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Loon: A Novel

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ABSTRACT

Loon

Leanne D'Antoni

Loon is a novel that investigates familial relationships within a framework of biblical parallels. Like many seventeen-year-olds, the narrator questions her identity and her role within society - which in this instance have been shaped by her mother's insistence that she is the Second Coming.

Her mother's mental dysfunction and religious idolatry determine April's place in society and within her own family as a misfit, ultimately preventing a relationship between mother and daughter. Coloured by insanity and Christianity, Loon is about an adolescent attempting to establish her own identity beyond that which her mother has assigned her. In that sense, this novel investigates the familiar pattern of mother-daughter relationships through an ironic parallel with the Christian notion of God as the Father and God as the Son.

for Reg, Nellie, Arthur and Erma

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All Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible. Oxford University Press, 1989.

"Hold off! unhand me, graybeard loon!"

- Samuel Taylor Coleridge,
"The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Mrs. Mulsen is dressed as she would for the heathens, wearing crisp khaki pants and a fine, white cotton shirt. I can't imagine anyone would consider eating Mrs. Mulsen, all sinew and bone, even though she's spoken of cannibals in her missionary past. Stewing her, perhaps, or boiling her hide for soup stock, but actually taking a bite, that's another story entirely.

We are in Religion class. Mrs. Mulsen has written "Annunciation" on the board and is waiting for us to settle into our desks with her pointer in hand when Mellie, whose curly red hair falls to her shoulders in a perfect triangle, and is the source of all her troubles in life, leans forward to whisper in my ear.

"Mellie! Change seats with Ralph over by the window where you can't bother anyone," Mrs. Mulsen bellows. Ralph, a tall, lanky boy I've known since kindergarten, was moved there the week previous so he couldn't bother anyone either. "April, tell us about the Annunciation."

"Brown-noser," Ralph whispers.

"Fuckin' kraut," I called him last year when he sat behind me in Chemistry 20, but regretted it later. Now I ignore him, even the photos of humping couples torn from dirty magazines.

"Gabriel told Mary She's pregnant."

Mrs. Mulsen paces, tapping her palm with her pointer. She sighs, turns to the board and underlines the annunc in

Annunciation. "Gabriel announced to Mary, hence Annunciation." She raps the top of my desk with her pointer. "He announces that She will be visited by the Holy Spirit and consequently give birth to the Christ Child. Read Mary's response, April. Luke 1:38."

I know the passage by heart, but I open my Bible and read, "'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'"

Mrs. Mulsen hands me a stick of white chalk. "Write it on the board, please April."

Despite her bony frame, a pendulous, wing-like lobe of fat swings from Mrs. Mulsen's arm when she writes on the board, and her bum shakes and ripples beneath her khaki slacks and grey woolen skirts. A sudden panicked recollection of the summer before, when I was dunked at Our Lady of Perpetual Grace's Spring Fair: my yellow cotton pants like Saran Wrap over underwear printed with The Bay's Christmas Bear proclaiming, "Unwrap Me First." I angle my body sideways against the board and write, "Luke 1:38. Let it be with me according to your word."

At about the same age, Shakespeare's Juliet was swooning madly, teased, charmed and finally won over - dead not much later, but still, she'd swooned. Mary's deflowering must have been antiseptic, steel cold and terrifying - all the more so for the petals left on the rose.

Mrs. Mulsen points to our posters of Mary. Always in

blue, face alabaster, palms upturned in a gesture of resignation, peace, benevolence - I never can tell. We were asked to draw the Holy Family in grade two and Chuck Bazant was sent to the office for making God a happy, Marcel Marceau-type mime in the sky. Chuck obviously hadn't heard enough of the Old Testament. Dolores told me she's seen Chuck in Automotives, and I saw him myself this September on the way to our annual commencement sermon. I sometimes wish I had the nerve to go down to Automotives and thank him for all the times he hid me from Aunt Sis.

"Mellie. What can you tell us about Mary?"

"She's a virgin," Mellie cracks through her gum.

"In the garbage, miss."

"What is most important about the Annunciation? Marion? How did she react to Gabriel?"

"She was scared."

"Yes, Marion. 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.' And Mary accepted the Holy Spirit willingly."

Ralph hisses in my ear, "You'd accept me willingly, wouldn't you, April?"

Not Luke, and least of all Mrs. Mulsen, will convince me a fourteen-year-old happily put out for an angel come to announce to her in the middle of the night. Scream, widdle, run for her mother is more like it. Maybe teenagers were used to angels and burning bushes back then, but there is no

denying the tight spot Mary must have found herself in - pregnant, unwed and, despite all the contrary evidence (the swelling belly, which June Abbington managed to pass as gaseous distention for a whole four months before she was finally caught out), still a virgin.

Joseph is forced into a shotgun wedding by God Himself. Mary gives birth in a barn with the livestock watching, the whole of Herod's army breathing down Her newly-wedded neck, and the frankincense, myrrh and gold sunk into savings funds, but the investment company never could hold water being Cousin Sherman's last-ditch attempt at a respectable enterprise and Joseph knowing it all along but unable to look into Sherman's eyes and tell him so. Mary and Joseph escape with their infant son to Egypt and their friends' sons are murdered in their cribs by Herod's men. All this, and no sex. No sex, and maybe no sex ever. No mention of any siblings or the fate of Mary's perfectly preserved virginity, not to mention Joseph. Aunt Sis, my mother, knows about these things intimately. She is an expert on virgin births, having suffered through one herself.

Mrs. Mulsen holds up an art book, <u>Michelangelo, the Passion</u>. "Michelangelo's Pieta, the best-known representation of the Virgin grieving over the body of the dead Christ." Fluorescent lights bounce off the glossy pages and we bow over our desks in a unified squint.

"Grieving?" Ralph snorts. "She doesn't look too upset." I can make out only a ghostly shimmering of marble, but I know

every fold, elbow and limb by heart. Aunt Martha ripped the Pieta out of a "Reader's Digest" before I was born and tacked it to the living room's yellowing walls. The four corners have long since curled up and rolled inwards - the air in our house humid, thick with cigarette smoke, the paper brittle enough that the corners might break off and roll away in my palm if I touched them.

"Mrs. Mulsen?" Ralph again, his arm waving like a flag above his head. Mrs. Mulsen acknowledges Ralph with a lengthening of her neck, lifting her chin upwards and out, pointing at him like a crooked finger. "Mrs. Mulsen," he begins, "if Christ is thirty-two, or even twenty-nine, I mean, Mary doesn't look any older than thirteen - uh, Ma'am."

"Mary's body was free of corruption, Ralph. As was her soul. The European masters chose to depict Mary in a state of perpetual youth because they believed that the purity of the soul is reflected in the body."

Aunt Martha and Uncle Dan made a pilgrimage to Rome before I was born. Well before Aunt Sis dropped the last remaining screw that had kept her mind in place, before the horrible accident involving the knitting needle and the stove element, which no one has ever fully explained to me, but permanently rid Aunt Martha of the use of her right hand straight up to the elbow.

They didn't go anywhere else, not Sienna or Florence or

Milan. Just Rome, to see the Pieta. Both Uncle Dan and Aunt Martha have told me the story and both versions have become so intertwined that I can no longer separate one from the other, but Uncle Dan wept before the statue. Not from the sheer beauty of the thing or the luminescence of the marble, but because someone had taken a hammer and smashed it to pieces. I have told both Uncle Dan and Aunt Martha many times that 1973 was a good ten years before Miss Crazy Whoever attacked the Pieta, but they stick to their story.

Uncle Dan must have cried in fearful anticipation. He must have known that a thing of such beauty could never survive intact in this world. He knew, although it had not yet happened, that some crackpot would rush to the Basilica San Pietro and whack away at Michelangelo's masterpiece; it had been inevitable.

Aunt Martha did not cry, but stood agog before the Virgin holding Her dead son in Her arms. Mary's downcast eyes, the gentle inclination of her head, her left hand open and turned upwards, infused the Pieta with a tranquility that illuminated the statue. Aunt Martha says she felt as if Mary might have looked up and smiled, Her grief waylaid by the knowledge that Her son was destined to die before He was born.

Aunt Martha went back to the hotel that night and lay on the hard narrow mattress provided by Il Duomo Gitano, the bed covered in cotton sheets of the summer camp variety, stiff with disinfecting washing sodas. Aunt Martha swore to herself

then that she would never become a mother. Children are taken away far too easily, their destinies written by a hand other than your own. A parent's only recourse - grief, fury, indignation - extinguished by the realization that they never belonged to you in the first place.

Mrs. Mulsen opens another book, to a carving of Mary Magdalene. Her back is stooped, her face distorted in a permanent expression of remorse and anguish. She'd repented, reformed, but too late - the Magdalene's clothes hang from her haggard body in wooden rags. I sneak a sidelong glance at Joanne Carver, searching for a flicker of guilt, a hint of decay. Joanne wears a lot of make-up, too much my aunt would say. She laughs easily - a bubble in the back of her throat, bursting open like a pricked balloon. Unlike Stacey Norton, who I have English with. She puts her jeans on wet. Plaid shirts, stiletto heels, a rabbit's foot key-chain hanging off an enormous leather purse, Beauty Culture instead of Physics or Sociology. A friend of Stacey's told me Joey McDougal fucked Stacey on the pool table with a cue while his friends watched.

Joanne's head is bowed towards her desk. My own back hunches forward, dreading Ralph's baritones. No one makes a sound and I'm wondering if the class feels the same as I do, doomed.

Mrs. Mulsen strides to the blackboard and writes in bold

letters across it, "I AM A VIRGIN." She turns to face the class, "Virginity is a state of mind," she says.

Mrs. Mulsen should have told that to the prostitute we heckled from June Abbington's car after a student council meeting last spring. She was wearing lingerie under an open trench coat, and we jeered at her as we passed. She'd stepped forward defiantly as we rounded her corner in June's tiny green Datsun, hands on hips, hair thrown back with a quick toss of her head, but she'd lowered her eyes when her gaze met ours.

In my childhood nightmares, Aunt Sis rose up with her Bible in hand and a toy lamb tucked under her arm. I saw her scolding the small crowd gathered around her as she named their darkest sins and petty offenses, admonishing the evil that, she was certain, slept within the soul of every man, woman and child. Now that I'm seventeen, she's still at it, visiting my dreams - she's become a tired old woman, her damning finger directed at my face. "Betrayer," she whispers. "Judas. Turncoat. The cock will not crow this day before you have denied me three times."

No one knows who my father is, although some like to speculate. Aunt Sis became pregnant a few months after the death of her husband, just weeks after their only child, Camille, died quietly in her crib. She'd gone to Aunt Martha, pregnancy results in hand, face puckered and drawn.

She was shaken, Aunt Martha has told me, but coping. No one knows what happened after she left her sister's house that evening. From my cousins, I learned Aunt Sis was found the following day walking Seventh Avenue with a makeshift stigmata ground into her palms with Avon's Luscious Lips #12.

My entrance into this world became the first-ever recorded virgin birth in Calgary's history. Recorded, because Aunt Sis solicited the attention of half the newspapers in North America. Only the rags responded and in the end, the sole reporter to show for the final event belonged to an itty bitty porno tabloid called Allo Police from Montreal. Through some miraculous misfortune, Ralph Reise obtained a copy - which he presented to me in Grade Three.

There it was. In print. I was the Second Coming of Christ.

St. Ignatious High School is laid out on a grid like the city itself. Our school was originally built like the roman numeral III with corridors "A," "B," and "C" running perpendicular to "N" and "S." Expanded in the early seventies, "N" corridor now jogs west like a tail from the bottom of the three, turning into "D" and "E" in the bowels of St. Ignatius where the smell of perming solution and singed hair from Beauty Culture mixes with the odours of the

grease and gas from Automotives.

Mellie, Marion and I walk down "B" hallway together, the Italian corridor, past rich kids at their lockers wearing Ralph Lauren Polo jackets. The Italian boys only smell of Polo cologne - as if they'd bathed in it. Italian girls wear white leather tassel boots and banana clips hold back dark manes of hair. They call to each other, laughing, as they make their way to class.

"What does she mean," Marion asks. "'I'm a Virgin'?"

Mellie grins at Marion. "Weren't you listening?" She stops and we gather around her, creating a bottle-neck in the narrow hallway. "'We are all pure through Christ's divinity!" She raves. Her arms out-flung, Mellie ignores the students pushing past her. "Reborn! Saved, <u>virginal</u>,'" she cries. Resuming her normal voice, Mellie tells us, "She does it every year. Didn't anybody tell you?"

"How can she be, you know, the big 'V'?" Marion asks. "Its not like she's still a nun or anything."

"Nun doesn't always mean virgin."

Marion flicks Mellie in the forehead with a well-practiced forefinger and thumb. "She's married, is what I'm saying."

"To a paraplegic," I tell them. "I saw her pushing him down the hall in a wheelchair."

"Maybe it wasn't her husband," Marion offers. "Maybe it was just some generic sick guy."

"Doesn't mean his dink's not working anyhow, even if it was her husband," Mellie counters.

"What does she do then? Have Christ revirgin her after every time they do it?" Marion asks.

Mellie gives Marion a knowing look, "I think she prays her husband limp every night."

Mrs. Mulsen gives "the virgin talk" to shock. It is shocking, what with that big wedding band on her ring finger and the "Mrs." in front of her name. A regular show-stopper for sure. She does it as a lead-in to the redemptive powers of God. No one's ever fallen forever, is her point - just look at Mary Magdalene.

Marion and Mellie turn down "S" hallway and I continue along "B" when a hand clamps down hard on my shoulder. I know it's Ralph before I turn around. I can only make a half-turn under his grip, his large fingers fixed above my collar bone, mid-way along my shoulder. Such a fat, ugly nose. "Big Nose" I'd called him after he showed me the newspaper clipping of Aunt Sis, then I'd kicked him in the shins and ran.

His eyes crinkle gleefully and we stare at each other in silence while he squeezes my shoulder. My cheeks are so hot my eyes smart, which only makes me blush even harder. Ralph squeezes my shoulder until I buckle under the pain. My books spill out of my arms and onto the floor, binders fall open, their sheets scattering, Duo-tangs skip across the

hallway. Ralph laughs out loud and only when I am down on my knees gathering my papers do the tears come. I might almost believe Ralph has a crush on me, if he didn't dislike me so much.

On that fateful morning at recess in Grade Three, when Ralph first showed me the Allo Police article, children chased each other on the frozen playground while others huddled before the main entrance of St. Pious, stamping their feet and flapping their arms to keep warm. Ralph hooked me around the neck in the mudroom, his arm a bulging winter jacket of puffy blue nylon. I had learned that disinterest was the best defense against the things boys did to girls. I knew about "playing doctor," but no one had bothered to initiate me and the closest I'd come was a game of kissing-tag during which my captor imprisoned me in the Jungle Gym for ten painful minutes and hurled obscenities at me instead. I didn't protest as Ralph walked me to the back of the school.

I shuffled snow into patterns over the black asphalt with my moon boots, waiting. I'd assumed that after some elaborate ceremony, he would kiss me. Instead, Ralph took a newspaper clipping from his zippered pocket - a black and white photo of Aunt Sis' drained, pallid face propped against hospital pillows, her stomach still bulging. My mother's photo was set beside a coloured insert of Mary and the Christ Child - Christ holding two fingers aloft in

benediction. The "Second Coming" was nowhere to be seen, as I had been whisked away immediately after birth.

"So," Ralph sneered, "you're the new Jesus, huh? Aren't ya! Aren't ya! Say it April, say,"'I'm the new girlie Jesus!'"

That's when I kicked him and ran.

II

When people ask why I live with my aunt and uncle, I tell them my parents are dead. There are plenty, like Ralph and Trinity Woolfe, who know better. Their whispers follow me throughout St. Ignatius, just as they did at St. Pious before. Aunt Martha tells me I have to develop a thicker skin, that I can't go around imagining the worst and jumping to conclusions. Her advice doesn't end the whispering, the looks and the laughter, nor can it change the fact that my mother's insane. Even Aunt Martha worries I could go bonkers anytime myself, even though she would never say so.

Uncle Dan likes to tell me that Aunt Sis was ahead of her time - evangelizing before all the big names got into the act. I seriously doubt Billy Graham got his start on the preaching circuit putting out cigarettes with a water gun at a local shopping mall.

This is what I know. It made no difference to my mother that I was a girl. "There was a Judith," my mother hollered at the nurses. "A Suzanna, a Ruth! God is not sexist! It only makes sense that Christ would be reborn as the most downtrodden of humankind!"

My mother was dismayed, for no angel had come to

announce my name. Torn between Jesus, Christ, a female version of either or something entirely different, she refused to declare my name on the Birth Certificate and wrote "Yahweh" next to "Name of Father."

Guardianship was awarded to Uncle Dan and Aunt Martha, almost immediately after my birth, following a rapid interview with a Child Welfare worker, during which Sis performed -- as Aunt Martha likes to call it -- her Agnes of God routine.

She held up her palms. "Stigmata," she said.

"Let me see," the social worker asked, and took a closer look.

"The blood of Christ," my mother told her.

"Nail polish," the social worker declared.

"The blood of the lamb," my mother insisted.

Aunt Sis was dead set against her sister's guardianship - her crippled left arm a sign that the devil had once had a hold on Aunt Martha. And she smoked. Aunt Martha says my mother wept and sprawled herself across the floor in what my aunt calls "a melodramatic pantomine." She raised her hands to the ceiling as if she were beseeching Heaven and recounted the night in which God descended from His heavenly throne to seduce her. I once asked Aunt Martha what my mother said. Aunt Martha only shook her head and told me, "it was obscene, obscene" - as in a disgusting display of ridiculousness. Afterwards, Aunt Martha eyed me warily and

said, "No god seduced your mother, April, it was just an ordinary man." As if I didn't already know.

I don't know my mother. At least, not intimately. My family and I work our lives around her, hopeful that Aunt Sis will remain little more than a passing embarrassment. They have tried to spare me from the shame the very sight of her usually creates, and I have come within a hair of her worn figure, ranting and raving in the middle of Stephen Avenue Mall, harassing pedestrians on busy street corners, praising God and promising hell-fire damnation in department stores. My relatives fear her religious fervour will rub off on me, just as they fear losing me to her, although Aunt Sis would never attempt another kidnapping. She is much more stable now, and I'm too heavy now to cart away under her arm.

I don't like pietas much. They're creepy and often gruesome, like the hologram crucifixion I saw in a storefront in Wayne, Alberta - Christ's eyes opening and closing, His blood running down His face like raspberry tears. I prefer Annunciations - Luke's account surprisingly stark and, I'd say, lacking in detail.

