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Man and Myth
(Short Stories)

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English (Creative Writing) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2003

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0-612-85275-X

ABSTRACT

Man and Myth (Short Stories)

Leanne Wright

This collection of five short stories is arranged around the theme of failed relationships, both familial and romantic. Though its point-of-view characters are exclusively female, the collection is an attempt to explore the dynamics of interdependence in both male and female experience, and is concerned with the ways in which an individual is inevitably located in a social construct even as he or she struggles to maintain an individual space within it. Distance is an important preoccupation in each of the stories, so that the narrative voice attempts to reflect the distance each character maintains from the people in her life, as well as the difficulties of knowing, or being known by, another. In all cases, the stories are concerned with life's very small lessons – the things we learn through exchanges that are almost unnoticeable events in the course of a day or a life. Although no character achieves unqualified fulfilment by the end of her story, each comes away with some small new piece of understanding – of insight – that better prepares her for the future.

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Lucky Strike

Marta was bowling while Richard lay dying. Well, not bowling exactly – not the game as it is ordinarily played, inside an alley with suitable shoes. The alley was there, of course, but Marta was not inside it. She was beside it, more or less; on the grounds. Or, more accurately, she was just beyond the grounds, in a vacant lot behind a red brick apartment building, in the snow.

And Richard wasn't dying, really. That is, he didn't die, though he thought he was going to, at the time. Would it have mattered to Marta, if he died or he didn't? It would have, but not in the way he would mean it. When Marta tells the story, his death is imaginary, intended only to dredge up sympathy, for herself, but also for Richard – she never thought he actually *meant* it. By the time she got there, anyway, the doctors already knew it was heartburn, and Marta prefers a more romantic prognosis. *I was out bowling while Richard lay dying*, she likes to say. She would change the bowling part too, if she could, but there were witnesses to that.

What she does change is Richard, his looks and his job, the way that he talked. She doesn't add in the part about his hair, thinning already at thirty, or the problem he had with his skin. She does mention the car he owned back then, a crab-coloured orange Camaro, with bucket seats and carefully shined chrome bumpers. In her stories, Richard drives the Camaro carelessly, with one hand on the wheel; he squeals around street corners, burning rubber. Her parents don't like him (this part is true enough), so she climbs out windows and down drainpipes to see him. She takes risks; she is reckless.

Richard himself is a shadowy figure, he is mysterious, and doesn't say much. Parts of him may even be missing. It is true that the Richard she tells about is the one she knew herself, then, the one she invented, out of bits and pieces of the real thing, and also out of scraps of things she saw in the movies, or in television programmes about slightly crooked policemen who drank too much beer and abandoned their wives.

At the time – when was it? Fifteen years ago? Twelve? Not long enough to be ancient history, but long enough to be looked back on with humour, or at any rate with only a little discomfort. It was 1980, a year on the verge of becoming something else – a year that defined itself mostly by what it was not: it was not the seventies, with its softly feathered hair and its back-lit, iridescent haze. Marta was attending the community college that year, sporadically; she was enrolled in the Secretarial Arts, a discipline approved by her father – primarily, she thought, because it would get Marta employed and off his hands in the fewest possible number of terms. For the most part, she spent the year sprawled on sofas in the student lounge or propped up outside, smoking. At home, she listened to rock anthems and imagined herself being sung to, by kohl-eyed singers with long, tortured hair. She had her own hair cut into a rumpled shag, and hung around street corners, pouting. If anyone had asked her, she would have said that something was bound to happen sooner or later, and that, when it did, she would be ready.

Of course, no one did ask. Her parents thought she was in classes, learning to type and to conjugate French verbs. Her instructors had given up on her long before, looking down at her empty, radiant face and allowing their top lips to tighten slightly, their foreheads to crease. So much wasted capacity, they seemed to be thinking, as though she were a cup or a jug to be filled. With what? With whatever it was they were

hocking, at the time. English Grammar, or Bookkeeping. Feminine Health. What they didn't know was that she was full already, of anticipation and a chilling certainty that she, Marta, had been arranged for the future – not the future you prepared for, but the one that happened to you, like a thunderbolt.

What happened to Marta, first of all, was Richard.

In October, Marta got a job in a bowling alley, after classes and on weekends, for spending money. She worked behind the counter, taking money and dispensing necessities: bowling shoes, cigarettes, potato chips, coffee. Richard was her boss; he smelled of cigarettes and gasoline and managed, besides *Lucky Strike Bowling and Video*, an engine repair shop and the faded, peeling ice cream stand on the outskirts of town. Richard had a wife and a baby at home, though he didn't behave much like a father: he didn't mow lawns, or wear oxfords, or golf. He wore pale drainpipe jeans and ball caps emblazoned with urban graffiti, different sayings every day: CLUCKING GRASS MOLE or LOOK AT ME, HAVE AN EYEGASM or EVOLVE, DAMMIT! He told off-colour jokes, loudly, and played the drums in a band on the weekends. He had a reputation, or so said Marta's friends. The reputation was for drinking, and for undisclosed transgressions, with women who were not his wife. It was also for being dangerous, though this may have had mostly to do with his looks: he was thin as wire, and pitted, and sharp.

Richard parked his Camaro in the manager's space, slantwise by the double glass doors. In the lull between the ladies' leagues and the after-dinner teams, while Marta disinfected rental shoes and served fries to the after-school crowd, Richard prowled

around the car in his jean jacket and tennis shoes, smoking and fiddling under the hood. Stooped there in the cold, he looked as though he were made entirely of frozen denim, a lean, spare scrap of hardened fabric fitted over bone. Bone, thought Marta, and muscle, and sinew: he looked solid, but brittle, as though someone had placed him in an icebox, and left him there to chill. The high school girls in their rabbit-skin bombers collected like dust-balls in the window booths to watch him, pie-eyed. He was a kind of hero for them, then, an unlikely one, and, as it turned out, a temporary one.

Coming in, he would wink at Marta. *All those curves*, he would say, in the fug of cold and heated air that swirled around him, *and me with no brakes*. Marta liked this, and also she didn't like it. He was singling her out, the way a wolf singles out a buffalo. The buffalo that is singled out is seen as the best prospect, but only because it is the weakest, and can't keep up with the rest. Marta was put on edge by his interest; she felt a certain startled thrill, a rush of adrenaline, mixed with protest. She observed his advances coolly, but inside her a jangle of nervous pleasure quickly retreated.

She began to watch him, out of the corner of her eye; she kept her distance, and learned not to make sudden movements. She learned to distract him, when that was necessary, but also she learned that she could prolong the ambush, when a seamless escape was not all she wanted. She wore long, arcing skirts with slits up the back, beneath which her legs flashed whitely as she padded here and there behind the till. She said she did this because she was too warm, inside the alley with its stifling, blowing heat. Actually, she did it to unnerve Richard, to see him swing his eyes over her thin bare legs under the dark green cotton of The Lucky Strike smock. She cut the slits a little higher every day, and made a habit of turning abruptly from the counter so that the apron

fluttered out from her body, revealing a milky inward curve of thigh. She liked the feeling of power these moments gave her; she didn't feel wanton, or foolish, or cheap. It was a kind of exchange, really, a lesson in bartering. It was all a matter of how much you could get, for how little.

It was true, too, that she was good at the job. The customers liked to see her in her skirts, even the women, who were mostly older and past the point of worrying about sex appeal, their own or anyone else's. They kidded her about the heated blood of youth and told her to eat up, she was fading away, if she turned sideways she would disappear altogether! The men, especially the older men, flirted with her in the kind of old-fashioned way men did in novels, tipping their hats and making vague remarks about the colour of her eyes, or her hair, or her small, curving waist. She didn't mind chatting with them; most of them were funny, and kind, and anyway they seemed to depend on her somehow, on her being there, each day, wiping tables with her Javexed cloth and making tidy rows of burgers in the slanting, lighted trays. Sometimes, it seemed that her days were cut neatly in two, the first half beginning in the sleepy haze of cigarette smoke that rolled through the dank winter air of the college's smoking pit, and ending with the long, cold tramp through the fields beyond the town and up over the railroad tracks, where the bowling alley twinkled in the gloom. The second half was warmer, for a start, and had to do with wiping and polishing, with quick silver tongs and the calibrated glug of the two round-bowled coffee makers, which she started on schedule, every half-hour. What she liked most about all this was the pace of it, the satisfaction of knowing that when one simple action was complete, another one moved up behind to take its place, like a sandbagging chain or a square dance. She relaxed into the routine of it, and she and

Richard worked out a sort of bawdy routine, quarrelling affably for their customers, providing a tempered show of sexual *frisson* between the echoing thunderclaps of falling pins. Richard provided the gags, and the come-ons: she had only to tilt her head and smile, a weary, provoking sort of smile with a twist of her eyebrows, a cluck of her tongue, or shake her head sadly, or laugh. *In your dreams, buddy. In your dreams.* Had she meant that? Obviously, she hadn't.

The customers, especially the ones who came every day, began to smile knowingly. The women sided with Richard, egging Marta on: *why deny it? Anyone can see they're in love.* The men counseled caution: they had a soft spot for Marta, a collective one. She reminded them of their daughters, or their granddaughters, even their own wives, when they were younger. They thought of her as susceptible, to men like Richard, who reminded them, most likely, of themselves. They didn't know about Richard's wife, or if they did, they pretended not to. It was good entertainment, Marta supposed – it was better than staying home alone, which is what Richard's wife did, day after day. What did she *do*, Marta wondered? She imagined nail polish, soap operas, chewing gum.

Marta herself was a favourite; she had a way with the regulars. It wasn't long before she knew a great deal about them: their hobbies and their families, of course, their interests, but also their disappointments, the things that made them sleepless, the things that made them blue. Perched on the leatherette stools that she wiped and polished, they told their stories, spilled the beans as Richard said, over coffee or chocolate *éclairs*. She heard about their children, who lived in Toronto and never came home, and also their spouses, the ones who were dead but also the ones who lived on, making their home lives

a misery. She heard about the careers they'd had or the ones they'd wanted, the holidays taken during better days, the money saved or invested, the fortunes lost, the opportunities squandered. She heard it all, a great, splendid outpouring of personal history, and she never blinked, never squinted, never passed untimely judgment. She performed each of her small tasks quickly, then moved to the next thing, all the time listening as someone talked or offering small, encouraging phrases of her own. Mostly these phrases were sayings she had picked up from the customers themselves: *every cloud has a silver lining*. *Least said, soonest mended*, and so on. Some were from rock songs: *you don't always get what you want*. *Don't rock the boat, baby*. All of them were useful, in a surprising number of situations.

Richard, of course, used a different set of phrases: sharp spangles of four-letter words used in surprising and intricate syntheses. These were culled from the seedier streets of Parkdale, where he said he'd been born. Parkdale was in Toronto, Marta found out later; it was on the subway line, but Richard spoke of it as though it were further away than that: a separate country, perhaps, with its own language and customs, even its own laws. Marta imagined a dangerous landscape, where anything at all might jump out at you from the shadows: thugs with crowbars, black-jacketed pushers, women with long, sharpened fingernails and bruise-coloured eyes. It would be necessary, in a place like that, to hoard atrocities like spit balls, so you could talk your way out of danger, using words as though they were weapons, or charms. Once, Richard said, he'd been mugged while unpacking band equipment, by two girls and a boy, none of whom looked over eleven. This story made Marta shiver, which Richard had taken as a sign of romantic interest. (Which, of course, it had been, though Marta is loathe to admit that, now.)

She'd ended up wrapped around him in the front seat of the orange Camaro not long afterwards, while loose blasts of heat planed out over the backs of her bare, chilly legs.

After that, she wrapped around him in other places: in the spare bedrooms of vacant apartments, in trailers hitched on bare plots of land outside town and once, for brevity's sake, in the men's bathroom at the bowling alley, with the door latched for safety. Over all these entanglements a patient air of absence hung -- objects appearing over Richard's shoulder took on massive proportions, while Marta herself seemed to shrink in comparison. Richard was too close up to be seen clearly; he was the shape of a face, looming large, a body under clothes, a substantial, bony weight. It was only afterwards, when he moved away from her across the room or climbed back into the front seat of the Camaro, that she could see him properly again, in sharp relief against the car or the ball ramps or the cash register. In these moments, he was a secret she had, a smell on her hands, like smoke. Seeing him, she felt a cauterized rush of recognition, an obscure but thrilling sense of proprietary smugness. *A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush*, she said to her customers, and they always laughed. Marta is such a card they said, so clever, so droll, so full of wisdom beyond her years, really, beyond her years.

For a while, Marta believed this. She held her life in the palm of her hand like a small, treasured ball: it felt compact and snug, but contained within itself a series of undisclosed marvels, high, arcing patterns and spiralling flights.

Inside the ball, in the very centre of it, was Richard.

All of this was months ago. Marta feels that her life has evolved a great deal since then; she has had to grow up; she has had to adjust. She has heard a great many of

Richard's stories by now; in fact, she listened to several of them just today, sitting in the hotel restaurant, at breakfast. The hotel is in Stratford -- not Stratford, England, but the one in Ontario, which Richard says is a sad imitation of the real thing. The name of the restaurant is something to do with dragons and ladies (she can never remember it exactly), and the hotel itself is a sombre replica of a medieval castle, with heavy wooden doors and red velvet draped over faux limestone floors. A castle, or else a dungeon, it's hard to tell which. They are staying here, instead of downtown, because it is private, and out of the way, right across from the river with its long, narrow park and curving drives.

They are here, officially, on business. That is, Richard is here on business, for a Leisure League services seminar, and Marta has come along for the ride, to keep Richard company. Someone else has taken Marta's shifts at The Lucky Strike, for the week, so she can be here, with Richard.

Of course, she hasn't actually seen that much of him. He leaves each morning right after breakfast, which they eat from a buffet in the breakfast ell of the restaurant -- melon slabs and bagels, with pink cream cheese spread and a green Jell-O salad. After breakfast, Marta is free to do as she pleases, which means she is free to wait for Richard, until he gets back. Her patience for waiting has been almost used up; there isn't exactly a glut of activity in Stratford, during the off-season. She has already walked back and forth beside the river, several times. She has fed breadcrumbs to the swans and been rained on by quite a few warm April showers. She has wandered through the souvenir shops, and bought gourmet fudge chunks in small plastic bags; she has peered through the doors of the theatres, all of which are closed.

While she does these things, Richard goes off to hear speeches given by the upper echelons of the Leisure League management, not the regional managers, but the real ones from Detroit and New York, the franchise distributors. From them, he is learning the ins and outs of something called *quality client commitment*; Marta has been reading the literature, while he is gone. She's read all about the friendly greeting; she's read about product placement and paired products and even activity-based merchandising. She's read straight through the afternoon, making careful, apt notations in the margins with her purple felt tip pen. She is amazed by this information, transfixed by it. It has never occurred to her before that so much thought and planning, so much *ingenuity*, could go into the running of a bowling alley. It has never occurred to her, either, that one way of doing things might be any better than another, less typical way, but now it does. For instance, the bowling alley in Stratford has been renovated, modernized, to cater for contemporary tastes. It serves alcohol, for one thing, draft beer and spirits, and neon-coloured cocktails in cerise and lagoon. It serves these drinks to college kids, farm-hands, and waitresses, coming off their shifts in the local cafés. Also, it serves them to couples, newly married with children, and to nurses, off-duty ones, from the large county hospital nearby. The fruit-flavoured drinks are supposed to attract women, especially the young and restless kind, who in turn are supposed to attract the men, who can be old or young, depending. Sometimes, Sadie Hawkins nights are held, when women get in free and can bring along the man of their choice. "Afterwards, an orgy is held in the parking lot," is what Richard has to say about that. "Those off-duty nurses are insatiable."

He goes on to describe the things that would carry on inside: insults and fisticuffs, assaults with flying balls. Jealousy is a feature in these stories, and sex. Richard has a

knack for uncovering stories about sex, the way other people have knacks for riddles, or folk tales. He adds details to his stories that seem to Marta, when she hears them, excessive. She has begun to suspect him of adding sex to his stories on purpose, to increase his shock value, or to shock her personally, she isn't sure which.

As she reads, Marta makes a list of all the cocktails she has tried: kamikazes, sloe gin fizzes, prairie fires, heart attacks. Once, something called a legopener, which Richard bought her as a joke. There are other, more graphic names, and some having to do with violence: the irish car bomb, the vodka hand grenade. Another one, which Marta has never tried, is called the wife's revenge. Would Richard's wife want revenge, if she knew about Marta? Probably she would. Marta has seen a photograph of Richard's wife, an old and slightly yellowed one, in a small plastic frame in the glove compartment of his car. The frame is bifold, with the wife on one side (small, wiry, with a stiff halo of voluminous brown hair, and wide-spaced, squinting eyes) and the baby on the other (not a baby, really, more of a toddler, small and fat with tweed-coloured curls and a wide, bullish neck). Only the head and shoulders of the wife are visible in this photograph, but it is easy to imagine the rest of her: she would be sharp, like Richard, mettlesome, with hazardous elbows and leathery hands. If Marta were to meet her in a dark alley, she knows exactly which one of them would run the other way. *Wifely* is not a word Marta thinks of when she sees this picture, but *foxy* is. And *outfox*. Outfoxing is something this wife would be good at. It wouldn't surprise Marta if it was the wife herself who placed the photograph there -- it is not something Richard would do, it is not something tender. It has an improvisational nature, with its cheap plastic frame and its off-centre snaps:

planted, is what Marta thinks. The question is, for who? Marta takes the shoddiness of this picture as a personal affront; there is a bluntness about it, a seediness, that niggles her. It is no good saying the wife has poor taste – from the looks of it taste is not a thing she concerns herself with, at all. Besides, Marta is not sure she likes the implications of this idea. What would it say about Richard, for instance? What would it say about Marta herself?

Marta has had enough of reading for one day. She looks at her watch: four-thirty. Richard won't be back for hours – he and the other managers have been taken on a bus to a place called the Rock & Bowl Lounge, for a tour. "Like a goddamn field trip," is the way Richard put it, over lunch. There is a flyer on the bedside table for the Rock & Bowl; Richard read from it the night before, as Marta unzipped him. "An inter-galactic bowling mecca," he recited, "back-lit for maximum dazzle." Marta looks at the schedule - - today is Thursday, seniors' day. After that, an evening of salsa, the carnal Latin craze. The brochure actually says this, *carnal*, which makes Marta picture a jungle with tigers, someplace sweaty and dense. There's a photograph too, of bowlers surrounded by dancers: men with short-cropped hair and tight black chinos, thrusting out their chests and looking fierce. Women, in rhythmic stasis, plunge rounded hips through liquid dresses. Their hands rest lightly on the shining skin above their breasts, their heads sway back, their eyes are closed. Stars of blue and silver flash above their cheeks.

Beautiful, thinks Marta. She means the dancers, but also the alley, the unexpected sheen of it, the lights and the dresses, the swaying hips and bared sexuality, the glint of sweat on the backs of necks, the darkened lane beds, secret and smooth, the dim, cool

roundness of the bowling balls that hang like polyps from the hands of the bowlers, fixed in mid-air.

There are lessons, too, advertised in this brochure: Latin dancing, mambo, salsa, ballroom, given on the pine-cured dance floor opposite the lanes. Every night of the week a different dance. Tonight's instructor is Dominic; he grins at Marta from the back of the flyer, dark-skinned and shining. The effect is theatrical; the lights are too liquid, the teeth are too white. Even so, the scene is enticing. It has everything a person could want: entertainment, excitement, mystery – even romance. Especially romance, thinks Marta. She would like to see the Rock & Bowl for herself. She would like to watch Dominic and admire his fancy footwork, and see herself illuminated in the turning crystal ball above the lanes. Also, she would like to see whether the seniors stick around for the dancing, how many drinks they buy, and what kind. If Richard is asked to sell drinks at The Lucky Strike, it will be Marta who serves them. It will be Marta who coaxes the customers onto the dance floor, who claps and cheers for them, and who writes with her purple felt pen the names of the ones who want lessons.

This is what she decides: she will ask for directions, from the concierge, and then she will drive to the Rock & Bowl, in Richard's Camaro. Richard may not like this; no one else has ever driven the Camaro, least of all Marta. Also, she has not actually been invited to attend any of the Leisure League functions; she is meant to be incognito, a sort of mysterious stowaway, kept out of sight. There is a risk that she will be seen as a nuisance, or that her good intentions will be misconstrued. Still, she thinks, she has a right to see it, at least, after all the reading she's done.

She dresses in her black dinner ensemble, which requires pressing but will have to do, and tucks the brochure, with its red-arrowed map and its schedule of lessons, into her purse. Richard's keys are on the bureau, winking in its laminate surface: two great rolls of vari-coloured metal, wedged together with wire. She won't need all of these, not even Richard, she thinks, needs all of these. Probably he doesn't even know what half of them are for. One will do: the car key, with its round protective ring, is the most obvious of them all, right on top. She decides against taking her jacket – it will only make more creases in her already questionable dress – and heads out into the rain.

