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Cutting Clear

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

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Abstract

Cutting Clear

Meg Sircom

The short stories in this collection explore the effects of having belonged to the Canadian subculture of treeplanters. Most of the main characters are ex-treeplanters: young, or to their dismay, not so young, middle class women and men who have experienced hard, seasonal labour in the Canadian wilderness. They may have taken up planting in the first place as a means to pay for university or travelling, or to support their music or art, but most of them returned to it year after year, finding in it something more compelling than just the money. Now, they have quit, or are on the brink of quitting planting, in some cases due to the physical injuries caused by the job. They are trying to get a life outside of planting but are crippled by their connections to their past planting experiences.

The protagonists' attempts to grapple with these connections--connections which take the form of relationships, fears (of bears or nine-to-five jobs), environmental or class awareness--are often ambiguous or ineffective. But by the end of the stories their view of planting, whether utopic or dystopic has been tested. They are forced to see how their view affects the people around them and the choices, or lack of choice, it provides.

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Never Play Dead

I have thick eyebrows, thinning hair and a tendency to gain weight. I don't dance at parties. I identify more with Woody Allen than Woody Harrelson, who reminds me of my brother, Cal. My brother has the height, the luxurious locks, the movie star smile, the singing voice. In all ways I'm average except one: I have an un-average fear of bears.

It began the summer Cal and I went treeplanting in northern Ontario. Cal took to the Great Outdoors, the adventure of it, like a giant, good-looking boy scout. In the evenings, after supper, he embarked on woodsman projects. He chopped down a tree and shaped it into a clumsy canoe which floated him to the middle of the lake before rolling him off into the water. He built a sweat lodge out of tree branches and tarps. When you couldn't sit in it for the smoke, he tried curing meat in it, hanging up strips of steak which grew green fur in two days. He bought an air gun in town and strolled through the woods taking pot shots at squirrels. I asked him who he thought he was--Grey Owl? Buffalo Bill Cody? Elmer Fudd? "Buffalo Bill," said Cal, "maybe him." And then he said next year he was going planting without me. I had no intention of returning. I swore this would be the last time I ventured into the Canadian bush. In the evenings, after supper, I sat around the campfire with most of the other

planters complaining, dabbing lotion on my blackfly bites, bandaging my sprains and blisters and cultivating my fear of bears.

Perhaps it was because Lise told me my first bear story that it branded me so deeply, my fear mixed with longing. I lusted after Lise and jockeyed to sit next to her by the fire. Though she was tiny, she was the camp high-baller--which meant she planted more trees than anyone else. When she stuffed three hundred seedlings in her bags and hoisted them around her thin hips she could barely stagger up her piece. While she told her story, I inched protectively closer to her on the bench, picturing her dropping her bags and backing away, trembling but fierce, screaming swear words as the bear approached her. The other planters, or friends of theirs, had similar stories. They had defended themselves from bears with shovels and been dragged from their tents at night. They'd been ripped in the chest and left for dead and you could still see the scars. We'd all heard of those two girls in Timmins who stumbled, half scalped by a bear, to the road, to be rescued by a highway crew.

On my first day off I went to town and bought two cans of bear mace. "To be used on aggressive bears only," read the label. A book on bear attacks in the town library listed the signs of aggression: rising on the hind legs, pawing the dirt, shaking the head from side to side. "Back away slowly," the book advised. "Climb a tree or run, but never play dead." When I planted, I kept the spray-cans in holsters at my

waist. Every crack of a twig along the tree-line froze me to attention, sweat prickling under my arms, ears straining for the sound of the truck on the road below or a snuffle from the woods.

I began planting with a partner--not Cal, for he filled up the open, easy spots with his trees before I even got to them. "Be nice, Big Brother," he whined, when I complained he was creaming me out. I planted with Lise, who said, "You baby, I bet you've never even seen the bear." I hadn't really, only dark shapes leaping to the side of the road and people yelling excitedly from the truck, "BEAR!"

Planting next to Lise, the smell of her sweat, her soft grunts of exertion, put me into a trance of desire. But just as I had decided that the way she reached out and slapped my arm or grabbed my hand playfully when we talked on our breaks was a come-on and not simply a French thing, I caught her her crawling out of Cal's tent one morning, pulling up her long johns and laughing. That night I lay in my tent and listened to Cal wooing her with renditions of Jimi Hendrix songs by the fire. After their voices died away and I lay staring into the dark thinking I would never be able to sleep again, there was a crackling and snorting in the bushes beside me. I reached for my bear mace, thankful I'd taken it to bed with me and then realising, with panic, it was of little use if the bear decided to swipe me right through the nylon. Out I rolled and jumped to my feet, ready to run, spray-canister cocked. It was Cal and Lise looking at me and then collapsing

with laughter into each other's arms when I threw the canister at Cal and missed.

That winter in Montreal, I dreamt of bears, creeping and snuffling, standing on their hind legs and hugging Lise. I slept with the bear mace right beside my futon. When I woke up with dream-bear breath in my face, I would turn over and touch the cold silver canister for comfort. Cal and Lise--now pregnant--stopped by on their way to a little town called Likely in northern B.C. They had planter friends there who were letting them live on their gold claim, rent-free. They would hunt and fish and chop down trees to build their cabin in the spring. I looked up Likely on the map. It wasn't far from a place called Horsefly. I could imagine the summers.

"Haha," said Cal when he saw the mace by my bed, "do you think you'll be attacked by a bear in your sleep?"

"Robbers, you bastard," I told him.

Lise lay down on my futon and aimed the canister's nozzle at me, her stomach protruding like a brown nut from beneath her hunting jacket. Then she dropped the mace and pushed back her jacket. "Feel my tummy!" she ordered. Her skin was covered with a soft down.

After they left, the bear dreams would start up before I even fell asleep. I visited a shrink who said that they were an embodiment of my fear of success. She gave me anxiety attack pills.

"Do you have any bear attack pills?" I asked her.

A few summers later I took back what I had said about never returning to the bush because I'd seen pictures of the baby, Theo, who resembled, to my delight, Lise more than my brother. Cal had hurt his back and had spent part of the past winter flat on the bed. He was looking after Theo in camp outside Horsefly while Lise planted. Theo, sweet as sugar--*"Oncle!"* he called me--looked like hell from the bug bites which covered him like measles, scratched until they bled. The ladies in the William's Lake Greyhound bus stop looked at the bites and then looked at Cal who had shaved his head and grown a beer belly.

The first thing Cal said when we hit the dirt road, Theo chirping and bouncing in the back, was, "Did you bring me any pot from the city of sin?"

Did he think I'd try to sneak it through security at the airport?

"Well you don't have to be so prissy about it." He took the corner so fast we fishtailed. "Tires are soft," he said.

The road to Horsefly passes through Likely and we stopped at the Likely Pub for a drink.

"Every parent does it," said Cal, when I told him we shouldn't leave the baby sleeping in the car. "We'll only be a minute."

A couple of old gold prospectors with grey beards sat at the bar. "Haven't seen you around for a while," they said to Cal. One of them got up, unhooked a curled horn that hung by

the door and handed it to me. "You ever heard a moose call? Blow on this."

I got a face full of flour that made Cal almost laugh his pants off. The old men said, "Hee!" and "Ha!" and, "It's the first time in forty years anyone's fallen for that one."

I told Cal he was a bastard, and he punched me on the shoulder, hard. "Can't you take a joke?"

"I'll be in the car with Theo when you're done drinking," I told him.

Cal soon came out, all smiles and loud apologies with a case of beer for the road. We took a detour to check in on the cabin, half an hour out of town, where they lived in the winter. It was derelict enough place and not made from logs, as I'd imagined. A pre-fab shack about half the size of a mobile home with no running water and the toilet out back. A rusty bathtub crouched over a fire pit in the front yard.

"I'll get that bath tub going this winter for sure," said Cal. "I just have to figure out how to keep the bottom from getting so hot."

Victor, a retired miner and water dowser who was staying in the place while Cal and Lise were out at camp, came out to greet us.

"How's it going Victor?" said Cal.

Victor hitched up his pants. "It's boring-er than a pig in shit out here. I moved in the TV and generator."

I asked Victor about dowsing and he told me he could also dowse people's auras. He offered to dowse mine--stuck a

bent coat-hanger up to my head where it started bouncing around in his hand like it was possessed.

"You must be from the city," he said. "Don't got a very healthy aura there."

"Check mine!" said Cal and the coat-hanger bounced around his head as well. "That's funny," said Victor, "you're not from the city."

"It's the TV," I said. "Maybe the TV's interfering."

When he held the coat-hanger up to the TV it fairly leapt out of his hand. "I guess the TV'll have to go," said Victor, letting the wire droop from his fingers.

From behind the cabin came Theo's piping voice, "Bear! Bear!"

I pushed Victor aside and rushed out. I knew there were grizzlies in those parts, the most unpredictable bears of all. Theo was sitting on a pile of sand and smiling.

"He does that sometimes," said Cal, sauntering up behind me. "To get our attention."

I couldn't stop thinking of bears and when we got to the planting camp, I set up my tent as close to Cal's trailer as I could. At dawn the next morning I was awakened by heavy clumping sounds and I jerked upright. I stuck my head out and it was Lise stomping around in a pair of giant work boots, picking up her water jug, hoisting on her knapsack.

When she saw me she said, "Go to sleep. Maybe you can come out with me tomorrow. I'll ask if they need another planter."

I told her she'd sprain her ankle in those boots.

"He's not too big with three pairs of socks on." She stuck out her foot and admired it. "Pretty good, eh? I only paid five bucks for him at the second-hand store." Then she clumped off, calling Rider, their German shepherd, and I took two anxiety pills, for my heart was still pounding, and fell back asleep.

The next day I borrowed a shovel and bags and headed out with Lise's crew, excited by the idea of planting beside her again. In the truck people gave her things from their lunches: a chocolate brownie, a bag of trail mix. Lise never took much to eat. She made her own lunch, the same two peanut butter sandwiches and a couple of apples, every morning. She and Cal were cooking their own food so they didn't have to pay camp fees. "Sure, I take the same thing every day, but I don't care," she said. The rest of the camp cared though, with her looking so thin. A new mother and still high-balling three hundred dollars worth of trees a day. One planter had told me at breakfast, "You're the brother, you're the one who should remind Cal that the ten dollars he spends on a six-pack every day could go towards his kid." I'd replied that I would talk to him, but I was thinking I'd drink too if I were stuck in camp as food for a million blackflies. I didn't mention the new tricycle Cal had just bought for Theo, or the fifty dollar casting rod, though the kid couldn't yet tell the difference between that and a piece of string tied to a

stick. I'd let the camp go on believing what they liked for a while. It was good to hear Cal getting some flak for once.

Planters clambered out of the truck at intervals along the logging road until it was just Lise and me left to drive to her piece in the farthest section of the clear-cut, next to the forest. We parked and were pulling out our bags and shovels when Lise paused and scanned the roadside, her thin eyebrows drawn together with worry. "That's funny, where did my trees go? I put him here under a tarp yesterday."

The trickle of the brook sounded loud in our ears. We looked towards the forest, at something white shining in the trees. It turned out to be the tarp, ripped full of jagged bites. Beyond it, the cardboard tree-boxes lay flattened beneath a log, half buried, like corpses in a hasty grave. Rider barked and tossed the seedlings that littered the moss into the air with his nose.

"*Tabernach*!" breathed Lise and I was about to ask her if she would mind me spending the rest of the day in the truck, when she hooked her arm around mine. "Today we stick close together, eh?"

Then I wondered how I could even think of letting her plant with only Rider for protection, boots two sizes too big flapping on her feet. I sang at the top of my voice all day, the feeling that I was being watched from the woods never once leaving me.

At the end of the day, as we drove out to pick up the other planters, Lise leaned wearily back in the seat beside me, her face white and vulnerable under the dirt.

"How's it going with Cal?" I asked, concentrating on navigating the bumps in the road so I didn't have to look at her.

She turned her head and looked at me and I caught a whiff of her sweat, mixed with peanut butter. "Cal's okay," she said quietly. Then she sighed, or yawned, and slumped towards me and I felt her shoulder and head digging into my side. I took my hand off the wheel and slid my arm around her thinking that I could drive her right past the planters and back across Canada with me. "He loves the kid a lot," she said, her voice muffled by my shirt.

In the evening we had steaks with the rest of the camp to celebrate tomorrow's day off.

"Why did you need to order two bottles of wine, along with the beer?" I asked Cal.

"Some for you," Lise answered for him.

The steaks were an inch thick and as big as dinner plates. A Buddhist guy with a shaved head said, "Carnivore!" to Cal as a joke, not knowing that there's nothing Cal hates more than to have someone thrust their politics at him. Up jumped Cal, red-faced after the wine.

Lise said, "He is joking, Cal."

"Those wouldn't happen to be leather shoes you are wearing, would they? That wouldn't happen to be a leather

belt around your waist?" Cal snatched up his steak, ready to slap it across the Buddhist guy's cheek.

Lise grabbed his arm. "Cal's making a joke, aren't you Cal?"

"I'm not joking," said Cal, but he sat back down.

Cal never stays mad for long. By the end of the evening and the two bottles of wine, he had Theo's fly rod out and was teaching the Buddhist to cast long arcs across the grass. "Fly fishing is all about Zen," Cal told him.

The next time I saw my baby brother and his family was in Jonquière. They'd moved there to be close to Lise's family and so Cal could take a computer programming course at *Cégèp* and land a good job with a company like Alcan. I was teaching English and it had been a long time since I'd been in any woods besides those of Montreal's parks. I woke up in bear sweats less often.

Cal and Lise had enough money in student loans and loans from Lise's mother to pay the rent on the bottom floor of a suburban house with a fenced-in back yard, big enough for the kid and dog. As we pulled in the driveway, Theo proudly pointed to the brick walls of the house, saying that they would keep the Big Bad Wolf away.

Lise pressed against me and whispered, "Cal wanted to tell him they were fake bricks, but I didn't let him."

I wasn't just imagining her new affection for me. At the station she had kissed me on the lips.

The apartment was open-concept, painted antiseptic blue and decorated with clocks that all showed different times. There were two cuckoo clocks and a grandfather clock in the living room, and several mahogany-cased ones in the dining area. Cal had taken to buying clocks at yard sales. He told me he was planning to fix them up, that people were crazy for clocks. "They're cuckoo for cuckoo clocks," he said.