The librarians at the Varsity branch know me, and often set aside books that might interest me. Once I overheard the Scottish librarian say, "God love her" as I carted off a stack of books. I'm tempted to ask Aunt Martha why the woman

would feel sorry for me, but Aunt Martha would probably forbid me to go traipsing back to "that yellow trailer on stilts" to be pitied.

Robert Campin painted the kindest-looking of the Gabriels, a timid suitor kneeling before the Mother of God. Mary, absorbed in her reading, is oblivious to the angel. A star is patterned into the folds of Her red dress. In Her hands are the Bible and the cloth that will wipe Christ's face as He carries the cross. Easter lilies on the table predict His death and resurrection - Christ's death foretold the moment of His conception. I search out my mother in the Annunciations, what she might have seen the moment she opened her eyes to Christ and gave me up.

The librarians have found books on Fra Lippo Lippi and Fra Angelico's Cortona for me, and last week, I saw the San Marco Annunciation in a colour plate for the first time. Mary is in a bare, cell-like arcade, kneeling on a wooden pew before Gabriel, her arms humbly drawn to her chest. In Fra Angelico's Noli Me Tangere, Mary Magdalene beseeches the resurrected Christ's retreating figure on her knees with outstretched arms, blonde like the other Mary and wearing the Virgin's rose-coloured dress.

Gabriel Rossetti's Virgin Mary huddles on a narrow, white cot, eyes large with animal fear. Possibly, it's not the face of my mother. How, I wonder, did she first receive the news of my coming?

After her discharge from the institution in Ponoka, my mother was given permission to spend Sundays with me. Her visits went well at first, despite her hesitation to either hold or touch me. She was heavily doped up, blanketed in whatever drugs or tranquilizers were keeping her sane. My mother was serene, calm and, Aunt Martha insists, with me in her arms, she did resemble the Virgin Mother.

My mother's visits, I'm told, quickly became less calm and more frenetic. She blessed herself repeatedly, muttering rosaries under her breath. She couldn't keep still and her eyes became frightening - even Uncle Dan agrees - widening at odd moments, like those of a spooked horse. Aunt Martha believes her sister was remembering the foolish things, the embarrassing things, she'd done - the lipstick stigmata and hair shirt made of hair-curlers - but I think my mother's madness kept her alive after both her husband and her baby died.

I side more with Uncle Dan's version of events - that Aunt Sis' pacing and blessings were caused by a reduction in her medication, which, Aunt Martha is always quick to add, my mother promptly replaced with another drug - religion. I also suspect that her eyes widened from memories of being dragged to the police station, strip-searched and committed to a nuthouse by her sisters. More shaming, I think, than the humiliations she chose for herself.

Not long after my mother's medication was stopped

altogether, she dumped her husband's savings from the Centre Street Bridge into the Bow River. Grandma Lil has told me that my mother's neighbours "got ahold of her fresh out of Ponoka." A week later, Aunt Sis withdrew her account at the bank, and Grandma says, "chucked the whole lot into the Bow."

"It was the most enlightening experience," Aunt Sis is said to have told my grandmother. It has since become a favourite expression of hers. "Was it a most enlightening experience?" Gran asked Uncle Dan when he told her he'd voted for Trudeau.

My mother's neighbours told her that her recent hardships were not surprising, given that she had lived far from the hand of God. They instructed her to abide by the same precepts and ordinances by which they, too, governed their lives: charity work, living humbly and tithing. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," Gran says they told my mother. "Put your faith in God," they said, "and He will take care of you." In a fit of religious fervour, which was to become the earmark of her everyday life, Aunt Sis emptied her bank account into the Bow River. This was not what her neighbours had in mind, but this act of devotion marked a turning point in my mother's life. She launched herself with even more fervour into a pursuit of the Father.

Aunt Sis began frequenting every church in the city,

springing up in the middle of an Anglican service, an Episcopalian, United or even Greek Orthodox, belting out "Johnny Appleseed" as loud as her cracked voice could carry under the vaulted ceilings. She publicly criticized Aunt Martha's smoking. It was depraved, she'd say. Depraved, ungodly behaviour, and she began a holy crusade against smoking, setting out for the local mall armed with a squirt gun, swiping cigarettes from strangers and forcing a Bible into their empty mitts.

Between reprimands levelled at smokers, Aunt Sis quoted long passages from the Bible. She was especially partial to those excerpts from Luke detailing Christ's four-day stay in Jerusalem without his parents - which Aunt Martha has always insisted was a very callous, inconsiderate thing for Jesus to do, Son of God or no Son of God. My mother took to repeating, "The blood of the Lamb will take away the sins of the world," moaning "Have mercy on us" as she rocked me in her arms. Aunt Martha had my mother's visiting privileges reassessed.

I grew up without my mother, raised on stories Aunt Martha thought fit for my hearing. When they were children, Aunt Martha renamed her "Sis" because it suited her more than Mary. She was screwy even before she lost her marbles entirely. Eight months pregnant with her first child, she flashed my cousin Shirley on the way to the shower,

hollering, "Now you see it, now you don't!" Physically, Aunt Sis takes after her mother, while Aunt Martha does not. Although you wouldn't know it now, my mother had been a smaller, pretty version of my grandmother. This was her undoing, Aunt Martha often says.

There are other stories. When I was around eight, I sat at the melamine kitchen table for one full afternoon, waving Aunt Martha's smoke away with one hand, my feet dangling mid-air, not long enough yet to reach the floor. A cup of coffee in one hand, and a wad of Cloret's gum on her saucer, Aunt Martha stared stonily at the door. "She's going to hear it one day, Martha, better it come from you," Uncle Dan said, leaning against the kitchen sink. Aunt Martha continued to stare at the door and we sat there for hours it seemed, the clouds rolling in to momentarily block out the sun from the kitchen window until, bit by bit, it became dark and Aunt Martha got up to switch on the lights. I figured she would eventually tell me, when I was old enough, that it was one of the things you had to be "old enough" to hear. Now, I wonder if Aunt Martha ever will.

Aunt Martha and Uncle Dam are not my real parents. I've descended from angels, of heavenly blood and regal lineage. I never kept a suitcase under my bed for escape like other kids, knowing my mother kept one for me. I never ran away, not even to the playground to sit on the monkey bars with a

suitcase full of underwear and tins of tuna fish and Campbell's soup - like both Mellie and Dolores have told me they'd done.

Dolores, Mellie and Marion were addicted to Annie as kids. Because Dolores owned the soundtrack, they gathered in Dolores' basement and lip-synched to the songs - "Hard-knock Life" being far and away the favourite. Even then, Marion and Mellie tell me, Dolores commandeered all the best parts and threw a hissy fit if she didn't get to be Mrs. Harrigan in the "Little Girls" number.

All three, even Marion (who read The Little Princess and The Secret Garden at least five times each), regularly fantasized that their real parents - glamorous and long-suffering - would show up to take them away. My childhood was the opposite of their fantasies and more Huckleberry Finn than Sara Crewe.

Grandmother Lil likes to tell me that Aunt Sis drove a cart and drank too many gins in the gazebo at the golf course she'd joined with her husband. My grandmother has also hinted that my mother met my father at that same golf course. None of my family, not even my grandmother, has ever outright confirmed or denied this, despite all the sitting Aunt Martha and I have done, staring at the door.

Mine was not a posthumous birth, but carries the distinction of having sent my mother off the deep-end. Born a year after

James Ryman's death, a glance at my birth certificate will tell anyone who cares enough to look that I cannot be his daughter, even though I carry his name. The upshot is, I've never mourned my father's death - only his absence.

I've often hoped that my father might show up, and that his appearance would cure Aunt Sis' madness - like in the movies when the amnesia victim bumps his head for a second time and recovers his memory.

My father would waltz through the door and say, "Look here, Sis. Remember me? I'm April's father." My mother would have to admit that there'd been no immaculate conception. I've read up on that too, and reserved books from the North Hill Branch that I never dared take home. None of them are ever full of what Aunt Martha calls "practical wisdom."

I suspect Ralph knows all about whatever it is "someone" will tell me before Aunt Martha works up the nerve to do it herself. I've considered asking Ralph, but I fear it must be really awful, more awful, I think, than I want to hear. As for Dolores, Marion and Mellie, we have an unspoken code. We never speak of Aunt Sis.

Despite everything I don't know about Aunt Sis or my father, I know more than enough about Gospel Mary, my bughouse mother. When I was three years old, my mother began at "I" for "Immanuel" in the phone book and called each entry, telling strangers, "Put your faith in the Lord and He'll look after you." Others she sang to:

Hallelujah! I've found Him.
I've found Him, I've found Him, I'm home.
Its a-bubblin' up, its a-bubbling up.
I'll praise the glory joy.

I know, because Ralph told me she'd called his house and his mother had her sing it over and over again while his father listened in on the extension.

My mother sews bells into the hems of the old fur coats she buys from the Salvation Army. She wears gold turbans, carries miniature cymbals in her purse which she sometimes slips onto her fingers and although I've never witnessed it myself, she is said to improvise a pared-down Salome complete with Herod and John the Baptist. Once, my cousins tell me, she used a head of lettuce on a tea platter. After her sermons she hands out gold cards printed with quotes from the Bible.

"Resist the devil and he will flee from you."

"The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight - indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."

"The Soul that Sinneth, It Shall Die."

"Hell Were Cast Into The Lake of Fire"

"For the Wages of Sin is Death."

Of the hundreds she has handed out, these few have come into my possession. I found the Lake of Fire card last Thursday, on the sidewalk across from St. Ignatius.

On Thursdays, Aunt Sis' Bible study class ends the same time school lets out. When I went to school at St. Pious,

Aunt Sis attended the Seventh Day Adventists' community services just around the corner, and when I moved to St. Helena and then St. Ignatius, she aligned herself with the minister at The Church of The Redeemer. I've sometimes begged off school on Thursdays, but never so often that Aunt Martha might notice.

Not always, but often, the Northmount bus passes Aunt Sis on the sidewalk, straight from church and already ringing her bells for Christ. "Gospel Mary" they call her in town, not Aunt Sis. No one much considers the family of its crazy people. There is always family, no crazy could be without one.

Thursdays, I choose between racing out of the school with books in bag and jacket at the ready in fourth period, or I stick around, and try to kill enough time for Aunt Sis to gab with her fellow parishioners, have an interview with the minister and dole out a few mini-sermons amongst passersby. Neither choice is safer than the other, both can, and have been, disastrous. It is not unknown to happen, entirely dependant upon the speed and dexterity of our bus-driver, that Aunt Sis sometimes boards the Northmount bus and preaches.

On Thursdays, I huddle at the back of the bus, hidden behind the interlocking bodies of other students, armed with textbooks and heavy backpacks. Eight fingers crossed, thumbs hooked, I slump in my seat and pray. Calgary's bus drivers

are wary of Gospel Mary, well acquainted with her exploits. Fellow students (especially Ralph and Trinity Woolfe) cheer and holler as the Northmount overtakes her, gunning past what would have been her stop, the bus bouncing high on its wheels, their shouts accompanied by triumphant bangs on the windows. The driver calls out, "Hey! Hey! Simmer down" even though he is no more anxious to have Aunt Sis on their bus than we are.

The pounding and yelling only persuades Aunt Sis to run, loping after the bus, the Jesus bag jangling into her right leg, her left arm, flailing with whatever bell, cane, lamb or prop she's accessorised herself with that day. The Thursday chase is a crap shoot, anticipated by the students of St. Ignatius, as it had been by those of St. Helena and St. Pious before them. In spring and sometimes, cruelly, in winter, Thursdays mean water-guns hidden in book bags. Thursdays mean spit balls (and, once, a mooning!). I have never participated, but I root for the bus to win the race every week, my heart pounding triple time, a rabbit in a greyhound run, the greyhound somewhat beefy and encumbered. Every Thursday, I am terrified that she will beat us to the next stop.

The spring of my first year at St. Ignatius, Ralph and his gang took advantage of the warm weather and yelled "Nutbar! Jesus Freak! Bible-Thumper!" at Aunt Sis from an open window. Usually, Aunt Sis would retort with glee to

public rebuff. "You will be betrayed by relatives and friends. You will be hated by all because of my name," she counters. That day, Aunt Sis caught my eye and stopped in her tracks. Draped in layers of coats, her form was misshapen, the grocery bag slumped forlornly at her ankles, her stockings sagging, exposing fleshy white ankles. She pointed at me as the bus lumbered along in a patch of slow traffic. "The cock will not crow this day," she called out, "until you have denied three times that you know me."

There is no sign of Aunt Sis today and I am pleased when Carol, my long-legged cousin gets on the bus. Carol is wearing an Esprit outfit I covet: a grey mock-turtle neck sweater and ankle-length black canvas skirt. Now that I wouldn't mind, I no longer receive the Stewards' hand-me-downs. Aunt Martha says that not only is the sweater an extravagance, it is a crime that companies charge so much money for clothes they sell to teenagers.

I must look nervous because Carol asks "Yahoo watch?" as she sits beside me. For once, I am relieved someone shares my secret. The boys behave themselves better around Carol. At eighteen, men yell "Marry me!" as she walks down the street.

She leans in and whispers conspiratorially, "Last Friday, I finished my shift at Eaton's and I got onto the bus, exhausted, you know. I'd been on my feet for eight hours straight and," here Carol pauses and raises her

eyebrows for dramatic effect, "Aunt Sis climbed in after me." My mouth dropped. "She was wearing that blue straw hat, the one with the flowers and the veil."

I know that hat. I've seen it often, bouncing dangerously, set askew on her God-fearing head.

"All I was thinking about was getting home and having dinner and she makes a bee-line straight for me, screaming, 'Fit for a Jezebel! Only whores wear red!'" Carol leans towards me and whispers in a horrified hush, "She recited Revelations, the entire 'Whore of Babylon' passage. I prayed that bench would swallow me whole, right there and then." Carol pauses as she stares out the window, the streets free for once of Aunt Sis. "Someone should lock her up permanently and get it over with." Carol turns to me and slowly, as if she were bringing her eyes into focus, raises her hand to her mouth. "Oh God, April. I don't mean that." But she does. I remind myself, it's easy to forget, living with my aunt and uncle as I do, that Aunt Sis is my mother.

I am the child of a loon. Ashamed before the saner members of my family, crushed under their weighty pity or their scrutiny, I'd give anything to be like my cousin Carol and her sisters - blonde, athletic, built with big American bones and personalities to match.

We used to visit the Stewards every Sunday - Uncle Dan, Aunt Martha and I. Wearing Carol or June's cast-off Sunday dresses, which Aunt Martha always managed, despite my

pleadings, to bleach into a faded version of the original, I took my place beside the three sisters in their bright identical dresses, edged in rick-rack or lace. Aunt Martha forever pinched my cheeks in hope of staving off Aunt Hannah's inevitable suggestion that perhaps I was anemic.

Dark-haired like my mother, sallow and gangly, I spent much of my childhood fantasizing I would find the twenty thousand dollars in cash and savings bonds my mother dumped into the Bow River - clutches of my birthright lumped together and moldering between the reeds of the river's shore. We would move to a big house on Memorial Drive. My hair would turn flaxen, my skin white as porcelain. Uncle Dan and Aunt Martha would buy me clothes from Woodward's, no hand-me-downs from the Stewards.

When I was ten, I almost convinced myself that my mother's savings weren't lost to me forever, and I began conning car rides to the Bow River from Uncle Dan to look for them.

A failed rebel, Uncle Dan likes danger of a kind. He walks too close to the edges of things, runs on swinging bridges, eats wild berries from bushes, drawing the line at mushrooms - which poisoned an entire family in Edmonton, including the linebacker son for the Eskimos. Uncle Dan is nice-looking, even handsome, you might say - slightly taller than Aunt Martha, trim, with a melon-sized belly and calves like gigantic Florida grapefruit.

Despite all his good qualities, both Aunt Hannah and my grandmother are hard on him to the point of cruelty. I suspect, because no man manages to stick around long enough. Poor health and other disasters seem to bloom in the men chosen by Steil women.

A kind of panic fell over me when Uncle Dan and I drove to the river. Staring edgily at it from the car, I tightly gripped the Naugahyde arm-rests, imagining the river scattering my birthright. Drifting away with the current, more and more lost, I was sick with gold fever and believed that if I looked hard enough, what my mother had thrown away would be returned to me.

Uncle Dan and I stopped going to the Bow, but Dolores and I made our way over the cliffs near Silver Springs this past summer, to the wide-mouthed Bow separating Calgary from Bowness. Empty beer-bottles and charred embers from bonfires the night before, no money. No bonds. Once we found the skeleton of a wolf by the river, a stake driven through the top of its head. I shrieked and ran. Dolores took the stick out and poked it back in again, churning its dried-up insides. Only the head and long trailing pelt were left, its muzzle grizzled into a snickering, black-lipped grin.

Three years and nine months after my mother first stumbled her way through the streets of downtown Calgary, through

both The Bay and Eaton's fragrance counters with a man-made stigmata ground into her palms, I was playing alone in my backyard. August 14, 1978 was the day of the gala charity dinner held by the YWCA, a dinner Aunt Martha had been preparing weeks in advance. Aunt Martha was in the kitchen, doing the dishes and the laundry and the cooking all at the same time.

When Aunt Sis made her last visit to our home, in a car borrowed from one of the other out-patients, Aunt Martha was holding court over a kitchen full of delicacies. Cranberries split and burst in her stainless steel dutch oven, their white-pink guts spilling into the liquid sugar and lemon rind sizzling on the stove. Her famous antipasto bubbled away on the back burner, and buttery white shortbread crisped in the oven. Aunt Sis parked the blue Volkswagen Beetle in the alley, a few houses before our own, and walked the short distance to stand behind the raspberry bushes separating our yard from the alley.

I do not remember the words Aunt Sis used to call and coax me into her arms, but I do remember the cool, wet earth of our garden sinking between my toes as I stood before her, the print of Aunt Sis' blue and white sleeveless spring dress, her blue straw hat set securely on her head. I remember the raspberry bushes and their seemingly insurmountable height, the woman behind them urging me up and into her outstretched arms beyond the ripening fruit and

forbidding thorny stems.

I also remember Aunt Martha's desperate cry that preceded the slam of the screen door, causing Aunt Sis to hastily scoop me up into her arms, catching the hem of my dress and scratching my legs in the raspberry bushes. Aunt Martha ran towards us across the lawn, her crippled forearm swinging haplessly back and forth from her elbow as her shortbread charred to black. Back and forth her arm swung as she ran, gaining momentum as she flew across the lawn through the garden towards her sister.

