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ISBN 0 315-56110-6

Donut Shop Lovers

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

May 1989

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ABSTRACT

Donut Shop Lovers

Melissa Steele

Donut Shop Lovers is a collection of eleven unconnected stories set in various locations including Winnipeg, Montreal and vague composites of some Canadian cities and towns. Most of the characters in the stories are still young - in their late teens or pre-yuppy twenties. The stories are often written in the first person. When they are written in the third person, the narrator is usually intimate with one major character. Excepting flashbacks, in almost every story, the action occurs within a twenty-four hour period. Neither the characters nor the reader is allowed to see the effects of choices or actions over time, but the characters are always face to face with the subtle reverberations of the experience of childhood. It is as if the characters' lives are defined more by what is done to them, without their consent, understanding or even knowledge, than by their adult attempts to rationally control their situations. Because they are young, drifting casually through life is still a safe and effective strategy for most of the characters. For them, it is still possible to avoid commitment and therefore the possibility of failure. Many of the protagonists have a strong urge to lose themselves in something death-defying, usually sex. As

everyone knows, even the least analytical Steele character, it is only a matter of time before the fact of death, particularly one's own death, becomes dominant.

Epigraph

The Train between Vancouver and Hope on the Way to Montreal

Crossing a country
too young and frozen there
for words
like Will or Patriotism or Plain Repetition
to carry you "all the way"
it's not even romantic

There's nothing wrong with the country
even from the dome car
we might, with luck, see some wildlife
even in Vancouver

Blackberries turn from red to black
waiting for children who wave at trains
or some other natural phenomena

Looking out
the map is to scale--there is no key
you expect nothing
when you see her
not even out of Burnaby
framed by rainbow coloured junkyard
mountains
tupperware pail at her feet
berries spilling on nuts and bolts grass
two stained hands wave wildly
and your heart fills up with hope like steam or love or
patriotism or juice or sweetness

Her mother points at you--you're sure it's you
but your raised hand goes by
the child will not turn her head
she is waving to the train
not to you at all.

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JANE

They took Jane to the hospital for trying to get at herself, and Danny wished they'd taken him instead. The first time, Mum and Dad spent almost as much time at the hospital as Jane did. This time, Mum didn't even go with them. Dad took her in the morning and then caught his plane to Vancouver. Jane was pretty bad this time. Her arms and legs were all scabbed and smeared with blood. She picked at the scabs, making them into potholes. Danny asked her what the hell she was doing and she'd said, "I'm finding myself." She said it in such a smart-assed way that Danny knew she wasn't any more crazy than he was. But then she just drew him into another inane conversation.

"You're right here, Jane. Here with me. Your brother Danny."

"Here is where the heart is."

"That's right, you're home."

Then, "Here is where the heart is, here is where the heart is, here is where the heart is," in a flat chant, all the time picking at one great purple scab on her thigh. She stopped chanting when the scab came free and started finger painting on her shorts with the fresh blood. She drew little Xs and Os which only half came out.

That was yesterday and now Danny's mother was acting like it was something awful happening to her, not Jane. She

was circling the island in the kitchen, just walking, with her hands wrapped around her elbows and her arms folded into her chest. She wasn't a big person. Danny was fifteen and already he was a head taller than her. Usually she seemed big, though. Usually she was rushing around organizing something huge like sabbath dinner or measuring for new floor length curtains or just talking, dictating how everything was, as opposed to how everything should be. You could say she took up a lot of space for her size. But now she was holding onto herself, her shoulders bunched up like she was a homemade doll that was pinned together and still needed to be sewn up.

Danny felt at once like yelling at her to come back to earth and like touching her back where she was all drawn in, just to prove that she was really solid and strong. Back rubs make everything all right. That's what Jane had told him when he was little and afraid to go to sleep again after a nightmare. She would rub his back and usually he would sink right back into sleep. Other times, he would be too tense. It would tickle and he would half scream, half laugh, kicking wildly. Then Jane would start tickling in earnest. She really liked tickling him. "Cause and effect. I touch you, you laugh," was how she explained it. He laughed and screamed and always nearly (once did) peed his pants.

She was six years older and had lots of friends and records. They had parties in the basement; Danny wasn't allowed to go. When Jane was having friends over, Mum and Dad would be especially nice to Danny. Dad would find some treat he'd been saving, like leftover chocolate Hannukah gelt and Mum would read to him from his favorite book (which she said she hated), World's Greatest Hockey Tales. Now Danny could see that the rotten thing about having a perfect childhood is that it doesn't prepare you for how rotten things are when you're not a kid anymore.

Danny couldn't remember when exactly Jane started fading out. Gradually the friends stopped coming while Jane settled more and more into the basement. She read books like The Bell Jar and listened to the same Joni Mitchell songs over and over. He hated Joni Mitchell's too high wailing voice pouring into the kitchen from the basement stairs. Bits of her songs would lodge in his head like a stuck record. None of this made him worry about Jane though. Once when he was nine or ten, he had complained that Jane never played with him anymore. Dad said it was just adolescence and she would grow out of it. Jane seemed to grow into it rather than out of it though. Mum must have known something was strange. She would constantly suggest activities for Jane. Then Jane would produce a test or essay from school with "excellent work, Jane" marked on the

top and excuse herself downstairs. Even Mum couldn't argue with marks like that.

The first time they took Jane to the hospital was after she stopped going to school and long after they had gotten used to leaving her supper at the top of the basement stairs. She was like a refugee in a strange house with a foreign language. What was foreign was scary, so she was barricading herself in. Danny had felt a mild jealousy at the attention she was getting, but not much more. He got to spend the weekend at Lenny's and they held the World Table Hockey Championships. They used Lenny's mum's cooking timer to make the games regulation time. Lenny was Sweden, Canada and Florida and Danny was the U.S., the U.S.S.R. and Check because neither of them could spell Czechoslovakia. Lenny's little brother Dave, whom they called Dumbbell Davie, was the referee.

Danny realized how little he'd thought about Jane these last few years. She was like a well-loved security blanket; an essential part of childhood that at some unmemorable point gets tossed aside without a backward glance. If you asked him to describe her now, what she was like, what she did, what she liked, he couldn't do it.

When he was little, she was always there for him. He had been a crybaby about everything. A leftover birthday balloon would pop, and he would be in tears.

"Danny, don't be sad. It's great what happened."

"What?"

"That was a special balloon, Danny. All the air inside it was real sad, but strong too. It liked being a big red birthday party balloon for a while, but then it got to be like a trap. All the air inside was in one place while all around the balloon, everywhere really, was all kinds of other air. The balloon could fly about when you batted it, but it could never touch any of the air that wasn't inside with it. It seemed like wherever it went, it never got any closer to the air on the outside. This made it so sad that it decided to get out, no matter how."

"How did it make itself pop?"

"It just held its breath until it puffed up so big it couldn't help but pop."

Danny looked around. "So where is it now?"

"It's all around you, Danny. It's touching with the air on the outside so well that you can't even tell it apart."

Danny spread his fingers and waved his arms slowly up and down. "Is some of it touching me?"

"You and me and Mum and Dad and maybe everybody in Winnipeg soon."

Danny looked at the red rubber fragments in his hand and then to Jane for explanation.

"That part is happy too because its inside can touch its outside and it doesn't have to be all stretched out anymore. Look at how red and happy it is compared to when it was all thin and tense."

He must have been crazy then because he believed her. For the tenth time he wished it was him who was freaking out now, not Jane. He couldn't have, though. If Jane was her old self and he was going nuts, she would have known just what to say to make everything all right.

Danny watched his mum go around one more time. Usually he kidded her about wearing too much make-up. She was forty-nine, but you wouldn't know it when she "put on her face." Just a few years ago, a waitress had mistaken Jane and her mum for sisters. She wasn't made up now, and Danny wished she were. Her face didn't look old, just blank--wide open--he couldn't look at it for long.

When the phone rang, Danny practically jumped on it.

"Hi, Pritchard. How's it going?"

"Okay, Lenny. What's up?"

"There's a river party tonight and my brother says he'll sell us a quarter ounce, but you've got to put in ten bucks. Are you coming?"

"Yeah. No. Look, you're going so if I'm there, you'll know I'm coming," Danny said, instantly out of patience.

"Okay, okay. Keep your shorts on, Danny-Boy. Gee. Do what you want. So long."

Lenny had only recently started talking that way, calling him Danny-Boy or Pritchard and acting like Winnipeg's number one dope dealer. Last year, he and Lenny were known as the brain brothers or the super geeks in school, but this year, Lenny was cool. He cut classes and dressed and walked and talked cool. Danny thought it was dumb, but he caught himself walking that way too--kicking his feet out and taking long slow strides like a cartoon villain--when he was with Lenny.

Mum finally stopped pacing and slid onto the bench in the kitchen nook. She braced her elbows on the table and held her face up with her hands.

"I'm going out, Mum. You'll be all right?"

"What? Of course, honey," as though she hadn't even heard. Danny thought he would go and get stoned out of his face. On Monday he would go to school and brag like Lenny, "I had such a good time Friday night I don't even remember it."

Outside, Danny couldn't believe how easy it was to breathe. When he was little, he'd had asthma. The attacks would come on gradually so he wouldn't even notice them. His eyes would get wide and he would start to move in slow motion like a person walking under water. Mum or Jane would

notice and give him medicine from the "puffer" spray. If it worked, he would be instantly exhilarated. When breathing was so easy, it was almost as if he could get high on air. It was like that song, "you never know what you've got til it's gone." Danny was one step behind that. He never knew what he'd lost until he got it back again.

He also didn't seem to know where he was going until he got there. It was a long way from St. Vital to almost downtown, and this was the first time Danny had walked it. The hospital had a separate building for people like Jane. The Elizabeth Dafoe Building tried to look like the rest of the hospital: the same red brick, the same freshly cut and watered lawn, the same pink begonias beside the sidewalk. It managed all right, Danny thought, unless you looked closely. The outside was supposed to be cheery and healthy looking, but the inside, the silent screamers, the deluded visionaries, the rockers who did nothing but rock back and forth all day every day and Jane, all seeped through somehow. Danny had never been in. His parents had never asked him to come with them.

Jane is still sitting in the tweed armchair staring at her green thighs. Her pajamas look like what Hawkeye wears for surgery on M*A*S*H. They are supposed to be loose and comfortable, but the bandages on Jane's thighs are making the pants so tight the seams threaten to split. Her hair is

pulled back in a ponytail, and her face is too big. Jane is one of those people who have big lips that jut out too far and look permanently bruised. It makes her look like she's trying to look sensitive and serious all the time. Her eyes are wide and her pupils dilated from the medication. She senses her face spread out and around these features, like a lake around islands, in a great wide oval. It's as if her cheeks are just as open as her eyes. Danny looks at her and then looks away. The trouble is, it is all just space. Eyes, lips, nose, cheeks, chin dimple, none of it forming anything Danny can recognize. None of it is the real Jane.

"Jane?"

She looks up at him just for a second. She seems to have recognized the name, but not him.

"Hey, Jane?"

She is thinking about her face, about the bones that are trying to push through, that just have to get through, only to break up all that smooth face. If the bones can't do it, she thinks she will have to become very old. The smooth stretches of skin will shrivel up and cling to the bone underneath. The face will become one ugly tight mess of dry features, but at least it will be a manageable size. She runs her tongue gently around the inside of her cheek, knowing that if she presses, even a little bit, it will go right through and the cheek will dissolve into pure space.

Danny looks at the person where Jane was and thinks, "Whatever happened to Baby Jane?" That film is something he'd watched when he was little and he still has nightmares about it. The final image of Jane's sister lying helpless on the beach surrounded by happy oblivious sunbathers is as vivid now as it ever was. Thinking about a horror movie here, with Jane so sick, embarrasses him so he can't help smiling. The smile turns into the start of an idea. A crazy idea, but what better place for it. He feels suddenly dizzy, like he's just discovered something great. Like he's just discovered he could fly and all he needs is a good take-off point. "Just hang in there, Jane baby. I'll be right back."

He needs something to get things going. That much is clear. Magic or fuel. Maybe magic fuel. He takes the elevator up to the top floor and then changes his mind and takes it back down to the cafeteria floor. The cafeteria is still open, but it doesn't look very promising. There are a few dried out looking sandwiches, no doughnuts, and some canned drinks sitting in a puddle of water which must have started out as ice. The woman at the cash register is reading a book, a Harlequin, and doesn't even look up when Danny comes in. Danny is about to leave when he spots it. There is a yellow plastic bag on the radiator, ripped open at one end, with the word "GENERIC" written in block letters across it. It is probably empty, Danny thinks, but he picks

it up anyway and stuffs it into his pocket. It's a start. He feels like a thief, walking quickly, but not letting himself run to the washroom to examine the thing. No one seems to notice, though. He remembers that you could be dying and helpless on a beach full of people and so long as you were wearing a bathing suit, no one would even notice you. The "GENERIC" bag isn't empty after all. It has one of those surgical gloves stuck onto one side so you can put it on and peel the yellow plastic off without contaminating the glove.

Jane is still in the chair looking like nothing has changed.

"Jane, talk to me."

Her pupils swim up and actually look at him for a second before they sink back down again.

"Jane, I know how to get you out. Are you coming?"

This time she doesn't raise her head at all, but the room is tense with the effort it takes her not to do so.

"Jane, if you want to get out, you have to let me in."

"You're crazy, Danny." Her voice is slow and hazy, with no intonation, like someone talking in her sleep.

Danny wishes he could explain what they are going to do, but, as usual, he is not quite sure himself. Maybe a massage, but he is afraid to touch her, afraid she would pull away and then the chance to pull her back would be lost. If the glove is really magic, maybe if he wore

it...she's right. He is crazy. What the hell good could that do. He is starting to get mad. The beigeness of the walls, the tweed stuffiness of the chair and Jane; the room itself seems to be conspiring against him. If he and Jane could fly, they'd be able to take off from anywhere except here.

Danny is sitting on the floor now shredding the yellow plastic off the glove. They are both cross-legged, almost in the same pose. He thought something magic would happen, thought he'd come up with a master plan to get to her. Visiting hours are almost over. Danny is sure they won't ask him to leave. They'll think he is just another patient here.

Jane is still in her trance. She scratches half-heartedly at her thighs, but the bandages don't loosen. Danny finds the opening of the glove in his mouth and starts blowing. He remembers Jane's story about the balloon. Instead of remembering with that warm-sick tenderness, this time he wants to throttle her. She really pulled one over on him that time. He will blow the glove up like a balloon, until it bursts into a million pieces; until there is nothing left. He will blow it up so big that it will break this room apart before it explodes itself.

The glove is hand-size now, but no amount of blowing will make it any bigger. Danny's shortness of breath is

increasing with his anger until finally she snatches the thing away from him.

"For chrissake, Danny, are you trying to give yourself another asthma attack?"

Danny hasn't had an asthma attack since he was twelve, but he keeps quiet about it. The magic seems to be working.

"I want a balloon, Jane."

"Okay. I'll do it," she says, and she does.

The wide spaces on her cheeks get red and round and solid as the glove starts to expand. Her lips take to balloon blowing as if it is their natural vocation. Danny looks up at her and again feels the admiration that only a younger child can feel for an older sibling. When she's finished, she pinches the end and holds it up for him to see. It is perfectly clear and looks like a strange sea creature with four rounded spikes on top and a tail or a pod to one side.