The Rock & Bowl is not far away; it takes her just over twenty minutes to drive there, along a road so new it looks like liquid rubber. At the end of the road is a parking lot, with freshly painted hache marks criss-crossed neatly along it in rows, and at the end of the hache marks is the alley, done in ultramarine brick, long and low with soft silver stars painted all over it. It doesn't look much like a bowling alley. Apart from the stars, it looks more like a hospital, or a grocery store, something utilitarian built in the seventies, institutional, but with a welcoming ambiance, spacious and blunt. It might have been used for something else, once; it might have been a market, or a skating rink. Something vast and impersonal, handy for trysts.

Inside, it's a dim, cool cube, thickly and haphazardly strung with looping strands of Christmas light, which shine dully blue in the gloom. Richard is just inside the doors, beside the till. There's another manager with him, and several others in groups of twos and threes, peering into the lane beds, and milling around at the bar. Marta says hello, and squeezes in beside Richard, but doesn't otherwise explain her arrival. Richard gives her a quick, exasperated glance.

“How did you get here?” he asks, as if she is a child or a pet who has strayed.

“Drove,” says Marta, a little more childishly than she intended.

“Not in the precious Camaro, I hope?” asks the other manager, with a smirk. He looks fairly precious himself, is what Marta thinks; he is younger than Richard, more tidy, with a neatly trimmed mustache and careful blonde hair. He looks well-preserved, like something out of a wax museum.

“Marta works at The Lucky Strike,” says Richard. The wax man is not fooled; he presses Marta’s hand into his and looks meaningfully into her eyes.

“Of course,” he says. He holds onto her hand a little longer than necessary, giving it a gentle squeeze, as though they are in cahoots about something.

“Can I look around?” Marta asks. The wax man raises his eyebrows at Richard – hasn’t she already looked around, an important employee like herself? With a scandalized shrug – if Richard won’t look after her properly, it will be up to him to do it – he whisks her away from Richard and leads her towards the bar.

The dance floor has been laid out in the shape of a fan, extending from the bar in even waves. Spotlights have been rigged up to shine from a trestle overhead and the lights around the bar have been dimmed, for effect. The managers – about twenty of them – huddle around the bar, whispering into their cups of cold tea and coffee; they don’t look at Marta. It’s possible they haven’t even noticed she’s here. The wax man guides Marta onto a stool and then leans in towards her.

“You’re so thin,” he says, placing a hand on her thigh. “You could be one of the dancers.” With his free hand, he gestures towards the stage, where a sign has been displayed: *Demonstration 5 minutes!* Marta shrugs. She has been made a little dizzy by

the lights, not to mention the closeness of the wax man's face to her own. Things – people – are beginning to take on an unreal quality.

Now there is a moment or two of confused silence as the managers wait for whatever is about to happen, and then a door opens up to the right of the stage. The open space where the door has been is not entirely blackened out, because of the sunlight that is still coming in through the plexiglass doors and windows on the other side of the alley, which spoils the effect a bit, since the grayish shapes of the dancers can be seen shuffling one by one through the door and along the narrow strip of tile that leads to the foot of the stage. This reminds Marta of a puppet show or a backyard variety act, the kind put on in the afternoon by children and attended by parents and put-upon neighbours – the kind of thing Richard might have to attend with his wife.

Where is Richard, anyway? She's surprised he isn't front and centre. This kind of thing should be right up his alley: bared thighs and flashing bosoms, all neatly delivered with minimum fuss. But he's not here; she doesn't see him, anyway, and in another moment the lights have come on, hectic rainbows of blue and pink and orange, arcing up and over the stage like moving fish. The lights play over the chests and eyes of the dancers, who have assembled themselves into a tidy arc, four couples standing equidistant on the lacquered parquet, frozen in place. The black of their clothing shines as though it has been oiled, and the soft rise and fall of their breathing is mirrored in shadow against the far walls. Music crests to a fanfare, something with trumpets, brute but contained, and then they step in unison – *tamph* – with the heels of their shining black shoes.

They whirl in pairs around and across the stage, drumming their feet and clapping their hands above their heads. Then a silent prowler enters from the wings; Dominic, Marta sees: she recognizes him from the brochure. His clothes are the colour of seal skin, the bristles on his chin and the curls of hair that escape over the fold of his collar are a startling blue. The colours look different under the lights, Marta knows that. But still it is easy to picture him lurking in the shadows of an alley, breaking into bedrooms, sneering with a rose or a stiletto between his teeth, contemplating desecration or worse. He exudes an air of careful concentration; his lips are slightly pursed, a ridge of tension runs between his eyes. He treads softly, first with the tip of an outstretched toe and then sliding behind that the foot, one and then the other in a syncopated rhythm that trembles in his legs and his hips, over his chest and down through his outstretched arms. He leers silently at each of the women managers in turn, and they screech or giggle; one or two roll their eyes. As he moves past her, leaning close, Marta can see the small quiver of breath in the hollow of his throat. His skin there is loose and slightly creased, like a slept-on pillow, and under the ruthless silver flood of the lights, two colorless pouches appear beneath his thickly made-up eyes. He is much plainer when you get him up close.

For a moment, Marta feels strange about watching. She feels like a voyeur, peering in on someone in the shower or in bed. Worse, she feels embarrassed, and not for herself. She is completely unprepared when he grabs her, latching on to her wrists and pulling her, gently but insistently, away from her stool and out onto the pulsating oblong of the dance floor. "Don't worry," he hisses to the crowd as Marta is lit up by a spotlight, "I'll be gentle."

The spectators laugh and Marta is spun and whirled effortlessly across the floor, while Dominic shouts instructions over the music, explaining to the managers that they can enlist the dancers to fill their lesson rosters, to smile at the bowlers during the show and then lead them out onto the dance floor; most people won't object, they don't want to be rude, or be seen as poor sports. Women in particular are quick to comply; when they are hesitant you can use roses or costumes, feather boas and long, lacy mantles, to flatter them. Once you have the women hooked, the men will surely follow; the female dancers, as it turns out, are not strictly necessary, but they look nice and can always be used as waitresses or bus-girls later on. At the end of the dance, Dominic bows deeply to Marta, then pretends to kiss her passionately, dipping her deeply over one knee. He doesn't really kiss her, just lets his breath graze damply over her chin, but it must look real because the managers hoot and laugh, clapping their hands and murmuring appreciatively into one another's ears. Marta is breathless, and she is more than a little shaken. She stumbles over Dominic's feet as he turns her away, wishing, not for the first time, that she were more graceful, more urbane and complex. Her wrist and the back of her dress are moist where Dominic's hands have been, and she feels wrapped in a fug of cheap aftershave. She slips back onto her stool.

The wax man is smiling at her; his look is predatory, as though he has suddenly decided she is more generally available, but less interesting, than he originally thought. Richard is beside him by now; he sees this look and doesn't like it.

For dinner they have nachos, supplied by the Leisure League and set out on platters. The managers sit down at a long table to eat and discuss things; Marta sits with

them, since she has nowhere else to go. Richard has adopted a cavalier attitude toward her presence: her insurrection is plain enough, but he doesn't have to condone it. He doesn't bother to explain her to the other managers, but later, she can see from his face, she will have to explain herself to him.

The wax man talks about the dancers. That they will attract customers is beyond doubt. The question is, what kind? He doesn't want his alley turned into a pick-up joint, or worse, a meat market. He lowers his voice; he doesn't want Dominic to hear him, or the Leisure League bigwigs, for that matter, but really, isn't it all a little *pedestrian*, the lights and the roses, the bared chests and lewd come-ons and all that exposed chest hair? He isn't at all sure his regulars will like it; they're used to a more informal atmosphere, they might not take kindly to things being altered.

"After all, not everyone enjoys dancing," he reasons, gazing pointedly at Marta. Under the table, he lets his toe come to rest against her instep, briefly. "Lots of men are quite shy about it, in fact. I guess it would help if the ladies encouraged them a little. Help them come out of their shells, so to speak."

Marta doesn't answer. She thinks about telling Richard what the wax man is up to, but there's no way to do this without causing a scene. Besides, she thinks, Richard should be watching out for this sort of thing. He should be *jealous*.

"But then you haven't come here to talk business," says the wax man. "You probably have more interesting reasons for being here, a woman like yourself." This comment is more or less a direct insult; several of the other managers are women, though they are mostly older and more imposing than Marta herself, with their piled-up hair and their wide, rouged-in cheeks.

Marta sits back and crosses her legs. "Oh, no, not at all," she says brightly. "You must have me confused with Richard's wife. She isn't part of the business, but I am. Richard is my boss – that's how we met." She giggles suggestively. "It does make it hard to get things done, sometimes. Doesn't it, Richard?" As soon as she has said this, she regrets it, but only for a second. Then she is resigned to it. Richard doesn't say anything, but she can feel his anger coming towards her like heat from a stove. Before he can recover, she has gathered her purse from beneath the table, and is pushing back her chair.

"Speaking of business, I'd better be going," she says. It's a long drive back." She smiles broadly, and then she walks out of the bar and along through the alley, out into the sunshine of the parking lot where the Camaro is waiting. Richard doesn't follow her, but then he doesn't know she means back *home*, which is precisely where she intends to drive, this minute. She goes to the hotel first, to get her bags, and she leaves a curt note for Richard at the front desk. *Absence makes the heart grow fonder*, she writes. *You can't sit on two horses with one behind*. All the way home, she feels triumphant. She has rocked the boat; she has changed something.

Weeks later, Richard comes to see her at her parents' house. Her mother answers the door, and tells Richard in her coolest voice that Marta is not in, she has gone to see a friend, she won't be back for hours. Marta closes the book she has been reading (a textbook, in fact, from her office administration class: she is beginning to be a lot more interested in her classes), steels herself and marches to the door. "I'm right here, mother," she says.

Richard is wearing a hangdog expression; he is not angry any more, she sees. Instead, he is morose, and more than a little repentant. He kisses her hello, and she lets him, but his mouth is softer than usual, slacker, his lips have lost their resolve. It's like kissing a leftover ham.

"I got your note," he says. "I've been trying to call you." He is no longer wearing his wedding ring. There is a thin dry patch of skin where it used to be.

"Have you?" asks Marta. She knows this isn't true, but she's glad he's said it, anyway. She sniffs, loudly, and crosses one foot over her ankle. She has no intention of making this easy for him; she wants him to sweat a little over her, to beg and plead, to roll in the muck at her feet and grovel, to give up something really important, like his pride. She doesn't know why this is so important to her; she only knows that it is.

"I think we should get married," he says. This takes her by surprise.

"What?"

"I could get a divorce." He says this as if laying a gift at her feet, a shining apple or a perfect tiara in gold. She goes out the door of her mother's house and stands facing him on the porch. He is greyer than she remembers him, his face is the colour of day-old potatoes. Has he been too depressed to wash, or has he always looked like this?

"Marta," he says.

"No," says Marta. His hair has been squashed flat by the brim of his ball cap, and his temples are showing through, with marks on them like faint bird tracks. Marta has never noticed how thin his hair is before; she is fascinated by this discovery – has she blocked it out? – and also she is a little repelled.

He moves to embrace her. "I need you," he says. She can see that this is true. It's in his face; it's in the saggy seat of his jeans and the state of his hair and the sad white space where his ring used to be. Marta cannot believe the way things are turning out. She cannot believe that Richard would ever feel anything as trivial as need.

"I'm sorry," she says again. She means this. She can see how things are. She would like to say that she is sorry for hurting him, that, through no fault of her own, she has no sympathy for him, or at least not *that* kind of sympathy, but it sounds more dismissive than she intends it, as though she is mocking him or trying to teach him a lesson of some kind.

A noise escapes Richard then, a low-pitched groan like the sound of an injured cow, and he raises a fist as though to strike her. He stops himself quickly, and lowers it, but Marta has already dodged back into the house and slammed the door, so he bangs on it and bellows her name.

"I'm going to call the police," says Marta calmly. She is amazed by her own composure. She looks through the small glass window in the door and sees Richard, his red face and flaring nose.

"I'll call the police," she shouts loudly through the door. He leans there for several minutes, banging his fist against the frame of the house and calling, "Marta, Marta," but then he stops banging and she hears his footsteps echo back down the lane and the metallic clang of the Camaro door being closed. The engine thrums in her driveway for a while and then he peels off, spraying gravel over her mother's freshly manicured lawn.

She sees him again, of course, it's a small town, and they can hardly avoid each other forever. She never goes back to work at The Lucky Strike, though, and when a new bowling alley is built on the outskirts of town, Spare Change, she applies for a job there, and gets one, first as a cashier and later as a manager herself. She builds a dance floor and hosts elaborate theme parties: Hawaiian luaus and Irish step-dancing competitions. A lot of The Lucky Strike regulars switch allegiance; they say Marta serves better food and anyway, they like to dance and to listen to live music she has brought in regularly. It makes for a nice change of pace.

Each time she sees Richard he looks smaller and older, until finally he is so small and old as to be hardly noticeable among the other older men in town, and she stops thinking about him in any way other than as someone she knew once, vaguely.

One night, years later, after she is married herself and pregnant for the first time, the phone rings in her bowling alley (by this time she has bought out the owners of Spare Change, and painted it over in shades of cerise) and Richard's voice wavers on the line. He is in the hospital, he says. He is dying, he is thinking of her; he still thinks of her often. Will she come? Will she stay with him, just for a little while? He is sorry to call on a Friday evening, but he can't think of anyone else he would rather be with, on his last night on earth. She is sorry, she says. She would like to come, really, but she is tied up right now, she has customers; Friday night is her busiest night. She has a new work-study student, from the high school; he can't be left alone with the register. She hangs up, and the world outside the window goes a little grayer, as though a cloud has just passed over her building.

“Cheer up, love, it may never happen,” says her husband, who, ironically, does come from the Stratford in England; he has the accent and the lineage to prove it. She touches his shoulder, gently, just the one small touch to prove he is there, and then she grabs a cigarette from her purse (she still smokes, although she is trying to quit; they are all trying to quit, it’s the nineties) and she goes outside to smoke, although it is ten below and the snow will turn her hair spray to glue. She smokes, and she walks around and around the grounds and on past the gates of her building, out onto the road and back again, because she feels guilty and doesn’t know why.

In the end, of course, Richard does not die. She hears this from a friend, but it doesn’t make her feel any better. The friend asks her to tell the story again, one day, over coffee and cinnamon buns, and she does, trailing cigarette smoke between exclamations, laughing weakly at the ghosts of her past. She tells the story, but she makes it more interesting than it really was; she adds some new details and leaves others out; she makes Richard more handsome than he was, larger and more stalwart. She does this out of kindness, or so she thinks; she gives him a long, romantic illness (lupus, or Hodgkin’s) and pretends he was suffering from something more exotic than garden-variety depression, that night on the phone. When she gets near the end of the story, she loses her way; she’s not entirely sure what kind of story it is, what kind of ending it requires. Is it the story of a tragic love affair? A lucky escape?

In the end, she dwells on the humorous aspects of it all, on the awkward trysts and the second-rate dancing. “Thank God I didn’t marry him,” she says, and laughs.

The way she tells it, it's a story of misplaced affection; it highlights the absolute artlessness of her nineteen-year-old self, her innocence but also, somehow, her crime. A crime of passion, she thinks, or the lack of it. It's a tale from another century, a youthful legend, not the story of how things were but of how she interprets them, from this distance.

Richard is not Richard, but then he doesn't have to be; he is only a symbol, of something she herself was, at the time. It's hard to remember, exactly.

What she doesn't say is that she saw Richard that night, the night he thought he was dying. She went to the hospital, hours later. She told her husband she had to buy milk, and she drove to the emergency ward at the hospital, in the minivan she'd bought for the alley, the one with its new name, Highway Heaven, scrolled in pink handwriting over the side. She didn't actually speak to Richard, she just asked the nurses about him, and poked her head through the curtained-off room where he was lying, asleep. Already, he looked flatter, like a cardboard cut-out of a man, like a cartoon. He was so thin, and his mouth was dragged down the way the mouths of heavy smokers are, and he had on cowboy boots, imitation snakeskin ones, that stuck up out of the sheets and seemed far too big for the thinness of his shins.

That is how she described Richard to her husband, when he asked her where she'd been, and it made him happy enough to hear that story.

The Gazebo

In the afternoon the food arrived, great platters of grilled shrimp and creviches and the tiny thumbprint cups made of grated potato that Moira intended to fill with smoked salmon, in dill sauce. Lydia, of course, was nowhere to be found, so she asked Dave to carry the platters into the dining room, and he did, thumping each one down flat on the wooden table so that the composition was all upset: olives tumbled, dressing splashed. One tray in particular was needlessly ravaged: Moira's *pièce de résistance*, a platter of dainty fruit ices brought in that very morning from Toronto: miniature clusters of grapes in frosted purple, cold and vibrant cherries, shining golden lemons. They had been arranged in a silvery hollowed-out horn of ice, a kind of shimmering cornucopia, which now bore the marks of its transit across the lawn: two wet patches in the shape of hands, pitted with gravel. Inside, the delicate mound of fruits had subsided slightly, having already begun to swelter in light rain outside. Moira swabbed the broken pieces with warm water to freeze them back together again, which took patience and also skill. She used a silver dental pick to repair the tiny trenches that distinguished grape from grape, fruit from stem, and carefully shaved away the places where the ice had gone soft. Then she placed the ice bowl in her freezer, a kitchen walk-in, installed with the money from her teaching bonus two years before. She ran one hand down its sturdy, silver side.

She always felt a special sense of pride when she stood quietly in the kitchen, after the dishes had been done and put away, say, or waiting for a cake to rise. More than any other room in the house, the kitchen reflected her influence on the house, her own special brand of care. There was the chef-designed island with its shiny vegetable sink

and its inverted knife rack, the stainless steel refrigerator (double width, with the fridge part up top, for easier access), the mammoth antique cookstove, professionally renovated and cleverly converted to gas. It was a far cry from the way the room had looked on the day Moira moved in, with its ring-burned formica and buckled linoleum floor. She'd spent her entire vacation that year, eight full weeks including weekends, ripping up the floor, stripping wallpaper (who in their right mind would have papered a kitchen with kitten paws?), and finally called removal vans to take away the brow-beaten appliances left there years before by the previous owners. She had cajoled Dave into knocking down the east wall, and he had, swinging the heavy mallet in the August heat, crumbling the plaster but swearing the whole time, like Rumpelstiltskin coming through the floor of his garret, bothered and cross. Dave did not like do-it-yourself home maintenance. He was more apt to call someone, anyone, and pay far too much, in Moira's opinion, for the simplest household tasks. Worse, he was inclined to ignore things – stopped-up toilets and creaking hinges, for example, until it was too late, and unnecessary damage had occurred.

Now that it wasn't raining anymore, Dave had retreated to the back yard – Moira could see him through the picture window she'd had built into the back wall. He was transferring tomatoes from the vegetable garden into Moira's colander, one by one. The tomatoes had done well that year; the plants were nearly as tall as Dave was, but the evenings were chilly and Moira was afraid the tomatoes would freeze. Also, she'd thought of serving the tomatoes sliced up on a platter – big beefsteak tomatoes dotted with salt and pepper – at the party. Dave was wearing shorts, old denim cut-offs with

stringy, ragged hems and a t-shirt with the name of one of Lydia's ball teams written across the front – it must have been ancient; Lydia hadn't played ball since the seventh grade. It didn't look as old as that, though, and neither did Dave, even though he had finally given up shaving and grown a beard. In fact, he didn't look much different from the way he had looked when Lydia was small – a little softer, maybe, around the eyes and in the hollow of his neck, where the skin was creased, but the rest of him was still firm, and tanned from working on the lawn. He looked at home out there in the yard, hunched over above the tomato patch, swatting bugs. He didn't fit in so well in the house, although once, it had been his house, before he married Moira. His ex-wife was the one who'd had the kitchen papered in paw prints. Not ex-wife, really; they had never divorced. Natalie had died of cancer two years before Moira moved in.