When Aunt Martha reached the raspberry bushes and Aunt Sis, her arm had accumulated the force of a baseball bat, poised and waiting for the pitch. With this forearm, Aunt Martha struck at Aunt Sis, smashing into her right shoulder, skidding upwards in a delighted arc to her neck and face in one fell swoop, sending the blue straw hat twirling into the air. Aunt Sis tumbled sideways and I fell free of her grasp, toppling into the raspberry bushes' awaiting thorns and the dark soil of our vegetable garden. This I also remember: the thud of my head as it hit the ground, and a startlingly hot liquid, trickling into my eyes.

Bloody, ripe raspberries bruised themselves against my forehead and were ground into a leafy, pulpy mass matted into my bangs. I'd been scratched on both sides of my temple, and blood dribbled down my face, mixing with the crushed raspberries to streak both cheeks.

Aunt Martha says I was screaming by the time I landed, a deep, howling scream that startled her into action as she stood panting over my fallen mother. My scream, Aunt Martha tells me, was nothing compared to that of my mother's as she righted herself from amidst the raspberry bush and the gravel alley where she had fallen, and glimpsed my bloodied head topped with raspberry leaves and thorns amongst the leafy tops of our carrot bed.

I do not remember her scream, or the milling neighbours' cries for the police as I was trundled into the house. I am told that my mother plunked herself down in the gravel on the other side of the raspberry bush and stared, blankly. Our neighbour, Mr. Bairns, always a keen executor of his civic duty and a merciless gossip, needlessly held onto her lifeless shoulders, in case she tried to escape.

In the police report, Aunt Martha stated that from her position at the kitchen window, she had seen her sister, Mary Steil Ryman, bending towards April Ryman, and had been alarmed less by this act than the sun glinting off a long blade-like object which Mary clasped in one hand. Aunt Martha had cause for concern, given my mother's predilection for the "blood of the lamb." The blade-like object turned out to be a baptismal candle. Upon questioning, my mother insisted that she had been going to baptise me in the Bow River.

In her borrowed blue Beetle, a Bible was found, as well

as a child's car seat, diapers, baby food and a child's rattle. A map of Manitoba was discovered in the glove compartment. While Aunt Sis probably did mean to baptise me, the cache of baby food suggested that she'd intended to keep me awhile. Aunt Martha recorded her concerns at the police station - that her sister's intentions were even more menacing, that like Abraham with Isaac, Mary Ryman had been prepared to sacrifice her daughter for God.

Despite my aunt's fears, no evidence could be found in the car or at the site where she'd meant to baptise me, that she'd meant to harm me. I only know that as my mother gazed upon me from the other side of the raspberry bushes, she saw the Second Coming, crucified before she could be baptised. Crucified, not by the society which she was meant to redeem, but by the very woman who had served as the vessel for her arrival.

III

I am not the Second Coming. The crazies my mother gathers around her probably don't believe it either, even that legless lady she wheels around town on Wednesdays, praising God for his magnanimity for creating such a creature and handing out her gold cards:

"The Soul that Sinneth, It Shall Die."

"Death and Hell Were Cast Into The Lake of Fire."

"For the Wages of Sin is Death."

Aunt Martha says my mom spends all her money on those cards and Legless is a half-wit who doesn't know crap from marmalade, but is only too pleased to be wheeled around town once a week by a one-woman circus carnival such as my mother. Aunt Martha likes to remind me it could just as easily have been me in that chair, performing miracles before the multitudes - walking across the fountains at Olympic Plaza or that pool in Bowness that'd been closed down after a child of seven was electrocuted in it.

I've looked for signs and I've read the Bible, and nothing fits with me or my mother. I've never performed a miracle, if you exclude the night I forgot to pray for Baby Fae and she died. I saved a worm stranded after a rainstorm by moistening it with water, not knowing it would fry into an s-shaped pancake under the summer sun that afternoon. I blessed a baby bird fallen out of its nest; it did not

spring back to life, and Uncle Dan and I buried it in one corner of the garden, over Aunt Martha's lettuce seeds, which caused no end of grief.

Being a Catholic, no one encourages me to read the Old Testament. Even in high school, we are fed only snippets of stories in Religion class - Noah's Ark and Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel. They'll tell us about Jacob wrestling with the angel and Esau's hairy arms; they don't mention Noah's drunkenness, Lot's daughters or Jacob cheating Esau out of his inheritance. I figure God's favour must be on the random side if He chooses Jacob for great things.

I've never read Job at school, only been expected to know he was a good guy, not that he suffered endlessly and without purpose. I still don't understand Samson, or why Lot's wife had to turn to salt, only that it seems the same sort of justice that damns Ham for finding his father drunk with his privates hanging out of his pants. Other than the Israelites and the Egyptians, it's sometimes near impossible to tell the good guys from the bad, the only difference being that one is God's people. If I could forget the parts I don't understand, I would know God, but I've decided it is better not to be one of His chosen, let alone wind up like His Son.

My mother is no Virgin Mary either, and certainly she was no virgin the night of my conception. The Second Coming, anyhow, is supposed to occur amid plagues and disasters, all

of which have appeared from time to time over the last twenty years, if I'm to believe The National Enquirer. He's supposed to descend or appear, according to Paul, who never even met Jesus and who wrote his letters forty years after His death. According to Paul, the Second Coming will not be born a second time unto a woman. I don't think Paul was very keen on women.

I for sure can't be the Second Coming if Mrs. Mulsen thinks I need saving or some kind of spiritual guidance, and she does. This year it's the Pro Life group she wants me to join.

The Pro Lifers went to a rally in Ottawa last week and I saw them having their photo taken for the yearbook. Mrs. Mulsen was wearing a pink button-down shirt under a white, cable-knit vest, and they were all wearing little miniature pins on their labels shaped like babies' feet. Mrs. Mulsen tells me they're the exact size of foetus' feet at six weeks. They all looked very serious and lit from inside.

Marion says she would kill herself if she ever got pregnant, and hopes she'd be in a high office building so she could leap out the window the moment she was told, so as not to lose her nerve later. We all talk about it, but only Marion and I seem to have set ideas on what we'd do - probably because neither of us have had sex.

Ralph jabbed me in the rib with his elbow while we watched the pro-lifers get their photos taken, a group of

about twenty kids, boys and girls with scrubbed, cherubic faces, a healthy portion of them Chinese students I've never seen before. It's typical of Mrs. Mulsen to sign up immigrants who barely speak English. "By God, they're all virgins," Ralph whispered in my ear. "Hey, shouldn't you be up there? Where's your pin?" He asked, poking my shoulder where a lapel would have been.

I thought about Ralph's once pin-sized feet, and poked his shoulder with my finger. "Lucky for you it was illegal to have an abortion seventeen years ago," I told him, and made sucking noises with my lips pursed together. "Some pro-lifer would've had to fish your toes out of a vacuum." Aunt Martha always tells me "Never descend to the level of your adversaries." Good advice, I'm sure.

Up until last week, Ralph called me "St. April," hollering it down the hall whenever he saw me. In elementary, a little shrimp of a kid used to call me "The Nun." "Hey Nun!" she'd holler. "Don't throw the ball to the Nun," she'd warn when we played baseball at recess, "She can't catch."

Ever since my vacuum crack, Ralph's taken to calling me "The Virgin." "Virgin incoming!" he yells when I enter class, a hallway, the cafeteria. I long for the days Renee called me "Nun." Aunt Martha thinks Ralph has a crush on me, and I wonder how adults can be so thick.

Marion has taken to walking the "A" hallway with me for

moral support. "Gosh, he really does hate you," she murmured once, satisfyingly awe-stricken. Only Dolores seems unaffected by Ralph's behaviour towards me. Dolores lives for boys and thinks any kind of male attention is better than none.

Even though I am older and taller than Dolores, she looms over me in every other way. In the looks, boys and experience department, she is Godzilla, and I am a frightened Tokyo tourist. At thirteen, Dolores began practising a slither into her walk - a permanent swagger by fifteen. Her father leaves her alone with women's magazines and she is the closest thing to perfect, womanly grooming I know. Dolores disapproves of my appearance, of course. I bite my nails; I am not permitted make-up. This summer, she grabbed a handful of my hair and brought the ends up under my nose. "Don't you ever use conditioner?" she cried in disbelief.

Without makeup, Dolores' skin is blotchy and uneven, her eyes are shadowed with dark circles, making her look younger than her age. Made-up -- and she never leaves the house any other way -- she is legal tender, I overheard an older boy say. Uncle Dan called her Natasha Nogoodnik as we watched Dolores saunter from our house, her long, black hair streaming down the middle of her back. In my aunt's estimation, Dolores looks cheap. Her father's neglect ("He lets her run wild," my aunt said), fuels my aunt's

disapproval.

IV

Dolores Jeffries was my best friend in grade three. We've faithfully avoided each other ever since. That is, until this summer, when her dad called up and asked me to see a movie with her. I told Mr. Jeffries I'd have to check, hoping Aunt Martha would give me an excuse to skip out of it, never having been a fan of Dolores. Unfortunately, Aunt Martha has always been a fan of Mr. Jeffries, what with his estranged wife dying in a foreign country and him being a doctor and all. I had to go, she said. "Dolores needs someone to talk to about her mom," she said.

Give me a break, I thought to myself, but I didn't say it out loud. I knew enough not to open that can of worms.

The night of our Grade Three Retreat, Dolores had slept over at my house. I had worn my "Night Owl" pyjamas, baby blue with bands of darker blue elastic around the neck and arms. Dolores had worn a coffee-coloured, silk pyjama set her father had ordered from an American mail-order catalogue. "Wildly inappropriate for an eight year old girl," Aunt Martha had whispered in the kitchen, furrowing her brow.

"Don't they scare you?" Dolores asked, working at her long, permed hair with a pick as we sat on our sleeping bags. "Those eyeballs glowing in the dark like that?"

I shook my head, careful not to disturb the dimple in

my cheek I was cultivating with a frozen pea. "It's like having a night-light."

"A night-light on your chest, easier for spooks to find you."

I threw a pillow at her.

Later that night, after my aunt and uncle had gone to bed, Dolores took a flashlight out from under her sleeping bag and directed its beam against the ceiling of our darkened room. She put her hand above the light, spread out like a claw, then lowered it. The shadow of her hands' descent reflected above us, threatening to swallow us up in its enormous grasp. I closed my eyes and pretended to sleep.

"You're no fun," Dolores said, and turned off the flashlight. "Know why people say 'God bless you' when someone sneezes?" Dolores rustled in the sleeping bag beside my bed. "A little devil," she continued, "comes out from inside them and makes someone near them sick. 'God bless you' makes the devil go back inside."

"Don't you want the devil out?"

"And have someone in your family die?"

Dolores sneezed. "Well?" she asked.

"That wasn't a real sneeze."

"Doesn't matter."

"I don't care if I get sick."

"What if the devil doesn't want you sick? What if it makes your aunt sick?"

I stared at the gold flecks dappling my stucco ceiling, retracing the constellations I grouped and regrouped every night. Aunt Martha was so sick as a child the priest had baptised her twice and had even performed extreme unction.

"Bless you," I said.

"God bless you."

"God bless you."

Dolores didn't sneeze again until the next day when the school bus was well in motion, heading up the steep incline of Moran Flats into the ghost-like birch forest that began just beyond the city limits. She nudged me with her elbow. "I sneezed."

"Dolores," I hissed. "Stop it."

Dolores sneezed again. "That's twice, April."

"Twice what?"

"Now you have to say it twice."

"Cut it out."

Dolores pointed at Chuck Bazant's head. "Chuck could get sick."

Chuck had tried to kiss me one winter, but he'd had two snailers coming out of his nose, and I deflected his advance with a Wonder Woman karate chop. Until then, he'd smiled at me two or three times every morning as he sharpened his pencil beside my desk, and I would blush to the roots of my hair. Still pointing at Chuck, Dolores wrinkled the bridge of her nose, tilted her head back and feigned a sneeze.

"God bless you God bless you," I blurted, then jumped from my seat before she could sneeze again, weaving from side to side as I lurched to the back of the bus. When I looked back, Dolores was whispering to the girls behind her.

My classmates sneezed for the rest of the ride, except for Chuck, who didn't sneeze once. Ralph Reise sneezed the loudest, making "loco" circles at the side of his head with a finger and laughing between sneezes. They continued to sneeze after we got to the retreat, breaking the muffled silence of its long dark corridors, the study hall and the mini-chapel. The brothers floated through the halls, their legs scurrying noiselessly beneath bell-like robes. I refused to say a word out-loud, but thought, "God bless you God bless you God bless you," furiously in my head.

The sneezing had begun to thin out towards late morning, and seemed to be forgotten by lunch-time. Ralph Reise sat beside me and sneezed as I bit into my Macintosh apple.

"Sounds like you're getting a cold," Brother Jim said, and smiled. Brother Jim's smile spread slowly across his face, overwhelming his features - a full, flat face and dark eyes set a little too closely together.

I blessed Ralph, sealing his demon into his body, safely away from Brother Jim. A chorus of sneezes erupted throughout the cafeteria and followed me the rest of the day. And I hated Dolores for it.

On the ride back, I sat next to pale, freckled Rose, who had some sort of blood disease and was always sickly. Rose was allergic to poplar fluff. She sneezed for real all the way home.

I didn't wait for Uncle Dan to pick me up from St. Pious when we got back. I made my way from school on foot, sobbing as I went. I was furious at Dolores for what she'd done - making me believe her, then getting the class to mock me for it. I needed Aunt Martha to tell me I was right and Dolores was wrong. That Dolores had lied. There was no devil in a sneeze. And poor me. Poor girl.

I cried quietly behind Aunt Martha's back. She was scrubbing the sink, smoking, her orange and yellow apron tied around her waist, hair up in a blue silk kerchief she had bought in New York but had never found the time to wear while it was still in style. I waited for her to turn and see me with my tear-stained cheeks - knowing she would rush to comfort me, that she wouldn't wait to take off her rubber glove before gathering me in her good arm.

Aunt Martha never did turn around and I had to run at her, butting her in the middle of her back with my wet face. Blubbering and snuffling, I told Aunt Martha what had happened and she looked down on me, grabbed my shoulder with her good hand and shook. "That's weak, April," she told me. "Weak." Her fingers in their heavy rubber glove pinched and the water soaked through the shoulder of my blouse, pricking

goose bumps up and down my arm.

Aunt Martha crouched on one knee and stared into my eyes like she used to with Tiny, our terrier, now dead. "You are not responsible," she began. "You are not responsible for other people. You were not born into this family to martyr yourself for others so they can laugh at you behind your back." I stared at the floor, but Aunt Martha tweaked my chin between her wet fingers and tilted my face to hers. "Look at me, April," she said. "The next time you see Dolores, you ignore her. Or you sneeze on her."

I tried to back out of Aunt Martha's grip, but she wouldn't release my chin. I pushed her hand away, muttering, "You're wet," knowing I would never have the nerve to sneeze on Dolores.

I lay on my bed breathing slow, deep breaths. I prayed to God that He would send a truck to run over both my aunt and Dolores, knowing if He did, I really would become like Aunt Sis. Aunt Martha, looking down from Heaven, would think less of me than she already did. And I didn't care.

That night I crouched outside her bedroom, listening in the moonlit corridor. Aunt Martha told Uncle Dan I was too sensitive. I had heard her say it before. "She doesn't have a mind of her own," she said. I waited for her to say it, that I was like Aunt Sis.

Trinity Woolfe sneezed Monday morning at the coat racks and I turned to her and hissed, "You're going to Hell,"

because I knew it would make her cry. And she did. I wouldn't talk to Dolores. I was still in trouble at home, too ashamed to look at or even speak to Aunt Martha.

I was furious all day, as furious as Aunt Martha had been. When Ralph Reise sneezed at last bell, I sneezed back on him, as hard as I could. Dolores saw me do it and followed me home. I ran, one step ahead of her always and when I got to the end of the playing field, I turned around. "Fuck off," I hissed between my teeth. It was the first time I'd said it and I felt a great release, a sudden weight lifted. I picked up a lump of dirt and threw it at her.

"I'm telling."

"Fuck off!" I screamed at Dolores' retreating back.

That summer I said fuck off to the neighbours' dog, to corners I bumped into, plates and mugs I dropped. I said fuck off to lights that turned red before I could cross them and showers that ran cold. Aunt Martha was troubled. "It's better than 'God bless you,'" Uncle Dan said.

I didn't talk to Dolores that whole summer and when September rolled around, we were no longer friends. Aunt Martha told me that Mrs. Jeffries' brain tumour had come back. I was ashamed of it, but a voice at the back of my head blamed Dolores' sneezing.

Mrs. Jeffries brain tumour went into remission soon after and Dolores disappeared for months at a time, travelling back and forth between Korea and Canada after her

parents separated. Dolores and I weren't friends again until this summer.

Neither of us spoke as we stood in The Palace line-up this past July. I stared at my feet, Dolores at the marquee. I was the last person in the world she would've wanted to talk to about her mother and the reason I'd been asked along would soon become clear. "There he is," Dolores said, and flashed a smile. She waved. To me she turned and said, "Don't say anything, 'kay?"

After that, Dolores and I would go to a movie together once a week, always with a boy who showed up later, a different boy every couple of weeks. Sometimes, horribly, a second boy would join us - both he and I painfully aware that no matter what his friend had promised, he was getting the short end of the stick.

Dolores began phoning me to talk about the boys she was dating or the movie we had seen, and we became friends again. Dolores lent me clothes her aunt had bought in Seoul, and we'd go shopping together - which is how we first entered The Emporium, with me dressed in Dolores' clothes.

Frequented by down-and-outers and teenagers in tight black jeans and heavy metal t-shirts, The Emporium is a squat concrete bunker on the east side of Stephen Avenue Mall, smack between The Hudson's Bay Company and Calgary City Hall. The very thought of two young girls on their own

downtown, gives Aunt Martha shivers up and down her spine. "It's too dangerous," she says.

The first time we went to The Emporium, Dolores and I wore pastel mini-skirts and matching boat-neck tops. We changed our dollar bills for a ransom in quarters and awkwardly circled games neither of us had the know-how or the nerve to play. The regulars leered and poked each other with their elbows, pointing at us with glowing cigarettes. The hair on my neck stood on end. We ogled an out-dated Million Dollar Man pinball machine, each of us silently willing the other to brave The Emporium regulars and play. Neither of us did, but outside on the mall, reeking of smoke, straw purses clasped to our sides with sweaty palms - we squealed with delight and vowed to return.

Permanently weighted with five dollars in quarters, I learned how to slip unseen from my house and became an expert with alibis. Dolores stole her father's change from a laundry bag he kept at the bottom of his closet. We sneaked off to The Emporium as often as four times a week, and by the end of the summer we had both reached level five in Donkey Kong.