When the attendant leans his head in the doorway and says, "visiting hours are just about up," Jane is so startled she lets go of the glove. It takes off on a short frenzied, obscene sounding flight around the room. Danny can't help giggling, and once he starts, he can't stop.

"What's so funny, baby?"

"Cause and effect," Danny sputters. "I giggle. I giggle some more," he says and then she starts to laugh as well.

"I giggle, you giggle, he/she giggles."

"It's a giggly little world in here."

At the same time, they remember where they are. Jane pulls her knees up to her chest and lets the film slip down over her eyes.

"Okay, Jane. I'll be back tomorrow if you want," but she is back in her cocoon and won't answer. "I really will be back."

He is almost sure she gives a little nod. Danny jogs down the corridor and takes the stairs two steps at a time. He puts a quarter in the pay phone and dials automatically.

"Mum?"

"Danny, where are you, honey?"

"Everything's okay, Mum." He's flustered realizing she won't know what he's talking about. "No. I mean, are you all right? Did Dad call? I mean..."

"Are you at the hospital, Danny? You wait right there. I'll come and get you."

"It's all right, Mum. Really."

"Danny, I'll be there in ten minutes."

Only after he has hung up does he realize how normal she sounded on the phone. She sounded like a mother who could be counted on to take care of everything. Both of them, her and Jane, pop back to life again the minute they forget he's not a kid anymore.

Danny goes outside to wait for his mum. It's dark, but the air is warm and sticky. The sky is huge and empty like a planetarium before the light show starts. Danny leans against the Elizabeth Dafoe Building and looks up straight into space. For once he doesn't feel tall for his age.

SQUATTER'S RIGHTS

Dear Jake,

People shouldn't write suicide notes. I mean when the me-ness, the me myself and me, gets so big that it has to be crushed, there is really no one to write to about it. It's absurd.

Dear Jake,

I love you. It's not you (not your fault).
I just can't play anymore.

It's not absurd, it's obscene. How could I sign it? "Love Always, your dead ex-girlfriend," or "In tender finality, Mona." Maybe a Hallmark approach would be least offensive: "Death and kisses, with best wishes."

Jake, do you remember that night we almost spent by the river? It was spring and I was still playing married with Tim. When Tim was working out of town, we were together all the time. We walked and talked each other raw. Do you remember? We weren't allowed to touch yet--my rules--but it was such a clear night that we decided to sleep outside on the river bank. We went and lay down and even tried to sleep. All we had were sweaters for blankets and it was getting cold. It was the time of year when it would be shirt sleeve weather in the day and then cut down below freezing at night. We just had to sleep one night under the stars. You said it. I didn't really care about that. I'm

sorry. I would care. If we did it now I mean. It was just that lying there meant we could bend the rules. We were freezing except for the line of heat between us. Arm to arm, all the way down. There was strictly no skin contact, but God, Jake, wasn't that the best heat there ever was? Or did you not really care about that? You said you did, though.

Of course, we never did sleep there. I told my story about the Santa Barbara axe murderer who patrolled the beaches and we both got scared (I got scared and you were shivering anyway). That some California psycho would find his way to the banks of the Red River seemed pretty likely then. I guess it was just getting cold. If we did it now, wouldn't we stay all night?

You've gone away and I continue the conversation. Am I really starving that bad? You go away and I can't even miss you. I have to keep you with me in my head. I pound away at what you were; what you said. For a while it almost brings you back, but then I'm left with something worse--a caricature that isn't really you at all. It grins at me from inside my head. A cheery grin that says, "You think you caught me and you have, but it's all right by me because I'm nobody really."

Nobody but me.

this is too long for a suicide note. sorry.

I'm in our old room, writing in bed like I like to. You should be able to picture it. The bed, the single bed, is too big. It's making me sea sick. The room with shirts and papers all over it (my stuff) is too small. It's making me sick.

Most of the conversations are playing out now. We never talked; we tickled each other with words. Tickling is great torture because it feels so good at the beginning and then you can't stop. I've played those words out so many times I know your parts as well as mine. I own them now by squatter's rights.

"It is snowing and death bugs me/as stubborn as insomnia." That's Anne Sexton. "I know," you'd say, whether you knew or not. It's not snowing and that bugs me. Death is not a word I can get my mouth around right now.

Today I woke up with my face wedged between the wall and the metal frame of the bed. Really wedged so I don't know how I could even breathe. Sometimes you walk in on my dreams and make everything all right. You come over and put your hand across my forehead like for a kid with a fever and say, "Just forget that stuff. It's all okay now. I promise." That's where I wake up. I guess because I don't know what is supposed to happen next. I never know how to say yeah in a way that really obliterates whatever the torture was. I never know how to say yeah to someone else

in a way that makes them not someone else, that makes "us" out of you and me.

If this is a suicide note, I had better get to the point. Yeah, the point. Fuck you, Jake. No, that's not it. I love you, Jake (love: capital L double intangible U V). No, that's not it. You, Jake. That's the point. It's time to cross you out.

Did you really think I was going to do it? To me I mean. Give the me-monster the last and best tranquilizer? Did you really think she would let me? Did you kind of want her to? If I did, I would have done it in style. You know that. A half empty (not half full) bottle, Anne Sexton lying open and underlined and a rusty razor blade. Not one ripped out from a twenty-five cent throw away shaver, but a real old-fashioned bloody good steel razor blade. I'd one-up you, Jake. I wouldn't do it the way you did it. Not a bullet through the head (a Twenty-Two, for Christ's sake) in your mother's brand new carport. That's small town stuff, Jake.

This is your suicide note, Jake. It's all the space around what you would have said; what I would have heard. All the space around the nothing you left behind. You don't have to thank me for it. This note is left for me, not you.

That's it. It's not snowing. Not in here, anyway.

YOU HAVE TO WAIT TILL VALENTINE'S DAY

Indelible

You probably don't know any Von

Ink

Shackleburgs. It seems impossible that anyone named Von Shackleburg ever existed. Especially in Germany around 1939. If they did exist, it is even more unbelievable that they would have survived the Holocaust and gone on to produce offspring. My father did, though his name originally was just "Shackleburg." He took on the "Von" as a symbol of the gratitude he felt for the family, the Von ----s, who saved his life by pretending he was their son. My father hates Germans, especially, he once told me, the Von ----s whose kindness was equalled only by their stupidity and surpassed only by their fanaticism as Christians. They baptized my father, saying only a submission to Christ could really save him. Not his life, but him; his soul. He didn't submit easily. They had to do it at home in the bathtub because a church baptism of a seven year old boy would have aroused suspicion, not only in the congregation, but in the priest, who like them was a vocal Nazi supporter. My father threw a tantrum as he stood up to his knees in the holy tap water.

They thought he was carrying on because the water was too cold. Mrs. Von ---- dumped a bucket of scalding water into the tub, giving my father third degree burns. The resulting purple marks, which still spread across his legs like spilled ink, are something he doesn't mention. Most of his friends at the club have carefully printed numbers on their arms. Souvenirs of Auschwitz or some other chamber of horrors. My father's arms are free of memorabilia.

Mickey Sorry. I'm getting off topic. I only
Mouse mentioned Dad so you would understand about my name. That isn't the most important thing. I don't have a father complex. Actually, I'm quite normal. I'm twenty-one and I'm in Education, which isn't such a mickey-mouse faculty as everyone says.

The most This is a story about something important
important that happened to me. I really don't know how to
thing put it nicely. You could say I lost something, but it's nothing. Or maybe I got something like love, but one or two gradations below. That isn't much either. Love is separate if you ask me. Things that are almost love are like

forgeries. Have I stimulated your curiosity? In my Child Development class they say that's the most important thing. Don't worry. I won't keep you in the dark much longer. I'm getting to it. (It. That's a clue.)

The Another thing that isn't that important but
perfect you might want to know about is what I look
couple like. Nobody believes I'm Jewish because I have
 freckles and long straight blond hair which
 drives me crazy whenever I try to do anything
 athletic. I'm not fat or anything and I'm kind
 of tall. A beautiful girl, right? That's what
 my boyfriend Larry thinks. We've been going
 around together for three years. He's a really
 nice guy and please don't get nauseated and stop
 reading when I tell you that everyone thinks we
 are the perfect couple. Whenever we go out to a
 party or a social, our friends are always eyeing
 my left hand for an engagement ring. I'm not
 going to go on and on about Larry and how his
 blond hair covers one eye all the time, even
 when he's driving, or how disappointed my dad is
 that Larry isn't Jewish. Haven't I said enough
 about Larry?

Guilt

Larry can't understand why my father is so disappointed that Larry isn't Jewish. He doesn't understand my father at all. I probably don't either. My father is always telling me how things are. His method is guilt, his medium history. I don't see how anyone could argue with that. All my life he has told me I am lucky because I'll never know what it's like to live in constant terror; to be a Jew blessed with Christian fools to keep you alive. If we see one of those amazing pink sunrises which only happen on the prairies, he tells me it's nothing. A sunrise can only be truly appreciated when you've gone to bed the night before with the knowledge that you probably won't wake up the next morning. You pray to be allowed to die in your sleep rather than face the hell of another day. Then when you see the sun, you find strength again somehow. When you see the sun, he says, you see God.

God

I don't know why I'm telling you this. It probably explains why I never get higher than a "B" on my essays. I have a tendency to ramble. Anyway, I grew up in River Heights and I never saw God. I never expected to. It's not that I

don't believe, because I do. It's just that I have enough sense to realize that God isn't lurking behind every quaint antique lamppost on my street. God, like Education, is not a mickey-mouse affair. God likes to come out for a good show, but nothing very awe-inspiring has ever happened in my life, and I doubt it ever will.

So I never saw God, and getting back to the point, I never planned to do "it" either. It isn't that I'm stuck up, it's just that it doesn't seem worth risking bringing children into the world. They would either grow up like me, not even capable of appreciating a sunrise, or in some hell like my father's or worse. I just don't see the point of it, and besides, I'm sure I would die in labour. My hips aren't that wide and I'm not much for pain.

It

It must be time to spell it out. This is a story about how all that rational, sensible resolve in the last paragraph disappears into thin air. If this story were an essay, I'd flunk for not getting to the topic sentence until halfway through. I bet you are wondering whether Larry, the perfect boyfriend, is

responsible for what happens. I'm wondering that too.

The big event Larry drives me around a lot, which makes me feel guilty since there are times when I find his car more interesting than him. On the morning of the big event, I was waiting on the steps for Larry to pick me up and give me a ride to school. He is punctual, which is a valuable quality a lot of people overlook. I got in the car and we kissed. His kisses are like pleading, mine are vacant lots. His mouth is all soft and giving in, wet like a puppy's and always wanting more. I didn't know what to do with my mouth. I tried to balance it against his and not let both of us start to melt. This particular morning he was extra passionate, kind of clawing at me. I thought another thing I like about his car is that it is a standard. The stickshift makes that kind of groping really awkward. He has a sense of propriety, he's considerate really, so we got going after not too long.

Fornicating I'm really running on at the mouth now. Larry's car has nothing to do with what I want to tell you. When we got to school, Larry was looking for a parking space, and I was looking for an excuse to have an hour to myself before class. Did I mention Larry's in all my classes? At this point, Larry told me he thought we should "talk." This surprised me. My dad always wants to "talk" to me. Usually he starts out with a description of something that happened in the concentration camps that is so horrible I can't even imagine it. The last one was about people, brothers and sisters sometimes, fornicating openly in cramped cells full of filthy, starving men, women and children. The point was again how lucky I am that I can live a decent life, that I should be thankful I don't know true suffering, and be grateful I've never been reduced to an animal who has to claw away at anyone, even his sister, for a moment of feeling alive. Translation: that boyfriend of yours isn't even Jewish. I hope to God you don't bring that kind of shame on your family. That's my father, but Larry and I aren't big talkers. I didn't know what he

wanted to talk about, but I could tell it wasn't going to be fun.

Talk

Larry and I stayed in the car. We turned to face each other and he put his hand over mine. Larry has brown eyes that always look sincere and a slightly large, but not grotesque nose. One of his eye teeth is crooked, overlapping the next tooth. This is his only obvious flaw, and when he started talking, I had trouble concentrating on what he was saying. I wanted to reach out and push the tooth in line with the others.

"Shelley," he started off, his eyes zipping back and forth between our hands and my face, so I can't help but notice again how sincere his eyes look. I was expecting the worst. Something horribly sentimental like, "You know I can't make it without you, _____." (Fill in the blank with the appropriate endearment: a) Baby; b) Honey; c) Sugar Pie). Then it would have taken all my power to maintain a calm, reassuring expression on my face.

Yogurt

"You have to love me, Shelley. You have to love me, but you don't. I think we should break up." His voice was shaking like a scared little

boy's who is announcing to his mother that he is running away from home. If I had reached over and hugged him right there, he would have melted all over me. He would have told me he didn't mean it. We could have held hands and walked into the Education lounge. Before class we could have talked about whether we should wait until after we graduate to get engaged. We would have talked about our chances at getting jobs in the city or near each other in the country. Our future is such a safe subject that I can believe in it often enough. It is the same way I believe that the next time I open the fridge there will be at least two flavours of yogurt to choose from. The way I believe that what happened to my father, to his family, cannot happen anymore, never happened, because I cannot imagine it.

I thought about all the times I swore up and down to Larry that I really do love him, the times I argued just because I won't "have sex" doesn't mean we aren't lovers. I was having trouble focussing. The most I could say was, "Larry, don't tell me how I feel. Don't tell me I don't love you."

"Shelley, it's not your fault. You're screwed up. I love you but I'm tired of this."

"This. What this? Are you tired of me? You don't love me anymore so you tell me I don't love you. Take some responsibility, Larry." This was meant to be my trump phrase. How could he accuse me of not loving him when given the impossible task of proving he really loves me?

"I love you Shelley, but I'm leaving you." He said it word by word, like he was engraving the sentence in his mind.

I had nothing to say. I saw the world gaping around me devoid of Larry. I was relieved. I was petrified. I didn't believe him. "What do you want from me?"

His face, which usually has an anemic tinge, was deep red. My fingers were white and my whole hand hurt where he gripped it. Larry was angry.

"I want you to be human. Maybe it's not your fault, Shelley, but you're faking it. You're a pretty girl, but that's all."

There was a moment of stunned silence where both of us marvelled at how Larry could know and say so much. Eventually, I thought of saying "same to you, Lambkin" and slamming the door,

strolling nonchalantly away, but the dramatic moment was already lost by the time I thought of it.

Truth I said instead, "Fine, Larry, fine. You're entitled to your opinion," and got out of the car.

Larry pulled the lever on the bucket seat and lay back in the car, his anger, the only anger I'd ever seen in him, spent. He said "Wait Shelley..." I slammed the door.

Enough about Larry. I mean it this time. I had to get away from him as fast as I could. I left him with his one sentence of truth. It was better than hanging around and giving him the chance to take it back.

Walking Walking. I couldn't stop. Down Pembina Highway with the wind blowing my hair across my face. For the last three years Larry and I probably drove down Pembina Highway at least three times a week. It is the fastest way to get to school and the ugliest street in the whole city. I wondered how I should feel, walking for the first time, taking the strip for the first time, without Larry. McDonald's Burger King and Wendy's, all crouched together

at the same intersection, their plastic weatherproof skin glaring RED, ORANGE, YELLOW, respectively. Then the Pony Corral which despite its name had great rootbeer floats and real hamburgers, but is now a discotheque where the waitresses wear a cross between exercise leotards and Playboy Bunny suits. Then the Pink Flamingo motel which really is pink and really has a greater-than-life-size plastic flamingo perched over the semi-burned out neon sign. Then the car dealers, Pontiac Chev Olds Nissan, all the same tin boxes. Deathtraps, all of them, according to my father.