Dave did not really appreciate what Moira had done with this kitchen; he cleaned his golf clubs in the ceramic hand sink on occasion, if Moira was not there to stop him, but that was end of his involvement. He was unfazed when Moira fretted about the dings he might be putting in the finish, which would never come out completely, not even if she dabbed them with ceramic repair gel, and was forever leaving grit and clods of grass behind to clog the drain. Moira made jokes about this, in the staff room at school, comparing Dave to a child and describing his cheerful carelessness for the other teachers, the way he allowed his neckties to curl like tapeworms on the floor of their bedroom or the carpet of hair she would find in his bathroom when she had been away for the weekend or even overnight. It amazed her that Dave, a grown man, could be so defeated by objects. He was, though; they seemed to surround him, piling up on his bedside table or on the desk in his study until they reached uncontrollable proportions, spilling over

onto the floor or into the drawers which he almost always left open, exposing their jumbled contents to the world. Almost every weekend, Moira found herself re-organizing the contents of these drawers, replacing staplers and paperclips, filing scraps of paper, lining up pens and pencils in the special holder she had brought home from school for this very purpose, closing the drawers with a brisk and satisfying thud. Something else that amazed her was the kind of things she would find on these surfaces, things she wouldn't have expected any grown man to keep, or even find -- where would he? Slingshots and snake skins; once a fully formed bird's nest, muddy and broken, containing a single blue egg. Dave found these things at work -- he was the communications officer for the local watershed authority. His main job was to manage the membership programme, calling old ladies on the phone and persuading them to leave their knitting and their bridge clubs to tramp around the river valley instead, picking up candy wrappers and abandoned truck tires, and drinking coffee out of the cracked cups in Dave's plywood office. Also, he wrote fund-raising materials, pamphlets and flyers that were hoisted in boxes by his army of helpers and distributed, when the wind didn't blow them all over town, under windshield wipers and onto the vacant seats of buses. Many of these flyers ended up in Moira's dustbin, after Dave had unwittingly carried them home in his pockets or in the folded up sleeves of his shirts.

He also brought home cracked mud from the bottom of the creek beds in summer; rolled up flags, green and red, meant to advertise boating conditions on the river's three lakes; rubbish, of all varieties, in half-filled grocery bags that he saved in his office; leaves, green and brown, depending on the time of year; bird bones; dead fish in buckets, soil samples in baby food jars; and zip-locked bags full of animal pellets, grainy and

damp. He brought these things home, and set them down in unexpected places – the small patch of linoleum beside the front door, the dining room table, the back of the toilet tank – and then he was surprised, later on, when he found them again. “How did this get here?” he always asked.

Once every year, Moira took her class -- she taught grade seven at a parochial school just outside town -- to visit the watershed office. On these visits, Dave would take the children wading for tadpoles; he produced litmus strips so they could test the acidity of the river water, and herded them inside to see the stuffed Carrier Pigeon, the last specimen ever found in this part of the country, that hung from the ceiling of his office. He explained to them in careful, patient tones about the need to conserve water and the best ways to do this, and passed out information sheets for the children to take home to their parents, with lists of dos and don'ts in two typed columns down the page. *Curtail outside watering*, he had written. *Landscape with native plants that are adapted to Canada's climate. Minimize lawns!* Moira knew the parents of the children who went to her school, doctors and lawyers and mutual fund managers with six-figure incomes and great, rolling properties on the outskirts of town; she doubted very much that they ever followed Dave's advice. She could imagine their reactions when the children produced this literature, their poorly concealed smiles and amused glances. *How granola!* she had heard one of her students exclaim on the bus going back, folding the sheet of paper into an airplane and launching it out of the window.

Moira was always exhausted at the end of these visits. She spent the whole afternoon running around after Dave, picking up falling scraps of paper or dragging children out of the muck when he had let them wade out too far.

At home, though, Moira made a good-natured effort to conserve; she collected rainwater in a barrel for gardening, she watered deeply once a week (*shallow, frequent watering causes shallow roots that dry up quickly in the summer heat!*), she shut off the tap while brushing her teeth. She drew the line at using a bucket to catch shower water as it warmed up; this was going too far, it reminded her too much of her grandparents, when they still lived on the farm, using baking soda instead of toothpaste and sewing the damaged legs of pantyhose together, sometimes two different colours, so that her grandmother's legs looked like two separate people, coming out from the bottom of her skirt. Moira had nothing against a little thriftiness, but she didn't see the need to be stingy. Besides, she had no *reason* to be stingy; she brought home a lot of extra cash. In the summers, for instance, while her colleagues were cooling their heels at the lake, Moira ran a profitable day camp -- a godsend, the parents called her -- what else could they do with Johnny and Suzie while they themselves were playing tennis at the club? In the winters, she took classes. Then she typed out her additional qualifications on handbills and ran private tutoring groups, at what she secretly considered to be exorbitant hourly rates. Also, she gave lectures, to the teachers at other schools: *Making Science a Verb* and *Mud-Pie Math!* All of this had netted her a very tidy nest egg, though of course Dave didn't know the true extent of it. God knew what he'd have wanted to use it for, if he had known -- installing low-flow toilet bowls in the town's public buildings, or a conservation programme for red-toed newts.

Lydia was another story. She was sixteen that year -- sweet sixteen, they called it, though there was nothing particularly sweet about Lydia. Oh, she'd been lovely as a child, all that wavy dark hair and those blue eyes -- strangers would stop Moira on the street to exclaim over Lydia's eyes. "What a beautiful child," they would say, and Moira would wind a strand of Lydia's hair around her finger and smile, and nod. It had helped that they had the same colouring; people had always assumed they were mother and daughter. Of course that didn't happen anymore. Lydia'd gained thirty pounds in a year, and the hair was gone completely. It came off one day after Moira made a comment about the pictures of Natalie Dave keeps on the mantle -- nothing sinister, just that it was a shame her hair had fallen out so early in her treatment. She'd had beautiful hair -- that's where Lydia got it from -- but in every picture there she was as bald as a cue ball, wearing one of those awful Jamaican knit caps, or a wide straw boater with big plastic flowers. *Well*. Lydia had disappeared to the mall and came back looking like Telly Savalas, saying it was a gesture of solidarity and if Moira didn't like it she could go right to hell. She actually said this, in an ordinary speaking voice, right to Moira's face. Well, not to her face; to her back, really, since Moira was gardening at the time. After that episode, Lydia had been grounded for a week, though Moira knew very well that Dave had let her use the telephone when she herself was not at home.

The hair was growing back now, in tufty spikes that stuck up all over Lydia's head and halfway down the back of her neck. It must have been very itchy, because she scratched it all the time and her scalp was awfully red in some places. The way she looked was quite surprising, especially with the extra weight and those dresses she wore: childish print dresses, short as diapers, with wide round necklines that revealed the new

wedge of fat at the back of her neck. One of these dresses had pictures of pineapples all over it.

“Maybe she’s a lesbian,” Irene had said when she saw the new hairstyle and the dress with the pineapples on it. Irene was Moira’s sister; her speciality was advice with a twist of the knife. She was getting at Moira, really; in her opinion, Moira was a fool to have married Dave, to have saddled herself with someone else’s child in that way. Especially when that someone had so recently died a tragic and heart-wrenching death. “You’ll never measure up,” Irene had said at the time. “They’ll put her on a pedestal and worship her from beyond the grave. You’ll always look shabby, in comparison.” Irene called Natalie *Saint Natalie* and crossed herself when she mentioned her. Moira thought that was a little profane. Also, it was a little unfair. After all, it wasn’t Natalie’s fault she was dead. It wasn’t Moira’s fault, either.

Dave had finished with the tomatoes; he was tinkering around in the rock garden now. Some of the rocks had come loose with all the rain they’d been having and were in danger of rolling out onto the lawn, so he was packing new soil in around them to hold them in place. He liked doing jobs like that, moving rocks around, shovelling dirt. When he’d finished with these projects, it was always hard for Moira to tell exactly what he’d done -- things never looked much different than they had when he’d started. Sometimes, she would start a job over again without realising he’d already done it, and then he’d be annoyed with her, and say she was too fussy.

Irene said this was par for the course, what did she expect from a man who wore rubber boots to the office? When Irene came over for dinner, as she was meant to

tonight, Moira made sure Dave was wearing a nice pair of dress pants, and a button-down shirt or a sweater vest. She tried to get Lydia into something that covered all of her flesh, at least. At one time, she had thought that if Lydia only knew how she looked, she'd want to do something about it, reduce, or buy something from the Plus Sizes section at Eaton's or the Bay, something in a neutral colour, maybe, with those vertical stripes that were supposed to be slimming. But Lydia seemed to *enjoy* looking this way; certainly she didn't try to hide it. She seemed to go in for a particular kind of aggressive tackiness – bold colours and unusual patterns, gauzy fabrics, anything in paisley, with sequins, or beads.

"I wonder if she's doing drugs," Irene had remarked recently, not without reason.

Moira was making *sauce piquante*, to serve with the shrimp tray, and tiramasu for dessert. She'd chosen tiramasu because it was Lydia's favourite, or at least it had been once, when Lydia was small. She shouldn't have bothered, really; she didn't expect any thanks for it, but she felt a certain obligation, like a bruise. When she was younger, Lydia might have come into the kitchen to help her grate chocolate, or beat up the cream with the electric mixer, or break eggs into the batter, one by one. She'd always wanted to lick out the bowls, afterwards: this was before all the scare over salmonella. At seven or eight, in fact, Lydia had seemed to think of Moira as a friendly, capable aunt, skilled at dress-making and confectionery, able and willing to teach jump-rope, juggling or hopscotch at the drop of a hat. Of course, to Moira, Lydia at that age had been an easy extension of her work at the school; she had approached her with the same cheerful but sensible briskness she used in the classroom. Often, she brought home projects her class had been working

on – an electric hatchery half-full of duck eggs, a butterfly habitat, an ant farm – and did them over again with Lydia, showing her that it was possible to take an interest in nature without tracking it all through the house. Lydia had taken a great interest in these projects; she'd spent hours listening for the chirps of ducklings from inside the eggs, or making small, complex drawings of ants as they tunnelled about in the sand. She would drag Moira into the community centre after her swimming lesson to introduce her to the other mothers. "This is my Moira," she would say, gleefully, and Moira would be touched and a little alarmed by the dampness of that tiny, cool hand in her own. They would flit once or twice around the pool, Lydia in her flip-flops, Moira in her clogs, and then they would get back into Moira's car and drive home. There would always be the small imprint of Lydia's legs, still wet, on the seat.

It was beginning to rain again, now – Moira could see the drops of water showing up like magic ink against the walls of the gazebo. Dave had put on a hat – his only capitulation against the weather. It was a floppy canvas hat, the kind that had once been popular for wearing to the beach and was making an unexpected comeback, replacing the ubiquitous ball cap on the heads of Moira's students. This one was of the older variety – Dave had bought it on a trip to Cape Cod they had taken the summer after Dave and Moira were married, as a kind of delayed family honeymoon. They'd driven there in a green Gremlin hatchback, through New York and Vermont, with Lydia in the backseat behind the cool plastic wall of the cooler, reading books Moira'd borrowed from the school – *Anne of Green Gables*, *Black Beauty*. They'd stayed in a campground and walked back and forth to the beach down a long gravel road that smelled sweetly,

dependably, of cedar. In the afternoons, when Moira had judged that Lydia'd had enough sun, they put on tee shirts and long pants and poked around in the forest, looking for pine cones and trilliums, or else they put on long boots and looked at water striders in the stream.

One afternoon, after they'd been there for a week or so, Dave decided to rent a bicycle, so he could dander up and down the road and see the sights. Lydia didn't want to rent a bicycle; she was tired, but she did want to ride along with her father, on the crossbar or the handlebars, like the children did on gravel roads at home. Moira had advised against this, of course – it was dangerous, not to mention illegal, and neither one of them had a helmet. Another child might have kicked up a fuss, whined, complained. *You're not my mother*, that tired old line. Not Lydia, though. Not then.

"She'll get her foot caught in the spokes," said Moira.

"She'll get her foot caught in the spokes," said Lydia. She spoke in a mincing whine, the way children imitate teachers, although Moira had never known any teachers who actually talked like that.

"I'm not joking, young lady. Bicycle accidents can be deadly," said Moira, but by then Lydia's arms were around her waist; she was laughing hysterically, her knees buckling under the weight of her nine-year-old humour. And Moira had softened, something in the pit of her stomach drained away, she gave in. Thirty minutes later, they were in the emergency room, and Lydia's foot was a throbbing purple mass. What if she'd broken it, Moira had thought, what if Dave had landed on top of her, what if she'd smashed her skull open on the road? She'd thought of funerals she had gone to, when one or another of her students had died, in car accidents or after some long childish illness -- leukemia or

lupus erythmus. She'd thought of their still, vacant faces, intact as diamonds but irretrievable, as though they shone from a great distance away, from the bottom of the sea.

After that, she'd been stricter. She felt that she owed it to Natalie; she felt a kind of ghostly sisterhood, an instinctual bond that sprang up in the space between Lydia and Dave's absent, scattered carelessness. Although she'd never been a spiritual woman by nature, she began to suspect a divine intervention, an angel or some other benevolent meddler who had worked behind the scenes to bring the three of them together – this may have been Natalie herself. She thought of herself as a special kind of surrogate, like a Girl Guide leader, in charge of safety and moral integrity as well as cook-outs and orienteering. Lydia resented this new effort almost immediately, as though her nine-year-old self had somehow been awaiting this exact form of treachery. She was no longer interested in projects; she didn't want to bake brownies or learn about crystals; she ignored the space videos Moira ordered from NASA until dust bunnies grew in their spindles. She didn't exactly give Moira the evil eye, but she watched her with a sort of wary vengeance; she got out the photographs of her mother and displayed them all over the house.

Moira understood that this was a natural reaction, an anger caused by grief. She dusted the photographs and made frames for them, using scraps of things from Lydia's childhood: her Brownie badges, her t-ball medals, a bracelet she'd made at the Y. Last year, she took a decorating class at the community college, *Uniquely Yours: Home Decorating for the Human Spirit*. Then she redid Lydia's bedroom in shades of white

and blue, which were meant to be both soothing and uplifting, the perfect thing for ancient sorrow. Lydia raised an uproar immediately.

“Oh my God!” she had said. “What happened to my old bedspread?”

“I put it away,” said Moira. “in a box, in the closet.”

“In a box.”

“I thought you might like this one,” Moira had answered, carefully. “I thought we’d keep the one your mom made safe, so you’ll still have it when you’re older.”

“Moira. My mother made that bedspread. With her own two hands. For my birthday.” Lydia’s voice telescoped into perfect contempt. “I don’t want it when I’m older. I want it now.”

Moira thought Lydia would come to regret this decision, but she capitulated. What else could she do? She folded the new spread, with its calming blue stripes and its timeless button closures, and draped it over the back of a chair in the bathroom. It looked cosy and inviting there, which was how it was meant to look in Lydia’s room, in the first place.

Now Moira heard the back door open and close, and then Dave was in the kitchen, still wearing his hat and his long green gardening boots, pulled on over his bare legs. His glasses were covered with small splotches of rainwater and his hat and his clothes dripped more water all over Moira’s clean floor.

“It’s really coming down now,” he said. He dropped the tomatoes into the sink and then he moved up behind Moira and ran his wet hands under her blouse. Dave was never shy about sex; he was willing to ask for it any time of the day or night – he never

thought about whether Lydia would walk in or whether the neighbours could see them through the blinds. Moira had always appreciated that about him; she found in it a determined resourcefulness Dave lacked in other areas of his life. She knew where it would end, though. Once he got her into their bedroom, with the door locked and her clothes on the floor, he collapsed, and then it was Moira who was expected to be resourceful and determined. He would lie there, as pliant and pale as a root, saying nothing. Sometimes, Moira wondered what he was thinking about in these moments, flood walls or levees or some residual creature he'd found in a swamp. Mostly, though, she wondered what it would be like if Dave were another sort of man, the sort who would roll her over and insist on certain things, and who would expect her to insist on certain things too.

A person's outer world should reflect their inner one, the instructor of *Uniquely Yours* had said. The instructor was a middle-aged woman who owned a book-keeping firm and gave decorating classes on the side. Moira had seen this woman's home: it had dusty rose carpets and slip-covered sofas, and gold-striped paper on the walls. "She must have found her inner world at Sears," Irene had said afterwards. Moira was sympathetic, though; she had trouble enough with her own inner world, which seemed to be clean and white, a functional space, like a kitchen. Dave's inner world, on the other hand, was as foreign to her as an alien landscape, or worse – a familiar, unreachable place, like an underwater town. This would not be in the salty depths of an ocean but in shallow riverbed, with light and dark spaces, from the sun. She thought of Dave himself as a sort of fish, floating in among the rocks, drifting. He drifted along down there, sucking in bits

of gravel and small rocks, and spitting them out again. He didn't disturb anything, but he didn't do anything either, and after a while, Moira got tired of watching him; she felt sleepy, and had to think of something else.

When she redecorated the master bedroom, she'd used the leftover blue paint from Lydia's room. She'd bought a comforter with a sailboat stitched into it, and arranged a collection of shells on the dressers. When she'd finished, she stood in the doorway to look at it. She knew right away she'd got it wrong -- it was too folksy and nautical, like a seaside hotel room. It looked cosy, but provisional, the way a waiting room looked when someone had taken the trouble to put out magazines and table lamps -- it was comfortable, but in the end it had nothing really to do with Dave, and nothing much to do with Moira either.

Now she took a step back from Dave, and smiled up at him. "What do you think of tiramisu, for dessert?" she asked. She wanted Dave to know she had done this, made this special effort for Lydia.

"Do I like tiramisu?" Dave said absently. He knew very well that he didn't.

"Lydia does," said Moira. Then she winked. "I could always do meringue à la minnow for you, though. I'm sure if I look around I could find a nice dead bird to go with it."

This was a familiar joke; it was meant to indicate the buckets and field bags lying in ambush around the house, discarded by Dave but tripped over by Moira, like something the cat had dragged in. She liked to make jokes about the delectable meals she

could make with them: squashed newt pie or rotten fish soup. She tried to be a good sport.

Dave only said, "I wouldn't count on Lydia being here," as though he hadn't heard the rest. He used the back of his hand to clear a spot on the window and leaned right in against the glass: was he tuning her out? It really was raining, though; Moira could see the water running next to his face in a solid, wavering sheet. So much for mingling on the lawn, is what she thought.

"I think I should go down to the office," said Dave, smiling apologetically. "They might need some help out at the tributaries." He swung his arms out to one side, miming the piling up of sand bags. "The ground can't hold anymore rain. Who knows how long some of those shallow banks will hold, if she storms like I think she's about to."

You're the *communications officer*, Moira thought. What are you doing piling up sandbags? Bringing home dead fish in buckets? But she didn't say these things. She knew the answers already. *It takes a village, Moira*. Not to raise a child, but to protect a county's water table. Don't forget the village idiot, she was tempted to add. Instead, she pulled open the cupboard overhead, took down a thermos, and plugged in the kettle. If he had to go out in this rain, she thought, he should at least have a hot drink to take with him.

The last assignment for *Uniquely Yours* had been something the instructor called a "Me-Bee." This was a decorating project undertaken for purely selfish reasons, not a family room or a child's play room but a space that would be used for something personal, something special – a hobby hole, a sewing room, a hanging garden with an

indoor waterfall, just for effect. Most of the students had chosen something small and ordinary, like a breakfast nook or a reading corner pushed into one side of the bedroom, but one or two chose larger, more complex and also more daring projects: hedonistic bathrooms or gleaming, well-stocked bars. One man had built a bowling alley in the basement of his duplex; one of the younger woman had had a dance floor installed in her attic.

At first, Moira had thought of redoing the bedroom. She'd thought of painting the walls *amandine*, getting rid of that sailboat bedspread, putting in wood-look laminate floors. The instructor had teased her about this: it was hardly the kind of thing she'd had in mind, and besides, Moira's bedroom was lovely. Oh no, Moira said, the carpet was a disaster, and that sailboat -- what had she been thinking? She'd been secretly pleased, though; she felt let off the hook in a way, and then when she finally settled on the gazebo and brought the plans to class she felt a rising excitement, like a tide. She kept the plans tucked into the corner of her bedroom mirror, and when she looked in that mirror she'd seen a different kind of woman altogether, a woman with sun-bronzed limbs, the kind of woman whose feet looked thin and elegant in sandals, who drank wine every day from crystal glasses and never left a lipstick mark behind on the rim. When she started to build that gazebo, she felt the years fall away from her as though they were a restless weight of leaves -- she made meat loaves for dinner and left them to dry out in the oven while she worked; she herself had eaten standing up at the refrigerator: grapes and bits of cheese and long swallows of milk straight from the carton. She wore a pair of Dave's old work boots tied up with ribbon and found a straw hat in the basement -- one of Natalie's old hats -- and stuck it on her head to hide the sweat that ran down the back of her neck. It

had taken her just five weekends to build that gazebo, though she'd hammered every nail herself, sawed every board and sanded every knot and rough patch out herself. When she'd needed help assembling things, she wrote a cheque and hired a man from the garden centre, and laughed and flirted with him, and brought him glass after glass of iced tea.

During all this time, Dave and Lydia, the laundry, and even her work at the school had receded into the background. When she was finished, she felt as though she'd walked through a hail storm; she was tired and bruised, but she was also elated. She called Dave and Lydia and they came blinking out into the cool morning sunshine to look at the thing she had built.