I began eating at Dolores' house. Her dogs, Jack and Jill, are kept in the garage to spare the wall-to-wall carpeting, while Mr. Jeffries parks his car in the driveway, even in winter. Once a month, Dolores and her dad hose down the garage, and Jack and Jill's excrement washes down the

driveway into the street. The dogs escape every chance they get. We lead them home by their collars, fur filthy and thickly matted.

Dolores' house smells of ammonia, dog, fish tank and fermenting yeast. Once, it even smelled like excrement, when I accidentally left the garage door ajar. I'm in awe of their household chaos, as I am of the raw, marinated steaks her father puts in the fridge for us to cook by ourselves, and the fifty dollar bills he sometimes leaves in the cookie jar for groceries. Nights I sleep over, Mr. Jeffries will often creep down the stairs late in the evenings, wearing a silk tie and smelling of cologne. He has a kiss for each of us, telling Dolores that he's "Off to the hospital, Baby."

Aunt Martha, less and less a fan of Mr. Jeffries, complains that he shouldn't leave a young girl on her own so often, especially with her mom dying in a foreign country and all. Dolores never talks about her mother.

V

School feels like its barely begun, but here it is, already the beginning of October with November looming large and December exams not far off. The thought of them makes me nauseous. Dolores has asked me to skip Typing and come with her to pick up the photos of her last trip to Korea at the only One Hour Photo Lab in town. How can it be one hour development if you have to pick them up the next day? But who am I to question such things?

Of course I said no, saint that I am, I wouldn't skip. I will dutifully get off the bus outside of St. Ignatius. I will not sit in my seat and let the bus carry me downtown, where more exciting things happen than typing "Fred has a new job" as fast as you can for thirty seconds straight and then tallying the results. Trinity Woolfe always gets the highest score, but only because she's taken piano since she was five. We can't all be over-achievers is all I have to say about Ms. Woolfe. Still, it irritates me that Dolores should pick up where Ralph left off and call me "St. April," just because I won't follow her downtown.

The bus climbs Northmount Drive. The mountains to the west are sunk from view, as is Nose Hill to the north. The fields of dead prairie grass that surround St. Ignatius have come into view, and beyond them, the yellowed-green of suburban lawns. It could be any Albertan town. On the

horizon, I can make out a lumpen figure on the opposite side of the street, waiting for the bus. It is Aunt Sis. As we approach, I see that she is wearing a man's grey fedora pulled down over her ears and clutching her grocery bag between raw, reddened claws - hands chafed by the chill fall wind. She doesn't run after the bus as we pass, not even a flicker when a few fists pound on the windows. I can't imagine her small and pretty like Aunt Martha always describes her. She is so bulky in her crazy layers of coats, her cane, bag, bell and lamb. My mother's face is drawn, her back stooped like an old woman's, she looks crumpled and lost. I put my palm up against the glass as if to wave, but think better of it.

The last time the four of us were all together, I was eight years old. Uncle Dan, Aunt Martha and I had been on our way to see "The Phantom of The Opera" when Aunt Sis climbed on the LRT. She lurched towards the back of the car where the three of us sat, her eyes shining with religious conviction. Aunt Martha clutched my knee, draping her lifeless right arm protectively across my shoulders. I've never liked that arm, a dead thing like a callous at the end of a foot, but I was grateful for it then, pinning me like a weight to the bench.

Aunt Sis pronounced, "Que les anges vous protègent, et Dieu, soit haute près de vous, haute près." She waved her arms theatrically in large circles of benediction. She may

have been doing callisthenics in my mind, if not for the sing-song of her voice. My mother was then a ward of Paroisse Ste. Helene in Troshu, and Uncle Dan asked, "The Sisters teaching you French up there, Mary?"

"Sinner," she said, and spat angrily on the floor. She scurried off at the next stop, clutching her well-worn Bible between the hands she clasped to her heart.

Not a good time for my mom. She hadn't been out of Ponoka for long - the dulled eyes and listless face alien to the woman my mother would become. Soon after Troshu she became Gospel Mary - wild woman of God.

Aunt Sis was in Ponoka for the second time when the phoning began. She called at odd hours during the day, at night, in the early morning. A regular escapee - nutty as a fruitcake, but never stupid. One evening she called during dinner.

"I want to speak to the child," she began, as she always did. "You will not pollute the child."

Embarrassed at how crazy she was and ashamed that I caused my aunt and uncle so much upset, I made myself as small and still on my vinyl chair as I could, terrified that I would have to speak to her. Laying down my utensils, I would stare into my lap until the phone call was over. Uncle Dan would also put down his knife and fork. Sometimes he put his hand over mine. That particular conversation was different from all the others. What took place between the

two sisters, I later pieced together from listening at my guardians' bedroom door, and from the Stewards.

"April's well taken care of," Aunt Martha said.

"No meat on Fridays. Only fish."

"April will eat anything she likes on any day of the week."

"You could give the child some macaroni," Sis offered.

"For God's sake Sis, her name is April."

"Martha," Uncle Dan warned. All three of us knew what that slow, low-pitched "Martha" meant; Don't rile her up. Don't bait her, as was Aunt Martha's habit.

"Only God can name His child!" Aunt Sis shrieked through the receiver, loud enough that I heard it with my own ears, although maybe that isn't quite right.

Aunt Martha always counsels me to "rise above" the anger or slander of others. She believes in "rising above," in never "lowering oneself" by yielding to the "baser passions" of one's rival. My mother is not allowed to be angry, Aunt Martha has hollered many times, thudding her own chest with her fist and crowing, "I'm allowed to be angry."

"You want her to go around as 'It' for the rest of her life?" Aunt Martha roared.

"Martha," Uncle Dan warned, getting up from the table, "put the phone down." His caution was not required. Aunt Martha never entirely lost control. She held back the worst of Aunt Sis' offenses. This was her crowning achievement and

Aunt Martha glowed with the virtue of it. To suffer and suffer in silence, she continues to preserve the hurt of her sister's wrongs and is never obliged to forgive them.

"I named her, Sis, because you couldn't."

"There'd been no sign. I had to wait for a sign."

"She's been named for the month she was born," Aunt Martha said.

"The month of the crucifixion!" Aunt Sis screeched.

My mother's cries must have alerted the staff because Aunt Martha barked into the receiver, "For God's sake, would you keep her away from the phone."

The next day Aunt Sis escaped from the sanitorium and hitching a ride into town, pounded on our door in the early hours of the morning. I stumbled into the hallway, my aunt and uncle pressed up against the front door, the door itself shuddering, pleading cries on either side, Aunt Martha's mouth distorted in an anguished cry. Her right hand, crimson red around the fingertips, swung with the momentum of her body. "Get back to bed! Now!" she yelled at me in my nightgown. I watched as Uncle Dan worked the security chain and slowly, willfully, pushed the door shut. A woman sobbed from the other side and the door continued to shudder as she heaved her body against it.

Aunt Martha ran to me and herded me into the kitchen. Folding me into her night gown, she cradled the receiver in her shoulder and called the police while my uncle stood

watch over the door. Sis pleaded with him to be let in. She believed Martha was poisoning me. When the police arrived, my mother was gone.

Aunt Martha had opened the door a crack and when she tried to close it, she'd heard a dull, heart-sickening crunch. She knew right then, she's told me, that her fingers were done for. But Aunt Martha wouldn't lose them, even though they looked awful - swollen and bruised, black with old blood.

Aunt Martha had to dress and undress them every day, sucking air through her teeth when she came to the finger that'd lost its nail. Not that she could feel it, but the look of it gave her the shivers. She did everything her doctors told her, but the fingers scarred. She cried over them at the kitchen table, Polysporin, gauze, splints and tape spread over the table-top. "Its bad enough as it is," she'd snuffled, Uncle Dan's arms wrapped around her shoulders, his chin resting on her head.

Her fingers have always been strange looking. They curl into her palm and the fingertips are fat and heavy. They remind me of parrot beaks and shudder when she moves, as if on a spring. Aunt Martha is supposed to take her upper arm in her left hand and pull down to her wrist with firm, quick strokes, as if she were milking a cow, but she hardly ever does the exercise.

Once she mapped out her forearm for me. "Here," she'd

said, touching her fingers. "I can't feel a thing." Past her wrist, to the left side of her forearm, she traced a stretch of skin three inches in diameter. "You could stick me with a pin and I wouldn't know it. Here," she pointed, moving her fingers up to the back of her palm, "I would." And she tapped the patch of skin with her fingernail, smiling at me.

After she'd caught it in the door, Aunt Martha was supposed to tie her arm to her body. When Doctor Hall suggested she keep it that way every day, she cried.

"Why not just cut it off then?"

"You want to keep your arm, don't you?" Uncle Dan asked. Aunt Martha had nodded. "Then do what they tell you."

Aunt Martha burst into tears, sobbing into Uncle Dan's chest.

Aunt Martha would be better off without her arm. She smacks it into the kitchen counter and laughs at herself, then pales as Uncle Dan takes the forearm in his hands and examines it for breaks. Aunt Martha argues that she can feel it. "It itches in the night," she says. Ghost arms also itch in the night - I have also looked this up. Missing toes and absent fingers feel phantom pains. Once she scratched the arm in her sleep until it bled, and now she has to wear a glove to bed.

She's burned her arm, sprained the hand, cut herself, broken little bones that she didn't notice were broken until the tell-tale signs appeared - purplish, black swelling that

continued long after a bruise would have gone away.

Her cigarette, more permanent than the limb she's lost, dangles out of the corner of her mouth, changing the shape of her face and has streaked a patch of her hair orange with nicotine. It's not unusual to have ash in our dinners. Once she set the living room carpet on fire. When asked how she manages to be a chain-smoker with one arm, she likes to say, "Where there's nicotine, there's a way."

That first weekend after the accident, we went to the Stewards'. I sat on the porch with my three cousins, Carol, June and Shirley, wearing June's old Easter dress. Shirley hadn't been big enough when June grew out of it, and it was passed to me. Short cap sleeves, a close cut bodice and straight neckline sprayed with purple and pink primroses, azaleas and freesia, tumbling down onto the gathered skirt. Shirley was wearing hers that day too, now a little too tight under the arms. Aunt Martha had bleached mine and the flowers were pale compared to the original, the hem had come undone in places and the zipper bunched. June leaned over, "You couldn't wear it now, Shirley, even if you wanted to."

"Oh shut up, June," Shirley said. "Aunt Sis tried to get her, you know."

I call my mother "Aunt Sis" because my cousins do. It doesn't upset Aunt Martha like "Mom" does.

"She didn't try to 'get her', Shirley," Carol corrected.

"She tried to rip Aunt Martha's arm out," June offered.

Shirley turned to me, "Is it true, April? Did Aunt Sis try to rip Aunt Martha's arm out?"

Carol gave Shirley a short hard slap on the head. Shirley rubbed her head and scowled.

"Because April can't eat pork?"

"June," Carol interrupted, "she thought April was eating meat."

"She's allowed to eat meat," June said. "Just not pork. Or lobster."

Shirley looked at me, "Why can't you eat lobster, April?"

"She's Jewish," Carol answered.

"I'm not."

"She goes to St. Pious, moron," Shirley said, then cowered, covering her head with her hand.

Shirley and I crawled around to the back veranda to peer at the grown-ups through the milk chute. My Aunt Hannah was examining Aunt Martha's hand on the kitchen table and shaking her head. "Where were you all this time?" Hannah asked Uncle Dan, who was standing beside the refrigerator, drinking a Heiniken.

"I opened the door, Hannah," Aunt Martha told her.

"You put that child far above your own needs."

"Should I have let Mary carry her away?" Uncle Dan asked.

Aunt Hannah gave Uncle Dan a cursory glance and turned her attentions back to Aunt Martha's hand. "The phone calls. Dealing with Sis day in and day out. Martha, you've exhausted yourself with worry."

"And what do you suggest we do?" Uncle Dan asked.

Aunt Hannah leaned forward over the table. She clutched Aunt Martha's dead hand in her own. "You are not her mother, Martha. You've taken on too much. April is Sis' child."

"She's insane!" Aunt Martha exploded. "She'll never be able to raise her."

"They won't keep her locked away forever."

"We'll adopt her!" Martha yelled. But my aunt and uncle had tried that before.

"This isn't the fifties. They won't give her a lobotomy and shock therapy for the rest of her life. They'll let her out. Sis only has to behave long enough," Aunt Hannah said.

"I don't want her to have a lobotomy!"

"You'd like her locked up for the rest of her life."

"She's insane!"

Uncle Dan crossed the kitchen to sit at the table next to Aunt Martha. I couldn't see his face. "You've been a real help, Hannah," he said.

Shirley tugged me down to the hot patio bricks, offering me a pansy she'd pulled up from between its cracks. "You ever pinched Aunt Martha's arm?"

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Wanna try?"

That night I crouched outside my aunt and uncle's bedroom, listening.

"They're putting her under close surveillance."

"Her hearing is next month."

"They won't let her out, Martha, not after this."

"Is April safe with us?"

"We could move."

"I don't want April to think we have to hide from her mother."

Aunt Sis was discharged from Ponoka a year later. There was a restraining order and she was supposed to communicate with us through a social worker. The restraining order didn't stop Aunt Sis from coming to my school and watching me at recess and lunch hour.

She always dressed well, her clothes neat and carefully arranged. She wore a hat and held a purse primly between her hands, as if presenting herself to me. I began having nightmares of her standing over my bed as I slept and thought I saw glimpses of my mother through the kitchen window. However, she haunted me only at school, and became known as 'the spook'. Ralph had shown the newspaper clipping to me first, then passed it around the classrooms and huddled groups of children in mukluks, toques and down-

filled jackets, their breath puffing frozen into clouds of white, condensed air above their heads. "Elle est née, la petite enfant!" the headline read. My classmates knew who Aunt Sis belonged to.

There was no escape from Aunt Sis' gaze on our flat, bald playground and Chuck tried to hide me inside his winter jacket. He would unzip his parka with the fake fur trim on the hood so I could stand inside, chest to chest, my face buried between his shoulder and the jacket's lining. After I'd dodged Chuck's kiss, I spent recess alone, or hid in Fort Pious - a hulking plywood fortress stained a deep brown. Uncle Dan helped build the fort the summer before, and had missed a nail and hit his thumb with the hammer instead. Uncle Dan says he'd almost passed out from the pain and had gone home to lay on the bed with his thumb elevated over his head, like he'd been told to do in Boy Scouts. Uncle Dan's thumb exploded like that, the blood building up under his nail and splattering all over the wall of my aunt and uncle's bedroom, in an arc over their bed. "Some carpenter you are," Aunt Martha said to him.

I felt like the fort belonged to me more than the other students after that, and had looked for tell-tale signs of Uncle Dan's thumb-nailing, but never found any. I sat in the bottom of the fort, in the northeast corner where I knew my mother couldn't see me except through the cracks between the plywood slats. Scared at first, then angry, I sat in the

fort in defiance. It's hard to remember for how long, but it felt like forever.

I became less afraid over the days that followed, and more and more angry, until one morning the bell rang and the lines of children filed through the double doors without me. I had stayed awake the whole night plucking up my courage and in the morning, eyes puffy from lack of sleep, I slipped behind a corner and hid until the doors of St. Pious closed. I knew where Aunt Sis would be standing. She'd taken up a post outside my classroom window, on the other side of the six foot wire fence. She was there when I walked to the back of the school, staring at my classroom window.

I was furious when I first approached her, more angry than afraid, my heart pumping. "Go home," I told her, the words dying on my lips as she turned her eyes to mine. She didn't respond, only stared. Her silence encouraged me and I felt emboldened by the fence between us and Uncle Dan's pocket knife nestled neatly in my palm. "Go home and don't come back. Do not come to my house do not come to my school. Do not follow me. Don't come near me, ever." My mother's lips drained of their colour and slacked from their grim set line to a slightly rounded "O." She shifted her weight and her purse quivered a bit between her hands, but she said nothing. I felt like I was scolding a small child as I lowered my gaze on her, searching out her black-grey eyes, murky in their depths, which seemed to register nothing at

all. "I will tell the police." I turned and marched back up the hill and into school.

Seated at my desk, I risked a glance out the classroom window. Aunt Sis was not there. She was not there at morning recess or at lunch hour. That afternoon, I excused myself from class, went to the bathroom, pulled my legs up underneath me on the toilet seat and cried.

Ralph slipped in behind me when we lined up for afternoon recess. He was shorter than me then. Only in Grade Six would he shoot up, heads above the rest of us as the girls took their place behind the boys, out-run and out-distanced in the school yard. He whispered in my ear, "You lied. You didn't sleep in."

Ralph cornered me again in the cloakroom after school was over. "Where'd she go, your mommy?" He asked. I did up my zipper to my winter jacket slowly, careful not to catch my scarf in its teeth and pretended not to hear him. Ralph followed me to the entrance of the school where we kept our boots on metal shelves that came and went with winter. In winter, the school's entrance was flooded with mud and melted snow despite the janitors' tireless mopping. I was a pro at keeping my feet dry.

I located my boots amongst the hundreds and jostling with other students, grabbed a shelf to hold on to. I took off a shoe and dangled my foot above the floor while I unzipped my winter boot with my one free hand. A sudden push

from behind staggered me, then Ralph lay into me with his full weight and sent me toppling among shrieks of protest from other children, all of whom had been precariously balanced in much the same way.

I landed on my back on the wet floor, gritty with salt and small chunks of gravel. I turned over and pushed myself up with my wrists, the red vinyl of my winter jacket coated with muddy water, my knees soaked through to the woolen tights beneath my pants.

From somewhere in the fray, amid scattered books, readers and journals, school bags, mittens and the fallen limbs of other children, Mrs. Henry the school librarian emerged. "What is going on here?" she demanded to know. Her reading glasses hung around her neck on a black cord and rested on the enormous shelf of her bosom.

I pointed at Ralph. "He pushed me."

Mrs. Henry's super-human reach extended from the middle of the room and grabbed Ralph by the scruff of his coat. "I won't have these shenanigans. Do you know how cold it is out there?" Nodding at me she told him, "She's going to freeze out there." Mrs. Henry came from Scotland, a wide solid woman who wore printed dresses, and the only woman at St. Pious to streak her hair. She could be counted on, above all else, never to go in for shenanigans. "Come with me young man," she said, with Ralph half-spinning in the collar she held an inch above his head. His arms, trapped in taut

sleeves, jutted out from his body at a forty-five degree angle. "And you, Missy," she said, addressing me once more. "Off that wet floor. You'll get yourself pneumonia, and then won't your mum be happy." She sighed, staring at my wet knees. "You're taking the bus?"