Waiting

The ugliness was overwhelming. I kept walking. My father says there is nothing worse than waiting. He should know, but I bet the people who had to walk from one camp to the next or until they dropped thought walking was worse. It's so slow it's almost a kind of waiting.

After a long time I got somewhere: the cement park at Confusion Corner, which is at the end of Pembina Highway and the beginning of downtown. The park is modern. There are no trees, no grass, no swings, not even a fountain. There is a cement sculpture-thing, big cement wedges for leaning on, and that's all. You can

think of it as an experiment that failed. It is so not school, not home and not Larry. Not Spiderman human like me, I thought, and then I saw someone was watching me. He was young, with curly hair that was too long. He looked like a juvenile delinquent--old blue jeans, a yellow t-shirt with the YMCA emblem faded so it was barely recognizable and great big running shoes with the laces undone in the junior high fashion of the day. He was crouched like a spider on the edge of one of the cement embankments, just staring.

Not everything that happens has a reason, according to my all-knowing father. Hopefully I'm getting close to the reason for this monologue.

"Hi," I said. (Can you believe I had the nerve to talk to him?)

He jumped up and loped over to sit by me, showing off his long spider legs. "I was watching you because I thought you were a friend of mine. You look like her--you know, the blonde hair--but you ain't her. Sure is a fuckin' ugly park. Want a cigarette?" he said, the words tripping over each other like his feet probably did with those laces.

"I don't smoke, thanks," I said.

"Good thing, cause I don't got any cigarettes," he said and belted out a laugh into the empty park. There was a hysterical edge to him and he was so skinny that he was almost all edges. Up close I could see that he was at least my age or older, and that he wasn't about to act it.

"Yer nice," he said.

"You're nice too," I said, for lack of anything better to say and took one quick desperate look around to see if there was anyone or anything around to stop us. The grey edges of the park were all around.

"Come on. I've got my own place, just over behind the school. Come on. I'll show you. I've got some smokes there." On the way he talked incessantly about himself. He punctuated the description with abrupt, loud laughs. He was tossing words out like he had an endless supply. The laughs he hurled. He was too jittery to be shy or to really look at me or to realize how weird it is to invite someone to your apartment you don't even know.

I wondered if he would evaporate after we'd done it, or if he would stay to haunt me.

"Here it is, what a great dump, eh?" He was grinning, out of breath from talking so much, and just barely managing to suppress another explosion into laughter. He touched my back to point me in the right direction and ducked as he led us into the basement suite.

The place was tiny and packed with stuff. The ceiling was so low that he had to keep his head bent forward whenever he was standing up. One enormous tabby cat was sprawled across the kitchen table. It yawned at us, but didn't make a move. Two kittens were attacking a roll of toilet paper. When they saw us they immediately started to cry and ran over and jumped his feet. He tried to lightly kick them off, but they clung to the laces like it was a matter of life and death.

"Great dump," he said again to fill in a space where he wasn't talking. "You got yer own place? I love it. I ain't never going back."

I liked that his questions were just part of the monologue. There was never time to answer. "Back where?" I asked.

"Yeah, back where," he said, laughing again. "I talk too much. The big cat on the table is Mathilde. She's the mother. The

kittens are Jack and Jill. I forgot to introduce everyone. I'm Teddy. Teddy Bear. That's my real name. Can you believe my parents would do that to me? Shit."

Teddy Bear and I sat down on the bed because there was no place else to sit. Teddy pushed some dishes, newspapers and dirty clothes off the bed. The kittens had come for the ride on Teddy's feet. He pushed them off and took his shoes off. The kittens started to cry again and after a few attempts climbed on the bed.

Teddy said, "Shhh. Jack and Jill go climb a hill. Get lost. Big joke. There's no hills in this town. Asshole of the universe is what this place is. Fuckin' cold or fuckin' hot all the time." He locked the kittens in a cupboard where they started to cry in earnest and scratch frantically at the door. Mathilde turned her head to where the noise was coming from and then fixed her green stare on us.

It at last What was it like? His ribs were marvelously wide, skin stretched like a drum. You could say he talked me into it, because he talked almost the whole time. As for me, I'm not superstitious, but it seemed like I was astral projecting while it was happening. I was

one of those hidden cameras crouching in the corner of the ceiling watching the spiderman work. "God, shoulders," Teddy said, clearly amazed that I had them. "Oh wow. Those kittens better shut up. This is amazing. Do you like this? Do you like me? Do you want me to shut the hell up?" But he didn't.

We undressed to his babbling and then he was inside of me, fast, like he'd tripped on his laces and just fallen into place. It hurt a little bit which made me realize it was finally happening to me. Then there were a few seconds where he couldn't talk. He was in a frenzy, thrashing against me like a crazy person throwing himself against a padded wall. He shuddered, said something, or rather moaned something, and then it was over. I stopped watching, and hugged him like I was trying to crush him. He was so sharp. I wanted to make the imprint of his body against mine permanent, to have purple bruises where each rib cut across me. While I hugged him, there was no noise. Mathilde was still staring at us and the kittens must have either suffocated in there or gone to sleep. It didn't take Teddy long to start babbling again.

"Oh God don't never go away. I don't even know your beautiful name. Don't move. I'll be right back. Don't move. I got a surprise for you."

He was circling the room. I closed my eyes and felt my body shaking. It seemed like my heartbeat was coming from lower than it ever had before. I was afraid to look in case there was blood.

Shit

"Shit," he said, knocking something over. "Keep your eyes closed. I'm looking for a surprise. Jesus H." His voice was getting more hysterical.

When I opened my eyes I saw him crouched between the fridge and the counter as if he was trying to hide something--himself. He pulled one hand behind his back, almost losing his balance, and our eyes met. We saw each other completely naked--as complete strangers. Teddy was cornered. He wiped his mouth and his nose with the back of his hand and cleared his throat. He kept staring at me, bewildered, until a huge grin covered up for him. I couldn't stand to look at him.

"Teddy, get up. What are you doing there?"

"I told you not to look. Now you don't get no surprise. Have to wait till Valentine's Day. Hey don't go. Come on. Did I hurt you? Shit." And so on.

Love

Outside it was cold and getting late. I put the quarter in the phone and dialed automatically.

"Hi."

"God, I looked all over for you. I wanted to say--"

"You have to believe me. I love you, Larry. I do."

"Say it again."

"I love you, Larry."

"I'm starting to believe you. I never wanted to break up. I didn't mean--"

"Larry, can you come and pick me up?"

"Well, yeah. As soon as I finish helping mum. She just wants me to move a few things down to the basement."

"Fine. Great."

I bet you guessed that Larry and I are engaged now. I'm not any different than I was before. Anyway, I'm going on the pill. After a

month it's supposed to be safe. Sometimes in a movie theatre or some place like that, I hear someone laughing helplessly; out of control. Usually I'm with Larry and we just stare harder at the screen as if that horrible sound has nothing to do with us.

AFTER THE CREDITS

The phone rings at eight in the morning while I have Chris in the bath. I can't leave him there alone. "Come on Chris, hurry up. Daddy's on the phone." I pull him out and try to dry him with the towel on the floor which is still wet from my shower. He struggles, almost slipping out of my hands as I run down the hall to the kitchen. "You're a pain, Chris," I tell him. I pick up the telephone and say hello to a dial tone.

Ann comes over with Lise and Carl around nine and we have coffee. Lise and Carl are supposed to be company for Chris but they don't get along. Chris hugs one of his cars and tries to stay out of the way. Lise or Carl rips the car out of his hand and chucks it. Chris decides not to cry. Carl and Lise forget about him and fight over a Fisher-Price learning toy--a whole little town. Carl won't give Lise the mailman. Lise knocks over everything in the firehall.

Ann's policy is to let Carl and Lise work out their problems themselves. I don't blame her. Just Chris alone when he's sulky is usually more than I can handle.

Ann and I have a lot in common. I met Ann at Ace when I worked there and I also met Steve and Doug there. Steve is Chris's father. We are all commercial artists, which is

another thing. Steve and Doug had once been pretty good friends.

Ann and I used to talk about her husband Doug all the time. Before he was her husband. We'd have coffee at a different time than everyone else, just by accident, so we could talk about him. The first thing Ann would say is, what can you say about Doug? I should appreciate him.

Ann credits me with helping her get serious about Doug. She would say, how can I know the future, and I'd say, get serious, Ann. What are you waiting for?

We never talked about Steve then. He was kind of my secret. Some Fridays after work, pay day I guess, Steve and I would go to a bar. Steve, who never said a word to me all day at work, sure could talk. He had plans. He wasn't really a commercial artist. Words like "commercial" and "artist" were shit. He said he was just filling up time. All you had to do, he said, was spin him around three times and he'd be gone. Some big city where nobody knows anything about anybody else and he could splash himself in red and blue and green across every building and billboard on every street. We would both get pretty drunk and then he'd drive me home and we'd make out on my carpet. Whenever he kissed me, he had this kind of ritual where he would hold the back of my head with both hands and slide his cheek across mine. He had these Harlequin Romance sand paper cheeks. On

Mondays he would brush past me like Friday hadn't existed. We were co-conspirators.

I didn't want to let Ann in on it, but once, after she and Doug were already living together, she told me, "Steve'll come around."

He did, but it took a few years. Not until after I got pregnant with Chris. We got this house and everything was fine except Steve never could figure out how I got pregnant. I mean he thought it was something I did to him. But he told me all those plans were shit and that arrogance was shit and that he could get up in the morning and go to work every day as well as Doug could. He'd been doing it for about as long, hadn't he?

For me, it was like after the ending to some Hollywood movie. We had this house and there was Chris kicking around inside me, ballooning bigger and bigger, and Steve coming home from work kissing me systematically; forehead, mouth, bellybutton. I'm not much of a doubter, but after the credits is no time to doubt. I didn't miss going to work at all. I was bloated with anticipation.

Now Ann and I talk about the kids, and what Chris and I are going to do. I am glad she is here for the distraction, if nothing else. I wish we could go on about Doug the way we did at Ace. Her wanting to help makes me nervous. It's like I was a bystander to some event and then they turned

the TV cameras on me. I should have something clever to say. It's expected. "You can work. Chris is old enough for daycare," she says.

Chris knows when someone's talking about him. He comes over and climbs on my lap and tries to pull up my shirt to nurse. He is eighteen months old and hasn't nursed for about six, but he still tries sometimes. I hold him and give him a cookie. Carl and Lise are playing house in the dog house. Steve and I were going to get a dog, a Golden Retriever, as soon as Chris was old enough. Carl and Lise are shouting at each other, but it's only a play fight. Ann and I have to raise our voices to hear each other.

The phone rings. "Jeez," I say to cover for the panic in my throat. "I wonder what they're selling." It's a man's voice; no one I know.

"Ann?" it says.

"Just a minute," I say.

"Hi," Ann says.

"I'm not playing in your stupid dog house," Lise shouts.

"Lise, honey, keep it down, Mummy can't hear," Ann says, covering the receiver of the phone. To the phone she says, "Yeah, I know," nodding her head. "I know, I know," each word a little higher pitched than the last. "I want to see you too." For some reason her tone puts me into a silent rage, and I'm thinking, why did I invite this woman

and her two monster children into my house? Did I really think she might have something to say to me?

"I can't," Ann says. "Nursery school is tomorrow from 9:00 until lunchtime. We can talk then. I'll see you. Okay."

Ann hangs up the phone, looks at me and looks down. I realize I am looking at her as if she has just committed some unforgivable sin and we are both embarrassed. Just for something to do, I smile and Ann sits up straighter as if she has just noticed a stranger in the corner, a man, watching her.

"You can manage without Steve," she says, and I imagine she's suddenly remembered I'm the one we're supposed to talk about today.

I slide Chris off my lap and try to change the subject. I don't want to know about the mystery caller. I could care less. "How's Doug, anyway?" I say.

"You know, nice. Really nice. I can't stand him. No, not really. The kids are madly in love with him. They say Mom, you're such a grouch. Why can't you play with us like Daddy does? Yesterday I actually told Liz that it bores the hell out of me to play Snakes and Ladders with her. She couldn't figure that one out."

She's challenging me, like she expects me to say, that's great, Ann. I admire your honesty or something.

I get us some more coffee which takes the pressure off. Lise, or maybe it's Carl, is crying, but Ann is oblivious.

"He'll call," I say.

"What?" Ann says.

"Steve. He'll call. He's just got to figure some things out."

"Sure," she says.

Lise has stopped crying. She has pulled off one of the runners that hangs from my spider plant by the TV. She is going for the other one, so Ann runs over and grabs her.

"Here's a flower, Mum," she says, holding up the plant.

"No, it's a spider plant, Lise."

"Flower," she says, smelling it.

Ann swings her around and tries to get her interested in something else. "Come show Chris your flower."

"Chris piss," she says. Carl laughs and says, "Chris priss." They keep laughing and saying it. Even Chris is laughing. "Chris piss Chris priss Chris piss."

"Shut up," I shout. "Shut up. You've got no right." Everyone is quiet, staring at me. It is as if the house is frozen with fear and we are all trembling.

"It's been a week now, Deb," Ann says.

"I bet you kids want some lunch," I say. "Come on in the kitchen."

For lunch they have cottage cheese, raisins, and Alphagetti. Chris buries his hand in the spaghetti and sucks it off his fingers. Carl opens his mouth and orders Liz to throw raisins in it. "Don't you dare," Ann says.

"Just eat," I say, "just eat."

Ann helps me scrape the dishes and put them in the sink. She has to go take Carl to the eye doctor.

I'm glad when they finally leave. Chris cries, wanting them to stay.

The telephone rings. I stare at it. Chris is sleeping on the carpet in front of the TV. Game shows always put him to sleep. I guess he likes the background noise. When he wakes up he will have the imprint of the pattern of the carpet on his face.

The phone rings again and I go to answer it.

"Hello."

"Hi. My name is Melanie. Are you the lady of the house?"

I can't believe this nothing call. "No," I shout. "No, I'm not."

"Oh, um, sorry, um..." she is so flustered she hangs up on me before I have a chance to do it to her. She sounded so young; probably her first real job. I feel sorry for her. She isn't going to last long.

I change Chris while he's lying there, hoping it will wake him up. He stirs to make it easier for me to get the old diaper off, but stays asleep. I get up and look at the little town. I put the mailman inside the post office. The firetruck in the firehall. I put the nozzles in their slots on the gas pumps. I fold the two halves of the town together and close the latch. I pick up Chris's cars and put them in a line on top of the radiator. I listen and think I hear a car slowing down outside. I listen until I hear it pull up next door and the engine clicks off.

I walk into the kitchen and stare at the dishes in the sink: a week's worth. I just rinse what I need. From the kitchen I hear Chris waking up. "Kiss piss," he says, because he can't pronounce the R.

IMMORTAL WORDS

Dear Wendy:

Come to Montreal. Apartments are cheap near the university.
You can work on your French.

