross the North Saskatchewan River and pass through the small city center. Dad speeds up over a little hill and my stomach rises and falls as the truck tips up and then dips down. He used to do this for my sister and me when we were girls. I'd squeal with nervous laughter and Libby, though older, would bury her head in my lap.

We pass over railroad tracks and I lift my feet. We drive through a graveyard and I hold my breath. When we cross into the west side of town, I sit up a little straighter waiting to round a bend in the road that will reveal the house I was born in. “Gone,” Dad says, avoiding my eyes. A second later I understand. A shiny new strip mall covers the whole block where our old house once stood.

“Prime real estate,” Dad explains. “Mrs. Walker died a couple years ago. The doctor’s wife went soon after. Between the two of them they pretty much owned the whole block so with them gone it went up for sale.”

Mrs. Walker was our landlady for twenty-one years. We called her place the ginger bread house because it had a tall, peaked roof and was covered in decorative white lattice that looked like frosting. She rented us the small house next door. It had a red roof and a huge backyard, which was lined with plum trees that would blossom full of pink flowers in the spring and drop squishy ripe fruit all summer long.

My parents first moved there when my sister was born. They paid a hundred and twenty five dollars a month for two small bedrooms, a kitchen, and a living room. There was no basement. When my baba came to live with us before going into a nursing home she never could unpack her suitcase because there was no extra closet space. All the relatives referred to our house as “cozy.” So when aunts and uncles visited Edmonton they would always stay with my family even though brothers Horst and Fred both had guest rooms.

When we moved out two decades later, I was seventeen, and the rent was still the same. My mom tried to convince me the move was a good thing. They would finally be homeowners and I could have a room of my own, but I didn’t care. I cried for the house,

the yard, the plum trees. I cried for our neighbors. The girls I played with, even Penny Little who used to lift her pretty pink dress and pee in our garden. And the boys I kissed, Bobby and Matty and Peter Tumm. I cried for the ravine we played in, our tree house built in the quiet, cool pines, brown needles poking our bare feet, scary stories of the witch who lived down in the river valley and boiled children in her brew.

But my tears did not stop us from moving out or strangers from moving in. From a distance I watched the changes. A fence was built, the swing set rusted, the weeping willow was cut back, and the garden was sodded. Only the plum trees remained the same and I would walk the edge of the boulevard and suck the sweet fruit from its skin and feel good. But now the plums are a paved alley where employees park and put out garbage.

Dad has stopped talking and we travel into the suburbs to my parents' house.

As the truck rolls into the driveway, my mom opens the back door and a small fluffy dog runs out and barks at me. "Gizzy! Gizzy stop that. Come back here." Mom moves towards me but I'm too busy trying to fend off the mutt, which is now bouncing off my legs. Dad joins in the chorus of admonitions, "Gizzy, that's enough." But both my parents are laughing. I'm surprised they have a dog. When I was growing up, I begged for a pet. One year, I even made a calendar called *Six Weeks to Waiting for a Puppy* because I was convinced that this would be the Christmas all my dreams would come true. Instead, I got a record player, a bunch of Play-Along 45s, and two stuffed animals. "They don't need to be walked," my mom said cheerfully.

"I can't believe it." I bend down and pick up the squirming animal.

"We're just babysitting for Auntie Ruth." Mom hugs me loosely so as not to crush Gizzy who licks her face when she comes close. She laughs again. "Yes, you love Nana,

don't you?" She reaches for the dog and I get a good look at my mom. For this occasion, she has changed from her usual sleeveless flowered dresses into a beige blouse and brown slacks. She's gained a little weight but looks healthy. Her hair is cut short and permed curly. As we walk to the house, she favours her right leg and I see a gauzy bandage peeking out from her sandals. She wears darkened glasses because her eyes are sensitive from the laser surgery.

She's been a diabetic since I was born, shooting insulin into her thigh every morning. She avoids sugar except during a reaction, when sweat will pour from her brow as she sits down, eats three chocolate bars at a time, and spoons honey into her mouth. The doctors tell her she's been lucky even though she has sores on her feet that won't heal and her eyes are bleeding.

As a child, I remember her saying her greatest fear was blindness. I could feel the terror in her voice and her fear became mine. When I was ten, I was convinced I was going blind because we had to change my eyeglass prescription twice in one year. I stayed home curled on the couch, watching *Another World* and faking sick, a rosary clutched in my hand, praying for my sight. A large round bead, *Our Father who art in heaven* -- please don't let me go blind -- ten Hail Marys -- oh please God, don't let me go blind. My mom slowly climbs the steps to the back door. Please God don't...

The house smells like pine cones. An electric freshener in the shape of a Christmas tree is plugged into the wall by my feet. It's cold inside. "Close the door, honey, we've got the air on. I tell you, I complained when your dad put it in. I thought it was going to be another white elephant, as they say. Like that huge rototiller he got for a bargain." Mom draws out the last word and mimes quotation marks in the air to stress her

sarcasm. "But I've got the sweats all the time now. I thought the change was supposed to be hot then cold, but I'm just hot, then hot, then hot again."

"How's your eye?"

"Oh God, the stupid doctors. If I never saw another one it'd be too soon. I hate them. I hate the doctors."

I nod. "Where's dad?"

"Probably smoking in the garage."

I clear my bags from the entry, splash some water on my face, and go outside to drink Pilsner with my dad. He sits in a plastic patio chair, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He's wearing slippers and I suddenly wonder if he had them on at the airport. "They found your uncle Bill."

This is news. My uncle Bill is the family mystery. What ever happened to Uncle Bill? He disappeared from the farm as a young man and never looked back. Once a woman came searching for him, tracing him back to Saskatchewan. My baba told her she hadn't seen him in twenty years. The woman then explained that she'd been living with Bill in Toronto but one day he just up and left. My baba shook her head and offered the woman some tea with a liberal shot of rye. "For courage," she told the woman and they stared at each other, knowing.

"How'd they find him?"

"Dead. The RCMP phoned Auntie Helga and asked her if she had a brother Bill. She said yeah and they said he's dead. He'd been living with a woman and her son in a house. Apparently, it was pretty run down. It was the son that found his identification and

all the names and phone numbers of our family. That's the damndest thing. He had all our current numbers just like he'd been calling us for years."

"Did you find out why he left?"

"No. Probably never really will. He was always a little quieter than the rest of us. Read a lot and hung around the girls more than us boys. He left early, but we all did. I was fourteen. At first, he came back now and then. Came for our dad's funeral. After that he disappeared. We tried like hell to contact him when our mom died. You might remember that. But he missed your baba's funeral and after that we didn't care so much." Dad shrugs and slides his slippered feet across the garage floor. "Want another one?" He opens two cans for us. Mom comes outside and we all go sit in the sun together.

I stretch and turn my face to the warmth of the day. "Am I ever happy to be on vacation," I say, feeling slightly self-conscious in my attempt to make small talk.

Mom responds easily, "How is work?"

"Not bad. I was getting pretty burnt out. It's the busy season what with the tourists on the road and the highway stays warm till late at night. The deer come out of the woods for the heat. We've got a skunk problem, too. And, of course, the cows." I stop talking. I realised early on that nobody wanted to hear about my job and my parents are no exception. Hell, I don't even want to hear about my job. But it's not as bad as people think.

When I was nineteen, I moved to Montreal to go to university. After one year of studying nothing in particular, I looked forward to the summer and a chance to work and make some money. I found a job with the Ministère des Transports du Québec and pictured sunny days of cutting grass by the highway or holding a SLOW sign to direct



traffic around road construction. When it turned out I was on road kill duty, I was slightly disturbed, to say the least. As a little girl riding in my parents' car, I used to cross myself three times when I saw a dead dog or cat or porcupine on the highway. I'd squeeze my eyes tight and pray there was an animal heaven.

But the job wasn't that bad. I didn't have to speak French. I got used to working nights and, after my week's training period, I was let loose alone on the highway. This was close enough to my childhood dream to be satisfying. I'd always wanted to drive the big rigs. While other girls played teacher, I played truck stop. If I cried as a baby, my dad would take me for a spin around the block and I'd be gurgling happily by the time the ride was over. I'm most content when I'm going somewhere, even if the destination is a dead deer.

The funny thing was my parents didn't seem to really mind me dropping out. I always thought they wanted something better than blue collar for their kids, but they did get to tell people I worked for the government and I got the impression they were just thankful I'd settled down into something.

"Joe called, he was wondering when you got in. He's got some tickets to the Folk Festival." Mom feeds bits of her sandwich to the dog and I get up to phone my first love.

When I leave the house that night, I'm squeaky clean. Powdered, perfumed, pepperminty fresh. I have even optimistically shaved my legs all the way up to my crotch. I'm going to meet Joe. Big Joe, The Joker, Little Joey or Pickles, as he likes to be called.

I'm driving my mom's sedan. I've found an old tape of The Cure in the basement, which I pop into the stereo.

*The very first time I saw your face  
I thought of a song and quickly changed the tune.  
The very first time I touched your skin  
I thought of a story and watched it reached the end too soon.*

As I drive the twisting road into the river valley, I squirm in my seat. I feel sexy. I feel sixteen. The cool evening air streams in through my open window and I taste the sweet smell of dried grass. I park the car on a gravel side road and walk over a small footbridge to get to the ski club. The stages are set up on the small bunny hills and there are crowds of people milling about, but I quickly spot Joe at the entrance gates and skip up to meet him. He picks me off the ground and twirls me around in an oh-so-happy embrace. We link arms and go to the beer gardens where we sit on the ground and tell each other how good we look.

Joe is a handsome man. He's a big man. "I'm a fat man," he says, laughing. "Actually, the boys are going to kick me out of the fat club soon, if I don't gain a bit more weight. That's the problem with this job, it's too healthy." He lifts his plastic Labatt's cup and toasts the air. "And I don't get to drink nearly enough beer." This summer, he's been painting houses as opposed to the bartending jobs he's had since high school. He's lost that pasty look bar people get from too much free liquor and never seeing the sun. But he's always been shy about compliments. "My eyebrows are going bald," he says when I tell him his lips are beautiful.

I ask him what else he's been up to. He responds, "I'm writing a short story."

"Really?"

“Yeah. It’s about my penis.”

I groan. He asks about my family. “They’re fine. You know. Same.” I answer vaguely because I don’t really know, yet. “How’s yours?”

“Crazy. They’re nuts! We all are. It’s a good thing we’re a family because nobody else could stand us. Sally slept with Jean Claude Van Damme. She was working as a chamber maid in a hotel and the next thing you know...” The late afternoon sun escapes a cloud and silver shines at Joe’s temples. “He’s a Face Man by the way. Picture that.” Joe’s sisters have a list of categories to classify men sexually. The Face Man goes down on you, the Over Achiever is everywhere at once but never gets you anywhere, The Wham Bam Thank You Ma’am is self-explanatory, and, then, there is The Keeper.

“But was he a Keeper?” Occasionally, the classifications can overlap. Obviously, only the Face Man can also be a Keeper, but there is that rare instance that a Keeper isn’t a Face Man.

“She said ‘Yes.’ Go figure.”

“What’s Sally doing now?”

“Mostly black men.”

I mock hit him. “Seriously.”

“Seriously, she’s working in a bar. So is Amy.” Amy is Joe’s other sister. She’s 6’2”, has blonde hair down to her ass, and has breast implants. “But get this - Amy’s a wrestling bimbo. Her new boyfriend is semi-pro and she gets sixty bucks a show to go sit in the stands and trip the other wrestlers’ girlfriends as they come down the aisle.”

“That’s crazy.”

“I know. I said. All of us. Nuts.”

We laze on the grass, falling into a comfortable silence. I'm glowing a little just being around him and I'm thinking this town's not so bad. Joe was my longest and best romance. We met when we were fifteen and stayed together for four years. We spent hours parked in his truck, pressing bodies, never naked, grinding hip to hip, groin to groin. When we felt queasy from so much innocent passion, we'd stare at the stars and wish dreams for each other.

The day is disappearing, I stroke Joe's thigh. His breath is damp and hot against my hair. I know he's smiling. A couple of girls who I remember from before walk up. Pammy and Lola are sisters. One of them has just gotten married today and the whole wedding party is at the Festival celebrating. They are both tiny and cute and wear cowboy hats. They hand us a joint and I take a small puff, barely inhaling. I pass the next half hour hiding my face from the crowds, giggling like crazy, and begging Joe to stay with me. Finally, when I can move, we go sit on the hill by the main stage and I feel roots growing from me, spreading into the ground, spreading, growing, from me into the ground. And I'm thinking those cowgirls have some wicked pot.

I spend the next three days at the Festival. I hardly see my family. Instead, I see Alejandro Escovedo five times, once on the main stage and four times in the smaller workshops with other musicians. He steals my heart the first night when he sings a cover of "I Wanna Be Your Dog." *Now I'm ready to close my eyes. Now I'm ready to take your hand.* Distortion. The folkies don't know what hit them, but I love it. I am not often a fan but, when I become one, I'm dedicated. He starts to recognize me in the small crowds. He has dusky skin, wears dark wrap-around sunglasses, dresses in black, and has a sad smile that invites thoughts of salty necks, moist skin, and open-eyed ecstasy. I can't help

but wet my lips. On the final day, he says “Hi” and I respond, “You guys are so great, I hope you never die.”

The festival ends. Joe unwillingly goes back to work, complaining about the early mornings and long days. He promises to see me on the weekend. With no other distractions, I spend the next five days in the suburbs with my parents. I slow down and easily blend into their retired life. I feel we have accomplished something when, in an afternoon, my dad and I get groceries at IGA where the lunch meat is good *and* go to Safeway where we have a dollar off coupon for 2 litres of milk. I drive Mom to her doctor’s appointments, the foot clinic, the optometrist, the eye surgeon. We also go vacuum cleaner shopping. We buy a Dirt Devil, but when we get it home, Mom is not impressed so we exchange it for a Phantom Fury, which she likes better. “You should see all the gunk we got from the rug,” she tells my sister on the phone. “It’s gross. I can’t believe it. Yeah, she’s right here.” Mom passes the phone to me.

Libby’s voice is like my own. We have soft voices that can be easily drowned out, especially by the sound of running water. “So you’re coming to the cat party?” she asks. My sister self-admittedly wants to be one of those crazy old cat ladies. And by her estimate, she’s well on her way. She’s bought a ninety-two year old, three-story house where she lives alone and she’s adopted four cats so far. Ginger and Buddy came first. Buddy died a year later of feline leukemia. Libby grieved like a mother. After a time, Mom and Dad became worried and gave her Sebastian to try to break the depression. It helped some and Tookie helped some more. She found Tookie in a pet store with a sign on her cage saying, *Please take me home, I die tomorrow*. There was no question in Libby’s mind. Every year Libby has a party to celebrate their adoptions.

I make sure I inquire about the cats.

“They’re fine,” Libby responds. “Ginger-cat’s not eating her soft food. I’m a little worried. I think I’ll go get her some baby beef liver. That might spark her appetite.”

“I’m sure Ginger’s fine,” I say distractedly. My mom is watching Judge Judy on TV. “Who do you think you’re kidding?” Judge Judy raises her eyebrow at a young man. “The picture was taken before the accident so the damage couldn’t have been caused by this woman. The date’s right here in the corner of the photo.” The young man looks guilty. The woman has a smug little smile on her face but also looks guilty. Everyone in the crowd looks guilty.

Libby coughs into the phone. “Sorry,” I tell her.

“It’s OK. I’ve got to get to work anyway.”

We hang up and I feel bad. I wanted to tell her how much I was looking forward to seeing her. I wanted to chat, catch up, connect. I like my sister. She’s a smart woman. Sometimes she breaks my heart. She has cat-green eyes and thick blonde hair. She’s been fighting her weight for years. Now, she seems to have given up. She stays at home nestled into the couch under layers of homemade blankets, sleeping cats, and fat. She breathes heavily when she climbs the stairs in her house.

Between my sister and me, my parents have given up the dream of grandchildren. They talk baby talk to the dog. Much of their day is spent wondering if Gizzy is hungry, does she have to pee, is she bored? Even though it’s still over a week away, they plan the day I’m supposed to leave. They plan it around the dog. I fly out at 5:00 and my mom has an appointment for more laser surgery at 1:30. “I’ve called Gena and she can take me to the hospital. You and Dad have to leave here by 3:30 for the airport. I’ll be home

probably the latest at 4:00 so that means Gizzy will have to stay alone about a half an hour.”

“That’s not bad,” Dad says. “We could maybe leave a little later.”

“No, I think it will be all right. I could get Dora next door to come look in on her.”

I watch my parents in fascination. I want to scream, “It’s only a half an hour!” But I let them go on, thinking it’s good they have something to discuss. My mom told me that sometimes she and dad can go days without saying a word to each other. She was talking about how a relationship can go through all sorts of phases in thirty years but the hardest part is making it through the dull times. I believe she was trying to make a point about my habit of dumping boyfriends after eight months. My mom’s not the kind of person to sit me down and say, “You’re thirty-five, now, don’t you think it’s about time you settled down,” but she does make her views known in other ways. Her speech has not left me thinking about trying to hang in there with someone. Instead, I realize how lonely my parents must be sometimes. Since I don’t want to think about this and I certainly don’t want to think about leaving, I head out to the garage for a smoke. I’ve started again.

My dad soon follows for what has become our ritual late afternoon beer. He tells me about his first job in a metal shop where he worked for eighteen dollars a week and lived in a room with no kitchen, no toilet. Just a bed. From there, he travelled across Canada and the States. He squints, remembering. “Eventually, I got a job with the railroad. Had a gas station with brother Horst for a while at the same time, but it didn’t last.” Dad smiles shyly. “We went under. We had a good go of it for a bit when they were working on the highway. All the big trucks would stop. Even had a girl working for us in

the coffee shop, but after the highway was repaired we realized we were on the wrong side of the road. Didn't get the traffic."

It's strange for me to imagine my father as a young wanderer. He'd stopped taking chances on risky business ventures by the time I was born. I do remember his job in the railroad yards. He started his shift at midnight, leaving the house in the dark with a thermos full of coffee and the sandwiches Libby and I would make for him. The next morning we would ask, "Did you like the sandwiches? We made them with two cheeses. Did you like the cookies?"

During the winter, we were especially concerned with providing treats for him. Even though I was supposed to be asleep, I often woke up to hear my dad quietly rustling in the kitchen, the soft light filtering through the half-closed door. I always felt bad that he had to leave our warm house while I stayed snug in my bed. Initially, he had started working nights so he could look after us during the day while my mom went to her job. When we began school, Dad was able to quit the railroad and work construction until he retired. Sometimes, when we were let out of class early, he'd take us to a job with him. He'd tie a white carpenter's apron around our waists and start rows of nails for us to finish pounding in. I loved the efficiency of the heavy hammer in my small hands even though it would sometimes take me six tries to drive a nail home. My dad had it down to a consistent, rhythmic two swings -- tock TOCK, tock TOCK, tock TOCK.

We hear the back door close and Mom comes into the garage. She folds her arms across her chest and rocks side to side, shifting weight, swaying. I have this same habit.



She joins the conversation, ticking jobs off on her fingers. “Dollar Cleaners. Phone operator. File clerk for the university farm. Waitress — which was a nightmare, as they say.”

“When’d you start work for Woodward’s?” I want her to keep talking. I realize that this is why I’ve come back, this is where I come from, this is who I am.

“Just after you were born. The girls from the flower shop and I still laugh about that job when we get together.” She looks at my dad and asks, “Remember the time I almost lost my job?”

It’s hard to picture my mom being fired. A woman who is so responsible and organized that she calls me long distance to remind me to set my clock back in the fall and sends me stamps just in case I can’t get to the post office.

Mom and Dad share smiles. She turns to me and explains, “There was this real fancy type in the garden center. She was all done up. Her hair teased to high heaven. I was watering the plants and she kept standing in the way so I asked her to move but she stayed where she was — real bitchy-like. I turned around to get the roses in the corner and for some reason I thought she’d moved so I turned back to water the plants I’d missed. But she was right behind me and the next thing I know she’s dripping with ice-cold water and hollering bloody murder, as they say. Her hair came down off her head like an avalanche.” Mom laughs while she tells her story and her voice becomes louder and excited. Dad and I laugh, too. We laugh and laugh.

Mom gleefully pinches her nose. We fall silent, each of us looking at our own feet. Mom goes inside to watch TV. Dad and I follow. The true crime programs depress me. Men murdering children. Women murdering children. Children murdering children. I

read my book instead. *High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby. The narrator, a sarcastic, slacker type, has a habit of listing things: *I was going to ask you for your top five records to play on a wet Monday morning and all that, and now you've gone and ruined it.* It's a game not to be spoiled.

I, too, start to think in top fives. Top five liquor stores in Alberta: *The Booze Barn* and *Liquor Select* come in top two. The first advertises *Really, Really, Really Cold Beer* while the latter demonstrates its upper-class allure with the promise of *Extremely Cold Beer*. For those customers who have problems locating a store or perhaps have problems locating themselves, *On 111th* is conveniently located on 111th Avenue. Then, there is the ever popular *Liquor Store* of which there are hundreds. And, finally, the *One Stop Shop*, a favorite because of their senior citizens' specials. Thursday, my dad and I go there for a 5% discount on Pilsner. The errand takes us thirty minutes. We return to the house satisfied.

The house my parents bought when we moved from our small rental was never really home to me. It was bigger, stucco with brown trim, but it lacked that warm, chicken noodle, baked bread feeling. And my room downstairs was haunted.

One night, I woke up startled to find the radio blaring U2. I knew the music well because I'd always joked "The Drowning Man" would be the first song I'd play at my wedding.

*These words and tides  
This change of times  
Won't drag you away  
Hold on and hold on tightly  
Hold on and don't let go.*

Heart beating wildly, I fumbled in the dark and tried to unplug my ghetto blaster. I slid my hand along the wall, feeling for the outlet, but the socket was empty. My fingers traced the outline of the radio and found its cord dangling harmlessly to the floor. The red power button blinked once and then there was silence.

I climbed back into bed and crossed myself over and over again. I was seventeen. I didn't pray anymore. Praying was a memory like all the other childhood games. *Holy Mary Mother of God. Three blind mice. Blessed art the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Three blind mice.*

But even as a teenager the sign of the cross still had the power to soothe me. After this first experience, I was ready whenever the ghost showed up, rosary wound around my fist, a glow-in-the-dark statue of Mary at my bedside. The door would open, scraping across the low plush carpet, letting in the light from the hall and I would say, "Mom, I'm awake," because she would sometimes check on me before bed. But the door would just close and when I opened it, no one stood in the hall. I was alone in the house.

My night light used to flicker like the flame of a fire and make the sound of a dragonfly's wings. My uncle Horst who was an electrician for the public school board came over and fixed it. Just a short. But it happened again. And again.

In the morning, I go for breakfast with Mom and Auntie Nelly to Smitty's in Kingsway Garden Mall. I ask them if they remember the ghost because I know they do.

"Your cousin Victoria saw it, too," Nelly says. She's my mom's only sister and is ten years younger. When my mom moved away, Nelly was still wearing knee socks. She's almost fifty, now, but her face is still girlish. Her long lashes lap at her brows when she blinks.

Mom perks up. She's having one of her bad days. Her right eye is weepy from surgery. It squints, and puckers. It looks like a leaky belly button. Her left eye is bright blue. "There are many ghosts in our family. When your baba saw Gido after he died in the crash all her own kids thought she was dreaming or nutty. But I didn't. I talked to her one day when we were at the farm. She said she woke up and the room felt so cold she went to get another quilt for the bed."

We all lean in closer, huddle together in the busy restaurant. I have a chill. I pat down the hairs on my arm. An ambulance drives by. Its lights flash. The restaurant noises seem to get louder, cups clinking, knives scraping, people talking. We compete against the wail of the siren, which stops just outside the mall's door. The paramedics walk in and people hush. We crane our necks, but can't get a good look at what's happening. Nelly half stands up. "It's an older gentleman. Must be a heart attack. I don't think he was choking. They're listening to his chest. Putting him on a gurney." She sits back down. The people at the surrounding tables avert their eyes, smile weakly as their breakfasts arrive. The ambulance sits outside for a while before driving away. I'm thinking in Top Five lists again. Top One place I wouldn't like to have a heart attack: Smitty's Restaurant in Kingsway Garden Mall during the breakfast rush.

Our food comes. The smell of sausage and eggs wafts over our table. My waffle is covered in fake whipped cream and frozen berries. It's not what I expected. I pour artificial syrup over the plate. Our cups are refilled and the coffee is so weak I can see through it. I could weep. I scrape off the edible oil products, and tear the soggy waffle apart with my fork. We all dig in.

"What about Baba?" I ask, now only half-heartedly interested in ghosts.

Mom answers quietly, "Baba woke up and it was cold. She was going to get an extra blanket and there Gido was standing at the foot of her bed."

"Then what?"

"She said she knew that he just wanted to let her know everything was going to be OK."

"And that was like the ghost you saw, right?"

Mom nods. "Same thing happened to me. That's why I wanted to talk to Baba and let her know she wasn't seeing anything that wasn't there."

Nelly adds, "It was our Uncle Cliff, wasn't it?" She looks at me and explains, "Uncle Cliff was a real mean bastard. Whipped his kids. I think there was some sexual abuse happening, too. That side of the family's a little funny. Simple. We're really only once removed from white trash." Nelly frowns. "He used to set the neighbors' barns on fire." She closes in, her fork marking the air with punctuation. "One day he went into his own barn with a shotgun and blew his head off as he dropped a lit match on the dry straw. I tell you he was a devil. I didn't want to see him when he was alive, never mind dead."

"How'd it happen?" I ask Mom.

"Just like Baba." She takes a napkin and mops her weepy eye. "Dad was working the night shift and I woke up to a freezing cold room. I sat up in bed and there was Cliffy Mactavish. I recognized him immediately. He raised his hands, palms upward, and I knew he was asking forgiveness."

"What'd you do?"

"I forgave him the best I could."

I push my plate back and drink my too-sweet coffee. “Why do you think he came to you?” My mom shrugs, she looks at her plate. I look at her and know why. Because my mom is the rare person who can tell you everything is going to be fine and you believe her. She has the power to reassure. She has the power to bless.

We argue over who will pay the bill, my mom wins, or loses, depending on how you look at it. Uncle Bart, Nelly’s husband, is watching golf on TV with my dad when we come home. He glances at me. “Well,” he says.

“How are you?”

“Long time.”

“Yeah. How’s retired life?”

“Good, good.”

I sit on the floor and our attention shifts to the TV. Tiger Woods misses a putt. “Ha,” Uncle Bart gloats. “I told you he was worthless. Damn spook.”

I’m not sure I heard correctly, but my mom cautions, “Baaaart.”

Uncle Bart grunts. He looks at me. “How you like living with those frogs? When the hell are they going to separate already? They think we give a flying fuck? I’d like to see that. What a joke.” Clapping from the TV.

I want to say, “Shut up you ugly, fat, ignorant, ugly ignoramus.” But I love my uncle Bart. I used to think he was funny. “A Ukrainian and a Pole were walking down a country road. The Ukrainian starts walking strangely. The Pole says, ‘What’s wrong?’ Ukrainian says, ‘I have to go to the bathroom.’” Bart would hold up two fingers and whisper, “Number two.” I’d giggle. “‘Go in the bush,’ says the Pole. ‘I don’t have any toilet paper,’ says the Ukrainian. ‘Use a buck, what’s a buck?’ says the Pole. So the

Ukrainian goes into the bush, comes out a few minutes later but is still walking funny.

‘What’s with you,’ says the Pole. ‘Have you ever tried wiping yourself with three quarters, two dimes, and a nickel?’” Bart’d pick me up and tickle me until I cried and my panties were a little damp from pee, but I loved him.

When he leaves, I notice his leg is turned inward and he winces as he stands.

“Gout,” my dad sighs into my ear.

Dad gives me twenty dollars as I leave the house that night. “It’s OK,” I say, shoving the money back at him.

“Take it,” he says gruffly. My parents have never had a lot of money, but what they have, they share. One time, I came home from babysitting pissed off because our rich neighbors gave me a ten and said I could come back with the dollar change I owed them. Cheap bastards. My mom told me that’s why they were rich and we never would be.

Friday night and I’m meeting Joe and a bunch of people at Dewey’s Bar. I’ve been looking forward to this all week. Joe is anticipation, an unrealized dream that keeps me coming back for more. We keep each other in reserve so when things don’t work out with other people, we can console ourselves with the idea that *we* could be together. We *could* be happy.

When I arrive, I see a table full of guys I used to know. There’s Joe, Pepsi, Spaniard, Scramble, Monty, Boston, and Lush. Before there were some girls, but they’ve all left or gotten married. The boys look slightly bleary-eyed, but still manage to greet me

with enthusiasm. I settle in and Lush, who's about ten years older than the rest of us, continues slurring his story. I never knew if they called him Lush because of his velvety, come-hither eyes or his alcoholic tendencies. I suspect the latter.

“Before I went to prison a gay man was sending me flowers and expensive gifts. My mom was worried I was hustling and kept bugging me about it. When the cops came and picked me up I said, ‘See mother, I’m a thief not a whore.’”

I try to flag down the waitress. I have some serious catch-up to do if I want to be on the same level.

“‘If someone tries to fuck you, fight ‘em to the death’ was my dad’s final advice before they put me away. Jesus.”

I buy a beer for me and a Bombay and tonic for Lush, who's still talking.

“That’s where I stuck myself for the first time. I was seventeen. Jesus. I shoulda never been put there. First time offender. Jesus.” He shakes his head, what a waste. “The last thing I wanted to be was a junkie – good thing the last thing I didn’t want to be was a Volkswagen or someone’d be driving me right now.”