I shook my head. "Walking," I told her.

Mrs. Henry pulled me to her and turned me around, a hand squeezing my damp clothes. "Oh no you're not, you'll come with me too." She wheeled both of us down the pale yellow corridor to the office. Boots in one hand, my shoe in the other, I limped down the hall, my one wet stocking dragging beneath my foot across the institutional green carpet, growing longer and dirtier with each step, like a lengthy, black tongue.

Mrs. Henry dropped me off with the school secretary and sailed past the principal's doors with Ralph in hand, his collar eased level with the top of his head, still obliged to walk on tip-toes. The office door shut loudly behind him, its frosted glass giving a final shudder. I will pay for this, I thought.

Aunt Martha came to pick me up in the neighbour's car. I sat in the front seat beside her and she combed my bangs to one side with her fingers, tucking a blanket around my shoulders.

"Want to tell me why Ralph pushed you?" she asked.

"He hates me," I told her.

I shivered as Aunt Martha ran the bath for me, thankful to be out of my damp, gritty clothes and away from the sickly heat of the car-heater Aunt Martha had directed on my upper body in the car, leaving my cheeks flushed and my legs cold and damp. I was near to bursting with everything I wanted to tell her - Ralph showing my classmates the newspaper article he had found, Aunt Sis and the days spent alone in the Fort, brooding.

"Boys do that sometimes," Aunt Martha said, as she pulled my turtleneck over my head. "They pick on girls they like." I let Aunt Martha peel off my layers of damp winter clothing without saying a word.

Blue-green water poured from the bath tap, sending egg-like ripples to the back. I lowered myself below the surface of the water and lay, eyes open, staring at the ceiling, my hair splayed out, floating from my head. I told myself I wasn't afraid of Ralph. I combed my fingers through my hair and slowly let the air out of my lungs, watching the bubbles rise to the surface. I saw my mother's face hovering above me, her hands gesturing quietly in the muffled underwater silence. I received my mother's baptism and her blessing, understanding as I did so that if I was not afraid of Ralph, I had chased her away for his sake. I would not tell Aunt Martha what had happened and betray her a second time.

Friday, after school, I will take the bus straight to

Dolores' house. I have permission to eat there, too.

Dolores comes to the door wearing a sweatshirt and sweatpants from Cotton Ginny. Her hair is up in a scrunchie and she has washed her face, which without make-up, looks like someone else's. She is holding Jill by her collar, sticky Jill, who is straining to escape. "Well, get in," Dolores snaps. I always feel more clumsy than usual around Dolores. Dolores is never awkward, and she doesn't have much time for those who are.

Mr. Jeffries is not home and the lights in the house are dim. As we pass through the kitchen, I notice a pot of Kraft Dinner on the stove, cold and dried out. We go upstairs, to Dolores' bedroom, and there are at least a dozen white envelopes spread in a semi-circle on her bed. Some photographs sit on top of their envelopes - there are pictures of palm trees and swamps. Dolores has told me about enormous Monarch Butterflies as big as the palm of your hand, Praying Mantis and poisonous Red Arrow Frogs. There are spiders too, also poisonous, and Dolores has told me you have to check to make sure there aren't any in your shoes before putting them on. I've always assumed she was pulling my leg.

Dolores picks up envelope after envelope. "My uncle's house," she says, holding up a photo of a bungalow. She shows me her grandmother's house, the room she stays in when she visits, palm trees and long stretches of highway.

Dolores points at department stores dressed up as sky scrapers, entire buildings housing barrettes or skirts or handbags. Amongst the shopping trips, shots of crowded streets and towering buildings, mountains, and stretches of rolling hills, there is a photo of Dolores' mother, and there are more to follow. Her mother's head is swollen and puffy and most of her hair has fallen out. In these photographs, Dolores sits by her mother's bed, twisting around so she faces the camera, her mother's I.V. and taped wrist also in the picture. It's baffling to me that her grandmother would have taken the pictures. In my family, we don't display illness to outsiders. It is just as baffling to me that Dolores poses in them as she would with a healthy person. She smiles in each of them, even when her mother's eyes are closed. Holding a picture of her mother, Dolores tells me, "She called out for me while I was in the room, but she didn't remember who I was." I don't know what to say, so I don't say anything and Dolores stuffs the photo back in its envelope.

VI

The whole school files through "D" hallway for the year's commencement sermon at Canadian Martyrs. I saw Chuck in "D" this September, bending over a tire in machine shop with the attention of someone who'd like to be as preoccupied as he looked. I'd scuttled past him and into the church - illuminated by stained glass windows depicting the messy ends of Old World Christians in the New, bent penitently before their deaths - blushing into the roots of my hair.

Kids you haven't seen since elementary turn up in St. Ignatius' "D" Hallway years after you've assumed their families had moved to Fort Saskatchewan. Ms. Butte watches over its corridors: Beauty Culture doyenne, hair in a mild beehive in the front and a shoulder-length permanent wave in the back, fingers all bony knuckle, tipped in coral-red varnish, and the same blue polyester pants year-in, year-out, on her impossibly thin frame, gaping at the back, none of it hidden by the regulation blue baker's smock.

Almost all the girls of "D" hallway have processed hair and wear their blue cloaks in the doorways, smoking and clutching ruched black leather bags to their sides. The boys, wiry and undernourished, dress in old t-shirts and

jeans. Some are tattooed. They are worldly, older, and dangerous in a Leader of the Pack-ish kind of way.

Dolores told me I should go down to "D" hallway, lean on Chuck's tire, say hello and get it over with. When I tell Mellie this on the way to class, she asks, "Is that her professional opinion? Dolores would do more than just lean on his tire, you know." Mellie hasn't forgiven Dolores yet for Saturday night.

Marion, who hardly ever drinks, swallowed a full glass of shit mix on the weekend - Courvoisier that a patient had given Mr. Jeffries, Johnny Walker and some Jamaican rum that Aunt Martha and Uncle Dan had pretty much forgotten about, mixed with half a bottle of red wine Mellie managed to smuggle from home. We'd dumped all of it into great big jello glasses and topped it up with Coca Cola.

Dolores goaded Marion into downing an entire glass with her nose pinched and a Fisherman's Friend in her mouth to help mask the taste. Marion passed out almost instantly. We dragged her into the sauna in Dolores' basement, thinking we could sweat the alcohol out of her. It only made her dizzy and she threw up in the bathroom sink, which irritated Dolores.

"Quit complaining," Mellie said to Dolores as she scrubbed out the sink. "You got her drunk in the first place."

"I didn't 'get' her anything. Would she stick her hand

in the fire if I told her to?"

We spent the rest of the night walking along the cliffs overlooking Bowness, not far from Dolores' house. It's probably not the safest place to go walking when you're drunk - black as pitch and covered in gopher holes, not to mention the cliffs themselves and the long drop into the river. The cliffs are sometimes the least of your worries, with all the other teenage and not-so teenage drunks roaming around. In fact, it's best to stay away from the other bonfires - you never know who they belong to - mostly toughs from Bowness or public school kids who score heroin in the caves.

We took the mix with us. Mellie had poured it into the empty cola bottle and she hid it under her spring jacket. We sipped from it as we cut through cul-de-sac after cul-de-sac until we made it to the paths along the cliffs, Marion stumbling along between Mellie and me. Dolores called us winos. She laughed when she said it, and told us we would wind up downtown bumming for change and living at the Mustard Seed.

Marion was as silent as the grave after she'd thrown up in the sink, except for the occasional groan and stumble and I had to keep reaching out to make sure she was still there. I worried she had alcohol poisoning - and we'd have to take her to the hospital to get her stomach pumped - not that I know the signs of alcohol poisoning.

We walked the rest of the way in silence, watching the lights from the other side of the river in Bowness. The sign above the Bowness Bar says, "No knives, no helmets, no colours." Before it was annexed in the early '70's, Bowness was a town of its own. Aunt Martha says Bowness is a sign of things to come. I swallowed as much of that shit mix as I could stomach, hoping that it'd make me drunk enough to turn our endless, silent trudging into something more amusing, but I'd run out of Fisherman's Friends.

When we got back to Dolores' house, she told us we had to leave, even though her father wouldn't be back that night and we'd told our parents we would be staying over.

"What about Marion?" Mellie asked.

"Her dad can pick her up."

Marion, who had sobered up quite a bit by this time, slapped herself, took two deep breaths, and called home. Marion told us at school this morning that pretending to be sober while her father drove gave her the hugest headache and that she was afraid to speak in case he'd smell the alcohol when she opened her mouth. "Good thing your dad's no talker," Mellie said.

When they pulled into the driveway, Marion couldn't work up the energy or the co-ordination to open the car door. Luckily, her dad didn't think it odd that Marion stayed inside the car. Lucky too, that he was on the porch when Marion opened the door, because she fell onto the

driveway. Marion says she lay like that for quite some time - her top-half on the pavement and her legs in the car. As she knelt before her bed, saying her prayers, Marion threw up in her hands. She dumped it into her garbage can and had to smuggle it out of the house before church the next morning.

"She's a prissy crab," Mellie said, meaning Dolores. Marion was more concerned about taking communion in a fallen state - as she hadn't confessed to Father Pat about the drinking.

"He'd make me tell my parents," Marion explained.

"No, dumb-dumb," Mellie said. "He can't. He can't tell anyone, even if you'd murdered someone he's not allowed. Anyhow, vomiting isn't a sin."

Marion forgives Dolores for her crabbiness because of her mother's illness and her father. While Mellie makes exception for her mother's sickness, it doesn't matter how much of a dink Dolores' father is, Mellie's mother being no peach herself.

I know Marion feels responsible for Saturday night by the way she looks at the floor and blushes when she speaks. It wasn't half as bad as the time she broke up Catherine Hamsburg's toga party when she puked all over the most popular guy there. She tried to clean it up with her toga, but you just can't bring a party back from the brink of destruction after something like that.

Dolores showed up before first period and Marion hung around Dolores' locker, staring at her feet and blushing even more. Dolores looked miffed and disdainful and didn't make it any easier for Marion to apologize, not allowing at all that it wasn't entirely Marion's fault for the way Saturday turned out. Both of them walked away without saying a word to one another.

The windows of the cafeteria are hidden by the same heavy ochre drapes used in the sick room. Fluorescent lights bleach white the creamy-yellow walls, and groups of students sit scattered throughout the cafeteria's long tables, huddling and whispering or laughing loudly. Mellie pokes at the special of the day with her fork - Beef Stroganoff that will become meat loaf on Tuesday and Spaghetti Bolognese by Wednesday. The silence is worse than at the cliffs and Marion and Dolores refuse to even look at each other. I wonder how Dolores has the nerve to sit with the three of us. Then it occurs to me; Dolores is expecting an apology.

"So you might have a sister out there," Mellie says. It takes a few seconds for me to realize Mellie is talking to me.

"What?" I say, taking my eyes from Marion's Daily Special.

"You might have brothers and sisters."

"No, she's dead."

Marion and Dolores have looked up from their meals. "She means your father," Dolores explains. "Your father might have kids."

"Yeah, I guess that's right." My cheeks are hot and I stare into my chocolate chip muffin. The tops are always best. Crisp as if they've been fried up in Crisco. The rest is a doughy, cakey mess.

"You don't know who he is," Mellie says by way of asking.

I stare hard at the bits of muffin that have flaked all over the table and onto my lap.

"Her dad is dead," Marion says, puzzled. Then asks, "He's not dead?"

"You should really find out if you have any brothers before you marry one," Dolores says.

"April has brothers?" I hear Marion asking as I get up from the table and exit the cafeteria.

Grandma Lil thinks she knows who my father is, but I wouldn't ask her for anything. Not after the kidnapping.

When I was five, Aunt Martha and Uncle Dan decided I should be baptised a Catholic. They are Catholic, and despite Martha's schooling under the nuns at St. Mary's, they believe the Separate School is superior to the Public. "Wouldn't it be better that she be brought up with no religion at all?" Aunt Hannah had asked.

"Why on earth would you raise her a Catholic if you want her to learn religion?" my Grandmother Lil protested. "It's all 'trickle down, trickle down' with them." When Aunt Martha mimics Grandma Lil, she makes a pyramid with her hands, wiggles her forefingers, wrinkles up her nose and crows. "Pope, bishops, then a bunch of pent-up priests distributing the word of the Lord to the good people on their knees."

"It's not all like that, Mum," Aunt Martha said.

"How different is Alberta from Newfoundland? Imagine if April had been an orphan in one of those homes."

"Well she wasn't."

"Lucky for her."

"We can't ignore April's spiritual needs," Uncle Dan said. Uncle Dan says Grandma Lil laid her cold, fish-like eyes on him and measured out the length of him like she was fitting a coffin. "She'd be better off having no religion at all. Catholic of all things. Catholics did her mother in."

"Jehovah's Witnesses, Mum."

"Jehovah's Witnesses nothing. Where she'd get those loonytoon notions about being the Virgin Mary all over again if not from your father?"

Grandma is a staunch Anglican, a lifelong member of the International Order of the Daughters of the Empire, as was her mother before her. She buys Royal Commemorative Plates from Birks and sets them on top of the highboy in her living

room.

Grandma Lil was born and raised in a wealthy Ontario family, and Uncle Dan says she likes to present herself as a grand dame who'd had the misfortune of marrying beneath herself when her father's business bottomed out in the thirties. Gran held firm against her own conversion, but baptised her children in the Catholic faith, and a much diminished prosperity, for her husband. A handsome man with a rakish wit who'd died before I was born, his absence has left a palpable, gloomy void in my grandmother's home.

The second time I was kidnapped, Gran had offered to baby-sit. The moment Aunt Martha left the house she dressed me in the clothes chosen for my baptism and drove to Calgary's First United. South of Tenth Street and Kensington Road, the United Church is tucked between residential homes and a shopping district of rundown second-hand shops.

Grandma Lil was unimpressed with the church itself, grunting at the cut-out felt Stations of The Cross. "All bare-boards and spiritualism," she would later say, "and no eye for decor what-so-ever." The organist was passable, the young minister barely tolerable. He seemed to wilt before Grandmother Lil, standing solemnly with her enormous leather purse, pinched mouth and haughty forehead, her eyes that examined and never left their findings unpronounced.

This could not be the baptism I had been promised. My hair was uncurled, there were no flowers, I hadn't the

necklace my aunt had chosen to go with my dress, and I was too afraid to ask.

There was no mystery, no ceremony, no sense of awe as I stepped up to the fount. The minister held my white gloved hand, and I remember being embarrassed that Gran hadn't washed my knees or bothered with my new white tights, only scrubbed my face raw with a wash-cloth.

I felt ashamed for the young minister, so clearly slighted by Grandma Lil, equally ashamed by the dismissive air with which she signed the registry.

Aunt Martha was waiting for us when we returned home, the groceries in their bags on the kitchen table. She sat in our green, over-stuffed, living-room chair, smoking, her legs extended out into the middle of the room. Without looking up, she asked, "Where is April's dress, Mum?" When Gran didn't answer, Aunt Martha raised her head, her eyes shut. I stood in the doorway beside my grandmother, studying one face, then the other. "When I open my eyes," she continued, "April will not be wearing the baptismal dress I spent a month sewing."

My grandmother has never been one for fiction or high drama. "Open your eyes, for God's sake, Martha. You're acting like a fool."

"Did you baptise her, Mum?"

"They have ministers for that."

Aunt Martha leaned forward and sighed. She covered her

down-turned face with her hand and the smoke from her cigarette curled up to the ceiling. She looked up at us. "Where did you take her, Mother?"

"United," Gran sniffed.

"You didn't bother to put April's tights on."

"Tights are hardly important when such matters are at stake."

"There was nothing at stake, Mum. April was never in any danger of anything."

"Do not raise your voice to me, missy."

"You had no right. April is not your child, nor are you her guardian and the only thing you have accomplished is robbing" - Grandma snorted when Aunt Martha said "robbing" but Aunt Martha persisted - "yes, Mum, robbing April of an opportunity to be surrounded by family and friends and to go through a completely normal ceremony like any other little girl."

"Here is your niece, Martha. Make her some lunch, she must be hungry."

"How is it, Mum, that you wonder where Sis gets it from?" Grandma Lil turned and marched out our kitchen down the front porch, seemingly unruffled.

Aunt Martha sat down heavily at the kitchen table. She pulled another chair up to her and patted it. My bottom lip trembled and my eyes watered as Aunt Martha's words sank in. I had been robbed, though I was not sure of what.

"Sweetie," Aunt Martha said peering into my face, "nothing bad has happened." She smacked my knee and declared, "you are now a Child of God in the eyes of the church. Now, run and take off that dress, we don't want to get it dirty." I did as I was told and the next day, cousins and aunts and uncles on both sides came to our home to celebrate my baptism. Grandma Lil did not. There were flowers and cake, fruit salad and little minced ham sandwiches cut into triangles. I wore my dress for the second time and Aunt Martha curled my hair and set tiny pink carnations into my bangs. It was as if everything had gone as planned, but I felt we were dishonest. I was United when I was meant to be Catholic ("We'll just fudge a bit," Aunt Martha had told me when I'd asked if I was still allowed to attend school at St. Pious). I was marked, different. "A child of God," Aunt Martha had said.

I left the adults and my cousins to sit on the edge of our lawn and contemplate my new relationship with God. I had become part of a larger family that claimed me as its own, but I had been baptised into the wrong one, the wrong family of God. It occurred to me that I hadn't chosen to be anything at all.

I mean to go to the library to look at Annunciations. Instead I cut across "N" and "S" hallways, towards "D". The smell of perming solution and singed hair mixes with the

odours of oil and Glo-Fuel. The doors to Automotives are shut - two big steel doors with little rectangles of glass - chicken wire between the double panes. I stand on my tip-toes to look in. Students are working on the bodies of a few rusted-out cars, laid out like cadavers on the stained concrete floor. I don't see Chuck until I realize he's staring at me. I put my hand up against the glass and wave.

"Hi," Dolores says, leaning against the locker next to mine. I went to my classes this afternoon with foolscap I bought from the Collingwood corner store so I wouldn't have to run into my friends, the yahoos, with their puking and crabbing at each other, and watch-out-before-you-commit-incest advice. Why is it that they're all pissed off at each other and I'm the one who gets my fingers slammed in the door? "Go to hell," is what I'd like to say to Dolores.

"Hi," I say, as coldly as I can. I stare at my lock, hoping Dolores will go away. Maybe, if I'm really lucky, Ralph will show up to tell me my father is the pervy school janitor.

"So?"

"So nothing."

"I didn't see you this afternoon."

"Yup."

"You didn't come back to your locker to get your books."

"Nope."