Wendy I miss you. Mirna is depressed. The baby is talking away, not really a baby anymore. She still calls me Dada. I tell her that is an outdated art movement and she can call me James if she likes. She won't though. Yesterday she was trapped in her high chair. She started shrieking, "Dadadadada," and throwing her food on the floor. Great performance art.

Wendy, I need you with me. There has to be a way. I'm going crazy. Yesterday I was teaching and half way through the lecture, I started thinking about your hair the way it is when it has just been washed. I was just standing there like a fool staring out the window until the students started giggling and I finally came to my senses.

I am upstairs in my new study. Mirna thinks I am doing our taxes as I will be as soon as I finish this letter. You're beautiful. The book is almost finished. Working on it has kept me sane these last few months.

Love,

James

p.s. You really are beautiful. You can write to me at the English office at Concordia. Honestly, no one goes through my mail there.

Dear James:

It's great to finally be able to write to you. I'm glad you miss me. Montreal sounds gorgeous, but I just started the term here. Besides, I don't have any money. Besides, I told you I don't want to be your mistress anymore.

Today I sat through an hour and a half of translation class. Boring, boring, boring. My French must be terrible because, when I asked a question in French like we are supposed to, the prof got all red and answered me in English. We learned that the British expression, "the splash of the weir," has a French equivalent. Tomorrow we learn what it is. You can bet I won't sleep tonight.

On Friday night, I slept at Shelley's. We drank a magnum of Donini and lay on her stupid waterbed listening to Bruce Springsteen and betting on who would be the first one to get

sea sick. Cheap thrills. She lets the cat on the waterbed and one of these days the claws are going to go right through it. I forgot to call Mom until the morning. She wasn't even mad! Remember all the fits she took when we were together and I pretended I was at Shelley's? Mothers know everything.

I just read this over and it sounds really dumb. What do you see in me? Shelley says I have to start looking at boys again. I look, but I don't like.

Why do you call her the baby? She is two and a half. You have to start loving Mirna. I bet she is a great mother. I could never be a good mother. I can't even remember to feed myself.

Oh, I got an A on my Chaucer paper from Turner. He's such a jerk (not Chaucer, Turner). I bet he didn't even read it. I spelled separate wrong three times in seven pages. His only comment was that I shouldn't let my spelling problems "dilute the power of my intelligence." What does he think I am, a martini? I pointed out (to Shelley, not Turner) that the fact that my spelling mistakes are consistent is a sign of intelligence. Don't you think so?

Do you like your students? Are you still smoking that

stupid pipe? It's so cliché.

Be good.

Love,

Wendy

Dear Melissa,

You know. I know you know. It's all right, Melissa. When you have something special like that, you have to keep it a secret. They'll talk it right off the face of the earth. Don't tell. I know you won't.

Love,

Mirna K.

Dear Wendy:

Come to Montreal. Yesterday Mirna cornered me at breakfast and asked me how I was. She thinks I'm seeing someone. I said of course I was fine, but she won't believe me. The ridiculous part is that I couldn't see anyone even if I wanted to. I need you, Wendy. I realize those are pretty useless words. Fortunately the baby (okay, Melissa) started screaming about something and I had a nine-thirty class.

Mirna didn't have a chance to keep prodding.

I can't believe how patient Mirna is with Melissa. She doesn't spoil her either.

Your letter wasn't dumb, it was wonderful. It was you. If you won't be my mistress, will you be my lover?

I am getting to know some of my colleagues here at Concordia. They are the same as the ones at the Manitoba campus. A lot of fossilized human specimens who haven't had an inspiration since 1958. They talk and laugh loudly in the corridors with each other, as if they are reassuring themselves that they are still alive.

Do you know how I know I am still alive? I just imagine your face, Wendy. You are so beautiful. I've tried to write a poem about you, but I just don't have the words. Some things in this world defy description. Just say the word, I'll send the plane fare.

Love,

James

p.s. In the immortal words of your hero Bruce Springsteen (whom I still think you will outgrow), "I wanna die with you

Wendy on the street tonight in an everlasting kiss." It is a bit melodramatic, but I think it gets the point across.

Dear James:

Bruce is really hot. Do you think we'd make good street punks together, you and me? Even with all my youthful exuberance (blah) I kind of doubt it.

To tell the truth, I'm not feeling that good. Why don't you forget about me and get on with your life? Maybe you love me. For the sake of argument, let's say you love me more than you love Mirna. But you can't love me more than you love Melissa. It's not natural.

You must really love me if you are finally listening to music post-Dylan. Let me throw another one at you. In His immortal words, "I can't believe what you say, cause darlin', I don't wanna fade away."

Be good.

Love,

Wendy

Dear Melissa,

You have it too. When we were pretending to watch the soap and you pointed to the TV laughing the way you do, I could tell that you have it too. We have to keep him from knowing. We have to keep going through the motions. You do a wonderful job of acting like a baby. I'm acting like the mother. I am meek and clingy for at least half an hour of the day. I think it's working. While I do it, I think about the little boy named James in the nursery rhyme who would not do as he was told and was eaten by a lion. What do you think about when you are crayoning the closet walls? Are you making plans?

Love,

Mirna K.

Wendy:

How could you send me a letter like that? I LOVE YOU. Of course I love the baby, but that is so different. I've been moping around all week since I got your letter. Mirna thinks I have a cold or something and is being all gushy and nice. Melissa brings me the bottle of Vitamin C and says, "Cee Cee Cee." At two and a half she thinks she knows how to cure a cold.

Wendy, I can afford to pay for an apartment for you here. Mirna never asks about the cheques. She is still acting like there is something wrong. I tell her nothing is going on, but she can tell I wish it were. She's not dumb.

I will have to cut this off because I'm late for lunch with my publisher.

Did I tell you I love you?

Love,

James

Dear James:

If you love me, why are your letters always about Mirna? How could you ever marry anyone named Mirna? (Sorry, I know: you were young, she was beautiful, you didn't know what you were getting into.) Can you believe how insensitive I'm being?

The reason for this temper tantrum has nothing to do with you. Bruce Springsteen is doing a Canadian tour and he's not coming here. The city is in shock. People are walking down Portage Avenue with aimless, half-pained, half-crazy

looks in their eyes. Classes have been cancelled. Well, at least I'm walking around that way and, to put it mildly, translation class has lost its compelling force. I haven't actually been skipping classes, but I might as well be. How can he do that to me? He's the one who said, "Don't turn me on again, I just can't face myself alone again," and then he does it to me.

What do you see in me? Can't you see what an airhead I am?

You've got to stop taking me so seriously, James. I am nineteen, I am in love with a rock star who grosses millions of dollars for singing about cars. From what you say, Mirna loves you. If you can't make that work, why would it ever work with us?

Shelley arranged a date for me with a friend of her brother's. We went to see a great movie (the new Woody Allen one), but I couldn't get into it because his sweaty hand was pressing at my leg the whole time. We walked home and I thought I had better let this guy kiss me. He was so starved for self-confidence that I felt like I had to give him the illusion of success, if only for a few seconds. Of course the whole thing was grotesque. He stuck his tongue in my mouth right away. All I could think about was the time my brother threatened to force feed me slugs (the big

green garden variety) until I promised to be his permanent slave. In the words of the valley girl poet, gross me out the door.

On the cover of Chatelaine this month it says, "Are there any real men left?" I didn't buy it because I'm afraid they'll say "Yeah, and he's doing a cross Canada tour this year, stopping everywhere except Winnipeg."

Be good.

Love,

Wendy

Dear Melissa,

I have to tell you that he wasn't always who he is. He is all wrong, but once he was a lover. A lover like we are, Melissa. Someone you could wash your body against until everything about you was smooth like white sand. He stopped being a lover when the words took over. He thought the words would be magic if he could only find the right ones to use. The words are bad magic, Melissa. They took the lover and hollowed him out like a pumpkin on Halloween. Now he is just an empty mouth that doesn't even grin, it talks instead.

It isn't sad what we have to do, Melissa.

Love Always,

Mirna K.

Dear Wendy:

When I think about anybody (anybody except me) kissing you, it makes me want to do something drastic. I'm sorry I talk about Mirna so much. She is a good person, Wendy, and I don't want to hurt her any more than I can help it. She has stopped asking me questions. I am amazed at how content a person can be. If you and I could be as complacent as her, life would be a lot easier.

I seem to have picked up your obsession with Bruce. I realize how gauche that is for someone in my position. If my students found out, they wouldn't have any respect for me at all. At any rate, "Don't spend your life waiting for a moment, a moment that just don't come." With that in mind, I've purchased tickets for Bruce Springsteen's Montreal concert. It will be during study week so it should be no problem for you. The travel agent at Concordia is affiliated with the one at the U of M so you can pick up the plane ticket from them (by the time you get this letter, the

ticket should be ready).

I'm telling Mirna I have to go to a conference to push my book, so we can spend the weekend in a hotel of your choosing. I'll pick you up at the airport in the morning and we can take a drive through the Laurentians before we go into the city. It's almost spring here.

Love,

James

p.s. Are you still as beautiful?

Dear James:

I'm so excited! You know you are bribing me, but how could I live with myself and miss a chance to see Bruce Springsteen and you and Montreal? You have to realize, it will only be for one weekend. You have a beautiful little girl and Mirna who love you.

I've got most of my papers due before study week, so it will work out really well. Since I got your letter, I've been cramming like crazy. My French is really picking up too.

I've decided to move out of the house in April. Shelley is

going to get a bigger place so we can share it. You may have nobody reading your mail at your place, but it's not so easy here. Mom said if she ever saw your face she'd spit in it. I told her to mind her own business and she said she was.

Of course I have to pretend I'm going with Shelley to her aunt's for the weekend I'm spending in Montreal. I know Mom doesn't really believe me. The only thing that keeps her from showing it is her superstition that if you accuse someone of something, they are more likely to do it.

See you in ten days. Until then, "The street's on fire in a real death waltz between what's flesh and what's fantasy."
(Isn't He something?)

Love,

Wendy

Dear Melissa,

He talks away about a conference. He wants to go there so he can talk some more. He is not really going anywhere. He is working on another spell. He calls it poetry, but it's bad magic.

It will happen in the car, far away from home. Something will go wrong and the talking pumpkin will be smashed against the windshield glass. He will think he is going to the conference, but all the talking will only be silent wanting.

I want you to understand all this, Melissa. I know you do. Soon we will be safe and happy and the world will be lovely together.

Love Always,

Mirna K.

THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE

I see by the crack of yellow light between my curtain and my window sill that it is before six in the morning. This is unacceptable. The curtain is an ugly rag whose past lives have included bedspread, table cloth for at least one impromptu thanksgiving dinner, and room divider or, rather, roommate divider during one of my many three week stand-offs with Jake, alias superman, alias asshole. Worse than that, it is incapable of keeping out the glare from the street lamp that is aimed like a spotlight at what I laughingly call my bed (and it is laughable--a scrap of foam rubber soaked in oily, anti-inflammatory chemicals that do God knows what to your nervous system). The curtain also fails as a sound barrier, which explains my present unfortunate state of consciousness.

Three doors down is a warehouse which has some mysterious, but apparently crucial function. Every day, starting at six in the morning, trucks arrive to load or unload something. They begin by backing up, something they have to announce. It's a unique sound, like an aural electrical shock and it matches the artificial brightness that is a solid direct hit, more colour than light, invading the room. I lie in bed and try to think of a way to make today go away. "Fuck off. Fuck off. Fuck off," I whisper over and over like a mantra. I try not to think about

facing work and Marnie, my boss who hates me because I am growing my hair and wear it in my face as if, she says, it was Haight-Ashbury, 1968. It's 1987, she says. Get it done. I must be developing arthritis. Every joint in my body seems to be enlarged and moveable only with excruciating effort. There is a raspy noise that hums as background to the assault from outside. It is my breathing. I vow to quit smoking starting today. The sweet taste of nicotine in my mouth suddenly seems to be all there is of no worth savouring. The awareness that it is only six o'clock in the morning and already I have committed myself to failure--I will never quit smoking, not today nor ever--sends me reeling into what seems the deepest depression I have ever known.

* * *

I must have managed to go back to sleep after all, because when the alarm rings at seven it is another day. I switch on the radio: the Brandenburg Concerto. Number Five. It fills me up. I must have died and gone to Heaven. There is a thread of clean autumn daylight between the curtain and the sill. I push the curtain all the way open and the light rushes in and over everything like the music: the measured but near wild joy of dangerous clarity. The curtain is soft with age and use. For a second, I want to

touch it the way, as a child, I longed to brush my cheek against my grandmother's. Mine smooth as blankness, hers fragile like crumpled velvet. I pick up my socks from the corner and hurl them one after the other into the laundry basket a full ten feet away. I am a perfect shot.

In the kitchen I make coffee and lazily dial the phone. As if it's nothing, I tell Marnie's machine that I must have the flu so I guess I'll see her tomorrow. Sorry about that, I say. She writes junior high school textbooks about Canadian history. I am her research assistant. It will all be there tomorrow. Laura Secord, the Plains of Abraham, and the Cree will not vanish because I skip out for one day. If only they would. Lying, even to a machine, causes a sudden dip in my altitude. But in this air show, I am still flying the plane. Turning the engine off momentarily is just a trick; a thrill. I defy crashing and limit myself to one sweet longing taste of falling. I love lying to machines. Fuck machines. Fuck history. Fuck Marnie. I will adopt "fuck" as a power word. Fuck falling. I've gone too far even for that now.

I make myself a peanut butter, banana and Edam cheese sandwich on toast. It is perfect with the coffee. Then I clean the entire kitchen and water the plants. There is an old postcard from my friend Janice on the fridge. It is a bluish picture of Patty Smith with three or four snakes and

the lyrics from one of her songs scrawled along one of the snakes: "Out there, there is a sea of possibilities/One who sees his possibilities." It has been there for months, but I look at it as if for the first time. Freedom is nothing but stolen time. I appropriate this day for myself. I say it out loud.

* * *

It is still before 8 o'clock, early enough for the cheap long distance rates. I know by the third digit that I've blown it, but it's my home number, and once I've started, I dial automatically. One way to trash a mood is to try to tell someone about it. Especially your mother. I will my voice and hers to avoid falsetto enthusiasm, but it's useless.

"Hi. It's me," I say. "I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"That's alright, Honey. How are you?" she says as if she didn't just talk to me last Sunday. As if how I am was something I could tell her and she could hear. "You aren't working today? Everything's all right at work?"

"Marnie gave me the day off because of all the overtime we've been doing," I say, wishing it was the answering machine I was lying to. She wants to hear that. She would think I was sick. She wouldn't understand that people need well days even more than sick days. I tell her what is

meant to be a funny story about work. I tell her how we might have to take a field trip to the Maritimes to find something good about this Indian tribe, the Sawno. They were wiped out before anyone noticed any endearing cultural traits about them. All the old history books say about them is that they were war-like, possibly cannibals who fished, but couldn't swim because of demons in the water. I want her to find this amusing. I want her to ask if they ever fished up any of the demons. The story pleases her, but not because it means anything to her. She is just thrilled that I have a real job that is almost artsy and therefore appear intelligent, earnest, and headed in the right direction.

"Graham went out fishing this morning," she says. "The salmon are running even though it's still so warm. We've been having salmon steaks every night with salad from the garden. My lettuce and cukes are still hanging in." She goes on in this sixties vernacular about seaweed mulch, how low the tide was and the "organic-ness" of their almighty garden, which really wouldn't bother me, it wouldn't, except I want her to say something.