"Great. A big shack," is what Lydia had said. "It takes up the whole damn yard." This last in a scornful plea to Dave, who shrugged and made his eyes wide at her as though to say, *not now!* Moira wondered how much of this routine was mere adolescence, and how much of it had to do with her.

Tonight's party was meant to be a celebration. The celebration had been Dave's idea, to make up for Lydia's rudeness about the gazebo. He'd suggested she invite people, her friends from the decorating class or some teachers from the school, who could appreciate it. He hadn't seemed to notice the implication that he, himself, could not. Moira didn't point this out; she didn't like to nit-pick, and besides, she'd been quite pleased with the idea of a party. She trimmed the gazebo with Christmas lights and set her best Adirondack lawn chairs at a coy angle inside; she planted marigolds all around the border and hung up gas lanterns on shepherd's hooks on the lawn. She wanted to

show the gazebo off to its best advantage; also, she didn't want to disappoint Dave. He didn't like to think that her life was compromised in any way by Lydia's growing rebellion. He expected her to keep up, as he did, the illusion of the ordinary family. Getting along, it seemed, was more or less beside the point.

When she was finished with the *sauce piquant*, Moira took a quick bath and dressed in a new silk pantsuit, dark green, with wide, flowing slacks and bell-shaped sleeves. She painted her toenails in Mother of Pearl; she had a vision of her feet in strappy sandals, though with all that rain she might as well have worn wellingtons. Once she was dressed she went downstairs and opened the fridge to check on the ice fruits -- she wanted to see if they'd refrozen properly or transformed themselves into indistinguishable lumps. They were there, neat as pincushions in their individual paper cups. She pressed one with a thumb: it was firm, but granular, soft and wet around the outside, like a kiss. Moira pinched it between her fingers and popped it into her mouth.

Straightening up, she caught sight of Lydia in the yard, home from wherever she had been. She was rooted to the path outside the gazebo, in her clunky Doc Martins; rain jumped from her shorn head. What was she doing? The tiny lights from the gazebo shone on her face and the toes of her boots; they blinked on, they blinked off, a dependable heartbeat. Lydia's hand jumped forward, and one of the small bulbs exploded in a burst of dull yellow: then that spot was dark. Another bulb jumped, another.

Moira was shocked. For a moment, she was too shocked to move; she could only stand there, glued to the window. The world outside the window, the world with Lydia in it, was a parallel universe: Moira was inside the bright, warm kitchen and everything outside was in shadows, and the rain fell down like a curtain. The bulbs flared and died,

flared and died. Finally Lydia was in semi-darkness; all the bulbs on one side of the gazebo had been cracked open, and now she stepped back and bent down, retrieving something, a dark shape, in her hands. Moira raised her hand to rap on the window, too late. Lydia threw her hands toward the gazebo and a liquid shadow passed out of them. She stood for a moment, a solid dark shape on the path. Her hands reached up to touch her face; she wiped the back of one wrist across her eyes. Then she was gone.

A basic rule of thumb: When decorating, light what you want to see. (Usually this meant walls, not floors). Moira could see the bulbs that were left on the gazebo, first sharp against the sky and then wavering out through a new sheet of rain: on, off, on, off.

There were missing places too, where the bulbs had been smashed. Moira's gazebo was like a blackboard drawing, carefully done, through which a curled-up fist had been dragged: something had been there, and now it was gone. Moira thought she would never be able to look at this gazebo without seeing those missing places, empty as bombed-out walls. She thought about Lydia's hands reaching out, throwing something: what had that been? She peered out the window, cupped her hands around the glass to ward off the glare. Paint. Black paint, splashed over the door and the two cheerful windows, dark now like punched eyes. It wouldn't stick, though: already the rain had washed a lot of it over the sidewalk. By tomorrow, most of it would be gone.

Where would Moira and Lydia be, by tomorrow? Already Moira could feel an unfamiliar lightness in her chest, a pressure released. She felt tense but not angry. Instead, an extravagant generosity had settled over her, and when she saw her face reflected in the window it was full of the gentle awkwardness and clumsy surprise she had seen on the

faces of mothers at school, being told of their children's transgressions. She pulled a raincoat on over her clothes, slipped on her sandals, and went outside to sweep up broken glass. The rain that fell was warm and wet, and underfoot the water had collected in running pools that swirled and rose around the small bones of her ankle, a tiny, backyard flood, a small disaster, earnest and grave.

When Dave came home he told her what she already knew: a flood warning had been issued, the river that wound through the town had overflowed its banks. Moira's phone had been ringing all evening: her guests had cancelled, one by one. At eight, a police cruiser had stopped in the street; the two men inside it had waded toward the house. Was Moira all right? Was her family safe? Yes, Moira said. I don't know. At nine, Lydia appeared, soaking wet in her thin cotton dress. Irene was behind her; she had come across Lydia in town, stalking up and down Temple Street with her boots in her hands. Irene's hand was on Lydia's shoulder, gripping it tightly: had something else happened? If something had, Irene was not saying. Her lips were closed in a grim straight line across her face. You don't want to know, those lips said.

Moira made a pot of coffee, quickly, in case the power went out. She ran a bath for Lydia, and put Lydia's bathrobe in the dryer for a few minutes, to warm it up. Then the three of them – Moira, Irene and Lydia – sat together in the living room, watching the water rise and rise in the street outside. It rose slowly at first, almost imperceptibly, and then, impossibly, the weight and sound of the rain increased again; water fell in a rhythmic crush. In the street, the drains were vanquished: water flowed over the curb and up onto the lawn, advancing, ebbing, advancing again.

Finally, the lights went out, and they were met by a brow of silence. Moira lit candles, hummed, fumbled in drawers and cupboards for batteries. She didn't look at Lydia; she didn't look at Irene, either. On the mantle-piece, Natalie smiled calmly and mercifully over the scene.

In a few moments, Dave would be back in the kitchen, calling. His bucket and broom would lie abandoned on the sidewalk; his boots would thump, one by one, against the wall in the mud room. Probably they would leave marks. He would call for Moira, but before she could answer he would appear in the doorway, dripping wet. Oh, Moira, he would say. I'm so sorry, honey. Someone's been at your gazebo.

Moira would raise a hand to her throat, her mouth would open: what would she say? She knew, already. Yes, she would say, I saw them. *Teenagers*. As though the word, with all its mutinous implications, did not apply to Lydia. As though, in fact, their tiny family had weathered -- skilfully, gracefully -- a palpable external threat.

Later still, they would be hungry, and Moira would lay out the party food -- the shrimps, the salmon, the cold *sauce piquant*. As they ate, a sense of emergency would envelop them, they would speak more gently to one another than they normally did, and the sound of the rain and of their voices would hover on the frontier between reality and dream, fiction and fact. At the end of the meal, Moira would take from the refrigerator the lovely ice fruits, so tenderly repaired but still, still imperfect: too soft, too hard, diminished, like small damaged hearts.

Tomorrow, Dave would replace the broken light bulbs, and Lydia herself, silently, regretfully, would repaint the walls of the gazebo, two coats, tidy and smooth. Moira would feel the walls of the house expand around her; it would seem lighter and larger, a house for the future, full of hope.

A House with History

Around four-o'clock, my father said, "Want to go see how the pond's getting on?" My mother had started a job and wasn't home from work yet and Meg was only a baby, still at the sitter's where my mother would collect her when it was time. But I was allowed to walk home from school myself; my new school was not far away – just two streets over and one street down, all on freshly paved roads perfect for walking. The streets there were full of children in the afternoons and we all followed the same route, up Tamarack and on along Elm, where we branched off into smaller groups at the head of each antler-shaped crescent. Each antler had its own green sign, to tell its name, and every one had been given the name of a tree. Our street was called Chestnut. There were no real chestnut trees on our street, or any other kind of tree for that matter. There were not many families there either, but all around us grew cement foundations, like whale bones sticking up out of the dirt. My father said that these would soon be other houses full of children, but at that time they were only full of cats, and pebbly sand that was no good to play in.

My father went around to the side of the house where a canoe lay sleeping up against a hedge, and together we pulled it over the driveway, which was a long and ragged sort of driveway, covered in nothing but gravel. We tilted the canoe up onto a wagon my father had built and towed the wagon to the end of the street and then on through the maze of dark new roads with their tidy rows of bungalows and bus stop signs standing on the sidewalks beside skinny, struggling shrubs. This was Oakridge Crossing, the newest section of the city, and our new home. The name sounded to me like a green

and bustling sort of place, where children might build tree forts like giant cocoons and where perhaps a stagecoach might have stopped in the old days, but that was not what Oakridge Crossing was like at all. The houses there had sprung up as suddenly and unconvincingly as mushrooms on an old rotten log. The lawns around some of the houses were grassy, but mostly they were bare, just clay heaped up and waiting to be levelled so that sod could be grown on top. People were sitting out, regardless, men in corduroy cut-offs holding half-empty bottles of beer, and women in swimsuits, with babies caged in by playpens or toddling free on grass as fine and young as bean shoots. No one seemed to move much in the late afternoon heat, but people would nod or smile as we passed, and my father would hold up a hand in reply.

Before too long we left those streets behind; we passed Mac's Milk where my father bought cigarettes, a gas station just being built. Then Oakridge Crossing gave way to a greying shaft of city street, the sidewalk gave out and we were walking on an old dirt path hemmed in by dandelion, Queen Anne's Lace, and purple thistles all around. We went down a hill at cross-angles to the road and entered a kind of park – a disused city dump, really, sown over with weeds and mounded like a series of hump-backed beasts against the sky, cross-crossed with trails. In the distance we could see the hospital, where my mother worked as a secretary, with its tall brown tower spouting smog into the air. Closer still, towards the centre of the dump, we climbed a steep path that slanted off into the woods, a pocket of trees and ponds and pathways that separated Oakridge Crossing from the rest of the city beyond.

When we got to this path my father pulled the wagon by himself, because there were cracks there and ruts where the tree roots had grown out like dragon's tails over the

ground. The path led away to a small, soft patch of mud, and when you jumped over that there was a little dock there, perfect for fishing. Teenagers hung around the dock and sometimes on these afternoons they were sitting there already, with their legs hanging down, smoking and throwing their butts in the pond.

When they saw my father they murmured and sniggered amongst themselves and asked him if he had any beer they could buy. He said he was sorry, he'd had to swear off the stuff himself – it was bad for his career. "I'll spot you five bucks, though, if you'll help me get this canoe into the water," he said, opening his billfold carelessly. He held out a glistening blue note, crinkled it with his thumb and held it out to the nearest boy, who took it and pushed himself off the dock into the mud.

They lined the canoe up alongside the dock and I stepped in – I knew the right places to step so as not to tip the boat. When my father got in he rocked us a little on purpose and yelled and shouted as though he believed we would tip. The teenagers gaped and tittered but I wasn't fooled because he did the same thing every time. I just held onto the gunwales and smiled. "You going fishing?" one boy asked, the one who had taken the money, and my father said, no, no, we were just going to float and see what was what. Then we pushed off into the water, which was murky and brown, with wide green lilies floating up here and there and a lot of invisible weeds under the surface that pulled at our paddles. The lady who had sold us the house told my father the pond was stocked but we had only ever seen slow brown pike, thick as loaves and floating sideways to the top. My father told a story about when he was a boy, and rode his bicycle straight down a hill into the Exeter river, and came up with fish in his pockets and under his shirt, rainbow trout

and all sorts. I thought that was a great kind of story to tell, and said so, and then he told a little about the pond we were floating on now.

All that land behind our house used to be scrubland, a wide green bowl. The ponds were there, of course, kettle ponds, a strange thing to find in that part of the province. There weren't any paths or houses or even any roads there then, just trees and ponds for miles around, and people could tramp back in there if they wanted to fish or swim or skate in the winters. He swung his arms out around him like in a song I used to sing at school, *Rise and Shine*, it was called, and I could imagine the sun shining out on those ponds and those trees and all the tiny caterpillars and other things that must have lived underfoot. There were snapping turtles, my father said, and salamanders and jackrabbits living there then. There were wild strawberries growing everywhere upon the ground and even now and then a deer would come through, eating the berries and drinking the cool, clear water from the pond. There were trilliums growing all over the hills and down the dales, and all of this treasure was owned by a man named Saunders, who later had a high school named after him, on the other side of town. Why would he want a high school, I asked, and my father opened his eyes. Well, he said, maybe you're too young to appreciate this story after all, and I said no, I was certainly not, so he went on.

"Well, he said, "Saunders was what some people call a naturalist and others call a fool. He kept this land and never built on it, though he might have gotten a lot of money for it, if he had. He let the trees grow and the flowers bloom and that was all he ever wanted out of it, just so he could have a walk now and then in the woods, and a swim in the ponds. He didn't mind the slimy weeds at the bottom, or the turtle grass at the sides,

or anything.” Here he leaned over with his paddle and dug up a wedge of the grass, and dripped it down my neck, which made me laugh, and the sound of my laughter rose loud over the pond and all around.

“The city owns this land now,” he said. “They bought it for \$2.00 when Mr. Saunders went broke in 1923, imagine that! Mr. Saunders died sick and penniless, though he was once the richest man from here to Toronto, and none of his family would buy back the land, even though that was his last request. That’s why there are roads and paths and houses springing up, and someday the roads of Oakridge Crossing will probably run right through this very spot where we are floating now.”

I looked around then, at the water lying slivery flat in the dusk. I tried to see that road before me, the pond dried up and covered in concrete, the skeletons of new houses, the lawns, but I was stopped by a shiver of dread when I looked at the shore. The past opened up like a yawn hole, and the thwarted ghost of Mr. Saunders sat beside me on the seat, and the future swirled strangely around us, demolishing the pond and the docks, the criss-cross trails, the Mac’s Milk, the streets. Even my father, so strong he could tip a canoe straight up over his head, whose laugh was as loud and clear as a church bell, would be bones in the ground one day. And I would be his age, or older, a wisened, unknown ghost, by that time.

In the half-dark I could hear our paddles dripping louder than ever, like fish jumping, and I felt that I was in that other song, *Land of the Silver Birch*, and I was an Oneida squaw paddling my canoe around the pond. I wished I could have been. I would have shot an arrow straight through the heart of Christopher Columbus when he arrived on the shores of America, I thought, so that the pond could be always a pond, with its soft

pebbly shores, and the wide green bowl of trees and the tiny spotted salamanders shining in the earth.

My father had a new job too, managing properties for the Department of Welfare. This was a part of the government that rented houses and apartments to poor people, who were down on their luck. Dundas, Highbury, the Pulrose Estates – he looked after buildings in all those places. Not in Oakridge Commons which was closer by – those were not rentals at all but condominiums, and my mother was thankful for *that* small mercy, at least. My father dealt with cold drafts and ovens, stopped-up toilets, mouse holes, roach nests, ant trails, the mowing of lawns, the patching of ceilings, broken windows, overflowing drains, dirty grout, dryer vents, leaky radiators, outstanding rent cheques and sometimes, the misdeeds of dangerous children. Those children had a nickname for him, Mr. Bill, although Bill was not his name.

It was not a nickname to be proud of, my mother told him, it was a janitor's name, and who could be proud to be a janitor, knocking at the doors of pigsties and worse with a plunger in his hand. Until that winter, he had been a teacher, in a college downtown. He taught electrical circuits, and wore a tie, and carried a brown leather briefcase full of papers and finely diagrammed books. But in the evenings he always had a whiskey at the bar, and one morning he woke up groggier than usual, with red-rimmed, watery eyes and a ferocious gaiety about him. After he had sung all the songs on the radio and danced my mother around the kitchen in her nightie, he crashed his blue Datsun into a tree on Highway 100, and walked to work with a bleeding nose, and lost his job. The chancellor,

who brought him home, told my mother he should give up the drink, the smell coming off him was enough to pickle a horse, and it wasn't even ten o'clock in the morning then.

So instead he was a tinker, he said. I always liked the sound of that, and I liked to go out to the pond with him, when I got home after school. My mother didn't like it at all, and she didn't like the way he wore his boots at the table, which was her own grandmother's table and had come all the way from England, on a boat. The table had a scratch on it, which was put there by the movers when they brought it here from town. *Uptown*, my mother said, where she would still be living now, if it weren't for my father and his childish ways. I heard her say this to Mrs. Rainey, who lived next door and was the only neighbour we knew there, at the time. (Mrs. Rainey brought us a meat loaf after we'd been here a week, which made my mother laugh, and say she guessed that was what people ate out there, *meat* loaf). She said that table was meant for an *uptown* house, with big bay windows and polished wood floors. A house with history, she said. That was the kind of place she'd always had in mind. Instead, she had been flung out to the boondocks, in a house with a mud flat for a yard, and whose fault was that? Whose? I was surprised my mother would say such things to Mrs. Rainey, but my mother said that Mrs. Rainey was not so high and mighty herself, she worked in a *bacon* factory, for God's sake, and besides, she had very little shame left at this point.

The table was scratched, and nothing would unscratch it, ever. No pond or canoe ride would make up for it, or new grass in the yard or a porch chair for rocking, not even the bright red mailboxes on every corner or the bookmobile on Tuesdays and White Oaks Mall so bustling it had an ice cream parlour right in its very centre, and kittens as soft as velvet, as playful as tigers, wrestling in its paper-strewn cages. My mother hated it all.

On Sundays, she took Meg and I to church, in the little red car she had bought to drive back and forth to work. The church we went to was not the First United Church with its blue concrete walls and the painted face of Jesus on its sign; that was not a proper church, in her opinion. We went to a big church uptown, with stained glass windows and dark wooden pews as hard as bunions. My mother wore a very short rose-coloured dress, a knit one with two white pom-poms on dangling strings down the front. Also a wide wicker purse, with stiff handles on it like a basket, and burgundy shoes she had polished on a stool in the kitchen. I had a dress and a purse to match, and inside my purse, rattling there, was a quarter for the collection plate. I had on tight white knee socks, and buckled-up shoes, and my hair had been pulled into a pony tail in back, so tight it made my eyes water. Before we could leave my father wanted to take our picture, on the new concrete porch, and I could not comprehend his betrayal. Mrs. Rainey's two children – both younger than I was – were peering through the hedge, witnessing my humiliation. My mother presented a thin smile, not a smile really but a kind of dignified sufferance. I smiled twice as wide to make up for this and turned a little away from her, hoping to give off disdain. My father looked through the viewfinder at us, at my mother standing primly like a lady, and at me, her mannequin, in the priggish dress and pointless purse, hair imprisoned and lips made red with a single, lip-sticked kiss – everything I had promised myself I would never, never be. I could not bear even the sound of my heels on the sidewalk, so crisp and prudish, echoing exactly my mother's stylish steps.

After church, my mother sometimes brought home, as a treat, currant buns from the bakery in town, the one with the black Formica tables and the lady with her hair in a bun. This lady would come out from behind the counter and take my mother by the hand.

“Well, hello, stranger,” she would say. “Where have you been?” My mother would laugh, a small, hard kind of laugh, and tell the lady we lived in Oakridge Crossing now. *Crossing* she said, in a way that made you think of country bridges and green, green grass. I would have liked to tell the lady about our yard of mud, and the seeds that my father sprinkled in it with his spinning pail, as fine and bright as specks of gold, but my mother took my hand and pursed her lips, and in a minute we were out the door and quickly along the smooth grey sidewalk. There were people on the street near our old house but my mother did not wave; she kept her head down and didn’t talk until we got into the car and drove away. Then she leaned her arm out the window in the leafy shade and she asked me, did I miss the children from my last school? Did I remember how nice my old teacher, Mrs. Parsons, had been? And how she, my mother, used to have time to come in and help out at the school? I did remember all those things but I pretended not to. I was careful in the way I answered because I could hear the catch in her throat, and her voice was as hard and as bright as a marble. Then she said, “You can never put your trust in a man. You always have to keep a little back for yourself. That way when it all goes to pot you’ll have something of your own to fall back on.” It seemed to me that she thought of all this a little late, herself.

When we got home, we sat on the porch to eat the buns, and my mother brought out cups of ginger tea, and a bit of bun mashed up in a bowl for my sister. She put the tea in real china cups, and the bun in the good Doulton bowl. She looked out over the yard and tried to imagine what it would be. “I suppose we’ll have grass,” she said, “and a nice bed of marigolds by the window.” But she couldn’t keep herself from comparing it to our old yard, with its carefully tended vegetable patch, its woody rose bushes. No. There

would be no Splendours of Autumn party this year, no bobbing for apples, no barbecued ham. There would be no swimming pool next summer. (It didn't matter that there was no pool at our old house, either; that was a different sort of lack). I did not look at her. I did not want to be tricked into taking her side, into feeling unwelcome self-pity. But Meg saw the trembling of her thin lower lip, and was frightened, and started to cry.