Cal looked as if he'd been studying too hard. He was pale and he sulked when he couldn't get the stove working--the part he'd bought was defective and so we would have to fry the Thanksgiving turkey. His mother-in-law put duct tape on the wood stove chimney in the basement and it had melted. "Even Theo would know better," said Cal.

Lise's mum, small as Lise and pretty, smiled only with her mouth, like a person with a tragic past. She was high energy, into arts and crafts, shopping and dancing. After lunch she put on some French accordion music. "This music makes me *danser*!" she said. She grabbed Theo: "*Danse, mon petit*!"

Cal sat on the sofa and stared moodily out the window.

"Yes, let's dance," said Lise, catching me around the waist. I put my hands on her shoulders and looked down into her face. I suddenly felt that if I tried, I could lick off the tiny crows feet that spread out from the corners of her eyes. "Cal's depressed," she murmured, pressing her fingers into my spine. I squeezed her shoulders back and she pulled me closer.

The mother-in-law called out to Cal, "You are morose for two days now. You will make us all morose."

I was about to take her side until I glanced over at Cal again. He sat hunched over, a view of the aluminum factory's smoke stacks in the window behind him. I pictured him how he used to be, chopping down trees and fish-tailing on the logging roads in B.C.

I let go of Lise reluctantly and sat down in the armchair opposite him. "Remember that wacky Buddhist vegetarian guy you taught to fly fish in Horsefly?"

"He was crazy," said Cal, looking interested.

"Remember Victor? Remember the time I blew in the moose horn in the Likely pub?"

Cal was smiling and nodding his head. Soon I was describing that time so alluringly, I barely recognised it. But Cal did. He interrupted me and added details. He told me new stories. He was feeling the raw, frontier feeling of northern B.C. again. I talked on, leaving out the blackflies, the horseflies, not asking about the time the firewood ran out, the icy, two-hour drive into town for groceries; the reasons they came back to Jonquière. I talked of the fishing we did when the contract was up that summer, the hunting I didn't do, not the meat, hanging rancid in the back porch because Cal couldn't be bothered to skin it. The pictures tumbled out bright and enticing and I didn't know how I created them. They certainly weren't what I had seen at the

time. But Cal was back, the fast-talking, woodsmanning Cal that I'd been missing.

In the kitchen nook Lise was playing a new game with Theo and Rider. When she shouted, "BANG!" Theo and the dog dropped to the floor and lay motionless until she kissed their bellies and they came back to life.

I got up and went towards her, feeling as if I had to make her see that the old Cal was back.

"BANG!" she said to me.

I hesitated until Theo screamed, "You're dead!" and then I slumped convincingly onto the floor just beyond the sofa where Cal was sitting.

I opened one eye and saw that Cal had grabbed his guitar and was hastily tuning up. As Lise and Theo approached me, I closed my eye again and heard Cal break into a rusty Jimi Hendrix riff. Then I felt my shirt being pushed slowly up over my belly and a kiss--a lingering one--on my bare skin. The music broke off and I sat up. Lise was backing away from me on her knees, her head turned towards Cal.

On Cal's face was the tail end of an expression I'd never seen before--open and pleading--and crumbling at some sign from her into a relieved smile. He thrust his guitar aside and stood up. "Let's go hunting," he said. His eyes were calculating when he finally looked at me, but livelier than I'd seen them since I got there. He knew how much I hated hunting.

Lise got to her feet and stretched. "You guys can't go out now. It's going to be dark soon."

Cal reached out and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, "Bye, baby bunting, daddy's going hunting."

She smiled. "Well change first, at least."

He was wearing new pants, new shoes--Italian leather, a new shirt. "No time. It's getting late already."

Out the window a greyness was coming on and a few lazy snowflakes drifted down.

"Anyway," said Cal, "Big Brother here will be doing the shooting. I'll just be keeping him company, sitting in the car."

"Yeah, right!" said Lise. She gave him a kiss on his way out.

Twenty kilometres out of town we turned off the highway onto a dirt road. The snow was coming down heavier, sticking to the ground and the thin branches of the trees.

"Look at this scritchy forest," Cal said, making a face and waving a hand at the bushes and scrub. "Not like the forests around Likely." We were driving slowly enough to miss the rabbit that leapt out in front of the car.

"Keep your eye on it," said Cal, excited.

The rabbit paused on a wide part in the road and Cal stopped the car and said, "Well, go on. Get the gun and be quick and not too noisy about it."

I dropped cartridges all over the seat.

"Give me the gun already!" Cal said, exasperated by my fumbling. But rabbit had hopped off into the bushes, leaving a clear, black trail of paw prints behind in the snow. Cal slammed the car door. "Come on!"

He strode ahead of me through the scritchy forest saying, "Hohoho, we'll get you, little bunny," under his breath. I stepped on every cracking stick I could find. After about twenty minutes there was still no sign of the rabbit and its tracks were becoming hidden by the fresh snow.

Cal said, "Let's wait, he's bound to come back this way. They always re-trace their steps."

I was getting cold and figured I'd humoured Cal enough. "That's a piece of hunting lore you just made up," I told him.

Cal brushed the snow off a rock, sat down and said challengingly, "What do you know about hunting?"

"I'll be in the car waiting, when you're ready to go." I re-traced our footsteps back to the road and there, sniffing at the front tire of the car, was the bear.

I stood and looked at the bear, ten years accumulated fear roaring in my head. The bear looked back. Slowly, I understood it was a very small bear. Maybe a couple of years old at the most and it wasn't rearing on its hind legs, pawing the ground or waving its head back and forth. It was looking at me in a bored sort of way and it soon turned and meandered away.

Disappointment slowed my racing pulse. I trailed the bear up the road, half curious and angry. It paused and looked back at me. And when I was around the corner and out of sight of the car, I yelled, "Bear!" and then "Bear!" with panic, for effect.

My voice echoed through the trees and then everything was quiet except for the stream gurgling beside the road.

Cal's voice from the woods sounded far away, "Bro...?"

The bear looked towards the woods and then towards me. "Never corner a bear," the bear book had advised. It reared back on his hind legs. I squeezed my eyes together and it turned blurry and huge. I smelled its rank, bear smell. The dream-bear, cold sweat fear flooded back and I turned and sprinted for the car.

Cal was there when I got back. "Look at the size of those prints!" he said. They had melted and spread wider on the road.

"I saw the bear," I said.

"We'll go after it!" Cal threw the gun across the seat and climbed in.

I stood by the car, not wanting to see the bear again. "With a .22?"

"Get in, retard!" Cal yelled.

We followed the prints up the road until they headed off into the woods. By then it was getting too dark to see.

When we got back to the house Theo wasn't in bed yet. I shot him, Lise and Rider before the door even closed behind

us. "BANG!" I said and they dropped to the floor with the snow blowing in all over the place. When I kissed their stomachs they all came back to life except Lise who lay motionless.

Theo jumped up and down. "Haha, Mama's dead."

"Haha," said Cal, gazing at her tiny curvy figure.

After a couple of seconds Theo said, "We're only playing, right?" He kissed her face but still no response. Then he lay down and put his head on her chest and I saw her mouth twitch. "Please Mama, it's just a game."

Just when I couldn't stand to see them like that for another second Cal nudged me with his elbow. "Maybe she really *is* dead," he said, prolonging the feeling for just one more moment.

Nursery Rhymes

They stood at the bow of the ferry, which nosed out of the harbour at Chesterton and headed into the open water of Mahone Bay. Though it was early May and blowing a cool breeze, a few small sailboats dotted the water, tacking drunkenly to avoid the course of the outgoing ship. When the ferry pulled beyond the shelter of the mainland, it picked up speed and the waves settled into a steady, slapping rhythm against its hull. Then, as the purple hump of Tancook Island slid out from behind Quaker on the horizon before them, Jill took a deep breath and sang as she had done at this point of the ferry ride all through her childhood: "I see the Cooky and the Cooky sees me, long live the Cooky and long live me." This was one of the songs from the wacky repertoire of children's songs and verses that her mother had created for the ride to the island, to make the time go by faster. Alice, Jill's sister, had stopped singing them aloud after some of the island kids had overheard and never let her forget it. But she'd kept on singing them silently, like a prayer to ward off disaster. Alice used to think that if she didn't sing, rafts of jellyfish would float in and ruin the swimming, or a mink would break into her hospital for sick birds and eat the patients.

The songs had inspired the present Alice had for Jill in her knapsack: an oversize book of nursery rhymes with gilt-edged pages and pictures you felt like walking into. When Jill's husband, Derrick, had phoned to tell her Jill was pregnant and to invite her down to help open up the cottage, Alice had wanted to get her sister something that good. A few years ago she'd had her tubes tied to ensure that she would never have kids herself, but she was excited for Jill. Excited enough to have read the whole book herself already, wondering why none of the poems made any sense to her at all.

"Why aren't you singing?" Jill asked Alice, leaning on the railing and swinging a silver, elevator-sneakered foot. "Don't you remember the words?"

Alice did want to sing, but she wasn't sure what or where. Her sister had been mixing her up since they'd left the wharf. She'd been improvising and singing the songs all over the place. She'd hardly even stopped singing. She sang absent-mindedly, her voice a scratchy Sharon, Lois and Bram record playing in the background of her head.

Alice wanted to ask her if her singing had anything to do with encouraging the baby to grow. Alice imagined that even at about ten weeks, as her sister's was, it could respond to sound. So far Jill had been so reluctant to talk about it, it was hard to believe she was pregnant at all. She didn't have any sign of a maternal glow as she leaned back against the ferry's railing in her skinny white bell-bottoms and sighed, "Oh Al, What am I gonna do about you? It looks as

if you gave yourself that haircut." She reached into her bag and pulled out a cigarette, turning away from the wind to light it.

Alice dug her fingers into her short, chunky hair. "You're not still smoking!"

"I've cut way back. Hey diddle, the cat and the Cooky..." Jill sang and sighed out a long stream of smoke. She eyed Alice's red checked lumber jacket. "Honestly, you look so butch."

Alice shivered, pulled the jacket closer and looked over at Derrick who was fiddling with his Discman on a nearby life-jacket locker. The breeze was so cool that they were the only passengers on deck.

Jill followed her gaze, eyes narrowed from the smoke. "You're not going to recognise the old cabin, the way me and Derrick fixed it up. You should have seen the mess it was in when we bought it last year."

Alice thought of Jill and Derrick's stucco monster home in Mississauga, a house whose expanse of white carpet and walls made it as inviting as an igloo. She tried to imagine the cabin with white walls and carpets. It had been built of logs with creaking wooden floors and a rickety ladder up to the sleeping loft.

Their father had bought the cabin, a dory, hemp fishing nets and floats after he gave up his teaching job in Toronto and decided to become a fisherman in the style of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Alice had been six and Jill a baby. At the time,

houses were going for cheap on Tancook, an hour's drive south of Halifax.

"Let me know what I'm in for, at least," Alice said to Jill.

Derrick glanced up, techno beat cheeping from the silver discs of the headphones slung around his neck. "Don't worry Sis, you'll still be roughing it. We didn't destroy its rustic charm, did we Jill?"

Derrick knew about roughing it from a corporate bonding, *Iron John* weekend in Japan--Alice had seen the pictures of him climbing up a waterfall in Sumo underpants--and a variety of edgy sports. He had a new neon green windsurfer and wetsuit packed away in the hold. Alice doubted that this sport would make him any edgier, any less conservative than any of his other sports had. His face was as smooth as putty and as boyish as a Sears catalogue ad. His Tommy Hilfiger jacket strained across his worked-out chest as he sat back and pouted at Jill. She looked right through him and out onto the water. Usually when Derrick and Jill were together they retreated into a fuzzy world made up of pet names, caresses, kisses and mock melodrama. Jill was always striking dominatrix poses and telling him she'd make him suffer. Alice thought the chilly distance between them now didn't seem much like a game.

She glanced back at the mainland, at Chesterton, the small town receding in the distance and at a new pink stone mansion surrounded by a swath of green sitting on the shore

some distance from the town. "Who built that castle? Who built that *golf* course?" she yelled.

Alice had planned to do more on this trip than just help open up the cottage. She wanted to point out to Jill all the things Jill had been too young to recognise, the things their parents had discarded by moving back to Toronto. She wanted Jill to notice that the constant, white noise of distant highways was missing on Tancook. She wanted Jill to sit in the smoky kitchens of the fishing families Alice had known. She wanted her to be able to identify the endangered piping plovers that nested in the sand dunes.

"That's the Clearwater estate," said Derrick smugly. "You'll find that things are changing quite a bit around here."

Alice gaped at the house. "I suppose that's the kind of place you'll build for yourself one day."

"No, your old place is more my speed." Derrick stood up to get a better view. "I wouldn't mind playing a round on that golf course, though," he added.

"They say it has over a dozen bathrooms," said Jill. She took out a compact and touched up her frosty pink lipstick. "Who's Clearwater again?"

"Clearwater," said Derrick, looking at the golf course and the mansion covetously, "is the company that sold Nova Scotian lobsters to Japan. It made billions of yen at a time when yen were worth many more billions of Canadian dollars."

"They are also the company that's shooting themselves in the foot by dragging for scallops and ruining the lobster's natural habitat," Alice said loudly, frowning at Jill's lipstick. She often found herself talking loudly around Jill, partly to drown out Derrick and partly because she felt as if she was never getting through to her sister. "Oh *there* you go again, "Jill always complained. "I've heard it all already."

Alice tried to remember if she'd read a book about lobsters. As a volunteer for an ecology group in Montreal, she'd read a lot of books about the environment. She read about grizzlies starving for lack of salmon in the Yukon, about sunburned fish in Ontario lakes, about ospreys suffering from mercury poisoning. She followed the progression of oil spills, chemical leaks, holes in the ozone and emissions controls. She knew the names of herbicides, fungicides, and pesticides.

"They're basically clear-cutting the ocean floor," Alice said to Jill. "The catch is half this year what it was last." She thought that if she could explain the books better Jill would listen to what she said. Now she was taking Alice's words like the spray flying up from the bow, slightly braced and with her eyes shut.