"Aren't you supposed to have them with you in class?"

"And your point?"

"You mad?"

I am mad, I just don't have the guts to say it.

"You gonna tell me to fuck off?" Dolores asks. "How about you throw some dirt at me. That make you feel better?"

Dolores grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me friendly-like, "Oh come on, April. Don't be mad." She tears a sheet of paper from her notebook and waves it above her head. "Truce? Okay? Let's do something fun. Why don't we skip fourth period and go to the Emporium?"

Dolores grins stupidly at me as we head downtown on the bus. I am so nervous I could upchuck and I stare out the window so I don't get motion sickness. I hate skipping, even though Dolores has promised to steal a doctor's appointment form from her father.

I loved going to The Emporium this summer. My favourite is the Indie 500, even though I never really got a handle on it. I mix up the gas and the brake and what with the gear shift on the console and the little red buttons, I never know what I am doing, let alone steer. The regulars watch when anyone plays it, which made me even more clumsy, and I'd die, I'd have just die if anyone said that I drove like a girl.

Aunt Martha blames strip malls, urban sprawl, and post-boom bust for the death of Calgary's downtown. Department stores and the small cluster of streets and businesses that make up the downtown core are deserted after five o'clock. Office employees have replaced shoppers. Its streets have become vulnerable to transients, the loose and unhinged, hoodlums, truants and toughs.

During the oil boom, strip malls and shopping centres were built on glacial moraine to the northwest of Calgary and on prairie farmland to the west and east. Those malls and shopping centres became the heart of far-flung communities with names like The Hamptons, Discovery Ridge, Coventry Hills, and Sun Horizon Paradise.

"Who do they think they're kidding?" Aunt Martha has stormed. "Whatever happened to Crowchild and Shaganappi? Just you watch, there'll be 'Tuscanys' and 'Martha's Vineyards' next."

"Just wait until the boom is over," she'd pronounce, a finger pointing skyward, "and then what'll they do with a jackass name like 'The Hamptons'!"

Now that the boom is over, Aunt Martha blames our economy for spousal abuse and divorce. She hasn't yet polled the home-owners in The Hamptons on how they feel about the jackassedness of its name. <u>The Herald</u> is full of news about those new communities and their residents, plenty of whom are selling off their mortgages for a dollar apiece and

getting the Sam H out of CowTown as fast as their cars, still bearing Ontario licence plates, will carry them. Despite the bust, Aunt Martha predicts that Canmore and Airdrie will become bedroom communities. "Mark my words," Aunt Martha says, "urban sprawl will become Calgary's most distinguishing feature."

When Aunt Martha goes on like this, Uncle Dan looks at me and sighs, "It seems we are living in apocalyptic times."

Aunt Martha forbids me to go downtown on my own. Crazies and criminals pace the corners of Centre Street, waiting to ensnare me at every turn. Or so she says, and their real or imagined eagerness to do me harm gives her headaches. Despite the riffraff, my mother worries her more, and I am wary of her myself.

Aunt Sis sleeps in rotation at a handful of half-way homes. During the day, she sets up with her Bible on the corner of first Street and Seventh Avenue. When Light Rail Transit split Calgary's downtown in two, the south side of the avenue became a row of pawn shops and derelict businesses. Their dark, recessed entrances are littered with cigarette butts and windblown newspapers. Toughs in leather jackets lean into the walls with hunched shoulders, whispering, "Hash, pot" as you pass. Aunt Sis has blossomed in the changed climate and cries out from her corner, "The least among you!" and rings her giant school teacher bell.

She's a crusader, a rallying cry against the stronghold of despair, a self-proclaimed witness to all that is and has ever been done in God's name - an agent of the Lord. An embarrassment, hallelujah!

Aunt Sis storms Eaton's on weekends. Standing at the Eighth Avenue entrance, a tall, broad figure, she scatters fistfuls of pennies before the multitudes of shoppers looking for overcoats and rubber boots, like Jesus turning over the money-lenders tables in the temple. "For you have taken the house of prayer and made it a bargain-hunter's paradise!" she cries. Aunt Sis will never get over Sunday shopping.

If we are mortified, Aunt Sis is either oblivious to the stares and laughter, or immune. In a photograph featured in the "About Town" section of The Albertan, which I cut out and folded neatly into the bottom of my jewellery box, Aunt Sis squares off with the camera, her chin tilted upwards, beaming. It could have been your average people-around-town pictorial if she weren't wearing a cardboard box on her head with her Bible poised above, mid-swat. "Calgary's own Gospel Mary," the caption reads. The butt of so many jokes and so much gawking, the newspaper is in on it too - a cheap, easy shot. Aunt Sis probably pasted it into a scrap book, prouder even than the moment it was taken.

I am not a rebellious teen. Except for my trips to The Emporium with Dolores, I have pretty much stayed within the

well-manicured lawns of Varsity Village, our quiet, middle-class neighbourhood, and obeyed my guardians. I would continue to stay put, sallying forth between my home, the local mall and St. Ignatius the whole year long, but for Dolores, who knows where the action is and how to get there.

The Emporium is dark - dim lights, tinted windows, made even darker by the black and orange shag that is meant to hide the Coke stains and cigarette burns. Dolores disappears into The Emporium, and I am suddenly ashamed of the coral jeans and matching sweater I am wearing, realizing in a Saul-on-the-road-to-Damascus-blinding-flash, that my clothes make me look younger and mousier than normal. Wincing as the regulars appraise my thin, brown hair, I try to flatten some of the staticky strands floating up from my head. I make a mental note to wear more black, like Dolores, and file in behind her.

A new Mario Brothers game is on the top deck. Dolores points to it. "This is why I wanted you to come," she says. She claps her hands together, beaming. "It is so fun," she says. "You have to assemble the hamburgers - lettuce, tomato, sesame seed bun, patty, with extra points for cheese - before you are devoured by a glob of green mould." I am getting too old for this.

Dolores taps a cigarette on her pack before she puts it to her mouth. "You want one?"

She always offers. I always decline.

"I'll take that if you won't." A hand flashes between us to grab the fag mid-tap. "Don't smoke, eh?" Ralph Reise asks, the unlit cigarette already bobbing in the corner of his mouth. "Might help your playing," Ralph says, not to me particularly. "Steadies the nerves." He holds out one of his hands to illustrate. "Basketball, rugby and football three years running." I ignore Ralph and hope he goes away.

Ralph may be spiteful and mean, but he is handsome - in an athletic, brutish sort of way. Dolores thinks he is, even though Ralph is also thick-set and rolls on the outside of his feet when he walks - a congenital defect, Aunt Martha says. Ralph lights the cigarette and thrusts his hands into his front pockets, rocking back and forth on the heels of his deck shoes. "Wow," Ralph says as if he'd never noticed Dolores before, her face reflecting back at him in the flashing neon screen, "you're pretty beautiful." Dolores turns from the console and giggles, letting a green blob eat her before she can put the bun on top of her beef patty. My aunt has warned me, but I'd never believed you can get into this much trouble downtown.

A voice booms from the front of The Emporium. "Howdy children!" Oh God. Aunt Sis. Her hair is done up in a severe bun at the back of her neck, a blue pillbox hat sits above the bun, fixed with a veil and two spoiled velvet flowers. The crumpled veil rides just above her eyebrows, making for

a strange, cross-hatched bang.

My mother's features begin to emerge from the shapeless mass of wool and fur - the form I've become so familiar with, like the symbol for walk or the green "Yuck" sticker my aunt used to put on cleaning products. I recognize my grandmother's high, wide cheekbones. My mother's eyes are small, liquid marbles in the enormous expanse of her face. I have seen those eyes before, and they have never held out much hope for my own. My heart feels as if it is stuck in the bottom of my throat and threatening to explode out of my neck.

"That fucking mental case," Ralph mutters between his teeth. Turning to me, he taps my nose with a yellowed forefinger. "Showtime," he says.

A hot, prickling sensation climbs up my neck and across my chest. Sweat trickles down the sleeves of my sweater. My knees weaken, and I fight against the urge to fall on the floor and roll under a pinball machine. Carol runs to the bathroom when Aunt Sis barges into Eaton's main foyer with her pennies all ready to go. No such luck in The Emporium, where they lock the bathrooms to keep out junkies.

Aunt Sis drops her shopping bag, plastered with the bleeding heart of Jesus, at her feet. Her clothes are an armour of upholstery on her large frame - a slab of granite cinched at the waist with a belt.

I pray Dolores will desert me, and if there is a God

somewhere, Ralph will go with her. Please Dolores, I beg silently, run now, scram. Dolores stays where she is, struck dumb by the apparition within spitting distance and now advancing, cradling a stuffed lamb in the crook of her arm.

Aunt Sis takes a Bible out of her bag, holds it up before The Emporium and scans its length from left to right and back again, crying, "I expel all demons from this place." I have seen Aunt Sis ranting in the middle of Stephen Avenue Mall, have come within reach of the back of her ratty, mended coat, I've faced off with her in the school yard - never before have I been among the crowds she preaches to. My stomach clenches and churns, but I feel oddly protected - one of a number, in a crowd of unbelievers.

Opening the Bible she reads, "You shall not defile yourselves with them, and so become unclean. For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy." Lifting her head, she calls out, "Do not worship false gods! Nor any graven image! There is but one true God - and His Son! Get busy and study The Word!"

Denouncing the evils of Pac Man and Donkey Kong, the corners of her mouth fill with frothy white spittle. "He that believeth not, shall be damned!" Aunt Sis prophesizes into The Emporium's gaping mouth.

We are rooted to the spot, as if nailed to our tall black machines. Beside me, a skinny head-banger in a Motor

Head t-shirt shifts from foot to foot, jangling quarters in his palm.

"Crazy old broad," he mutters.

The Emporium's owner, fat and balding, wearing a change belt around his waist, emerges from a darkened corner and shuffles towards Aunt Sis, his hand extended and low to the ground as he might approach a strange dog. "Come on, you," he says. "You come on. No one here's doing anything wrong." He lays his outstretched hands gently on Aunt Sis' forearms as if to lead her away.

"Do not touch me," Aunt Sis warns, her voice menacingly calm. "Do not touch a lady. Remove your hand. I'll scream."

"Ain't you already screaming?" Ralph yells across the room. For the first time I notice that Ralph's nose looks like it's been broken. I wish cauliflower ears on him.

The owner raises his hands above either side of his head and eases backwards, "This here is a business, lady. There's plenty of empty churches for you to holler in."

"Where two or three are gathered in my name, I will be among them, Matthew eighteen verse twenty!" Aunt Sis cheers, arms upraised triumphant.

"Get out, you old bat!" Ralph yells at her. He raises himself high on his toes and points angrily, his finger stabbing for emphasis. "Pack your Jesus-loving garbage bag and move your fat ass!"

I want to shush Ralph, but it is too late. Aunt Sis has

already fixed him in her sights. The Emporium seems to hold its collective breath as she picks up her bag and files past the onlookers towards Ralph, Dolores and me. I'm reliving every dream I've ever had in which the face of my mother is barrelling down upon me like a locomotive from God, and I'm frozen on the tracks. In six effortless strides, Aunt Sis has crossed the length of the Emporium to stand before Ralph. I manage a half turn away from Aunt Sis, her arm brushing my shoulder as she passes.

"What's wrong, son?" she asks tenderly, hand outstretched with a small red Bible sitting in her palm. Her face is oily, as if slick with sweat. Her eyes skip over me. "It just goes to show you," she says, nodding to Dolores. "You never know what's troubling a person. What's troubling you, son?"

"You're troubling me, you fat old cow," Ralph squeaks, his voice yelping on "fat" and "cow".

"Jesus leads me. I am never lost. And you too, you too, my son, will find your way through Christ."

Ralph's face has blanched and I watch the smoky orange lights reflecting off his slick hair gelled into an impossible duck's tail.

"Take it," Aunt Sis coaxes, jiggling her palm, "it's the Lord's word, it'll do you good."

Ralph's arms hang at his sides, his face burning bright red. He clenches and unclenches his fists held tight to his

thighs. Aunt Sis sighs and tucks the tiny Gideon Bible into the front pocket of his Bennetton rugby shirt. "You have surely done nothing God won't forgive you for." Plucking the still-lit cigarette from Ralph's fingers, she crushes it beneath her foot. Aunt Sis grabs the back of Ralph's neck and kneads it with a mannish hand. Ralph jerks away from her touch, but she holds tightly onto his neck. In a low voice, Aunt Sis coos, "I warn you, son, the road to hell is paved with cigarettes."

Aunt Sis pivots on her heel and turns to exit The Emporium. Passing me, she grabs my arm, her fingertips bite through my sweater. She pulls me to her and hisses in my ear, "Sanctify yourself and be holy." Her breath is hot and smells like something rotten. Rings of dirt have collected in the folds at the back of her neck. The fingers gripping my arm are swollen, black sausages.

Releasing me, she snatches Dolores' pack of cigarettes and breezes through The Emporium and out onto the mall. I can hear her singing, "Nearer My God to Thee," her voice growing fainter as she moves down the Avenue.

"Bitch took my cigarettes!" Dolores cries, incredulous.

Grandma Lil would disagree, but my aunts have told me my mother was never "all there" from the start. As a child, she followed others. She became an adolescent ignorant of her own mind and a young woman others felt obliged to look after. How many would say the same of me, I wonder?

"Are you listening?" Dolores asks.

My mother's breath is on my skin and the dirtiness of her clings to me. I turn to Ralph and he looks like I must - mouth agog, face drained and ashen. Without a word, Ralph runs from The Emporium.

Dolores calls after him, "She's an affront to the eyes of God, Ralph!" She turns to me angrily. "Sacrilege." I slump down on the dirty orange and black carpet and put my head between my knees. "What are you doing?" Dolores hisses "Get up."

She's only a nut, I want to say and am seized by the sudden desire to grab Dolores and shake her until her eyes roll back into her head, but not before she promises never to say another word about my family, or better yet, what she thinks God thinks about my family. "What do you care about the eyes of God?" I ask, upside-down, acid in the back of my mouth.

Dolores stands over me. I can see her bottom-half through the curtain of hair that falls over my face - legs apart, hands on hips. "She should be put away."

"Ashtray," I say, eyes on a litter of cigarette butts beneath me. Dolores unhooks an aluminum bowl from its base and passes it to my outreached arm. I spit into it. I would feel better if I could throw-up.

"She's a freaky, idiot, religious nut-case."

"You want to out-religious freaky nut-case her?" I ask

into the powder-filled ashtray, heaped with round hard nuggets of gum and yellowed cigarette filters.

"She picks on innocent people."

"Ralph?" I ask, incredulously. I spit again into the ashtray. I put the ashtray on the ground and crouch over it. "It was his own fault. He shouldn't have said anything."

"Like you? Like you don't say anything? She's on to you." Dolores lowers her voice and drones in biblical tones, arms spread wide as if holding an enormous basket, like Charleton Heston reading the Ten Commandments, "Sanctify yourself and be holy."

"Only because she saw me here."

"She sees you here," Dolores corrected. "Sees, not saw. You'll spend the rest of your life hiding from her and she'll still know everything about you."

"What are you saying?"

"Duh, stupid. She follows you. She knows where you go. She probably knows you skipped class today. Haven't you figured that out yet?"

My forehead is beaded with sweat, as if I've caught a fever. I look up at Dolores. "What would your mom say if she saw you here?" Dolores squints at me, which only makes me more pleased with what has come unbidden from my mouth. Dolores doesn't say anything, only glares and slowly it comes clear to me. Dolores' father lets her run wild and it doesn't matter what she does, as long as she doesn't go too

far. It matters to her mother. I stand and toss my hair. "She's a sacrilege," I simper, mocking Dolores. "You're just pissed because she ran Ralph off before he could feel you up!"

"Get a life," Dolores sneers and marches down the steps away from me.

"Get a life," I mimic. "You're a slut, Dolores. Everyone knows it, haven't you figured that out yet?"

Dolores looks back at me and screeches, "Mental! You and your family. Psychos! All of you."

Dolores' "mental" is visible in the faces that quickly turn away from mine. I replace the ashtray on its base and take Dolores' quarters from the console of Eat 'Em Up.

Head bowed, I quickly file past the rows of towering black machines to the exit, the people behind them a feverish blur. The owner sits on a stool beside the glass doors, shaking his head, chuckling with a lanky boy. I know the boy. It's Chuck.

"That kook," the owner says as I push open the door. "That nut, she come here looking for you or something?"

I look from the fat, balding man, and back to Chuck.

"You can't be coming here if she plans on tagging along."

I stare at Chuck, who stares back at me. His face is longer and leaner than the one he'd had as a boy. He must have heard Dolores and I screeching at each other. He

probably thinks I'm as crazy as Aunt Sis. Chuck must also have told the owner who Aunt Sis belongs to. It's alright though, it's not like I'd ever come back here again.

*

I run to the bus stop next to the Central United Church. Dolores is not waiting for the bus back to Varsity Village. Beggars and drunks cluster around Central United's back door. Across the street, underneath the Hudson's Bay arcades, two young men wearing denim vests over their leather jackets throw punches at each other and spit at the display windows, making rude gestures at the willow-backed mannequins.

If not for Aunt Sis, Dolores and I would be eating soft tacos together in the food court at The Lancaster. We usually eat at The Lancaster. We stopped using its bathrooms after we stumbled onto a girl sticking a needle in her arm, holding a scarf wound around her arm with her teeth. It's an awful thing to call someone a slut. My heart is pounding so hard I hope it bursts and I am so ashamed I could cry.

Uncle Dan and Aunt Martha are at the front door waiting for me when I get home. I can see Aunt Martha's face from the street, her jaw set like she's about to eat her own teeth. "April Steil Ryman," Aunt Martha says, pronouncing

each syllable as I make my way up the short walkway. I learned at an early age that the length of my name is an accurate measure of my aunt's anger. "April Steil" sends a chill through my heart. "April Steil Ryman" means kiss your ass good-bye, it is the last you are to see of it for a long while.

Aunt Martha has a loud voice, a voice that carries, and it echoes in our quiet, supper-time crescent. Families sitting down to their dinners, fathers' and husbands' cars parked in driveways. Uncle Dan stands beside Aunt Martha, still in his work tie and jacket, lips grimly pursed, fearing for my moral fibre. A united front. Certain death awaits me on the front stoop.

"Were the hell have you been?" rebounds off the neighbour's garage door. Oh God, save me. Except for "jackass," Aunt Martha never swears. I stand dumbly on the step, sweating in my coral Esprit sweater too heavy for September. "Dolores' father called here looking for her. The school's called looking for both of you. You lied, April. Why is it we can't trust you anymore?" She pauses for me to answer, and I know enough not to. "We didn't know where you were, we were about to call the police and you could have been lying dead in a ditch somewhere for all we knew!"