The table falls silent for a second as the joke settles in and then Pepsi thumps Lush on the back. “You smart bastard.” We move on to the Black Dog, the Back Street Vodka Bar, the Commercial, and finish up at the Rev. At the end of the night, I’m too drunk to drive so Joe and I sit in my mom’s car and kiss. There is nothing in the world like kissing your first love, even if it’s fifteen years later.

Joe once tried to explain our connection. He toyed with the idea of reincarnation but found the odds of actually rediscovering your soul mate again and again to be too



staggeringly unlikely. I remember him carrying around a copy of *The Eolian Harp* and quoting Coleridge to me.

*And what if all animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd  
That tremble into thought, as O'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?*

I'd listen, straining to catch the words like elusive butterflies. Joe wrote it down for me with a note I still keep folded, worn, and torn: We are all of one mind, of one soul -- reflections and variations of one and other. Sometimes these variations are so extreme, I imagine, that feelings of kinship with another are an impossibility -- like a toe, for example meeting an ear with utter disinterest. In those instances, however, when two people meet and connect and love and feel so utterly no longer lost in the world, perhaps they are like two fingers -- say one from the left hand and one from the right -- discovering their sameness. You and I.

Joe was a romantic. He was going places. He thought he was bound for greatness. He looks to the sky through the windshield and points. "Look a farting star." A light streaks across the darkness and he breaks wind. He turns to me, "They are very rare, you know." I'm in love all over again.

Joe worries that the time for greatness has passed. I can't relate because I'm well pleased with my mediocre life. I have a job I don't hate and an apartment I like. I live in a big city and I've learned to speak French. I don't worry about what will come next. I take him in my arms and feather his neck with kisses. I suck on his lips and taste the juice of plums. We are sixteen, we are twelve, we are two, we are babies. My smooth thighs never get touched.

He proposes. "If we don't meet anyone by the time we're sixty, will you marry me?"

"Yes."

We fall asleep in the car and wake up cold. Early morning condensation beads the windows with droplets. I drive him home and then go to my sister's and let myself quietly into her big house. The cats are sleeping. I curl up on the couch and try to sleep off the rest of my hangover. My tongue feels thick. I exhale rye. The sound of the neighbor's sprinkler lulls me to sleep. Tch Tch Tch Tch. Then double time, tchtchtchtchtchtch.

I wake up sweaty. The sun is burning a spot in my head and a cat is draped across my neck. Libby's already starting food for the barbecue. "Good morning," she says in a sing-songy voice. "Or rather, good afternoon."

"Hi." I take the two Tylenol and big glass of cold water she offers. "You're my hero," I say.

She crinkles her brow. "I'm sure." She folds the quilt she put across me sometime in my sleep. I look around the house and make small sounds of approval. Her renovation project shows signs of slow progress. A window, half stripped of paint, reveals dark natural wood under layers of blue, white, and eggshell. Plaster is torn from a wall that had to be redone due to water damage. I swing my legs off the couch onto new, used carpet. "If you buy it used, it won't give off the toxins that new rugs do," Libby explains. "Plus I'm broke." She moves into the kitchen. She's wearing stretchy pants and an oversized T-shirt. I trail her, my head pounding. I'm hung over from too much alcohol and too much kissing.

My sister smells like lilies. I breathe through my mouth, feeling weak and shaky as I listen. “We took a pay cut at the hospital and the trip to Paris really sunk me into debt. But I have to show you my pictures. The tour was fabulous. I’d love to go again and actually spend some time there.” She looks me up and down. “You look a bit wrecked. How was your night?”

“Good. Want me to do anything?”

“Naa, go ahead and take a shower. People will be here soon.”

My sister’s friends arrive bearing gifts. Cat nip. Tins of Fancy Feast. A fake mouse. She thanks them and gets them settled with a drink. I’ve made a rum cocktail with fresh limes and mint. Everyone accepts a glassful but this is one of those “No, I couldn’t possibly have another” kind of crowds. The guests consist of three sisters who Libby traveled to Australia with after they all graduated from university and Libby’s best friend, Pam, a tall, buxom woman who used to be quite a slut but is now unsuccessfully searching for a husband. She wants to have a baby. “I can feel it the clock running down. Tick. Tick. Tick,” she explains while I stare at her cleavage.

Mom and Dad arrive with Gizzy in tow and one of my friends drops by with her daughter. Belle is a single mother. She was the first in our group to have a child. She was a groundbreaker. Now, everyone is married and having kids. Tim and Sue just had their first. Chris and Shelly just had their second. Raymond and Lana have two. Shane and Dina have three. They all talk to me with the same question in their eyes. Tick? Tick? Tick?

I can’t fathom the thought of kids, but I am starting to see the attraction of marriage. One late night at my parents, I had a kind of revelation as I watched a comedy

bit by Dennis Miller, whose basic message was -- Wake up, loser. You want to be alone all your life? What are you waiting for? So, I'm thinking marriage might not be so bad, but I have no prospects. There's the guy who's been obsessed with me for years and periodically phones up to pop the question. But he frightens me. The most likely prospect is Joe, but I'd have to wait twenty-five years for the event, which actually might be worth it if we finally got to have sex after all this time. It's not like we don't want to have sex with each other, but we seem to be stuck in a habit of perpetual foreplay. I'm thinking maybe if we were married we'd be less afraid of disappointing one and other. Of course, there's always Alejandro Escovedo, but I'm guessing our brief exchange does not a marriage proposal make.

Besides, there are worse things than not being married. Right?

Look at my sister's friends. Career girls happily eating good food and chatting about cats until a big black thundercloud bustles in and makes them run for their cars with jackets pulled over their heads. Dad drives the truck up to the front of the house for mom and they're off with Gizzy panting on the window, making small puffs of white on the glass with each breath.

Libby and I do dishes after she tries to coax Ginger to eat some salmon, which she's carefully de-boned. "Does she look all right to you?"

"Oh yeah, she looks fine. It's probably the heat." I reach down and rub the sides of Ginger's mouth. Purr.

"So what's your plan?"

Every time I come home someone asks me this question. What I hear is, "Are you going to move back?" It makes me defensive. I lay it on the line. "I have a life there, you

know. I get the impression that everyone thinks I'm still sleeping on a mattress on the floor. I'm an adult, you know. I have stuff. A box spring. A couch. Dishes."

Libby dries the plates I hand her. "I never meant anything by it. I know you have a life. I would hope so, you've been there over ten years."

I look Libby in the eye. She stares back, clear, green marbles. I hate it when she's sincere. I hate it when I misunderstand. "I know. I'm sorry. I seem to revert back to childhood when I come here. You know mom and dad still won't let me have keys to the house. They remember every time I lost them and every stupid thing I did. They hide it above the garage door for 'safe-keeping.'"

Libby wipes the counter. "They're proud of you, you know. You did something they understand, you moved away from a small place that was suffocating you and started your own life."

She's watching Ginger, wet rag hanging from her hand. "Did you ever want to do that?" I ask.

She looks at me like she's just remembered I was there and pooh-poohs my questions with a wave of the rag. "Nope. Never."

"It's hard being away you know. Nobody tells me anything. I didn't even know about mom's eyes until months later. You gotta tell me things." My voice rises. "You really have to tell me things."

"Mom says not to worry you. There's nothing you can do. They're getting older. They are going to die sometime, you know. They are only mortal."

"Mothers are mortal? Next you'll tell me Santa doesn't exist." I'm trying for a joke, but feel very unfunny. "Look, the fact is I'm worried all the time anyway. It'd be

nice to know what I'm worrying about. I feel guilty. I should be here. I even think about moving back for a year or two."

"What do you have to feel guilty about?"

"For everything. For moving away. For not coming back. For not being here for you."

"God, you really are like Mom."

"What do you mean? What does she have to feel guilty about?"

"Nothing in the world, like you. But she still does."

"Oh."

Libby picks up Ginger and we go snuggle into the couch and watch a video. We choose a movie from my sister's large collection of Disney cartoons, fantasy flicks, and romantic comedies. We watch *Battlestar Galactica* and Libby falls asleep with her favorite cat purring contentedly in her arms. Ginger looks at me, blinking slowly. Her mouth curls at the corners. She looks like she's smiling. I could swear she's smiling.

The next day, Libby and I drive to Rocky Mountain House to visit our cousin, Victoria, who is married and lives on a ranch with all her in-laws. The family is in the oil business. I expect J. R. to drive up any minute. Victoria takes us on a tour of the place. Each couple has their own section of land. Victoria and Bill live in a trailer on the edge of a clearing. Trees surround their home and a river winds its lazy way past their sundeck. She shows us her mother-in-law's house, the office where the business is run, and the family campground. I gaze in wonder when she describes how she looks forward to the family gatherings where once a month the whole clan shows up to spend weekends together.

She shows us where her brother-in-law raises deer to sell to a hunting farm in the states. The deer are hand-fed and fattened, then shipped off to Montana to live in another enclosed area -- the only difference being, all the men walk around with rifles. There is an entrance fee to hunt and another if you manage a kill. Considering the deer don't know to run, it's virtually impossible to walk away without a trophy. Hell, the deer probably clomp trustingly towards the hunters expecting an apple or a cube of sugar. Ready. Aim. Fire. What big antlers you have. You must be so very proud. Libby looks at me. I say nothing.

Victoria takes us into her trailer for tea. Upon entering, I can't stifle my gasp of shock. She smiles. "It's too big, isn't it?"

We all stare at the immense television looming in the corner of their living room. Libby giggles. I recover. "No. No. Well, maybe it's a little big for a trailer. Maybe if you had more space for it, like a parking lot."

"It's the biggest one they had. We paid over \$5000 for it. The next day I had to take out more insurance on the house." She clicks it on. The subtle hum of electricity fills the air. We watch Courtney Cox screw up her little pixie face at her friends.

"I'm always a little uncomfortable when the TV people are twice my size."

Vicky laughs and flicks the TV off. "Bill loves it. It's his baby."

"Where is he?" Libby asks.

"At a wedding in Regina. He should be back anytime now."

I take a seat at the table. "You didn't go?"

"No, I had to work and I really didn't want to drive the fifteen hours to Saskatchewan with Bill and his brother to go to a wedding of people I don't even know.

Margaret, Bill's mom, was a little put out. She likes to have the whole family around her, but sometimes you just got to put your foot down."

"HmMmm," Libby and I hum in unison like we know what it's like to put your foot down to your mother-in-law.

Libby gets up to go to the washroom and Vicky leans conspiratorially close to my ear. "We all wish she would find someone." She plops down in the chair by my side and drops her voice to a lyrical whisper. "You," she says and pauses for dramatic purposes. I stare at her lips and catch myself looking for a mustache. Vicky was diagnosed with a hormone deficiency and has started taking testosterone. She told us her voice has lowered and hair has started to sprout in un-feminine places. The up side is increased sex drive. She says some women actually think they've grown a small penis because their clitoris becomes so enlarged. This hasn't happened to Vicky, although she did remark that hers has come out of hiding. Where have you been all these years? She touches my arm lightly. "You," she says, "I have the feeling you're about to meet the man of your dreams." She has just given me her highest unction.

"How's work?" Libby walks towards the table. Her thighs rub together, playing a tune of swish, swish. Swish, swish. Steam from the tea coils in the air, blurring the powder blue decor of the trailer. Libby and Vicky exchange hospital stories. "I can tell the sex of the baby before its head is out. I don't know how, but I'm always right," says Vicky. Both she and Libby are nurses and have no qualms about casually relating incidents involving, pus, urine, blood, stools, stones, and other such niceties. It shouldn't really bother me, considering I shovel guts off the highway for pay, but for some reason there is a difference between gore that still lives and gore that's been long dead.



I've only once come upon a deer that'd just been hit. It was still breathing, but I could see its guts spilled onto the road, glistening in the glare of my headlights. I shut off my truck and heard the deer moan. The sound was utterly human and was the last the animal made. I waited for the body to cool. Mist rose from the dark hole in its stomach.

Vicky fixes me with a stare. "Do you brush your tongue?"

"Ahh, sure, I guess, sometimes."

She turns to Libby. "You want to hear gross? Bill smokes, right?" We nod. "Well, he went to the dentist and the guy told him he really should brush his tongue. Bill's like what's up? So the dentist shows him. Bill comes home and shows me what the dentist showed him. He puts his finger in his mouth and pushes his tongue down and opens wide and way back in his mouth are thick strings of black goop hanging there like something you'd find in a sewer."

"Yuck." Libby speaks for the both of us. I rub my queasy stomach and stare at Vicky's shoe collection. Little glass slippers, twinkling colors, lined up in a row waiting, just waiting to turn pretty young girls into princesses.

Libby goes back to work and I return to my parents'. My vacation is almost over. I know the last couple of days will be the hardest. I don't want to say good-bye. Worse, I can't remember why I have to leave. I go for a run in the river valley to try to sweat out some stress. I plod. I run so slowly, I can't even frighten the rabbit sitting at the edge of the trail. His soft brown face is encouraging. When I look back, his chubby bunny buns bounce off into the bush. I decide he is definitely a sign of good luck and pick up my

pace. I pass an old man on the trail who looks into my eyes and cries out “Bravo.”

Another good sign? I sprint home. Libby has called.

“Hey, what’s up,” I pant into the phone. I should have waited to cool down.

“Will you drive Ginger-cat and me to the vet in the morning.”

“Sure.”

Libby’s voice softens and Dad is doing the dishes so I have trouble hearing her. “I made an appointment to put her down.”

“What?”

“I told her last night to just go ahead and die. That it was all right, we’ve said our good-byes, just go. But this morning she was still alive and she can’t breathe and I can’t watch her suffer like this.”

I taste her tears in my throat. “What’s wrong with her?”

“The test came back. Leukemia. I knew it. Just like Buddy. They really go fast. You’ll take me?”

“Of course I’ll take you. What time?”

“Nine.”

“Can I do anything? Want me to come over?”

“No.” Then thinks again. “You can pray that she goes tonight.”

Libby wanted to be a nun. I got my religion from her. My parents were lazy churchgoers, only attending mass on Christmas Eve, but both Libby and I went to Catholic school and every Sunday Libby would get up early and walk to St. Marks’s by herself to attend mass. She gave me my first rosary. She also gave me *The Outsiders*.

Libby and I would curl up on my bed and take turns reading the story to each other. *When I stepped out into the bright sunlight from the darkness of the movie house, I had only two things on my mind: Paul Newman and a ride home.* I had a crush on every boy in the book. I wanted to be Cherry Valance but I would say “Hi” to Ponyboy in the school hallways, no matter if he was a greaser. We always had a box of Kleenex close by for when Johnny dies. And after Dally is shot in the streets, I would imagine being there to hold his hand and kiss his eyelids. Salty tears on my lips. It’s OK, everything’s going to be all right.

That night, I go over to Joe’s for comfort, but Monty and Pepsi are already there with a big baggie of pot. I wanted to spend my last night with Joe quietly, alone, my head nestled in his armpit, but the boys have settled in for the night so I take the joint and inhale too deeply. The smoke burns my throat. Joe pounds my back. “Tell her about the cow.” Joe passes the joint to Monty.

“What cow?” I ask.

Monty squints as he takes a drag. “It’s a cow at school.”

Joe explains, “He takes agricultural studies.”

“There is a small farm outside the city as part of the program.” Monty stubs out the joint in a beer bottle cap.

“My mom used to work there,” I say.

Pepsi pipes in, “I go there, too.”

“So the cow?” I nestle into Joe’s armpit.

His voice resonates loudly in the ear I have pressed close to his chest. “It’s the craziest fucking thing.”

Monty nods. “This cow, that’s part of our studies, has a hole in one of its stomachs. They have four, you know.”

“That’s too bad.” I feel sluggish.

“No, you don’t understand. It has a hole cut into its side so that students can open it up and put their hands inside the cow’s stomach and feel around.

Voices gather around me. I close my eyes.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

“It’s true.”

I try to imagine plunging my hand into a cow, but can only see a field full of cattle as if watching them from a car window. When I was young, my dad used to honk the horn at cows by the road and we’d all *moo*.

“Why haven’t I heard of this, I go there too?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why would you have to feel the insides of a cow’s stomach?”

“No reason.”

I wonder what a stomach feels like. I think of a story about students in Belgium who, as part of a hazing ritual, sewed newcomers into the carcass of a cow. One year, a young boy suffocated.

I wonder what my stomach would feel like. Squishy like peeled grapes? Warm? And how would it feel having someone’s hand inside of me? Would it be like indigestion or would it be a soft, intimate caress?

“No reason?”

“Not really.”

“How do you open and close it?”

“There’s a cap.”

“A cap?”

“Like a gas tank.”

“Is there a key?”

“A key?”

“A key to the cow?”

“Is there a key to the cow?”

“Hey, has anyone seen the key to the cow?”

“Who was the last person to use the cow? Where’d you put the keys to the cow?”

We’re always losing the goddamned keys to the cow!”

“What do you mean, Are there keys to the cow?”

I open my eyes. Wet my lips. “He means like a gas tank, you know.”

Monty and Joe look at me. “Oh.”

Pepsi sits with his head resting heavily in his hands. “I go there, too, why haven’t I ever heard of the cow?”

Joe shifts, making me hit my chin against my chest. My neck cracks. I pull myself out of the couch to go pee. In the bathroom, I sit on the cool toilet seat and crane my neck to look out the high window that overlooks a garden. A breeze drifts in and I remember another garden full of beans, zucchini, lettuce -- everything practical, except for one bush at the edge that blossomed yellow with lady’s slipper flowers in the hottest days of

August. When I was young, my mom would give me a salt shaker and send me through the rows of vegetables to hunt for slugs. While she and Baba pulled weeds and turned soil, I would carefully lift beet leaves and brush aside carrot tops to look for the slimy creatures. When I'd found, then I'd sprinkle salt on them and watch them writhe and curl into themselves until they dropped from the vegetables to the ground, leaving only a dark wet spot behind them.

The summer my baba died, the tomatoes hung ripe and heavy on the vine, dripping to the ground because no one had time to pick them. One night, just before Baba moved to the nursing home, we were woken by a high-pitched squealing. I ran outside and followed the sound to the lady's slipper bush where I found a cat shaking a squirrel in its mouth. I called for my mom to come and, as she freed the little animal, she exclaimed that she had never before seen a white squirrel. Baba stood in her slippers on the back step, a shimmering pale shadow peering into the darkness.

As I bent to examine the animal, I saw a gash of red blood around the squirrel's neck. It lay quiet and still. My mom pointed to more blood on the ground and I realized that six tiny babies lay squirming in the dirt by the squirrel. When I saw those babies, I vowed to save them and raise them as my own. Mom said they were too young and wouldn't be able to survive without their mother, but she gave me a shoebox lined with an old towel to serve as a crib for the orphans. When I showed my baba the little pink babies, she nodded, her wispy hair trembling in the wind, and said it was a sign.

The little squirrels died within two days of their birth despite my constant vigilance and careful ministrations. I was surprised. I'd been convinced they would live. When my baba died, it seemed as though no one was surprised. After all, she was eighty-

nine and she'd been ill for over a year. But I think, now, that perhaps her death had been a surprise -- not for others around her -- but for Baba, herself. I picture my baba waking up with the sudden realization that she was no longer alive, an awakening and most profound sleep at the same time.

I rub my eyes and shake my head. I feel tired and older and stupid for sitting in the bathroom for so long. I reach for toilet paper and discover there is none. But there is a small basket filled with coffee filters, which I assume are to be used as a replacement. It works quite well. I wander to the kitchen for water.

"What do you think is the ugliest part of the human body?" Pepsi asks.

"It's all beautiful," I say, resting my back on one side of the doorway and my feet on the other. I wedge myself in between and shimmy to the top of the doorway where I look down on the boys. I haven't done this since I was a kid. I'm surprised I still can.

"What do you think is the ugliest part of the human body?"

"The underside of the tongue," Joe asserts. He curls his tongue back, catching the tip under his front teeth, exposing moist lumpy red flesh shot through with fat purple-blue veins and I have to agree that this is the ugliest part of the human body.

Joe asks me to stay the night and I would like to climb into bed, onto him, escape into sweat and sweet kisses. But sweet kisses are no longer enough. I tell him I should go home so I can get up early and take Libby to the vet's. I think he is relieved.

Even though it's late and there is no traffic, I drive carefully, meticulously. I'm not really high anymore, but I have to fight to focus on the road because my attention is too easily swayed by a shiny new garbage can or a garden gnome.

I pull into the driveway at a perfect angle, fish the key from the hiding spot, and go directly to my room. I no longer stay downstairs. The haunted room is now used for extra storage: sweaters in summer, sandals in winter, my old music box collection, bundles of dried flowers, an ancient black and white TV, and a ghost.

I sleep on what used to be Libby's bed in the room next to my parents'. It's very narrow. I have to be careful to be quiet. I slide my hand down my panties. Gizzy crawls from under a chair, whines a little and hops on the bed. "Shhh." I press my finger to my lips. She settles down by my feet, her soft, furry butt pressed against my feet. I stop. I can't do this with an audience. She closes her eyes and falls asleep. I wet my finger and my hand drifts down. I come quickly, fervently, repeatedly. Without a sound. Like those stories about being in prison.

In the morning, the birds outside scold a squirrel who scolds them back. I'm precariously close to the edge of the bed and wake up with a jerk that almost sends me to the floor. Bed is the only place I want to be right now, but the clock shines 8:04 so I get up, get dressed, and brush my teeth while standing on the cold bathroom floor. I avoid my mom's eyes as I say good-bye and send a brief wave in the direction of the garage where my dad sits smoking. The tip of the cigarette glows hot in the windowless garage. When my dad inhales, he looks like a Cyclops with one tiny red eye. Though I swore off smoking after Vicky's story about Bill's blackened throat, I'm dying for a cigarette. I get into the car and chew my nails all the way to Libby's.

"You're early," she says, clothed in a long shapeless dress of cotton. Her face looks swollen, her eyes lined with dark circles. "It only takes about ten minutes to get there and I don't want to make Ginger wait too long."



“Where is she?” I follow Libby up to her room where the cat lies under a chair. I crouch down and put my hand out. Ginger closes her eyes and draws in raspy, hard-worked breaths. Libby gets dressed and I stare at Ginger trying to avoid the sight of my sister’s nakedness. When Libby puts Ginger in the carrier, the cat lies limply in her hands.

Ginger is quiet on the ride over. I would prefer indignant howls, but all we hear is Ginger’s struggle for air which stops every so often. During these silences, Libby and I also stop breathing. The air-conditioning hums. With my hands placed carefully on the steering wheel at two o’clock and ten o’clock, I can smell my sour sweat.

At the vet’s office, we are immediately shown into a private room. I ask Libby if she’d rather I stay or go. She shrugs so I stay. A woman in a white lab coat enters. She strokes Ginger’s head. “She’s not looking so good. You’re doing the right thing,” she says to Libby who nods. I gulp. “You should know that this procedure is absolutely painless. Her brain is affected first, so all she’ll feel is the prick of the needle. She’ll go fast, though, almost immediately, so if you want to say your good-byes, you should do it now.

Libby’s voice is sandpaper, “It’s OK. We’ve already said our good-byes last night.” I pat Ginger’s head and reach for the Kleenex.

The vet is speaking. “If you’re ready, I’m going to get an assistant. You should know that at the time of death sometimes the animal will lose control of its bowels. Also, sometimes it is hard to get the needle into a vein at this point, so we may have to insert a catheter.” Libby nods again. The vet returns with another woman in a shorter white lab coat who smiles gently and holds an electric razor. Together they shave a patch of fur off

Ginger's front leg. The sound of the razor grates. The assistant searches for a different blade to get closer to the skin. Ginger's soft coat falls to the floor like fun fur. She lies perfectly still, her eyes trained on Libby.

A needle is produced which the vet tries to insert. When she is unsuccessful, she takes Ginger into another room. Libby and I wait. We wait so long, I begin to wonder if that's all. I look at Libby. She must know what is happening, but I lack the courage to ask. Just then the vet returns. She lays Ginger on the table.

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She quickly grabs a cloth to wipe the cat's bloody paw.

"It's all right," Libby puts a hand out to Ginger. The vet puts the needle to the catheter, steps away from the table, and says, "She's gone."

Libby bends to kiss Ginger's head. I do the same. She smells like the sun. Her head is warm. My long hair brushes against her paw and I come away with blood staining the tip of one braid red. Libby doesn't notice, so I tuck my hair under a baseball cap. I don't want to wash it away just yet.

I turn to my sister and give her a hug. Her arms hang loosely at her sides, her body stiff, but I hold on and stare at the backs of my burning eyelids.

We get into the car and Libby says, "We can wait a little if you need to."

I swipe a hand across my damp face and attempt a little laugh. "If you wanted someone to be strong, you sure picked the wrong person to drive you. I cry at Tampon commercials."

"It's OK. Everyone would have cried. Could you imagine Dad?"

We both smile. Dad is a notorious softie who used to take us to the movies and end up weeping. Both Libby and I remember walking out of *Where the Red Fern Grows*,

each of us holding one of Dad's thick, strong arms. His eyes were a brilliant red, his hands clutched a crumpled hankie.

"Can you call Mom to let her know?" Libby opens the door and quickly catches Sebastian and Tookie who both make a mad dash for the great outdoors.

"Sure." I sit down heavily in the old stuffed rocking chair my parents gave to Libby to fill up her house. Mom would always tell us how she used to sit in Dad's lap when they first met even though she was twice his size. He would pull her into him and the chair would rock and the springs would groan. By the time she was diagnosed with diabetes, she had already lost one hundred and fifty pounds, leaving only ninety-eight. Barely a lapful, really.

"Hi, Mom, it's me."

"Is Libby all right?" Mom is stuffy-nosed quiet. There has been a death in our family.

"She's doing OK. I'm going to stay here. We're going to watch some movies and take a nap. She has to work the night shift."

"You're coming home after?"

"Yes." I leave tomorrow.

"OK, dear, we'll see you later."

"Bye."

"Bye."

When Libby and I part in the evening, we know it will be another couple years before we see each other again. When I first moved, I was sure I would visit every year, twice a year even, but summer easily turns to fall turns to winter to spring to green leaves

to orange to no leaves to buds and it seems hard to leave the home I've built for myself. But oh it is so much harder to leave the home I was born into. This time when I hug Libby her arms go around me, tight. Her body is soft and we don't let go for a long time.

I press my hand into Libby's. "It was on my sweater," I explain. She smiles down at one of Ginger's whiskers.

"Thanks, I'll add it to my collection." She has test tubes filled with whiskers. Since she was young she would find them everywhere. Gifts.

My parents are eating dinner when I arrive. The smell of fried onions makes my mouth water. I go to the stove and fill my plate with perogies and onions and sour cream.

"She's OK?" Mom asks.

"She's OK." I cut the perogies with my fork and shovel the soft cheesy dough into my mouth. I feel starved. My dad happily refills my plate.

"I can cook up some more. Or there's some meatloaf in the fridge I could heat up," he says.

"No, I'm fine. Do you guys want to play some cards after dinner?"

"Sure."

I wash the dishes while they smoke. The sky turns orange and then darkens to a deep electric blue. None of us want to watch TV so we play progressive rummy at the kitchen table. We sit in a circle and Dad deals the cards slowly, snapping each to the table. When he gives me two cards at once, he licks his thumb to separate the cards.

"Dishpan hands," he jokes.

Mom drinks a glass of wine, saying, "What the hell." She adds Pepsi and ice to her glass. We eat wheat crackers, orange cheddar cheese, and pre-sliced dill pickles. Usually, these snacks are reserved for special occasions like Christmas or the Super Bowl, but I suppose tonight, too, is a kind of celebration. We are drinking to our last night together, but the room is not festive, the air is already too heavy with good-byes.

"We should have played a penny a point. Dad could have bought you dinner." I say after Dad beats us three times in a row.

Mom shakes her head. "I won't play for money. When we play partners with the neighbors, they want to play for money but I always say no way."

Dad collects the cards with a groaning sweep of his hands. "They're not very good," he says confidentially.

"And they cheat." Mom turns from the sink where she's rinsing our dishes. Her hair is pushed in on one side from the nap she had earlier. Grey streaks the center. It looks like a wild flower has been attached to her head.

"How do they cheat?"

"Lay down a wild card or an out card by accident and then pick it up again."

"Dora's famous for that." Mom points in Dad's direction. "He's good at calling them on it, but when he was in the hospital, I could never win a game. So we stick to our guns, as they say, and never play for money."

My stomach slowly sinks to the ground, a puddle at my feet. "Hospital?"

"When he had the heart attack."

My dad looks down. Mom turns back to the sink, busying herself with the clean dishes. After a long silence, it is obvious they won't say anything. I feel my frustration rise.

"How could you not tell me? My god, you had a heart attack. You? How could you not tell me?"

"I'm fine. It was minor. We didn't want to worry you."

My knees quiver under the table. I stare at my feet. My sparkly blue toenails seem ridiculous. I look into my dad's face and see all trace of laugh lines and dimples have fled. His dentures click. His hands lie crumpled on the cards. Mortal.

I curl my toes under. "Are you fine, now?"

Mom sighs into the refrigerator. She closes the door and turns to me.

"He's really fine."

"I'm really fine. It was minor. They kept me for a little longer to take a good look. They could never get me to the doctor before, so once they had me, they had to do the whole work-up."

Mom joins us at the table and I ask, "Will you tell me next time something happens to either of you?"

"We don't want to worry you," Mom says. Dad's hand comes awkwardly off the cards and onto my arm. He squeezes once. When he pulls away, the ghost of his fingers remains.

"Time for me to hit the hay, as they say."

"Me too."