"If you're boycotting scallops," said Derrick, eyeing her, "you're going to be pretty hungry tonight."

"Don't be so foolish," Jill said, popping open her eyes. "You know we have enough food to feed everyone on this ferry

if we wanted to." She turned her back to him. "Tell me more about the lobsters, Al."

The ferry rumbled out past Quaker island and Alice looked back and yelled again: "I suppose Clearwater's *son* built that place?" There was another new house, ranch-style, low and long on the hill where the lighthouse keeper's shack had stood.

"German lawyers," said Jill, "There are signs that say *Keep off. Verboten!*" She looked away and sang, "The Owl and the Pussycat went to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat."

Alice suddenly wondered if her songs were a part of a secret language belonging to her and Derrick's private world. Then she remembered Derrick once admitting, "Now singing is the one thing I can't do. I can't hold a tune to save my life."

"...in a beautiful pea green boat," Alice found herself humming.

"That place must have six bathrooms," Derrick interrupted, trying to catch Jill's eye. She glared at him and kept singing. "They took some honey and plenty of money wrapped up in a five pound..." Her mouth hung open for a second. "Look, they cut some more trees down."

The seaward side of the island, brown and scarred with stumps, reminded Alice of the mountainsides she'd planted in B.C. She remembered how Quaker used to be covered with low pine trees in which cormorants had nested. The family had

sailed there in the dory for picnics and had run around under the trees, the cormorants screaming in protest overhead. Looking at the island now made Alice feel panicked and helpless as if she were falling headlong. When she got this kind of feeling in Montreal, she just shut her books. Now she moaned, "Why did they have to cut down all the trees around it? Why did they have to clear-cut the place?"

Jill tilted her head to the side and looked at Alice. "Oh Al, they had a disease."

"You don't believe that, do you?" Alice said, thrusting her hand out at her sister like an aggressive beggar. "That's the excuse everyone gives to cut down trees. I planted on a clear-cut in northern B.C. that's so big you can see it from outer space. It's bigger than P.E.I."

"Oh right. Bigger than P.E.I!" Derrick snorted.

"Sure," Alice said. "And you know the excuse they used to create it?"

"Disease!" Jill stepped back.

Alice dropped her hand apologetically. Jill was listening to her now, without Alice even trying. "Spruce budworm."

"Couldn't they have had spruce budworm?" Jill asked.

"Spruce budworm only kills the weak trees. Some people say it's even good for a forest."

Jill looked at her, a little wide-eyed, a little concentrating, like at a math test. She brought her front

teeth down over her bottom lip and there were flakes of pink lipstick on her teeth when she said slowly, "You don't say."

Derrick stuck out his flat stomach and said to Alice. "Just because you plant trees doesn't mean you're some kind of environmental expert." He spread his legs a little and took a step towards her. "You know what? All those trees you plant are just turned into paper, that's what you're doing for the environment."

Then he paused and said triumphantly, "Toilet paper. I'm wiping my ass on the trees you planted."

Jill hooked her arm through Alice's and sneered at Derrick, exposing her pink front teeth to the gum. Then she guided Alice up to the bow, singing, "Rub a dub dub, three men in a tub!" to her own tune.

Alice's headlong feeling pulled up abruptly and rocked back on itself. Three men in a tub. She watched the breeze spanking the tops of the waves into curly white caps.

"...and they all jumped out of a rotten potato," Jill finished. The ferry tooted its approach to the tiny island of Littlecook.

They leaned out over the railing and watched a crane on the back of the ferry lift the thick aluminum storage lockers off the lower deck and onto the wharf. There were crates of shingles, pink bales of fibreglass and piles of lumber. Three passengers got off: a young couple who loaded up a bicycle cart with cans of paint and wheeled quickly away, and white-haired lady in a light blue coat and matching hat, a

shivering terrier in her arms. The old lady took a step forward as the last container came swinging towards her over the wharf.

"She'd better get out of the way," said Derrick, who had trailed them up to the front. He let out a laugh when she stepped back and stumbled, dropping the dog. The longshoreman threw open the doors of the locker. He pulled out some of bags of groceries and a giant bag of Alpo and piled them at her feet.

"That lady doesn't get to the mainland often," Derrick said.

"How the hell is she going to carry all that?" Jill said.

"Maybe she has a wheelbarrow tucked away under the wharf." Derrick took out his Discman.

Jill frowned at him. "She's wearing high heeled shoes."

The woman peered around, confused.

"I think it's Mrs. Collicut." Alice gripped the railing with both hands. "Her husband built our old dory. I visited once, with Dad, and she served us home-made cookies and tea in coronation mugs." She yelled down at the lady, "Mrs. Collicut!" But the lady made no sign she had heard. She pictured the lady's husband wandering around their old-fashioned kitchen in his pyjamas, trying to remember something.

As the ferry churned away from the dock, an old man appeared at the top of the hill pulling a wagon behind him.

"That will be her husband," said Jill. The tone of her voice made Alice think that in her world, little old ladies never got stranded on the ends of wharves.

"It'd be nice to think so, wouldn't it?" Alice looked down on the wake of the ferry which was a dark, bluish grey like the mud beneath sewage outlets, and back at the old man.

The old man dodged onto a side road before the wharf and disappeared from view.

Alice glanced at her sister sideways and Jill turned towards the bow chanting, "Row, row, row your boat..."

"Gently down the stream," Alice joined in after a minute, feeling the rock of the ferry beneath them as it rotated and set its course for Tancook.

"What's with all the singing?" Derrick cut in, taking a CD out of its case. "I can barely hear myself think."

Jill stopped singing and stared at him. "Think!" She snatched the CD from him. "Think!" She pulled him roughly by the hand. "I have to use the heads. Come below with me."

Tancook approached. "Row, row, row your boat," sang Alice. Her voice sounded thin and lonely. There were the island's low black cliffs, eroded into razor-sharp ridges, its pebble beaches with the sand dunes behind them, extending from the cliffs along both sides of the island, its red, blue and yellow houses that straggled up the hill from the wharf. Their cabin was hidden by a tiny forest at the farthest tip. This was the point at which Jill had always taken her arm and

started to jump up and down. Now Jill was making her way towards her, stumbling a little and fluffing up her white-blond hair. When she came closer Alice could see that her mascara had run slightly around the corners.

"What's the matter, Sis?"

Jill shook her head and fumbled in her bag for her cigarettes. Alice put an arm awkwardly around her skinny shoulders. "What did we used to sing? How did the pulling-in-to-the-wharf song go?"

"Oh, don't ask me," Jill sighed, leaning into her.

This was the same wharf from which they'd seen their father off on his first day as the *Old Man and the Sea*. The local fisherman, tinkering with their engines and testing their radios, stared as Father got into his freshly-painted dory, piled his nets around his feet and set the oars into the wooden oar locks. When he saluted and pointed at the sky, "Red sky in morning, fisherman's warning," Alice felt as if she was going to die of embarrassment. He rowed off unsteadily, his strong neck, below a fresh beard, straining against the heavy weight of the boat.

Their mother turned to the men on the wharf. "You boys will look out for him won't you?" She wore her hair in two braids and her face had none of those lines, etched by sarcasm or cigarette smoke, that could make their own wives look so severe. Mother had modelled herself after some kind of rustic heroine--Maria of *The Sound of Music*, perhaps. She

had sung, filled the cabin with flowers and sewn all their own clothes.

"Don't you worry Ma'am," they said. "We'll direct him to a spot where you can keep an eye on him."

Tied to the wharf were large yachts, outboards and seadoos. Alice looked at them in dismay. The brightly-painted fishing boats had gone. "Even the Eisenors gave up fishing?" she said.

"There have been no fish around here for ages," said Derrick scornfully. He had emerged from below, agitated and as red-eyed as Jill.

"Not here. They used to go round the province to the Bay of Fundy to fish," said Alice.

Jill said, "I heard that when the father retired, the boys decided they would try other things. One's working at the refinery in Halifax, another's in construction...I don't know about the others..."

Alice didn't recognise anyone on the wharf, though at one time she'd known everyone on the island. They had been as close to locals as you could get and perhaps Jill hadn't even known they weren't until they moved away.

Alice and Jill had attended the one-room school house in the mornings and spent their afternoons tending sick seagulls in an abandoned fish shack. When their parents had had enough of getting back to nature and decided to return to Toronto, Alice had packed a knapsack and taken Jill to a cave hidden

away in the black cliffs at the end of the island. She'd sat Jill down on the clicking barnacles and hoped her parents would never find them.

The couple standing next to them on the wharf pushed their sunglasses over the top of their heads to examine Derrick's windsurfer and describe the great waves on the beach at the opposite side of the island. Jill and Alice had spent whole summers swimming there. Alice listened and nodded, wondering if she qualified as a local in comparison to them.

The battered aluminum cargo lockers swung from the ferry to the wharf and they helped the longshoreman pull out their boxes of food, suitcases and garbage bags of bedding. Then Derrick said to wait and strode up to the parking lot. He returned driving over the new boards of the wharf in a bright blue SUV and pulled up next to them. He stuck his head out the window and said in a challenging voice, "How do you like it, Sis?"

Alice stared at the car. She pictured a thousand environmental books slowly opening and closing their covers like giant, man-eating clams. The island was four kilometres at its longest. Alice thought of oil-covered sea gulls, of trees suffering from die-back. "I can't believe you brought a car here!" she yelled loudly enough to make the surf-lovers look.

Derrick packed in their belongings and then stood running his hand over the hood. "She's a beaut, eh?" He took Jill's arm. "You need a hand there, Jilly-poo?"

Jill shook off his hand and stepped away.

Alice banged the end of the windsurfer. "What's wrong with Swinimer's taxi?" We used him often enough. He'd drive you anywhere you wanted to go for a couple of bucks."

Derrick walked around and pulled Alice's hand off the surfer. "Not down the roads to the beaches, he wouldn't," he said, getting back behind the wheel.

"You can friggin' walk to the beach." Alice rested her hand on the roof over the driver's window and leaned in close.

"With a wind-surfer?" Derrick said.

"Sand dunes are protected areas, you idiot!"

Derrick craned his neck to look past her to say to Jill, "Come on, what are you waiting for?"

Jill hesitated, glancing from her husband to her sister.

"There's no way she's getting into that car," Alice said slowly.

"Get in, Jill!"

Alice repeated, "She's not getting into this car!" emphasising each word with a little push that made the car rock.

"Why don't you ask her what *she* wants?" said Derrick. "After all, she's almost two and a half months pregnant."

Jill stood and considered Derrick for a few seconds, her hand on her hip. "I'm walking," she said at last.

"You get in the car!" yelled Derrick. He flung open his door, his face red. But the seat belt held him and he fumbled at it for a moment swearing. Then he stopped fumbling and snapped the strap tight across his chest. He leaned forward, slammed the door and peeled away up the wharf.

Jill marched ahead of Alice, her silver sneakers turning brown in the dust. Every second or third house had been renovated. There were new porches and sky lights, new artificially weathered shingles, new gingerbread decorating the eaves. There were stone walkways, fences and folk art mailboxes.

"I bet you hate all this," said Jill at one point turning and almost tripping backwards. "Damn. All this development." She pointed out The Fo'c's'le, the classy new restaurant and gift shop that catered to the tourists and summer residents. "There'll be a fishing village theme park in here by next year."

Alice felt as if she should hate it, but she had stopped looking around. She was thinking of B.C. She would start planting again there in a couple of weeks.

When they reached the top of the hill, Jill was panting. Her hair lay flat with sweat and she had lost all trace of lipstick. Alice looked at her in sudden concern. She

shouldn't have let Jill push herself so hard. She had to get her to quit smoking. She suggested resting on the bench that acted as a lookout on top of the hill, but Jill wanted to walk on.

"My back hurts," Alice said, flopping down on the bench.

Jill stood in front of her, wiping the sweat from her face with the bottom of her jacket. "How come?"

"Planting, I imagine."

A little mushroom of concern appeared between Jill's eyebrows. "Why do keep planting year after year?"

"I'm a masochist, I guess." Alice pictured the brown snag of a clear-cut. How it felt peaceful to be there knowing that the damage couldn't get any worse.

Jill sat down beside her, knees spread wide. "I know why you keep planting." She looked at her triumphantly. "I think you're doing the right thing."

"You do?" Alice pictured little figures moving on the horizon of her clear-cut. They were hopping and dancing and as they approached she could hear them singing.

"I'm glad I walked. From now on, it's going to be only walking. And I'm going to do something like you--something good, like putting trees back, making the world a better place." Jill put a cigarette between her lips and felt her jacket pocket for a lighter. She added, around the cigarette, "Though it's hard to know what kind of action to take. Do you think *I* could plant trees?"

Alice pulled the cigarette out of her sister's mouth.

Jill paused, took the cigarette back, dropped it and ground it under her sneaker. "Yes, this'll be the first thing to go. I bet the tobacco industry is one of the worst polluters."

"I was thinking of your kid," said Alice.

Jill took her foot off the cigarette. "Oh, the kid..."

Alice could see the figures now: the Owl and the Pussy Cat, Goosey Goosey Gander, Little Miss Muffet, the Butcher and Baker and Candlestick Maker, Little Boy Blue, Baa Baa Black Sheep, all jumping over the stumps towards her. She reached for her knapsack. "Jill, I got something for you."

"When are *you* going to have kids?"

"Look!" Alice said, holding out the book to her with both hands.

Jill took it absently saying "Thanks" and put it on the bench beside her without looking. "What about you?"

"I'm not having any kids."

Jill looked at her in a calculating way as if she knew it already. "Why not?"

"Can you see me with a kid?"

"Sure, why not?" She prodded Alice's arm.

"Anyway, I can't." The figures were all around her, tooting and bleating and honking their songs. And then they quickly danced past her and away into the distance. She leaned across Jill, picked up the book and placed it on her lap. "Listen, don't look at me, I'm no environmentalist.

Derrick's right. I plant tree farms that will be harvested in twenty years and turned into books, like this one."

"Tell me why you can't have kids, big sister!" Jill opened the book and started flipping through the pages. After a minute, she put her hand down somewhere near the middle of the book. "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water," she read. She looked up at Alice, squinting slightly as if through invisible cigarette smoke, carefully ripped out the page and folded it in two. Then she folded the corners back. "Jack fell down and broke his crown." She let the paper airplane fly and it floated away, outlined against the roof of a new house below. "And Jill came tumbling after."