One Sunday, my mother was ill. She would not go to church, and she did not want to eat currant buns or drink ginger tea. She had a headache, she said, and a cold washcloth lay over her forehead, as in the pictures of wounded soldiers I had seen in my books.

"I'll just lie still," she said, "and pretend I am back at home with the cool wooden floors that feel so nice."

"What you need," said my father, "is to get outside for some fresh air."

"Hmph," said my mother, "it would have to blow up over the swamps to get here, and that is not exactly my idea of fresh."

"They're not swamps," I said. "They're ponds. Can I have some fresh air?"

"I think your mother could use some company today."

"I am well past the point of company," my mother said.

"Fine. Then I'll take her with me. I'll take both of them, and give you some peace."

It seemed to me my mother had had plenty of peace with the bedroom door closed all day but I was happy enough to wake Meg and get us both in the car, our four feet bare, our hair untied. My father carried from the shed his heavy toolbox and his big orange cooler full of ice. He wore his blue coveralls, with a wide leather belt full of hammers

and a tape measure and small buttoned pouches of nails. This was his tinker's outfit, as complete as the one in our playroom at school, having even the hard yellow hat hanging neatly from a loop at his hip. He went back inside for a minute, to ask my mother if she'd like him to bring her back some corn for our dinner, and to hear her say no, not if he intended to get it at that stand by the Esso station, that was only cow corn and not fit for eating. Then he came back down the drive and my mother shouted from the window, "Be careful, with those children along," but he had already started the motor and the firm crunch of gravel was under the wheels. My mother's voice was a windy complaint as the car pitched backward, out of the driveway, and paused, for one small second that was full of a heady anticipation before he gave it some gas and the car surged forward, smooth and quick, a little jolt and then sailing along, turning into the breeze at the end of the road. He took us out the back way, toward the railroad tracks and the graveyard and beyond that the countryside, a small road running along the highway, curving and smooth. There was long grass growing up alongside and I hoped that sooner or later I would have a walk in that grass, with my bare toes feeling cool, and we would sing a song that had been playing on the radio, one from a tape or whatever the DJ might play. If it was a song from a tape then no doubt it would be the kind of song my mother wouldn't like, with mournful cowboy voices and questionable language, like the one he sang now:

Goddamn hippies, ain't served here,

Been that way for goddamn years.

Sure as hell ain't goddamn startin' now."

What were hippies? Nothing good was my guess, but my father's voice was mock-stern, with a sham Southern twang like that rooster in the Saturday morning cartoons, so it was hard to know whether it was the hippies he objected to or the ones who were supposed to be singing the song. Now he sang and tapped his foot on the gas pedal so the car lifted and jerked along with the song, fast and slow down a long gravel road, and I thought it was a good thing my sister couldn't talk, or she would repeat those words at home and God only knew where else. I knew enough not to do this myself, so it was all right if I belted out the words as loud as I could. I was full of a reckless hope for adventure, though there couldn't have been much more waiting for us but long hours in the dusty car, stopped outside a ragged building in the sun, and if there was time on the way home a Vernor's Ginger Ale and peaches from the stand where he bought the corn.

My father sang and whistled and drove with his arm out the window, leaving a trail of invisible *esses* in the air beside the car. He turned right at Lowe's Arcade and drove west along Dundas Street, raising two fingers now and then to people on the roadside, women in aprons and men carrying ladders, old people shuffling their faded way along the walk.

Dundas Street was a long and pitted bi-way that led out of town, past the fairgrounds where the carney men had already pitched their tents, past the race track with its rusting silver mustang out in front, past the metal works and the cereal factory with its stench of yeast and hops, past the tiny square houses hardly any bigger than the church in the Anne of Green Gables village we saw at St. John's. We bumped up a long pitted lane and at the end of it was a scorched grassy field, and an apartment block standing in the middle of it peeling paint like sunburnt skin. The tenants' cars are parked in front, and

my father found a spot between an old white Chevy and a rusted-out Plymouth, with the wheels pulled off and one door hanging down into the grass – disgraceful cars, with bumper stickers flashing dirty words and Jesus’ name with almost identical zeal. My father went through the field and on past a heavy grey gate, into a kind of shabby courtyard that had more grey gates, smaller ones, in rows up and down both sides. There was nothing in the courtyard at all except a dead tree at one end, whose leaves and twigs had all shrivelled up in the late Autumn heat, as hopeless and gloomy as moths.

My father cleared his throat, knocked at a door, and disappeared inside it. What was it like in there? How dark and dank? How smelly? Forbidden to follow, forbidden even to leave the car to sit on the dusty curb outside, I could only imagine what he saw – what scenes of indolence, what sloth, what wretched poverty. Sometimes, to make us laugh, he pretended to be conversing with the occupant of one of these houses, usually a woman, usually distraught – pretended to be trying to find out exactly what in the world it was that she wanted. “Now then, ma’am, what can I do for you today? Was it the drains? Was it that stink in the air? Well, now, that might have something to do with these unwashed pans in the sink, what do you think? Or perhaps this bag of rotting garbage here behind the door? What’s that you say? Your children won’t stop scratching? Is it the fleas, ma’am? An awful dose of scabies, perhaps? Well, now, we’re none of us protected from nature. And your husband, ma’am, where is he this fine morning? At the race track, I presume? No? Ah, yes, I see. Face down in bed, is he? Been that way since nightfall? Well, no, ma’am, I didn’t think I *could* do that. And I’ll ask you kindly to remove your hands from my...what’s that? No, ma’am, I will *not* give you just one little tumble. Well, I can see why your husband won’t either – really ma’am,

it wouldn't hurt you to brush those teeth every once in a while." Here he waved his hand before his nose, and my mother put her own hand to her mouth, horrified, but a thin smile would sometimes escape her anyway. "Does he really meet people like that?" I would ask, and she would say she had no idea; it sounded like a different world from the one she herself knew.

There was one building after another, and each was more rundown and dismal, more slumped and dejected, than the last. There were no more grown-ups on the streets. The children, if we saw them, were hunched on the sagging porches, or in ragged gangs of three or four at the corners, throwing stones at bottles, staring at us with open hostility as we glided past. The car seat had grown hot and filmed with dust, and when my father entered the houses now I felt a rising sense of dread, as though some danger was lurking in the empty, baking streets.

In the doorway of one house a woman stood ranting, still dressed, although it was past noon, in a faded nightgown, ripped under one arm and stained an unwholesome yellow across the stomach. She held the door open as my father approached, and pointed at some children who stood on the sidewalk beyond the house, their eyes bright with cunning and a readiness to flee. "Just look what they've done!" she said, jabbing her hand toward the porch, which was dotted, I saw now, with small piles of fresh brown turds. "Animals!" she cried. "Dirty sluts! I won't clean that up, you. I won't!"

My father glared at the children and they scattered, not laughing as I would have expected, but sharply vigilant and unashamed, triumphant. My father was not whistling as he cleaned up the turds. He was bent over on the woman's front porch, and she was

watching him, glowering, through a broken window as he scooped up each one with the shovel, and carried it down to the bin.

“Did you see that?” I said to Meg, pointing. “Those kids pooped on her step. That was poop!” She recognized the word, and looked back at me inquisitively.

The door had been slammed, the lock turned, and the woman in the bathrobe had disappeared from sight. My father came back to the car without the rent. He started the engine, and pulled out of the driveway, looking straight ahead as he steered the old Datsun – his teacher’s car – between the drooping rows. He held the wheel lightly and didn’t sing, but hummed a quiet, brooding kind of hum, with pauses in between. We passed the same children, the ones who had perpetrated the unholy act, as he turned off Dundas and onto a gravel side road. They were all perfectly still, watching us with smooth, barely curious faces.

“Poop!” called my sister, straightening her legs in her car seat and arching her back. “Somebody pooped!”

“Well they certainly did,” said my father. “They certainly did.” To me he said, “Let’s hope she’s forgotten that story by the time we get home.”

But it seemed we would not be stopping at any more houses because my father drove quickly now, hardly bothering to slow down for the signs that drifted up every now and then as we rattled on by. We were not going home, either. We drove straight through the city without speaking a word and turned off on a concession road toward the sinking sun and now and then my father muttered to himself. We turned again, sharply, and I saw fields spreading out on either side of the road, a willow tree weeping on a corner, a small herd of dusty cows lowing in a field. Dust billowed in front and behind

and we had to roll up the windows or choke. We were on a bare dirt lane, dampened with oil, and at the end of it was a lovely, tidy brick house with two neat additions on one side and a garden on the other.

“Is this one of your buildings?” I asked.

“No, it is not.”

“Then why are we stopping?”

“Just for fun, this time.”

In the garden at the side of the house a woman was picking beans and pitching them into a dull silver bucket at the end of a row. When she saw the car, she straightened up and shielded her eyes from the sun, craning her neck from one side to the other to get a better look. She had an awful mess of bright red hair, and a long face the shape and colour of a parsnip. She threw one last handful of beans at the bucket, and then came across the yard to the car, wiping her hands on her denim overalls.

“Are you looking for the Crawley’s place?” she said to my father in an even voice, neither friendly or unfriendly.

“No ma’am. I’ve just come to see if your grass needs cutting.”

“John Crawley cuts my grass,” she said, poking a thumb over her shoulder. “He’s only just done it.” It was true; you could still see the marks where the mower had sliced into the lawn, back and forth, leaving diamonds behind. “He was out here this morning,” she said, “and charged me twenty dollars.” Then she peered into the car with a kind of surprise in her eyes, and her face changed slightly; some of its initial suspicion dropped away.

“Well, crumb, Tom, it’s you. You should have said so!”

“Now, Penny, if I’d done that, you’d have found some excuse to see me off the property,” said my father, grinning.

“Well, of all the – ! Imagine Tom Weir paying me a visit. After so many years – when was it? When was the last time?” She didn’t wait for an answer but gave a small metallic laugh, like a tin can hitting the ground. “You’ll have to excuse my appearance. I was just about to clean the eaves. Isn’t that always the way? I could sit around here all day in a tiara and not a soul would come by, but the minute I get stuck into some dusty job here comes the Queen of Persia in for tea.” She gave Meg a wink through the car window and Meg, traitorously, laughed. “Are these your daughters, Tom?”

“What? How’d they get in there?” my father said, craning his neck in mock-surprise, but then he laughed, and nodded yes, and told our names and ages. “Go on then, girls, you better get out. This is Penny-Ann, Mrs. Crawford. Penny-Anne, you better set me straight, is it still missus?”

“I’ll tell you what, if it wasn’t I sure wouldn’t be out here doing yard work dressed in these old rags,” she said, and laughed. “I’d be dolled up and waiting for a nice handsome handyman like you to come along. No, Frank’s just gone to Williston to see about some seed. There’s no one here but me and these flies, so come on in and have a drink. It’s been years, Tom.”

She set her bucket on the porch and led us in through the open door (“Don’t close it up, girls, it lets the breeze in. Aren’t these old houses just awful for heat?”), past a hall mirror where she stopped to pat at her springy hair, and into the kitchen, which really was hot, wide and white-panelled, a spare, neat, country room with oiled wood floors, shutters closed against the heat outside, cups of rooting fern, a small round table covered with a

brisk plastic cloth. In spite of the clean starkness of this room, and the rope of spice hanging down from a cupboard, and the old fan stirring up air, there was a smell of something earthy, of old damp or an ancient drain or the old brown dog, because there she was, spread out under the table with her nose on the floor. She rolled her filmy eyes in our direction and Penny-Anne said, "This is Tom Weir and his two lovely daughters to see us, Princess." To my father she said, "That's the same dog we used to have Tom, the very same one. You won't believe that, but it's true. She's a smelly old thing now, eighteen years this fall, but as active as ever on a good day." My father leaned down and Princess clambered up onto buckled, gnarly legs and waddled over to him, wagging her long, thin tail. She stood with her head bowed as my father patted her head and ears, and when he stood up again she rose onto her two hind legs and leaned up against his stomach, pawing there.

"You see, Tom, she remembers you!" said Penny-Anne, but when I looked at her I could see she was frowning, leaning there against the sink with her hands on her hips. "Oh, I need to get into something crisp," she said suddenly. "Here, you take Princess and let the girls pet her in the yard. That'll be a treat for her. She hardly gets any attention at all, these days."

My father swatted Princess on the rump and followed her out to the yard, which was a long, cool carpet of grass without any fence to hem it in, and a bird's bath tilted at a crazy angle at one side. In the distance we could see a tractor moving slowly back and forth, and some boys bent over in the dust, scrabbling along behind it. That land belonged to the canning factory, my father said, and those boys were picking up rocks that the tractor had turned over, getting the field ready for next summer's planting. "I

used to do that very job myself,” he said, “when I was a boy. Our place was right there, over that hill.”

“Now, tell the truth, Tom,” said Penny-Anne, who had emerged from the house in a new dress, a sundress of shiny yellow cotton, with a fluttering bib across the front, more girlish and less fashionable than anything my mother owned, with graduated panels forming a bell shape all around her legs. She was tall and big-boned, with thick elbows and ankles, freckled calves and a wide, rounded waist. “You were near enough a man when you held that job.”

My father laughed easily and said she might be right. Penny-Anne set down a tarnished silver tray on which were arranged four tall glasses, a pitcher of real lemonade and a small blue bowl of sugar – not cubes as my mother would buy but real, loose sugar with a tiny silver spoon nestled in it. “You go ahead and pour the girls a drink, Tom, while I get us some chairs.”

Princess, who had laid herself down in the shade, struggled up and came to pant against my father’s leg as he poured, leaving dark spots of slobber on the dark blue weave of his pant leg.

“Would you look at that,” said Penny-Anne, coming back with the chairs. “You old tramp, you. Never mind the one that feeds you. Of course that used to be your father’s dog,” she said to me, meaning Princess, though I didn’t see how that could possibly have been true. “Remember, you had that old bitch, Frenchie – oh, excuse me, Tom, I bet these girls haven’t heard that word used in its proper sense, growing up in the city – he had an old lady dog, and she had pups one summer. How old were we then, Tom, nineteen? Twenty?” My father passed her a glass of lemonade, and she took a

long drink, so that little beads of wet dropped down on the bosom of her dress, spotting it. She made a sound when she drank, teeth clinking against glass and long, satisfied swallows of the sort that would have made my mother stare. "Oh I fell in love with those pups," said Penny now. "I had Tom bring one around to the house in a baker's box, Tom, didn't I? I thought I would just plunk her down on daddy's desk and hope he found her as cute as I did. Well, she widdled right there on top of everything, papers and everything!" She let out a loud laugh at the memory of this, and my father smiled widely.

"Of course it was all right by then, daddy'd seen her. Those pups were so cute, and she was the last one, all the others were taken. She was the runt, you see, so small. You'd never know it to look at her now, though – look at that stomach!" Her hand fluttered up and rested a moment on her chin and we all looked at Princess, who, perhaps surprised at our sudden attention, let out a long and airy fart.

"Oh, Princess, company!" said Penny. "Excuse her manners. It's old age, that's all. Poor thing!" But she was laughing again, a deep and roomy, genial kind of laugh, the laugh of a farmer's daughter, I decided, with her mouth wide open showing teeth. We all laughed then, and whatever shyness I might have felt at first was gone, sucked into Penny-Ann's matronly lap and heaving chest. I tried to imagine what she would have been like as a girl, and believed that she couldn't have been much different from the way she was then – the same bony limbs, the freckled legs, the frazzled red hair sticking out like a hedge from her head, the same long neck and easy laugh, and the same dry quality about the skin, as you might get from a good deal of time spent outdoors. She seemed solid and firm and reliable, and yes, beautiful, the way Queen Elizabeth or Ella Fitzgerald were beautiful, with a bountiful, matronly, vigorous air.

One of the stories my mother often told was that she had been my father's only true love, that he hadn't had a proper girlfriend until he met her. But I saw now that she was wrong. He had had one.

I would have liked to sit closer to Penny-Ann and tell her some stories of my own, but just then she said, "So, Tom, you're a handyman. We always heard you were teaching in London."

I looked at my father quickly, but Penny-Ann had said this so plainly, with such matter-of-fact good will, that he only blinked and answered cheerfully, "That's what I was doing, but the chancellor and I had a bit of a falling-out over the amount of whisky a person should drink before breakfast."

"Oh, Tom," she said, and her eyes fell over him with a kind of motherly sadness. "Yes, now that I think of it I did hear something about that. A car crash, wasn't it? I expect that'll have taught you a lesson or two, if nothing else. You know a similar thing happened to my sister Elizabeth's husband, who lives in Williston. He was pulled over on his way to work at the Ford plant, and he hadn't touched a drop since ten o'clock the night before. He blew over, though, sure enough." She clucked her tongue and shook her head, and I thought that now she would say something cutting, some irrepressible womanish thing. But she only sighed deeply and said, "My how the world has changed, Tom. My how the world had changed. I expect my father wouldn't have been able to drive a car at all, if he'd had to wait for the alcohol to drain out of his system first."

She frowned, and then we were quiet for a moment, considering this. Penny-Ann sat very still with her glass held cupped in her lap and there was the sound of birds splashing in the bath at the side of the lawn.

“Did I hear you say Elizabeth has a husband?” said my father finally, and Penny-Ann nodded.

“She does, Tom, and two young boys who look exactly like her. They’ve got the same strawberry blond hair, and the mischievous look, oh, all of it.”

“That’s hard to imagine when I think of the last time I saw her. She couldn’t have been taller than this one here,” he said, pointing at me, “without a tooth in her head, and full of questions. I used to bring her ice cream, remember? So she wouldn’t tell your parents what we got up to while they were out. What about Sheila?”

“Married too, and divorced. She’s a teacher in Ashbury, and goes out with a man there who runs a fix-it shop. He does fairly well for himself in that shop, Tom, so there you are. If you do half so well as he does you’ll have piles of money in no time!”

“Well, that’s good news, Penny. Mind you, I had piles of my own just this morning,” said my father with a grin, and then he told the story of the children, and the mess they made on the old woman’s porch. “Imagine me,” he said, “an educated man. *Hello, madam, and what have we here today? Why, is that --? And did they --?*” He went through the motions, pointing idiotically, rolling his eyes, pinching his nose closed with this thumb and a forefinger, pretending to faint from the smell. “Yes, it’s a fine road I’ve travelled in life,” he said, “a fine road indeed.”

Penny had a hand over her open mouth and her eyes were wide and bright. “Oh, Tom, they did not! That’s an awful tale you’ve made up, Tom, I know it is. Why, the cheek of it! Imagine!”

My father put a hand on his heart and opened his own eyes wide, and told her, “Penny, dear, I cannot tell a lie. There was poop on the stoop, so help me God,” and she

whooped and laughed and wiped tears from the corners of her eyes, and told him to stop, stop, before he made a fool of her.

“Well, I see I’ll get no sympathy from you,” he said solemnly.

“Oh, Tom,” she said finally, catching her breath, “I can see you haven’t changed at all.” It amazed me to see two grown-ups talking in this way, like school children, but Penny didn’t seem at all dismayed. She kicked her shoes against the rung of her chair and rolled her glass of lemonade over her forehead which was dotted with sweat.

Then she had an idea: she looked at the birds preening themselves in the bird bath and jumped up and stood before my father. “Well, listen to us, going on and on and not giving a thought to these poor overheated girls. I think those birds have the right idea for today, that’s what I think. What would you two say to a nice swim? There’s the council pool right around the corner and there won’t be a soul in it this time of day. It’d do us all the world of good. What do you think, Tom?”

“If the girls would like it, we’ll go down,” said my father, “just for a bit.” Penny Ann looked at me. “I bet you’d like a swim, wouldn’t you?”

I told her, yes, but I didn’t know how.

“No?” said Penny-Ann. “A girl your age so tall already and don’t know how to swim? Well, I’ll show you how. It’s as easy as one-two-three! I’ll show you how to do a stroke your father used to do, in his more athletic days. You didn’t know your father was a swimmer, did you? Well, I guess there’s a lot children don’t know about their parents.”

She went inside to get the swimsuits, and called me in too, to change.

“You can change in my room,” she said. “Just us girls.” She led me into a room with a canopy bed, and a white chest of drawers with shallow golden scrolls. The canopy and the bedspread and even the curtains at the window were done in a print of rose, on leafy fern. The pillows and the bed-skirt were pink, and there was a musical doll with cool blonde hair perched atop the dresser. Penny-Ann handed me a swimsuit, a one-piece, in turquoise nylon, with bows at the sides of each hip and a strap that did up around the neck. She turned her back while I put it on, and I was a soft pink slug in my nakedness, sweaty and hot. When I was finished, she plucked at my hips and said, “That’ll do fine. Now, you turn yours,” and I turned to stare at the darkened roses on the bedspread while she snapped off her dress and her panties, threw them up over the closet door, and grunted into her suit.