I tell her things are really over between me and Jake and she says "so long as you're happy. You're so young you know. You still have chances." She stops herself from saying he was a nice boy though, so kind and what a sense of humour. Nice looking too. She doesn't have to say anything.

"Is Graham feeling better?" I ask, remembering that he had been sick, but not what was wrong.

"Graham?" she asks.

"Graham," I say, "you know, your husband. The guy who lives in your house." I am losing it completely, giving in absolutely to rage masqueraded as sarcasm. Because she said "Graham" like it was ridiculous that I pretend to care whether he's sick or well? Because I could be ninety and she could be dead for fifty years and still even the thought of her would slash open all my insensitivity, all my self-centred self-loathing. She doesn't have to say anything.

Then, to cover up, we talk for five more minutes about Graham, I pretending to be intensely interested, she pretending not to have been surprised at my concern and not to know that it's all bullshit anyway.

* * *

I have managed to kill the morning. Walking downtown, there are certain places you can be alone: on Park Avenue, in bookstores, in Harvey's. I'm glad this city has enough of a sense of itself to ignore me.

There is a coffee shop on "the Main" that reeks of grease and fluorescent lights. Another anonymous zone. I go in to use the washroom. It is the kind of washroom where you try not to sit down on the toilet. From a semi-crouch

position, with all of gravity against you, you rip off the last few squares of toilet paper (the ones with finger prints on them) and drop them on the floor that is already encrusted with a collage of wet toilet paper, light grey mold and various remnants of sanitary protection products. You don't even take time to wash your hands because you don't want to touch the sink and your claustrophobia starts to get out of hand. You do up your top button in the hallway and wipe your hands on your jeans.

I am squatting and peeing and reading the graffiti.

I am a WOMAN who loves WOMYN"

"FREDERIC, JE T'AIME"

"Fucking dyke cunt lickers."

"I LOVE JOHN. FOREVER FOREVER FOREVER"

"FUCKING DYKES AND CUNT LICKERS UNITED AND FREE"

"JESSIE does it for free. 846-5686."

NOTHING IS FOR FREE"

And again, Fucking Dykes Loving and Free, but the word "loving" has been crossed out and replaced by the word

"licking" which has in turn been crossed out and replaced by loving."

There are lots of hearts with initials and T L F in capital letters.

This stink-hole washroom exists in near human form. There is a world of voices in here, each one shouting out its primacy. I stand up and look in the mirror. It is radiant with reflected light. I see the pores in my face, like the dots that make up a newspaper photograph, but don't bother to focus on the whole image. I don't have any lipstick, so with a bar of grimy soap, I write on the mirror, "I too." It is faint, barely legible. The toilet makes some noise, but will not flush. I love it in here. I never want to leave.

THIS ISN'T THE DREAM I WAS MEANING TO HAVE

One Version: Sweet Rolls

Jamie and Clara don't go out together. They don't live together. In fact, they never even met except for a few words at a party. Jamie never passed his driver's test. He failed it three times. He never had a car accident, never needed a blood transfusion, wasn't the one, the actual one, of five in the province. Too sensational. He never drove her home from a party. He never thought she was cute but stupid because she didn't know what was important, because she just flew off the handle at random. He never thought she was immoral because he never asked her for a body count and never didn't find it funny when she didn't say "twelve and a half if you count Karl and David, but you can't count David."

Clara never really met Jamie, so she did what she felt like because she knew she was going to die anyway and she didn't have to be around for most of it. Her father was already dead, but it didn't count because she didn't remember him, and maybe he wasn't dead but had just gone off. Clara tried cocaine and law school and charity fucks, but she didn't overdo it because it was all like skating on your own pond--you wreck it if you keep at it and it's your pond. She started to get thin--translucent--so she had to

settle down. By then she was a Legal Aid lawyer and she even got married.

Once, when they were old and thick and retired, she sat next to Jamie on the bus and felt nothing at all except the aches in her fingers and the smell of the sweet rolls she was bringing home for her grandchildren. Jamie thought about England; about riding a bicycle; about how everything got pleasantly farther away; about nothing unbearable.

Another Version: Jamie and Clara

Clara was seropositive for HIV but it didn't bother her because she always knew she was going to die anyway. Now she just knew it a little more. "One study predicts that 20 to 50 percent of individuals infected with the virus will develop AIDS within five years, though percentages may climb higher in the future." Climbing high sounds good; like an achievement. Clara was definitely not feeling dead. She was an underachiever.

Jamie wasn't gay. He got the virus from a car accident and a blood transfusion four years ago and three years before the Red Cross started testing donated blood. It was really crummy because Jamie wasn't who you thought of when you thought of people getting AIDS. He was pretty athletic. He was right-wing. He didn't even know any gays. He was also a bit religious. Jamie thought it was lousy, but he

knew he wasn't going to die. He had gotten really sick with a kind of pneumonia when they first diagnosed him. It had happened so fast--one perfect lay-up in a game of pickup basketball and he was on the floor gasping like he'd just been kneed in the solar plexus. "You collapsed," everyone said at the hospital. Just like people do on TV. Then all the tests. He'd wanted to die right away, like when you roll up your sleeve for a needle and wait--you can only keep your head turned away so long.

But he didn't die. In fact, he felt completely better now. It seemed an absurdity now that he could think he would die from something so inane; so sensational; something that had nothing to do with him; from an oversight; from a percentage. He didn't plan on dying, period. He planned on marrying Clara to save her because now that she was seropositive she was a carrier and couldn't have another relationship ever, and it was his fault.

Jamie and Clara had been perfect for each other except that Clara thought Jamie was too predictable, and Jamie thought Clara was crazy and "loose." When they were first together, she bought him Joni Mitchell's "Wild Things Run Fast" for the old song "You're So Square," and she would sing along just to the one line, "You're so square, baby I don't care." Clara was more adventurous than Jamie. She was the kind of girlfriend your parents didn't approve of; not the serious get-engaged, get-married kind of girlfriend.

Clara thought Jamie was good for her with all his non-verbal jock friends. In high school she'd been the "I'll slash for my man" type and she needed someone who wouldn't push her to that edge. Jamie was good for her except he didn't really like her. He treated her better than Chris, her last boyfriend, who had thrown a twelve of beer at her (empties, one by one) because she'd laughed at some other guy's (Jamie's) joke. She was always getting in trouble for things like that and she could see it coming tonight at the party she was at with Jamie, even though she was totally committed to Jamie, lock the door and throw away the key. It was the kind of commitment you imagined your great-grandparents had on their homestead twenty miles from the nearest neighbour--union by blind faith, nothing so fleeting as choice. There is something pleasing and reassuring about any kind of finality but Clara was the kind of person whose feelings always came in pairs of definitive opposites. Yes means no, not ever.

At the party, they were playing The Fine Young Cannibals and in the living room people were dancing slowly and clumsily because of the music and because it was late and a lot of them were drunk. Patty and Ian, who might have met once before, were doing a cross between a waltz and the pogo, jarring their pelvises against each other seriously and almost in time. Jamie was in the kitchen with some of his friends eating humus and taco chips and talking sports.

Part of Jamie's strategy for not dying was to stay incredibly healthy by working out all the time, eating good food and not drinking or smoking. Clara was with a cluster of girls in the living room, drinking and watching the dancing. They were mostly watching Patty and Ian. "It's disgusting," Melanie said. Ian was short with short, straight, gelled hair and slightly bowed legs. Patty was taller. She was wearing turquoise tights and a stiff black vinyl mini-dress that resisted all but the jerkiest movements. Ian was a friend of Jamie's. As far as Clara knew, he had absolutely no personality, but something about him made Clara keep watching. "It's pornographic," Melanie said. Clara said if she was a little more drunk she would waltz-fuck Ian off Patty's hands.

"Well, it's safe sex," Allison said.

"Naw, you can get AIDS from just looking at Patty."

Laughter.

"Ian's not looking at her. He can barely stand up, let alone keep his eyes open."

Clara missed a few minutes of the conversation because she was scrutinizing as many faces as she could focus on to see if any knew about her or Jamie. There was no way anyone here knew.

The conversation got more personal. Allison was talking about charity fucks. "You know, when you don't even like the guy, but it's three in the morning and it's

freezing cold out and you're too tired to explain in a way that won't collapse his already bruised ego. You know. The kind of guy with big cow eyes."

"And moles."

"And his own special smell."

More laughter.

Melanie was trying to see what was funny. "Ick. I could never do that. I couldn't even kiss someone I don't like a whole lot. It's gross. What's the point?"

Clara fantasized about throwing up on or very near Melanie. She smiled through her teeth. "It's not a question of point. You live in the world, so things happen. Things, not points, get it?" Clara stopped and laughed because she sounded too serious for girl talk at a party. No one else laughed. They sipped their beer or lit cigarettes and looked around the room. They looked uncomfortable and slightly annoyed, as if she'd broken the party code--never say anything you mean as if you mean it, as if it matters.

Ian and Patty stumbled into Melanie and pushed her against a coffee table. "Ooh!" She shoved Patty as hard as she could. "Cut it out."

"God, I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Ian was saying to everyone. "I'm terribly sorry." He kept saying it, milking it, like it was his only line in a major motion picture.

Clara wished the film was Notorious and she could be Ingrid Bergman. She could say to Ian, "Good times, that's what I want. With people who like me and understand me." Because she was Ingrid Bergman, she wouldn't have to spell out the sense of tragedy.

"No big deal," Clara said. She felt Jamie's hands on her shoulders.

"What's no big deal?" Jamie asked.

"Charity Fucks," Allison said.

"Stupid idiots," Melanie said for an exit line and went to look for her coat.

Everyone laughed except Jamie who stood straighter than usual with a dignified look of ignorance on his face. The kind of conversation they had been having didn't bear finding out about. He tried to think of something pleasant to say.

"Let's walk home," Clara said. "I want to puke in the snow."

Jamie squeezed her shoulders, maybe in a gesture of affection, but his hands were strong and Clara's shoulders knotted with tension. It hurt, but Clara didn't care. It felt good to break through the numbness of the alcohol.

"Let's go," Jamie said. "It's nauseating watching you."

"This is a very strange love affair."

"What?"

"Come on. Let's go have a picnic."

"Let's go home, Clara."

Outside, away from everyone, they felt better. Just Clara and Jamie walking through the empty snowy streets holding hands. Jamie's cheeks were red and his ears seemed to stick out more in the cold. He didn't look around when he walked. Everything about him was concentrated on moving in one forward direction. Watching him, Clara felt that knowing what she knew would happen to Jamie was the one way she had betrayed him. Clara started to talk about a new TV series, "Mount Royal," that was filmed in the neighbourhood they were walking through. It was a stupid show, but Clara liked it anyway. She got a laugh out of it. Jamie wouldn't have understood that, but he didn't say anything. He was feeling a canker sore on the inside of his cheek with his tongue. He felt dizzy with heat and then freezing cold, like a little kid with a fever. It was late and he was just over-tired. Clara's chatter smoothed out the rest of the walk home.

At home they were like an old couple who had long since closed the space between touching and being touched. They no longer made love with the violence of beginning; of claiming and proclaiming. After, they fell quickly asleep.

Jamie was looking in the mirror. His face was covered with great red acne splotches. It was repulsive. The kind of face he would never have been friends with. His mother was standing behind him in the mirror saying, "I told you to use the cream I bought you. Just look at you. If you'd only listen."

"I used it. I used it all." Jamie was whining and practically crying. It made his face look worse. He put his hands to his face because he couldn't bear to look anymore. Instead of his face he felt a soft gooey mass. He pressed to locate the bones of his face, but his hands just got slimier and he found nothing solid. He was afraid to keep pressing so he stopped and looked at his hands. They were covered in a green, pus-like mucus. He saw that all the pimples on his face were erupting, making a mess of slime like the face of a monster from a cheap horror movie. He couldn't look. He couldn't not look.

"I used it. I used it," Jamie was saying into his pillow and Clara was pressing on top of him, holding his wrists to stop his body from shaking.

"Shhh, shhh. It's only a dream, Jamie. It's okay. It's okay."

After a while, Jamie got up and went to the bathroom. He saw his familiar clear face in the mirror and smiled at it. It smiled back at him. He ran his hand along his cheek and jaw where he would have to shave in the morning. He

tried to get a look at the sores inside his mouth, but he couldn't find an angle where there was light enough to see.

Still Another Version: Cheesecake

Because nothing meaningful happened to either of them--neither of them had a fatal disease--Jamie and Clara stayed together long after Jamie got cynical and stopped thinking Clara or anything else was crazy. Jamie quit his jock friends or they quit him. Jamie got a hair cut and glasses like Elvis Costello's and a full scholarship to NYU film school. He planned to take the summer off and have some fun before moving to New York.

Clara wasn't sure if she'd move with Jamie to New York. She'd go if she had something meaningful to do there. That didn't mean waitressing in a place like Calories, the Yuppie-pig spot in Westmount where she worked now. Jamie bought her the New York Times for the classified and caught himself hoping she wouldn't find anything. It wasn't that he didn't love her or that he had stupid, romantic ideas about New York film makers and their lonely, drugged-over lifestyles. He didn't have any illusions and he thought he probably did love her. They'd been together for five years, ever since that party where Ian gave them both a ride home and Clara had to sit on Jamie's lap to make room for Allison who was passed out in the back seat with little strings of

vomit coming from the side of her mouth. Five years is a long time, his whole adult life, and Jamie thought they had fun together too. Clara wore his shirts. Some of them had become her shirts. Whatever was bothering Jamie probably had nothing to do with Clara. Anything would have gotten predictable after five years. Jamie liked predictability in certain things. Isn't understanding predictability the same thing as having freedom?

Jamie didn't consider other women. He didn't think they were attracted to him. Ex-jocks and would-be filmmakers are everywhere in Montreal. He didn't think even Clara was all that attracted to him. The year before they had moved in together, they spent almost every night together in Clara's single bed in her parents' basement. They had perfected the art of molding their bodies into a single compact arc. When they got the apartment, they got a king-size poly-fill comforter and pushed two single bed mattresses against each other. Sometimes they slept the whole night without even bumping into each other. Lately Jamie had been waking up with an arm or a leg lodged in the crack between the two mattresses. Clara would already be up having coffee with their feeble-minded roommate, Carla. Jamie would hear them laughing in the kitchen and rattling dishes aimlessly.

Jamie was bored, so he decided to drop in on Clara at Calories. He had been wandering through Les Terrasses,

vaguely thinking about buying a Fine Young Cannibals compact disc and trying to estimate how long it would be before he would be wearing bermuda shorts. Everyone was wearing them. They were in every store window. Mauve was a major colour. Jamie was pretty sure his spindly legs would look ridiculous sticking out of a pair of knee length bloomers covered in mauve sunflowers, but that wasn't the point. Advertising and peer pressure were what mattered. He gave himself three weeks to a month. He thought he'd tell Clara about how he was weakening. She'd get a kick out of it.

"I almost bought the bloomers." Jamie's voice was controlled and flat. He had been crammed into a window seat for ten minutes smoking a cigarette and waiting for Clara to notice him.

"What?" Clara said. She was wiping the next table and repeating to herself, "Two coffees and a decaf; three cheesecake--two cherry, one blueberry."

"The bermuda shorts. They were screaming at me to buy them."

"So buy them. Look, it's crazy in here at lunchtime. You know that--"

"What? And become a slave to mass-marketing? Never. I do what I like in this town. I--"

"So don't buy them. Now I can't remember whether it was two cherry or two blueberry."