Canal Flats

The lilacs outside the bar are still in bloom, but their scent, lifting into the late afternoon air, doesn't hide the stink emanating from the pile of broken furniture, rotten mattresses, split plastic bags in the small junk yard opposite. Nobody planned to have a garbage dump in the centre of Canal Flats. This used to be the bad end, the wrong side of the tracks, until the town expanded and its ends became middles. The dump is officially closed and has been waiting for several years to be ploughed under and turned into a parking lot. Despite the chain-link fence with *No Dumping* notices on it, people still heave the occasional bag onto the pile when they can't be bothered to drive their garbage to the new site down by the river.

A sandy hill rises abruptly behind the dump. To the west, towards the mineral flats of Columbia Lake, the hill has eroded and formed hoodoos, giant stalagmites of sand that crumble and reform in heavy rains. Closer to town the sand is held in place by red-barked Ponderosa pine trees except where wide swaths have been cut for the moto-cross courses that twist up the face of the hill at eighty degree angles. There has been talk of replanting the trees. When the wind comes up the sand hisses off the trails and across the town, leaving a

fine layer of grit on the windshields of cars, a crunch between your teeth.

But replacing the trees would bring an end to the town's main source of entertainment. Most evenings, an audience gathers on the front deck of the bar as the air comes alive with the urgent whine of motor bikes receding up the road behind town and screaming down the trails towards Main Street. People drink beer, bet on the riders and watch as bike after bike plunges over the top of the hill, swerving and skidding sideways in long plumes of dust. The spectators might even stand up for a better view on the rare occasion a bike appears at the top of Crack Head, the steepest trail that runs down between two large pines to the back of the general store. This trail got its name a few years ago when Jimmy Arsenault lost control on it and hit a tree. You can still see the scar on the tree. Jimmy suffered a concussion and quit school soon after. His mother blamed his dropping out and his subsequent involvement with drugs on the tree. But most of the boys in Canal Flats leave school in grade ten and have problems with drugs.

Alison, Jimmy Arsenault's little sister, wobbles around the bar in her pumps serving pitchers of beer. She's just sixteen, very pretty and dressed sophomore style in a short-sleeved cashmere sweater. Though she's been working at the bar for a month, ever since the famous bet was laid, she can't set a drink down without spilling half of it over the table. Still, Pete, the bartender, has her on every night,

even week nights when the bar is mostly empty. He calls her Missy and treats her with an offhandedness that makes her hang her head around him. But she's earning money for college. She does well at school and people say she's going to make up for her brother and really go someplace.

Tonight the crowd of spectators on the front deck is much bigger than usual and growing. Jimmy's fate partly explains why the town is taking such interest in the prospect of a college boy doing the Crack Head. In addition, this college boy is going down in a VW van, otherwise known in these parts as a "Very friggin' Wobbly piece of hippie shit." Best of all, he's a treeplanter, and ever since the Asian stock market crash slowed down the logging industry, treeplanters receive higher wages than anyone else around here and aren't too popular as a consequence.

When it became known that the bartender put the boy up to it and was offering odds that he would make it, just about everyone in town came round to the bar to place a bet. And when they came they called the bartender Pete, instead of the usual Pierre, which wasn't his name in the first place. Maeve was the one who had dubbed him Pierre after she found out that he was from Montreal. The name had stuck despite his protests, for it had suited the thin figure and sensitive face he used to have.

Even Judy, president of the sewing circle, who had once hissed "Frog!" at him on the street after he stopped returning her daughter's calls, swallowed down a whisky,

waved two hundred dollars under his nose, money she and her ladies had raised from their bake sale and stabbed her thumb at the hill. "I'm telling you Pete, if your treeplanter fellow hits a rut, he'll go rolling ass over tea kettle."

The way Pete sees it, he wins no matter what happens. He stands to lose five thousand dollars if the boy crashes or backs out, enough debt to keep him working here for a while longer. But his loss will also lift some of the resentment that the town holds against all planters and that extends--though he hasn't touched a tree in over ten years--to him. If he wins, the money will take him as far away from this town as he wishes to go.

Inside the bar the decor hasn't changed since Bill Eisenor set Maeve up here and then left her for a younger woman. The room has red wall-to-wall carpeting, fake wood panelling and a stuffed bear head over the faux fireplace. The video poker machines came later when Maeve realised she wouldn't be able to keep herself on the sales of draft beer and the occasional shot of hard liquor. For some reason--perhaps it was the way she always made you feel as if you were asking her a favour when you wanted a drink, or the way she pre-empted any possible contempt with her own--she had rarely received a tip.

Maeve said she had envisioned this town as a peaceful retreat. She had been ready to retire. She admitted women aged quickly in her profession, for at forty, though her legs

were still firm from table dancing, her skin had wrinkled into crepe paper on her neck and deep lines ran from the sides of her nose to her mouth. Her breasts pointed downwards, pendulous and huge. During a long conversation and if she was standing, she had the habit of gathering them up impatiently with both hands and holding them away from her body, like a present. "I got the implants for that bastard Bill," she told people.

Bill had described to her the lilac bushes on Main Street, the small business he would buy for her, the children who skateboarded down the middle of the street. He would take her away from her cramped flat off Hastings Street in Vancouver, her nervous walk home after the club had closed, her fear that a discarded needle would spring up off the sidewalk and embed itself in the thick flesh of her calf. He said she would be happy in this town and he would drive out from Vancouver every weekend to visit her.

Canal Flats, named after a canal project abandoned in the twenties, was reborn out of a natural disaster--a forest fire that had burned a whole summer long, through two valleys and over fifty thousand hectares of land. It was the biggest forest fire ever recorded in B.C.'s history and a tourist attraction for those willing to drive an hour over rutted dirt roads to see its charred moonscape. Until the fire, the town had got by on money from a nearby gypsum mine, a small saw mill and the occasional tourist. After the fire, the local saw mill expanded to salvage the burnt trees, to strip

the singed bark from the trunks before insects and drying ruined the wood. In a couple of years the mill grew to ten times its original size. Rectangular stacks of honey-coloured planks covered a square mile. The town kept pace by sprouting new houses, decks, swimming pools, paved driveways, ATV's and shiny trucks.

Despite its money, the town has the air of a new toy forgotten in the mud. The men stretch out on their couches in the late afternoon sun, too tired after a day at the mill to do anything but watch TV and drink beer. To stave off boredom, the women play bingo or organise the only event of the year: the annual road rally. Each first of July, every truck in town speeds along the dusty logging roads, fishtailing around the corners to the next clue. First prize is five hundred dollars--enough for a drinking spree at Maeve's bar.

To Pete, Maeve embodied the spirit of the town: its chain saw boots, its whining motor bikes, its police dogs, its Garden Restaurant that smelled of grease and lemon polish. Maeve wore acid-washed jeans and a pastel lycra top that revealed the tops of her brown-spotted breasts and the dark, slack valley between them. Her face was handsome if you caught it at a certain angle in the dim red light of the bar. She slid a beer at you so abruptly that you had to bend over and take a sip quickly to keep it from spilling all over the counter.

At first, she had wanted nothing to do with Pete or any other of the treeplanters who had arrived that spring in a long procession of vans and cars painted with peace symbols, and set up camp in the mountains close to the forest fire. They showed up at her bar with messed-up hair and wearing the same plaid hunting jackets and flesh-coloured safety boots that the men in town wore to work, as a fashion statement. One night when they came down to watch M.A.S.H., she refused to turn on the television over the bar.

"Go outside and read the sign," Maeve said, gesturing towards the door. "Does it say 'theatre'? Well, does it?"

The planters admitted it didn't, but would she mind turning on the TV anyway?

"I got in Dunhill's for you folks, I got in cranberry juice for your fancy drinks. Don't I do enough for you?"

The more contemptuous Maeve was, the more the planters tried to win her over. They left her enormous tips, tried to tell her jokes and took to calling her Maevie. They talked about her constantly, trading stories of her latest rudeness in the cook shack at night. Pete, however, began to have fantasies about Maeve. She yearned for respect, he imagined. A house and kids--she wasn't too old for kids. A husband who lay on the couch before dinner. She wanted the townspeople to stop telling anyone who cared to listen, "She used to be a whore, you know." Maybe she wanted to travel--Christmas in Florida. And she despised the planters, he decided, for feeding off her. She saw through their attempts to experience

through her, a piece of the world that they, as urban, middle-class, students, had missed out on.

Soon he was thinking about Maeve all day long. He imagined fondling her enormous breasts, submitting to her impatient movements. He began to go down into Canal Flats more frequently, on any excuse--to buy cigarettes for people, or to pick up the mail. He went after supper, eating quickly and shunning invitations to play Scrabble in camp.

The more time he spent in town, the more the camp began to seem to him like Franklin's expedition, which took fine china and a library of books thousands of miles into the North. There were flowers on the tables, beer and cider in the coolers, jazz on the tape player, and a collection of paintings on black velvet strung along the walls of the cook shack. On days off, when the planters went into the bigger towns, they returned with new pieces from the second-hand stores to add to the art collection: Ballerina in a Spotlight, Small Dog with Flowers, The Bull Fighter.

After he had done his errand he would go to the bar and sit in the corner. He'd drink a beer, pretending to watch the hockey game, but mostly watching Maeve, excited by her disconsolate gestures. He told himself he was tired--tired of earning just enough money planting trees to pursue a career as a mediocre painter in Montreal, tired of art shows that only his friends and parents attended. The only paintings he had ever sold were by raffle draw. At his last show he had

overheard the gallery owner offering to buy someone a drink if they bought a ticket.

One night near the end of the season there was a bonfire and cases of beer to celebrate the day off. Pete went down to Canal Flats for cigarettes and stopped in as usual for a drink at Maeve's. After ordering, he took his usual seat to wait for Maeve to pour his drink and leave it for him on the bar. She would take her time if she felt like it, even though he was her only customer. That night, however, she poured the drink quickly and brought it directly over to his table. Then she stepped back, gathered her breasts in front of her and stood looking down at him.

"So Pierre, you've almost finished for the season."

He nodded and pushed some bills at her. Then, looking at the table he said, "I guess you'll be glad to be rid of us."

"Well!" said Maeve.

"I know we were probably a pain in the ass for you," he said, and suddenly he wanted to apologise for all the Maeve jokes and for the planters about to return to their bright, city lives.

Maeve pushed the money back at him awkwardly. "It's on the house tonight."

He looked at her, surprised.

"You planters can act pretty strange sometimes, I have to admit, but you never stuck up your noses at me." Her voice became louder, "You were always nice to me. Folks in town

never let me forget where I come from, but it seems like you all respect me."

Pete remembered how the planters around the fire had yelled after him as he pulled out of camp that evening. "Give Maeve our love!" Someone had shouted, "Bring her back with you, bring her up for a drink." This last comment had been followed by laughter. He was suddenly angry that they'd used her for fun and won her admiration at the same time.

He grabbed her arm, dizzy at the feel of her soft skin. "Maeve, those guys don't respect anything, least of all you."

She looked down at his hand with arched eyebrows and he sheepishly pulled it away.

"They don't respect anything, which is why they can accept me," she said.

"They make jokes about you."

"I don't blame them. I haven't been exactly friendly to them, have I? Maybe I feel like apologising."

He was trying to imagine the kind of reception an apology from Maeve would receive when she said, "You respect me, don't you?"

He said that he did and she smiled at him triumphantly. Then he rushed on to explain how he was different from the others, how he'd come to see that they weren't living real lives, but that they were like leeches, taking money and manners from here and there, as long as they didn't take anything seriously. Then he noticed Maeve was glaring at him.

"Well, mister know-it-all," she said. "You certainly seem to have it all figured out. But why don't you take me to your camp so I can judge who's worthwhile or not."

"You can't go up there," he said, thinking of the jokers around the campfire.

"Well, if you don't take me, I'll ask one of your friends to the next time they're down."

Maeve came into the cook shack tent late the next morning tousle-headed and looking much younger than her forty-two years. He had dropped her off by the camp fire the night before and headed to his tent, ashamed that he couldn't deal with the subtle jeering Maeve would be in for as soon as the planters got over their astonishment. "Where did *you* disappear to last night?" she said, when she saw him. Then she shrugged and he could feel her scorn settle on him, but he knew it was a different kind of scorn than she'd levelled at them all before.

"I was tired. Too much beer," he said lamely.

"Well, it sure is different to wake up in an old clear-cut full of squeaking gophers and be served a steaming cup of cappuccino. Down in the Flats they'd say, 'Cappu what? Do you think you are in a bistro?'" She took a delicate sip of her coffee and turned to survey the room. He saw that she was wearing a planter's T-shirt, one with sweat stains from the planting bags still visible even after an industrial wash. "You sure have got bad taste in art around here," she said.

When he took her back to town, she went into her bar absent-mindedly, her eyes sliding over the dusty tables, sneezing at the stale cigarette smell. She left town a few weeks later, after hiring him as the bar's manager and giving him her bank account number to deposit any profits. "You definitely have the smarts," she had said, with a little too much emphasis. " I trust you." She got a lift with a planter named Dave, who played Neil Young songs on his guitar and who had once boasted that he had slept with twenty women in four months. Dave stopped his van in front of the bar and went around to open the door for Maeve, sliding his hand gently under her planting T-shirt and onto a cheek of her bicycle-short clad bottom as she got in. Pete stood in the doorway of the bar and watched them drive away, the last in the procession of trucks coming down from camp and heading back to Vancouver. It was only when he lifted his eyes from the receding trucks to the junk pile across the street that he began to feel some relief.

The planters continue to arrive each April when the snow's melted on the mountains. They trundle through town in their old cars and vans and in the shiny rental trucks that take them from their camp to the clear-cuts each day. They are the last of the forest industry workers to keep their jobs. The lumber yard is full of square stacks of planks wrapped in white plastic starting to turn grey and rip from exposure. The saws are silent and the giant jaws of the tree-

lifters slack. Most of the mill has been laid off until the market recovers. But people wonder if their jobs will still be there when it does. The salvaged trees from the forest fire and the prime timber in the mountains next to the burn have all been cut; the forest industry is down-sizing all over B.C. It is as if the whole town is holding its breath, waiting for the machinery to start up or for some signal to start looking for work in the more prosperous towns.