I am not, and I have never been a cruel or disobedient child, but I admit, my aunt and uncle have spent a large amount of my childhood thinking I am lying dead in a ditch

somewhere. Today, I've learned for all time never to stray from their protection. I mean to look Aunt Martha in the eye and swear I will never do it again, and I really never will, only I look at Aunt Martha and burst into tears.

VII

I've told Aunt Martha that Dolores and I sneaked downtown, then fought. I've been suspended from school for a day. As it is, I'm in plenty of trouble; I don't need to tell Aunt Martha about Aunt Sis. Besides, Aunt Martha would only call my mother's parole officer, even though it was the general godlessness of the place she was after, and not me.

I haven't apologized to Dolores. Every time I pick up the phone, I remember what happened at The Emporium - Ralph yelling at Aunt Sis, Dolores standing over me with her hands on her hips, telling me my mother is "a sacrilege". I remember the look on her face, shrieking "mental" before the entire Emporium, and it makes me so angry I can't apologize. I can't forget the face of my mother either - the smell of her rotten clothes, her dirty hands. If I'm to believe Aunt Martha, my mother spends all her money on saving souls when what she needs is a good wash, new clothing and a decent place to sleep. All I've managed to do for my mother is call Dolores a slut.

My stomach a tight knot, I lay in bed last night, watching the clock tick away its minutes to Tuesday, my first day back at school. When the phone wakes me, I'm surprised to

find that I'd managed to fall asleep after all. I can hear my aunt in the next room, sighing and tsking into the receiver. I still haven't called Dolores.

"April," Aunt Martha says gently, and pads into my room, the phone held against her body, the receiver extended in her right hand.

"Hello?"

"My mom is dead," Dolores says.

"What?" I say, even though I heard her.

"My mother is dead," she says again, almost angrily.

"I'm sorry, Dolores."

We are quiet for awhile and I listen to her breathing into the receiver. I can't quite believe it, that someone can die like that, over the phone. "I'm so sorry," I say again. I don't know what else to say. I want to ask her when it happened, but the question seems impolite. Sitting beside me, my aunt fingers the ties of her bathrobe.

"She died on Friday," Dolores says, as if she were reading my mind. She didn't call to tell me. Mellie and Marion didn't either, and I am pricked all over with guilt and remorse.

"Do you want me to come over?" I ask.

"Dad's driving me to school."

"Do you want me to meet you?"

"I'll see you there," she says and hangs up.

The sky is blue, chill and the light dimmer than a week before, promising winter. Aunt Martha gives me a ride to school. "Why would a girl go to school so soon after her mother dies?" Aunt Martha asks. I shake my head, my eyes searching the sidewalks, but there is no sign of Aunt Sis this morning. My aunt and I drive the rest of the way in silence.

Dolores stands in front of St. Ignatius' orange brick facade, surrounded by a mob of girls. At the moment, she is being hugged by Trinity Woolfe. They have never been friends, but Trinity's dad is a friend of Mr. Jeffries. Trinity's mascara is running down her cheeks, smears of it on the arms of her pink sweatshirt draped around her shoulders where someone has wiped her eyes. Dolores is crying too, sparse tears and smiling grimly. I still don't know what to say. I wait my turn outside the circle of girls.

A private memorial service for Dolores' mom is held at a funeral home. "Strange it wouldn't be held at the church," Aunt Martha says as we close the doors to our green Dodge in the parking lot. I've never been to a funeral home before and I am surprised by the marble tables and richly embroidered chairs that line the entrance. "Big money in death," Uncle Dan whispers to me.

We are ushered into a small dark room that reminds me

of the music room at St. Pious. There is a photo of Mrs. Jeffries at the front, beside an enormous bouquet of star-gazer lilies. Dolores and her father sit on the other side of the flowers and the photograph. Mellie, Marion and Trinity have come with their parents. Almost everyone is dressed in black, although Aunt Martha says you don't have to anymore. Father Pat gives the eulogy. I never met Mrs. Jeffries, and Dolores has never told me about her. Father Pat says she was a kind, gentle woman. He reads from Matthew, the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, ending with Matthew's dire warning, "Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour in which the Son of Man is coming." I do not know if Dolores is comforted by these words. I don't think I would be.

The halls at school are full of talk of her mother's death and I hear from Mellie that Trinity's family sent a big bouquet of flowers and fruit to Dolores' house. When I see Dolores at school, she is surrounded by the same group of girls I saw outside St. Ignatius, and she is always with Trinity. She smiles at me, but moves away before I can talk to her. She also laughs a laugh I've never heard before, tilting back her head, showing her white teeth.

"She's milking her mother's death for all it's worth," Mellie says on our way to Religion, staring after Trinity and Dolores running sock-footed down the long hall,

giggling. Marion smacks Mellie in the thigh with her Religion 20 textbook.

"It's true, Marion."

"Mellie," Marion hisses, "you're mean."

"She's allowed to laugh," I say.

"She laughs a lot, don't you think?"

"It's not her fault they're nice to her."

Mellie shrugs. "I wouldn't let them be nice to me."

Dolores is at her locker. I don't have to wait for her to stream towards me with her brigade of popular girls and their blow-dried hair. She looks away and stares at her lock.

"I'm sorry for what I said in the Emporium. I didn't mean it." Dolores stops fiddling with her combination and laughs.

"I don't hate you," she says. Dolores tugs angrily at the lock, it clicks open and she gives me a pinched smile.

"Yes, you do. You hate me. Look, you're not a slut, okay? I didn't mean it. I was just angry. And I didn't mean what I said about your mom, Dolores?"

"My mother is dead."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"You keep saying that."

"Is it your turn to tell me to fuck off?" I ask.

Dolores doesn't smile. Instead she tells me, "I

wouldn't bother, but now that you've mentioned it, St. April, why don't you?"

The library at St. Ignatius is opposite the principle's office, next to the cafeteria. It borders onto a courtyard, which is always locked, although the litter of cigarette butts and crumpled paper cups seen through its glass doors suggest otherwise. The library's walls are lined with dark wooden book cases, flanked by rows of creaking turnstiles filled to overflowing with the newest paperbacks.

It's a loud library, bookended on both east and west sides by large, round tables meant for group research. I should be studying Our Western Heritage for my Social Studies exam fourth period, but I keep turning over what Dolores said. I've come to one conclusion - I suck. I've found a copy of an illustrated manuscript, but it is too loud in the library to concentrate even on that. I'm tempted to shush the girls to my left. I sigh loudly and smack the wall of my carrel with my foot, when I'd really like to stand up and yell, "Shut up, please!" I hear the name "Ralph" whispered in a giggled hiss followed by "Dolores," then "Emporium," and finally, "Gospel Mary." My stomach sinks to my shoes.

The girls are giggling and whispering, and I only catch bits of their conversation, followed by sharp peals of laughter, much gasping and convulsions of hiccups. The

showdown at The Emporium was really not that funny. I press my ear against the wall of the carrel. Their words are lost in high whinnying, so I give up listening and wrap my hands over my ears. I hum St. Francis' Prayer as I skim through pages of gold leaf, not registering their images. I focus on my breathing - in through the nose, out the mouth.

I can't take another second. I stand to gather my books, and all four girls stop and stare at me. They are football types with lockers in upper "B" hallway. Unlike cheerleaders - a small, desperate bunch suffering from good grades - football types date football players. One of the girls plucks the sleeve of another. A bleached-blonde with a pony tail like a wheat sheaf of frayed split-ends hisses, "That's her!" I should have stayed in the carrel, but it is too late now. I don't look up as I pass their table, my heart racing. I pretend I haven't heard or noticed anything.

Near tears by the time I reach Mellie and Marion at their lockers, I blurt out, "They were laughing about me in the library!"

"Laughing at you?" Mellie asks.

"Talking about me."

"Are you sure," Marion asks, "they were talking about you?"

"Dolores hates me!"

"You're figuring this out now?" Mellie asks.

"Was Dolores in the library?" Marion asks. "Dolores

doesn't hate you," she adds. "But April, you called her a slut."

"In public," Mellie says. "And you made fun of her mother."

"I didn't make fun of her mother."

"You insulted her," Mellie says.

"I insulted Dolores."

"You used her mother to do it," Marion says.

I nod. It's true.

"Well," Mellie says, "you couldn't have known she was going to die."

"She was sick enough," Marion says.

Unlike lunch hour when an over-flow of students muddies the division of one group from another, after lunch the cafeteria is pocked with groups set off from one another like cardinal points of a map. Chuck and his friends are sitting beneath the windows. I am tempted to turn back, but I am starving and I can barely think straight as it is, let alone write an exam. I skirt Chuck, hoping he won't notice me, and pass Trinity's table instead. She sits amongst a handful of friends, hair falling to her shoulders in a leonine curl. I feel as I had before the chalk board in Mrs. Mulsen's Religion class, vulnerable and examined.

Lined up to order, I am startled by a loud thud beside me. I jump. A Psychology textbook lays on the floor, face

up, its pages undisturbed as if it had fallen from the ceiling. I pick it up from the floor and return it to the nearest table, smiling quickly at Trinity before turning back to the counter.

A second thud. This time I take a long look at the textbook. It has landed spine up, its pages pressed open against the floor. I look at Trinity's group and they stare back, unsmiling. I can't read anything unkind in their faces. "This belong to you?" I ask the table. "This yours?" They stare, unblinking, until Trinity motions with her hand that I should bring the book to her. I do and she grabs my wrist, banging the textbook against the table, which falls for a third time. Startled, my wrist still clutched in Trinity's fingers, I look at her and she hisses.

In the girls' washroom, I pull my feet up and huddle on the toilet seat. I could skip the exam, it's only worth twenty-five percent of the year's grade. If I went home and hanged myself, I wouldn't have to worry about the test at all.

The washroom door swings open and footsteps march towards the sinks, then pause. A male voice announces, "Hurry up and get out of there." I press the back of my hand against my mouth and hold my breath. I don't recognize the voice, but it's surely not addressing me. The footsteps retreat and echo out into the hall. Almost immediately the door opens again. "Finish up your business, I don't have all

day," the same voice says. His footsteps approach the stalls. He opens the door of the first cubicle, and I nearly scream, more from embarrassment than terror. I can't think of anything worse than both his and my impending dismay brought on by discovering a stranger huddled on a toilet seat with teary eyes. The second door bangs open, the third and then the fourth. I hop off my seat and fling open my own door. "It's not me you're looking for," I announce, noting that my voice is shrill and high-pitched. I was this way in hide-and-seek too - so terrified at being discovered that I would rush headlong into the arms of my pursuer.

"Took you long enough," Chuck says.

I can't handle one more showdown, one more sneer, one more hiss. To be discovered hiding in the girls' washroom by Chuck, who has seen my mother in action, who hid me from her in grade school and ratted on me to the owner of The Emporium, is too much.

"Why do you let them do that to you?" he asks. "Why'd you have to pick up the book?" Chuck is wearing a faded jean jacket lined with sheep's wool. I stare at his runners, frayed on the outside of his right foot. He is holding a black binder in one hand and I wonder if they have Math in "D" corridor. Remedial Mathematics for dummies. "Why do you care about them?"

"Who says I care about them?" I ask, tilting my head up and staring at him down the length of my nose. "I don't

care."

"Then what were you doing in here?"

"Duh," I say, throwing up my arms to encompass all the glory and splendour of the girl's washroom.

Chuck takes my hand. "You can't hide in here all day," he says, and pulls me from the bathroom into the hall. We pass through "S" corridor into "D", Chuck still holding my hand. My cheeks flush and I forbid my palms to sweat, but I do not pull away.

"Where are we going?"

Chuck pushes open the doors to Automotives and we pass gutted cars, and engines like greasy cows' hearts laid out on steel tables.

We cut across the parking lot towards Confederation Park, past Chisholm, Columbia, Capri and Constable, their crescents and cul-de-sacs, towards Fourteenth Street. I half-jog, half-walk beside Chuck's furious pace. My heart beats giddily in my chest. We pass blank two-storied houses sided in green, yellow and white aluminum. NuWest two-stories and split-level homes line the sidewalks. Chuck doesn't answer when I ask where we are going a second time. He has let go of my hand, and I keep pace with him.

The sky has darkened. It is a cool, October day and my neck and back are wet with perspiration. I wrap my arms tightly across my chest. "I have a test at three-thirty," I tell Chuck. "I can't miss it." He doesn't respond and there

is no sound other than our feet striking the pavement.

Fourteenth Street splits the Confederation Golf Course in two, the club my mother belonged to before she lost her mind. My mother's husband, James, had been a member before they married and my mother took up golf soon after they wed. "Didn't want to be a golf widow," Grandma Lil once said, looking over her glasses at me.

The sky is darker by the time we reach Fourteenth Street. Chuck points down to the fairway. Together we descend the bushes and scrabble that surround the golf course. I have no idea what Chuck has in store for me. A group of boys at a Catholic school in the south have "Dog Fights". One year's winner screwed a toothless woman in the back of a truck. I am not quite sure why I am following Chuck, although it's better than hiding in the washroom, better than having textbooks thrown at me in the cafeteria. All the same, I can't help but imagine my decaying, naked body stumbled upon in Spring by a Physical Education student taking a shortcut through the one kilometre run. Perhaps no body would be left to be found. Perhaps I would go up in a poof of smoke like the virgin martyr, St. Agnes.

I keep walking, to whatever fate awaits.

In kindergarten, and maybe as late as Grade Three, I was chased during recess by a selection of boys. There were invitations to birthday parties and Valentine's Day cards. All this changed the day after Aunt Martha cut off my

shoulder-length hair. My new hair was a relief to me - no more rat's nests for my aunt and uncle to comb through amid my shrieks and the endless spraying of Johnson and Johnson's No More Tears - balm of lollipop-headed children who pass into grade school with baby-fine hair so light it waves upright at the mere mention of a balloon. My new hair was a no-go with the boys and their chasing days came to an abrupt halt. I lost my front teeth soon after and discovered I was sallow, gangly and unattractive. My friends were like me - Mellie, a pale, buck-toothed, red-head. Marion spat when she talked. We were unwashed, eczematous, pukers and nose-pickers all, except for Dolores. As for boys, only Chuck would have anything to do with me, until I slighted him.

Three giant gold coins of the Lion's Club billboard form an enormous shamrock against the darkening sky. "It's three o'clock," I tell Chuck. "We should head back." He is on the middle of the well-tended fairway, in the valley of its low hills and white sand traps. He has shot ahead of me, as if we are racing against one another in one of those walking marathons, minus the nylon shorts and the funny walk. He doesn't notice that I have slowed down and that he is a good half-green ahead of me. I watch Chuck. Thin, broad-shouldered, his strides are low to the ground. He's a loper. How am I ever supposed to kiss anyone with the burden of Christ on my shoulders? Did Christ have sex? Other than Judas and all that foot-washing and hand-kissing, did anyone

kiss Him? Unfortunately, Christ is entirely silent on the subject.

I have to turn back, or I will never make it to my exam. I stop, panting over my shoes on the spongy turf. Chuck doesn't notice. I call after him, "What is it you want to show me?" Chuck returns to my side. Grabbing my arm, he straightens me up and tugs me onwards.

"No," I say, pulling my arm out of his grasp. "I'm not moving until you tell me where we're going." He stays where he is, mute, unmoving.

"Look, Lassie, I have a test to write." I mean to be funny, I want Chuck to answer me, I want him to <u>like</u> me, and I giggle after I say it. It's one of those awful tinny giggles you regret as soon as it comes out of your mouth. Chuck stares stonily at me, his lips pressed together in a thin, disapproving line. I turn to leave and Chuck grabs me by the arm, turns me north-east, back into the valley. "Who died and made you the ghost of Christmas past?" I demand to know.

In the distance there is a man in a brown uniform carrying gardening tools. He watches us as we make our way across the fairway. At least there will be a witness if anything awful happens to me. Chuck waves at the man, and the man shouts back, "Shouldn't you be in school?"

He is tall and skinny and, as we near, I note a pronounced crease across his forehead like a second mouth.

"Charlie," the man says, "this better be good." Scratch that. No witness. An accomplice?

"Dad," Chuck says, "this is April."

I didn't know Chuck's dad was a grounds-keeper. He looks at me and makes a low whistling sound between his teeth. "Boy, if you had a brain, you'd be a half-wit. What are you doing bringing the girl here?"

"What does he do for her?" Chuck asks his dad. "Nothing. She has nothing, Dad."

"Do for who?" I ask. Who has nothing?

Mr. Bazant ignores me. "Her family should do for her. It's not his fault they don't."

"The way she is, isn't that his fault?"

"Who's fault?" I want to know.

Mr. Bazant makes another low whistling sound. "That's some faulty thinking you got there, Charlie. She was going in that direction long before he got into the picture. I don't defend him, but what do you think her kid can do for her?" Mr. Bazant motions at me with a spade.

My head feels dangerously light. I want to say something, but find I can't.

"You called it a tragedy!" Chuck yells. He kicks at the turf with his running shoe.

"Don't put a divot in the turf, nitwit."

"A tragedy, you said."

"Sure, sure it's a tragedy. Anyone," Mr. Bazant begins

and then glances at me, "loses their mind, it's a tragedy. Bringing the girl here won't change that, and no sense making it worse."

I think I might faint.

"Tell her," Chuck says, pointing at me, "just tell her, why don't you?"

"No, Charles, I won't. Now take your friend here, and the two of you get back to school." Chuck opens his mouth to protest. "Not another word. Now scram. Both of you."

A white golf cart appears on the crest of a distant hill, before the gold shamrock. Chuck points. "April, look."

"Junior," Mr. Bazant warns.

"Know who that is?" Chuck says. I stare dumbly at the cart.

"I mean it. Take her with you, now."

"That's the golf pro, April."

"Golf pro."

"Mr. Reise."

I put my hand on my head, for fear the top of it may blow clean off. "Ralph's Dad?"

"That's right."

Chuck turns to the direction of St. Ignatius, in the direction we'd come, leaving me to stare at the golf pro bouncing down the hill in his white cart.

"April," Mr. Bazant says. "Don't think about it twice, it won't do you any good." He grabs my shoulders and turns

me in the same direction his son has gone.

I run up to Chuck and grab him by the arm. Stop him. "Ralph's dad?"

He nods.

Chuck can't be telling me what I think he is. How would he know anyway? How long has he known what he thinks he knows? I squeeze my head between my hands, trying to still the thoughts colliding against each other.

"Don't tell me that sour old woman has been right all along!"

It's Chuck's turn to be confused.

Calmly now, gather yourself.

He turns, walks on, and I follow.