On the bedside table was a picture of Penny on her wedding day, wearing a lace dress buttoned right up to her collarbone and a feathered band around her head. Her husband was good-looking in a firm, old-fashioned sort of way, with a thatch of corn silk hair and a square, determined jaw. He looked like an amiable, fun-loving sort of man, a man who would enjoy a good laugh – even in the picture his mouth was not set in the tight-lipped manner so common in the wedding portraits of my parents’ friends, but curled up gamely on one side, as though he had just removed a cigarette from its corner to have the picture snapped. I stared straight at that picture the whole time Penny was changing, and by the time she had finished, I had more or less convinced myself that I was adopted, or else I was a changeling child, and my real place was here between these two, sweet, corn-fed shapes. I had fallen in love with the house and its long sloping yard,

with the bird bath and the sound of stillness in the air and the spraddling corn fields – I had fallen in love with it all.

Penny hummed happily as we walked out to the front of her house and down the long dusty lane we had driven in on, to where a cement walkway led off to the pool. When we got there, I jumped straight in, because the too-big suit was puckered and gaping, but my sister played by herself in the kiddies pool. Penny-Ann leaned over and paddled the water with her foot.

“It’s cold,” she squealed, and splashed a little water up over her dimpled white thighs. Then she was in, and put her hands unexpectedly around my waist. “Now, here’s what you do. Take my hands, see? And kick your legs a little. No, no, keep your arms out straight. Good, just like that. All right now, lean forward just a bit, don’t be scared. Kick harder. I’m going to let go, and you scoop the water with your hands, like this.” She let go, and I swam toward her bosom, which was pale and freckled, rising out of her swimsuit like bread.

Then she left me at the side of the pool and ducked herself under, gliding away in one long, breathless surge, all the way to the other end of the pool and back again, and then up, in a smooth, effortless muscular curve, the arms arching up and pushing at the concrete rim, the shining back and curling legs flashing by in a silver wave as Penny shot again along the lane, where she finally rose, casual as a porpoise, in the sunlit, dappled air.

Oh, she was splendid! I wanted to *be* her, and be myself at the same time. I begged her to show me tumble-turns, and the sweet angled back-flips she could still do

from the side; I tried my best to swoop and glide as she did, to raise my arms with the same elegant grace and kick my legs with the same athletic vigour

“It isn’t just the strokes you need to worry about,” Penny-Ann said to me. “A good swimmer lets the water hold her body. There now, don’t strain. There’s no sense fighting it, you’ve got to let it carry you. Float! Float! That’s it!”

Round and round the pool we went, me following, rigid and thrashing, as Penny-Ann beckoned, laughing and pushing through the water smoothly on her back, her shoulders and tummy rounded, water glistening on the downy hairs between her breasts and the tops of her thighs. She dipped back further and further, cheering and clapping, then stopping suddenly, breathless, in front of my father. She was a marvel. She was everything my tight-lipped and fault-finding mother could never be. Why, my mother had never even got her hair wet, in all the times I’d seen her swim! If she went in at all, she held her head high up out of the water, like a straight-necked crane, with her hands raised warningly in front of her, squinting against the splash. I was determined, I made an oath to myself right on the spot: if I had to grow up, I would grow up to be like Penny. I would wear ruffled blouses and laugh at dogs’ farts and get my hair wet – get it soaking wet, every, every time.

But Penny had left me now and floated in front of my father, her arms hanging loose on the edge of the pool, her breasts – which suddenly made me self-conscious with their nearness and volume – heaving with breath, her pale face shining with water and excitement. She was so near I could have touched her, and I did try, slapping my hand in the water and giggling uncertainly, wanting for Penny to dance me madly around the pool again. But instead she turned her head, and said:

“Do you still swim, Tom?”

Just that simple question – nothing more. My father didn’t answer, and Penny did not try again. She did not beg – she did not even flirt, as I had heard other women do – but there had been a quiet invitation in her voice that it pained me to hear, a regretful tone that seemed to have nothing to do with there and then and everything to do with a past that was invisible to me, but that hovered everywhere around. It was oddly improper, that tone, coming as it did in the open, in the middle of the day, with me and even my sister still splashing close by. I had the sickly sensation that I had witnessed something unseemly, and I thought again of my mother, lying at home with a washcloth over her head.

“You used to swim so beautifully.”

My father smiled apologetically, and shook his head no, so Penny-Ann sighed and looked down and I climbed out of the pool, dripping water from my body all over the searing cement, and cloaked myself off with a towel.

Back in Penny-Ann’s pink bedroom, I pulled off the suit, damp now and too private, like underpants or worse. I hung it carefully on the bed post, where it dripped cold water onto the floor. When I had got my clothes back on, I went back outside, where my father was wrapping Meg in a towel and Penny-Ann was putting her wet things in a plastic bag, to take home. Her voice was even now and friendly and my sister looked up at her attentively, reaching out a hand for the cloud of red hair. Penny only chuckled and caught Meg’s wrist in a grandmotherly way, tucking it into her own.

"You'd like to stay for supper, wouldn't you?" she said to my sister. She turned to my father and said, "Really, Tom, Frank should be home any minute now."

"I'm sure we're the last things he'd want to see after a hard day's work. We won't put you out, Penny, really."

"But we'd love to have you. Call your wife, she could join us."

"She'll expect us home for dinner any time. I'm under orders to pick up corn on the way home."

"Of course you are."

"I really shouldn't have just dropped in on you like this, anyway, without calling first," my father said. "Frank will be wondering what I'm playing at. I just forgot for a minute how many years have gone by, since our good old days."

"Yes," Penny-Ann said, it seemed to me with great sadness. "Well. It was good to see you, Tom." To me she said, "You keep up that swimming, okay?"

She followed us out to the car and stood on her lawn, dressed again in her soft yellow dress, while my father started the engine. She held up one hand as we backed down the driveway, and raised her chin in a country manner, or what I believed was a country manner, as she turned to go in. She did not wait until we were out of sight. She stood with her hand on the doorknob for quite a long time, staring forwards, and then she was gone.

On the way home my father did not stop for corn although the stand was still open. I thought of Penny-Ann saying, *My, how the world has changed* and these words seemed forlorn and discouraging to me in a way they hadn't seemed at the time. I looked

at my father out of the corner of my eye, expecting some newness, some sly transformation, but he had not changed. His mouth was the same. And the look of his face in the half-light coming in through the window – that was the same. It seemed to me, for the moment, that the world had shifted completely, and the sight of his ordinary, unmoved profile unnerved me. I waited for him to mention Penny-Ann, to laugh and to tell me a story about her, from the past, but he said nothing at all. I felt nervous, and also I was remorseful – I was guilt-ridden – by the recollection of my rapid defection. I was ungrateful, I was repugnant, and I was sure that my mother would see it as soon as I walked in the door.

My father drove on as the sun dipped lower and lower, and the countryside around us – first the lanes and roads near Penny's house, then Dundas, and Maitland, and finally the black tarred crescents of Oakridge Crossing loomed dark and strange in the evening light. We were very still in the car and my father stared ahead reflectively, so that I could tell he was seeing things in the hills and valleys and roadsides that I could not see. It was as though we were travelling through the past and the present simultaneously, through a landscape full not only with previous versions of my father but with a whole host of strange and impossible things. When we got close to home I was struck by the flimsiness of the houses in Oakridge Crossing, the unsettled quality of the lawns and buildings, in contrast to the solid walls and stretching fields of Penny's place, which seemed to me more permanent even than the grand brick and glass houses uptown, where my mother longed to live. The gardens some people had planted, the lamp posts and baskets and wreaths that had been put out, in an attempt to personalize things, seemed

only to have underscored the transience, the newness and fragility, of these homes. That was the first time I had seen it like that.

We passed the gas station, and beyond that I saw the entrance to the woods, and shining out in the dark was the silvery shadow of the sun's last rays hovering over the pond, where even now I supposed the fat brown pike would be lurking. I tried to imagine them there, with their soft dull backs lazily breaking the water's surface, but the glinting made the water shimmer outlandishly through the trees, until it was possible to think that even now the pond was being transported to heaven, so that when I woke up in the morning, it would be gone.

Song for a Lover

We board the train from Botanic Avenue at some point mid-morning, just as the last reedy tendrils of fog spin away. Along the aisle, we pass mottled pink knees under gray pleated skirts, legs crisp in denim, black platform lugs, one great nyloned mass of vibrating flesh rising mountainous out of a dress flat. A nondescript series of black leather brogues, held aloft above briefcases lining the corridor. Long winter Ulsters brush dust on the floorboards as the train scuttles forward, the thrum of the engine swells loud over silence, and we rumble away from the city in heartbeats. At Balmoral, the shadows of Belfast drop off into memory and we circle out free into thin strands of sunlight. We sit leg by leg on the blue plastic benches, watching the world rush up on us, over us, gone. The usual particulars flit by on either side: trees, of course, bracken, craggy edges of rock. Tiers of stone walls, arcing out with precision over variously sized parcels of countryside. Neatly right-angled, each square sealed off by continuous box mazes of piled-up slate that wink out tiny and gray at the skyline. For the first time in this country I almost feel warm: the air in the train is the concentrate heat of sun trapped by closed windows, and just the right number of finely spaced bodies. Outside, thin gusts of wind rock us gently as we wind down the rails, as we clatter through villages empty of life.

By Lisburn, the engine's soft throb is narcotic; I wrap myself deeply in vespers of sunlight and drift off to sleep with my head on your arm. Cocooning, I bend in toward you, drawn over and down by the warmth of your skin, which is held and diffused through the light cotton shirt. I fall in through your curtain of hair, come to rest with

my cheek against the smooth hidden moon of your neck. I open and close with the intimate trill of your pulse on my lip line; I inhale you, your fragrance as deep as all roses: your smell of strange soap, bed sheets, and cigarettes. You sit on the edge with a book on your knee, you turn pages, like clockwork, scratch belligerent notes to yourself in the margins. Before long, you displace me, the weight of my head having deadened your shoulder: I am relegated to the cool hard plastic of the seat edge, I murmur discomfort and scrabble for warmth. Around us, unmoving, the Dubliners. Reading their papers. Arranging their limbs. Awaiting their enigmas. We are warm in the midst of these chilly strangers, our own private incubator. The train shudders on, judders bravely through farmland the colour of pickles. We are enfolded in sunlight, and warm to the touch.

At Newry, you sketch me, in various poses: *stop moving*, you scold me, and kiss me compliant. You draw me, in green ink on lined yellow paper, torn from my journal. You draw me naked, from memory, but better. The memory is quickly extinguished, you tell me, when I point out the embellishment: there is only this track through the sunlight, two iron beams running south to the centre of life. Above them, we hover, we rumble through space. There is only this track and these momentary, wide open, galloping spaces, these instantaneous, magical, inconstant spaces. That replace one another like rain. The train renders miracles, I know: it is better than Jesus. On the train I am timeless, I'm shapeless: I float. Beneath these jeans, I am liquid. Intangible essence, like gas: helium, ether. I am malleable, tractable, full-pliant flesh. I am vodka inebriate, absence of pain. Of place. Of time. Of tactility. *If I can't feel my body does that mean I'm gone? Because now, on this train, the only parts of me I can feel are the parts touching you.* warmth on my leg. head on my shoulder. lips on my throat. You made

my boobs too big, I tell you. And my hair too long. (*See how it smothers me?*) You tuck me inside your back pocket, and laugh.

2.

At Dundalk, you talk to a stranger, in Irish, so I can't understand you. You talk about the weather, perhaps, the price of good farmland, or the meaning of life. I listen, for a moment, to language unfettered by meaning, words without reference, free phonemes, falling down from your mouth. I tap out the cadence of your voice on my belly; articulate drumbeats, sound without sense. If I lose the tempo, even for a second, it is all cacophony. Suddenly, Babel divides us, like countries. How did you slip over the border so quickly? Strangeness drips down from your tongue, spreads out over my body like cold floes of ice. I am flattened, I am fractured, by this torrent of words. This thunder of indistinct words that flies out from your discourse like carnage. I am alone on a train, bound for everywhere, spinning through space. You, having drawn me, now draw the line. You vanish before me: even in fiction, a person can only be present in one world at a time. *Céard air a bhfuil tú ag smaoineamh anois?* you ask me. Are you going to kiss me? Or not?

The sign at the crossroads says Carrickmacross. This sounds dramatic, suggestive, romantic. I relish its texture, roll it like stones in my mouth, on my tongue: (*Carry my cross, will you carry my cross?*) Side by side, we eat cheese and tomato sandwiches, drink hot tea from a thermos your mother insisted we bring. (Funny, I had never before thought of you having a mother). I watch you now, chewing, slow toothy ruptures in soft juice-soaked bread. You are a paradigm of wonder, self-possession itself. You are not bothered at all by the red seedy juice dribbling down over your chin. Neither

am I, for that matter. As for myself, I am afraid to chew, in case unseemly squelching noises escape my indiscreet mouth. I swallow small wedges of tomato, whole. They slide down my gullet like pride.

You sketch a new version of me on the empty paper bag, around a wet tomato stain, which you use for my mouth. You ball up the paper bag and inflate it with leftover bread crusts, tie a string at the bottom to stand for a neck. You add brown lipstick eyebrows, an oversized dimple, plant your chewed gum where my nose ought to be. You fashion a paper doll's body, and mount the stuffed head with a broken off matchstick. *See?* you ask, pointing at each trick in turn. These are your knobby knees. Your elbows. Your ten stubby fingers. You set me helplessly atop the luggage rack, next to my backpack. You have forgotten to give me feet, or I might prefer jumping.

Two miles past Ardee you point out the water. Dundalk Bay, then Dunary Head, then Drogheda, tipping into the channel. When you come to the water, you're all the way there, you say. It's forever. I stay inert in the sun with my head on the window, miles rattling out time on my temple. Blue sea spreads before us like loneliness, beautiful and savage. What does it look like? you ask me. Like glass, I reply. Like cold, hard, crystalline glass. Can you see your soul in it? you ask me. Like shadows, I reply. Inchoate, slithering, indistinct shadows. Pondering this, you draw me again, ripping off paper like bed sheets. This time I shimmer, I slide off the page, a mass of fine lines, red spiral eyes. aubergine hair. lips parted slightly. waist like a pinprick. I slide off the paper, and shimmy to life. I climb up your forearm, pixie-style, dance a sultry rumba in the crook of your elbow. You pick me up by the straps of my negligee and drop me

headfirst into your shirt pocket. The wings you have drawn for me fall to the ground; when I lift them, I notice they are exactly the size of my thumbnails.

Balbriggan

This is where one train stops, and another is boarded. The problem with the first train is, you have filled up our berth with your drawings, and now they will not let us sleep. The other passengers were starting to complain about the noise, all that rustling paper, not to mention the soft screams floating up from the folds in your clothing. You brought them to life, all of them, with your heartbeat. And now, ungrateful brutes, they stand jeering and calling you names. Their mutiny astounds you; you were unprepared, couldn't see it coming. I, on the other hand, knew they would stoop to it sooner or later. One-dimensional as they are.

Some have disrobed, and dance nude in the sunlight, carelessly trampling their delicate garments to bits. You gave them the gauzy sheaths of piano lounge singers with small cloven crotches like upside down V's. They seem to be multiplying, fanning out like accordions, joined by the shoulder, dancing the can-can in unruly ranks. They thumb their noses at you, and pelt you with bread crusts. One topples over onto the toe of your boot, and the weight of her breasts anchors her there, despite the furious kicking of her spindle-thin legs. The tiny bare feet batter the air, your toes, the pavement. She pulls herself, inch by tenuous inch. She lies spread-eagled over your instep, grabs hold of your ankle with both hands and bites. You kick her off, howling, and she sails up over the roof of the stationhouse, soft pink dot in the sunlight, arcing triumphantly into the sky. Another sneaks up behind you, taps you gently on the back of your knee. You turn, just in time to see her pucker, suck air, draw in great glorious gasps. She grows larger,

ballooning, she hovers in air. You reach out to her, flat hands poised in a threatening embrace, but she is quicker, she rises, as easy as breath. Her body expands, she grows loose folds of skin which propel her like sails; she flits this way, and that, while you slap at your head to dislodge her tiny slippered feet from your hair. From a distance, we can see that she looks like an angel, her wide Kleenex wings flapping strong in the breeze. She holds herself steady in front of your face, unfragile, defiant. The two pale nipples are aimed straight at your eyes, the breasts are enormous, but airy and light as feathers. Astonished, the others refrain from their dancing, and their hundred tiny voices are hushed by the hum of her rippling wings. We stand, the entire unmoving throng of us, and gape up at her, hanging there in the heavens, a vision of light.

And she sings! But by now we are all singing, all of us. A multitude of joyful voices. We gather together in concentric circles under the place where she hangs, so solemn in air, and we lift up our voices to strengthen her there. *And don't be afraid, lover, don't be alarmed. Only listen, just listen, to hear our true song.* It is clear, by now, that a sacrifice must be made, and someone (the sandwich bag doll, with her head hanging low) hands our angel a match. She strikes it on air, and we witness the blaze clearly before she applies it to her own hair. She sizzles eerily for a moment, and then her body explodes in ethereal fire: she proffers a burning hand, and, one by one, we take it. You watch the last one leave the earth, the last hand grasping onto the light chain of being, the kite tail of lovers that lifts from the earth. As I float away, over your head, as I breach the reedy tendrils of afternoon cloud, as I spin softly out into the heavens, you look up, downhearted. You are unearthly sad, you are crying, you reach out your hands. There's no need, really: I'm just as human as you.

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to navigate the ebbs and eddies of the summer's seaside crowds. It was the sort of trip Hazel had always cherished most, a kind of active reticence, requiring only the simple, gracious acts of walking and watching to reveal a host of rare and unexpected things: a goat being led on a harness through the streets of a city, or a child spinning tops in traditional dress. A trip like this could sustain her for ages, granting, perhaps, one bright memory on every newly-minted day. In Hazel's opinion, it was a lot to give up.

Of course, it won't be entirely new; she has been to Gibraltar before. This was a few years ago, three to be exact, when Robert had come down here on assignment. He'd been doing a series on modern warfare for the *Globe and Mail*, where he had a weekly column. A nuclear submarine, with a crew of one hundred and thirty, had been stranded off the coast. There was a leak in its coolant system, and the British navy intended to repair it in the docks, in order to prove to objectors that nuclear submarines were safe. Of course, the Spaniards didn't think it was safe; there were demonstrations every day at the quay, by people who wanted that submarine out – out of Gibraltar, out of the Mediterranean – out of the world. At the very least they wanted the submarine taken back to England, where it would only blow up the British, and not their own brown-eyed, silky-skinned children.

Robert heard about all of this from a navy buddy of his. He wanted to do a story about it, so down they had come, taking a night flight from Toronto to London and then on to Gibraltar, so that Hazel supposed it was really over they had come and not down at all, though the weather had certainly been better. Hazel wasn't working then; she'd given up teaching the summer before, so it was easy to take off like that, hop on a plane, spend a few days in the sun. She pattered around town, visiting shops and taking excursions on

her own, while Robert stalked around the quay, watching the protests and angling for a tour of the sub. At breakfast each day, he made notes about what he had seen in the crowds, pushing and shoving mostly, a few blackened eyes and battered heads. He tossed photographs on the table between them, angry shots of contorted faces, placard-waving pacifists, the submarine a shadow in the background. "Spaniards snub sub," he said, trying out headlines. "Brits promise leak can be easily tweaked." She'd found it unsettling, this persistent attention to the only unpleasantness for miles. She was glad when he went off for the day with his pictures in a briefcase under his arm. She stayed away from the seaport, and when anyone mentioned the submarine or the protestors or the dangers of nuclear power to her, she rolled her eyes and tried to focus her mind on something else: the sunrise, the seagulls, the surf. She hoped that Robert would get his wish for a tour, so that they could stop talking about submarines and start doing something more pleasant, seeing the sights or sitting out together on the beach, in those short padded chairs they had there.

When Robert did get on board, it was with a group of insurance salesmen who'd been staying in their hotel for a conference. The submarine's captain had been invited to give a motivational speech at this conference, all about ways to egg on the troupes; Hazel supposed a lot of egging on would be required, in insurance sales and submarining, both. Robert had been invited to join them, and so had Hazel, who politely declined. There could be health risks involved, she thought; the protesters seemed to think so, anyway, and she was not willing to take the chance. Robert had gone, and that had been enough; he'd written all about it in his column when they got home: the narrow passageways and the escape hatch; the miserly bunks, slept in by mariners in rotating shifts, with their tiny

hidden compartments for personal things. On the plane back to Toronto, there'd been more photographs: complex-looking radar screens and cramped compartments filled with nervous, smiling boys. He hadn't been allowed in the engine room, his one regret. No colonials allowed, they'd told him; he'd taken that as a snub.