Steve, the planter taking on the Crack Head tonight, appeared in the bar a month ago. Pete could tell right away he was a treeplanter by his short hair, sixties style golf shirt and extra-large skater pants. It's the kind of outfit all the planters wear on their nights off, when they come down to the bar to watch TV, shoot pool and drink beer. Pete noticed Steve in particular, for he stood in the doorway for a few seconds and checked out the room, shaking his head and smiling. He shuffled up to the bar and pointed to the stuffed bear head. "Is that, um, for real?" He breathed heavily through his mouth and talked from the back of his throat like he had a bad cold.

"Shot it myself in the mountains, up by where you're camped," Pete joked.

"Are you telling me there are bears around here?"

"Sure, they raid peoples' garbage all the time." Pete paused and watched the planter's eyebrows go up in alarm. "A kid in this town got carried off by one." He gestured at the

bear head. "Shot that one from the road. He was just sitting there blinded by the headlights."

"Isn't that illegal?" Steve looked doubtful, but impressed and shouted over to his friends, "Pete here says there are bears up in them hills." They looked up from the pool table. "I'm going home," he said in a whiny voice and the others laughed and went back to their game.

That night, Pete felt like talking. Usually he was uncomfortable around the planters, unsure of how to act when they found out that he had been a planter too. But it had been a long winter what with half the town laid off and he welcomed the opportunity to talk to anyone new. The winter, too, had seen the end Pete's relationship with Mary, a surveyor and tree-checker who lived on an old ranch in the sagey hills between Canal Flats and the nearest town. Pete had met Mary on the cut-block, while he was planting. She worked for the Ministry of Forests and had been sent out to check the crew's quality. A few months later she had visited him at the bar and taken him home with her. Many mornings over the past seven years Pete had woken up beside Mary, full of loathing for her Ikea furniture and crisp sheets. She told him he was wasting himself in Canal Flats. He'd agreed and encouraged her to see other men. When she finally did marry another man, a geologist, and moved away, Pete found he wasn't as glad for her as he pretended to be.

Pete gave Steve a beer on the house and made up some more bear stories. He told him about Canal Flats, inventing

child brides and hinting at incest. At first, he couldn't tell if Steve believed him or not, but in the middle of his act he recognised the look on Steve's face. It was the same greedy expression Pete had turned on Maeve years ago. Under this guy's cartoon voices and trendy clothing, he wanted something from Pete--a piece of down-trodden, hard living. He wanted from Pete exactly what Pete had wanted from Maeve. Under Steve's hidden, admiring look Pete felt himself expand to fit exactly the character he had wanted to become. The mirror behind the bar confirmed it. The sallow skin on his face clung to his cheekbones and gathered into pouches beneath his eyes. His hair, streaked with grey, hung in greasy strands about his ears. And then suddenly Pete felt angry that this puny, fresh-faced boy, who reminded him so much of himself at that age, had the power to confirm anything.

When Steve turned his head slightly at the mosquito whine of the last motor bike descending for the evening, Pete said, "I know you planters think you're tough, but I bet you couldn't make it down one of our trails."

"You're right. I'm not tough," said Steve. He widened his eyes. "Are you challenging me, dude?"

"Could be."

"Cool!" said Steve.

The next day, Pete had said to Rick, the Chinese cook at the Garden Restaurant and his only real friend in town, "I tried to talk him out of it."

"Yeah right you did, I bet you put him up to it."

"He was so full of himself, he didn't need much putting up to. But he'll probably make it if he's a good driver."

"In a Volkswagen van?" said Rick, eyeing him cautiously. He had lost a few thousand in Pete's gambling machines in the past year. "Not a chance." Then after a long pause he put down his chopping knife.

Rick stood on the front step, slowly rubbing his hands on his apron and gazing up at the Crack Head. "How much are you willing to bet that boy makes it down the hill in one piece?"

There are about thirty townspeople on the front deck of the bar now, watching as the sun sinks behind the hills and the hoodoos cast jagged shadows onto the roofs of the houses below. The hill looks steeper encased in shadow, its narrow path barely visible. The town fire truck is standing by, hoses at the ready and the lumber mill's First Aid man has volunteered his services if they're needed. At the sound of distant drum beats the crowd looks towards the road that winds down from the mountains. Around the final bend comes a white truck streaming plastic flagging tape, filled with planters who chant "Steve, Steve, Stevie," thumping their feet on the bed of the truck and banging beer cans together. The townspeople on the deck shift perceptibly. Behind the truck, Steve's VW van slows and turns off onto a narrow track that heads up through the trees to the hill top. "Jeez, will

you look at them," the Canal Flatters say to one another, their animosity tinged with pity. They are sure this boy won't make it.

Pete appears at the door of the bar. He's changed into a maroon polyester suit with bulls embroidered on the lapels and a battered cowboy hat. A caricature of someone who might have hung out in the bar in the 70's.

The Flatters look at him and whistle loudly. "Looks like you've been shopping at the Good Will store."

Pete hooks his thumbs in his belt loops and spreads his cowboy-booted feet wide. "My boy Steve is going to make it down that red-neck hill all right!" he announces.

There are derisive whistles and boos.

"Tell us another one, Pete," says Judy Sewing Circle getting up to go to the washroom and punching him playfully on the shoulder on her way by. "Old Crack Head has it in the bag."

"My boy Steve has it in the bag," says Pete. "Steve, Steve, Stevie!" He stomps his boot on the floor and looks at the Flatters challengingly.

When the Flatters chant back, "Crack, Crack, Crack Head!" he turns away grinning, buoyed like a maestro in front of an orchestra by their response.

As soon as the planters alight from the truck, the crowd in the front divides: planters on the grass and townies on the deck. It's as unconscious and as natural a division as

that between the men and the women at any of the few parties Pete has been invited to in his ten years in this town--parties where he'd stood uncertainly between the two groups. Pete knew the women who came by in the day for a beer and to lose fistfuls of quarters at the poker machines; he'd gone out with a few of them, though not for long. On dates they were polite and tentative and tried to make references to things they thought he'd be interested in. It was only when he didn't ask them out a second time that they became scornful, like Maeve had been. He knew the men who dropped in after work and who talked less, more distrustful than the women of an ex-treeplanter who was connected in some way to Maeve. People spoke of Maeve negatively when they mentioned her at all, hoping that Pete would take the bait and corroborate the rumours, disappointed when he revealed nothing. "She was a whore anyway," they concluded, as if this explained her quick escape into a life or class they believed Pete still represented.

The treeplanting girls this evening wear their short hair tied up in half a dozen tiny ponytails. They sit on the grass with their arms draped around one anothers' shoulders and their legs spread wide. Alison, wobbling around with her trays of beer, looks at them in admiration. The planting boys are thinner than the girls and take up less space. They hunch their shoulders, hug their knees and drink their beer in small sips. It's the girls who make forays into the townspeople's territory, for an ashtray, a cigarette, a chair

that no one is using. And it's the girls whom Pete approaches now.

They sit up and eye him with curiosity. His outfit is more retro than theirs.

He hooks his thumbs in his belt loops again and spreads his feet wide. "So are you losers ready to order yet?"

The girls jab one another in the ribs and grin at him. "You're the one who's going to lose tonight, mister."

"I think it's pretty safe to say our Crack Head has it in the bag," he says. "Crack, Crack, Crack Head."

The girls jump to their feet and look from the hill to the deck and then back to Pete. "Steve, Steve, Stevie," they say tauntingly at him.

"It's Crack Head all the way, doll faces," says Pete.

They sneer at him and chant louder. "Steve, Steve, Stevie!"

Up on the deck the Flatters hear them and take up their chant, "Crack, Crack, Crack Head!"

Pete retreats to the doorway and stands grinning as the two groups vie to drown each other out. His teeth shine like yellow kernels of corn. What ever the outcome now, it will be a momentous one.

Up on the hilltop Steve appears without his van, yelling something in a far-away voice and gesturing.

"His van's probably stalled again," a girl wearing army pants beneath a short, flowered dress, shouts over the chanting.

"It's the alternator," a boy in a maroon cardigan shouts back. "But he doesn't listen to me."

"Oh that *boy*," the girl rolls her eyes. "I'll go see what's going on with that silly boy." The girl stands, shakes grass off her dress, gets into the pick-up and drives off up the hill.

The chanting has increased the demand for beer. Alison serves it clumsily, at one point tripping and sending a pitcherful foaming across the red carpet. Pete strides over to her, slides his hand up her arm almost to her armpit and squeezes hard. She pulls away, the white marks of his fingers coming out on her skin. "Just be careful, will you?" he hisses at her. And then, emboldened by the clamouring voices outside, he lets his hand rest slyly on her tightly-skirted rear. When she shakes him off, blushing, he leers at her.

Outside, the treeplanting girl has returned and explains loudly that Steve is having battery problems. "I gave him a boost and told him to wait until I came back down."

"Pour it in here, sweetheart," she says holding her glass out to Alison who is passing by with a bottle of beer.

Alison hesitates and looks back at Pete, who is watching the scene from the doorway with a satisfied expression on his face. "This is for someone else."

"Put it here, girly."

Alison hands her the beer and stands by uncertainly while the planter girl hikes up her dress and feels in her army pants pockets for money.

"You know, he has no idea how his van works," she says to Alison.

Alison shifts from one foot to the other.

"He can barely drive in the first place," says the cardigan boy.

"He's going to kill himself." The planter girl holds out a five dollar bill to Alison and makes a face of exaggerated concern. "Keep the change, sweetie."

Alison takes the money but doesn't move away.

"He's not going to get up enough speed to kill himself," the boy says.

"Well, I tried to talk him out of it one more time," says the girl, "but he's too crazy to be talked out of anything."

"Is he going to kill himself?" Alison puts down her tray and adjusts the front of her sweater.

Pete has walked up behind her. "No doubt about it," he says.

Alison whirls around in alarm. For a second she stares at him and then she takes a breath, collapses into the planter girl's arms like she's been practising and begins to moan.

The planter girl looks over her head and makes a face at the boy, but then she just holds Alison and rubs her back.

"He'll be fine honey, he's wearing a helmet. I was just kidding."

Alison's moans turn into wails and the chanting dies away. The whole bar is looking at her. The planting girl is half-laughing and still stroking. "What's the matter, baby?"

Pete grabs Alison's shoulders and tries to separate her from the planting girl. "I'll take her. It has got something to do with her brother, I imagine," he says, loudly. "He got hurt on that hill." He tries to pry open Alison's fingers but she holds on hard to the other girl.

"Come on!" Pete says between clenched teeth. "Are you going to make me look bad, Missy?"

Uneasily, everyone trains their eyes back on the hill. But as Steve's yellow van appears at last, Alison's wailing changes pitch and becomes a high, keening cry like a siren, winding down at the end of each breath and bursting out again on a high, heart-stopping pitch. In an abrupt and silent consensus, attention turns back to Alison. The treeplanting girl holds her to her chest and glares at Pete who is making what-did-I-do signs and retreating backwards into the bar. And as Steve comes over the edge of the hill unobserved, Pete takes his pay from the cash register, hurries out the back door of the bar and gets into his Jeep. He turns the key in the ignition quickly, to drown out any sounds from outside.

The Barbecue

Over the years Woody had marked Frances's birthday in some small way. The summers he'd still been planting he'd take his guitar out to the cut block and spend the day playing tunes amongst the stumps and purple fire-weed. Then when he stopped planting and moved to Montreal he'd quit work early and go out for a few beers. Once he'd even brought home a bouquet of flowers that had pleased his wife so much he hadn't the heart to tell her he'd been thinking of Frances.

A couple of times, Woody tried calling Frances on her birthday. When they had parted that summer she'd given him the only permanent number she had--that of her mother's cabin in Lac Tremblant. But each time, he had been informed that Frances was travelling or working abroad. Her mother hadn't been too helpful after she found out that he was an old treeplanting friend.

The year Woody's wife left him for good and Frances turned forty, he phoned the cottage again and this time Frances answered.

"I knew you'd be there," said Woody. "It's all coming together."

"What? Who's this?" said Frances.

He was shocked that she didn't recognise his voice.

"Really Woody, I don't know," she said, when he suggested that they meet.

"It's meant to be," he pleaded. "This is the first time I've talked to you in twenty years. You're turning forty. We're both in the area. And I wrote a song for you already."

"A song?" There was a pause at the other end of the line. "Well, I'm having a little barbecue. You could come to that..." Frances's voice gathered speed. "Yes, come. My friends would love to meet you."

On the way to the cottage, Woody rehearsed Frances's birthday song. It compared her to a tree and rhymed "Frances" with "branches." Most of his songs rhymed, like those of Woody Guthrie, after whom he'd named himself. The songs were also often about trees, so his name worked that way too. He was so engrossed in his singing that he missed a turn and found himself in a ski village instead of at the lake.

The village had a fake, Old World feeling to it. Pots of begonias hung from wrought iron lamp posts and brick sidewalks lined the streets. He parked and got out to look for a phone. It had been unnaturally hot for weeks and he reeled a little as the sun hit him. When he reached out to a nearby car for balance, the car said, "This is the Viper. Stand back!" and people looked. He went into a grocery store which had antique jars and bottles in its windows.

"Where am I?" he said when Frances picked up the phone, "Disney World?"

"You're still coming, aren't you?" she said anxiously. "I told people you were coming."

"I don't know if I can make it. Seems like I got lost and landed in a theme park."

"What? Oh, the town..." She repeated the directions and finished, "You'll know the place by all the cars. Everyone's here already."

Before Woody left the store he bought a case of blueberry beer. "If I like blueberries and I like beer, I'll like this blueberry beer, right?" he asked the saleslady.

"To be honest with you, it tastes like blue Mister Freezies," she told him.

"Groovy," said Woody. "My friend will get a kick out of it!"

He also bought a family pack of cheese-filled chili dogs, remembering how Frances had loved to roast hot dogs over the fire.

Woody parked his Volkswagen Beetle on the road between a Pathfinder and a Toyota Jeep and followed the red arrows through a stand of rhododendrons to the edge of Frances's property. The cottage was old and big with a balcony running all the way around it. It looked freshly-painted, new lime-green gingerbread trim tacked around its eaves. In front, the lawn sloped towards the lake and ended in a short bank. Below the bank a red stretch of sand lead to the water.