We scrabble up the bank of the hill together, grabbing onto brush and scrub as we climb back up to the sidewalk in silence. My brain's whirling. Is this what Aunt Martha meant to tell me all these years while we sat at the kitchen table? Has Chuck known all along - in kindergarten, at the retreat, while he hid me on the playground, while he smiled at me in class? Has he been kind to me because my mother's life is a "tragedy" and by extension, my own? I dare not look back at the figure in his glistening white cart, for fear of ending up like Lot's wife.

"Let me get this straight, Chuck. The golf pro is my father."

"Yes."

"Ralph is my brother?"

"Yup. Half-brother anyway."

"Are you sure, totally, completely, one hundred percent without a shadow of a doubt positive?"

"My dad's worked here for twenty years. He knew your mum, he knew Mr. Reise. He knows everything."

Holy Moses. I'm really not the Second Coming. I turn away from Chuck, in the opposite direction of St. Ignatius.

"Where are you going?" Chuck calls after me. "You're going to miss your test!"

I break into a run, and Chuck does not follow. Screw the test.

I'm not the Second Coming. Mr. Reise is my father and Mr. Reise is not God. She needn't have been crazy all these years. "Mom," I will tell her. "think back, think way, way back. You had sex with Mr. Reise. You got pregnant, after James died, after Camille died." And then it'll be alright. She can move in with us. We'll buy her new clothes. We can get her a job, maybe, once she's back on her feet.

I will look for my mother at The Mustard Seed first. If I don't find her there, my cousins have seen her at St. Martin de Porres, near the Carmelite convent. I know that The Sisters of the Faithful Companions of Jesus have helped her out from time to time and The Church of The Immanuel on First Street was once her parish, before they asked her to leave. Although, if Dolores is right, I won't have to find

my mother, she will find me.

I head south in the direction of Bridgeland. A blister has formed on my heel. I am wearing beige swede loafers with navajo-style leather binding on the toes. Painful at the best of times, they are not meant for walking, let alone speed-walking. The wet flesh sticks to the leather. I favour that foot a little and limp down the avenue, street lamps humming above me. Red tail lights of receding cars flash by. It has never occurred to me before that the Northmount bus would've taken Aunt Sis in the opposite direction of her home.

I pass the YMCA on my right and an old sandstone school on my left, the flag poles of Confederation Park where a Miss Teen Calgary was raped. The noisy swell of cars on Cromwell has subsided to a trickle. It has to be close to four o'clock or maybe later. Uncle Dan and Aunt Martha will be waiting for me soon and I can't look at my watch for fear of losing my nerve.

Aunt Hannah warned Aunt Martha against raising a child who wasn't her own. Grandma Lil would have told her she should have seen it coming - I would return to my mother, and I would turn out as deluded as my mother. "Guaranteed heartbreak," I once heard her say. Mac's Open All Night Grocery is up ahead, with a phone booth outside. I scurry quickly past it.

The streets are seedier towards the city core. More

cars, fewer people. Very few walk these avenues in the evening. Aunt Sis has probably never been afraid. Not only does she rebuke danger in the name of Jesus Christ, Our Saviour, her appearance alone must be enough to keep any mugger at bay. I don't have my mother's "look-but-don't-touch" appearance. Dressed in thin, beige dress pants, bad shoes and no jacket, I am small, cold and scared. Without my mother to fear, other dangers loom in the coming night and I feel her protection vanish like a mist.

The thought that Mr. Reise has allowed my mother to wander theses streets alone for all these years fills me with such anger, I am half-tempted to return to the golf course and knock him off his cart.

"Since when is God a golf pro?" I'd scream.

Maybe Ralph, like Chuck, has known or guessed all along. Maybe Ralph would also like to push his father off his cart. Failing that, he's given me a jab or two.

S.A.I.T's underpass looms quickly in the distance. Three young men, wearing jean jackets, approach from the opposite direction beneath the underpass. I look away and quicken my pace, lifting my shoulders like Aunt Martha has taught me, sucking in my stomach and puffing out my chest.

"Hey Muffin," one of them says. "Want to suck cock?" They laugh. Chin up, I avert my eyes.

"Naw, not her. She'd bite your dick off," another says.

"Knock her teeth out first," the third boy suggests.

They laugh.

I dash across the street and hop onto the meridian, a car angrily blowing its horn as it passes. I run across the southbound lane and make a mad dash for a bus stopped at the light, banging on its side with my fists as it pulls away from the sidewalk.

"You trying to kill yourself, kid?" The driver asks as the doors open.

I have no money with me and no bus pass either.

"They were chasing me," I say, panting and gasping for air. I point to the empty sidewalk I'd escaped. The bus driver glances at me briefly, keeping his eyes on the road. I move to sit in the back.

"Ticket," he calls after me.

I walk back to the front. "I don't have anything with me," I tell him, lowering my voice, aware that the other passengers are listening.

"You'll have to get off if you don't have the fare."

"I'll pay her fare," a voice pipes up from the front of the crowded bus. "<u>You</u> should be on your radio to the <u>police</u>." I would know that voice anywhere, it is Mrs. Mulsen. She comes forward and hands me a ticket, which I hand to the bus driver, who begrudgingly issues me a transfer. Mrs. Mulsen's crippling gaze lowers itself upon him, and he garbles something into his walkie-talkie. Only then does my Religion teacher take my arm and lead me to her

seat.

"Are you in trouble, April? What are you doing here? Without a jacket none-the-less." I am still sweating and panting. I could burst into tears.

"My mother," I begin. "I have to find her."

"Ah. Your mother. Yes. Odd woman. Did you know? I learned a great lesson from your mother." I must be gawking at Mrs. Mulsen because she explains, "I met your mother in Troshu." She puts her hand on my shoulder. "God comes to us in many forms, April. It is not always easy to recognize Him." Mrs. Mulsen has confirmed my suspicion that adults do not listen.

"God is not my father."

"Not biologically, no." Mrs. Mulsen shakes her head, as if this conversation is normal. "But your mother has a great gift."

"Do you know what your mother's downfall was, April?"

I shake my head.

"Sexual guilt. If she had only believed that we are all pure through God's divinity! I tried to tell her, April, but she was beyond me by then."

I'd like to ask Mrs. Mulsen if she had been an inmate or a nun at Troshu. The bus stops and I bolt from my seat and back onto the sidewalk. I catch a glimpse of Mrs. Mulsen's stunned face as the bus pulls away.

I never knew it before, but this town is full of loons

dressed up like normal people. It's my job now to save my mother from their number.

"April!" I hear a voice call. Dolores runs up to me with Chuck in tow. "What are you doing, crazy?" She asks. "You missed your Social mid-term. You are in so much shit!"

I look at Chuck. "How'd you get here so fast?"

"Fast!" Dolores exclaims. "It's five o'clock! We finished class and took the bus like normal people! April, where's your head?"

I point in the direction of the overpass. "Some boys chased me and I got on the bus and Mrs. Mulsen had to pay my fare, and she's nuts." I don't care, I wipe my nose with my sleeve, right in front of Chuck.

Dolores grabs my hand, "You're freezing, Appie. What are you doing down here?"

I am trying not to cry but my shoulders are shaking and before I know it, I'm blubbering into my hands. Dolores hugs me. "Dolores," I whisper, "please help me find my mom."

I pull away from Dolores and we both laugh nervously, sniffling and wiping our eyes. "I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Ralph is your brother!" Dolores yelps and we laugh again.

"Chuck told you?"

Chuck looks sheepishly at the sidewalk and takes off his jacket. "I didn't think you'd run away," he says apologetically and drapes the jacket across my shoulders.

Dolores catches my eye and winks.

"Chuck thought you'd be here," Dolores says as I burrow into the second-hand warmth of his jacket, a slightly grotty feeling, like hitting on a warm toilet seat, but pleasing all the same. She points across the street to The Emporium, which I hadn't even noticed.

The three of us cross the street. "Hey," the owner, Checkpoint Charlie, says, pointing at the doorway separating Stephen Avenue Mall from The Emporium. "Those two aren't allowed in here."

"Have you seen her?" Chuck asks.

"Who?"

"You know."

"The crackpot with the Bible?"

"Yeah, that one."

"Nope." He knocks on the formica table beside him. "Haven't seen that nut for a good week."

"Know where she might be?" I ask.

Dolores takes my arm and leads me away from the entrance of The Emporium. "What are you going to do when you find her, April?" She asks.

"Tell her."

"Tell her what? That the golf pro is your dad?"

"Yeah."

"You think she doesn't already know that?"

"No, she doesn't. She thinks my father is God,

remember?"

"And You can convince her otherwise?"

Why does Dolores always have to be the worm in the apple? "Yes."

"That's your plan?"

"Yes!"

"Then what?"

I shrug.

"You think she'll be all right after that? She'll be cured?"

I look at Chuck to back me up.

"April. Your mom is crazy. Being crazy is like getting hit by a truck," Dolores says.

"You thought I could make things better," I tell Chuck.

Behind us, a bell rings.

My mother stands in the middle of Stephen Avenue Mall, her chin smudged with something yellow. Mustard, I think. She is dressed as she usually is - as if she had stepped through a time machine bestowing upon her an article of clothing from every past era up until the present. She wears a blue straw hat, providing little protection from the fall weather, but fixed firmly on her head with a coat hanger. My mother is younger than Aunt Martha, but she looks much older, the life she has lived since my birth written across her brow, in her hollowed out cheeks and the deep lines around her mouth. Is it true what Mr. Bazant said? That her

family does not "do for her"? I could cry again, looking at Aunt Sis. She stands motionless and I move towards her.

My mother moves back, and keeps moving. "Stop!" I call after her.

"One hundred feet," Aunt Sis says, her palm raised upwards, forbidding me passage like a saintly traffic cop.

I halt in my tracks. "I won't take another step," I tell her. One hundred feet?

Gospel Mary rings her bell and cries, "Great and amazing are your future deeds, but stay one hundred feet away from your mother!"

Right. The restraining order. Like that ever stopped her before.

"Okay, you got a deal. I'll stay right where I am, I won't move."

We stop and stare at one another. What do I do now?

"I have something to tell you."

"The Good News!" Gospel Mary cries and rings her bell enthusiastically over her head. "The Son of Man has come to speak to us! Hear ye! Hear ye! The days of miracles are here!"

I notice our conversation, such as it is, has drawn a small audience. Aunt Sis has noticed too. She calls to them like a vaudevillian, crooking a finger and inviting them to come near. Smiling, she improvises a sort of polka-high-stepping.

"Flee from the wrath to come! The Second Coming is at hand!" She announces. "Tell 'em, child," she exclaims, sweeping an introductory arm my way.

"No! Stop." She has taken out her kazoo and is threatening to play. "Aunt Sis! Cut it out! Stop!"

"Do you think the Son of Man yells at her mother?" she asks.

Beside me, a fat man hoots with laughter.

"Do you mind? This is a private matter," I inform him.

"Listen to me. Do you remember Mr. Reise? The golf pro?"

"Saved! Saved by the blood of the Crucified One. Born again to start the world anew!"

"Remember James? Your husband?"

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. A camel!"

Think. Think. How to get to her when she blocks me at every turn?

"Did he have a good swing?" I ask.

"Swing?" She asks. Suddenly, she's with me on the sidewalk.

"Did Mr. Reise, the golf pro, have a good swing?"

"He was all right. Nothing to write home about." The clarity of this remark surprises and encourages me.

"He was the golf pro."

Aunt Sis shrugs. "No accounting for taste."

"You liked to golf once. Remember?"

"I was nothing. Then the Holy Spirit filled me and came to live in my heart. A new creature in Christ. It is wonderful. It is for all who come."

"You won some trophies."

"I was heartbroken. In God, I found salvation. I was dead, like Paul says to the Ephesians, dead, through the trespasses and sins in which I once lived!"

"Your husband died."

My mother nods. "His skin turned yellow. He went quickly."

"Then Camille."

"She was the first," Aunt Sis say. "She came to announce your coming. John the Baptist to your Jesus Christ. She would have baptised you in the river of your faith."

I have seen photos of my sister. A skinny baby with jet-black hair and blue-grey eyes that looked like they were going to turn brown, just like her mother's.

"I am not the Second Coming," I tell her, my voice slow and even. "You were depressed, heartbroken, you said so. I am not the Son of Man. Listen to me, I've come to help you. You don't need to live like this. Mr. Reise is my father. You didn't sleep with God. Mom, you slept with the golf pro."

Aunt Sis raises her bell into the air above her and

rings it. One, two, three, four strokes. She doesn't stop, but walks in a circle, ringing the bell over her head, her bell drowning out all noises but that one sound. Her face is red from the strain, her eyes shine with conviction, her chin, resolute, thrusts forward. When she stops, there isn't a sound. She has brought bank managers and sales clerks to their doors and windows. A large crowd of bystanders has gathered around us. I don't see Dolores or Chuck in the faces that surround me.

"I have cleared the air of the demon that has beset you," she informs me calmly. "If he returns, I will smite him."

"Someone call the police, the loonie has finally lost it altogether," a voice beside me says.

"Don't you dare," I tell him. Where are Chuck and Dolores when you need them?

"And the beast was captured," Aunt Sis cheers, her Bible thrust towards the crowd. "And with it the false prophet. And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and the birds were gorged with their flesh!"

"Aunt Sis, please," I step forward, my hand outstretched. "Please, I didn't mean to upset you."

"Aunt Sis! Get away from me," she spits at me. "Behind me, devil!"

"You chased the demon away, remember? With your bell."

"Do I look stupid?" Aunt Sis bellows. "Who do you think you are to come down here and torment me with such names! I have paid. I have paid dearly."

I watch the woman before me kneel on the ground, her Bible on her lap, her eyes downcast. When she speaks, her voice is quiet. "I lost everything for you. I was nothing, and I was saved. Christ saves, keeps, satisfies, and in Christ, I have Eternal life. In Christ, I am forgiven."

I didn't listen to Mr. Bazant, Mrs. Mulsen or even Dolores. I didn't hear when my Religion teacher said my mother had a great gift. The way my mother worships only emphasizes her insanity, but she believes with a desperation and a need that makes her faith possible, and her faith keeps her out of Ponoka and Troshu. She has suffered the death of her husband and her child and whatever deluded comfort she has found in their loss, I have risked destroying, and not because I love her.

I kneel beside my mother. I don't care if she smites me. I might feel better if she did. "Camille was the first," I say quietly. "John the Baptist to my Jesus Christ." Aunt Sis looks up at me. "She would have baptised me in the river of my faith, had she lived."

Aunt Sis studies my face quietly for a long time.

The coat hanger has pinched the crown of my mother's hat into a triangle. She notes me staring at it and touches it gingerly with her hand.

"Ever since your aunt knocked it off, I've had a hard time keeping this hat on my head."

Being crazy is like getting hit by a truck. Like getting cancer or a brain tumour. An Act of God. "Mom, do you still have that baptism candle somewhere? The one Aunt Martha thought was a knife?"

"Nope."

Cast your mind back, April, to Religion class. "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" I know it's John the Baptist's line to Jesus, but it'll have to do.

"I would never have hurt you." Aunt Sis places her hand on my arm. "That Martha," she snorts. "Always such a meddler."

I point to one of those pebbled-over public water fountains that line Stephen Avenue Mall. "How about it?" I offer my hand to my mother and with great strain, I help lift her to her feet. Together Aunt Sis and I walk over to the fountain. The crowd follows.

"There won't be any doves appearing," I warn my mother.

"They ever teach you about metaphor in that school of yours?" She surprises me again with the clarity and the quickness of her mind.

I find Chuck and Dolores, set off from the crowd under a store front's awning. Aunt Sis has seen them too and she waves them over. "The more the merrier!" She trumpets, finally perking up.

We approach the fountain and I stand with my back to it. An inquisitive buzz rises up from the crowd. My mother takes me in her arms and bends me backwards. She smells like a wet dog.

Guiding my head beneath the spout, my mother presses the sign of the cross onto my head with a dry, cracked thumb. Her face hovers above me, her hands gesture to the heavens. My mother's eyes closed, her mouth works silently, praying. She cups my face in her hands and calls out to the heavens, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature and Lo! I am with you always even unto the end of the world." Still holding my face, she bends over and kisses me on the forehead. She lifts me upright, smiles, taps me on the head and cries, "Next!"

Dolores and Chuck dutifully follow. The three of us stand before Aunt Sis, our heads and shirt fronts dripping. The baptism has ruined Dolores' bangs, which lie flat against her forehead. If she minds at all, she doesn't say.

Now that the baptisms are complete, the crowd of curious on-lookers has begun to disperse. Aunt Sis picks up her Bible and her bell, as if to move on with them.

"I'm coming with you," I tell her.

"You should go home now."

"I'll come back tonight."

"Don't you have school tomorrow?"

"I'll come back tomorrow," I tell her.

She shrugs and waves good-bye.

VIII

Chuck, Dolores and I hop on the Northmount bus heading home. We sit in silence for a long while looking out at the dark streets.

"Thanks for letting her baptise both of you."

"It wasn't so bad," Dolores says, and pats her hair.

"Do you think one cancels out the other, like rubella shots?" Chucks wants to know. After a long pause, he says, "Your aunt'll know you skipped school. You want me to come with you?"

"Not if you don't want Martha and Dan to hate you forever," Dolores says.

"Thanks," I tell him. "I think I better go in alone."

He makes a low whistling sound between his teeth.

Chuck stands to get off the bus. He tells me I can keep the jacket.

"He would've kissed you if I hadn't been here," Dolores says after the doors have closed.

"You think?"

Dolores looks at the floor. "My mum couldn't be cured either," she says. "She doesn't suffer anymore." She sniffs and wipes the tears away with her hand. Only adults, I think, carry kleenex with them. "What are you going to do about Ralph?"

I shrug. There are a few things I could do about Ralph.

"We're almost the same age, you know."

"Busy man, your father," Dolores says.

"Must make Ralph angry."

"You think he knows?"

"It'd explain a lot, if he knew."

"What'll you do the next time he's mean to you?"

"I'll tell him that's no way to treat his sister."

Dolores nods, her eyes wide with admiration. "That'll do it."

My stop comes up and I walk to the front. I give her a little wave.

"Good luck, J.C," she calls out as I step from the bus.

IX

When I get home Uncle Dan and Aunt Martha are eating dinner. Aunt Martha turns around in her chair to look at me. "You must have a death wish, April," she says, and resumes her meal. "Go upstairs. I don't have the energy to deal with you right now. And for God's sake, dry your hair off while you're at it."

I climb the stairs to my bedroom and lie on my bed. I finger my damp bangs, and smile to myself. My hair can stay wet awhile.