Months later, after the snow had fallen and Robert had given up writing altogether, they'd heard the news. The Spaniards were protesting again; the leak was more serious than anyone had thought, people were starting to worry. Hazel looked over at Robert, at the side of his face which was a pale, rippling blue in the light from the television screen and unshaved, so that he looked like an invalid or worse – one of those old, smoking soldiers in a hospital in Bosnia or some other war-torn place. He was not, though. He was as healthy as a horse. She thought he was.

It made Hazel wonder: if he had been allowed into the engine room, would he be contaminated, now? Would she? Surely that kind of thing could be passed on through bodily fluids. She imagined Robert's sperm floating radiant inside her like jellyfish, electric blue and pulsing. She had felt in that instant a rising panic, a thrill passed through her like a current; she imagined mourning, herself in dramatic poses, draped over a coffin, sobbing in black. She couldn't actually imagine her own death, that was beyond the pale, but in an ungrounded moment she could easily imagine Robert's. She saw him as an intrepid explorer, a casualty of exotic unrest. She herself would be the aggrieved party; she would sit frostily beside the British prime minister in her sleek black suit, flashbulbs going off all around, staking her claim for justice.

“Listen to what I dreamt last night,” she said in the morning, flushed and expectant. When she told him, Robert let her know he was offended. He said he found it insulting to hear she’d had a dream like that. Especially considering the glamorous clothes and the flashy interviews she’d been giving. “It’s a bit rich, Hazel, all things considered. I don’t mind saying I’m a little hurt. What does it say about me, is what I’d like to know.” Hazel didn’t know what it said about him. She had a hard enough time trying to decide what it said about her.

A year and a half later, when Robert started complaining of chest pains, she felt guilty about that dream all over again. In some ways, she believed that his illness had begun on that night, and that somehow her faithlessness had caused it. His heart had attacked him – this is how she thinks of it. Sleeping beside her, he had picked up electrical signals from her brain, like an enemy dispatch. Then, the malignant pulsing, the heart like a conquered general in the chest, issuing orders, implementing strategic blockades. Self-sabotage – the final desperate act of a desperate organ. She knows what a heart attack is, of course; the doctor explained all of that to her. But this is how she thinks of it.

Hazel doesn’t think Gibraltar has changed much in three years. Not like some places at home, which seem to slip loose from their old faces every few months or so, new shops springing up here and there, blind alleys turned into crescents with their small boxes of houses blinking out from curving rows. Here the past rolls visibly into the streets; the old men leaning against taxi cabs at the airport are the same old men who were here before and who got from Robert a too-generous tip; their fingers are stained with tobacco in the same degree and their voices lay flat against their chins with the same

bored contempt. The Rock, if anything, looks bigger and more solid than she remembers it, and the hotel, when she came to it, was met by the same flight of winding, dilapidated steps leading down to the beach. She looked at those steps as she passed them and she felt a strange and not unpleasant familiarity with them, as though she'd known them all her life. At the same time, they seemed to her completely foreign; she couldn't imagine herself and Robert passing down them on their way to the beach or the road into town, though of course they must have done those things, many times.

For the first three days, she allows herself to sit quietly on a tooled iron chair on their balcony; she is mourning after all – a certain degree of melancholy is permitted, even expected. She gets up out of bed and wraps herself in one of the bleach-scented robes she's found hanging in the wardrobe. Her suitcase, intact except for her wash bag and a worn cotton nightgown, lies open on the valence, like a blind satin mouth. The nightgown was purchased years before, in Athens; it was intended, at the time, to be romantic. The romance she means is not the erotic kind, not the wine-induced fumbings of younger couples anxious to add exotic sights and sounds to their love-making, and definitely not the peep show variety, all pale, exposed nipples and removable panels. This particular nightgown is more romance with a capital R, the kind available in a certain variety of drug store novel, or after twenty-odd years of marriage. It is a slow and patient kind of romance, the kind that appreciates the added comfort a layer of good quality cotton can provide, that appreciates, too, the ankle-skimming length of the thing, so full of suggestion and rounded bodily shapes. It is a nightgown that allows for fantasy, that makes allowances in general, for sagging flesh or flagging passion, whatever is necessary.

Already, the nightgown has taken on a new smell – not the homely smell of her everyday self, the soda-based powder her doctor has recommended for feminine hygiene (talcum powder causes cancer, they say these days), laundry detergent, soap – but a sun-baked, unfamiliar smell of sea salt and sulphur and bleach. The bleach is from the robe, and also the sheets, which are stripped each day and replaced by newer, stiffer sheets, with a parboiled, chemical odour and a coarse rawness suggestive of scrubbing. The hotel must be expecting sex to go on between these sheets, Hazel thinks, or else they are protecting themselves against vermin. Either way, it takes her two days before she can relax under the heavy rigidity of those sheets, before she can kick out their hospital corners and curl herself into their fragrant and functional heft. Her own smell, her personal one unmixed with the scent of Robert's skin and hair and after-shave, is foreign to her; it is a weakened smell, powerless to combat on its own the invading strangeness of the bedding and the room around her. At night, she listens to her own breathing and she feels that she is a stranger to herself; it has been thirty years since she has noticed her own sleeping sounds: the smooth, even intakes of breath, the muffled release, unvarying, private.

Strange, too, is the absence of Robert – not the absence of his actual body, which Hazel herself has seen buried, but of its practical accoutrements, the small daily proofs of his existence, concurrent to hers. The kind of thing she might pick up in her hands – a wallet, a razor, a sock. The kind of thing she might, in their earlier married life, have moved, or tidied up, or put away. Later, it was Robert who'd taken charge of the organizing, who'd learned to manage the detritus of their lives, the small scraps of paper, forms and receipts and correspondence and faxes, things Hazel meant eventually to file,

or dispose of, or read. Twist ties, batteries and coupons shoved untidily into drawers, crowding out the things that were meant to go in them, and impossible to find when you wanted them. To cure her of this habit, Robert had purchased a collection of baskets, into which he had routinely swept the paper sea that accumulated around them, the reams of crunched and folded tickets, notes and bills. He placed the baskets in logical rows on the shelves of the closet, not the closet in their bedroom, but another one, a utility closet, below the stairs. There, he'd said, when everything was neatly stored and out of sight. Much better. Now she would like him to sweep this absence from around her, to halt, in his efficient way, its spread across her life. She does not try to do this herself. Instead, she writes about it in her journal, adds a jaunty footnote, scrawled in purple ink. *Isn't this just like Robert? He was never one to clutter up the place!*

Hazel's feet are beginning to swell. It was a longer walk than she expected, from the hotel into town; most of it was uphill and then of course she's worn her new sandals, a mistake. The crowds are getting thicker, too. Couples are strolling hand-in-hand through the streets, mothers are pulling uniformed children in rag-tag groups home from school. It is getting harder and harder to appreciate the cobblestone with all these people around. Hazel finds a clean-looking bench just past the Alameda Gardens and sits down. From her bag, she extracts her journal, a new one purchased at the airport in London, with a picture of Big Ben on the front and double-decker buses running up and down the spine. She could write a little something about the gardens, with their luxurious palms and their carefully manicured blooms – that would be satisfying to read later. She begins: *In the*

cooling shade of a Canary Island Palm, clusters of daisies gaze cheerfully up at the sun.

She stops. Robert would have laughed at that, if he were here.

Across the street, a man is walking back and forth along the sidewalk, carrying a clipboard; now and then he glances around him, then looks back at his clipboard, making mysterious markings there with a pencil. Is he lost, Hazel wonders? But no, he must be a local; he's got that swarthy skin and the loose, upright walk of someone familiar with the landscape. A van is parked behind him, facing the garden; its door is open and two tourists, a husband and wife in twill walking shorts and matching Tilly hats, hang out of it, fanning their faces with folded brochures. He's a tour organizer then; he'll drive that van to the top of the rock and charge those people fifteen pounds each to do what they could do in the cable car for five. The Great Siege Tunnels, St. Michael's Cave; after that the Moorish castle and at the very top the Barbary apes, combing each other for lice. Hazel saw all of these things the last time she was here; the caves were something to see, all right, she has a nice entry in her journal about those, but the Moorish castle was no better than Casa Loma in Toronto, just a damp stone shell done up with a few Turkish rugs and bits of armour here and there – and the apes were the filthiest creatures she'd ever seen, hunched there by the roadside covered in dust and exhaust fumes, begging for scraps from the tourists. She'll give that a miss this time, she thinks, though perhaps it would be nice anyway to go up on the cable car to see the view. There is a stunning view of the sea from up there, sparkling blue and dotted here and there with military vessels, arranged in complex patterns over the bay.

Now the man across the street has spotted her; he's walking towards her, drumming his clipboard in anticipation. Another sucker. Hazel starts shaking her head before he

reaches her; she smiles weakly and points to her feet, shrugging helplessly: so tender, you see? So tired. The man returns her smile, opening his arms and tilting his head to the side as though to indicate his sympathy; yes, he seems to say, I see that you are suffering, but how better to restore yourself, how better to enjoy this perfect Mediterranean sunshine, than a leisurely drive up the mountain on a beautiful day? And he does say this, or something like it, pressing into Hazel's hand a colour brochure, printed in English rife with spelling errors, but preoccupied anyway with a series of location photographs, each crowding the other against a sea of shining blue. There is no point arguing; Hazel in her weakened emotional state is no match for him, he makes his living this way and besides, he has such a lovely smile, so friendly, so calm. "I'm waiting for someone," she interjects, an old excuse, used on sailors and other solicitous men in the days when such men might have been a threat to Hazel, in the early years of her marriage, or even before. This remark appears to go unnoticed.

For a moment, she considers calling for help; perhaps this man is a threat after all, perhaps he intends to kidnap her. His plan may be to drive her, along with the Tilly-hatted couple in the van, to some isolated mountain location, where he will search them for cash and credit cards and then leave them for dead. Hazel has heard about this sort of thing happening in other countries, even in Spain, which after all is just across the border. The Tilly-hatted couple could even be in on the trick, as tourist-bait. They could have weapons concealed in their shorts, handguns or cattle prods. They could be part of an international regime.

But the man only smiles at her, and holds up his hand in a conciliatory way. "But of course," he says at last. "Of course, we will wait – for your friend." He says this in a

heavily accented English, with an ironic emphasis on the word '*friend*' as though – quite rightly, Hazel thinks, he has imagined a ghost.

Reluctantly, Hazel gives up her bench and allows the man to lead her carefully across the street to the van, where she is introduced to the Tilly-hatted couple (Marge and Fred, from Rockport, Illinois) and ushered tenderly inside. She sits in the very back seat, which has been covered in a rough Turkish blanket that sticks unpleasantly to the backs of her thighs. Outside the window of the van, the sun shines weakly through the heavy trees of the Alameda Gardens, and rows and rows of heliotrope glow purple in the shade. In the distance, the cable car is beginning to rise on its taut, thin wire into the lowest bank of clouds. It seems an impossibly long way away.

In the driver's seat, the man with the clipboard scratches his head. "Your friend, he will be coming soon?" he asks, turning in his seat so that he can see Hazel in the very back of the van. Marge and Fred turn to look at her too. A feeling of unreality comes over Hazel when they do this, and for a moment she strains her neck this way and that towards the window as though she is expecting at any moment to see Robert come whistling out of a shop, with a small plastic bag swinging from his wrist, perhaps, or with batteries for his camera or a candy bar to eat. Then she has to face the man – what else can she do? – and tell him that her friend will not, after all, be coming. He doesn't look at all surprised, and for this Hazel momentarily hates him.

The man gets out and closes the sliding passenger door, and they are locked in. Then he eases himself into the driver's seat again, presses a button to start the air conditioning, and moves the elbow of his gear shift down until the engine thrums to life. "Normally we need four people to do a tour," he says affably, "but this is my last trip of the day. I will

take you first to the Great Siege Tunnels, then to St. Michael's Cave, the Moorish Castle and then we see the apes. The Barbary Apes." He turns again to Hazel. "You know what they say about the Barbary Apes? When the apes are gone from Gibraltar, the British will also be gone. So the British take very good care of the apes." He laughs, a silvery old man's laugh, though he couldn't be much more than thirty-five. Hazel herself is sixty-three.

They coast in the van across the docklands and up the mountain road, with the air conditioning on and the windows open anyway to let in the sea air. All the time they are driving the man with the clipboard is talking, telling them his name, which is Bruno, and giving them besides this a brief national history, beginning with the Arab invasion in the eighth century, continuing on through an unexpected attack by the Spanish in 1309, followed by a rapid succession of Moorish attacks and counter-attacks, and ending triumphantly with the Spanish Succession, Admiral Rooke in his noblest moments, and finally, finally, the Treaty of Utrecht. All of this is delivered in a cheerful monotone and punctuated by brief asides about the incompetence of the government, his mother's home cooking, the arrogance of the Spanish and the stupidity of this summer's tourists. "Not you, though. Not you, of course!" How expertly he has done this, tucked them neatly inside his invisible circle! Marge and Fred are laughing, clapping their hands upon their knees, emboldened now to ask questions, even political ones: What do Gibraltarians really *want*? Do they really hate Spain? They are no longer tourists, with their knee socks and their German-made shoes and their smell of hotel sheets, no. They have been befriended by a local, a charming, knowledgeable local who has seen fit to drive them up the mountain in his charming, local car. He might have performed this ritual five times

today already, but it makes no difference; they are grateful for it. In her head, Hazel starts to compose the entry she will write in her journal later, mentioning the van with its picturesque blankets and Bruno, with his jet black hair and his quick, fox-like laugh.

At the Great Siege Tunnels, Bruno gives them each a ticket, ripped in half, and tells them he'll be waiting for them in the van. "We stay here, ten minutes, fifteen minutes, then we go," he says, smiling broadly. They nod, and smile, and then they shuffle away, Hazel walking quickly in front, Marge and Fred slower, limping along behind. Hazel waits for them at the entrance; she feels obliged to, since it is just the three of them. She would have preferred not to. Though they are not much older than she is – five or six years at the most – they have a depressing look about them, a look of helpless, ageless collapse. They are both as veined and waxy as parsnips, with thick, yellow skin and the same sexless, rounded shape, everything merging together to meet in the mid-section. Hazel finds it odd to think that Marge and Fred are plodding along behind her, while Robert, who played squash every day of his adult life, who jogged and ate tofu and took care of his teeth – who'd been out *dancing* the night before he died, for goodness' sake – was not. There is something improper about this; it seems to Hazel patently unfair, and it fills her with an impenetrable grief.

"Do you have any children?" she asks as they move together through the door, and Marge says yes, they do: two are alive and one is dead. The one who is dead was a river rapids guide in San Salvador; he died while leading a group of Americans up a frothing river in spring. Hazel is amazed by this information; she cannot fathom it, that a couple so old and veined could have a son who made his living, and his death, in this way. To

put them more at ease, she tells them about Robert, how she'd come home one day to find an ambulance in the driveway, Jonah in tears, their neighbours horrified on the lawn, and the sleekly flattened plane in the rug where Robert had lain. She talks on and on; she babbles, in fact. Why does she do this? She doesn't know. Afterwards, she would like to take it back.

In return, they share with Hazel a photograph of their son, a broad-faced blonde with ruddy cheeks and almost transparent blue eyes. More than two hundred people attended his funeral, Fred says; some even flew in from San Salvador. There is a fateful pride in his voice, as he tells her this, a careful totting up; also, there is a challenge – can Hazel match it? Hazel has no picture, she has no statistics. She has no idea how many people attended Robert's funeral. It disconcerts her at first to think of a funeral in this way, as a kind of intimate accountancy. Who loves whom, and why, and how much? It's obscene, and it's also deceptive. Hazel knows very well that presence doesn't always equal love. She feels an unbidden urge to defend herself, though of course she does not. The thing about funerals, says Fred, is that they keep you so busy – all those relatives and friends and special, laughing remembrances. The trick is in keeping yourself going afterwards, when everyone has gone home and things quiet down again. That's when it hits you, he says. That's when it's hardest.

Hazel knows this is true. In her own house, shadows seemed longer after Robert's funeral was past. She does not like to think about this fact, or the fact of its waiting for her, still alive, at home.

Inside the tunnel, the air is light and cool. Hazel steps briskly along the pathway, leaving Fred and Marge to explore on their own. They are still close to the entrance,

stopping at each plaque to read with great care the information written there, even taking a photograph of each one, with their ancient camera. The strap on this camera is cracked and peeling, as though it has hung for a long time in an attic, or under the stairs. Hazel hasn't stopped to read the inscriptions, she is not terribly interested in history. At least, she is not interested in dates and places, the kind of fact you can memorize and hang on a wall. What does interest her is something she sees by accident, a small rock, flat and smooth on top, tucked in behind one of the floodlights at a place where two tunnels merge. The floodlight has been placed behind a barrier, but the rock is just visible, if you bend down at a certain angle, which Hazel has done to examine a piece of mining equipment left on display. A small white cross has been painted on the top of this rock, like the kind of thing you see at the side of the road when someone has died in a car crash. Hazel imagines that it was painted years ago, since it is barely visible now, just a chalky outline, really: if she hadn't seen it up close she might not have noticed it at all. Hazel knows that the men who tunnelled through this rock were almost overcome by fumes—that is why they opened the vent that became, finally, the vantage point for the guns that won the war. But she hasn't heard of anyone dying here. The thought of a death – or the possibility of one – gives the tunnel a harsher reality, something darker, more sinister, but also more true. Hazel can see, now, the way the tunnel must have looked without its cheerful haze of electric lights, she can sense the gravity of its original impulse, the crisis that must have hung in a palpable curtain on the other side of this rock. There is a feeling here, the kind of feeling Hazel believes must have existed in bomb shelters during the war, of contained gaiety, coiled and taut. When they got to the sea wall (would they have known when they were getting close?), the workmen must have

fallen silent; they must have had the sensation of imminent danger, exposure: a familiar rushing paroxysm between the legs.

To be that close to death, yet still be alive! How would that have felt? Hazel imagines frivolity, a coarse and unwavering humour, a kind of invigorating looseness. At the same moment, and for no particular reason, the idea of that tunnel merges perfectly with the image of her own house (her very own now), off Kew Street in London, which she thinks has the same snug sense of security, the same sense of something held off. She thinks of the delphinium she has planted around the porch and the way she has grown, since Robert's death, to leave her dishes in the sink after dinner, the single plate and the cup, on which she has eaten nothing but toast and an orange, perhaps, a small but nourishing meal, for one. She feels something like a vein reopening in her body, an ebbing, or thawing, of something frozen, and when she sees her own reflection in a signboard, she smiles back at it with such calm and momentary radiance that she surprises herself.

Further on down the tunnel, she hears Marge's voice, strangely familiar among all these tourists; she is pointing out to Fred a tiny plaque on which is stencilled the exact size and shape of the original passage, the one they dug with picks and axes before the machines were built to enlarge it. "Eight foot square," she is saying, loudly. "Well, that doesn't seem so big, does it?" Fred answers, a glottal, wordless sound, and stoops to tie his shoe lace. Hazel feels momentarily annoyed to be stuck with them; it is like traveling with your own aging parents, so long wrapped in their own stale customs as to be unable to penetrate, in any real or appreciative way, the world beyond themselves. Hazel goes

back -- what else can she do? -- and guides Marge by the elbow gently towards the exit. All the way there, Marge talks, or babbles, about the tunnels, giving dates, names, small, severed facts. It's as though she hasn't talked to anyone in weeks, months; she stumbles over words, gulps air, begins again. She pats Hazel's arm, and leans toward her as though they are schoolgirls, the soft sprays of her hair brushing the skin on Hazel's arm. She has a damply pointed chin and thin white sideburns, and as she talks she puts one arm snugly around Hazel's waist, holding her there like an aunt or a grandmother. Hazel is uncomfortable; she is close enough to smell Marge's breakfast on her breath -- strong tea and eggs, an unpleasant, sulphuric smell.

"I think we've been here too long already," she says mildly, conspiratorially, as though they are three daring children on the verge of disaster. This is a part she plays, a familiar part, which has come along with her from childhood, from the books she read then, Nancy Drew and the Bobbsey Twins, with Jessie and Violet keeping up with the boys. She used to tear the pages out as she read them, as though erasing a trail of incriminating evidence; she had it in her mind that there was some threat to the heroines of these stories, and it was up to her to protect them, to shield their moon-lit excursions from other, prying eyes. She read these novels with something like awe, for their characters' calm cool-headedness, their compassion and intelligence, and also for their vast expertise, which Hazel herself feared she would never possess. She could use the voice though; it was a kind of game she played, to shore herself up. Even later, with her first few classes at the school, or when she needed to return something in a department store or complain about her food in a restaurant, she used this voice -- a chummy, mysterious, quick-witted voice, with nothing like her usual note of quiet apprehension.