"Can I take the car out for a drive? I won't be long."

“Sure.” Dad tosses me his keys. I see the key for the house on the ring and grin matching Dad dimple for dimple.

“I’ll lock up behind me.” My mom stops me at the door. She kisses my forehead twice. Her lips are moist and my forehead feels cool like when Libby would touch holy water to my skin before entering the church. Blessed. She moves away and Dad rests his hand lightly on the small of her back as they walk towards their bedroom.

The night warms me as I step from the air-conditioned house. I open all the windows in the car and tour the city. Joe’s place is dark. I tap on his window. He blinks sleepily and I kiss his smile good-bye for now. Driving through my old neighborhood, I startle rabbits in the ravine as I pass. On my way out of town, I see the hospital where I was born. Libby works there now. Silent bye-bye.

When I reach the highway, I merge into empty lanes. The road is flat and straight, slicing the fields of wheat I can’t see but can smell. The sky is moonless. The wind clamours around my head. My thoughts complain they can’t be heard. The better for me -- I say to my thoughts -- the better for me. I touch my forehead, chest, shoulder, and shoulder and reach to the dash to turn out the headlights.

I’m blind. I forget I’m driving. Joe and I used to do this on full moon nights, but then everything was washed in a silvery light that clearly led the way. Tonight, the darkness complete. I peer through the windshield, trying to see something besides black. My back hurts. If I had wings, this is what it would feel like to have them ripped off.

I panic, fumble for the headlights. Night is hitting my eyes like the wind. I ease my foot off the accelerator and depress the brake. The back of the car tries to catch up to the front in a swing dance. When I finally find the lights, the beam cuts into a farmer’s

field and I am sitting close to the ditch at a crooked angle. My teeth chatter. I lean my head against the cool window and listen to the crickets sing. Tomorrow won't be the sky, the plums, the smell of sweet grass.

My mom always said that having me changed her life in more ways than one. There were complications during the delivery. Mom says that when she had me, she died. It was only for a minute, but the doctor couldn't find a heart beat and had to pound her chest to bring her back. "Back from where?" I used to ask. And Mom would smile and rock me in her arms and hold me a little closer.

"I can't tell you that," she'd shake her head. "But I do know it. I was only there a short time, but it was long enough to know." I would listen to her voice and press my back closer to her chest, craving her heat more than her answer.



## **Insomnia**

About the same time she decides to grow her toenails, Katherine begins to see bugs. She doesn't see them everywhere, only in her small bachelor apartment. At first, the bugs appear as dark scurrying blurs in her peripheral vision. She turns quickly to get a better look at the movement, to gather proof of the invading creatures, but by the time her eyes focus, everything is still.

Before she moved in, her landlady, Leeta, assured Katherine that the apartment had been fumigated. Leeta is a short woman who always dresses in a white blouse and skirt, with nylon knee-highs and flip-flop sandals on her feet. Her white hair is piled high on her head and held in place by a net. She owns a large white cat who roams the halls and hisses at the tenants. When Leeta showed Katherine the apartment, which was basically a square containing one closet and a small kitchen area designated by the linoleum on the floor as opposed to the hardwood covering the rest of the room, the old woman led Katherine to the bathroom and sat on the toilet as she talked. At first, Katherine thought she was peeing and marveled at her landlady's lack of inhibition. But really Leeta was simply resting her swollen legs by sitting on the only seat available in the empty apartment. Katherine signed a year lease, moved in, and, as she unpacked, found roach hotels under the sink and in the closet.

And now she knows why. Roaches. At first, teeny weeny baby ones. Now, great big bugs with hard-shelled backs who clatter across the floor making an unbearable noise which Katherine can't be sure isn't just a figment of her imagination.

At her little table, she covers her ears and skims the Help Wanted ads, beginning with the column marked *Teachers*. In the space of these small squares, she finds the room to dream. Katherine is convinced she'd be good with young children. She remembers many fairytales and would tell them using funny voices she's sure would make kids laugh. She stares hard at an ad advertising a position for an elementary teacher at Immaculate Conception. Her eyes blur the print on the page. When she focuses again, she is looking under the column entitled *General*. She decides that with her lack of qualifications she has two choices --

Like to listen to rock music?  
Need a good job?  
I'm hiring 7 new sales  
people. Cash bonuses  
Ask for Carlo 489-3883.

or

Adults only.  
Female.  
849-8611.

She circles these announcements and then flips to the crossword. The clue, number fourteen across: suffix of song and slug. Katherine pencils in "bird." Song of the slugbird. She smiles, folds the paper carefully, and presses her ink-stained fingers to her wrists, leaving four perfect prints on her skin.

She hums a song to herself and waits for Laszlo. When the buzzer rings, she smoothes the wrinkles from her bed, grabs her coat, and runs downstairs to meet him.

Laszlo is a messy, smelly boy who's just spent a year working on a sheep farm in New Zealand. Katherine hasn't known him long. She picked him up in a bar and followed him home one night to a cement room in the back of a basement workshop. The air smelled like sawdust and his bed was a pile of coats spread over a futon frame. As he gently eased her onto this nest, she could feel each slat of wood dig into her flesh. They undressed, further padding the bed frame with their own clothes. Katherine was amazed

at how she could run her fingers through the hair on Laszlo's back. His hair did not stop at his shoulders, stomach, chest, or anywhere for that matter. He was covered in dark curly hair, except his obviously balding head. His forehead was large and dreads formed a fringe around his ears. But Laszlo didn't care, and neither did Katherine. She grabbed onto him, and pulled him closer, deeper.

After, when Laszlo had fallen asleep, Katherine stared at his hand which lay close to her face. She counted the hairs on his knuckles. She'd gotten to a hundred and sixty-eight before he woke up and shouted, "Zorro!" Laszlo triumphantly pulled back the quilt and scratched a large "Z" across her leg with his toenail. With a queasy stomach, she looked down where a faint impression of the letter remained etched in her dry flaky skin.

Since that night Katherine has restricted their contact to an occasional coffee. As Katherine runs downstairs, she sees Laszlo jumping up and down, trying to keep warm in the winter wind. His dreads fly in the air as he moves. He stops bouncing only long enough to give Katherine a sloppy kiss. She tips her head to meet his lips, looks up at the clear bright sky, and shivers. Icicles hang from the branches of skeleton trees. The sidewalk is slippery. They shuffle over the ice to a nearby coffee shop and take a booth in the corner.

"Baaaa," Laszlo says, swooping in close to Katherine's face. His breath smells like cigarettes and grape juice. Katherine smiles indulgently.

"Baaaaaaaa," Laszlo insists.

"What are you doing?"

"Speaking sheep."

"Oh."

“People assume that one Baaaa is the same as the next.” Laszlo jabs the air in Katherine’s general direction.

“Really.”

“Yeah, but it’s a little more complicated than that. The sheep’s vocabulary is actually based on four different sounds.” Laszlo pauses as the waitress brings their coffee. Katherine leans over her cup, letting the steam warm her face. Her elbows stick to syrup smeared on the table. She feels like an insect caught on fly-paper.

Laszlo continues, “The first sound is hunger. The second is the cry of a young sheep looking for its mother. And the third is a nonsense Baaaa, used in general chatter when they have nothing much to say. That’s the one I was using when we first sat down.”

“What’s the fourth?”

“Ahhh, that’s a funny thing.” Laszlo sips his coffee, taking time to answer. “The final bleat is a cry of freedom which they call out only if they break loose from the flock. BAAA-aaa, BAAA-aaa! Freedom! This, of course, instantly alerts the shepherd and his dog of the escape so the sheep are never free for long.” Laszlo begins to bleat, demonstrating each sheep call. When he’s finished the restaurant seems too quiet and the waitress is watching them. He leans back with a satisfied grin. Katherine can see nicotine stains between his teeth. She represses the desire to reach over, put fingernail to tooth, and scratch the brown away.

They say goodbye on the street. Laszlo tries to extract a promise for a date which Katherine avoids by slipping on ice and landing on her hip so hard her teeth rattle in her head. Knees still weak, she stops at the corner store to buy today’s *Gazette* and, with the

bulky paper tucked under her arm, returns home where a certain persistent order has been imposing itself on Katherine's life.

Her coat forever finds its way to the same hook. Her scarf lies over her coat with the ends hanging at exactly the same length. Dishes are done instantly, a cup never rests in her sink, and water taps are turned snugly to guard against vexatious dripping noises. The one window at the far end of the room is cracked open just enough for air. Her slippers are placed gently under the bed with only the smallest hint of their tips peeping out from under her comforter. Her comforter is plumped daily; the corner turned ever so slightly affords a small glimpse of flannel sheets. Towels are stacked - - blue, white, burgundy. Soap to the right of the tub. Shampoo to the left. A bathroom with no stray hairs, a desk denying any sign of use, a kitchen devoid of food smells, a bedroom without chaos.

The creeping order, which is overcoming her home, just as surely avoids her regime of personal hygiene. "I haven't washed my hair in days," she told Laszlo over coffee. She felt rather proud.

"Sometimes we don't need to wash," Laszlo responded. "Sometimes we just have to live."

"No." Katherine shook her head and thought suspiciously to herself, "I'm not living. I may even be dying." And she is reminded of a car accident. Those eternal moments just after losing control and just before the crash when the world moves slowly, at a distance, pressed against a window, spinning, but suspended, unable to touch or hurt anyone -- until that final moment of impact.

That night, Katherine tells herself a bedtime story to relax. It is a silent tale. From her bed, she stares at the window and watches her thoughts reflected in the frosted, black glass.

*Once upon a time there was a beautiful young peasant girl. Her father was a miller who boasted to the King that his daughter could spin straw into gold. The King commanded the maiden be brought to him at the palace where he locked the girl into a room filled with straw and a spinning wheel. As soon as the King left, the maiden began to weep for she could not imagine how she was to perform this miracle.*

*Suddenly, a small man appeared at the window of the cell.*

As Katherine imagines this strange apparition squeezing in through the window, her heart races. She buries herself under the covers and lies awake in the dark. It's late. Her eyes itch and burn, but it's better to keep them open because when she closes her eyes, small noises grow large. Her pulse becomes a helicopter, the sound of her hair against the pillow is a hissing snake, and her thoughts are a loud echo across a vast canyon. She picks at her anxiety like a scab.

Katherine left Andrew for no good reason. That is, according to Andrew. He simply couldn't understand her abandoning a successful architect, a beautiful downtown apartment, and the chance of marriage for an impoverished independence.

Katherine's frail, almost ethereal appearance attracts men who like to wind their hands in her fine blonde hair, pull her head back, and expose her white neck to the sky.

“As far as I’m concerned you do not shit,” was Andrew’s first command in their new home. “You can piss, but I never want to know that you shit.”

“What are you talking about?” Katherine laughed before she realized he was serious.

“I’m talking about the fact that you do not shit. It can be done. I lived with Beth for five years without ever smelling or hearing her shit.” Andrew’s whole body shuddered.

“Can *you* shit? I mean is it just me or is it you, too?” Katherine still couldn’t believe he meant what he said.

“Enough of that.” He ignored her questions and turned his back to finish unpacking his books. Books filled with designs of cells and classrooms. Andrew specialized in schools and prisons.

Although she couldn’t even pretend to understand Andrew’s demands, Katherine decided to try her best. She liked when Andrew was pleased with her. She’d had various lovers before, but when Katherine met Andrew she could see a life she was missing. She had thought Andrew could provide her with a purpose, a feeling of safety, a reliable fuck, a shoulder to lean on, a stable home, a sense of being, and a sense of being with another. In the end, Andrew had provided her with everything she thought he could.

She mouths the words to a song. “Never did and never will, just the way it’s always been.”

Katherine turns the alarm off an hour before it is set to ring and starts her day. She arrives at her new job promptly at nine o'clock. The floor manager, Jeff, a pimply, blonde boy, shows her to her desk. She takes her place in an orange chair, which pitches her backward with a shocking motion. Once she has stabilized herself by perching delicately on the edge of the seat's flattened cushion, Jeff hands her a list of potential clients.

"The job's pretty straightforward. You've got the numbers to call there and this is the script you use to sell the product. Stick to the script. It's been written specifically to sell the product. They put a lot of time and money into writing the script, so use it. It's there to help you. Questions?"

"Who are they?"

Jeff looks confused.

"They. You know 'they.'" Katherine mimes quotation marks in the air, leans forward, and almost falls out of her chair. "You know, the people who write the scripts. The people who put a lot of time and money into it. Who are they?"

"I dunno." Jeff edges away from her. "If you need me I'll be in there." He points to a small cubicle at the far end of the room, but walks away in the opposite direction, disappearing through another door.

Katherine picks up the list of potential customers and scans it while stealing glimpses of the co-worker whose desk faces hers. The worker stretches a hand towards her and introduces himself. "Hey, I'm JD." When he removes his hand from hers, he self-consciously touches his shaved head and fiddles with the two large silver studs piercing the front of his scalp.



At ten forty-five, Katherine takes her coffee break and meets two other employees. A seventeen-year-old high school student who smells like watermelon Bubble Yum tries to encourage Katherine by telling her that all the clients are “cheap mother fuckers who shouldn’t get you down.” Spit flies from her mouth as she speaks. “My name is Jen,” she says. “And this is Jean-Francois.” She points to a skinny pale creature with mud-puddle eyes who says nothing.

At eleven, Katherine returns to her desk to make more calls and is hung up on every time. Soon, she is slamming the phone into its receiver. JD gives her a sympathetic look, but Katherine feels angry. Jealousy wells up in her as she watches him make sales and fill in order forms. Everyone in the room seems to be having more success than Katherine.

At eleven-thirty, she makes her first sale. “Can I have your full name and address please?”

“Name’s Elvis, honey. Like the king.”

“OK, Elvis. Your last name, please.”

“You sound real sweet. How old are you? Sixteen? Fifteen, maybe?”

“Sir, your last name.” She doesn’t like his softening voice.

He whispers, “I’ll bet you got a nice tight ass. A tight pussy, too. Are you a virgin?”

Katherine gently hangs up and carefully raises herself from her tricky seat. Through clenched teeth, she politely says good-bye to JD, Jen, and Jean-Francois. She lets the door slam behind her and runs down thirteen flights of stairs to ground level. Her right ear is hot from the constant pressure of the phone being jammed against it as she

dialed number after number trying to convince people to have their rugs cleaned by a Carpet Doctor Specialist.

Sweat runs down her back, tickling her skin. As she nears her neighborhood, she hears a loud BAA-AAA-AAA-ing sound coming at her from behind. It grows increasingly louder as Laszlo runs up to meet her. He leaps in front of her, his eyes wide, his mouth open. Under her breath, Katherine curses. His sounds upset her. Her stomach feels vaguely sick, or maybe it is more her bowels, some place deeper, darker than a belly, some place where substances form and sit and wait.

“Hey, what’s up?” Laszlo has stopped bleating.

Katherine’s gaze slides off his face down the street towards her apartment building. “Nothing much, just came from a new job.” She stares at a house with a bright red door. It is the only spot of color in a line of buildings and it looks violent against the gray walls and the dirty snow.

“How was the job?”

“Not bad,” she lies.

“Want to go for a coffee?”

“I got things to do.”

“That’s cool. Want to learn a sheep call?” The baaaa starts deep in Laszlo’s throat and lasts a long time. “Come on. It’s a real release.” He urges Katherine to try.

She looks around the empty street and makes a half-hearted attempt at bleating, but the sound is weak and she isn’t satisfied. Laszlo looks disappointed. Her shoulders tense and creep up toward her ears. She shakes them loose, trying to ease the strain in her muscles. “I haven’t brushed my teeth since I moved,” she tells Laszlo.

“That’s good, sometimes we treat ourselves too well,” he answers.

She closes her door in his happy face and watches as he walks away slowly. He turns a corner and there is nothing left to see. A vacant street. But still she watches, her forehead pressed against the cool glass, head heavy as if some force pushed her from behind. It seems all she can do is watch, waiting for that final moment of impact.

When Katherine enters her apartment, she checks the digital clock. Eleven forty-two. She places her coat on its hook, taking the time to arrange her scarf over the coat, and then sprawls across the floor to count her money. Fifty-seven dollars and change. She can’t ask Laszlo for money. Even if he had any, she won’t let herself owe him anything. And she absolutely can’t call Andrew.

When she left Andrew, she had asked him if he remembered the time the toilet overflowed. She looked intently into his eyes and saw stubborn denial. She said, “It wasn’t even shit, it was a little tiny turd and you were angry with me.” Andrew didn’t remember. He had been working in his office while Katherine sat on the tub glaring at the traitorous plumbing. As the water in the toilet bowl swirled and rose, dread clenched her gut. If she flushed one more time surely the water would overflow onto the floor. She snapped on the yellow rubber gloves Andrew used to clean the bathroom and fished out pieces of shit, wrapping them in toilet paper and hiding them under the Kleenex and Q-tips that filled the garbage. She snapped off the gloves and surveyed her work. When she went to get Andrew to help fix the toilet his reaction was violent. He slammed his fist into the tiny mirror above the sink. His blood dripped onto the white tile floor. Later, he denied the whole incident even though his left hand still bore a long scar from the tip of his finger to the bottom of his palm.

Katherine holds onto the little pile of money with both her hands.

The sun is rising when she finally sleeps. The bed seems to grab hold of her. She jerks awake and away from its grasp. The sun has just barely risen when she slides out from under the covers. She carefully steps away from the bed. It looks undisturbed. She goes to the washroom, turns the tap on, and slurps water through her hands careful not to get too wet, too clean. She runs her tongue over her teeth, reveling in the rough uneven sensation. Sleep from two nights before still crusts her lashes.

Returning to the main room, Katherine blinks her eyes against the light starting to pour in through her window. She drags her bed to the center of the apartment. Laszlo insists that sleeping east to west is best. Katherine aligns her bed with the poles and whispers a tune. "I love you 'cause I hate you."

In the corner where the bed once stood, the dust moves. It darts across the floorboards. The bugs are bigger now. Katherine looks away and shuts her eyes. The dark is no comfort. Outside, the clouds get lighter as the sun rises behind them.

Katherine plans to answer the second Help Wanted ad early in the day, but she finds it difficult to leave her apartment. It takes hours to clean the dust from the corners and then she stands for a very long time in front of her door before she can move to open it. She's aware she's avoiding what she has to do. Taking long minutes to dress warmly, she clumsily opens the deadbolt with her mittened hand. She inhales deeply before leaving, filling her lungs with the air of her home. Outside, Katherine's breath is shallow. She has to force the cold air into her mouth and she swallows it in tiny gulps. When she

passes a running car, the exhaust billows around her face and the taste of gasoline coats her tongue. She spits.

Taking a folded scrap of paper from her pocket, she sits on a bench and reads the directions. A group of young children pass, roped together by a colourful cord. Two women flank them, talking over their heads about the new guy at the community center. Katherine watches the women critically. She wants to warn them to look out for the kids who wobble precariously across the snow in their bulky snowsuits. She longs to follow the children, her arms held wide ready to catch any one who might fall. When the daycare workers notice her, she attempts a smile, but they avert their eyes and gather the kids closer, steer them away from Katherine. To them she is a dangerous thing.

She lowers her head. When she looks up again, the kids have disappeared, but she sees her landlady standing on the corner dressed in a white winter coat. Leeta's body blends into the large snowdrifts at the side of the road, leaving only her pink face visible, floating above the earth like Wonderland's Cheshire cat. The elderly woman watches the light turn green and steps tentatively from the sidewalk, testing the winter ground in front of her. Katherine's gaze takes in an approaching vehicle. The fast moving van tries to brake, but its tires lock. Time becomes lethargic and dull. Katherine watches the van point its nose at Leeta and slide slowly, silently on the black ice covering the intersection. She tells herself that now she must move, must call out, must warn Leeta, but finally the time that once seemed so endless rushes forward and leaves no moment for Katherine to act. Leeta looks up, leaves her foot hovering over the ground, and stands still as the van passes her and comes to a stop a safe distance away. She raises a white-gloved fist to the driver and crosses the road, her red face bobbing in the air.

Katherine unfixes herself from the bench and propels herself forward. She fights the panic in her throat, looks again at the address in her hand. Her trip will take her far into the suburbs. The subway ride seems to last forever and, by the time she reaches her destination, it is getting dark again and the panic has returned.

Double-checking the address, she hesitates only slightly before walking up a sidewalk to a split-level bungalow. The house looks like any other, with stucco sides and dark brown trim. Snow has been carefully cleared from both the driveway and the stairs leading to the door. Katherine rings the bell and a girl in tight jeans and a cut off T-shirt answers almost immediately.

“You must be the girl who called. I’m Judy,” she says and leads Katherine into a living room, where another girl lies on a plaid couch watching a nature program about an ape, Mimi, who communicates through sign language. “Do you want some tea?” Judy asks, gesturing for Katherine to sit down. Katherine sits on the edge of an over-stuffed easy chair and watches Mimi sort through photographs, classifying each as either human or animal. In one pile, the animal has grouped pictures of a deer, an elephant, and Donald Duck. In another pile, she has selected photos of Bill Clinton, her trainer, Cindy Crawford, and herself.

After only a few minutes, a man walks into the room and shuts off the TV. His arms and neck are thick. His nose looks like it has been molded from clay and stuck onto his face with glue. He barely looks at Katherine. “The girls will show you around and fill you in on the rules.” He leaves and the girls show her around and fill her in on the rules.

There are three bedrooms upstairs. When someone is entertaining in a bedroom, the others in the house try to stay in the front room to provide a sense of privacy. The

sheets have to be changed. Everyone shares the laundry. If you are caught doing drugs, you're out. Katherine nods. She struggles to keep her mind blank, but the story of Rumpelstiltskin invades her thoughts. *The maiden began to weep for she could not imagine how she was to perform this miracle.*

Katherine follows the girls to the dungeon. The basement is painted black with chains fixed to the walls beside a shelf full of masks, whips, and silver needles. "Do you mind doing the dominatrix thing?" Judy looks at Katherine while the other girl hoists herself onto a table that has straps dangling from the sides. She crosses her legs, cocks her head, and smiles encouragingly at Katherine.

"I don't think I mind. I've never done this before."

"Well, if you've got nothing against the dungeon, it can be a good place to start. You're in control and a lot of the time there's no physical contact. No penetration." Judy notices Katherine's gaze drift to the shelf of tools. "Oh, that. Yeah, we use those, but you wouldn't be doing anything fancy right away. We'd start you off with a slap and tickle guy."

Katherine raises her eyebrow, "What's that, exactly?"

The girl on the table answers, "A little nasty talk, a little spanking, and, before you know it, the guy's dropped his load and you're counting out a hundred and fifty dollars. Eighty of which you get to keep."

"Any questions?" Judy asks. Katherine has so many questions she can do nothing but shake her head. Judy squints at Katherine in the dim light. "Are you OK?" She touches Katherine's shoulder.

Katherine shifts away from Judy's touch and thinks, Please don't be nice to me. She is relieved when Judy returns to the tour, opening a flimsy sliding door to reveal a washer and dryer set.

"We try to make sure the laundry's done if we know we have a client booked for the dungeon." Katherine nods. Judy quickly transfers a load of wet sheets into the dryer before leading the way back upstairs.

The girls walk Katherine to the front door. Both shake her hand before she leaves. The sky is black, even though it is late afternoon. In the winter, the nights begin early and last a long time. Streetlights reflect off snow and the residential neighborhood is busy with people returning home from work. They walk with their heads down, their backs hunched over to fight the cold wind. When they open the doors to their homes they straighten and enter the warmth standing tall, shoulders back. As Katherine steps away from the house, a vent from the basement blows hot air on her ankles and the clean scent of Bounce fabric softener fills her nose. She breathes easily now. Moves quickly. She feels like she's been given a reprieve.

Walking to the subway, she fingers the handful of business cards the girls have given her. A Touch of Class. Mistress Strap On - bondage, spanking, and electric shock. Angela's Night Angels. Centerfold Escorts. X-tasy. Down and Dirty Domination. Dangerous Curves WWW.D-CURVES.COM. Seventh Heaven. Extreme Excitement. Erotic Fantasy Come True. Call. You won't be disappointed!

When Katherine arrives home, she adds these cards to her small pile of money. Twenty-three dollars and seventy eight cents.



There's been no hot water for days. But Katherine doesn't mind because she has no need for it. Still, she feels as if she should do something, perhaps call Leeta. Ask her to fix the water, make sure she's OK after her near miss with the truck. But Katherine does nothing and is concerned by how self-conscious she has become since living alone. As she sits in the tiny apartment, she feels like there is a surveillance camera hooked up in each corner of the room and that every action is being monitored. The sensation might be interesting, if she thought her watcher was at all intrigued by what she is doing, but instead she gets the impression that her watcher is eating donuts and scratching his hairy belly while he tries to stay awake on the job. Maybe she even hears the thud of his head on his desk as he drifts off to sleep.

Or is that the sound of bugs?

On her bed, Katherine stares at the ceiling, trying to ignore the sound of the bugs, her pulse, the saliva trickling down her throat. She thinks of the imprisoned maiden.

*Suddenly, a small man appeared at the window of the cell. He asked the girl why she was crying. Through muffled tears, she explained her problem.*

*"What will you give me if I spin the straw into gold for you?" The little man stared greedily at the maiden.*

*"I have nothing to offer." The desperate girl began to weep bitterly.*

*"If you become queen will you give me your first child?"*

*Thinking that impossibility, the girl agreed and the little man sat down to work. The maiden awoke in the morning to a room full of gold and a smiling King. "I'm very pleased," he said and led her to another bigger room filled with twice as much straw. "If*

*you can spin this straw into gold by morning you will be my Queen."* The King locked the door as he left and the girl sank to the ground, tears forming in her eyes.

Katherine feels a light caress on her hand. Like a breeze. It tickles. She looks down her arm and sees a dark shape traveling over her skin. She jerks her hand, sending the bug flying to the other side of the room.

The phone rings. The sound startles her. She looks at it vaguely, answering it not out of desire, but out of habit. Laszlo is calling to tell her a story about the circus he visited in India. Before New Zealand, Laszlo was in India, before India, Greece. Laszlo is speaking slowly. "And then the performers came out. Starving elephants. Leprous tigers. And a charmer who was as narrow as his snake. None of this was so special, except for the poodle. A tiny animal with bulging eyes who, when it wasn't jumping through hoops, ran in circles to deny the existence of the crowd gathered to watch."

"Why am I listening to this?" thinks Katherine.

"You remind me of that poodle," Laszlo says after Katherine turns him down for another coffee.

She hangs up brusquely. She's restless. Leeta's cat prowls in the hallway, hissing at the air. Ghosts, maybe. Katherine can smell herself. She has the desire to fuck. Or more precisely, she has the desire to be fucked. She wants to be pushed up against a wall and entered from behind. She wants it to be anonymous. She does not need to see her lover, but she must be able to smell him. She wants to roam the streets sniffing at men until she finds the right one whom she will politely ask to follow her into an alley and fuck her from behind. As he moves inside her, she will inhale him like air. After, her hair will catch on the bricks as she pushes away from the wall not surprised to find herself

alone. She has consumed him. Katherine touches herself, but, when she can't feel herself, stops. She sings, "I wish I would have met you, but now it's a little late."

She wonders if perhaps her sleepless nights are affecting her more than she knows, but is not convinced. "Maybe it's all a lie. Sleep is overrated. Who needs it? I feel fine and I haven't slept a wink for seventy-two hours," Katherine tells herself viciously and looks out the window. Across from her building, people mill in and out of the bakery. They look small and greedy, breaking off pieces of their baguettes to shove into their mouths as they walk. "Fools." Katherine feels superior, powerful.

When the man from the suburban whorehouse calls, she is grateful and tells herself the waiting is the worse part, she needs this job. When she lived with Andrew, she did not work. She had just been fired from a waitressing job in an Italian pasta and cappuccino bar. The owner was a Catholic family man who wouldn't let her wear short skirts. She had to buy a new outfit for the job. Every time she put on the green coatdress and white open-toe sandals she felt like she was playing dress-up. When Katherine caught the owner watching her through a peephole in the washroom, he fired her. Andrew encouraged her to relax. He pointed out that she wasn't a good waitress and that there was no need for her small income. Maybe she could go to school again. Do that Education certificate she was always talking about. Not this year, but maybe the next.

Sitting by her window, Katherine's gaze shifts to the paint on the frame. Purple. Violet. Blue. The colour of a bruise. The phone rings again. She ignores it, letting the answering machine pick it up. Laszlo leaves a message. "Hi, Katherine. I think you

phoned here a few days ago, but the time and place for coffee was unclear. Call me back.” Katherine moves to the washroom to prepare herself. The last part of the message is drowned by the sound of running water. She catches the final phrase and repeats it to herself, working the words in her mind. “Place for coffee was unclear, space for coffee unclear, space for coffee is male, space for people is male, space people read your mail. Call me back.” Click. Hmmmmmmmmmmm.

She holds her hands under the taps for a long time before she remembers the hot water is broken. The shower is ice cold, but Katherine forces herself into it. She lathers soap over her whole body, shampoos her hair, and cuts her toenails. By the time she begins shaving her legs, she’s shivering and covered in goose bumps. The razor snags on her frozen skin and small pinpoints of red start to form. She steps from the shower cleaner, but bloodier. She twists the cap off a new tube of toothpaste and brushes her teeth.

An hour later, the peppermint taste still lingers in her mouth as Judy greets her at the door a second time. She is dressed entirely in black except for a silver choker at her throat. “Hey girl.” Judy’s smile is wide, pleasant. “You clean up good. You look nice.”

Without the layer of filth, Katherine feels exposed. She believed no one could notice her tangled hair, dirty nails, and bad breath because she’d been thinking of herself as an invisible woman. “Thanks,” she says shyly.