Frances broke away from the people on the lawn and strode towards him. He stood uncertainly, bag of beer and

dogs in one hand, guitar in the other, until she gave him a quick hug.

"Look at you," she said, standing back and holding him at arm's length, "That Jim Morrison hair is a little grey maybe, but otherwise you haven't changed at all!"

Woody sucked in his gut, glad that he'd dabbed some of his wife's concealor under his eyes before he left his apartment.

"Neither have you, man," he said, overlooking the tailored shorts suit that made her seem so solid and her hair with its good blond dye job, hair spray holding it smoothly in place. She had once had the wildest hair in camp. By the end of the summer it had dreaded into one big ball at the back of her head.

She held out the bottom of his T-shirt to read its lettering. "Mountain Peak Enterprises. This is our old treeplanting shirt."

Woody had dug it out of storage that morning, a faded tie-dye with a bastardized yin-yang symbol on the front that had a tree and a shovel in place of the black and white dots.

"Cool, eh?" said Woody, "I thought it would bring back some good memories."

"This is too perfect!" she said, leading him towards the cottage.

"What's up with the gingerbread house?" he asked. "Looks like the village I just passed through."

She widened her eyes at him. "We bought the place from Mummy last summer and fixed it up. It's a bit of a commute from Toronto, but we love it out here." She paused. "Lance and me. I'm married you know."

"So am I."

"Oh, good." She looked relieved.

"But we're separated."

Woody had told his wife that if he only gave his music a chance, he'd really go somewhere. His wife had said that she'd be the one going if he quit his job again.

"Lance and France," said Woody, "I can't believe you married a guy called Lance."

Frances waved her hand at the lake. "Anyway, he's out there swimming all the way across and back. Pretty damn impressive. It's over three kilometres."

Woody looked around at the guests who stood in groups, clutching their drinks like bridesmaid bouquets and watching Lance's head bobbing in the waves.

Frances took Woody's guitar and bag and put them under the picnic table. "Now, what will you have? A gin and tonic? Oh, of course, you'd rather have a beer, wouldn't you," she said, getting out a bottle for him.

When Woody pointed out the label and suggested she try it, she looked doubtful.

"Do you remember this old trick?" Woody put the bottle to his mouth and cracked off the lid with his teeth.

"Seriously!" said Frances. "Now I want you to meet everybody."

She led him around from group to group presenting him impudently, like a bad driver's license photo. "Now here's something I bet you didn't know about me," she repeated. "You won't believe it, but I went treeplanting with this guy. We lived in a camp on the edge of one of the remotest lakes in B.C. with bears and bugs and everything. You should have seen me. I had the dreads, the ripped jeans...And the rain...!"

"The rain was pretty bad," Woody broke in eagerly. "But our tent was..."

"Isn't this a scream," said Frances in a rush and pointing. "Look at this shirt. I had the very same shirt once."

Frances left Woody with her mother, who said, "Have I met you before?" and looked him up and down as if she hoped not.

"We talked on the phone a couple of times."

"Oh, yes..." said the mother, pulling her gold chained glasses off her nose and waving them towards the lake. "Lance is a very strong boy, isn't he?" Her voice was blurry with alcohol.

"I guess so," said Woody.

"And you wouldn't expect it of an economist. But Lance is an all rounder," she said pursing her wrinkled lips. "An all rounder." She pulled forward the tall woman standing beside her, a woman whose posture made Woody think of riding

lessons. "This is Cecelia. She gardens," the mother said. "You must excuse me." Mother tottered away.

"So you're a treeplanter," said the gardener glancing at him and then training her eyes over the water.

"I don't plant anymore, actually. I'm a musician," he said firmly.

"Hmmm," said the gardener, scanning the water. "Do you see Lance out there? Oh *there* he is."

A while later, Woody found himself standing beside an airplane pilot who was dressed in canvas, like a member of an African safari.

The man pushed back his Tilly hat and leaned conspiratorially towards Woody. "Frances has been telling us about her planting adventures. I bet she was quite the gal."

The pilot's voice oozed like toothpaste, but Woody was pleased to hear that Frances had been talking about planting. "I guess so. She's a very spiritual person."

The pilot raised his eyebrows. "Spiritual?"

"She really got into the groove of being outside all day. She related to nature in a way I never saw in other people. For instance she used to take her sleeping bag down to the lake some nights so she could watch the animals come and drink."

The man looked into his glass and clinked his ice cubes around. "She didn't sleep in a tent...with you?"

"Well, of course. Most nights we were so baked from planting..."

"So she slept with you!" The man said triumphantly and took a sip of his drink.

Woody continued uncertainly, "The great thing about planting in northern B.C. was that it never really got dark. There was this cool energy in the air. Maybe that's what they mean by the spell of the north..." Woody trailed off, seeing that the pilot's attention was fixed on the dot of Lance's head in the lake.

"Tell me more about Frances," the pilot said.

Frances was suddenly in front of them, sticking out her chest, putting her hand on the pilot's arm and assuring him that Woody was the real thing.

The pilot placed his hand over hers. "Woody's been telling me some *very* interesting things."

Frances made a face and pulled her hand away. "What's he been saying about me?"

"I'm not telling," the pilot said, sticking his tongue between his front teeth and swaying his hips at her gently. "*You* ask him."

Frances watched the pilot walk away, gave herself a little shake and smoothed her hair behind her ears. She turned to Woody, her cheeks slightly flushed and her voice annoyed. "What have you been saying about me?"

"Nothing much. Just about how tuned in to nature you used to be. Probably still are, if you opened yourself up to it a little."

Frances rolled her eyes at him. "Oh *God*. Listen Woody, just keep me out of your crackpot theories, okay? Sure I went through a flower child stage, just like everybody else, but it was just a stage."

Woody didn't answer. He stared at the white splash of Lance's swimming inching towards the opposite shore. At last he said, "The people at this party are obviously not in tune with nature."

Frances sighed. "*In tune*, what does that even mean? These people probably see more of the country than you do."

It was true that Woody hadn't spent much time in the country since he stopped planting. All his songs were about the country, but he needed the stimulus of the city to write them.

"If they know the country so well, why are they so fascinated by a guy in a lake? These people are such city slickers, I bet if I climbed a tree it would blow them away."

"Listen Woody, if you're jealous..."

"No man, I'm cool. The guy must be okay if he went for you."

"Good," said Frances. She gave a little laugh, "If anyone is to be jealous it should be me. It's my birthday and I deserve all the attention."

The breeze made little ripples on the water. Lance was about halfway across now. For a minute Woody contemplated joining him. He would swim front crawl and catch up to him on the other side. They would race back, Woody staying ahead the whole way just until the end where he would gallantly let Lance pass him and reach the beach first. Woody thought about the time he and Frances had waded out into Williston Lake, how the shore had dropped off suddenly, how panicked he had felt as the sand slid away from under his feet and the water closed over his head. Frances had pulled him out laughing. Lance could probably swim across this lake and back twice in a row.

Woody went for another beer thinking of how Frances used to bring him presents from her piece: a weird-shaped stick, a fossil, a flower that she couldn't identify, words for a song that he'd been writing and that he'd played to her huddled against her in his tent, with a candle for light.

When he returned and put his arm lightly across her shoulders, she shook him off and stepped away.

He frowned. "Lance, Lance, Lance. That's all I've been hearing. Tell me about Lance. Why'd you go for him?"

She took a gulp of her gin and tonic, holding the drink in her mouth like medicine before swallowing. "I don't know. The usual."

"Shouldn't you like him for the unusual?"

"Cute," said Frances. "Okay, he's funny. He took me to this gallery opening once, of all these psychedelic

paintings. And imitated the artist like this." She closed her eyes and made her voice all breathy. "You have to feel the art, *feel* it." She opened her eyes again.

"I don't know much about painting," said Woody, suddenly feeling out of his element.

"Lance was a pretty funny guy," said Frances.

"Did you meet him planting?" Woody asked.

"Planting? I only went that one summer."

"I was sure you would go back. Not necessarily with the same company. Maybe in Ontario, or somewhere closer to here."

"I thought about it for about five minutes until Lance said he'd pay my rent so that I could look for a job in the city."

Woody took off the bandanna that kept his hair in place and shook his head as if he was freeing up his thoughts. Instead he felt a panic tightening behind his eyes. "You loved planting!"

"Loved it? Don't you remember how it rained all summer?"

Woody remembered the rain. It had fallen constantly from a low cloud hanging over the mountain tops. He remembered skidding down greasy logging roads in a company truck looking for the hot springs that some loggers had described. Shallow pools white with algae, that gave off a thick, rotten egg-smelling steam. The hot water had stung their cuts and bruises while the rain made patterns on the surface over Frances's pale skin. He remembered how they'd asked for adjoining pieces and fashioned a tent out of the tarp at

their tree cache. They'd stretched out beneath it on their breaks, listening to the rain drumming on the waxy cardboard boxes of trees beside them.

"What a nightmare," Frances said. "The mosquitoes were the size of hummingbirds. And the mud...Christ!"

"What about the cabins, do you remember the cabins?" asked Woody.

"Cabins...vaguely."

They had spotted them from the truck on their way home from work one day and had stopped to investigate. There were about six of them, built from stripped logs and still solid. Inside, racoon and squirrel droppings covered the remains of human occupation: the rusting baking soda and coffee cans, an axe head. The planters had run from cabin to cabin constructing stories. Perhaps gold miners had lived there, draft dodgers, Japanese families escaping internment. Frances had stood at a window, looked out at the view of the lake and fantasized about staying there forever. "We could live off the land in the winter and still plant in the summer," she had said, pulling off her bandanna and rubbing at the glass as if she was ready to spring clean the whole cabin.

Woody said, "Do you remember how you were ready to move right into one of those cabins and start a commune?"

She shrugged. "Can you see me in a *commune*?"

Woody looked at her, at her smooth, clear skin and the diamond on her finger. He finished his beer and set the empty bottle carefully on a rock.

There was a cheer behind them and they turned to see Frances's mother peering shakily through a pair of binoculars. "I can see him. He made it to the other side." She dropped the binoculars, swayed and sank onto the grass.

"Honestly, Mother!" Frances yelled. She thrust a bag of balloons at Woody. "Do me a favour and blow these up," she said and turned and hurried towards her mother.

Woody stared at the bag of limp, coloured plastic that read "Party Animals" and then at the opposite shore of the lake. He realised then that Lance was the one to blame. He had stifled the Frances Woody had once known. Woody drank another beer so fast that he felt blueberry bubbles buzzing in his stomach like revengeful bees.

Then he took a deep breath and held the balloons above his head. "Balloons, balloons! Everybody has to blow up a balloon for Frances." He went around handing them out. "A lion for you, an elephant for you..." His voice had become loud and upbeat like a fraternity. The guests mouthed their balloons tentatively, still glancing towards the water. Woody stretched out a balloon printed with a picture of a giraffe, took a deep breath and blew. The tightness behind his eyes intensified and then gave way as the balloon sprang into shape. He felt his head expand and get lighter with each breath. The giraffe squeaked hollowly beneath his fingers. "Hard work, eh?" he said to the pilot. "All my smoking is taking a dent out of my balloon-blowing abilities."

The pilot's balloon was the size of a tennis ball. "You're doing better than me," he admitted.

"Don't worry, man. It's not the size that counts," said Woody.

The pilot looked at him for a second and then snickered.

Woody blew one deliberate puff too many and his balloon broke with a bang that echoed around the lake. "Ow, my jaw!" He clutched his chin. "I think it broke my goddam jaw." He wrapped his bandanna tooth-ache style around his face and tied it under his jaw. Some of the guests began to smile.

"I really did break my jaw once, and both my wrists, in a motorcycle accident," he said to the pilot. He demonstrated how he had talked with his mouth wired shut, how he had tried to play guitar with his toes.

"Hilarious!" said a woman in a long black dress who'd been introduced to Woody as a civil servant.

A while later Woody led some of the guests behind the cottage. "Mary Jane?" the gardener had looked at him in bewilderment. And then said slowly, "Well, why not...I'm not a complete innocent, you know." When they returned Woody collected the balloons from the guests and climbed the oak tree in the corner of the lawn. "Somebody catch me if I fall!" he yelled. The gardener ran giggling into the house and returned with an armful of cushions that she spread under the tree. Soon, a dozen people were lying back beneath a shower of twigs and leaves, watching the balloons bobbing against the sky and Woody clamber wildly from branch to

branch. He looked down and saw that no one except Frances was watching the swimmer now.

When he was on the ground again he said to Frances, "See, it's pretty easy to be the life of the party."

She frowned at him. "Why are you talking in that voice?"

Woody concentrated on making his tongue work properly. "I'm drunk."

"That's not a drunk voice, that's a showing-off voice."

"Can't a guy have a good time at a party if he feels like it?"

"I don't remember why I invited you," said Frances.

She marched away and Woody started in on another beer. He smacked his lips loudly. "Tastes just like blue Mister Freezies," he said. "Remember those?"

"Lemme me try it!" The civil servant's eyes shone redly. She took a sip and spat it out laughing.

Woody's face felt like thick rubber and he tasted the salt beads of sweat sliding off his forehead. He grimaced and finished the bottle.

"You seem to thrive on that stuff," the civil servant said.

"Can't get enough of it," said Woody.

The pilot approached him. "I heard you had some pot," he said in a low voice. "Got any left?"

When Woody, the pilot and friends came out from behind the house again, the barbecue had been lit and was producing a watery shimmer of heat. Woody looked at it and realized he

wanted to turn it off. The party was generating enough heat on its own. He wandered over to the picnic table and sat down, wanting cool and quiet. But the pilot had followed him over and was asking him what he'd brought to eat. When Woody pointed to the chili dogs the pilot seized them, bit open the package and laid six on the grill.

"Everyone has to try one of Woody's chili dogs!" he yelled. "If you like chili dogs and you like cheese, you're going to love these babies." He rolled the hot dogs around on the grill. Two fell through onto the coals and burst into flames. He fished them out with a fork and presented them, black and smoking like blown-out candles, to Frances. "Happy Birthday to you!" he sang. She gave a tight little laugh.