She used it on Robert too, and he had responded by taking her two hands in his and holding them under his chin, a charming, boyish gesture. Once, on a car trip to Goderich, she'd used this voice while map-reading, to cover up her nervousness. When they'd ended up in the right place at the right time, Robert had issued a bark of happy surprise, as though she had pulled off a stunt of some kind, as though she were an astonishing joke.

Now she uses the voice with Marge and Fred, and the sound of it oppresses her. Hearing herself, Hazel thinks that this is another thing she will have to change, now that Robert is gone. She can no longer pull it off, despite her trimness, her scrubbed, youthful looks. A voice like that on a woman calls for a man, old-fashioned gallantry, a broad chest to touch, coyly, with your fingertips. All of this has been lost to her, a great amount.

Back in the van, Marge and Fred discuss their next stop, St. Michael's Cave. Concerts are held in this cave, Hazel remembers, rock concerts and orchestral movements, music resounding from age-old rock. Also, weddings. Hazel thinks it would be strange to be married in a place like that, surrounded in the dark by all that cold, dripping stone. You'd have to be a very gloomy sort of person to get married in a cave, that small, dark amphitheatre with its dwindling, murky lights. She says something like this, out loud.

"Fred and I got married in a field," says Marge. "That's true. We'd planned on it being in a church, but the church burned down the Friday night. We had it on the Saturday, in the field there just beyond where the church had been. When I think of our wedding day, I always remember the smell of wood smoke."

They are in line again, standing heel to toe with a crowd of other strangers, waiting for their turn to enter the cave. Fred says, "We could get married again, Marge. We could get married here in the cave, make a day of it." He is smiling, but his voice is tense and hard, with an echo of something nasty in it, like a bat flying overhead. There is the sense that this is a conversation they have had many times before. Fred looks down at his camera, fiddling with the fastener on the strap there. The back of his neck turns pink and mottled, but only for a moment; by the time they enter the caves the colour is gone. Inside, all their faces are dark and vague, as though they are made out of stone. Hazel takes a picture of Marge and Fred beside a fallen stalactite, and he puts his hand on the small of Marge's back, resting it firmly there, so that Hazel has the brief impression that he intends to give her a push, tumbling her from the small outcropping of rock on which they stand. He doesn't, though; they smile for their picture and then the hand is removed, sliding from Marge's back to her elbow, finding a steadying grip there, a courteous, husbandly grip.

The warning that has bloomed on Hazel's lips leaks away. She is dreaming, she thinks. The jet-lag, or her own bereavement, has unbalanced her. Later, she takes another picture of them, beside the plaster casting of a skull that has been found in the cave, a man's skull that has been set into a column of marble in the centre of the room, with dates and archaeological facts carved in around it. Hazel takes one on her own camera too, a digital one, and they laugh when they see it on the tiny screen, because Marge and Fred look so scared and nervous standing there beside the skull, with their tight self-conscious smiles.

“You know, I got married in a field myself,” Hazel tells them, as they settle again in the van. “I did. Only mine was on purpose. I mean, we planned to get married there. That’s what we wanted.” Fred gives her a look of purposeful disdain. “How do you mean?”

“Well,” says Hazel, “actually I didn’t want to at all. Get married in the field, I mean. It wasn’t a field, really, it was more like a meadow, a big meadow in the park. Robert, that was my husband, he thought it would be romantic; he was very big on nature then. He wanted me to come up the river in one of those pedal boats – you could rent them out in that park – and arrive at the ceremony like that, with bare feet under my wedding dress so I could wade out onto the shore. That didn’t happen though. I practised it one day, when Robert was at work. I decided it wasn’t very graceful, for a wedding.”

“Well,” says Marge. “That I can appreciate. I can certainly appreciate that.”

Hazel looks out the window. An expanse of sea opens up beneath her, as though she could open the window and drop out of it, straight down into the water. “I felt bad about it later. I mean, it was such a little thing, that he wanted. It wouldn’t have hurt. He would have been so pleased.”

Fred grunts and they shift in their seats as the van skitters in the road; Bruno has had to brake suddenly: what for? “Ah, little monkey,” he says, with great affection, and now they see what it is: a small Barbary ape, just a baby, really, all alone on the wide expanse of road. No other ape is nearby, no mother or caring adult, no small friend with whom he might have scampered off. “He has come away from his home,” says Bruno, smiling. “Little Macaca, where are you going?” He produces a small paper bag of nuts and leans out the window to pass one to the little ape. The nut is accepted, chewed, and then a noise

of claws and teeth is heard as the ape scrambles up onto the side of the van, perching on the side-view mirror there. Bruno dips his hand in under the ape's front paws, scoops him up into the air. "Go on home, little monkey. Here is not safe for you, your mama is waiting." The ape leaps up from Bruno's wrist, seems to hang for a moment in mid-air, chattering with indignation. Then it scampers away into the scraggly underbrush, its bob-tail flashing rhythmically up the slope.

Hazel is thinking about her wedding; she is imagining a different version of it, in which she does what Robert wanted – she pedals in the little boat up the gurgling river (she adds in the sound of the water, rushing along over the rocks) until she comes to the broad, arched willow tree where her friends and her family, and Robert, are gathered. (Actually, it was an elm, not broad and arched but rather thin, with a firm plume of cautious, narrow leaves). When she sees them she smiles and waves, and the sun beams down upon them with a clear, intense vigour. Robert stands in the grass with his trousers rolled up – this is Robert when he was younger, younger even than when they got married, the Robert of high school photographs, healthy and brown. He has his trousers rolled up and his shoes are off; they stand neatly to one side with the socks tucked inside them, perfectly polished and clean. She steps out of the boat – she doesn't stumble or splash as she'd feared – and feels on her own tidy feet the cool soft brush of grass. As she walks, she is listening to the minister's voice (this minister wears a long, flowing white robe, not the polyester suit which the real one, her uncle, wore), and he says clearly, "You know, that river's probably brimming with leeches."

That is her uncle's voice, and this is just the type of thing he would have said. Now Hazel looks down at her feet and she sees with distaste that they are indeed covered with

small black leeches, which bite at her flesh and leave gullies of blood on the skin there. Of course, this is the way it would have turned out; she was right all along. She opens her eyes. It was better the way it really was, with a borrowed horse and carriage in place of the boat, and small silky shoes on Hazel's feet. She tries not to picture Robert's face, which is turned to the river, expectant, serene. She tries not to picture her living room at home, with its dark, hopeful things and its smell of new wood. She faces forward as the van moves up the hill, and she tries very hard to think of nothing at all. "Seems like a pretty stupid way to do things by choice," is what Fred finally says.

Inside the Moorish castle, Bruno laughs and winks. "You Americans," he says. "Always so trusting." He has put them in the keep, and shut the gate. Now he is locking them in, to take a picture. "How do you know I will let you out?" Behind him, a guard stands rocking on his heels, chewing his gum maniacally, smiling. The guard jingles change in his pocket, lifts his shoulders up and down in the parody of a laugh. No sound escapes him.

"This part of the tower is still used as a jail, you know," says Bruno. "But you're lucky – today, no prisoners!" He winks again, steps back to take the photograph, then goes on with his spiel. "In 1999, a group of right-wing Spanish dissidents locked themselves in here, and raised the Spanish flag. That was the first time the Spanish flag has flown over Gibraltar since 1703. They were locked up in here again, afterwards. Of course, they were not very popular." Hazel stands looking through a small window cut into the stone, a perpendicular slit made for pointing a gun through, perhaps, or earlier, a crossbow. She supposes it is inevitable that these two cultures, pressed together so long

in such a small geographical space, would eventually need to chase each other out, would need to claim such fortresses for their own. Behind her, Marge and Fred are arguing over a problem with their camera: Marge has tried to reload the film and has managed to expose all their photographs, including the ones from the cave. "Jesus Christ, woman," Fred is scowling, while Bruno and Hazel smile sheepishly at each other through the bars. Hazel feels a strange sense of girlish pleasure at this shared smile; her cheeks flush, and not from embarrassment. She feels years younger, she feels the years sliding from her skin, like fish scales. She grins at Bruno and shakes her head: *Marriage*, she seems to be saying, *it's a prison*.

On the way back out of the castle, unexpectedly, Fred tumbles down. What he tumbles down is a flight of steps, the same decrepit stone steps Hazel remembers from her last visit here. He tumbles down the steps and he sits on a landing in a small pool of muddy water brought in on the boot heels of tourists, and Hazel listens as he moans. She doesn't move right away, though she can see very well that there is blood on his elbows, and it occurs to her that, as frail as he is, he may have shattered something. Marge moves more quickly, Hazel is surprised to see how quickly she can move, and she reaches Fred before anyone else – before the uniformed guard or the two American tourists who broke his fall, and long before Hazel, who stands meditatively at the top of the steps, looking down. From this height Fred looks like a startled child, with his small eyes widened and his fluttering lips. (But where has this come from, this furtive, unhelpful detachment of hers)? Fred lurches to his feet, almost falling again. "I'm okay, I'm okay," he says. He is

badly shaken, though; his voice trembles and he regards her from the landing with a queer, self-indulgent look.

"I think I might have a band-aid," says Hazel finally, searching in her bag as she descends the stairs. (Of course she has a band-aid; she has a band-aid and more in her first aid kit – she never leaves home without it).

"Why, thank you, Hazel. Marge would never think to bring band-aids," Fred says forlornly, and with a touch of aggrieved arrogance. He doesn't seem to notice at all the effect these words have on Hazel, making her press down remorselessly as she applies disinfectant to his wounds, jolting her out of her meditative mood and making her want to laugh in his face. The skin on Fred's nose is peeling and red; his legs are shaking slightly and his hand, as Hazel ministers to him, clutches damply, pathetically at her arm. There is a grasping and contemptible quality about that hand, thinks Hazel. There is something intimate and very slightly proprietorial about it, that sets Hazel's teeth on edge. There is something too, about the state of Fred's elbows, their bruised and bloodied appearance, and his shorts which have twisted themselves up in the fall, exposing a pair of withered, yellowed thighs – shanks, Hazel thinks, when she looks at them – that turns Hazel's stomach, that make her want to pull away. She applies the bandage quickly and sits back on her heels. She is glad when Bruno arrives, having heard the commotion and come to investigate.

"Well, my goodness, well done," he says in his strangely accented English, when he sees what Hazel is doing. "Such clear-headedness. Such preparedness," he says to her, with real or false admiration, who can tell? She doesn't care. She notices that Fred has recovered some of his gruff composure; he waves away Bruno's hand and lurches to his

feet, using a hand behind him to push himself up. He doesn't look again at Hazel, who disassociates herself pitilessly, who stands unaccompanied on the treacherous steps, and who feels, quite suddenly, as though she has slipped quite free of something, like a cool, clever fish.

Next Bruno helps Fred to the van, where he sits pale-faced and brooding, and Hazel goes back inside to wash the blood from her hands. She watches it ebb down the drain, this stranger's blood, and it makes her feel divided and dizzy, as though she has stepped out of her own life and into a surprising play in which she herself is the antagonist – she is the one who wishes everyone ill and goes striding away on her own. The air above the sink seems thinned and at the same time, more tremblingly present, so that she has to sit down for a minute and press her head between her knees. She is afraid she might faint, or else choke. But she does not faint. She does not choke. She gets up and splashes a little cold water on her face, and then she steps straight back into the sunshine. She walks along the edge of the cliff, looking down over the harbour, where the ships and boats of the navy are dotted like a child's toys here and there, as though abandoned in the bath. She thinks of Robert's submarine, and imagines it lurking shark-like in the depths of the water, churning slyly through the surf. It is hard to take that image seriously, now that she knows what actually happened: that the submarine was hauled by a merchant vessel back out of port, broken and reviled, a beleaguered bit of useless metal, an embarrassment to the British and an abomination to Spain. What seems most unlikely is the fervent joy with which Robert received his invitation to tour it, and the countless hours he stood on the dock, concocting its story.

On the way back down the mountain, Bruno stops to search out his little monkey.

“Macaca,” he calls out of the window, craning his neck and grinning in anticipation. “Where are you, my friend?” All along the roadway, tourists are competing for the best photo opportunities; their faces turn smilingly as Bruno rolls past, anxious to be charmed by this bit of local colour, to show themselves properly appreciative.

Hazel sits now in the passenger seat; she feels the need to escape from Marge and Fred, who have been in a decidedly foul temper since the upset on the steps. She and Bruno have developed by now a kind of friendly rapport: she has removed her sandals and sits in what she thinks of as a youthful, frog-like position, with her bare feet propped up on the dashboard of the van. Twice Bruno has called her by her name: *Haa-zell*, with a cautious finality, a rounding up of the final, swallowed syllable. It occurs to her that this is the first time anyone has called her by her Christian name since the morning Robert died, and the sound of it sends a shiver of joyful recognition down her spine. She laughs good-naturedly, and gives Bruno her most encouraging smile.

“I have been feeding him since he was born,” Bruno is explaining, his voice brimming with a private emotion. “I am his – how you say – I am his *daddy*.” He laughs broadly – a hearty belly laugh.

Behind them, Fred gives a kind of muffled grunt, which Bruno interprets as a sign of fear. “Do not worry,” he says. “You are quite safe.” He waves one hand at the cliff which drops away to their left, where small troupes of apes are romping playfully. “Even as a boy I drove vans here. My whole life, I drive,” he explains.

Hazel understands that Fred’s grunt is something different: it is intended to convey scorn, perhaps even disgust, for what he considers Bruno’s softness, this business about

the ape. She can imagine how Robert, too, would have scoffed to hear a grown man speaking in that way – there would have been an affirmation mixed with ridicule, in Robert's case, a casual flicker of humour and annoyance perfectly combined. Or perhaps she is wrong. Perhaps he would only have said, not unkindly, not even impatiently, "Is that right, now?"

She herself is moved – she admits that she is – by the fondness of Bruno's smile, and by the hesitant, lovesick way he calls out for the ape, as though half expecting it to have flown off, escaped down the side of the mountain, forsaken him. "Heartless monkey!" Bruno is saying now. "Every day he meets me here. Always he comes." He tosses a cashew onto the hood of the van and cranes his neck again, clicking his tongue and searching in vain for a sign of the bobbing white tail. Other apes hunker down and attack on all sides, their sharp nails scrabbling over the metal doors of the van until they find footholds in the windows or doors, but these he ignores.

"Oh, my!" says Marge in the back. "They don't smell very good, do they?"

Bruno only grins. Finally he brings the van to a stop and gets out, leaving the door ajar.

"How the hell do you like that?" Fred mutters. "Where in hell does he think he's going?" He doesn't bother anymore to conceal his annoyance; his voice travels peevishly out the open door of the van, towards Bruno as he stalks away across the road. Hazel turns to glare at Marge in the back of the bus: why don't you say something, her eyes say. But she wonders: would she have said something, herself, if it were Robert who had behaved in that way? Probably she wouldn't have. Probably she would have been oblivious to any rudeness in Robert's tone, allied, as she had been, to his quirks and

desires. They would have been a pair, then, like Marge and Fred were a pair: it wouldn't have mattered what anyone else thought or wanted. Little Macaca, indeed! It would have become a kind of joke between them, one of a treasury of anecdotes that began with, 'Do you remember—', and its mutuality would have trapped them into smugness. She would have recorded it all in her journal, later, allowing herself unforgivable forays into fancy. Bruno would have become someone ridiculous, or overtly romantic, a fop. She would have done that.

Bruno is far away now; he is a dot on the horizon, but there is something in his posture – a rigidity, an outrage– that impels Hazel out of the van. She walks slowly toward him, and as she nears, she notices that his arms are outspread, that his hands are splayed and held up in the manner of stop signs, the back of his neck is crimson – with anger, she thinks at first. He shouts out in a loud, incomprehensible vernacular and gestures roughly toward the edge of the cliff.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" he shouts, and Hazel is reminded of the groomsman at her wedding, the way he bullied the old horse pulling the carriage into submission. There is another sound, too, a rasping, clamorous sound – an animal screeching, feral and fierce. Bewildered, she looks about, and then she understands. A fat young mother ape with wild eyes, a baby under her arm, its head bobbing crazily, is perched on the side of the cliff. Out of her stiffened lips comes a wordless bleat of outrage. Macaca, half-hidden in the undergrowth, is hissing and spitting. He is stalking her, this mother, for some unknown reason of his own. Suddenly, he darts up the incline, intent on the shape of the baby, and when he reaches it, he scrabbles and shrieks, biting and clawing, creating a terrible din. Hazel does not want to watch, and yet she cannot help herself; she is

mesmerized by this viciousness. All around her is a stillness she seems to have anticipated, and she is exhilarated, light-headed, astonishingly alert. Macaca charges again, he lets out another blood-curdling shriek, and Bruno, unexpectedly, eggs him on: "Good, my monkey, good!" he cries.

Enraged now, the mother lets loose the tiny infant, which tumbles on the ground, which limps away, which hides beneath a bush. Then it is Macaca who flies into her arms, but only for a second. There is fumbling and scratching, and then she has thrown him, she has flung him, away from her body and down the cliff, where he bounces sickeningly against a rock, toy-like and limp. His small body lies inert on the cliff-face; his tail twitches lifelessly; a small patch of blood darkens the stone around his head. But no, he is not dead. He rolls a little on the rock, his hind legs searching for a hold. Then he sits up, and shakes his head. He reaches up and runs a finger through the wet spot, and then he places the finger in his mouth. The mother – who is, Hazel now understands, Macaca's mother – is chattering and scolding; she turtles across to the bush where her small baby cowers, and scoops him up into her arms. Then she is gone.

Macaca wavers on the rock for a moment, alone, unrepentant, and then he too scampers away in another direction, up the face of the rock and across the street, out of their view.

"It is natural," Bruno is saying – somewhat sadly, thinks Hazel – as they walk back together to the van. "Macaca is too old now to stay with his mother; he must fend for himself. But he does not want to."

"But she might have killed him!" protests Hazel. "He could die!"

"If he dies then that is as it should be," says Bruno. "But I do not think so." He turns now to look at Hazel, who has folded her arms across her chest and shivers, despite the rising heat. "You are sad, my *Haa-zell*?" he asks her. "You do not like such displays?"

"Of course not," she says. "Poor Macaca."

"Macaca is a clever boy. His mother knows this. She knows he will learn his lesson well. He'll be okay."

Hazel must not look convinced, because he continues. "This, too, is a kind of love." He gives her a friendly little pat on the shoulder as though there is nothing more to say on the subject, and pads off ahead of her up the hill. By the time she gets to the van, he has jollied Fred out of the back seat to take a picture, and is reciting again in his peppy tour guide's voice.

"There are two theories about how the apes came to live in Gibraltar. One is that they came as pets with the British soldiers who came here. But there are no records to prove that this is so! The other is that they migrated here from Africa, through a subterranean cavern below the sea. That idea is not so far-fetched as it sounds! It is only fifteen miles across the straits to Morocco, where the only other colonies of wild Barbary Apes can be found."

A small group has gathered around him now, pairs from other buses, and braver souls who've travelled up by cable car, and are finding their own way around. "There is another mystery!" he continues, jumping up atop the rock on which Marge and Fred have just been posing. "We don't know where they have come from, and we also don't know where they die. No one has ever found the corpse of a Barbary Ape in Gibraltar." He

glances around him now, for effect. "It is just as though they are magical souls who appear out of nowhere to be with us for a while, and then vanish in the same way. So Gibraltar has not become too dependent on its apes!" He smiles broadly. "We know better than to put too much stock in ghosts, heh?"

There is a smattering of applause, and Bruno bows deeply at the waist. The crowd moves off, revealing Marge and Fred at its centre, who seem pleased to see Hazel again and even offer to take her photograph. She arranges herself on the rock from which Bruno has casually alighted, clutching her purse to her side as though it is full of personal secrets.

When she collects this photograph from the drug store back at home, she will exclaim, quietly, because she is alone in the house, at the resemblance it bears to another photograph she has taken, on another day, which she will dig out of a box at the back of her closet with unease. In it, she will distinguish the same rock, the same unending vista over the sea, the same winding road at her feet – even the same, unclouded sky. She will be clutching the same purse, her old leather travelling purse, which even years later she will still keep wrapped in tissue, because she can't bear to throw anything out. But there will be a difference, of course. In one picture, she sits alone, staring calmly out at strangers, who are reflected as though by accident, in the mirrored rounds of her sunglasses. She looks adrift in this picture, washed out but unambiguous: solid, perplexed.

In the other, she is caught in the eyes of a ghost.

She will arrange both photographs in her journal, side by side, perhaps, or at catty-corners from one another, and she will write the dates and location, her own age, in

crisp blue ink across the page. But that is all. There will be no spiralling stories, no attempt to transform the scene into anything other than it was. Her memory, her image, will be enough.