“Let me take your coat.”

“Thanks.”

The house is quiet, there isn't even the distant murmur of the television. "It's a slow night," Judy says and leads the way into the front room. "How are you feeling?" She sounds more like a guidance counselor than a hooker.

"I guess I'm a little nervous."

"It's to be expected, just remember you're in control. Sometimes, with the straight clients, it's good to tell them it's your first time. They get off on it, like they're popping your cherry." Judy laughs dismissively. "But down in the dungeon, it's all a mind game. They're paying you to be the boss."

The doorbell rings and Katherine jumps. Judy smiles. "That's him. You go downstairs and put on the little black suit in the laundry room. I'll bring him down in a couple of minutes and stay with you to get things started. Then I'll slip away and it'll be your show. OK?"

Judy nudges Katherine to the stairs as the door rings again. Katherine descends carefully, gliding her hand down the rail for guidance. The darkness is complete. She rounds the corner into the main room where candles are lit. Their flames barely move in the still air. She can hear Judy and another deeper voice talking from some place that seems very far away. She opens the sliding door and sees her outfit hanging above the dryer. Shedding her own mini skirt, she struggles into a skin-tight fake leather jumpsuit that smells like Eternity. She rearranges her breasts to fit into the designated cups and takes a deep breath. When she exhales she accidentally blows out two candles. There are footsteps on the stairs. The voices get louder.

Judy enters the room and calmly looks at Katherine who smiles. But when no one else smiles, Katherine lets her mouth relax. Judy quietly shuts the door to the laundry

room and motions for the man to sit on the table. Now, he smiles. He seems fairly young with a muscular upper body, but slim hips and skinny legs. He wears a suit the color of buttered mashed potatoes. When he turns toward the table, Katherine sees that his tag is sticking up at the back of his neck and the cuffs of his pants are dirty from the winter slush outside.

“You have my permission to take off your clothes now,” Judy instructs, watching Katherine to make sure she’s paying attention. The man undresses. His forearms are huge and veined. He has pimples on his back. “Lie down.” Judy’s voice is a low monotone. At her cue, Katherine fastens the man’s wrists with two straps. Judy tightens them until his skin puckers under the bindings. He squirms a little, but Katherine sees his penis getting hard. She avoids his eyes.

Judy takes a small whip from the shelf. “It’s good you came here,” she tells the man. “You’re a very needy thing. We’ll teach you not to be such a needy thing.” Judy trails the tip of the whip across his skin, lightly, like the softest loving touch. Then, she cracks it loudly against the table. Katherine winces. The man is fully erect. Judy flicks the whip over his legs. She looks bored. Her chin drops close to her neck, her mouth turns downward, her eyes blink rapidly. She’s stifling a yawn.

The room is growing hot, the man is softly grunting, and just when Katherine thinks she’s been forgotten, Judy hands her the whip and quietly climbs the stairs. The whip is slick from Judy’s sweaty palm. It slips from Katherine’s hands. When she bends to pick it up, she feels the man’s foot on her ass. His toe nudges her insistently. She straightens quickly and slaps his foot away. He makes a satisfied sound, a soft encouraging “MmmHm” which feels wet in Katherine’s ear.

She watches her arm rise slowly in the air. The candles' flames flicker with her movement, a languid dance of light against the dark wall. Time suspended. Then she is released. Her hand easily slices the air, bringing the whip down across his chest. The moment the leather strap strikes skin, she's struck by the impact. Her palm tingles. When she raises the whip she sees a red welt already forming across his pale skin. She feels him staring at her. Her eyes move up his body, taking in every small detail. His chest is slightly sunken and in the middle there is a dent that looks especially vulnerable. She brings the whip down again a second time. A thin sheen of sweat covers his skin. He has a few grey hairs under his arms and there is a small patch of stubble beneath his chin, which he missed with his razor this morning. Other than that, his face is smooth and flushed. She looks into his eyes. They are brown, soft, and warm in the candlelight. They seem slightly misty and unfocused. He shows her his teeth. His hips pump forward, grinding against the air.

"Please," he says in a phlegmy voice. She pulls her arm back to strike again. "Please," he begs, but she stops. She opens her hand, lets the whip drop to the ground, and turns her back to the man. Her skin burns. She blinks the sweat from her eyes and, when her vision clears, she is surprised by her surroundings. She's not exactly sure how she arrived at this place. She feels stupid. She tells herself she's not.

"Please. Come on." His voice is jarring. She hears the strap rattle against the table as he struggles with his bonds. "Come on. Come on." Katherine has the impression that the man is praying. She reaches back and frees one of his hands. He grabs hold of himself, repeating, "Come on." Katherine knows she does not exist for him any more.

She stares into the darkness of the stairway and listens to him come over the sound of her own pounding heart.

When the room becomes silent, she approaches the table and undoes the second strap. He rubs his wrist and reaches for Kleenex to mop up the shiny trail of sperm crossing his lower stomach like a pale, iridescent worm. The man dresses unhurriedly, pausing over each shirt button. He watches her avoid his eyes and clears his throat. "Do you want to know my name?" he asks. She shakes her head, but as he passes her on his way out he hesitates, tucks her fine hair behind her ear, leans in, and whispers his name against her exposed throat.

By the time he finally climbs the stairs, Katherine is exhausted. The tension has eased from her body, leaving only a heavy fatigue. As she slowly strips off her tight black suit, the acrid smell of sweat burns her nostrils. In her mouth, the fresh peppermint taste has been replaced by thick sour saliva. She carefully hangs up the leather jumpsuit. Every small action takes especially long because of her clumsy fingers.

Her clothes, lying in a pile by the washer, look unfamiliar to her. She squats to find her underwear. When she stands up, she sees something on the ground between her feet. She backs up and drops to her knees. She narrows her eyes in disbelief. In front of her, on the shag rug there is a small, perfectly round piece of shit. It is fresh. Warm. She looks around the room, searching for answers, but the dark corners remain silent, seeming to point in her direction. She feels like the room is accusing her.

The whip lies slack on the floor. It looks relaxed. An outline of the man still remains on the sheet covering the table. She pulls this off, rolls it up, and sticks it in the washer. She returns the whip to the shelf and gathers the man's discarded Kleenex, using



it to pick up her shit. She places it carefully in the garbage on top of the bounce sheets and discarded balls of lint. It looks proud. Putting her mini skirt back on, she breaks its zipper. Judy calls from upstairs.

“Coming,” Katherine answers, taking one last look at the room. It is tidy and still. It looks as if she was never there. She climbs the dark stairs two at a time.

“How was it?” Judy asks, holding out four wrinkled twenty-dollar bills.

Katherine looks at the money in her hands. “I cleaned up and put the sheet in the washer, but I didn’t start it since it wasn’t a full load.”

“That’s fine.” Judy guides her to the living room and repeats, “How was it?”

“Not bad,” Katherine lies.

Judy looks at her and snorts. “Yeah right! Of course it was bad,” she says. “It couldn’t have been good. What I mean is, how are you?”

“I’m trying not to think about it.”

“Maybe that’s a good thing.”

“Maybe.”

“There are other options, you know. You don’t have to come back.” Judy’s arms hang loosely at her sides. She’s changed back into jeans and a t-shirt.

Katherine folds her arms across her chest, hugging herself. She asks, “Options?” She says it like a foreign word. One that can be articulated, but not deciphered.

Judy’s speech blurs and Katherine excuses herself to go home.

The soft rocking motion of the subway lulls Katherine into a light sleep. When she enters her apartment she has forgotten Judy, the house, and the man. She hardly notices the red light on her answering machine blinking red, call me, red, call me back. In

the bathroom, the toothpaste lies in the sink, oozing mint. Hair clogs the drain. She hears noises in the hallway. Leeta's cat, creeping. At the table, Katherine is aware that if she lifts her gaze even a fraction, she will be looking directly outside. Outside, the sense of people waking and shifting is almost tangible. The sun shines brightly, warming her arm as she swoops down and crushes a bug with her bare hand. "Oh yes," Katherine thinks, a dry smile splitting her face.

She feels strangely optimistic and eagerly climbs under the covers of her bed. The little troll man appears.

*A year has passed and the little man visits the maiden who is now Queen. She is nursing her baby with a sweet expression on her face until she sees her visitor and understands his threat. When she weeps, the little man offers her hope, though he is smugly confident in his game. Tomorrow night he will return and if she can guess his name, he will release her from her promise.*

*That night the Queen sends her men to find the little man's name. One soldier returns and whispers "Rumpelstiltskin" in her ear.*

This is the happy ending. Katherine's comforter feels heavy on her sore, tense muscles. The Queen keeps her baby. And the little man stomps his foot so hard he crashes through the floor. Katherine twists and turns and, then, frantically kicks the quilt off the bottom of the bed. But the Queen is still married to a man who would kill her for gold. She can't sleep.

She hums a song to herself.

This is the happy ending.

## **The Perfect Vacation**

Pat started her daily routine with a cold shower. She liked the shock of freezing water on her sleep-warmed body. Each morning, as she poked her feet out from under her comforter and pushed them into her fuzzy slippers, she would anticipate the moment when her breath caught in her throat and her heart stopped for just one instant. Fresh from the shower, she would slip on white cotton underwear and sit at her kitchen table with a coffee and an oven-toasted chocolate croissant. She hardly ever read a newspaper. Instead, she wrapped her cold hands around her warm cup and watched the world outside her window. Tall elm trees lined the sidewalks. Neighbors talked to each other over fences and children played hockey in the street, stopping mid-game to move the goalie nets aside each time a car passed. After licking the last of the buttery pastry off her fingers, she would return to her bedroom, slip on her work clothes, and head out the door. This morning was no different except that, for the first time in three years, she did not have to go to work. Pat was on vacation.

This morning, she sat at her kitchen table in her bra and panties, sucked melted chocolate from the middle of a croissant, stared out her window, and felt as if she could not move from her kitchen table. When the mailman came at 10:30, she had to duck and hide behind the counter in order to avoid giving him a free show. Jolted from her languor, she made her way to the bedroom to dress. As she passed her small sitting room, Sister Polly cried out, "Call me a lawyer. Innkeeper, a drink. Amen! Hallelujah!"

Pat shook her head. She had even forgotten to uncover Sister Polly. She entered the room, drew back yellow flowered curtains, and moved towards a large cage. She could see one black eye staring at her through a hole in the old blanket that covered the cage. "Hello, sweetie. Did you have a good sleep? Would you like some water?"

The parrot shifted onto its swing, shook its red tail feathers, and responded, "A banana?"

"No. Water?"

"Banana."

"Later. For now some water and sunflower seeds."

"Banana!"

"That's enough Sister Polly. Calm down." She touched the ravaged area on the bird's neck where it nervously plucked its own feathers. Pat liked the feel of the occasional pin-feather sticking out of Sister's soft, wrinkly skin.

"Pat?"

"Yes, Sister Polly, it's Pat. How are you?"

"How are you?"

"I'm fine. Now eat your breakfast."

Pat closed the living room door with a sigh, blocking out Sister Polly's final insistent demand for "Banana!"

"Banana, banana," she murmured to herself. She had bought the parrot three years ago; around the same time she had started her own business. Sister Polly came from breeders who lived in the country and were avid Billy Graham fans. When Pat brought her new bird home, she discovered that its only vocabulary was, "Amen and Hallelujah."

Keeping with the religious theme, she decided to call the parrot Sister Polly, but soon set out to teach the bird some new words. Now, even though Sister knew over two hundred words, the parrot had forgotten much of its original religious zeal and persisted in repeating “banana” enough times to drive its owner over the edge.

Pat had acquired the parrot because she wanted to be responsible for something besides herself. She couldn’t imagine having children, yet, so she saw Sister as a sort of starter family. At first, she readily gave the bird all the attention it demanded, but now she found herself resenting its exigent nature, which reminded her of the constant obligations of running her own business.

In the beginning, High Flying Balloons had been the challenge she craved. She enjoyed being busy seven days a week, consumed by the responsibilities of a new shop owner. Pat heaved a great sigh. Three years could pass so quickly she hardly knew what had happened to the time. The store, once viewed as a chance for independence, had become a thing to escape. Taking this time off was less a holiday than it was a mad dash for the door. She needed something to happen. But faced with the reality of free time, a minute seemed more like an hour as a full two weeks of nothing to do stretched in front of her.

Suddenly, she remembered the mailman and strode toward her front entrance. She pulled open the heavy wood door to her small cottage and walked out into the day, relieved. Following the stone path that led to the sidewalk, she happily noted that her lawn had to be mowed and the weeds trimmed. At the sidewalk, she bent down to pull a dandelion from a crack in the pavement and then straightened to look at her mailbox. She smiled at the colorful scene painted on the sides. At first glance, it looked as though

Jersey cows grazed in green fields, their udders shining pink against the metal of the box, but on closer inspection, the cows were revealed as spotted pigs, a strange anomaly that made Pat happy.

Opening the box's small door, she saw one single slip of paper resting in the dark cavern of the box. Pat fished out a postcard and hurried back inside.

"Screeeeech. Pop. Hello!" Sister Polly imitated the sound of the door opening whenever anyone entered and never failed to call out a cheerful greeting. "Banana!"

"Yeah, yeah," Pat capitulated and went to the kitchen to slice a piece of the sweet fruit for her bird. "This will shut you up a little." She put the banana next to the bars of the cage where Sister Polly reached for it and immediately spit it out. The parrot looked at her, expectation written across its face.

"Pat?"

"I hate it when you do that, you know?" But she stretched her fingers in through the bars and scratched the bird's head anyway. She knew Sister was just trying to get her attention. "You poor thing," she crooned. Sister rolled her eyes in ecstasy.

Pat sat by the cage and looked at the card in her hand. The scene on the front was a spoof of fifties' culture, a brightly colored scene of a perfect family sitting down for dinner. The mother was standing wearing a red and white apron and was serving her husband. He looked like Dick Van Dyke and was beaming at his two children, a boy and a girl, both perfectly blonde. "Meatloaf Night" was written across the top of the card in blood red.

Pat turned the card in her hand and stared at the message printed neatly on the back. It began with a little joke -- *It's here! Wish you were beautiful!* -- and continued

with some fairly boring news about the weather and Sister Polly. It ended in an exclamation – *I can't believe Nan is getting married!*

Pat's grandmother was ninety-two years old, lived a block away from her, and was always good for a hug. Her nan's house was the exact same layout as Pat's, but smelled of apples, cinnamon, and beer. Nan had started brewing her own beer when she was ninety. Since she only drank one beer a week, on Sunday after church, two years worth of stock had accumulated in the old woman's home. Everywhere Pat looked she could see brown bottles stashed, their original labels carefully scrubbed off.

Last week, Nan had had a surprise for her granddaughter. Pat arrived at Nan's just as the older woman was putting her homemade pickles on the table. The younger woman took the jar and forced it open with all her strength. It gave a gratifying popping sound and soon Pat was digging into the pickle juice, trying to scoop out the yellow beans her nan always added in between the cucumbers. Nan slid grilled cheese sandwiches out of a frying pan onto their plates, sat down, and then got up again. She returned with a bottle of beer.

"We're celebrating," she explained to Pat, as she opened the bottle and poured them each a half of glass.

"What are we celebrating?" Pat searched her Nan's face. The old woman's eyes were almost hidden by folds of flesh that had long ago drooped down all around her face. She had the look of a hound dog except that her skin was so pale it was almost

translucent and her eyes were still brilliantly blue. She raised her glass in a steady hand and smiled secretively.

“What? What are we celebrating, Nan? Tell me.”

“I’m pregnant.” Nan chortled at her own joke. Her dentures shifted forward in her mouth, creating the appearance of an odd, toothy pout. She calmed down enough to correct the position her dentures and looked at Pat expectantly. Pat smiled.

“Come on, really.”

“OK, I’m not pregnant.”

“MmmHmm?”

“I’m getting married.”

Pat smiled again. “No really, Nan.”

“No, really, little girl. I am indeed getting married. Getting hitched. I am telling you I got myself another ball and chain.”

“Get out!” Pat whooped and stood up to give her nan a big hug. “You old dog. How’d you meet him?”

“Bowling. His name is Buck and you can meet him at Sunday brunch after church, if you want.”

“I want. I want.” Pat settled back into her chair and they chatted for the rest of the afternoon. She had even persuaded Nan to open a second bottle of her homemade brew.

*I can't believe Nan is getting married. Pat could hardly finish re-reading her postcard. In fact, she could believe her nan was getting married. What she couldn't*



believe was that she, herself, had not had a date in three years. Nan always accused her of being too picky. And maybe she was.

From the junk drawer, Pat retrieved an old snapshot of Sister Polly dangling from a swing. She smoothed the bent edges and decided to write again. On a whim, she'd sent herself the postcard before she'd left work for holidays. Now, she felt like writing something more than just a greeting to herself.

"Who do I want?"

"Pat."

"I wasn't talking to you Sister. Be quiet and let me think."

She tapped the table with her fingernail.

"Tok, tok, tok."

"Shh, Sister."

"Banana?"

"Shh!"

She held her pen tightly. Silence. She found herself thinking of a man. He was a customer who had come to the shop to order "Get Well" balloons for a friend. Pat wasn't sure why she remembered him at all. He was not remarkable. Tall, skinny, in his thirties with lank brown hair. But, as he walked away, she noticed a limp that had not first been apparent. He hadn't smiled at her until he paid for his balloon bouquet and was walking out the door. When he said "Thanks again" it was like he was joking, when he smiled it was like he was letting her in on the joke.

The pen still clenched in Pat's hand slipped uncomfortably as she moved it over the slick surface of the photograph.

Nan called Pat an incurable perfectionist and perhaps that was true. Why else would she be at the strip mall checking in on the balloon shop the second day of her holiday?

Pat became her own boss thanks to a government program designed specifically to help young female entrepreneurs. She first applied for assistance to open up a flower shop, but had been turned down due to the over-abundance of florists already operating in the town of Sherwood Park. Her loan officer told her that the program was specifically looking to back exciting and innovative young female entrepreneurs. Pat applied again, this time proposing a new way to send a birthday message or an "I Love You" on Mother's Day. High Flying Balloons was a creative alternative to flowers and was exciting and innovative enough to get her into the government program.

When she entered the store, her assistant was sitting at the counter reading *InStyle Magazine* and twirling her frizzy hair into ringlets that stood from her head like antennae. Pat advanced and stood waiting at the counter. From this point of view, it was easy to see down Beth's gaping blouse. A black push-up bra accentuated her full breasts. As Pat shifted and coughed, Beth raised her head and leaned on the counter, further emphasizing her cleavage.

"How's the vacation treating you?" Beth smiled at her boss, unconcerned that she'd kept Pat waiting.

"Not bad after the initial panic wore off." Pat met Beth's blank look without surprise. Beth wasn't the hardest worker, she certainly wouldn't understand not being

able to relax. Maybe it was for this reason that Pat liked Beth, even though sometimes the girl's laziness was a bit much. Pat instinctively moved behind the counter, knelt down, and started to pick up some spare balloons, which had been left scattered about the floor. Beth crossed her legs prettily, to give Pat room.

"Doesn't seem like much of a holiday to me." Pat jerked her head up at the sound of a different, deeper voice. "Am I interrupting you?" It was him. The lanky-haired guy stared down at her.

"Nope." She stood up, dusting her hands off on her jeans. "My nan always says it's a bad day if you're on your knees and there is no man around." Beth gave a snort of surprised laughter, and Pat felt heat rise to her cheeks. She clenched her jaw. She couldn't believe she'd said this.

The man raised his eyebrow. "Quite the philosophy."

"That's my nan, full of pearls of wisdom she can just pull from her hat on any occasion." Pat wished she would stop talking now. "How'd you know I was on vacation?" she said, opting for a quick, safe change of topic.

Beth jumped in. "He was here yesterday asking for stuff we didn't have. I said maybe if you were here you could help him, but that you were on vacation. I was going to ask you about it today. He left his name and phone number in case you came in." Beth pulled out a crinkled paper from her work apron and handed it to Pat who glanced at it quickly. Jonas Cleary.

"I'm hoping you can help me out," he said. "It's my daughter's sixth birthday and I wanted to bring a couple piñatas to her party. It's hard to find anything like that in this town and I work nights, so a trip to the city is a bit of a hassle."

Pat studied him while he talked. There was something lopsided about him. He was over six feet tall. Almost painfully thin and older than she had first thought. Laugh lines were etched deeply around his eyes and mouth. He still had all his hair, though, even if it was fine and greasy. He stood with his hands in his pockets. His right shoulder sloped towards the ground.

“Where do you work?” she asked him and then, biting her tongue, asked herself why she had asked him.

“I play bass in a jazz quartet. We have a regular gig at the Four Seasons out on the highway.”

“Well, let’s see if we can help you.” Pat pulled out her supplier’s catalogue.

“When do you need it by?”

“Next week, Friday. Sooner if you can.”

“There’s nothing in the catalogue. I’ll give them a call.” She moved to the back room and strained to hear Beth and Jonas’ conversation while she pleaded with her supplier to make a rush order for her. All she could catch was Beth’s soft laughter. She returned with an air of calm efficiency and told Jonas that he could come by on Wednesday after three o’clock to pick up the piñatas. She watched him leave the store. His back seemed straighter as he walked. She wondered if she had imagined his limp the other day.

Pat grabbed a pen and flyer from her store and went outside to sit in the fresh air. A bench on the sidewalk of a strip mall hardly afforded the best outdoor experience, but it was sunny and warm and she would not be there for long. She just wanted to jot something down. She chewed the tip of the pen. *His club foot hits the pavement at an*

*unhappy angle. I pace myself to his awkward steps. I don't want to catch up to him, pass him, like all the other people on the street.* Pat paused. She felt self-conscious and raised her head, half expecting to find someone watching her. Crowds of people moved on the sidewalks, filtering in and out of the busy mall. She noticed a woman in a wheelchair looking in her direction but soon realized that hers was a blank, uninterested stare. She sat alone, still. The constant shifting mass of people soon hid the woman from Pat's view.

Pat looked around again and saw that no one was paying her any heed. She bent her head to her work and wrote quickly.

The next morning when she saw the blue flier in her mailbox it seemed strange and unfamiliar. She could hardly remember what she'd written and eagerly looked at the text scribbled in haste across the page. She read it aloud. *I want to lure him into a dark corner, press him into a damp wall and feel his unbalance.* Her voice was awkward. The words didn't come easily. She folded the paper and added the flier to her growing pile of postcards.

Feeling somehow satisfied, she went to visit her nan, sending off another postcard on the way. Nan greeted her at the door holding a large book of samples. "You're just in time." Today they were picking out wedding invitations.

As she entered the kitchen, she saw Buck sitting at the table with a bottle of homemade beer in his hand. When she met Buck at bowling, Pat had been surprised by

his youthful appearance. “Yep, that’s right,” Nan said. “He’s a young ‘un. At my age it’s hard not to rob the cradle.”

Buck had put his arm protectively around Nan and looked at Pat. “Once both people are past the age of eighty, I figure there are no more cradles to rob.”

As Pat took a seat opposite the happy couple, Buck passed her a beer, and her nan repeated, “You’re just in time. We have it narrowed down to three choices.” Nan flipped the pages to show the invitations to Pat who immediately chose the simplest of the designs on sable-colored paper.

Buck leaned happily back in his chair. “You picked my favorite.”

Nan pretended to pout. “I liked the this one better.” She pointed to a brightly decorated card with the words “Better Late Than Never” scrawled across the front.

“I might have guessed.” Pat raised her eyebrow at Buck who laughed.

“Of course, you can have any invitation you want Belle.” The man rocked forward on his chair and folded his fiancée into his arms.

Pat could just see the top of Nan’s white hair and the bottom of her chin. When Nan wriggled down a little in order to breathe, Pat saw a large smile on her mouth. She’d forgotten her grandmother’s name was Belle. As she watched the old couple she tried to imagine them as young lovers, but preferred to see the wrinkles and grey hair. She wondered what it would be like to kiss a sagging breast or an ear filled with coarse wiry hair. She shook her head, Nan broke free from Buck’s embrace, and they all toasted to the new invitations. “Better Late Than Never.”

*She sits on wheels, as walking people pass. Her white sweatshirt is lumpy, fat haphazardly stuffed into fleece.* Pat's eyes skimmed the text. It was morning again, and instead of looking out her window, she sat with her coffee and stared at her postcard. She had picked it up in a junk store from a box of old photos and cards. It was from Spain. There was a Flamenco dancer in the center of the picture. Dark hair fanned out around her head as she twirled and her skirt was made of real material glued onto the cardboard. Pat touched the material. It was made of nylon, which snagged against her rough fingertips.

When she had worked in flower shops, her hands were perpetually dry. Stripping roses of their thorns tended to strip fingers of their skin. Now, the balloons hardly seemed better. Her nan suggested that it might be chemicals, slathered Pat's hands in Vaseline, and secured white cotton gloves around her fingers.

Pat watched her fingers caress the postcard and wondered if she could show it to someone. It seemed a mystery, as if it had appeared in her life through no will of her own. She remembered seeing the woman in a wheelchair. She remembered thinking how calm the woman was even though she was forced into inaction by the milling crowd. She remembered desiring that calm. *She waits and I think how patiently her fingers would move over my skin, how thoroughly she could pull pleasure from my throat.*

"Banana!"

Pat sighed, and went into the sitting room to look in on Sister Polly. The bird lifted its feet excitedly one after the other in an eager dance.

"Pat. How are you?"

"I'm fine."

“How are you?” The parrot grabbed hold of its perch and spread its wings wide. It flapped noisily, banging its toy bell against the sides of his cage. The room filled with dust and small soft feathers. Pat grabbed her purse and headed out the door. She passed her car and walked briskly down the street, deciding the short hike downtown would do her good. As she passed Nan’s, she saw that both the screen door and storm door were shut tight. Two empty bottles of beer sat side by side on the stairs of the front porch. The railing was freshly painted a bright turquoise blue, and the hedge was newly trimmed, but the house looked completely empty. It seemed Pat never could tell when her nan would be home now that she was engaged to Buck. Since she was so close to High Flying Balloons, she decided to drop in, thankful that she still knew what to expect from her store.

For one brief second, Pat considered showing Beth her postcards. She fingered a card in her jacket pocket, fraying its edges with her fussing. It was one of those free postcards, which businesses print up as advertisements. Pat was thinking of doing some for her own store. This one was for a new sports shop specializing in snowboards, skateboards, and mountain bikes. It was a store decidedly meant for the youth of the community. Every day, there seemed to be more and more shops like it popping up in the conservative downtown core of Sherwood Park. Pat liked these stores even though she was too intimidated to walk inside them. They seemed dangerous.

She had picked up the card in the entrance of a coffee shop. She liked the bright colors and, unlike most of its kind, it had enough space to actually write something on



the back. On the front, there was a cartoon girl wearing a toque and baggy pants. She had a beat up old skateboard under her arm and a bubble over her head, which communicated her thoughts. "Girls Rule Boys Drool." The two "oo"s were made into a face with eyes and had a tongue sticking out of it. A purple heart punctuated the statement.

On the card, Pat had scribbled a quick message. *When I was a teenager.* It was becoming easier to write. The page seemed a safe place, even though she knew she ran the risk of exposure by mailing the postcards. She was reminded of the little red diary she had as a girl. It came with a lock and key, and across the top of each page the date was written in gilded letters. She'd kept the diary over five years, skipping many days so that, in the end, an entry from a Monday in April 1977 might be followed by a Tuesday from 1982.

Pat read her most recent message about her first boyfriend who had longish hair that curled over his shoulders, and soft, full hips. Everyone mistook him for a girl. Pat liked him because he let her squeeze his pimples. *But he was young. My later partners weren't so enthusiastic and were, unfortunately, clear skinned.* Eventually, Pat broke up with him because he did not kiss well. When she told her Nan this, the old woman chastised her saying that anyone could be taught how to kiss.

Pat had a sudden urge to talk to Nan. She turned on her heel and headed for Nan's where she found the old woman sitting on the porch shelling peas. Pat plunked down at her grandmother's feet and grabbed a handful of peas herself. She cracked the shells open and ran her thumb along the inside of the vegetable, dislocating peas in an efficient manner.

"I've been wanting to show you something." She read the card.

Nan's voice was slowed from the heat of the day. "Must run in the family," she said. Pat leaned forward.

"I remember being pretty young, passing Kleenexes to my mom as she swabbed pus from a large boil on my dad's shoulder. I used to imagine Mom's hand stroking those raw red bumps on his back, but I never pictured them in the dark 'cause the care Mom gave Dad was always given in the brightest light." Nan hiccupped. "I guess she needed to see what she was doing." She hiccupped again. "I need some water, dear."

Pat fetched a drink for Nan and concluded that perhaps she hadn't fully explained the situation, perhaps she had given a bad example, perhaps she would wait and try Nan again in the cooler air of the morning.

Nan tilted the glass to her lips and downed the water. She took Pat's hand and said, "Let's go get my dress." Pat nodded and put the card into her pocket.

They strolled downtown to the street, which had all the finer dress shops, and stopped in the one bridal store of the town, joking about the various styles of wedding dresses from Bo Peep to lemon meringue pie. As Nan tried on a beautiful flapper style gown made of white silk and hundreds of beads, Pat listened to the woman in the next stall complain about her body. She was young, in her late twenties with soft brown hair. Pat closed her eyes and tried to picture her next postcard. Maybe something scenic. A waterfall. She saw the woman's stretch marks as the Northern Lights, a glorious pattern of stars sprayed across ginger skin. She imagined gliding her hand up razor scraped thighs to trace the curve of the woman's waist and touch the side of her breast, finger stroking under arm.