After the song the pilot asked Woody what he did for a living in Montreal, nodding his head when Woody told him and saying, "You know, I play a little guitar myself."

The gardener looked up from trying to clean ketchup off her front. "Why don't you play us something, Woody."

"Play us a tune," said the pilot.

Woody shook his head and looked out over the water. The sun flashing on the waves hurt his eyes. Lance was halfway back, swimming in a relentlessly straight line. He swallowed, pulled his bandanna from out of his pocket and wiped his face. The civil servant followed Woody's gaze over the water. "He's almost..."

"I'm going to eat one of my chili dogs," Woody interrupted her. "Care to join me?"

"Why, I haven't had a hot dog in years," the civil servant laughed. "I've forgotten what they taste like." She looked at them doubtfully. "I brought an avocado salad."

"Avocados don't even compare to cheese-filled chili dogs."

The civil servant called over to Frances, "Aren't you going to have one too?"

Frances looked around. "You couldn't pay me to eat one of those things."

The cheese inside the hot dogs had liquefied into a yellow oil that soaked through the bun. The meat tasted like spiced preservatives.

"Extra nitritey flavour," Woody mumbled through a mouthful. Just what I deserve, he thought.

After he choked down a second hot dog, the pilot came up to him again. "We're all waiting for you to play."

Woody looked for Frances. She was gathering up the cushions from under the tree.

"Well..."

The pilot took up a pair of tongs and hit them against the side of the barbecue. "Wood-y, Wood-y," he chanted.

"Wood-y, Wood-y!" the guests took up the chant.

Woody saw that Frances had paused beneath the balloon tree. He pulled out his guitar from beneath the picnic table.

Williston Lake, the site of their camp, was the product of a fifties dam project which had flooded whole valleys of trees, enough to have kept the logging industry alive for an

extra twenty years. The night of Frances's birthday, there had been northern lights which had lit up the lake and made the tops of the drowned trees along its edges stand out like black skeletons. Woody and Frances had been sitting on the beach in the flickering light, singing and playing guitar, when the water just offshore began to churn and the black snags of the trees shiver. One by one, some fast and some slow, the tree trunks rose out of the water, tilting and swaying like synchronised swimmers, falling over each other in long splashes.

Woody sat on the edge of the picnic table, a sandalled foot on the seat, and tuned up. Frances looked at him blankly, collected the last of the cushions and walked towards the house.

As the guests crowded round him and he positioned his fingers on the first chord of "Underwater Avalanche," it was as if the level ground inside Woody's own head slowly titled away, sending the words of his song--Frances, branches, avalanches--sliding into darkness and when the ground tilted back, he felt sea-sick.

"Er..." said Woody, his face dead white and sweating.

"Whoa!" The pilot took his guitar and directed him towards the house. "Let him pass!"

Woody walked to the cottage and was quietly sick into the toilet. Then he lay on the white-tiled floor and gazed at the watery reflections shimmering on the ceiling. He thought about the time that Frances had told him he should be a

professional musician. That she knew he had it in him. I can't even remember the words to my own songs, he thought. He rolled onto his stomach, pulled a package of cigarettes from his back pocket, but he was in the wrong position to strike a match. He lay with the cigarette in his mouth, his cheek against the cold tiles for a long time.

The party's attention focused on Woody as he emerged from the cottage. "What about that song? We're still waiting." He felt the blood throbbing in his ears, hunched his shoulders slightly and avoided their eyes. "He needs a break for a while," he heard the pilot say.

The beach was clayey and smelled faintly of sewage. Woody walked down to the edge of the lake, kicked off his sandals and waded in. The water was warm and muddy, iridescent spots of oil lying on the surface like flattened soap bubbles.

At the sound of a splash, Woody looked over and saw Lance lying in the shallow water beside the dock. He wasn't how Woody imagined him. He panted heavily, his round face white with fatigue, his hair sculpted into a wispy top-knot. Beneath the water his body appeared bloated.

He floated motionless for a minute and then took a deep breath and said in a taunting voice, "I know who you are."

Woody looked down into the water, at his pale feet disappearing into the mud. He wondered suddenly if the tiles

on the bathroom floor had left an imprint on his cheek and he reached up and fingered his face gingerly.

"I'm Woody," he said.

"I knew it!" said Lance and he added wildly, "Nice hair!"

Woody's hair made a bush-like shadow on the water. He took out his bandanna and wound it around his head.

"So Woody," said Lance, "am I the hero of the day?" He shook his head violently sideways to dislodge the water in his ears.

Woody closed his eyes and waited for the splashing to stop. When he opened them, Lance had submerged himself up to his neck and was eyeing him like a crocodile.

"I guess so," Woody said.

"What do you mean, you guess so? What did Frances say?"

Woody looked at Lance doubtfully and thought back. She hadn't said anything about heroes.

Lance sat up and hit the top of the water with the flat of his hand. "Christ! It's not as if somebody does this every day. I would have thought that she'd come down to see that I made it back alive at least." His face had gone from white to red. "Though I guess she was pretty busy catching up on the past with you," he said.

"A little."

"A little!" Lance mocked. "I bet you couldn't get her to shut up. I know about you treeplanters and your world. I've

talked to planters before. I've seen the pictures. I've seen the movie." He hit the water to emphasise "movie."

"Movie?" said Woody, confused. "What movie?"

"I try to get her to talk about it," yelled Lance. "I try and I try, but it's as if she thinks I wouldn't *understand*, or something."

And then Woody couldn't hear anything any more, though he could still see Lance's mouth working and his hand hitting the water. He looked around at the beach and saw that its red clay had become silver and grainy as sugar and when he looked back again the whole lake was shimmering. He pushed his voice up against the plug of dread that had formed in the back of his throat and yelled, "I can tell you all about it. I'll tell you how it was."

The water churned as Lance rose to his feet, large as Poseidon, crooked rivers of water running off his belly. And as he towered there motionless, it grew still, as if a cyclone was gathering up its breath and then all the shimmering light was rushing along the surface of the lake towards him, lifting him right out of the water. Woody heard the wind in his ears and then the tremendous splash of Lance crashing through the water towards him and roaring, "You can't tell me anything!"

Woody squeezed his eyes shut, stepped back and shouted, "Everybody look! Lance is back! He made it!"

When the wind stopped and he opened his eyes, Lance had climbed the low bank and the guests were running towards him, shouting and clapping their hands.

How Do I Look?

Oscar met me at the cafe looking as if he hadn't slept in a week so I suggested a drink instead of coffee. I bought him another pack of Dunhill's when he was in the bathroom because I didn't want him to run out. It was so pleasing to watch him lighting cigarette after cigarette, his hair falling greasily into his eyes while he described the visit from his ex-girlfriend the night before. She was heading out to B.C. to plant trees and had come by to claim their tent. She had tried one more time to get him to go with her.

"Mandy kept going on about the glamour of the job, the mountains, nature. She left out the part about working." Oscar made a harsh sound with the back of his throat. "I want to make money painting, not fucking up my wrist banging trees into the ground."

After a couple of beers he pushed his chair back and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. He was skinny with these big eyes of such a dark brown that in some light the pupil and the iris blended together. He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. Then he explained once more the reason for their break-up, how Mandy had practically forced him into an affair just to justify her suspicions.

"Mandy's that kind of complicated," he said.

The cafe was closing. He got up and reached for his jacket. "You should come and visit me in the Eastern Townships. The weather's been so good recently. The pond is warm enough for swimming." And when I said I'd go he gave a deep sigh and said, "Good!" Then he looked at me intently. "I don't mean to sound vain or anything, but I get the feeling that all the women I've invited out to my place lately expect to jump into bed with me. I just want to say that Mandy's wrong. I'm not that kind of guy."

"I hate women who are attracted to artistic men," I bluffed.

I had admired Oscar for a month, ever since he walked into my office all angles and dressed in black. I'm the secretary for an arts endowment fund and he was looking for money to produce a series of paintings of clear-cuts in B.C. He showed me the photographs of some of his paintings. They depicted burnt and smoking wrecks of landscapes, black snags of tree trunks pointing skywards like accusing fingers. I wasn't sure the paintings would fly because the foundation was into social change and his work was all despair and nihilism, which is why I liked it. I met him a few times afterwards and I helped him with the application. We talked about nihilism and about Mandy and then when he did get the grant we talked only about Mandy.

For all our conversations about her, she remained a shadowy figure. Like a high school girl with a crush, I concentrated almost as much on the sound of Oscar's confiding

voice and the cleft in his chin that appeared and disappeared when he talked, as on what he said about Mandy.

He stepped towards me and kissed me on both cheeks. "Good old Louise," he said, holding me by the shoulders at arm's length. "Thanks for listening. You're a real life-saver, you know."

After he'd gone I went into the bathroom to digest the invitation, gazing at myself in the mirror as I always do at the first opportunity after someone calls me "good old" to see if the title really applies to me. I was depressed to see that it did. Good old Louise was looking back at me, a comfortable fifteen pounds overweight with red cheeks proclaiming my fantastic health and the fact that I've never had a sleepless night in my whole life. I rummaged in my bag and pulled out a tube of lipstick that I carry around thinking it might at some point start to do something for me. I leaned towards the mirror and applied a dab, pressed my lips together and stood back. Its only effect was to make me look like a man in drag. I rubbed it off quickly with a piece of toilet paper. And then I thought about Walter.

I hadn't forgotten about Walter. I was feeling guilty as hell about sweet and steady Walter who I'd been seeing for seven years. He owned a deli that earned him a decent living and enough free time to hang out with me. We had plenty in common. He liked art--I'd met him at a gallery opening and we'd gone to dozens of shows together. When I visited him at the deli, he horsed around with the rude lengths of salami

and made me laugh. We'd acquired a shared past that was easy to mistake for love, but it wasn't enough. When I told him so, Walter would wrinkle up his forehead and say helplessly, "How do you know there's more?" I only knew that if I didn't get away from him soon, I would be eating salami sandwiches with him into my old age without ever having tried to find out.

Oscar came to get me next Saturday afternoon in his baby blue Volkswagen Beetle and when I got in, dressed up in a new pair of tight black pants that felt illicit, he hit me on the arm in a jocular way and said, "Punch buggy, no punch back!"

"No fair," I said and gave him a lame punch in return. I couldn't stop the backs of my fingers from pressing briefly into his arm. It was hard and sinewy, so different from Walter's arm, which was as soft as mine.

"Great you could come," he said, as if he'd been looking forward to it all week. Then he slapped a tape into the stereo like he was kick-starting a party and Country and Western music came on.

"I saw this tape on your desk at work the other day and went out and bought it," he said. "If you like it then I figured I probably would too."

I didn't have the heart to say the tape belonged to someone else because he started banging the flat of his hand in rhythm against the steering wheel as if it was the greatest music he'd ever heard.

We booted along through fairy-tale countryside: hills like loaves of bread, blue lakes and big hardwood trees in knolls. The colours were intense spring greens and yellows and when I cracked open the window, the air was sweet and cool. I felt as if a blanket was being lifted from me and I shivered a little. I looked at Oscar sideways. With the green whizzing past behind him he looked like some kind of dark bird flying above the scenery and not being affected by it.

At one point he slowed, turned down the music and pointed out a barn standing in a field. He said Mandy had made him stop along here once in a rainstorm and demanded he sketch it for her. But first she had made him get out of the car so that he could feel the aura of the place.

"The goddam aura if you can imagine that," he said. "She dreamed about that wet barn once and it gave her this special feeling that I was supposed to capture. I said I could capture it from inside the car, but she didn't agree and so I ended up getting soaked."

I looked at the barn and saw it really did have an aura. It looked alive, as if its red colour came from some kind of barn blood pumping beneath its shingled skin.

We passed the village of Mitchell Bay without stopping. Oscar wondered out loud how he had convinced Mandy to move out here at all. "She had nothing but contempt for small towns and their politics and called the place 'Snitch Bay.' She could be a nasty little snob sometimes," he said.

I come from a small town and could imagine it. If she had walked into the general store wearing the flamboyant rags of a treeplanter, eyes would have followed her silently and accusingly. When she left the store, the gossip would have flowed over the elbows that leaned on the counter.

"I like the anonymity of city living," I said.

"Sure, we all do," Oscar said. "But you can't be isolated like that forever."

His house was nestled in a valley past the village. We came round the corner and there it was: old and white and looking as if it had been there for a hundred years, which it had. Oscar had the place all firmed up on a foundation of history before I was even out of the car. A bee keeper and his family had lived there once. Oscar was going to get the old hives behind the barn cleaned up and filled with bees. Perhaps he would make mead and sell it in Montreal. I wanted to know if the place had stories of ghosts and women falling down wells.

"Mandy was always speculating about stuff like that," said Oscar. "But I never heard about any ghosts."

When he gave me the guided tour I was surprised to see him become all shy and eager, the way everyone does when they show someone around their house, watching me as if he expected to see some aspect of himself confirmed by my reaction to the place. As if I knew any aspect of him. He was still all mystery to me--as dark and forbidding as his

paintings. And so when his place wasn't how I'd imagined it, I did my best to hide my disappointment. There were no Pollock splashes of paint, no torn canvasses, no velvet or leopard skin fabric thrown around...well, I'd only been half-expecting the leopard skin. He and Mandy had fixed up the house together and it had polished hardwood floors and white walls which were okay, but in the kitchen, which I saw first, there was a trail of ivy stencilled along the tops of the walls, going right the way around the ceiling and crawling down one wall onto an old enamel milk churn that stood near the door.

I said, "Who's into the *tole* painting?" thinking he'd laugh at it and tell me it was the work of the bee keeper.

"I did it." He cocked his head to the side and looked at it as if he were seeing it again after a long time. "I like it, even though Mandy never did."

I wanted to side with Mandy. I pictured her standing in the kitchen, shaking her dread locked hair--I was sure she had wild hair--and putting her foot down at tole painting. "It's well done," I said doubtfully.

"Hey, you look good standing there." He had his hands in his pockets and was smirking at me. "I thought farmhouses would suit you."

I didn't know how to respond to his comment, but I liked his smirk, all crinkly around the edges with a bit of an invitation in it. Just that was enough to make my blood beat a little in my throat.

When we got to the living room Oscar stood in the doorway and surveyed the space with satisfaction. "Mandy's stuff is all gone. This is all mine."