EMERGENCIES

The appointment is at three o'clock. Nicol knows Danny won't be finished with the bike in time and will leave the pieces scattered all over the living room.

Nicol is sliding the razor across her wrist, keeping it about a millimetre away from her skin. It's merely a test run. She is sitting in the bathtub wearing only her pink nylon shorts. Gym shorts left over from high school that are ugly but still fit. The plastic sides of the tub are too cool to lean back on so she is hunched up in the middle with her wrist laid out across her knees.

Danny is in the living room with the pieces of his bicycle spread out on newspaper. Every year he takes the bike apart for spring cleaning. He is meticulous about it, scrubbing down everything from the frame to the tiniest bolt.

At first they were just sharing the apartment, but they've been living together in the Christian sense for over two years now. They started sleeping together when there was a problem with the boiler in the basement. The heat was off and Danny's sleeping bag loaned out. They are both

still shy with each other, even though they have started to depend on each other and say I love you.

Danny is sitting on the floor staring at the stripped red frame, smoking a joint. He isn't thinking about Nicol or the would-be baby. He is remembering the time when he and his friend Lenny broke into the art studio where they both work. They mixed up a batch of poster paints. Lenny had wanted to paint rainbows and write, "Let the children play," on the walls. Somehow, Danny got carried away. He covered his hands in red paint and did cartwheels across the studio floor. He imagined himself going across the floor, up the wall and then spinning across the ceiling. He would be surrounding the room with a ribbon of red hand prints. What happened was that he got half way across the floor and crashed into some easels. He didn't break them and his hand prints didn't add much to the floor which already looked like a Jackson Pollock. Lenny said, "Hey, forget it. You're such a klutz, Danny," so they dumped the rest of the paint down the sink.

Outside they sat on the steps, freezing cold, sharing a joint. Danny's hands were still covered in red poster paint, so Danny did his Baptist minister imitation and washed the blood of the lamb from his hands in the snow while solemnly reciting Lenny's ancient proverbs from junior high: "The world is your oyster. Grab it by the pearls. Whether you like oysters or not." He kept it up until his

fingers were numb and Lenny was laughing so hard he was holding his stomach and practically choking.

Danny would like to reach back into that memory and pick up the easels he'd scattered. He wished he could go back and wipe the floor clean, not just of his hand prints, but really clean. Gleaming yellow linoleum. He feels so cluttered he can hardly think. Nicol wouldn't even talk to him today. He was going to tell her that everything would be all right. If she wants to have the baby, that's okay. They could get married. He had meant to say, "Why not, Nicol. Let's just go with it," or maybe, "Listen, you know I want whatever you want," but those phrases sound like lines in a script, not his life. He tried to imagine himself with a nine-to-five job, probably as a gopher in his dad's office. He would phone her at coffee break to see how the baby was. He would have gone through with it, he was sure, but when he tried to tell her, she just pulled away and looked at him as if she didn't know him; didn't want to know him. The hurt hung on him all day so he couldn't recapture the fantasy about the baby.

Nicol has her fist clenched so the skinny tendons that cut through her wrist protrude slightly. It is a relief she doesn't have ugly blue veins as thick as ropes like Danny's. Except for the tautness of the tendons, her wrist is really bland.

The blade accidentally nicks her skin. It's just like a paper cut. There is a thin line of blood, nothing significant. Her stomach turns over on itself, but it doesn't really hurt.

Danny gets up and pulls the auto switch on the record player. Joan Armatrading starts up again with no sign of tiring out. "You get too jealous/ You rope you tie me/ I need to be free." It's just background. Nicol once asked Danny how he could listen to the same album over and over again like that, even if it is Armatrading. Danny just said, "okay," and put on some la-dee-da jazz record, but then he played that one three times.

Nicol turns the water on to drown out Armatrading, forgetting she is still wearing her shorts. She jumps up, smashing her shoulder on the towel rack. The seat of her shorts is wet and hangs down like soggy diapers. She peels off the shorts and lies down in the bottom of the tub. The tap is on full blast, but the tub is too big to fill up fast enough for her.

The door to the bathroom has been painted too many times and doesn't close properly. From the hallway Danny can see most of Nicol in the bathtub. The water is steaming, but she has goose bumps where her skin is exposed. He can't see her face, but imagines it sullen and distant from him. The faceless body doesn't look like it could

possibly love him. Her hip bones, breasts and knees jut out. They are hard to look at: bare white patches like hills that once had trees, but have since been logged to death. For an instant he imagines taking the body and caressing it, making it alive, making it respond. In the fantasy, her body is warm and slippery-wet. Her hands are all over him, practically demanding him. But he can't get a picture of her face that isn't severe or sullen, like when he tried to talk to her this morning. The effort to create her face losing itself in pleasure; losing itself in him is too much. Instead he sees himself with a wave of disgust: a peeping tom, spying through a crack in a bathroom door, lacking word or gesture to justify his position.

Nicol squishes down and wishes the water were blankets and she could go to sleep. When she was fourteen, her friend Lise used to come over and wake her up before school. They would sit on Nicol's bed and have Player's Light cigarettes and orange juice for breakfast. Sometimes they would talk themselves out of going to school and spend the day blending into the shopping mall, people watching and making plans.

One day Lise woke Nicol up by bouncing up and down on the end of her bed. "Do you want to run away from home?"

Nicol was half asleep. "Sure."

Then Lise said the magic words: "Don't Think."

Nicol can't remember the names or faces of the people who gave them rides. The first guy asked a lot of questions. It seemed appropriate to lie to him even though he was more interested in asking than hearing the answers.

"Are you gals sisters?"

"Yeah."

"Twins?"

"Well, sort of...we aren't really sisters like that."

He asked how old they were and they answered in unison, a little too quickly, "sixteen."

"Sixteen means you're legal. You have lots of boyfriends?"

By the time they got to Saskatoon it was getting dark and harder not to think. Somehow they got dropped off near the centre of town, with no idea how to get back on the main highway. They spent the night huddled together in the foyer of Victory Elementary School. They said a little prayer to the janitor, thanking him for leaving the door unlocked. Lise propped herself up against the radiator and Nicol curled up against her. They kept their arms around each other and whispered and giggled most of the night. Nicol started singing some song from the radio, "I wanna live like lovers do." Lise answered with her own version, "I wanna die like lovers do." They traded off lines, "I wanna sigh like mothers do."

"I wanna fry like onions do."

"I wanna live like livers do."

"I wanna lie like your brother does."

And then together, a little too loudly, the last line of the song, "Is it really with you?"

Then Lise was whispering again in a phony accent from no identifiable place, "Hush, hush sweet Nicolai. We are lovers. I could never leave you." Nicol was giggling in steady waves. Somehow they got to sleep eventually.

When she woke up, Lise was slumped against her, still asleep. She was breathing noisily, like someone on a hospital soap opera gasping her last breath under an oxygen tent. It was morning in Saskatoon and Lise was having an asthma attack.

They held hands in the back of the cab. Nicol realized she was breathing slowly and mechanically in rhythm with Lise, as if it were possible to do some of it for her. Lise looked scared because Nicol was. Nicol whispered, "Do not worry sweet Lisonovitch. It is really with us."

At the emergency ward, Lise was taken in a wheelchair down the hall. A nurse asked Nicol a lot of questions and phoned both her parents and Lise's. An old friend of the family whom Nicol could hardly remember came and took her to the bus depot. She bought her breakfast and a non-refundable ticket home to Winnipeg. Lise's parents were flying into Saskatoon that afternoon.

When Nicol finally gets out of the bath, the music has stopped. She puts the razor blade away in the upper corner of the medicine chest. She gets dressed and yells to Danny to get ready to go.

Danny's gone though. He left a note and the keys to his Datsun. The note says, "Sorry, Nicky--I had to go meet Lenny--an emergency--you know Lenny--you'll be fine--Love Danny." Nicol reads the note over a few times as if there must be something else in it; a hidden message she's missing.

Danny half runs, half walks over to Lenny's apartment. There is no one home, of course. He sits down in the hallway and gives the yellow green, indoor-outdoor carpet a good stare. He doesn't think about the imaginary baby. Instead he sees the bike in his mind, going over bolt by bolt the way he took it apart. He imagines scrubbing down each piece of metal and returning them all to their proper places. Nicol gathers up the smaller pieces of the bike and stuffs them in a paper bag. She kicks the other parts into a heap in the corner of the room and piles the frame on top. She is almost out the door when the phone rings. It is Lise calling from Toronto.

"Hey, I'm getting married."

"To Tom?"

"No, to Billy the Kid. Of course to Tom. I want you to be my best man, Nicol."

"Okay, but tell me one thing, Lise. Is it really with you?"

They laugh and Nicol says, "I can't talk. I've got an appointment to make."

"Don't think about it. It'll go away," Lise advises.

"We aren't fourteen anymore, Lise. Can't you get that through your head?" Suddenly, Nicol is crying uncontrollably, whimpering and practically bellowing at the same time.

"Shh. shh." Lise is crooning into the phone. "It's okay. Do you want me to come? Is Danny there? Is it Danny? I'll come tomorrow if you want. Don't worry. It's good to cry. Do you think you can stop crying and tell me what's wrong?"

Nicol can finally talk. "It's okay, Lise. It's not an emergency. Let's talk about you, okay? Congratulations and all that shit."

They talk about wedding plans for almost half an hour. Nicol has fifteen minutes to make it to the clinic. On the way to the car, she tosses the bag into one of the garbage cans. The can was empty, so the bicycle bits hit the bottom with a thud.

MAKE ME

Annie liked reading novels. It didn't matter if they were trashy like Danielle Steel's Remembrance or classics like Wuthering Heights or The Red and the Black. She chose them for length, not status. She liked small words and lots of pages. It was distraction. The intensity of the distraction didn't matter. It made her feel adult and happy to climb inside a book that liked the sound of its own voice enough to go on for seven hundred pages or more. She also liked sex, she couldn't get enough, and she hated work and television.

Anna thought she was stupid. Brian said she wasn't stupid, just whiny. Anna said she'd rather be stupid, and anyway she was stupid so what did Brian know about it? Brian was sitting at the counter drinking coffee and waiting for Anna to be finished so he could take her home. Anna wasn't allowed to start putting things away and do the floors until quarter to eleven, even though she hadn't had a customer since nine o'clock, so she was leaning over the dishwasher reading a hard-cover book she'd taken from the town library. The book said "Great Literature Series" on the back cover, but it was the usual stuff: love, disappointment, fancy explanations, but nothing simple enough to be a real moral. Anna could already tell that the hero would die in the end. He wanted too much, and besides,

he was lower class and trying to mix with dukes and counts and even a princess. She was just at the point that it seemed everything was possible for him--everyone liked him, his looks, his cleverness, his shyness. The women were all fighting over him, but she was only on page three hundred. There were too many pages left for him not to fail, ruin everything, get disillusioned, find God or get married. It wasn't a bad book. At least she didn't want him to fail or think he deserved it. She could feel along with the hero the delirium of possibility, even though, as an outsider, she was more skeptical than he could be.

Brian started talking about plans for the addition he wanted to build on their house, and it was quarter to eleven so Anna started sweeping up. She didn't care about the addition. What Brian really wanted was a baby, probably a whole family, but Anna wasn't the type. She'd already been through it against her will once, as a child, and she wasn't about to do it again voluntarily. Thinking about children made it hard for her to breathe. Childhood was like an almost intelligible nightmare. The objects of childhood--parents, schools, monkey bars, the lake in the summer--were just barely too large to be recognizable in her memory. They were like close-ups, made too big and too general to be anything other than monster shapes and monster shadows. There was a lack of air to breathe. The thought of standing back and bringing it all into focus was impossible. Sound

was the same--the radio, screaming, arguing, laughter--all through a loudspeaker that blurred into a roar of noise. Like nightmares, childhood was something you wake up from and shake off. Anna was sweeping under the counter and Brian lifted his feet so she could get under his stool. This was a familiar gesture, an adult gesture. It happened every time there was a late night customer and Anna closed the cafe. "Thanks, Brian," she said.

"We could have an extra bedroom in the back, next to the family room," he said. Brian worked with his dad as a building contractor, so he meant business about the addition.

"I want horses," Anna said. "Why build on that little crummy lot? Let's get a farm."

"When? In 1999? I'm thirty years old," Brian said. Anna was coming by with the mop this time and Brian lifted his feet. "Thanks." Anna bent down to pick up a napkin that was balled in the corner of the floor. "Aw, anyway," Brian said. He looked at her crouched down and thought maybe her skirt was getting too tight. He liked that. She was pretty, but a bit too skinny. He stretched out and nuzzled into the material of her skirt between her legs with his foot. "Come on, Anna. Let's go home."

She stayed crouched a second longer because she was surprised, and she liked to be surprised. "Don't kick me," she said, standing up and coming over to kiss him. He

kissed her back, but quickly, because there was a big window and anyone walking by could see in. She wanted to make love that instant, but it was useless asking Brian to do anything out of the ordinary. He had an aversion to getting caught. He had an invisible mother who travelled everywhere with him, telling him, "Think how it would look to other people, Brian." Anyway, she knew tonight would be okay at home.

Anna and Brian lived in Maberly, a small town about five miles from Perth, the bigger town where Anna worked. The road between was gravel and windy. There were little hay farms and dairy farms all along the way. In the car she rolled down the window so she could smell the night and the farms and everyone, even the animals, asleep for the night. She thought, "we are both this moment thinking the same identical thought. If we didn't think how it would look to other people, we would stop the car and do it right by the gravel on the side of the highway. It's possible that at this moment, all we want is each other and we have that. We have everything we want," she thought.

"Roll up your window, stupid," Brian said. He was driving and his mind was comfortably in that automatic driver's fog. "It's icing up in here."

Anna rolled her window all the way down. "It was too hot in here. stupid. You were falling asleep." She leaned over the back seat and unrolled the back window.

"Anna, cut it out. It's winter. There's frost on the ground. Come on."

"Suffer, stupid. Moron. Illiterate. Hick." She was stretched out over the front seat, unrolling the back window on the driver's side.

"Hey, okay. I didn't mean to call you stupid. I was teasing. Everyone says you're smart. You know I'm crazy about you."

"Freeze your ass. I don't care. See if I care."

"Anna, don't start going crazy on me. It's boring. Act like an adult for once. I didn't mean anything."

"Imbecile. Ignoramus. Did I forget any? You're not just stupid, you're lazy. It's lucky you can work for your dad. What else could you do?"

Nothing would induce Brian to participate in this level of childishness. Everything she said to him, he knew, was designed to get a reaction. Everything in him refused to react. Brian stopped the car, got out, walked around and rolled up the back windows. He got back in and Anna was crying and rolling up her window.

Anna was used to making scenes like this. They just came out of her the way some people laughed for no reason. It scared her though, because it made her feel so crazy and Brian was so uncrazy. How could he stand her? Maybe he'd tell her to get out of the car and he'd drive away and leave her by the side of the road. She cried and said, "I'm

sorry, Brian. I just took it the wrong way. I take everything the wrong way. I'm just tired from work."

Brian hated when she cried. He wasn't mad. He just wanted to be away from her. Far away. "Forget it," he said. And they were home.