Pat opened her eyes to Nan swirling in front of her, beads flying and shimmering in the sun, which streamed through the store window. "TaaaDaaa," Nan said, her arms spread wide, her face flushed with the movement.

They had the dress wrapped and went for lunch in a greasy diner called The Silk Hat where Nan like to get her tea leaves read. They ate their favorite, grilled cheese sandwiches, and split an order of fries. For desert, they ordered a chocolate milkshake, which Nan sucked up through a straw while Pat spooned the extra into her mouth from a big metal glass. Alma, the psychic, came by to say "Hi" to Nan. She wore a long dress with jeans underneath. She had a small ketchup stain in the middle of her top. Dark hair covered her upper lip and the backs of her hands. She clasped Nan's hand in her own and said that she looked wonderful. Alma turned Nan's palm over and peered into it, her face brightened. "Good news. Happiness."

She took Pat's hand, studied her palm, patted her arm and said, "Don't worry, you have nothing to fear." Nan looked on approvingly, nodding her head in agreement.

Pat stood in the line-up at the grocery store, flipping through the *TV Guide*. The woman in front of her was buying milk, broccoli, two plaid throw pillows and a small glass teapot which, when you removed the top half, became a cup. Pat wondered at buying such items from a food store. She followed the woman out of the store and watched her unlock her car. The woman was elderly, though not as old as her nan. She wore a matching yellow pantsuit of comfortable cotton fleece and drove a new shiny green sedan. Pat felt a surge of envy. The woman's life seemed so secure. What would it

be like to not wake up to a question every day? Pat caught herself and reminded herself that she was too young to want that kind of comfort.

She brought her feta and tomatoes home and made a simple Greek salad with fresh oregano from her garden. In a tabloid, she read about Dolly Parton's breast reduction surgery. Then, on the subscription card inside, she wrote her next postcard.

*I have started to read the Enquirer like a dirty magazine.* She describes Lobster Man, Ape Man, man with two heads, eleven fingers, extra arm, missing torso. Cyclops. She wonders why it is always about an addition or subtraction, more or less from the average, the typical, the accepted, the oh-so-attractive. Pat flips to an article about a vampire who has sued his employers for a hundred thousand dollars because they won't let him work in the dark. "Anton Khoroni says his rare condition makes it impossible for him to tolerate daylight..." She chews her pen and decides that if she met Anton, she would tell him that the dark world is just as good as the light. *I would extinguish all fluorescence and would gain my sight by the radiance of his pale pure skin.* She continues. *But I don't buy these magazines for the articles; I buy them strictly for the pictures.* With cheap black newsprint smeared on her fingers, she touches herself.

The sun was high in the sky and Sister Polly was chatting away in the other room. Pat drew all the blinds in the house tightly shut and went to sleep in an artificial night. She dreamt that she was herself but she was also Dolly Parton. She was being interviewed by Barbara Walters. Her breasts seemed too large; they rubbed against her arms as she shifted in her seat. Her voice seemed too loud. She was trying to explain

something. *People always say, "But you're not bad looking." Then, I try to clarify that it is not my ugliness that draws me to the imperfect; it is purely their beauty.*

Even before Pat awoke, she knew it was the day Jonas Cleary was coming to the store to pick up his order. She stayed in bed a little longer than usual, lingered over her coffee, and chatted with the mailman as she planted tulip bulbs in her flowerbed for next spring. She wondered briefly if he ever read her postcards while walking his long route. But, if he had, he gave no hint, chattering on about the weather, the forecast. His braces glinted in the sun when he smiled and handed Pat her mail before striding away down the sidewalk.

Only junk mail for her today. She ate a quiet lunch and played with Sister Polly in the afternoon. She did not think of Jonas. As the day darkened, her stomach clenched. Twilight was her least favorite time of day. Everything became indistinct. She had to strain her eyes to focus. She turned on all the lights in her house, even the overhead ones which she usually found too harsh.

She took out a blank sheet of writing paper and looked forward to marking its whiteness. She liked the freedom of writing messily. She liked ignoring the rules she'd learned in grammar. Carefully placed commas, periods inside the end quotation mark, no run-on sentences. The last was a particular challenge for Pat, she loved running on.

*When I have fear, my greatest is blindness.* But when she imagines herself blind, she sees attraction groping hands feeling space to move forward in shadow and then maybe her strange strangers would come to her because their fear would be freed by her

sightless night and they would forget how sensitive her hands have become they would think that she would not know their deformity they would feel safe and she would feel their scars their twisted missing limbs their less than perfect shells and she would keep them safe in her shaded touch.

She put her pen down and rested her head in her hands. Not think of Jonas Cleary. He was probably still married anyway. But then wouldn't his wife be able to pick up the piñatas? And he did say he wanted to bring the piñatas to the party. That certainly sounded like he would be a guest at the party, not a daddy who's always home. Right? Not think of him.

Tomorrow was the last day of her vacation.

She went into Sister Polly's room and watched the bird groom itself, obsessively picking the feathers from the right side of its neck. As Pat opened the cage, the parrot playfully bit at the latch and her fingers. Sister used her beak like fingers. The bird was so dexterous that metal clips had to be hooked through the bars to secure the food and water trays and the door of cage. Once free, Sister Polly lost no time finding her way to Pat's shoulder.

"Give me a kiss," Pat said turning her lips towards the bird.

Sister replied with a quick peck of its curved beak to Pat's mouth.

"Let's sit down. My last day of holidays and you didn't even get any loving." As she sat with her legs up, the parrot ducked its head under Pat's chin. She lifted her hand to stroke Sister's head. She grimaced as she noticed how dirty the cage was. Seeds and shit covered the bottom. Delicate white feathers stuck to old banana caked on the bars of the bird's house. "I've been neglectful," she explained to Sister, who didn't respond, but

rolled its eyes back into its head with the pure bliss of being caressed. Pat smiled at the parrot and moved her fingers down to stroke Sister's neck. Underneath the bird's feathers, Pat could feel Sister's tiny fragile skeleton. She pressed her thumb and forefinger around the parrot's vulnerable throat.

"Banana." The parrot's loud voice was especially piercing when spoken directly into Pat's ear.

Pat sighed, rose from the couch, and walked into the kitchen with the bird. "Here we go. A yummy banana." Sister Polly took the fruit and ate it in delicate bites while Pat stared out her window. She opened the window for fresh air and quickly retreated to the other room before Sister had the time to realise just how close freedom lay.

She saw a woman jogging towards her on the street. Pat quickened her step and squinted into the distance to get a better look. The woman wore shiny nylon running shorts and had her socks pulled high on her calves. There was nothing remarkable about her except an odd shape around her middle. Pat squinted more. What was that shape? A growth, maybe? A malformation? The jogger passed Pat, who paused to sit on a bench by the tennis courts. Her knees felt a little weak, her forehead damp. She could hear the "thwupp" of rackets hitting balls and she shook her head. The woman was only wearing a fanny pack tucked under her shirt. Nothing to get excited about. Just calm down. It was eight in the morning, Friday. Pat continued through the park to her shop. Her vacation was over.

She opened the store's door and switched on the lights. Usually, she liked to come in early to do some arrangements before having to deal with the public. Today, especially, there would be extra work to do since Beth had been left alone for two full weeks. Pat sat at the counter sipping her coffee, and looked at the postcard in front of her. She had wanted something fun, something different. Yesterday, she finally mustered her courage and walked into the snowboard shop. Inside, no one noticed her as she slowly spun the card rack around so that she could study all of her possibilities. She stopped when she found the one she wanted.

The card in front of her had a seventies guy on it, striking a disco pose on a floor alight with colors. Red. Pink. Yellow. Green. His one finger pointed up and his other finger pointed down. His eyes were half-closed and his mouth was open. He had a big brown Afro and wore his shirt open to the waist. His pants were made of silver, which matched the word written across the bottom in shiny 3D characters. **FUNKY**. She flipped the card. On the back, there was a miniature of the disco guy and written beside him in bold black letters was **Hey, call me Randy!**

Pat looked around her store and sighed. She didn't know what to write. She looked at her window display filled with orange and brown balloons to represent the coming fall season. She sighed. Her glance rested on her shelves filled with balloons and cups and teddy bears and little angel statuettes. She looked at her own Gemini coffee mug and the yellow Post-it note pads she had in two sizes, small and smaller. Sighed. Suddenly, she heard a tapping at the shop door. She grabbed the blank card, hastily wrote some words on the back, and shoved it in her purse.



Moving towards the storefront, she unlocked the entrance. Jonas Cleary stood in front of her with a sheepish look on his face. "I know you're not open yet, but I saw you through the window." Pat nodded and kept the door close to her. He continued, "I didn't get a chance to stop by on Wednesday and the party is today at noon so I wouldn't mind picking up those piñatas. I haven't even got home to sleep, yet. If I could grab them now, I could squeeze in a quick nap." He looked expectantly into the store.

"Sure. Come on in." She moved to the back and grabbed his order, ripping off a note Beth had left with a big question mark written on it.

"Great. Thanks. I really appreciate it. Now, my wife can only be pissed at me for not coming home last night."

Pat nodded, took his money, and handed him a receipt. She walked him to the door, planning to lock it again since she had another good hour before officially opening. Suddenly, he turned back and she bumped into him. His leg connected with hers and she marveled at the solid, hard contact of his knee. He staggered a little and again she noticed the stiff movement of his right side. He looked down, rubbed his upper leg, and shrugged. When he said "Thanks again" it was like he was joking, when he smiled it was like he was letting her in on the joke.

She closed the door. Closed her eyes.

*He sits heavily on the side of her bed, sheds his shirt, takes off his pants and removes his fake leg. He asks if she minds. He explains it is more comfortable sleeping without it. Even though he speaks bluntly, she hears tension in his voice. He would rather not reveal himself but has grown accustomed to issuing the challenge. She undresses and climbs into bed. He curls his back into and against her heat. As she falls asleep with her*

*hand soft around the curve of his absent leg, she smiles and thinks exactly just how much she does not mind.*

The day dragged. Summer was a slow time for a balloon store. Pat sketched out some designs for Nan's wedding. Her grandmother wanted Pat to decorate the hall and make a special arrangement of balloons for the bridal bouquet. Pat dawdled over her work, feeling uninspired. She closed shop fifteen minutes early and went directly home. The kids playing hockey in the street accidentally sent a ball flying her way, which hit her bare leg with a loud slapping noise. She shrugged off their apologies and entered her house with a stinging round red spot on her shin. Her eyes watered. She tossed her bag on a chair. It slid off and its contents scattered to the floor. Lipstick rolled under the fridge, change clattered across the tiles, and the **Hey, call me Randy!** slid under the table. As she was bending down to retrieve it, a loud voice sounded in the kitchen.

"Banana!"

Pat jumped, bumping her head on the edge of the table. She looked around her and saw Sister Polly sitting above the sink, on the ledge, in front of the open window. Pat realised she must have forgotten the second latch the last time she'd taken Sister out of the cage. The window made a perfect frame for the parrot who was perched directly in the middle and was backdropped by the green weeping willows, which lined the street outside. The wind stirred, blowing the delicate leaves of the trees and ruffling Sister's feathers.

"Pat?"

“Yes, Sister Polly, it’s Pat. How are you?” Pat fell into the regular routine while slowly approaching the bird.

“How are you?” Sister replied.

“I’m fine.” Pat was around the table now edging toward the window. The wind stirred again and the parrot spread its wings. Sunlight illuminated each soft grey feather and then the bird took flight. There was a storm of dust and pinfeathers. Pat blinked once and then Sister landed on her shoulder.

“Banana!” Sister insisted and Pat laughed, sinking to the ground in relief. She stroked the bird’s head and felt happy when its claws dug into her flesh as Sister dipped down to better receive Pat’s caresses.

On the floor, her bag lay empty. It looked deflated. Change was scattered everywhere. Keeping one hand on the bird, Pat moved her foot to shake off the nickels and dimes, which stuck to her sweaty skin. As she bent her leg, the postcard slid out from under the table. Pat read her last message to herself. Her name was printed neatly in the space under the stamp, but the writing was a messy scrawl covering whole back of the card.

*I’m not sure when I first realised my desire for imperfection I think it was even before I realised desire.*

Pat stood up, closed the window, and put the bird back in its cage.

## Pieces

*In a million pieces the chance of having certain moments increases - Scrawl*

“Is that it?” the doctor asks, head between Jody’s legs, finger pressing down on a spot Jody can’t feel.

“I’m not sure. I think so.” She shifts ever so slightly in the stirrups. Her movement is not so much a result of physical discomfort, as it is a sign to the doctor that Jody knows his is not a fun job, that she, too, takes no pleasure having him pry into her private parts. The doctor responds sympathetically; he keeps the conversation impersonal, medical.

“It’s not really on the lips is it? It’s more towards your buttocks. Is that where you were talking about?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t feel where you’re touching. Ummm, maybe if I could just...” Jody laughs an embarrassed little snort as she reaches her hand over the paper blanket. Her face gets hot with the thought of touching herself in front of a stranger.

“Ummm...yeah...I think...I think that’s it there. It’s gotten smaller. I think that’s where you were?” Jody feels the doctor’s gloved finger next to hers, probing.

“There?”

“Yeah, there.”

“That’s not a wart, that’s a pimple.”

“Oh.”

“Well, that’s good news anyway.” The doctor rolls back on his chair and snaps off his gloves. “Warts are white cauliflower-like growths. The bump you have is red. Was there pus in it?”

Jody squirms. “I don’t know. I really couldn’t see.”

“It looks like the head was scratched open. Is it sore?”

Jody cringes, wondering if this is his discreet way of suggesting she squeezed the pimple on her butt. She repeats herself, trying to reinforce the idea that she doesn’t generally have her hands down there a lot. “It’s hard to see. It’s not really sore at all.”

“If you take a mirror and sit in good light you usually can get a better look. When was your last contact with this partner?” Jody explained earlier that her ex had the virus and that they faithfully used condoms – except for one night. One night and she got pregnant, and ever since she’s been expecting something else to go wrong.

“It’s been a few months.”

The doctor moves around to Jody’s side. “The chance of contracting the virus after being exposed once is about 30%. If it hasn’t appeared within a few months after contact, then you can be sure you’re safe. I’ve taken a pap smear and I’ll get them to run the gonorrhea/yeast/chlamydia tests. Your ovaries seem fine and your uterus is small.” Jody doesn’t know why, but for some reason she feels proud. It just seems tidier to have a small uterus.

“I’ll do a breast examination now.” As she feels the cover being pulled down and tucked around her waist, Jody stares at the ceiling. She concentrates on the poster hanging above her. A whale is jumping out of the water, trying to reach a small sardine

on the end of the trainer's long stick. It reminds her of the one visit she made to the Vancouver Aquarium before she moved to the west coast.

It was almost ten years ago. After graduation, she and her best friend, William, drove to Vancouver for a weekend to see The Police in concert. On a Sunday afternoon, before heading back to Calgary they stopped in Stanley Park to see the dolphin show. They were both severely hung-over. The bright sun stabbed Jody's eyes and her back hurt from sitting in the stands. But when the dolphins jumped and splashed water on the audience, William and Jody both lifted their faces to welcome the cool salty spray against their hot cheeks.

"Do you like my whale picture?" The profile of the doctor's head is indistinct as Jody keeps her gaze fixed on the ceiling.

"HmMmm," she affirms, thinking about how cold his hands are. The doctor pulls up the blanket and reports that everything seems fine. He turns his back on Jody's nodding head and disappears behind the curtain.

Hastily pulling on her jeans and t-shirt, she looks down at her outfit and thinks she's dressed like someone who would have an abortion. Jody can't believe she still feels self-conscious. She draws back the curtain and sits by the desk, her legs pressed closely together, her bag pushed tightly into her lap. As the doctor fills in a chart, Jody's eyes wander over the shelves, taking inventory of what she might like to have, what she could take from this place if she had a chance. She likes the tongue depressors. An oxygen tank with a mask would come in handy for her panic attacks, but Jody doesn't spot one.

The doctor stops writing and rests his hands on her open file. "How do you feel about the abortion?"

Jody tells him what she has told everyone who knows to ask, "I feel OK."

"You're not suicidal?"

"No."

"No regrets?"

"No."

She is telling the truth. She's known for a long time that if she ever got pregnant she would get rid of the baby. These words – pregnant and baby – seem strange to her. At first, Jody referred to her pregnancy as "the invasion" and the baby was "an enemy." She toyed with the idea of possession, but soon realised that this was no otherworldly affair – it was a war for territory. Later, she refused to discuss the abortion, but in her mind she renamed the baby "my visitor." Her unwanted house guest.

"How many weeks were you?"

"Seven weeks," she replies and remembers how much longer it seemed, the sleeping days and sleepless nights.

The doctor nods once, the answer is acceptable.

"I'm really fine." Jody wants to convince this doctor that his duty has been done. "My friend's just had a baby and I'm really happy for her. They've named her Serafina. Reminds me of serendipity."

Another nod. "I'm giving you a sheet with the tests I've done today. You can call for the results in two weeks." Jody takes the paper, folds it in half, and stashes it in her bag. She doesn't want to see the list of tests that will be run on a part of her, out there, separate.

As she leaves the room, Jody tosses a “thank you” behind her. She passes the reception desk and escapes. The bright sun is an insult to her mood and she is happy when it disappears behind a wall of thick, fast-moving clouds.

She has about an hour before she has to be at work, just enough time to grab a quick bite and stop by home for her apron. She picks up a ready-made sandwich and quickly moves through downtown towards her nearby neighborhood. Victoria’s center is so little she can easily walk or ride her bicycle everywhere. This was one of the attractions when she decided to move west after high school. Unfortunately, the small-town atmosphere also included a certain reticence towards strangers. After eight years, she still has few friends.

There is only Sal. Sal of the genital warts. Sal of the abortion.

Sal eats fire. He juggles it, blows it, tosses it high in the air, and swallows it. Jody had first seen him in the market square doing his fire act for tourists. Three years ago, when she got the job at the deli, there he was again, wearing a hair net and plastic gloves. Soon after, Sal and Jody became what he called “fuck buddies.” When he came to her bed, he smelled like kerosene. His kisses tasted burnt, charred. She felt he was too young for her. He had too much energy. The difference between twenty and twenty-eight can be great. He was always urging her to *do* something. “How can you work at these shit jobs and not give yourself time to be creative. Paint! Draw! Write! Act! Sing!” When he pushed too hard, she told him to leave her alone, she was happy with her sliced turkey and blood sausage.

She’d never really had ambition. Even in high school, while others joined drama clubs and sports team or excelled in English or Math, she’d always hung back, an average



student with no real interest in anything except smoking joints and listening to music. Dark circles ringed her bloodshot eyes and earphones constantly crowned her head. She was easily overlooked.

Jody quickly passes the deli, now. The volume on her Walkman turned up high, she keeps her eyes fixed in front of her. She knows Sal is also working today and she will see him soon enough. She turns the corner onto a residential street and pauses to look out over the little man-made lake only a few blocks from her house. The shore is lined with tall reeds and the water is covered with a layer of dark sludge. When the loons swim, the algae collects on their white breast feathers, staining them a dark green that matches their heads. Jody walks out onto the pier where people sit and throw bread to the birds. She plops down and unwraps her ham and cheese.

William would call this lake a puddle, but Jody likes it. She even prefers it to the ocean. The pond makes her think of Jackfish Lake and long summer days spent with William on the pier in front of his parent's cabin. When they were kids he used to dangle her off the edge, threatening to let her fall into the water. And even though Jody spent hours swimming and diving into that same water, she nervously pleaded with William to hold onto her, to not let her go.

William continued this practice throughout the years, but never once dropped her. Even when she grew tall and lanky, he always managed to pull her back and lay her down on the dock. Her heart still pounding, her armpits wet; she stretched her long legs, wiggled her toes, and listened to the water quietly slapping the boards of the deck. William sat beside her, stroking her head. His fingers were rough and snagged her hair, but every time he moved his arm Jody smelt the sun on his skin. During these times,

William often reached into his pocket to take out a bottle of small white pills, shaking one or two into the palm of his hand. The medication was prescribed to calm him and silence the voices he sometimes heard. William never talked about his problem and the sight of him chewing pills became familiar.

Jody has thought a lot about William, lately. It happens sometimes that she can spend days in the past. She remembers William's history of scarring himself with small, precise cuts along his arms and legs. He said the pain helped him to focus, to escape his head and come back into his body. Jody was used to the trail of scabs covering William's skin. She grew comfortable seeing him with a knife.

One day, she picked up his blade and started to chisel faces into a piece of wood. Each side showed a different expression: one smiled with its eyes shut, one seemed to snarl or sneer, and one opened its mouth in terror. William insisted on keeping the sculpture, convinced it was a portrait of him. The next day he gave her his knife and stopped cutting himself. Jody began carving out of a superstitious belief that her actions could somehow protect her friend and stopped carving when she was proven wrong again and again as William found new ways to hurt himself. She did keep his knife, though, and used it to cut parts from trees, plastic chairs, driftwood, dolls – anything that felt good in the palm of her hand. Rough, smooth, solid, soft. She'd stroke these pieces and remember.

Before, when she was overcome by nostalgia, she called William. She used to think her sudden recollections of him were a sign and she needed to know that he was fine. Every time she called, he not only assured her he was fine, but also expressed surprise by her concern. Now, she rarely phoned him. The last time was on Christmas

morning and he was already lighting up his second joint for the day. His voice was thick and slow and when Jody asked him if he was taking his meds, William said that if he wanted a lecture he'd call his mother. When Jody first moved to Victoria, she thought the distance wouldn't matter. Now she knows. Distance always matters.

Jody looks across the pond, pops the last of her sandwich into her mouth, and rinses her fingers in the slimy water. Sometimes she has an overwhelming urge to pitch herself forward off the dock and disappear under the lattice pattern of the lily pads. Instead, she lies down and puts her hand over her face, inhaling the fresh, green smell of the lake. She should leave soon. The thought of work makes her stomach constrict and her neck tighten. She doesn't want to face Sal, the manager, or the customers. Her breath stops and gathers in her throat. Her mouth tastes like stale air. She reminds herself to breathe and pictures a white flower in her throat. Imagines herself swimming in that spacious white flower. The world is air.

She feels the light drizzle of rain on her face as she rises and jogs up the hill to her house. She can hear the phone ringing as she struggles to free her keys from the hole in her jacket pocket. When she opens the door, the ringing stops. She picks up the phone and an automated voice informs her she has one new message and one saved message. She listens to her saved message first.

Her friend, Katrina, sounds a little edgy with excitement and lack of sleep. "Hey, Jody. It's been awhile, but I wanted to call to tell you we had our baby. Last week. A girl. Get a load of the name. Serafina Jelena Papadopoulos Hart. Are we too cruel or what? We call her Stretch for short. She's so long and skinny, her legs just kind of dangle over

my arms when I hold her. You know how short I am. I guess she must get it from her dad. Anyway, how are *you*? I should go now. Maybe I'll try again Sunday."

Jody replays the message again and leans into Katrina's happy voice. They have not known each other long. A year, just barely. They were the only two students in a summer French immersion program who were over eighteen-years-old. At twenty-seven, Katrina wanted to take a small vacation from her Ph.D. The immersion program was her idea of rest. At the same age, Jody had been contemplating a move to Montreal. An escape from Victoria, the deli, and Sal. She decided to take advantage of the government-sponsored program that provided a place to live and a food allowance. The immersion program was also Jody's idea of rest.

After a few weeks, both Jody and Katrina complained of fatigue. They tried to go for walks to work off the extra weight they seemed to have gained for no apparent reason, yet they were too tired to do anything but marvel at their mutual listlessness. They blamed it on the humidity of Quebec's summers. At the final party, Jody drank one glass of wine and threw up. She'd thought it strange. She wasn't a puker.

Katrina returned to Toronto and Jody to Victoria. Two days back home and Jody realized she was pregnant. She refused to believe it, even when she peed on the little strip of paper and it turned from pastel pink to baby blue. She was overcome. She wasn't with child, child was with her. Frantic plans were made for the termination of the pregnancy. This was how both her doctor and Sal referred to the abortion. Jody disliked these careful words chosen to sterilize the event, take surgery away from flesh, take flesh away from flesh without anyone noticing. But words subtracted nothing from seven weeks of weeping daily and then half of that again of bleeding baby out.

Baby. When Jody talked to Katrina a few months after the abortion, she discovered her friend was also pregnant during the immersion program and had decided to keep the baby. Katrina described her round belly and they commiserated on their experience of morning sickness. For a month, it seemed like any odour could make Jody's stomach turn with nausea. It wasn't only pungent, bitter smells like garbage and gasoline that had this power. It was also fragrant, tasty scents like roasting chicken and perfume. Jody remembers throwing up in the shower because of her shampoo and being vaguely thankful for the warm water rushing over her because at least then she didn't have to make the extra effort to clean herself.

Katrina's message is coming to an end. "Anyway, how are *you*? I should go now. Maybe I'll try again Sunday." Jody saves it again and listens to her next message.

It takes her a moment to identify the voice. A woman, clearing her throat. "Hello? I hope I have the right place." William's mom leaves her number and asks Jody to contact her as soon as possible. Her voice seems distant and uncertain. She clears her throat again. "Bye."

Jody doesn't bother to write down the number, she knows it by heart. She and William grew up together and his mother never moved from the old neighborhood. Mrs. Keller was a stay-at-home mom who used to take Jody in after school and feed her granola bars until her own parents came home from work. William's mom seemed to be the only person who noticed Jody, which the young girl hardly appreciated since she took such pains to make herself as inconspicuous as possible, folding her skinny limbs close to her body, rounding her back, lowering her head.

With the phone tucked between her shoulder and her ear, Jody erases the message. She can't imagine why Mrs. Keller would be calling. She looks quickly at the clock and knows she'll be late for work, but dials William's number. She hangs up on his answering machine and tries his mother's. Mrs. Keller picks up on the first ring.

"Hello?" His mother always sounds like she's asking a question.

"Mrs. Keller. It's Jody Leski. I just got your message."

"Oh Jody? Dear, I'm so glad to hear from you. How are you?"

"I'm OK, Mrs. Keller. You?" Jody is watching the second-hand tick around the clock. If she's late for work the manager will do his best to make her shift hell.

"I'm fine, dear. Well, I'm not really fine. I'm...I'm not sure how to tell you this?"

"What is it, Mrs. Keller?" Jody asks, but already knows that something has happened to William. She chases the thought from her mind.

Mrs. Keller chases it back, "It's William, dear. He's in the hospital."

"Why?" Jody brings her finger to her mouth and she chews at the skin around her nail.

"Well, maybe you know he hasn't been doing so good? I've been after him to take his medication. You know I don't like him smoking that stuff either, but the voices are worse when he stops taking the medication. The other day his boss phoned for me to pick him up from work. He was talking to himself. I went and got him, but you know William, he wouldn't stay here. He went home and the next day he was back at work."

William has worked at the same pizza parlor since high school. He used to give Jody free slices and, in exchange, she helped him cut mushrooms. Their childhood

friendship continued, even though as teenagers it would have been easy for them to grow apart. In school, William was out of her league. He was tall, clear-skinned, and blond.

She was tall.

The only thing that kept William from being really popular was his preference for comics over football and his habit of laughing at the most inopportune times. Jody still remembers the day their English class watched a BBC production of *Romeo and Juliet*. By the end of the play, every girl's cheek was damp with tears. William gave a big snort of laughter, which was incredibly loud because he'd been trying to hold it in throughout the whole tragic death scene.

Jody looked over at William's red face and had known exactly how he felt. She, too, had a long history of laughing at the wrong moments. Like when her mother got hit by that car. It wasn't serious, just a nudge, and Jody felt really bad, but she couldn't help herself. The guy driving didn't know whether to stop or not because her mother was limping, but Jody was laughing.

So, she knew how William felt -- laughing from nerves not humour -- and they stayed friends. Even now, Mrs. Keller's worried voice makes her shoulders tighten and her belly ache as a little unwanted giggle forms in her throat. She swallows it, making a loud gulping sound.

"Oh Jody, dear, are you alright?"

"Yes, Mrs. Keller. Please I want to know what happened. Is William all right? Why's he in the hospital?"

"I just don't know how to say this." Mrs. Keller's words become louder and no longer seem to have any question in them. "He cut himself, dear. He's cut himself badly."

Jody sinks to the ground. She plays with the end of her shoelace.

Mrs. Keller continues, "He was at work..."

"So, it was an accident?" Jody interrupts, wanting to believe that it's not as bad as she thinks, that it wasn't intentional.

"No. No, it wasn't an accident. It definitely wasn't an accident."

"But, Mrs. Keller, what did he do?"

"He cut himself. Not like the other times."

Jody tries for a big breath of air, but can't seem to get oxygen into her lungs.

"Mrs. Keller, did William try slitting his wrists?"

"No, dear, no he didn't." Jody's lungs fill with air. "He didn't slit his wrists. He cut himself down below. Jody? Dear?" Mrs. Keller's voice is once again filled with questions. "He cut himself down there. He says he heard voices. He says he listened to the voices. Jody? He tried to cut off his testicles."

Jody tightly wraps the shoelace around her finger, stopping the flow of the blood. She watches the tip turn pink, then white. She feels a giggle tickling her tongue. She gulps and gulps. "Mrs. Keller. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry. I have to go."

"I understand, dear. Call me when you can."

"OK." She hangs up. Her ear is burning. The giggle escapes. It's a quiet sound, like a small animal. Jody unties her finger and feels blood pumping under her skin. She rubs her eyes hard, pushing them back in their sockets. She feels the softness of her lashes roll against her skin. She fingers the phone cord and reaches down to carefully disconnect it from the wall. With her hands calmly resting on her trembling knees, Jody notices the red raw skin around her fingernail.