There was a TV in one corner and a sofa against a wall covered in a brown polyester throw. His books didn't give anything away: *Love Signs: An Astrological Guide* stood between *The Iliad* and Bertrand Russell's autobiography. I pulled out the Bertrand Russell.

"Read this?" I said hopefully. I certainly hadn't, but I intended to, or books like it. I meant to better myself in every way. I had lists of bettering books tacked to my fridge and an admonitory note stuck to the top of the TV that said, "Turn off the TV, you slacker--go read something edifying." But what if Oscar was into *Love Signs*, what then?

"Maybe I've read it, but a long time ago and I can't remember it."

I considered the room again. It wasn't completely terrible. It was a room that didn't impose itself on you, a room that you could perhaps ignore if you felt like it. I asked him where all his paintings were and he said I could see his studio later.

The bedrooms upstairs were similarly dull and unobtrusive, but full of tacky portent, just because of their beds. I stood by the window in one room day-dreaming his thin hard arms pushing me down onto one. He wouldn't be like Walter, who always asked first. Outside was a pond with a split-rail fence around it and a small yellow field that

disappeared over the crest of a hill. Beside the field were the overgrown remains of an apple orchard.

"It's a fantastic view isn't it?"

I nodded. But it wasn't taking my breath away. Nor was it anything like the photographs he'd shown me of his paintings of clear-cuts.

"I don't consider you a guest," he was telling me. "I want you to feel like the place is your own." He untucked his shirt and I felt a little curl of excitement. "Do you want to join me for a swim in the pond?" He showed me where the bathroom was, said he'd meet me outside and then he left me alone.

The bathroom was more like it, more how I'd imagined his place to be. It was almost as big as the living room. It had red walls and a black sofa. A full-length mirror faced the Jacuzzi which sat on a cedar stage with steps up one side. I put on my bathing suit in front of the mirror. It was bright blue with gathers at the side and a modesty panel in front that I hoped hid the red spots from my thighs rubbing together. I turned sideways and sucked in my stomach and then walked over to the window and leaned out. Oscar had his feet in the water, his back towards me.

"How's the water?" I yelled.

He looked around. It was perfect; I was to come on down.

"No, I'm going to stay in this amazing bathroom all day." I was only half joking. I could sing arias in that

bathroom. I could take off my dorky bathing suit and hide under a mountain of bubbles. The pond looked small and muddy.

He didn't turn around as I approached him. "The bathroom was Mandy's creation," he said. "It's too gothic. Looks like some kind of museum with the huge bath on a pedestal."

I noticed his back was covered with acne.

"Are you a good swimmer?" he asked.

"I'm okay. I was forced to take lessons as a kid."

Walter and I went swimming every Sunday morning at the YMCA. Walter entered the water gently with a long quiet sigh, the same sound he used for making love and drinking coffee. Sometimes he put his heavy hands on my waist and lifted me so I floated on the very surface of the water. "Look how light you are," he would say.

Oscar crouched on a rock. "I'm glad you can swim. Mandy was totally neurotic about any body of water bigger than a bath. When she was ten she went to a barbecue at a cottage near a lake and took her two-year-old cousin down to the beach to float on an inner tube. Some time later in the day, when nobody was looking, the child tried floating on the tube by herself and drowned. Mandy never went swimming again."

"That's terrible..." I pictured Walter holding a baby, white and crinkled just below the surface, water flowing in and out of its mouth. Then I pictured Mandy shivering by the side of the pond, her shoulder blades sticking out on her back like the stumps of wings.

"Her fear's not unfounded," Oscar said. "But I heard that gruesome story more times than I can count. She repeated it to every guest that came, I swear. She *adored* telling that story." He dove in a sharp thin line, glided under the water and pulled himself up on a rock on the other side. He sat there looking across at me. "But maybe it's a good thing she doesn't swim," he said. "She was so skinny, she would look terrible in a bathing suit."

"I'm not a great swimmer either," I said, sucking in my stomach again. I fell forward and the water felt warm and slimy against my skin.

When the sun began to set we stopped swimming and went inside to change. He came downstairs in a pair of blue wind pants and a grey sweatshirt with his hair plastered down. He rubbed his hands together and announced we would make supper together.

Cooking was something I'd hoped to avoid this weekend. I cooked all the time, for Walter, for my mother, simply because I could do it well and fast. But it had come to feel like an expected role. I had brought a baguette, blue cheese and some fine smoked meat from the deli. I'd been thinking torn bread and crumbs of cheese on the floor.

"Mandy nibbled all day like a little mouse," Oscar said, handing me an onion and a cutting board. "Bread and cheese don't fill you up. My speciality is casserole."

He cut the meat into little squares, fried it with bacon and onions and added it to a big pot of noodles. He arranged pieces of cheese on top.

During supper I asked him how his painting was going, but he changed the subject. His casserole tasted all right, though bland. And when I told him how great it was he insisted I have a second helping. "It's good to see a person enjoy their food," he said. I drank a lot of wine.

"I'll do the dishes," he said when we were finished. "I want you to hear a tape of this stand-up comic from Maine--you'll love it." I hate stand-up comedy but I was too drowsy from the wine to protest.

It was worse than usual, the comic laughing at all his own jokes. Oscar kept coming in from the kitchen with a dish or a pot in his hand, saying, "Oh, this is a good one, wait 'til you hear this one." I smiled until my cheeks hurt because I wasn't quite ready to let go of all that I'd expected of Oscar.

After a while I stopped listening entirely. I noticed the glare of the overhead light, the sallow tinge of the walls and the stale, old furniture smell of the couch. I suddenly realised that I had planned to take the Sunday night bus back to Montreal. I was going to have to spend the whole day here tomorrow. I thought about the lame excuse I'd given Walter for skipping swimming and how he'd looked at me with his eyes half-closed, in a way that told me I wasn't lying very well. I hadn't even cared. I wondered if there was an

earlier bus tomorrow. Then I asked Oscar if I could have one of his cigarettes.

"*You* don't smoke," he said, coming out of the kitchen and taking off his wet apron.

"Once in awhile, in the evenings. I think I'll to do it more often because I like the image," I said pointedly, wondering how I could have mistaken Oscar so completely.

"It's a disgusting habit. I'm going to try to quit." He brought me an ashtray. "You look like a faker with a cigarette in your hand."

I smiled and blew some smoke rings.

"Do you want to see my paintings now?"

I said, "Okay," but I didn't really feel like it anymore.

Oscar had converted one of the barns into a studio and we went out through the back door and crossed a field of tall grass to get to it. It was a warm evening and the grass was wet and scratchy and full of slugs which stuck to my bare legs. He unlocked the door, reached in and snapped on a neon light which glowed eerily for a few seconds and then lit up the room. I stepped inside and blinked.

"Well, here they are," he said. "Take your time." And then he said he would see me back at the house because it made him uncomfortable to watch people looking at his work. "People are always self-conscious when the artist is standing behind them and feel obliged to say they like the way I did this or that. Maybe you won't like them at all."

Maybe I won't indeed, I thought to myself.

I glanced around. About twenty paintings hung at regular intervals against the barn's grey wooden walls. Even at a distance, I saw immediately that they were good. They were luminous. It was as if Oscar had started with a light blue or pink undercoating which had been completely covered by new paint, but which somehow became more insistent than before, like the overgrown foundations of an old house that make you picture the house more vividly than you would if it were actually there in front of you. They were all paintings of clear-cuts--black moonscapes like I'd seen in the photographs and in all the clear-cuts was Mandy. At least I assumed it was Mandy. It was a thin, female form in various poses: standing on a huge stump, crouched on all fours, saddled with planting bags and scraping at the ground with her shovel. She had long, dreaded hair. But beneath the hair her face had been replaced by those of different animals. She was a cougar, owl, bear, coyote, eagle bear elk and moose. My mouth felt dry and I suddenly needed to pee.

I ran outside and squatted in the long grass. The air smelled like ripe melons and the moon had risen, throwing out an enormous shadow of the house which stretched across the grass towards me. The house was black and I could see Oscar moving about in the kitchen. Then as I watched, he paused in front of the window. There was no way he could see me. He lifted his arms over his head and started to turn. He rotated smoothly, spinning faster and faster. He lowered his arms to

shoulder height and tilted his head to the side. I looked down to fasten my shorts and when I looked up, he was gone.

I went in and examined the paintings again. The best one was of Mandy with the face of a bear. She was trudging up a hill, her back bent under the strain of her bags filled with seedlings. Squatting incongruously in the middle of the clear-cut before her was the red barn we had passed earlier that day. I gazed at it for a long time.

Oscar didn't hear me come in. He was reading on the sofa and I looked at him for a few seconds before he noticed me. The room no longer looked sallow for the luminous quality of his paintings filled the space. My restored vision of him saw through his dingy outfit and made him dark and mysterious all over again. He sat with his legs folded awkwardly beneath him turning the pages of the book too rapidly to be reading it.

"W...Well," I stammered and he looked up. "I love your paintings." I realised everyone must say that.

"I'm glad you like them."

"I mean they are really moving, they *moved* me." I had the language for this--I read descriptions of paintings every day--but I couldn't find it now.

He said he wished the book he was reading moved him. He let it drop to the floor and when he leaned over the side of the sofa to pick it up his profile was sharply outlined against the wall. He said he hadn't been able to get any reading done for months.

"Because you were painting," I said.

"It's not that. I only paint for a couple of hours in the morning. I just feel like walking, cooking and watching TV. Reading requires too much effort these days. It pissed off Mandy, of course. She wanted us to be reading the same books and discussing them like the required texts for a university course."

I thought of his paintings. In my mind, Mandy's animal faces merged into one. For the first time I could clearly see her sharp and delicate features.

"Did she discuss your paintings?"

"Didn't she! It used to drive me crazy. If I had wanted to talk about them I wouldn't have painted them, right?"

"What were you thinking of when you painted that old barn on the hill?"

He shrugged. "Don't *you* start."

He draped his arm around my shoulders and gave me a squeeze. Did I want to watch a movie? He had lots of movies upstairs that he had taped off the TV. The questions I had about his paintings sank to the bottom of my stomach.

He told me I could pick whatever I wanted, but when I pulled out a movie by Fellini he said, "You don't really want to watch *that*, do you?" He told me it was the kind of movie Mandy always chose. "She considered herself some kind of Fellini expert, but I can't even sit through one without falling asleep." He suggested *The Return of the Fifty Foot Woman*.

"Nobody really means it when they say they'll let the other person pick out the movie," I said.

He pulled out *Mars Attacks*. "Have you seen this one?"

I hadn't.

"It's hilarious. You'll love it."

"I heard it was pretty good," I said.

I realised I didn't want to watch a movie at all. I wanted to get at that painter of the black clear-cuts. His slagging Mandy was obviously just a pose. Underneath, he had to love her intensity, that quality he'd so vividly portrayed. I just couldn't bring the same thing out in him. I could only bring it out in someone like Walter. At art galleries Walter had stood by my side examining paintings and discussing them, his face growing all red and animated. But in the end he always wished he was more of an expert and confessed he never knew what he was talking about.

We went downstairs and Oscar got some beer out of the fridge. We sat side by side on the sofa. He laughed like a maniac right from the start and slapped my knee at the parts that he thought were really funny. I kept glancing at him and wondered how the same person could paint those paintings in the barn and then sit here in wind pants getting a huge kick out of this movie. I squinted and the blue glare of the TV turned him into a fuzzy glowing blur.

When the movie was over his hand was still on my knee and he looked at me and said he hadn't had so much fun watching a movie with someone for ages.

"Mandy would have considered a movie like that a waste of time," he said, "but she never did know how to have fun." And then he noticed his hand was still on my knee and he seemed sort of surprised about it but didn't take it away. Instead he moved it up to my waist and leaned towards me and kissed me on the mouth. I suddenly remembered his twirling in the kitchen window and pulled away. I was feeling as if I was twirling myself now, and I hadn't asked him about it.

Before I could, he fell back on the cushions and said, "Good old Louise, you are really great--you know that don't you?" I didn't say anything but slouched further down into the sofa and he put his arm around me and started paddling his fingers between my breasts.

"I'll be right back," I said. I wanted the dark colours of the bathroom and to brush my teeth because my breath probably smelled like his--of onions.

I walked over to the sink and remembered my toothbrush was in the bedroom. His was abandoned-looking with dried brown stuff between the bristles so I ate some toothpaste instead and then opened one of the cupboards beside the sink. It held towels and toilet paper and on the bottom shelf, some brightly coloured clothes. I had never seen him in brightly coloured clothes. I pulled out a purple shirt. It was small, made out of some kind of stretchy material and had beaded tassels all around the bottom. And then I recognised it from one of the paintings. I held it against myself and looked into the mirror. Purple suited me. I hit the dimmer switch

and my skin immediately looked paler. I took off my shirt and pulled the purple one on. It was tight, but flattering. Then I opened the drawer under the sink and found a tube of lipstick labelled Autumn Frost. I leaned towards the mirror and applied a smear to my bottom lip. I pressed my lips together, fluffed up my hair so it stood away from my face and turned around. And there looking back at me was Louise, with an interesting, maybe even alluring face that sort of shone in the dim light and when I swung my hips the beads clicked at my waist.

I heard him open the door. I even expected him, since I had been gone twenty minutes and he must have been wondering what had happened to me. He stood in the doorway without moving and I could feel my face grow hot. Then he smiled.

I swished the beads. "How do I look?"

He started to laugh. "Fantastic! Baby, that *colour*...can you believe Mandy wore that thing?" He was laughing so hard that he needed the door frame for support.

I sat down on the edge of the Jacuzzi. My face felt swollen. I felt the bulge of my stomach and saw in the mirror what he must be seeing: a caricature with bright red lipstick, wild hair and a hippie shirt that was too small and ten years too young for the body inside it.

I took a breath, "What do you know about style anyway? My boyfriend wears wind pants like the ones you have on," I yelled. And for a second he did look like Walter ready for the walk to the YMCA.

He stopped laughing, looked down at his legs in surprise and back to me. He laughed harder than ever.

"Trust you to come up with something like this..." He wiped his eyes. Then he held out his hands. "Let's dance. I want to dance with you in that shirt."

When he tried to pull me to my feet I made myself as heavy as I could.