* * *

You are really asleep and I don't hate you. I hate myself whining with my voice--do you want to...please, Brian, I just want, I want...whatever you want. Or whining with my hands. Tentative. As if I'm not asking for anything back, as if it's normal, not sexual, to touch you. You patted my shoulder before you went to sleep. It's a different lie. Pat my shoulder like a dog. Whine. You rolled over, hugged yourself, and went to sleep. You sleep with your mouth open. You make quick, jerky inhaling sounds--tense, private, selfish sounds. Your knees are bent and your hands, palms together, are pressed between your thighs. Your legs are skinny, the muscles in your thighs always defined. You are really asleep and I don't hate you. The skin on your back is smooth and perfect except for a white triangle scar by one shoulder blade--an arrow, from target shooting with your brother. I touch it. It's isosceles. You are oblivious, barely dreaming.

It's not completely dark. There's the neon "Jody's Hardware" sign and some light from the tower in the church across the road. Candlelight and neon. My eyes are used to

it and I'm used to you--the shape and shadow of your body sleeping. I squirm and twist and pull at the covers, but nothing affects you. On one elbow, I can lean over and watch the stubble grow, on your face. It only grows at night. That's true. It only grows when you are sleeping, when you can't stop it, when you are lost in sleep. Your face is growing darker, the corners of your mouth are uncontrolled, ragged. Your eyelashes are light and your eyes, not looking, but easily shut. If you are having a nightmare, it's in your face and not your body. Your face is not an expression. It is indifference, chaotic indifference growing darker. You will shave in the morning. You will look at yourself in the mirror calmly and shave. I could hate you. There is something I hate. It's impossible to sleep. My parents hated each other even though they claimed it had nothing to do with us. Us--me and Alicia, who must have been make-believe; an imaginary twin. I don't remember her, only the pretty name. My parents were great dancers. They took dancing lessons on Thursday nights. They weren't hicks. They moved to the city. My father worked in a bank and combed his hair slick back over his head. They hated each other except for sex. They wanted each other. That's what she told me. Once, in the new house, after Alicia, after I thought she was just pretend, he knocked my mother across the room, against the kitchen counter and broke her arm. They made love before he took

her to the hospital. He carried her upstairs, pulling her panties down. Up, up, up. That's a girl. One step at a time, because they wanted each other so bad. They did it on the landing. She told me this after, after he was gone for good, so I'd always know what he'd done to her, but she wanted it at the time. She thought it felt like being really alive, but really, the story goes, it was like being dead. The moral of the story: after, say you didn't mean it.

I can't sleep. I can't sleep. The light is constant: not enough to read by, too much to sleep under. I don't want you anymore. I could leave you, go back to Ottawa. There's nothing here. I don't want it. I think about falling from a building. Seven stories. I would hold my breath, lie on my back in the air and watch the clouds receding. So. I'm not afraid of it. The ground rushing up at me. I would just lie there. It would be instantaneous, the impact, a seven story instant impact. Practically forever.

I push all the covers onto you, bury you in the comforter. It's hot. My nightgown is up around my waist. I would like to masturbate to nothing but sensation, think nothing, touch this button, and nothing happens except the button takes over the world. It turns over and explodes slowly, like a film in slow motion, like the sun blown up in silence. Fireworks. A firecracker opening on the blackness

of space. And opening, and opening...but that doesn't work. I need something human. You are snoring lightly. You would be disgusted if you knew. Horrified. You might even laugh. That almost works, but it's not awful enough. It's boring touching myself; boring shocking you. I am flat on my back, knees bent, right hand moving in circles. Your hand on my throat, lovingly, but too tight. Your face smiling with hatred, your knee between my legs, make me, please. No, that's just awful. Go ahead and hate me. It's boring. My mother didn't get out of bed for almost a year. My wrist hurts--tendonitis. I hold my breath. You and my friend, Lesley. You can't help it--she's wearing a white cotton sweatshirt and she's so beautiful. Your hands are pressing her breasts. She doesn't have a face, no Lesley laugh, no Lesley expression, but her nipples are small and red and maybe tender. You don't want to hurt her. You kiss her breasts and suck everywhere, even the hair under her arms and her stomach, even her stomach is perfect. You can't help it, trying to pull down her pants, you don't mean it, but you're so hard your hands are clumsy and you just have to be inside her now, now, but it's too late. You've come all over your trousers and her and you look ridiculous standing there and how am I supposed to feel, spilling over like drink crystals dissolving in warm water?

It's over and I wish it could have been me, but maybe now it's possible to sleep. Her face is available now, and

I want to fall asleep holding her. She's smaller than me. I would kiss her eyelids, that's all. You move suddenly in your sleep and say something. I pull my knees up to my chest and my nightgown down around my feet. I like flannel...how it feels...

In the dream, Alicia and I are little girls. We are wearing pretty pink nightgowns and playing with matches at night on the bathroom floor. There are no grown ups. We are lighting the matches and throwing them at the drain in the bathtub. Our aim is bad, but the matches are shooting stars and burn up before they land. I am better at it than Alicia. As always, Alicia is better at watching. We are dreadfully excited. One match won't light and I rub the tip between my fingers till it sparks, but the flint is stuck to my thumb. It doesn't hurt. I hold up my thumb like a candle and make Alicia run her finger through the flame. She's scared but I tell her it won't hurt, but what doesn't hurt me hurts her. Her nightgown catches on fire and she starts to scream. The material is like plastic or skin and the flames just dissolve it; lick it away. Instead of helping her, I say, "It's your fault. You shouldn't play with matches." It's my mother's voice, though she isn't in the dream, and it's a muted dream voice that doesn't reach her. Then I am cleaning up. I pile up the burnt out matches and wipe the bathtub. I wipe the soot from the

mirror in circles, but it only smears. The air is thick with chemical smoke and I will certainly be caught. In a panic I remember Alicia, but the dream doesn't have room for her anymore. It's as if it never happened.

"Breathe, Annie," she tells herself, "breathe. You're awake. Stop it."

Brian is a light sleeper in the early morning. He holds her. He comforts her.

"A dream," she says. "A nightmare. A fire. My sister..."

"Annie, dreamboat, Annie," he says. "You're all sweaty." Nothing fazes him. She likes him. His hands are drawing a body for her, tracing it through her nightgown: neck, shoulders, breasts. He is happy. He holds nothing against her. He had been dreaming about flying or just as good.

They make love from their different ends of the earth. It doesn't seem possible to her, the fact of him inside her, of motion, of two together, of Brian and Anna. His movements aren't violent, but determined. He is trying to get at somewhere. Anna likes surprises, she's always "up for them," but this is not what she wants at all. Her body is still fragile and numb with sleep. He is pushing, pushing, pushing. She closes her eyes and her whole face in a grimace. It is an expression of strong feeling: pain or

ecstasy. She is practically awake. He likes his effect on her. The expression on her face is out of control. It feels like she has told him she loves him, wants to have his child, want him, Brian, him. He believes her as if her passion was something he invented, as if he had the power to make her feel it. There is a point where his faith is coercive. She is no longer aware of distance or doubts. Her body is fully awake. She has lost the faculty of speech. They move together more and more quickly, closing in the space. It is as if they are one single sensation, until one of them comes abruptly--another surprise--and they are jarred back into separateness. Brian is holding her wrists tightly and she is smiling at him. She can hardly remember the dream or Lesley.

"Is that what you wanted?" Brian asks.

"That's what I wanted. That's all I want." He looks at her in awe before pulling away and turning to hug himself back to sleep.

In the morning, Anna thought she would stay in bed as long as she could possibly stand it, which didn't turn out to be very long--about forty pages of her book. Brian was gone. He always got up at seven to go to work. She must have been asleep because she didn't remember him getting up today.

Anna got up, put the kettle on and read in the kitchen while she waited for the water to boil. The characters in her book kept proving their love for each other. They climbed ladders in the middle of the night and offered to sacrifice their own children. Anna put the book down and got up to make the tea. It was a glaring, sunny day. She didn't start work until four.

DONUT SHOP LOVERS

The Girl at the Donut Shop

Allison is the girl at the donut shop every morning before 8:30. Coffee with cream. A banana muffin. Heated. Never donuts. No book, no newspaper. Allison draws stars on her napkin. 5-sided, 6-sided, 8-sided. Writes one word: stargazer. Blots it out with drops of coffee from a spoon. Stares out the window, at the counter, at Adam.

Adam is innocuous. Two iced donuts. Black coffee. Anne Tyler just out in paperback. Pretending not to feel stared at. Wolfing donuts. Waiting it out.

It happens every day. 8:30 till quarter to 9:00. The girl in the donut shop is growing her hair. Adam notices. He sees her every day. Adam is on the last page. It's only 8:35. Allison is already staring. Today's the day.

"You can read it if you want. I'm finished."

"No, thanks. I don't."

"Don't what?"

"Don't read."

"Oh." 8:37. Adam has to think of something else to

say. He looks at her outright. She is still staring. A blank marble stare.

"You're here every day."

"Uh-huh. To wake up. You know--coffee. You're always here too. Did you like it?"

"What?"

"You know. The book."

The conversation goes right through them. Meaningless. Allison's face is oval, eyes dark brown, wondering, round (Adam's observations). He sits so straight, like it's perfectly natural (Allison's).

The You Think I Think Conversation

Allison on the passenger side, stocking feet, knees pulled up against her, twisting a strand of hair around and around. Resisting putting it in her mouth. Childish.

Adam driving. Feeling only rage. They both have their eyes on the road. "You always think I'm not on your side. Like I'm the enemy or something. I go to work and you think I'm abandoning you. You think I like being there? Do you think I lie awake at night thinking of ways to make you feel bad?"

"No. No. Did I say that? I'm just...you get so far away, I think you hate me. I do. I think you hate me sometimes because you think..."

"I don't hate you. I don't think anything like that, Allison. Do you always have to make something out of nothing? Can't you just let it go?"

"No," Allison says to herself. "No means no." Someone told her that once. The woman who looked after her when her mother wasn't there. Vanished without notice. She always returned "refreshed." A little bit lighter. Hollows in her cheeks hollower. "You see, I always come back, I'll always come back," she would say, convincing herself, but not Allison. Allison had to reassure her: "Of course you came back. You're such a silly mother and you do look refreshed. Prettier even." She would call her the perfect child, tuck her in and read to her. Allison would curl up in bed, suck her hair and listen to her mother's excited voice, "And then, do you know what happened?" Until the next time.

No means no. Allison is never going to let it go.

"Allison, wake up. At least pretend to pay attention." Adam has been talking. His side of the story. "What's the point," he says. "What's the point." He sees that there is no way out. He just drives. Her body is lodged in the passenger seat. He turns the wheel, slows, changes gears. "You could at least sit normally," he says. "Come on. Sit up."

Allison moans. A low, trembling moan. She's trying to look like she's trying not to cry (Adam's theory).

"Come on, Allie. Please don't cry. I didn't mean anything bad. Come on. Enough."

Adam brakes hard for a rabbit that crosses a few feet ahead of them without even looking. Just missed it. Allison sits straight up and they both stare at the highway, looking for the rabbit, but it's long gone.

"God. That would have been a real mess."

"Yeah."

They forget about themselves long enough to feel better; brighter. Allison is hungry.

"It's nice to get out of the city sometimes," Allison, sounding normal.

"But it's a long drive." Adam slows down for the turnoff. Everything seems to be all right.

Chicken

All Allison has to do is the chicken. The whole apartment smells like gas. She lights the pilot light on the stove. It flickers and goes out. This has been going on for a while. The raw chicken has goose bumps. Allison hates chickens. They are so stupid and so mean. This chicken is being a real bastard. She could fry it, but she doesn't know the Colonel's secret recipe. This is Canada. She doesn't know any fried chicken recipe. She can't stand the thought of sawing the legs and wings off. Allison puts

the chicken back in the oven, pretending the element is on. She opens all the windows.

Sensation

Adam's apartment is nice. She doesn't go to the donut shop anymore. She hasn't been back to her room on Alfred street; hasn't paid the rent. They must be looking for her. Adam doesn't ask. He is everywhere here. In the bookshelves, on the posters, in the toothpaste on the mirror. Even when he's not home, he's holding her, pushing back the edge. Saving her. She puts her hand under her t-shirt and flattens it against her breast. Her nipples are sore and swollen. She squeezes one and then the other. Sensation. Where is Adam? Allison twists her nipple hard. It feels like a steel pin from her breast to her navel. It holds her there. She wants to stay.

Safeway

Adam's friends are coming over. Jerry and Anna. Louise and Orb. Everything is arranged. They are dying to meet Allison. Adam is at the supermarket buying wine and garlic butter for garlic bread. Allison is at home making chicken. Everything is fine. He has no reason to be nervous. Last night she washed her hair and braided it into

sixteen braids. They'll like her. The dinner will be good. Anyone can make chicken. He can't believe they are living together. Adam and the most beautiful girl in the donut shop. She's so sensitive. Never goes out, hardly ever talks. All he has to do is love her more. Sometimes he thinks there's something wrong with her, with them.

Walking through Safeway: the aisles are wide. It's amazing how many different kinds of crackers there are. How many kinds of everything there is. Adam breathes. He knows where the garlic butter is, but he pushes the cart up and down the aisle anyway. He doesn't want this forward motion to end.

Like Normal

The dinner is a disaster. They order Champs Chicken. They laugh about it, but then Allison says it's all her fault. She's such a dunce. She's sorry. "Don't start being a pain in the ass, Allie." Adam whispering through his smiling teeth. Then she's sobbing. Adam has to hold her, shush her, right there in front of his friends. Pathetic. He wishes he could get in an argument with Orb. Flirt with Anna. Like before. Like normal. Jerry and Anna look at Allison and then at each other. They think he doesn't know they know. Orb tries clowning, slobbering over his chicken, making animal noises. "Oooh. It's sooo good."

Louise tells him to shut up. Then Louise and Orb do the dishes as if nothing's wrong. Anna and Jerry keep up the furtive looks. Allison is placed on the window-ledge, eyes dried, one leg stretched straight out, toe pointed, looking sad. Fragile. Adam wants them all to go away. Forget the dishes. Leave the talk about Louise's custody fight, about work, about the movies. Just leave and lock the door. He wants to kiss her back to life right there on the window ledge. Suck all her sorrow till it dissolves in his mouth. He can devour it. He has the power.

Finally she makes them too uncomfortable and they leave. "A lovely girl, Adam." Orb winks. Condescending bastard. "Thanks so much." "Give us a call." He can barely endure it. The door clicks shut.

Donut Shop Lovers

"Let's tell each other the truth about ourselves always," Allison staring straight at his wide-open eyes.

"Alright," Adam watching the perfect open-almost-closed motion of her lips."

"If your feelings for me change or whatever. Let's never be afraid to say it."

"Alright," Adam smothering conversation in a movie kiss. Circa 1946--a long one. No fade out. Sex isn't dirty. Adam and Allison close the door on time. Pull the

shades on everyone else. Lock the cat in the kitchen. Passion isn't phony. It lasts forever while it's lasting. The sheets are falling off the bed. The air is thick like Thunder Bay on a foggy night.

"If we die here, let's be reincarnated as mushrooms. The atmosphere is perfect," Adam looking up from licking Allison's toes, looking for a graceful way to bring his mouth closer, getting lost in the back crevice of a knee.

"You're crazy," Allison's hands on his penis. Direct action. It's easy, pulling him inside her still not completely hard and the only sound is the slushy sound of impact. They can see their breath. It's tacky to talk about quantity. At some point they fall asleep. Wrapped like a Christmas present in each other's arms.