The clock ticks away seconds. She grabs her apron and carefully locks the door behind her. Her right arm pumps back and forth as she walks. It feels like it's the only reason she can move forward. Her left arm hangs at her side -- inefficient, useless.

She did not sleep well last night. She dreamt she was swimming. The water turned to fire. She couldn't breathe the fire. Jody knows that if she told this to her doctor, he would relate it to her panic attacks. The connection is too obvious. She thinks there is something more to this dream and tucks it away in a safe place. She will hide it from the doctor like she used to hide jujubes from William. If she feels generous, she might share later.

When Jody enters the deli, she sees Sal behind the counter and the manager, Mr. Hatchet, standing beside him. "You're late." Hatchet looks into her eyes and then slowly lets his gaze trail down her body.

Sal is constantly on Jody's back about the manager. "Just tell him off," says Sal. "Just say fuck you and the horse you rode in on." Jody is incapable of uttering such phrases. She can think them, but she can never speak them.

Jody gives Hatchet no reason to think he can touch her. When the old man is near, she stands with her arms folded, her legs crossed, and her eyes heavy with reproach. She has read articles about body language. She knows that even if people aren't aware of the body as a form of communication, they subconsciously understand the language. Jody concludes that Hatchet has no subconscious.

Quickly donning her apron, she ducks behind the counter to punch in at the time clock. She can see Hatchet from the corner of her eye, moving in. *Go away.* He slides behind her and pretends to need a pen on the shelf above her head. *Go away.* Even

though there is plenty of room, he presses close. *Go away.* Jody feels one soft, ungentle hand grasp possessively at her waist. He can't believe that she doesn't want him, but knows there is no reason why she would. This makes him mean.

"Go away," Sal says in a deep voice, which cracks on the last syllable. Hatchet and Jody both turn to look at him, surprised. Sal directs his look at Jody. "Move girl, can't you see you're in his way." Jody darts from the old man's heat.

Hatchet stares at Sal and then Jody. "Don't forget to clean the bottom of the garbage," he says. "You guys left it over the weekend and now there's fucking maggots in the bottom."

Jody didn't work on the weekend, but she moves to the back where the garbage is kept. She feels triumph in Hatchet's stare and pity in Sal's as they watch her pass. Later, smelling like sour meat and Javex, Jody returns to the front of the deli. Hatchet is gone and Sal barely speaks to her.

He is punishing her because she won't sleep with him anymore. A couple days after the abortion, Jody went to his place, sat on the edge of his bed, woke him up, and told him that she thought it was best if they stopped seeing each other. She didn't even have the energy for the whole it's-not-you-it's-me spiel. She just sat on his bed and said, "No more sex." He rolled over and said that it was OK. Jody went away satisfied, even a little happy, thinking the whole thing had passed rather easily. Since then, though, Sal has intermittently treated her to cold silences and long rants. She hears his silence and his words in the same way -- indifferently.

Her four-hour shift at the deli passes neither quickly nor slowly. Sal has decided to talk to her again. He suggests drinks after work, but Jody doesn't want to go with him.

It would be too easy to tumble beer-drowsy into bed and then an hour later she would feel sick with her weakness and would have to tell Sal again how she thinks they should not sleep together. Jody would sleep with him, but she has no patience for his considerate approaches. Soft stroking hands, foot massages, wet mouth sucking at her toes, tender stares. He used to warm her side of the bed with his heat while she brushed her teeth. He has too much concern when all she desires is to be rag-dolled around Sal's apartment with beer bloating her belly and blurring her mind.

William has always had something to say about Jody's casual sexual relationships. He says Jody has low self-esteem. Jody has a problem with commitment. Jody has a self-destructive nature. Jody doesn't agree. She just likes the way men feel in the palm of her hand. Rough, smooth, solid, soft.

William and Jody kissed once. It was a long time ago. It felt incestuous. Jack Daniels forced their lips together and, after, they laughed at the whole thing like it was a tragic scene from Shakespeare or a car accident. They decided they should always be friends and never lovers.

Jody is trying hard not to think about William, but images flash through her mind. She sees William closing the door to the pizza ovens. Moving through the kitchen to the counter where all the cooking utensils are kept in large, organized drawers. Opening the compartment marked *Knives* and choosing the sharpest, straightest edge he can find. William, casually propelled to the washroom by voices. Voices in his perfect, beautiful blond head. The smell of plumbing masked by cheap rose-scented air-freshener. Voices.

She is too tired to be seen. Everyone's glance seems to bruise her skin. She escapes into the walk-in freezer at the back of the deli where she shoves her hands in her

pockets and fingers her jack knife like prayer beads. The action calms her. With the chilled air stinging her bare arms, she systematically goes through the stock of chickens. She cuts pieces from them. They are not random pieces. She's collecting the joints at the ends of the drumsticks where the foot has been severed from the leg. They are smooth round bones with an iridescent quality. She will keep them in a sack and carry them around with her like marbles as a symbol of her sympathy for William.

Jody leaves work rolling the bones in her hand. Empty thoughts carry her home. When Jody first opens the door, she is grateful. It is quiet, but the house seems busy like an empty room just after people have left it. The silence is artificial and the air is unsettled. Jody's neck tightens. Her breath stops and gathers in her throat. She looks at the phone and plugs it in without really wanting to. Of course, it rings. She knew it would.

She picks up the phone and waits.

"Hello?" William's words are slurred. "Jody?" It sounds like he's just waking up. "You there?"

"Yeah, I'm here," Jody answers softly. She's aware she's lowered her voice as if trying to coax a bird to her hand. She clears her throat and tries for a normal, every day tone. Just two friends chatting. "I talked to your mom."

"Yeah, she told me."

"How are you?"

"I'm doing OK. They got me pretty sedated. It's kind of hard to think."

"That's probably a good thing." Jody punches herself hard on the leg, wishing she could take back her words, find the perfect thing to say.

William gives a slow laugh. "I'm sure you're right."

Jody raises her fingers to her mouth and begins to chew on the skin at their tips.

"How long do you have to stay in the hospital?"

"They're not sure. They're moving me to psych tomorrow."

Jody doesn't want to press William, but she also doesn't want to seem like she's avoiding the topic. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"I don't really know. I'm a little mixed up right now. I don't really feel anything. They say I'm still in shock."

"I can believe it." She punches herself again, hard.

William laughs. "Anyway, I just wanted to call..." His voice trails off sleepily.

"I'm glad you did. You know you can any time you want. Maybe I'll try to come see you."

"That'd be good." It's taking him longer to reply, he's drifting. "I'm gonna go now."

"OK, William. Please..." But he's already gone. Jody lets her hands fall into her lap. A small drop of blood smears against her white apron. At first she thinks it's meat from the deli, but then notices how each of her fingers has been gnawed open by her teeth. To hide the damage, she folds her hands into loose fists and slides the phone into its receiver with her elbows. It begins to ring. She lets it, but it is too insistent. Her house becomes noise. She picks it up but depresses the receiver button without answering. Quickly, she dials the number to the deli and when Sal answers she freezes.

"Hello? Anybody? Is anybody there?" Jody can hear the meat slicer purring softly in the background. Sal breathes noisily.

**“It’s me,” she says.**

**“Oh, hey. What’s up?”**

**“I thought maybe we could meet later.” She gulps air like water. He takes too long to answer. “What’s wrong?” she asks.**

**“Maybe not,” Sal says hesitantly.**

**“Why?”**

**“I kind of made plans already.”**

**“Oh.” She waits for him to say he’ll change his plans. He doesn’t. “Oh,” she repeats. “OK, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”**

**“Yeah, tomorrow.”**

**“OK, bye.”**

**“Sorry.”**

**She hangs up. There is not enough air in the world. She has to leave her house.**

**The screen door bangs. Bang, banging behind her back as Jody jumps on her bike and coasts downhill towards the little man-made lake. No one is on the dock. The clouds and light rain have kept her neighbors inside. Gathering speed on her bicycle, she rides onto the pier with an ungraceful thunk. The wood is uneven and she feels her bike shaking under her. The motion makes her teeth chatter. She leans into the bike and feels her fingers burn with the pressure of her weight. She approaches the edge of the pier, rides to the end – and off.**

**She pitches forward slightly. The water hits her like a fist. When she comes up, she hears the startled loons complaining to the sky as they fly away. Her bike sinks and she turns over in the stale water to float on her back. The scum on the surface parts and**

outlines her body like a dense, dark halo. Water rolls off her cheeks. If she were crying, she might not even notice.

Jody thinks how easy it would be never to return home. Instead, she would go to Calgary and sit by William's bed. He'd tell her not to worry, assuring her that he's no crazier than she is. They'd both laugh. A laugh not from nerves. A laugh that would open their mouths and shake their bellies. Then, she would continue to see Serafina Jelena Papadopoulos Hart and when she held the baby girl in her arms, Serafina's incredibly long legs would fit comfortably in her arms and look perfect against her height.

Resting in the water, Jody sees a small plane overhead. The sound of its motor is muffled to her submerged ears, but as the plane comes nearer she can feel the water tremble. She smells burning wood, takes a deep, full breath of air and feels her throat relax. Jody closes her eyes and pictures how empty her home is. The ringing of the phone sounds hollow. In the kitchen, she sees small smooth objects tossed across the table. They are a sharp white against the deep mahogany wood. They are bones scattered in confusion with no one around to interpret their predictions.

## **Two Feet In Texas**

The most generous thing said about Pina Delmorie in the twelve years she worked for the Audio-Visual department at the university was, "At least she doesn't smell bad." For the most part she went completely unnoticed, tucked away in the back room, transferring student films to VHS cassettes. While her co-workers in the adjoining offices clung to their windows like starfish stuck to the sides of an aquarium, Pina was content to sit in her dim chamber, the light of the TV monitor tickling her face and illuminating the squint which permanently furrowed her heavy brow.

Pina loved her job. If she wasn't watching a film, she felt like she was living in one -- one of the worst kinds, an over-acted, self-conscious performance that amused no one, least of all herself. So she preferred staring at the TV screen, escaping into other people's drama. The only chore Pina did not like about her work was her rare interaction with the amateur filmmakers. Sometimes, if a job was late or the students were early, they would be sent back to her station where, much to her obvious annoyance, they'd incessantly ring the service bell and then lean heavily on the counter of the room's single small window. She resented this orifice with all her heart because it never let her fully relax, it never let her forget the outside world.

Recently, she'd been having an especially difficult time due to one student who made a point of always coming early. His name was Barker Gerber and Pina would cringe when she'd see his order on the "In" shelf. He seemed to have a talent for knowing



exactly when she'd be in the middle of his film. He'd snake his long skinny arm through the window to open the door that was always kept locked on the outside in order to avoid just this kind of intrusion. After he gained entrance to her private sanctum, he'd stand behind her and provide a running commentary of his movie. "Oh yeah, this is the scene where we had trouble with the lighting, but I came up with the idea of pinning a red sheet over the window in order to give it that sexy, ominous look." Whenever he talked about his work, his middle finger would move restlessly over his left eyebrow – stroking, petting, caressing.

Pina would purse her lips, shift her bulk forward into her seat, and focus on the screen which invariably showed the same shaky, out-of-focus images of unskilled actors experiencing some kind of angst in poorly lit, badly painted student apartments or gloomy streets covered in brown slushy snow. Since the deadline for student projects was the spring, their films were always shot during the bleakest winter months of January and February and, therefore, all contained the same desolate backgrounds.

Today, she decided to confront her problem head on and pushed his job to the front even though there was a rush order of departmental videos that was absolutely supposed to be done by noon. She quickly located his order, pried the metal film can open with her stubby fingers, and expertly aligned the "Start" frame into position. She adjusted the sound reels, checked the exposure and color, and then let it roll, making sure that at the end of the *three two one* countdown, a beep cheerfully sounded in synch. Only then would Pina reach to the corner of her desk and pick up a pack of "Bee" playing cards. This brand was her favorite because of the small, child-like Joker dancing on the back of a large bee with furry legs and bulging eyes. With deft hands, she casually

shuffled the deck over and over again, never dealing a game, never pausing in her habitual, meditative manipulation of the cards. Pina's usual frown of concentration seemed to ease slightly as she permitted herself to lean back in her chair and congratulate herself on avoiding one Mr. Barker Gerber.

"It looks like we're just in time." Barker's arm shot through the window. He popped open the door and Pina swiveled in her chair to fully face her enemy for the first time (usually she kept her back to him so as not to encourage their interaction). He towered over her from his impressive height of 6'4", came dressed in the battle gear of worn leather pants, which displayed a prominent bulge at the crotch, and was flanked by two flunkies whom she also recognized from the film studies program. Words of reproach dried up in Pina's mouth and she exhaled a bitter sigh as she turned again to face the screen and curse his name.

"Watch this scene. This is brilliant." Barker waved a bony finger at the monitor. "We shot this from the top floor of the library building. Look at the people scurrying around like ants while in the background we see what's really important, what represents the present moment. You know what I'm saying? The Now." Pina could feel the boys behind her strain forward, trying to glimpse the crucial image. Squinting hard, she could just barely make out a young man masturbating. He was shot in profile and was staring intently at a wall painted with a mural of an enormous, fluffy, white-as-snow sheep. Pina thought the man was Barker, himself, but it was hard to be certain since most of his head was hidden by a huge horned helmet.

“It’s supposed to be out-of-focus,” Barker asserted in defense of an unspoken criticism. “That’s the point,” he exclaimed. Pina could feel his followers nodding while they murmured their appreciation. “Yeah, cool, man.” “Yeah, that’s the point.”

The final scene was a slow-motion shot of clouds gliding across a flaming sky. “A pretty image,” Pina silently conceded. “As cliché as a gay hairdresser, but pretty.”

“Great, isn’t it?” Barker turned to his friends and leaned his ass on the back of her chair. Pina lurched forward to avoid contact and felt the zipper on her pants give way as her rolling stomach strained against the fastener. She looked down at the exposed pouch of pale flesh. In the cold light of the TV, her skin looked like blueberry Jell-O, the pockets of cellulite shimmering an even deeper shade. A line of dark, bristly hair trailed from her belly button to the waistband of her shiny white nylon underwear. Hastily, she folded her arms across her body.

Barker babbled on, “The people as ants metaphor has been done before but I think my take on it, as a contrast to the physical pleasure we deny ourselves every day or feel guilty about or are *made* to feel guilty about, puts a whole new slant on it.” His middle finger moved to stroke his brow.

“Yeah,” Flunkie Number One, a short guy with dyed orange hair and a pierced brow, agreed. “And the music is phat, you know, it’s all that.” He shot his arm out in front of him and dipped his hand in the air, two fingers pointing down, mock rapper style.

Flunkie Number Two piped in, “That loft space is great. Like the whole space of it really says something about what you’re trying to say.” He was as tall as Barker but had muscles built on muscles. Cigarettes were folded into the sleeve of his tight black t-shirt, which had the brand name “stoopid” emblazoned across the front.

And still Barker babbled on, “I think it’s really crucial we make a statement about society and how the expectations, no, *delusions* of the previous generation have contributed to our inability to really accept ourselves as we just live and breathe, man. As we just live and breathe.”

Pina let out a derisive snort, which she immediately regretted when the boys’ attention shifted in her direction.

“I’m sorry?” Barker said.

“You should be,” Pina thought, but just shook her head.

“No, I’d like to know what you think.” For a moment, Pina believed he sounded sincere, but she caught sight of his reflection in the monitor as he conspiratorially jabbed his friend in the ribs.

She lowered her gaze. She stroked the cards still clutched in one hand, their sharp, precise edges held strong against the anxious pressure of her thumb. She didn’t want to answer. She didn’t want to be their joke. She didn’t want to be trapped here, hiding her belly, wondering exactly what capacity of sweat her underarm shields were guaranteed to absorb. She just wanted them to leave. Better yet, disappear in a cloud of smoke. Therefore, her surprise equaled, if not surpassed, that of the boys when she finally answered, “You’re just bluffing, but you’re not doing a very good job of it.” She hazarded a glance at Barker’s reflection. The lines on the TV distorted his image. His skin quivered in the impatient light, but the weight of his stare hit the back of her head like the well-placed blow of a sledgehammer. His look said, “Just you wait.”

As Pina walked the last block to Barker Gerber's downtown apartment, she was filled with a profound regret. She regretted that her pants had split open, therefore making her feel more vulnerable and causing her to respond to a situation which she normally would have ignored. She lamented the confrontation that followed, which now seemed a surreal impossibility. Barker had replied with something like, "What do you know about bluffing?" His gaze drifted to the cards she fiercely held in her fist. And from there, with some goading from his friends, who seemed to thoroughly enjoy the exchange, she was invited to the boys' weekly poker game. A proposition thrown down like a glove.

Pina also mourned her acceptance of this duel and the closer she came to Barker's apartment, the more she regretted the very day her mother spread her legs for her father, the day she was born, the day after her birth, when her mother left her father, and the day her father sat her down to teach her how to gamble.

Her father hadn't ever been a high stakes gambler. In fact, his relatively safe method of playing the percentages could hardly be called gambling at all. But he did manage to supplement their monthly welfare checks by picking up a game or two each week. As a child, Pina was a regular sight in the back rooms of the few bars on the strip that hosted the poker games. Her father would make her an omelette for dinner, wash the greasy eggs from her face and hands, tuck her favorite stuffed bunny into her arms, and bustle her off to the games, which usually started to pick up after the supper hour. Pina would sit in a corner and gather the candy the other players always brought her. Striped, sticky treats that tinted her mouth red, purple, green.

Most of the men were laborers whose play was regular, if not consistent. One night, Tommy would go home smiling with a couple hundred in his pocket, the next he'd be counting his pennies to make sure he still had enough for cigarettes on the way home, while Johnny or Russell or Bobby gleefully fingered his winnings. Her father was the only invariable. He always came away on top, but never in a big way -- thirty, forty, fifty dollars maximum.

Besides the local players, the games also drew a kind of traveling gambler. Even though most of the men knew they'd lose to the stranger, they welcomed the challenge and excitement involved in sitting down with a "professional." Pina's father only joined these games as the dealer, preferring to keep his money close to him. "No thrill in losin,'" he'd tell Pina, giving her a friendly noogie. She'd smile as his knuckle grazed the top of her head, but she always admired the other men. To her young eyes there was a kind of nobility in their daring, even if they left the table shaking their heads in despair.

And she loved to watch the "professionals" who came in a variety of shapes, sizes, and styles but all had the same slow sweep of hand as they gathered the pot and unhurriedly stacked their winnings into piles of colored chips, looking so much like Lego castles to Pina's young eyes.

Pina, like her father and the men of her youth, was a Five Card Stud player, a game that demands bluffing skills since four of the five cards are dealt face up. Everything rests on the final card and whether you can make your opponent believe you drew a pair or you have a King in the hole that will beat the Queen he has showing.

Out of all the films Pina likes to escape into, *The Cincinnati Kid* starring Steve McQueen as a young gambler is her favorite. In the movie, the game is always Five Card

Stud. McQueen believes he can beat “The Man” and many rounds of poker ensue. During one game, a player, having just revealed the Jack as his hole card, which loses to The Man’s Queen high, angrily demands, “How in the hell did you know I didn’t have the King or the Ace?” As The Man casually rakes in his winnings, he replies, “Son, all you paid was the looking price, the lessons are extra.”

“The old bastard,” Pina mumbled as she climbed the stairs to Barker’s apartment, half cursing The Man for taking down young McQueen, half cursing her father for dealing her her first game of poker. Standing at the front door, Pina could see into Barker’s brightly lit apartment. The two other boys were already sitting at a table pulled into the center of the living room. They were sipping whiskey and laughing at something that Pina could only imagine being at her expense. When Barker entered the room, he, too, was smiling, and for a moment his gaunt face seemed almost soft. The whole scene looked like a stage setting. She could be walking into a movie, a high drama like the old westerns. When she entered the room, her boots would sound hard on the dusty wooden floor of the saloon and she’d have a thirst for beer and a craving for a game of chance.

Pina held her breath and rang the bell. Barker opened the door and looked at her with all the surprise of someone who’s just found a mewling baby on his doorstep. His head backlit, his expression once again looked remote and cruel.

“Welcome to my home, Pina,” he said, waving her in with a dramatic flourish. “You’ve met Shaughnessy and Alex.” The boys at the table both nodded, leaving Pina to wonder who was who while she shrugged her coat off her stiff shoulders. “Sit, sit.” Barker threw her coat onto a fake leather love seat and guided her to the table. Pina could feel Barker’s long skeleton fingers on her elbow. They stuck into her flesh, which jiggled

and rolled and bounced on her frame as she walked. She felt pierced by the boys' stares. She lifted her head, ignored the boys, and took in her surroundings. The room was painted a deep red, the furniture was all black and chrome, and framed Ansel Adam prints decorated the otherwise bare walls.

"Can I get you anything? Beer? Whiskey?"

"Just some water please." Pina cleared her throat, patted her chest, and sat at the table.

Barker returned, picked up the cards, and expertly shuffled them while he explained the house rules. "Dealer calls the game, we have no limit, if you're winning you have to call a round before you leave, your hand is what you call -- not what you have, and the buy-in is twenty dollars." Barker placed a book in front of Pina and opened the cover to reveal a hollowed-out space containing three twenty-dollar bills. She reached two fingers into the pocket of her snug jeans and pulled out a crumpled, slightly damp bill, which she tossed into the fake book. Barker snapped the cover shut, pushed a stack of chips toward Pina, and flipped a card in front of each player to determine who'd start the dealing. Barker's Ace beat Pina's Jack so he gathered the cards and named the game. Pina could tell that he thought this was a good sign; that he still played a superstitious game of poker, preferring to believe in good and bad luck rather than simple chance. Hidden by her bulky sweater, Pina deftly undid the top button of her jeans, leaned back in her chair, and settled into the game.



Pina had never actually played anyone other than her father. He stopped bringing her to the games when she was twelve, afraid that the newly developed breasts poking against her small t-shirts would prove to be too much temptation for one of the passing poker players. Everyone, including Pina, knew it was the act of an over-protective father since, even then, the homely girl, nubby breasts and all, did not have the power to arouse even the randiest man. Her body had already begun to spread into an indistinct shape, her heavy brows reached for each other over sunken, sullen eyes, her adolescent skin flamed with clusters of red, raw acne, and her wide bottom quivered violently when she moved.

Pina was happy to stay home, fewer eyes to follow her, rest on her with pity, never with interest. She was most content curled into the safe arms of an over-stuffed chair, comforted by the distracting sights and sounds of television. Sometimes, her father still sat her down to games of Five Card Stud. They would gamble with wooden matchsticks or toothpicks. By the time she was fifteen, she'd started winning, but retired soon after when she noticed a slight tremble in her father's usually steady hands as they flipped over card after card. When she was twenty she came out of retirement to entertain her father as he slowly died of cancer in a semi-private hospital room that depleted the meager amount of money he'd been able to stash away over the years.

By then, Pina'd already started working at the university, a job which adequately provided for her small needs, but left nothing over at the end of a pay period. In the hospital, her father had suggested she go to the games to earn a little extra. Pina had experienced an elusive feeling – pride. It was an isolated experience. Her father died the next day and Pina never played again.

Until tonight.

The cards always felt good in her hands; their solid edges fit her palm like old friend's handshake. As she shuffled, her eyes surveyed the table. They'd been playing for over three hours and she and Barker were about even but she knew enough to realize that this could change at any point in the game. The boys had proven to be adequate players. Nothing like her father, but they could hold their own. Whiskey was on her side, though. The boys drank steadily, the hard liquor bringing a flush to their cheeks and a drawl to their voices -- except Barker. He drank as much as the others and chain-smoked furiously, but his eyes remained sharp, his skin stayed a cool shade of white. He'd won the last two rounds. She needed something to change her luck. "One-eyed Jacks and the man with the axe are wild. Two draws of two." Pina usually preferred the straight poker games but she had a good feeling about this one and, unlike her father who played by numbers and percentages, she always tried to play by instinct.

Pina dealt the hand, looked at her cards, and sure enough there he was, the King of diamonds, the only man to wield an axe in place of a sword. His hair curled down, his beard curled up, and his usually stolid expression seemed almost cheerful to Pina as she regarded the pair of ladies accompanying him. In pure cinematic style, Pina imagined the King winking at her.

By the final betting round, Barker had drawn one card, the others had folded and Pina was looking at a third Queen, which made four with the wild card. She glanced at Barker who seemed pleased. "How many did you draw?" Pina asked, even though she knew it was one.

“One,” he responded, closing his cards into a neat pile which he placed in front of him. He seemed so smug, but Pina rationalized the odds of them both having four of a kind were slim.

“It’s your bet,” Pina reminded Barker, who was playing with his chips, dropping them onto the table with an annoying certainty that made Pina want to beat him bad.

“Check.”

Pina knew he was fishing to see just how powerful she thought her hand was. Now, she could bet high, but that might scare him off. She chose to try to draw him in, “Three dollars.” She threw the chips into the pot. Barker smiled.

“Three and I raise you five.” The other boys *aaahhed*.

“I see you and raise you,” Pina paused. The boy-with-the-dyed-hair’s exuberant shout of “You go girl!” faded from his lips as Pina shot a silencing look in his direction. She picked up five green chips. “Ten dollars more.”

When Barker didn’t even hesitate, Pina had one moment of doubt. “What you got?” Barker now held his cards close to his chest.

Pina discouraged the smile that tried to cross her lips as she laid her hand down. “Four Queens.”

Again the boys chorused their appreciation but Pina wasn’t paying any attention to them as she focused on Barker’s cards being laid in front of her one by one. Barker’s deep voiced growled out his hand, “Two, three, four, five, six, seven -- of spades. That’s a straight flush which beats your four of a kind any day, my friend.” For one instant his cold hand covered hers in a clammy clasp of victory before it moved to rake in the pot.

Pina sipped her water and kept her expression blank as she berated herself for being too sure. She looked at the clock, a wrought iron design that looked vaguely animal-like, perhaps due to the small claw that ticked the seconds away or the manner in which it seemed to crouch on four legs at the edge of the table. "I'm calling a round," she declared. She could see no reason to stay. She'd lost all desire to fight and craved only her easy chair and TV. She felt like McQueen at the end of *The Cincinnati Kid* – whipped.

She passed the cards to the boy on the right who called Four, Four, Four.

"Two thirds of the devil," Pina joked, trying to muster some energy for the last rounds. The boys shyly laughed, obviously not sure whether to take her seriously. Barker, too, laughed – but only when he won again.

Next they played a seven card game where all the cards are dealt down and are not looked at. "Blind Stud," Pina exclaimed, nodding as they explained the game to her. "I like Blind Stud," she said agreeably, smiling until she heard Barker mutter. "I bet you would." The boys smirked. Pina's stomach constricted and she fixed her teeth together in a determined grimace.

Barker flipped all his cards to show a high straight. He tossed a green chip in the pot. "That's worth two dollars." He put his hands behind his head and sighed. Pina noticed two wet spots the size of quarters staining his armpits and was acutely aware of her own sweat running in neat lines down the small of her back.

She started revealing her cards which first looked like a possible four of a kind as three sixes followed one after the other. She ignored their jokes about "The number of the beast" and "You'd better be careful." Focusing all her attention on the cards, she

turned them quickly, willing another six. No other six came and she'd been so intent on the four of a kind that she almost folded on her flush to the Ace. At the last minute, she declared her hand and bet big. In the end, no one could beat her and Pina stretched her short, thick arms across the table. It felt nice to pull in the chips and slowly stack them at her side.

Barker noticed her pleased expression and said with a mocking glint in his eye, "Maybe you want to stay a little longer?"

Pina stared him down – she knew when to leave. "No, this is the last game. What's it going to be?"

"Five card stud."

Pina's heart gave a little squeeze of joy.

"Twice." Barker added after a pause. The boys groaned and all joy left Pina's heart as she contemplated the idea of Two Feet in Texas, which meant that any chosen game had to be won by the same player two times. This game could change people's fortunes because the pot kept building until one lucky player took it all. It was a game of pure luck since there was no point in bluffing until the very end when only players having already won one round were left.

"And since it's our last game, let's make it interesting." Barker's sly voice drew Pina's attention back to the table and she prayed he didn't do something stupid like add wild cards to the game. He shuffled the cards deftly. The low hanging light drew dark shadows in his narrow, handsome face.

"Well?" One of the boys squirmed impatiently in his seat.

Barker cocked an eyebrow. “Well,” he began, “I propose that we up the stakes a bit.”

Pina relaxed into her chair. At this point, what did she care if she lost everything? The fleeting glimpse of pride that made her accept this invitation in the first place had long ago crawled back into its deep comfortable hole. And as far as money, it was only twenty bucks. If playing this game would get her home that much quicker, so be it. “Whatever you want, Gerber. Deal the cards.”

“Not so fast, little lady.” His voice oozed sarcasm. Pina felt like pinching him hard. “I propose...” Barker stopped shuffling. The apartment became quiet except for the refrigerator working in the background, its motor snorting and chuffing like an old dragon. Barker slowly met everyone’s gaze, his eyes resting on Pina last. “I propose we play for our souls.”

The fridge cut out. The room grew weightily silent, an empty church where nothing moves except candlelight stirred by a draft.

Pina was the first to laugh. And, as the boys joined in and she hugged her sides in glee, she thought she had never before truly laughed. Barker remained still, watching the three with a slanted grin on his face, half patronizing, half enduring.

Pina panted herself to some semblance of calm and managed to gasp, “And how do you *propose* we do that.” As the boys settled down into an uncomfortable hush, Pina noticed her heart thumped forcibly, tapping at her ribs.

“Oh it’s easy,” Barker responded quickly. “We just write our full names on paper, they all go into the pot and whoever wins, wins everyone else’s souls.”

“And then what? We have to do your laundry, take out your garbage?” Pina suddenly realised she was speaking as if Barker had already won.

He smiled, “Nothing like that.” He shuffled once more and offered the deck to the boy on his right who cut the cards. “No, it’s just the pure satisfaction of knowing I have your souls.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Is it?” he replied archly. “But that’s the game. Are you in?”

Pina waved her hand in his direction. She ignored her heart. Tap, tap. Just a movie, Paul Newman in *The Sting*, working the cards with fast fingers to reveal the Ace of spades with each new cut of the deck. “Whatever, let’s get this over with.” She straightened her spine.

Barker looked at the boys. One shrugged, the other gulped his whiskey, they all were given pens and small rectangular pieces of paper neatly torn on the sides. Pina pinned the paper to the table with her thick fingers and scratched her name on the scrap. The black ink of the fountain pen smudged on the page, but the writing clearly read *Pina Maria Delmorie*.

“I thought Pina stood for something.”

“Sometimes for Josephine, but I’m just Pina.”

Barker looked at his name proudly. “Gerber is an old Swiss-German name from the verb *gerben* which describes a process of removing the flesh from the skin of dead animals.” He placed his name in the center of the table and put a white chip on top of it. “Ante up,” he said cheerfully.

Pina narrowed her eyes. She stopped herself from pointing out that Gerber was also the name of baby food, strained carrots, soft peas, mashed bananas. Food to gum, food for the toothless.

“Are you in?” Barker’s voice brought her back.

“I’m in.” Pina placed her name by Barker’s and gently laid a chip across it. She wasn’t sure how a name scratched on scrap paper could look so exposed. The boys followed. And everyone seemed to inhale at the same time as Barker dealt the cards. When he won the first hand, everyone exhaled. Barker’s hands flew around the table seemingly independent from the rest of his body. “Bats,” Pina thought.

In the middle of the table, the colored chips mounted. The players bet high because it was the last game. But Pina also knew they were reckless because of the names that lay under the pot. “Everybody has one foot in Texas,” Barker announced, needlessly. All knew full well they had an equal chance at the riches and that the next game would be the last. Barker dealt the first hole card, which Pina restrained herself from looking at until the first up card was also dealt. “Ace high bets,” Barker said, looking at Pina who was aware of her strong start. Five Card Stud with no wild cards and no draws can often be won by a pair or even a high card.

“Ace bets three dollars,” she said.

Everyone stayed in for the next card. Pina received a Queen. “Possible straight,” announced Barker. “Possible flush,” he said to the next player. “King, two, nothing much going on there and a possible flush for the dealer. Ace still bets.”

“Another three dollars.” The boys groaned, but by this time no one would fold because everyone had already put so much money in the pot. By the next round, though,



both boys were out, leaving Pina and Barker to face each other. Barker's flush was looking good with three hearts showing. And it seemed like Pina was going for an Ace high straight. If they both drew their card, Barker's flush would beat Pina's hand. The betting had gone up to ten dollars last round. The pot looked enormous. Pina started to try to estimate how much there was and then stopped, picturing only the four small pieces of paper under the pile, smothered by the chips.

Barker slowly flipped up the last cards. Pina was now showing Ace, Queen, Jack, Ten. She fingered her hole card and looked at it again. Barker also pulled a ten -- of hearts -- looking to all the world like a flush. He didn't even glance at his hole card. In fact, he put a chip over it and relaxed into his chair. "Ace high bets." Pina peered into his face. At this point, she didn't need to add more money to the pot and was curious to see what Barker would do. "Check," she said. Barker reached into his back pocket and pulled out two twenty-dollar bills. The boys were leaning so close over the table Pina could feel their hot breath on her arms when they exhaled.

"I don't have that much with me."

"I know you're good for it."

Pina couldn't read him and had a flash that she should walk away right now, save her forty dollars for a binge in the supermarket to try to forget this miserable night. But her soul? That little piece of paper with her name inscribed on it. How could she leave that in Barker's hands? She couldn't fold, even when she peeked at her hole card, which disappointingly revealed a two. The best hand she could make was Ace high. If he didn't have the flush, that was enough, unless he had a pair under there. She studied Barker again. His middle finger wandered to his left eyebrow, stroking, petting, caressing and

suddenly she knew – this was his tell. Everyone has a tell, a nervous twitch, an uncontrollable action that surfaces only in a bluff. In the movie *Rounders*, John Malkovitch plays a Russian whose tell is the habit of splitting open Oreos. When his tell is learned, he shouts. “Meester son ov a beetch! Dat ees eet!” He hurls his cookies against the wall. “Niet. Niet. No more. No. Not tonight!” Pina knows if you learn a player’s tell, you control the game.

“Yeah, okay I’m in.”

“Fuck!” The word exploded from Barker’s mouth. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. How’d you know my flush was busted?”

The line from *Cincinnati Kid* ran across her mind -- “Son, all you paid was the looking price, the lessons are extra.” But Pina kept quiet, flipped her hole card and called her hand, “Ace high.”

“Wait a minute.” Barker leaned excitedly into the game. “You don’t have your straight?” He flipped over his hole card and said, “Ace high, too.” Hope lit his face and the boys’ were muttering “No way.” “Wow.”

But Pina tapped her King, and said, “Sorry, boys. My kicker beats his.” Then it seemed everyone let out a collective breath and Pina felt her muscles go slack. She sank deep into her chair. So tired even her hair hurt.

They wrapped up the game quickly, everyone eager to part company. Pina cashed in just over two hundred dollars. She dressed hastily and Barker closed the door behind her without a word of good-bye, his face a dark silhouette with shining, mad eyes.

Outside, the cold air splashed against Pina’s flushed skin. She walked with her head down and saw a dead bird on the sidewalk in front of her. When she arrived at it,

she realised it was only a dried, black banana. When she looked back, it had disappeared. Pina raised her head to the sky. She allowed herself a smile which first twitched at the corners of her mouth and then grew large as she shoved her hand into her pocket and fingered four small scraps of paper that felt nothing like souls, but instead were warm and damp like the softest skin.

## **The Woman Who Sat By The Sea**

She moved through the water, breathing liquid, seeing blue, Technicolor blue, with streaks of golden fish sailing by. Then, she was falling over fire, trees on fire. When she landed, she died.

Before consciousness, there was pain. An ache that began in the woman's throat like a scream. Her eyes open, she saw nothing. As she tried to breathe the scalding air, the taste of ashes touched her tongue. Then, shapes began to form and focus. The forest was alive with deadly things. Smoke curling from the tips of their branches, blackened trees stood tall like gunfighters firing pistols into the sky. Roots snaked across the ground. Steam rose everywhere, ghosts who danced and swayed and seared her eyes until she was forced to close them tightly. Darkness again. Silence. The cracking and snapping of the fire had long ago died. Though she could feel the breeze slicing her skin, the wind was mute, having no leaves or grass to rush through.

She felt the sound before she heard it. First, an itch deep within her ears. Then, the buzz of a bee. Finally, the roar of a small airplane. The woman jerked upright, as water splashed down over the charred forest. She felt her skin rip across her flesh while she watched the plane sweep upward and away. The sky was empty again. The woman looked at her skin, now clean from the soot and dirt. Red, blistered skin, tender to touch.

Smell of burnt hair. Trying to breathe, the air still too hot, she eased herself to her feet and began to walk in the direction of the disappeared plane.

She moved slowly, concentrating only on where her next step should be placed. The floor of the forest was still warm from the fire, the ash damp from the efforts of the firefighting plane. As all the brush and undergrowth had been burned away, her only obstacles were fallen branches and broken trees. Coming to a small stream, she bent to the water for a drink. It was cold and tasted like apples. She sat there for a long time, tired even though behind her she could still see the spot where she had lain. As she rested, the woman realized that her feet felt soothed from squatting in the cool mud so she scooped large handfuls of it onto her body, covering her legs, belly, breasts, arms, and, finally, her head and face.

As she caught sight of her reflection in the clear water, she struggled hard to recognize herself, to recall her name. Her questions met were met with a blank mind. When she stood again, she felt heavier but more comfortable. Much relieved in her camouflage suit, she named herself Char, gingerly jumped over the stream, and kept walking.

When night came, Char rested, filled with hunger. She consumed her sleep, fed off her dreams. A delicious tomato, ripened on the vine, heavy with juice, sliced onto fresh warm rye bread. Mangoes. Suddenly swimming -- years had come and gone, the sound of metal. Then falling.

It was not quite light, yet. The sky was a deep blue instead of black, and towards the east there was a softening. On the horizon, Char could see treetops. The sight motivated her to move from her resting spot, a shallow hole she had dug in the ground, which had sheltered her from the wind and kept her balm of mud moist and cool over her burnt skin. During the night, worms had slid over her. In the morning, she shook herself free from the earth.

The sun climbed in the sky and winked at Char with the passing of each cloud. Finally reaching the border of the burnt area, Char stepped away from the dead forest and disappeared into the lush green foliage not touched by flames. Walking through the woods provided its own challenge. The brush was thick and deep forcing Char to stop and bind her feet with dried reeds for protection. And, where the sight of the fire had been eerily silent, this new terrain offered an abundance of sounds. Leaves rustled overhead as squirrels jumped from treetop to treetop. Wind moved through the bushes. Small creatures shook the grass. But most amazing, were the thousands of small birds perched in the branches, kissing the sky with their songs.

Char's attention was soon captured by the sight of large ripe blackberries. She hurried to the bush and eagerly shoved the fruit into her mouth. Briars caught and scratched at her fingers and wrists as she plucked handfuls of berries. Her mouth filled with juice. Small seeds stuck in her gums. The taste of blood and mud mingled with the sweet wine taste of the fruit. She ate until her stomach cramped, wiped her soiled hands on the mossy forest floor, and moved on.

She kept walking until the sun sank and a full low-hanging moon shone brightly on the forest. Char wanted to continue, but she felt like she could bang her head on that

moon so she was forced to stop for the night. Digging her bed, she tried to remember the day before she awoke in the forest. She had sipped cinnamon coffee in the morning and eaten toast with butter and sugar on top. Had she gone swimming? She had moved through the water like she was standing still. It seemed as though years had come and gone. Then, she was sucked up into darkness. She could feel the walls of her confinement and pounded on these walls with clenched fists.

In the morning, Char ate green hazelnuts. She peeled the prickly skin off the nut, cracked the unripe shell with her teeth, and chewed on the soft tasteless seed inside. It took her a very long time to eat enough nuts to be satisfied.

Char could feel her cloak of mud stiffen with the warmth of the sun. Whereas the cold at night was carnivorous, biting at her flesh and eating into her sleep, the warmth of the day was benevolent, like the large rough tongue of a cow warming her skin with long slow licks. Becoming drowsy with this heat, Char shook herself awake and decided it was time to move on again. Soon, she broke through the woods and faced green sloping hills.

That night, when she stopped, she smelled the sea, and the rolling hills became water lapping against her body. She moved through the water, breathing liquid. Her hands and feet were fins.

In the day, she swam over the hills. No longer did she have to fight to take a step through bushes and trees. She could walk unhampered, but was careful to avoid the small farms and the people traveling on dirt roads. At one time, she had hoped for rescue, but

now Char didn't need the help of anyone. She was convinced that her tongue was dirt and would crumble if she were forced to talk. In fact, she felt like her whole being was the soil she wore and the ground was more kin to her than the people she glimpsed.

These people seemed unreal. Hair combed. Clothed in dresses and pants and shirts and too much stuff. Talking sounds that needn't be said. Everything was excess to Char. She could not stop. She swam over the hills -- until she stubbed her toe on a very large rock.

Char stood at the base of the very large rock and looked up, way up, to where something swayed and bumped high against the stone. A man. Two men, climbing the rock and talking about how good their sandwiches were going to taste once they got to the top. Char ducked down and scooted to the other side, watching the sun glance off the sweaty backs of the rock climbers. She felt desire as she watched the men, muscles pulling and rubbing under their skin. These were beautiful men wearing tight, brightly coloured pants that made Char think of fish. And the sea.

Past the rock, far in the distance, Char could see tall buildings, their outline hazed by the cover of smog. By tomorrow, she would reach this city, which she felt must be her home. And she still wasn't sure how she had ever left. She had been swimming, diving far under the ruckus of the waves. She had heard the sound of a motor getting louder and louder. There was darkness. The water tasted like iron.

Char stood scared and cold in the bright beautiful daylight. The rock climbers had disappeared over the edge of the cliff. The sun was high in the sky, stabbing her eyes with brilliant rays. She could hear crickets rubbing their legs together, making a song that buzzed too deeply in her ears. Her stomach was empty, but no longer rumbled with



hunger. It fed off itself. Dry grass scratched her legs, but she couldn't find the energy to move.

Char curled into herself and slept, hidden by the grass. When she opened her eyes, it was dark and lightening bugs flashed across the sky, stars close enough to touch and catch and hold in her hands like a wish.

She felt strong again and sunrise found her leaving the dirt roads of the country to follow a highway into the city. People stared at her from their cars, but they moved so quickly she was soon forgotten or thought to have been imagined. Nobody could really believe the sight of Char striding purposefully beside the highway, eyes shining white against her cloak of mud.

On entering the maze of buildings, however, people could no longer blink her away. They looked at her strangely and started to follow her through the streets.

Char walked on, not unaware of the attention, but completely unaffected. Her plan was to reach the water, hear its lullaby, and know she was finally home. As she rounded one last corner, she escaped the city and there, before her, lay the sea. Suddenly relieved, grateful, and exhausted, Char sunk to the ground and sat on the sun-drenched sand. The tide was out, the waves crested far from the boardwalk. Just a little rest, and then she was going to enter the water and let the salt waves heal her skin. She wanted to float in those waves for eternity. But first, just a little rest.

As the sun reached its peak in the sky, Char sat by the sea while people gathered and shifted behind her. They asked questions amongst themselves. Who was she? Where

did she come from? Why does she sit here? If they had asked Char she would have replied.

She had been swimming. Her hands and feet cut the waves like fins. Air strapped to her back, she moved through the water, and seemed to breathe the liquid. The sea was blue, Technicolor blue, with streaks of golden fish sailing by. She moved like she was standing still. It seemed as though years had come and gone.

She'd felt the sound before she heard it. An itch deep within her ears. A shadow, a roar, and then she was sucked up into darkness. She could feel the walls of her confinement and pounded on these walls with clenched fists. The sound of metal shook her blood. The water tasted like iron. And then she was falling over fire, trees on fire.

When she landed she died. The water around her boiled and became steam. She couldn't breathe the fire.

But no one asked a single question of the woman, herself.

The woman, herself, drowsed in the warmth of the day, glad to finally be not moving, moving, moving. The sound of the waves rushed over Char. The smell of salt and fish filled her nose. Even with her eyes closed, she could still see the water. She smiled and felt the sun dry her cloak of mud.

Later, when the people realized Char had not moved in hours, they were concerned, went home confused, and had the nagging feeling they had lost something. They patted their pockets, thinking perhaps they had forgotten a valuable trinket in their clothes. They walked from room to room, staring blankly at walls and in cupboards, trying to remember why they had stirred in the first place.

The next day, after a good night's sleep, people forgot they had seen the woman walk up and sit down on the boardwalk. They praised the city for this beautiful new statue, which would disappear under the waves with the coming of the tide and emerge newly polished each time the water retreated. The people of the city insisted a gold plaque be made where they could engrave her name or a few words describing this woman. In the end, though, nobody knew her story and the plaque remained blank. A shining, golden rectangle nestled under the figure of the woman sitting by the sea.

## The Corner of Star Star

Tory sits on the curb between a gas pump and a Co-op. Beyond the pump, she can see only an expanse of flat, open fields, but next door to the Co-op, stands one of the few other buildings in the town. An old, two-story hotel lies in disrepair, half abandoned. The top floor has collapsed into itself, yet the bar on the ground floor still keeps its door open with a sign in the window promising a *Cold Beverage Room*. Beyond the hotel stretches more level landscape. Silent yellow fields reach to the immense sky with fingers of wheat and rape.

Tory shifts her gaze to a puddle and is surprised to find more sky, as the still water perfectly mirrors a tiny portion of the blue above. She drops her hand to the ground and begins sifting through gravel, searching out the brightest pebbles. Finding a coral-coloured stone, and then a larger rock the hue of sunflowers, Tory throws these into the puddle. The shallow pool ripples, turning the reflected sky into a circle of small waves. She watches the thin clouds bend and sway in the water. Then, for a brief moment, Tory's eyes stray to her car, which is crookedly pulled off the road, looking lost in its dusty surroundings. Breathing a slow sigh, she closes her eyes and leans back.

This is the first time she has stopped since leaving her home three days ago, except for quick catnaps and pit stops for gas and fast food. While on the road, she hasn't even really spoken to anyone. Tory's last conversation was with her boss when she called to

inform him that she quit and was leaving the city as soon as she hung up. This, she did more quickly than expected since Mr. Barnes seemed intent on nastily swearing at her once he realised that there was no changing her mind. When he called her a “drab cunt,” she disengaged the phone from her ear and softly replaced it in the receiver. Outside the phone booth, commuters had just begun to file onto the freeway, jamming the lanes that led into Toronto. Tory didn’t mind – she was headed the other way.

When she opens her eyes, nothing has changed.

She looks down the road to her left. Everything is still. She then checks her right side, and again, no dust stirs on the horizon to tell of an approaching vehicle. She crosses the road to a third building, a small stucco box. Pressing her nose to the window, she sees that this spot is also vacant, but unlike the rest of the dust-covered town, it glows with cleanliness. Three round tables stand in the center of the room. Two white chairs are placed neatly at each table, their backs forming six perfect metal hearts. The floor is checkered black and white and gleams with fresh polish. Tory strains to see some kind of grime or clutter on the row of glass counters lining the far wall, but she can find no evidence of dirt. Above the cash register, a large sign written in scrolling, cherry red print proudly proclaims *Stella Estrela*. Tory steps back from the window and sees a note on the door. The letters, first scribbled in pencil and later darkly outlined by a black felt marker, simply read *Closed*.

She imagines that this is the sign they will hang off her desk at General Life Insurance. *Closed*. But she knows this is unrealistic, that Mr. Barnes will have a temp in her place by the end of the first coffee break. She knows that she will not

be missed, except, perhaps, by Heidi, her only friend at the insurance agency. But Heidi would understand Tory's flight. She would even applaud it. Heidi is all irreverence, a small woman who wears business power suits and appears serious but who always took the time to joke with Tory.

Heidi used to throw disparaging glances in Mr. Barnes' direction where he sat in his office with his feet up on his desk, his generous bulk teetering precariously on the back two legs of his chair. "Did you have to help him get his feet up?" Heidi whispered confidentially to Tory, making her feel just a little daring. Heidi's mocking e-mail messages had the same effect. Tory always read them quickly with a knot in her belly, like when she passed notes in grade school. She made sure to delete this correspondence, but printed and saved a copy of her favorite, a picture of Mr. Barnes and his other two partners in a clinch at the golf club. The three men were holding up the ten pounds of ribs they just won in the company's annual tournament. They were sweating and their noses were red from a sunburn, excess scotch, or both. Over the picture, Heidi had written *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, on the bottom, *Testicle Festival - Have a Ball!* Tory suddenly realises that she will miss Heidi.

She will not, however, miss work, her parents, or the mice.

She dusts off her jeans and continues exploring her surroundings. Moving away from the bakery, and she stands on the corner where a smaller road joins the town's main street, forming a T-intersection. A large, dented stop sign stands by the curb with the word *NO* spray-painted across it in black.

She smiles at the sign and happily notices that the graffiti is quite old. In her father's town, this kind of vandalism would be hastily cleaned up, especially on a city sign. Tory's father is the mayor of one of the numerous small communities on the fringe of Toronto. He also has a medical practice which Tory's mother helps run. Her father is a small man with large hands and a loud voice. Her mother is too skinny. When Tory talks with her mother, she always notices that the blue veins around the older woman's eyes are the exact pale shade of her irises. When Tory listens to her father, she only notices the floor.

Tory knows that she has not particularly made her parents proud, but she has never really caused them any trouble either. Until very recently, she maintained a safe, static life in which her parents never had to worry about her, never had to even really give her a second thought.

Tory had worked for General Life since she was eighteen and lived in the same apartment since she was twenty. This winter she had turned thirty and as a present to herself, she bought the Malibu. To celebrate, Heidi had come over one night with four tall, narrow bottles of sparkling Italian wine. They toasted each other and drank until they were silly. Every once in a while, they would raise their glasses to the old station wagon parked outside, a long black beast squatting in the snow bank. After Heidi left, Tory fell into a dead sleep in front of the TV and didn't wake until one o'clock the next day. The first thing she did as a thirty-year-old was to eagerly look out the window at her car. She was surprised to find it brightly painted in big fat letters and little cartoon designs. "Heidi," she thought fondly and then ran to her bathroom to throw up.

She suffered a day long hangover, which actually helped her get through supper with her parents. The headache numbed their words and her muscles were too tired to become tense. She smiled when she opened their first gift, a card with a one hundred dollar Canada Savings Bond enclosed. She winced when they gave her their second present, a bright blue budgie in a shiny gold cage. She had asked them for a dog, but she knew they thought she couldn't handle the responsibility.

"You don't even have to walk it." Her mother handed her a stack of pamphlets explaining how to care for the new pet. "The man at the store said they are extremely easy to keep. Food and water, of course. Every day. And clean the cage once a week. No fuss. No shedding." Tory kissed her parents goodnight and took the bird home on the bus. She didn't tell them about her car.

Tory takes another brief glance at the Malibu, before she crosses the street to the fourth and final building in the town. *Hometown Confectionery* is etched into the door and painted brown. The store also houses a restaurant that boasts *Largest and best steak in the west*. Reaching the door, she tugs at its heavy wood and glass weight. A bell chimes.

She is greeted by the stinging citrus smell of an orange peel freshly dug into and looks towards the corner of the store where a small child holds a huge fruit in his hands. The boy is dressed in cotton shorts and sneakers. His bare, rounded belly protrudes over his waistband. Juice runs down his arms and smears a clean path around his dirty mouth. A woman rushes over. "Joshua, I told you to wait till we got home," she fusses. "Now the car will get all sticky." She bustles the boy out the door past Tory, briefly throwing a smile in her direction.



Their departure leaves only three people in the store. A man sits behind the counter. His black eyebrows grow thickly together across his forehead, a startling contrast against his pale skin and white hair. He wears a navy blue apron tied at his waist. He grunts a reply to Tory's request for "A coffee please" and groans his way out of his chair, shuffling into the kitchen.

He reminds Tory of her landlord, another gruff old man who for years hardly even acknowledged her existence in his building. When she saw the first mouse, she didn't tell her landlord for two reasons: she had hoped the problem would just go away and she wasn't good at making demands.

Also, Heidi had told her a story about how'd she'd kept a mouse in one of her plants. She'd built a small ladder from Popsicle sticks to aid the tiny animal into its new home. She'd named the mouse Sheila. Tory had thought that she, too, could accommodate such a small cute creature but then one mouse became two and three and four. Soon, she was endlessly cleaning their shit from her bookcase and desk and cupboards. The only room they hadn't invaded was her bedroom. But even there, she could hear the mice scratching and moving in the walls.

Still, she had preferred to try to solve the problem herself.

She went to the hardware store by her home, an organized place with polished faucets and glistening garden tools. As she contemplated her choices, live traps, poison, sticky pads, she imagined that this must be what it was like to pre-meditate a murder. She bought a box of blue pellets that promised to not only kill the mice, but also shrivel their corpses into little tiny puffs of dust. She hadn't felt good about her decision and had felt even more guilty as she distributed the poison

around her home. The next morning, she squirmed as she sat at the kitchen table and watched the mice brave daylight to hungrily feed at the deadly buffet.

Tory shakes her head to dispel this image from her mind as she walks past shelves stocked with Campbell's soup and paper towels to the back of the room where the seating of the restaurant consists of wooden picnic tables. She joins the two other people in the restaurant, sitting beside a small elderly lady with yellowed hair. The woman's shoulders curve inward under a pink cardigan, and her freckled hand darts quickly to the toast and jam on her plate.

"Morning," she acknowledges Tory.

"How was your night?" questions the man sitting opposite them. His face is incredibly tanned and, though much younger than the woman, his skin is thickly textured with laugh lines and wrinkles. Around the collar of his T-shirt, which says *I like my beer cold and my women hot*, is the thinnest line of pale, vulnerable-looking flesh.

"It was pretty long. Quite the dump of rain you had here," Tory answers.

"Yeah, dammit, we'll be waiting another day for the wheat to dry out before we can bring it in. Last year, we didn't get started till October. And even then, I had to leave one field out."

"That's what you have. Wheat?"

"Nope, mostly it's canola now, which is a good thing 'cause it's not so fussy whether it's dry or not. Canola. That's what everyone wants."

"Less cholesterol in canola oil," murmurs the woman. A few dry toast crumbs fall from her mouth as she talks.

“I heard that our cholesterol level is all controlled genetically,” offers Tory, “and what we eat can only affect the levels minimally. So this whole cholesterol craze is just something else cooked up by food corporations to raise sales and give people something new to buy.”

“Yep.” The man nods his head, the bill of his baseball cap ducking up and down in agreement. “I like my steak,” he adds. The three fall silent contemplating cholesterol.

At General Life, if clients’ cholesterol levels went up, so did their premiums. That was Mr. Barnes’ idea. He also had the idea that letting employees wear jeans on Friday would increase morale and he designed a t-shirt with G.L.I. Inc. written ever so discreetly across the left breast. He bullied the employees into purchasing the polo shirts and then, not even a month later, circulated a memo banning the tops, explaining that Jeans Day was cancelled since so much of their outside business was conducted on Fridays. Tory had used the shirt to wipe out the bottom of her budgie’s cage.

Tory felt no affinity for the bird. The whole winter had passed, spring too, and she hadn’t even named it. One night, she discovered the reason her house was still infested by mice. She had been on the phone with her mother who was calling to remind Tory about her yearly dental check-up. Even though Tory’s dentist had not mailed anything to her parents’ address in years, her mother still managed to know exactly when Tory should be getting her teeth examined and clean. She also managed to make Tory feel incapable of keeping the appointment herself.

Although Tory had not done one major irresponsible thing in her life, her parents regarded her as completely inept.

Tory hadn't mentioned her mice problem to her parents, especially considering her mother's intense fear of any kind of rodent, so when Tory heard a mouse in the living room she didn't even pause in the conversation with her mother. She walked to the room and flicked on the lamp. Usually, the mice scattered with bright lights. This time nothing happened. The budgie who was covered for the night made a small peep and Tory could still hear something in the corner by the bird's cage. She walked warily towards the cage all the while keeping up a coherent stream of "Yes, mom," "No, mom," and "I know, mom." As she reached the budgie, she could hear rustling in the cage. She slowly stretched out a hand to give it a quick tap and two mice dropped down onto the ground.

She exhaled sharply.

"What?" her mother demanded. "Tory?"

Tory lifted the cover to the cage and four more mice hung from the material.

She screamed. These mice also tumbled to the floor, knocking against Tory's legs as they fell. She couldn't catch her breath. Her heart squeezed tight.

Her mother insisted, "Tory? What? What's happening?"

"Nothing, mom. Really, I just stubbed my toe. I've got to go now, sorry. Bye." She hung up and sat on the couch. Her skin crawled. She nervously scanned the room for any sign of mice. The budgie looked down at her and she suddenly knew the reason the mice kept coming despite the poison was because they were gorging themselves on the birdseed. Tory looked up at the budgie and felt awful.

“You poor thing,” she crooned and dipped her fingers in between the bars of the cage. The budgie bit her and Tory felt even more awful. That was the night she named her bird. Spike. The next day, Tory finally asked her landlord for help. He complained about the expense of an exterminator and reluctantly supplied her with traps, sticky pads, and rat poison -- all the choices Tory had first rejected at the hardware store.

She filled the saucers with the larger pellets of rat poison and set the traps with peanut butter and cheese as bait. Over night, she caught three mice. She was surprised how peacefully she'd slept through the sound of the traps snapping throughout her apartment.

A small shiver runs up Tory's spine as the owner of the store plunks down a cup and saucer in front of her. The noise sounds especially loud in the quiet dusty air of the store.

Her “Thanks” receives another grunt in reply. The pink cardigan woman starts to chew again. Loud, wet sounds. Feet shift under the table. Tory searches her mind for something to say. She shapes her mouth into a smile and points it in the woman's direction. “Did you hear about that scuba diver they found in the forest fire?”

“I don't think so, but I only watch the local news.”

“Well, apparently there was a huge forest fire in Montana somewhere. After the fire was out, a crew came to see what kind of damage had been done and they found a guy in the middle of the burned out woods. He was dead, but the weird thing was -- he was dressed in full scuba gear.”

“There’s a guy a long way from home.” The man leans back with his arms crossed.

“How’d that happen?” The woman leans forward over her plate.

“Well, my uncle’s friend is a ranger down there. He said they figured the fire-fighting plane had scooped the guy up where he was diving in a nearby lake. Nobody realized what had happened, so the plane carried him out to the woods and dropped him with the water over the fire.”

“Shit, that’s no death I’d wish on anyone. What about that story, Fred?” The man calls over to the storeowner who slowly turns the page of a newspaper.

“Mmmhmm,” he says without glancing up.

“I’m not actually too sure if it’s a true story,” Tory adds. “Someone told me it’s an urban myth.”

“You want a myth? Did you hear about the dinosaur bones they found down south of here?”