SHE WAS KATE

In the dream everyone is right there by her bed. The director, the cameraman, and the other actors all standing around. Kate feels like the little girl in The Exorcist. At any moment the bed will start shaking and she will be forced to make all sorts of inhuman, retching sounds. Someone should make The Exorcist from the little girl's perspective. She remembers reading a book where they did that with Grendel, the monster in Beowulf, and another one about King Arthur's court from the perspective of the women.

"Be Katherine Hepburn in Suddenly Last Summer," the Director says. He has a confident, encouraging expression. She can't believe this. If he had said Elizabeth Taylor it might have been slightly credible. She has short dark hair and she knows how to smoke a cigarette, but there is no way she can be Katherine Hepburn.

She tries, though. "My niece lacerates herself with memory. That is her illness." It is the only line from the movie she can remember and she isn't even sure she got it right. She feels like Katherine Hepburn though. Skinny and totally in control.

"Good. Now be Judy Garland. When she was the little girl, of course."

To stall, she says, "Kansas or Oz?"

"It's your dream," the director says, throwing the responsibility right back at her. Then an amazing thing happens. She understands that it is her dream and this is one audition she isn't going to blow. She looks down at the little red satin shoes on her feet (even her feet are little) and then the clock radio starts to blast the sports.

The best part is remembering without opening her eyes or moving that she had the dream, that she was Katherine Hepburn and almost Judy Garland. Or as good. She wants to live in black and white or forties celluloid colour for the rest of the day. There is no reason to go to work.

It takes forty-five minutes to find her keys. They are in the pocket of the jeans she wore last night and kicked under the bed with all the other dirty clothes. She has been skipping breakfast lately because there is only cereal and the milk is older than the "best before" date. It was probably still all right yesterday. Certainly the day before. She should have used it up then. There is no way she is going to risk it now. Anyway, avoiding breakfast gives her an edge all morning at work.

She hugs Camus, gives him some water and then lets him out by the back stairs. He is used to spending the day roaming the back lanes, scavenging and picking fights with other dogs. The apartment is too small for him, but she

couldn't stand to give him away. Who would want him, anyway?

On the way downstairs she drops yesterday's paper through the mail slot of Marianella's door. Marianella is a massage therapist. She lives in the apartment below Kate's with her son Luke. Luke was born blind. He is three years old and wakes up in the middle of the night smashing his little body against the walls and howling. Kate hears him sometimes at night, but during the day he is always sweet, running over to touch Kate's face and ask her to read to him. Marianella wants the newspaper to do paper mâché with Luke. He likes the cold glue oozing through his fingers and would put it all over himself if he could.

Kate works at Athlete's World in the postal shipping department. The company ships sports equipment and clothing to schools all over Canada and even to West Germany where there is a Canadian air force base. She likes the names of the faraway places: Uclulet, Ste. Teresa Point, Inuvik, Lehr, West Germany. She likes that from Inuvik to Vancouver Island they use the same soft leather tether balls and the same number five Louisville Slugger baseball bats.

The best part of the day is from 8:30 until 9:00. She has the third floor to herself. She keeps the radio off and looks over the orders waiting to be packed, stamped, addressed and sent downstairs. That is her whole job except

for sweeping up at the end of the day. As usual, it seems like there are an impossible number of orders for one day. Before nine she can drink coffee at her work table without getting caught. She wonders how this small act of defiance could give such intense pleasure. It is good to be too tired to think except in short sputters. "Bored" on its own isn't powerful enough to start someone ripping up baseball jerseys or smashing the postage meter with a floor hockey stick.

The pickers come at five after nine. She has already done three orders of six boxes--probably a record.

She has lunch with Mindy who types invoices downstairs in the office. According to Mindy, the important thing about working in an office is being pleasant. Kate is glad she works in the shipping department. Mindy must not think Kate is very pleasant, but feels sorry for her because she has such awful taste in clothes and isn't engaged and will probably be stuck at Athlete's World forever; at least until the computers take over. Kate feels sorry for Mindy because she is engaged and because, as far as Kate can tell, Mindy has never in her life had a really interesting experience, or even idea for that matter. As far as Kate is concerned, Mindy is a polyester. She wants everything Kate would never want. Kate likes talking to Mindy because it reminds her

that she really does have some things going for her. Mindy must feel the same way about Kate.

They are both nineteen, the youngest employees at Athlete's World. They are both still young enough to expect that something really wonderful will happen to them today or tomorrow that would alter everything. Being young is being small. They are so small that in all that bigness out there, there must be something, a word, a man, an accident, that was made to rescue them from a numb, Athlete's World life. The difference between them, Kate sees, is that Mindy has found her something. He is Gary Staminow, a halfback for the Blue Bombers, and he is going to marry her in the spring. Kate is still waiting for whatever it is to fall on her head, like one of those sixteen ton cubes that get the really bad talent acts on Talent America. It isn't going to be a halfback.

"Did you say yes right away?" she asks. They have already eaten and made fun of Mr. Cranton, Mindy's high blood pressure boss, who wears pin-striped suits with his Reebok running shoes. Dress for success he always says (suck-cess, Kate thinks).

"I wanted to, but I made him wait overnight. I said I wanted to talk to my parents first."

"Are you serious? What would you have done if they didn't want you to?" Kate knows the answer. Mindy told her

about the article on "what to do when he proposes" a month ago.

"How could they not like him? Anyway, I never asked them. I just wanted Gary to sweat a bit first. It's kind of like a superstition for good luck. I read this article about it."

"Oh yeah." Kate has a habit of saying "oh yeah" at work. She says it so much that she's starting to use it at home with her friends. There is a secret about it though. It doesn't mean "oh yeah" as in agreement, but "oh yeah" as in "why don't you drop dead?" As in "please shut up before I tell you how much I could care less." She says it deadpan. Almost pleasantly.

"Oh yeah, I got a letter from Teddy. He's in Vancouver and Cindy's pregnant and he's totally happy. They're going to eat the placenta." Teddy is Kate's ex-boyfriend, though at twenty-nine he's hardly a boy.

"That is sick," Mindy says, looking overly disgusted. Her eyes get mushy and she makes a face. "Isn't that illegal? It's so gross." Mindy likes hearing about Teddy because he is so appalling. He is like her father's war stories: part of another world, an imaginary world.

Kate is a little proud of having spent two years with Teddy--a circus freak by Athlete's World norms--and a little embarrassed. She wants to say to Mindy that he really will do it. It will be some kind of spiritual experience for

him. Just like when he blew up their TV, and when he gave all his clothes to the Sally Ann except for one pair of green work pants, a Clash t-shirt, and a sweater an old girlfriend had made for him. Just like the mushrooms or the spray paint frenzy. For Mindy, the point is that he is outrageous, not transcendental. Kate doesn't feel like explaining. Besides, when she was with Teddy, she wasn't so impressed with his spirituality. "You're a junkie," she told him. "A mushroom junkie, a spray paint junkie, a sex junkie, a spir-it-u-ality junkie. So what."

He had picked up his electric guitar and without plugging it in started playing Neil Young; "I seen the needle and the damage done/ A little part of it in everyone/ But every junkie's like a setting sun..." He had been totally absorbed. For all he knew, he was Neil Young.

"A Neil Young junkie," she had shouted before she could stop herself. He stopped playing and started to laugh--his favorite way of not explaining himself--but then he just looked away. Not long after, when he had left for Vancouver "just for a couple of weeks," she realized it was what she had wanted. She had been afraid he was becoming a permanent part of her life. A final sale. No returns.

After lunch Kate is glad to be back on the shipping floor with only the company of the order pickers. She is the only woman on the floor and the only woman who has ever

worked in the shipping department at Athlete's World. Her friends think it's pretty neat that she's a shipper, but she makes the pickers nervous. They are extra sweet and flirtatious with the younger women in the office like Mindy, and they are crude and buddy-buddy with each other. They are uncomfortable flirting with Mindy in front of Kate and uncomfortable acting like "the boys" around her too. They feel like she is judging them. She is. Today she is glad she doesn't have to talk to them except for "hi" and "see ya later" and "oh yeah." At 4:25 she sweeps the floor and puts everything away.

Kate walks home in a state of numb summer ecstasy. I'm a freedom junkie, she thinks. Freedom of movement. Freedom from Athlete's Foot World. Freedom to not have any have-tos. 4:30 makes her delirious. She would like to keep on walking to the city limits, past the perimeter highway, into some farmer's wheat field at dusk. She would like to walk right out of this life. Half way home, on the meridian, she's trying to cross Portage Avenue, when the delirium goes sour. On the other side she stops to buy some celery soup and crackers at the "7-11", and thinks she'll just go home and eat and go to sleep. It occurs to her that she could be, like everyone else, leading a life of quiet desperation, but she is Kate, not everyone else, so she decides to go home, have soup, and read Catcher in the Rye in the bathtub.

Right now, Kate knows her life is nothing serious. She is in a gap; a space between the things about being alive that matter. There are things. She calls them the "YESes". The first YES she remembers was falling in a swimming pool when she was three. Her eyes were wide. She wasn't afraid. She floated down like she was in amniotic fluid. Because of the chlorine, the water was aqua blue; a watery aqua blue; the correct colour for water. That's all she remembers except that somebody must have saved her. She remembers a large shape like the shadow of a whale coming towards her in the water. It must have been her father.

The second YES was a swamp behind the soccer field at school when she was nine. She had two friends at school, Sherry, who was blonde and giggled all the time, and Melinda, who Kate only liked because Sherry did. Some days Sherry and Melinda liked each other so much that they didn't like Kate. On one of those days, Kate found the swamp. She was going to run away and never come back, but only about twenty feet into the woods behind the school was her swamp. Everything there was old and smelled strong and sweet and heavy like fog. There were huge fallen trees covered with crusty green moss, a tiny creek that barely moved and toad stool mushrooms. Everything was in the process of becoming part of everything else. She could hear the children in the

soccer field, but it just sounded like static from a distant radio, poorly tuned in. The swamp was green and looked musty and wet, the way a swamp should and does. She could see and breathe, and she shrank like Alice until she was a very little girl, and she wasn't separate and she didn't care about Sherry and Melinda.

Meeting Teddy for the first time was another YES. She was in the coffee shop at the Aberdeen Hotel, skipping French class and reading Rainer Maria Rilke. It made Kate feel really brilliant to read Rilke and it made her really happy to skip French. The bar was attached to the coffee shop and she noticed Teddy when they were kicking him out of it. Teddy was shouting, "He's my seeing-eye dog. You can't throw us out. That's illegal. I know some important people. I'm important. Camus' important. You can't do this." Teddy's eyes were blazing--there was nothing blind about them.

The bouncer didn't talk. He just kept pushing Teddy closer to the door, prodding him with the flat of his hand. Teddy's face was beaming with righteous indignation; not the alcohol-induced kind, but the serious, naive kind. The German Shepherd pup was barking short, hard yelps because Teddy was squeezing him against the inside of his jacket, trying to shield him from the bouncer.

Kate stayed in the coffee shop, not reading, but thinking about Teddy's nerve. She thought, "What for, what a trouble-maker," but she liked him. She liked that he wore striped purple pants and that his outrageousness seemed totally out of his hands; he had no idea.

On the way out, Kate tripped over the dog, and then the step. She landed on the gravel, mouth first somehow. Teddy laughed a huge yuk-yuk kind of laugh, a laugh so un-self-conscious it was almost obscene. He stopped dead when he saw the blood dripping down her chin.

"My God. You're going to die. He's a seeing-eye dog. I'm training him. He didn't mean it." The dog just sat there as if nothing had happened. Kate sat on the gravel lot tasting blood. Teddy kneeled down beside her trying to coax the dog to lick the blood off Kate's chin. "Come on, Camus. Come on, Albert. Kiss it better. Camus, Camus, Camus," but the dog just started to pant and grin that insane grin some dogs have when they're panting.

Kate had never cut herself badly before. As it turned out, this cut was not serious, but it seemed like it at first. She had a child's fascination with her own blood. It was exotic like a crime or a revelation running down her mouth, her throat, and staining her t-shirt. Her lip was pulsating. "Spurting," she said. "It's spurting like a fountain."

"Come on, Albert, you schmuck. apologize," Teddy said. He jumped up and whooped another obscene laugh. "Come on, I'll take you to the hospital. The Misery's just a fifteen minute walk." He meant the Misericordia hospital.

"It's all right. I think the bleeding is going to stop." Kate touched her lip tentatively and found a crust forming. She tried to hide her disappointment that her unexpected outburst of blood could so abruptly come to an end. Nothing serious would happen. Then Teddy said he would like to kiss her entire body, everywhere except her lip (where it would hurt) as a penance for him and Camus. Kate wasn't shocked or very surprised. It seemed like since she saw Teddy, the two of them had been ad-libbing a love ritual, something long forgotten, but they found it perfectly intact. Everything that happened was appropriate.

Later, when they were lovers and her first apartment became their apartment, he kept the ritual of never kissing her on the mouth. She'd tried to talk him out of it or force him into it. Said "look, there isn't even a scar," but he told her he'd done enough damage. He was deadly serious and it infuriated her.

At home Camus is waiting for her, hysterically glad to see her. Marianella's door is open and Kate calls hello. Luke is listening to TV and tracing the lines on the couch

with his fingers. Marianella's apartment always smells good, like incense and fresh baking. "Come down for tea later, if you feel like it," Marianella says.

"Sure," Kate says.

Upstairs, she feeds Camus and makes her soup; comfort food. She eats a whole package of crackers while the soup is heating up. She could call Mindy and ask her to go to a bar. Mindy is always saying they should do that sometime. Three months ago, she could have quit work, gone to Vancouver, and talked Teddy back into loving her. Right now she can go downstairs and drink herbal tea and talk about Luke and harmonic convergences. None of these are fair options. She is Kate. She is nineteen and tedium is festering like stubborn cold sores inside her mouth which don't go away because she keeps irritating them with her tongue. Even her boredom feels weak and re-cycled. She decides that tomorrow she will plan her escape from Athlete's World. She will travel in Europe, go to university, and fall in love. She will make all those connections. Starting tomorrow. After supper, she reads Catcher in the Rye in the bath until the water is tepid. She calls down to Marianella that she is too tired tonight for tea, but thanks anyway.

In the dream Luke is in her apartment. Camus growls in his sleep, but he is in his own dream and doesn't wake up.

Luke is applying paper mâché to her body. She moves to make it easier for him. The strips of paper are cool and slimy with glue. He is working on her back and her ribcage. He uses long strips and wraps them like bandages. It is uncomfortable to be touched by such a little child, vaguely erotic and vaguely not nice, but she reasons that he is blind and must touch. She is afraid of suffocating, but because he is blind she thinks he will not understand if she tells him to stop. She looks at him, willing him to stop. His white, empty eyes, the colour of milk and cream separating, stare back. There is a meaningless, idiot smile on his face. The smile of someone who has never seen a smile. His fat hands hold a wide, dripping strip of newspaper. They reach out to cover her eyes. The glue is everywhere in the bed and the room and it smells like yeast. The dream has made everything in the room smaller except the little boy. He is life-size. Kate screams but no sound comes out.

It is suddenly morning and there is light and the sports on the radio. The Expos won. The Blue Bombers lost. The room quietly breathes daylight and regains its composure. It is time to get up and feed Camus and go to work.