“That’s no myth,” the woman shakes her head at Tory. “It is some story, though. That little town was almost as small as this one. Probably never had five hundred people drive through there in ten years, and now it’s got five hundred tourists traipsing through there every day.”

“You know what the dinosaurs died of, don’t you?” the man questions.

“No.”

“Boredom.” The man guffaws. Tory gives a polite chuckle. “Pretty soon we’ll be the damned dinosaurs the way things are going round here,” he predicts.

“It was pretty quiet out there last night, and dark.”

The woman munches up her last piece of toast. “Nobody’s left here but us old folks and we go to bed early. Habit I suppose. Everyone else is broke and had to leave town, or going broke.”

“That’s why the town’s called Banksend,” jokes the man.

At the counter, the owner stands and disappears into the kitchen.

“Is that what happened at the bakery next door?”

The owner reappears with a pot. Tory gratefully accepts more coffee. It is so weak, a dash of sugar makes it taste sweet as cotton candy. The woman covers the top of her cup with a steady hand. A crumpled, crooked, steady hand. The man rises and throws some change on the table. “That’s it for me, got to get back to work to pay for all the damned coffee I drink here.” As he reaches the door, it opens, ringing in another person. “He’s for you,” the man says to Tory.

“Hi,” she greets the young guy who had just entered.

He, too, is suntanned, wears a plaid short-sleeved shirt, and has curly red hair that stretches into incredibly long sideburns. He looks at her, and then checks a sheet of paper he holds in his hands “Tory?”

“Yes, that’s me. I’ll be right out.”

When she’d left Toronto, there were so many things she couldn’t even imagine happening to her. Tory used to spend hours at work, blankly processing insurance policies, and fantasizing about driving across the country to see the ocean. But her dreams were never detailed, they were vague feelings of freedom and excitement. She certainly never imagined her old Malibu station wagon breaking down in the middle of the prairies, and if she had, she probably would

have nervously thought of it as an insurmountable problem, an overwhelming inconvenience. But the reality was quite different.

It had been dark, really very dark when she first heard the clanking sounds in the front under her passenger side. The Malibu started to lurch forward, then sputter. It stalled just as she entered Banksend, so she coasted the wagon off the road by the bakery. She took a quick look out the car's window and saw that the town was completely shut down for the night so she pulled out her down comforter and fell into peaceful sleep with her head on the armrest and her knees tucked securely under the steering wheel. She woke early with the sun warming the car through the windshield, quickly rose, and called the nearest garage.

Tory watches the mechanic leave the store and moves to the cash, holding out a five-dollar bill. "Tory, huh?" The owner looks at her and she finally finds a smile in his eyes.

Shrugging she explains, "My father is a Conservative."

As he hands Tory her change, the man sees her eyes linger on his missing finger. "I used to like to eat raw meat when I was a boy. Stuck my hand in the grinder when my big brother wasn't looking and he took it right off." Tory searches his face for a pained expression, but all she finds is laughter. She smiles, leaves the counter, and waves good-bye to the woman whose call of "good luck" follows her out the door.

The young guy is waiting for her outside, smoking a cigarette. "It's just over there," Tory says, pointing to the old Malibu station wagon pulled off the road by



the bakery. "I guess it wasn't too hard to miss," she adds, noticing the tow truck already parked in front of it.

"Yep, they told me you broke down in front of Stella Estrela."

"What does that mean anyway?"

"Someone told me it's Star Star in Portuguese and Italian. Or Spanish. I can't remember exactly."

"Star Star."

"Now I got one for you," he gestures to the paint job on the car. In bright, kindergarten lettering, *ZOB* was painted on one side, and *MOVE IT* was scrawled across the other.

"Well, mostly it was just my friend having fun before I left. At first she just liked those letters, then later she decided that it meant *Zen Order of Buddhists Move It*." Tory gives a shrug to his raised eyebrows. "I don't know."

"Where you headed?" he asks, shaking his head.

"West."

"Where West?"

"I don't know."

"Oh."

"I think it's the starter," Tory suggests as the young guy opens the hood of the car and asks her to try turning over the engine.

"Hmmm. Well, it ain't driving anywhere like this," he concludes and starts hooking it up to the tow truck. Tory jumps in the front seat with him and shifts around to watch her car as they pull out of town. As she turns, she notices a woman

standing in the doorway of the bakery watching her departure. Dark hair frames a pale face. Her features are like a line drawing, a stark sketch of a person standing in an empty carnival café. In her hands, she holds a rag and a bottle of bright blue window cleaner. Her black eyes look through Tory, their focus fixed far on the horizon. She stands perfectly placed within the middle of the doorframe. Across her chest, the sign on the door still reads *Closed*.

As the tow truck lurches forward, Tory tries to keep the woman in focus, but all she can see is the Malibu bumping along behind them. She shifts again to look out the windshield. She hadn't noticed in the dark last night, but on this road, it seems possible to drive straight into the sky, to become lost in it. Floating, fighting desperately to grasp something, but finding only air, great handfuls of air.

## **Cold Sleep**

Caroline is awake and immediately aware that she does not want to be. She shifts under covers and pulls the bottom sheet over her head, just covering her eyes, leaving her nose and mouth free to breath the cool air of the room. She can't sleep with something over her mouth; doesn't like the smothering hot air, air that she has breathed before, damp, thick, prison air. Even when she goes down on her husband, David, she pushes the covers to the bottom of the bed, ignoring his complaints of cold, until, as she works her mouth, wet, sliding, swirling up and down, his objections fall silent.

Caroline can hear him moving in the kitchen, as he tries to get his breakfast and lunch together without disturbing her. Sometimes she wishes he would stop being so quiet and solicitous, stop tip-toeing around her in distant, hesitant circles. She wishes he would fling the bedroom door open, bang his coffee cup against the brass rails of the bed's headboard, and throw great handfuls of snow in her face. The dusty snow would take an instant to melt against her sleepy skin, but then its wet cold would soak into her dry thoughts and she would be truly awake for the first time in months. As she hears the front door close carefully behind her husband, Caroline curls her legs up close to her chest, tucks the quilt between her legs, and pushes herself back down into that soft secret place of sleep.

Caroline has stopped dreaming. David tells her that, of course she still has dreams, she just can't remember them right now. Caroline has always remembered her

dreams, she uses them as road maps, following their thin black lines across her waking day. It was a dream that told her she should marry David. He had proposed over dinner at her favorite Italian restaurant, Chianti's. She went there for the salad. Crisp dark lettuce, finely chopped onions, black olives, and flowers of green pepper tossed in a black pepper vinaigrette that Caroline tried and tried to reproduce at home, but to no avail. When she asked the owner for the recipe, he avoided answering her. "But then we wouldn't see you anymore, Lina." And while she smiled politely, she felt a sharp stab of anger with the realization that he would never tell her.

It was then that David shifted in his chair, cleared his throat, and blurted out his proposal. A fine line of sweat dotted his hairline, and his face glowed red against his pale blond hair. Caroline could feel his long legs shaking under the table in a frantic, rhythmic twitch. She said "Yes," but with no conviction. She seldom made a decision without sleeping on it, but as she looked at David slumped happily in his chair, she knew there was no other option at the moment. As Caroline returned his smile, she felt a piece of cracked pepper that was lodged between her teeth scrape against her lips. After dinner, David left her at the door to her apartment, saying shyly that maybe they should stop sleeping with each other until the wedding. As he turned his back, she closed the door and immediately called home, where no one had been surprised. David was a friend of both her father and brother from the RCMP and everyone had been aware of his proposal before he made it. Caroline slept deeply that night dreaming of a desert. She stood alone in the dry, barren land, and was frightened until she saw a soft face in the glow of the round moon. She lay on the ground, and

moved her arms and legs. When she stood again, she looked down to see the angel she had engraved in the sand.

When Caroline awakes a second time, it is dark and silent. She lies in bed, trying to imagine the sounds of a city. The splash of cars passing by her window on rainy days, the double honk of fire trucks moving slowly through traffic, the dull electric voices of her neighbor's television through the thin apartment walls. She throws the covers off her hot body and slips her feet into David's thick, plaid slippers. Moving through the small house, she flicks lights on in every room. As she makes coffee, she can see her face reflected in the glass of the kitchen window. Her hair is tangled and fuzzy on top. David asked her if she wanted him to wash it for her last night. She was confused at first, imagining removing her hair like a fur rug and handing it to David to put in the machine. When she understood what he meant, she just smiled vaguely, shook her head, and thought, *why?*

Caroline hears a snowmobile in the distance and sees a headlight shining round and small in the dark. Sitting at the table with coffee, she listens to the machine move across the tundra, a steady noise going in the direction of the airstrip. The store must have ordered supplies from Inuvik. When Caroline first came to Sachs Harbour, these were the days she most looked forward to, the arrival of fresh food. David had applied for a transfer before they were married. The arrangements were confirmed quickly and Caroline found herself honeymooning in the north at her husband's new post. They had arrived in August, when the days were still long, the sun a small,

burning ball suspended high in the immense sky. They had missed the twenty-four hour days and Caroline gratefully learned that they had also missed the early spring bugs.

Caroline had agreed to go north with David because it seemed both practical, what with the large salary he was offered, and an adventure. She was tired of working twelve-hour shifts at the hospital. Even while studying to be a lab tech, she had known she would not last long. She'd entered the program out of high school after taking a career placement test provided by the counseling department. The results had suggested pastry chef or laboratory technician. Since her parents wanted her to go to university, the first option was quickly dismissed.

After four years, Caroline discovered that she liked seeing blood magnified under microscopes, a community of cellular action, but she hated collecting blood from the patients. Her days and nights filled with endless rounds of pressing flesh and more flesh to find veins, easing in cool metal needles, and holding tubes of thick liquid still warm against her hand. So when David proposed his plan, explaining that the contracts were only for a year, so they would not be committed to a long stay and, that even at the end of one year, they would have saved enough for a down payment on a house, Caroline had nodded with an encouraging smile.

Caroline knew nothing of Sachs Harbour when she agreed. After she said yes, the RCMP arranged a meeting with another wife who had lived in the north a few years ago. She met the woman in the cafeteria of the west end station and drank instant cappuccinos dispensed from a machine into plastic cups. The woman said she didn't know what Sachs Harbour was like, but that Inuvik wasn't so bad. Next to

Yellowknife, it was the largest community in the northwest, so there was always fresh food and activity in the town even as the days became shorter and darker. Caroline nodded politely and watched the skin of the woman's neck fold over itself in long horizontal creases, wobbling slightly when the woman laughed. And the woman laughed, talking on and on about how the people up north were real funny and had the fattest babies and at least there wasn't much danger for the Mounties, breaking up the odd fight or so when the Natives were pissed, but mostly just standing in as figureheads.

David, too, said his job would be easy. In Inuvik, there were more problems. When the sun went away, people got restless, killing time by draining bottles of harsh homemade liquor. In the bars, the boys would buy beers and whiskey, but almost everyone also drank the white moonshine, which was cheap and always available. David explained that Sachs Harbour was a dry community so he wouldn't even be faced with the challenge of controlling bar fights. Caroline carefully read the pamphlets and books the Mounties had given her to prepare her for the trip and discovered that many of the communities were dry, as the natives seemed to be physically predisposed to alcohol addiction. They had never tasted it before the appearance of white explorers. Caroline also studied how to arrive at her new home in a perfectly politically correct fashion. The pamphlet cautioned that the term "Eskimo" was a name the natives resented because it came from the white man and meant "meat-eater." Learning these hints, Caroline tried to erase all misconceptions and bigotry from her mind. She imagined herself debarking the plane and greeting her new

Inuit friends with smiles and kisses and all the right language that would convey her open-mindedness and acceptance of their culture.

When David and Caroline arrived, the narrow gravel landing strip was empty except for a few boys, running beside the plane throwing dry dirt into the propellers. She and David had been flown from the city on a Hercules C-130 transport plane, which belonged to the Canadian army. It was bringing a communications truck to Sachs Harbour so the RCMP had arranged the lift with the army and Caroline found herself sitting in the back of a flying warehouse for six hours. She was strapped into a foldable seat made of netting with the truck only a few inches from her knees. David moved around a lot, talking to the army guys, and going up into the cockpit. Caroline didn't want to be a nuisance so she remained seated, staring into the side of the tall box of the green army truck with her matching beige and burgundy luggage set lined up by her feet.

Caroline had always been slightly claustrophobic. She refused rides with friends when she knew she would end up in the back of a two-door Honda Civic. Stepping onto an elevator, she would have to remind herself that the trip was short, that she would be off in no time, that there was no reason to panic. She had always preferred to be on top when she and David made love. She found the missionary position fine as long as they were moving and panting and grinding and loving but when they came and David collapsed heavily on her chest and legs, pinning her to the bed, she found it difficult to control the urge to squirm out from underneath him as quickly as possible.



When David strapped her into the seat on the transport plane she immediately started going through a breathing technique she had learned from a book about yoga she had bought at a garage sale. On the cover a slim woman sat cross-legged in a red body suit and white leotards. Her smile stretched across her face like a toothpaste ad. Caroline and David had laughed at the woman's dated feathered hairdo, but it was not long before Caroline could recite the description of every breathing exercise in the book. She would see the words against her closed eyelids as she forced herself to take in air. And let go.

*The Cleansing Breath: purifies the bloodstream. Inhale deeply. Whack your abdomen in forcefully to expel air. The sensation should be one of having been punched in the stomach.*

Caroline listens to the snowmobile retreat and moves to her living room, once again surrounded by silence. She sits on the couch, tucks her feet under her bum, and sips coffee, staring blank-eyed into the empty television screen. When they first arrived, Caroline was impressed by the new home provided for them by the Mounties. The front door opened into a small, cozy kitchen done in blond wood with an island in the middle to make more counter space. In the living room, a floral print couch and chairs circled a huge TV set. Two fat glass lamps sat on side tables by each chair and a matching wooden coffee table rested in front of the couch. Immediately upon entering the room, Caroline felt something familiar tug at her memory and then she recalled that she had admired the exact same room in the Sear's Spring catalogue. Even the

layout was the same. The only thing that was different was the size of the television -- theirs was definitely bigger. The bathroom was next to the one closet in the house and was approximately the same size. For the first week, every time David went to wash his hands in the sink, his broad shoulders would scrape against the wall of the shower stall and he would burn his forehead on the low hanging light bulb. He would curse, she would laugh, they would kiss.

In the days following her arrival, Caroline discovered that most of the houses in the hamlet were furnished the same way. When David told her they were going to visit the mayor's house, she had fixed her hair and put on her light cotton dress which had a top like a sailor's suit and was David's favorite. She wore her navy blue pumps to match. Leaving their house, she soon could hear the gentle sound of waves, and as they mounted a small hill, the ocean came into view. It was a cloudy day, the water looked flat and grey, shimmering slightly as the waves crested close to the shore. At the foot of the hill lay the town. Immediately, Caroline saw just how small it was, maybe fifty houses arranged in rows along a few hard-packed dirt roads. Certainly fewer than the five hundred residents proclaimed in her information pamphlets. When Caroline increased her pace to get a better look, she twisted her foot in a huge pothole. By the time they had reached the mayor's house, her ankle was swollen and throbbing over the rim of her shoe.

The mayor's house was like all the buildings in the hamlet. Few windows broke up the straight lines of wooden siding and it was raised on stilts to protect the structure from the constant shifting of the ground as it froze and melted and froze again. The mayor's home was painted a new bright red, though, as opposed to most of

the faded, peeling paint, which covered the other houses. David carried Caroline up the stairs and didn't even have a chance to knock before a young boy opened the door. The child seemed to know David. He smiled a big-cheeked greeting and led them through a boot room filled with shoes and coats scattered everywhere.

In the living room, Caroline was surprised to see a TV bigger than theirs blasting out a MuchMusic program with five kids watching a video, fully entranced. As David paused to greet everyone over the blare of the music, Caroline stared at the screen. A man with long, dark hair and heavy white make-up lurched in closely to the camera and Caroline could see the fine lines of his mouth cracking under his red lipstick. She could catch only fragments of the lyrics he was screaming. *The beautiful people, the beautiful people. Can't see the forest for the trees. Can't smell your own shit on your knees.* "Marilyn Manson," an older girl told Caroline. She had long dark hair and was wearing an intricately beaded vest designed with pictures of polar bears and the moon. As the girl spoke, Caroline could see a perfectly round silver stud piercing her tongue. A younger boy proudly informed Caroline that they were the first family to get over twenty channels. Now, it seemed that every house had a satellite dish, clusters of large silver mushrooms stretching to touch the sky. As they left the front room, Caroline could just barely hear the girl's voice singing softly with the TV. *Hey you, what do you see? Something beautiful and something free.*

A woman called to them from the kitchen. David immediately went to the freezer for ice. Caroline sat on the edge of the chair indicated to her by the fast sweeping motion of the mayor's hand. The woman facing Caroline was young and attractive. She wore her dark thick hair plaited in the back, exposing high cheekbones

in a soft, round face. Noticing Caroline's surprise, the woman immediately launched into a comfortable monologue of how, at thirty-three years old, she was the youngest mayor to be elected and certainly the first female politician. She explained that her victory was due, in part, to the fact that her family was well respected, her father being one of the oldest rangers in the north. David added that the rangers were volunteers who helped the regular police force, often acting as liaisons between locals and law officers. He soon left the women to talk and Caroline sat for an hour listening to the mayor, gulping down her culture shock with coffee.

She learned that the hamlet had a history of plane crashes because the airstrip was so rough. In fact, only a few months before Caroline's arrival, a small Cessna had gone down in the lake previously used for water and five people were killed including three from Sachs Harbour. The mayor was trying to get the territorial government to fund the construction of a five-kilometer road to another lake because the residents were refusing to drink the water their relatives had drowned in. Caroline tried to think of this visit as just a typical coffee chat, but as the mayor talked, she cleaned the carcass of a caribou, strewing meat and skin and bones across the table. Caroline sat with ice packed on her ankle and a stiff smile fixed on her face. When David dropped her off home with a kiss and a promise to return early from work, Caroline sat in her kitchen. Absentmindedly rubbing her hand where tiny spots of blood from the caribou had sprayed her, she tried to focus on her breathing. *Whoosh hiss whoosh hiss.*

*The Cooling Breath: has a calming effect on the body. Form your tongue into a trough. Inhale air through this trough with a hissing sound. Exhale.*

*Whoosh hiss whoosh hiss.*

As the summer passed and the days became shorter, Caroline continued to visit the mayor. They would sometimes grocery shop together. Caroline would often help the other woman home with her bags, since the mayor carried enough food for her husband and five children while toting her youngest in a sling on her back. Caroline quickly noted that the babies were always being carried by someone, the mother, a grandparent or one of the older children. The mayor explained that most people kept close physical contact with their children, especially during the first two years. Caroline remembered smiling when she passed the daycare by her apartment in Edmonton where workers took the children for walks, stringing them together with plastic leashes and dressing them in orange, high-visibility vests.

Sometimes the mayor would have time for a coffee in the restaurant attached to the Co-op, but usually Caroline went there alone. The room was small, sparsely furnished with plastic outdoor patio furniture, and was never empty. People sat in groups of three or four and all greeted Caroline with a friendly hello when she entered. She would bring a book with her and try to read, but would always end up staring blankly at the pages and eavesdropping on conversations. At the coffee shop, she learned that John's new ski-doo had trouble with its starter, that Beverly's boy had to leave Sachs Harbour in September to continue his schooling in Inuvik at the age of thirteen, and that the price of mandarin oranges at Christmas would be thirty dollars

for a box of two dozen. As she listened, Caroline was always careful to turn the pages of her book regularly, even though she had not read one word.

Caroline also occasionally dropped in at the recreation center to talk to the only other non-native who had lived in the hamlet for eight years. He told her how the recreation center was needed especially in the winter months when everyone, even people born and raised in the north, became depressed. And it was this man who corrected her when she called the natives Inuit, saying they all referred to themselves as Eskimo and thought of the Inuit as a different people who lived in the northeast. And when Caroline went to the mayor to confirm this, the woman smiled and said that the term really meant *raw* meat eater and since she, herself, liked to chew the tender morsels of caribou right off the bone, she had no objections to the word. She smiled broadly and pointed to her mother sitting quietly in the corner of the kitchen. Deep lines creased every inch of the old woman's skin. Her face was a face that could only belong to the moon. She pulled back her lips in a toothless grin and showed Caroline the morsel of fish stuck between her gums. In the north, the elderly sucked on frozen raw Arctic Char like sweet hard candy. Caroline smiled back, went home, and threw out all the RCMP pamphlets, deciding that she knew nothing of this place, except it was October and it was starting to get cold.

Wrapped in the blue and pink afghan her mother had sent her for Christmas, Caroline puts her coffee mug on the table and snuggles into the couch. She has stopped going to the Co-op. She sends David for groceries and with messages to

the mayor saying that she is fine, but doesn't feel like visiting. It is very cold, after all. The last time she left her house it was -60 C with the wind chill factor. She put on a layer of thermal underwear, two sweaters and David's extra ski-doo suit. She wore heavy boots, thick mittens, and covered her head with a Balaclava. The frigid air stung her eyes and she moved slowly against the strong wind. Before reaching the town, she met a group of young boys who laughed at her bulky attire. Caroline liked the boys, even though they were often loud and too energetic. She preferred the girls who would stand quietly beside her and sneak their small warm hands into hers. As the boys left, one of them pushed her. They ran off when Caroline fell, leaving her flat on her back staring at the sky through two woolen peepholes. She struggled to get up, but the clothes restricted her movements. When she finally was able to rise to her feet, she was wet with sweat. She turned around and went directly home without buying the apples she'd been craving when she left her house.

She hasn't left since and has lost all track of time. Sometimes David threatens to carry her outside and throw her in a snow bank. Lately, he has been suggesting she return home for a visit, but he, too, is paralyzed by her languor.

She constantly feels drowsy. It seems no amount of caffeine can give her that edge of true wakefulness that she desires. Lowering her head, Caroline listens to the silence. She feels the blood pumping at the base of her throat. The coffee maker gurgles in the kitchen. Her hair rubs against the cushion as she sinks deeper into the couch. Through her half-closed eyes, Caroline can see the bulk of the TV lurking in the corner. A light flickers, and then the TV is on. The cheerful sound of a girl's voice, "One, two, that's right, keep your butt tucked in tight and push and push..." A blur of

colours kaleidoscope across Caroline's closed eyelids. She groans. She wants to turn off the TV, doesn't want to see warm beaches and women working out in g-strings, but she can't move her limbs, which are thick and heavy like elephant legs.

Much of Caroline's first months were spent in front of the TV. Everyone told her it would be her friend and that when she was homesick she could watch programs to comfort her. But aerobics on the beach did not remind her of home, only of a life more glamorous than hers. And, truthfully, the programs broadcast from Edmonton she did tune into did not ease her homesickness but intensified it. On ITV news, she could see glimpses of familiar scenes, the Silly Summer Parade on Whyte Avenue, the Folk Festival in Mayfield Park, a fire in the north end by her brother's house, an overview of the city showing them spraying for mosquitoes. Everything she saw made her feel disconnected, like she was a child staring into a city contained within a plastic globe filled with water and fake snow that would fall if she shook it.

Caroline does not watch TV when she is alone, preferring the silence to its constant background babble. When David is at home, the TV is always on. He eats his dinner in front of it, one hand on his fork, the other on the remote control. He changes channels quickly, his thumb deftly entering the numbers of his favorite stations. Sometimes he hands the remote to Caroline who takes it because she feels she must. She slowly flicks through all the channels including the weather station and Arts and Entertainment. She can never decide which program to choose and at David's impatient urging to just pick anything, please, she begins to do her game of eeney-meeneey-miney-moe. Melrose Place, or a re-run of Seinfeld. *Eeeney-meeneey-miney-*



*moe, catch a tiger by the toe, if he hollers let him go, my mother said to pick the very best one and you are not it.*

When Caroline first met David, he thought this process of elimination was funny. Now when she does it, he rolls his eyes in exasperation. He cannot believe, in the end, that this is the only way she can make a decision. Caroline often wonders what would have happened if another man had proposed to her at the same time as David. *Pick the very best one and you are not it.*

Jerking awake, Caroline feels the remote control jab sharply into her hip and then a light flickers and the television is off. Her heart beats fast. She is cold but her forehead is slick with sweat as she kicks off the afghan and sits up, breathing hard. She hears something at the door. A hesitant knock. A louder knock. A loud knock. Caroline drops to the floor. She wishes she hadn't left all the lights on. Wondering who it could be, she lies on the floor wedged between the couch and the table. She has been here for four months and not once has someone just dropped by. Since winter has hit full force, she has only seen David. His comings and goings are quiet and regular as if intentionally lulling her to sleep. The knock comes again and then Caroline remembers.

Last night, when David returned home, he crawled into bed and tried to wake her. He shook her gently. She groaned. He shook her again and started to talk. An army plane had arrived, carrying some personnel to work with the communications truck they had brought to the Harbour this summer. One of the troops was a woman.

Caroline tried to focus, still caught in the depths of what could have been a dream.

Yes, she was having her first dream in months when he had shaken her. She strained to avoid his voice and focus on the images in her mind.

David's voice kept crumbling the dream. He thought it would be good for her to talk to someone new. He had invited the woman to house. He was sure the woman was nice enough and that she would be able to fill Caroline in on what was happening at home. Wouldn't Caroline like to know what was happening at home? Caroline could recognize the concern in his voice, but she was too far from him, too close to the dream. He offered to wash her hair again.

She agreed to the visit to satisfy him, to silence him before the dream escaped her entirely. She was standing at an intersection. The corner of 109th Street and Jasper Avenue. The hospital where she was born was down that road. During high school, she had worked in Albert's Restaurant across the street from the hospital, pouring cup after cup of coffee for nurses who, after three hours of continuous refills, would leave her a thirty cent tip among the cigarette ashes they had spilled onto the table. The wind was beginning to blow, raising dust from the dry street. Sand stung her eyes and skin. She raised her head to the sky, trying to breathe clean air, and saw a black, moonless void. She fought to move away.

Still half asleep, she went to the washroom, then to the kitchen and looked out the window. At home, in the summer, the trees grew large, and crossing any bridge in the city, there was a perfect view of the lush, green river valley. Here, where the dry tundra stretched across the island and into the ocean, there were no trees.

Caroline did not stay up for long. She moved back to the bedroom, climbed under the covers, and stared at David's large back. His breath was steady and heavy. She remembered lying awake nights after they made love, watching his face, wondering if she would see him grow old. Now, she could not stay awake long enough to contemplate the new lines easing themselves into the skin around his mouth and eyes. Now, when David touched her, she shrank from the contact, folding into herself, unable to imagine the kind of effort it would require to open her arms wide and embrace another body. She preferred instead to curl up by his side and work the saliva in her mouth, bringing wetness to her dry lips. She would then take him into her mouth and, as he moved against her tongue, she would try to focus and concentrate. She would empty her mind and, above all else, she would try to ignore the overwhelming urge she had to bite down.

With the chalky taste of the dream still in her mouth, Caroline lay in bed and could feel her teeth press together. Her jaw clenched so tightly, she knew that when she awoke and tried to eat a banana, her whole mouth would ache. Her eyes itched and burned. She squeezed them shut and almost touched David's warm shoulder before she floated, drifted, and sank.

In the morning, Caroline had not remembered the conversation or the dream. As the knocking persists at her front door now, she cannot escape the dream or the noise. She knows she is unable to face the smiles of a stranger brought to her from that far away home.

Caroline squirms along the floor, careful to keep David's floppy slippers on her feet. She will need them. Worming her way to the bedroom, she reaches the small back door of the house, and with swift hands working at the lock, she wiggles the rusty latch until it gives way. The door opens silently. She hears the knocking from the outside and a soft impatient curse from the woman visitor. Hot from her sudden movements, the cold gently rubs against Caroline's exposed skin. She is still wearing her soft pink flannel nightgown, which the wind lifts, sliding its cool hand between Caroline's legs. Her hair moves, her eyes tear. She starts to walk and breathe.

*The Complete Breath: increases resistance to colds. Breathe deeply, consciously. First, fill the lower part of the lungs. Then, fill the tops of the lungs. Exhale slowly. Do not slump.*

Dry snow circles her ankles in soft puffs. Even with the oversized slippers, Caroline quickly reaches the hill leading into the hamlet. She looks back at her small house and sees the figure of the woman walking away in the other direction towards the camp the army has made by the airstrip. She looks to the ocean, which is indistinguishable from the tundra except for its enormous flatness.

No one is outside. Moving through the town, Caroline smells the gas of a snowmobile that has recently been used. She sees people through their windows. The mayor, washing dishes, talks into a phone tucked efficiently between her ear and shoulder. Tom Apiana, the local carver, sits at his table surrounded by the horns of dead animals. His hands are idle, his eyes blank. Amos Nasogaluk, one of the few still living off the furs he collects from his trap line, lounges in front of his TV. He is surrounded by endless faces of children, all laughing at the same time, becoming still,

and then laughing again at some sitcom joke. Caroline imagines the sound of their laughter, wet, musical giggles which come easily, but as she moves towards the frozen ocean, all she can finally hear is the silence cut by the flapping of her gown. Caroline reaches the beach and continues to walk out onto the ice, tasting the air with her tongue.

She knows that she can never walk far enough to escape the lights of the town so she keeps her back to them. Standing straight, eyes wide open, she chooses to face the blank night. Caroline can finally feel the cold. It covers her completely. During this time of constant dark, the moon, too, disappears as though every vessel of light snubs the north. It is only when she makes a small turn back towards the town, that she notices the dim stars, flickering like distant fireflies in the sky.