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TAKING PLACE

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in

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of

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ABSTRACT

TAKING PLACE

Matt Holland

This work of prose fiction explores two eras of a woman's life through contrasting narratives, situated more than seventy years apart. The woman, May Markham, indirectly witnesses the murder of her neighbour, an undercover R.C.M.P. agent, and becomes embroiled in the ensuing investigation. The disturbance recalls another violent incident, in the early 1920s, in which young May's father was murdered by her troubled lover, Major Redpath. As the story from the past unfolds, it informs May's present while she copes with people and circumstances both new and familiar. She befriends Monique, a colleague and former partner of the dead neighbour, who is struggling with her own demons surrounding the case. Meanwhile, a well-intentioned yet naive young May is revealed: bound by duty, moved by genuine affection, caught in the despair of an impossible and dangerously unpredictable situation. When the contemporary narrative moves toward a similar danger, she simultaneously confronts a concrete threat and an elusive sense of self.

For Basil Holland (1938 - 1992), an avid reader;
and for Marion Byrens (1900 -), an avid liver.

Special thanks to Mary Ellen Holland, sounding-board and mother.

1

The noise took May out of her dream. She opened her eyes to find herself facing the big red numbers on the digital clock that Julia had given her for her birthday. That was the first birthday after she'd had the operation to remove the cataract from her left eye. "Here, May," Julia had said. "They use these at the blind institute." Sweet child, always thinking of others, in her own special way.

1:01. The numbers blinded her and burned into her brain. She cursed Julia lightly as she rolled over in bed to face the wall. They had been friends for over forty years but Julia had taken on the tone of a nurse lately. Big clocks, elevated plastic toilet seats, a rubber lid-opener and lots of talk about getting more rest, and rest homes with lots of rest periods. She wanted to tell her friend to give it a rest. Rest in peace, Julia. May smiled at these words. Julia was twenty-six years her junior and took every opportunity to let May know how much she understood the plight of the elderly. Playing nurse was just her latest technique.

May closed her eyes to the wall. The red numbers were branded to her eyelids on the inside. She couldn't shake the time. She realized that it had nothing to do with Julia, she had used the clock as a distraction, to take her from her dream, or maybe from the waking up. The noise. She had heard a loud, muffled noise that shook her awake. The distraction was not successful in chasing away the nightmare and she knew that it was going to fill her mind now, like an unwanted memory. She opened her eyes and thought about her dream.

She had been standing in the back yard of the house in Pointe Claire, surrounded by her brothers and sisters. They were all young, but May felt heavy and slow and she carried her cane. It was winter, but she was in a spring dress, a light shawl across her shoulders. The children played in the snow in silence. Her brothers, Murray and Paul, were building a snow castle to defend themselves against Dorrie, Muriel and Helen, who were assembling an arsenal of snowballs on the other side of the yard. Wyatt, the oldest boy, looked to be about eighteen as he sat on the back verandah with little Ruth in his lap. He tightened her muffler around her neck and she appeared to be laughing, but no sound came out of her mouth. Behind them stood their mother, cradling the baby, Betty, in her arms. She, too, appeared to be laughing, but May couldn't hear anything. Her mother's foot held the back door open, letting all the cold air into the house. It was so bright outside that the doorway showed the inside of the house to be black.

A snowball whipped past May's nose and the fight was underway. There were no screams or shouts, all May could hear was the sound of her own breathing and the dull impact of a snowball on her shoulder. She turned and headed for the shelter of an old trellis. When she looked back everyone had disappeared except for her mother, who was now without Betty. She was holding the door open with both hands and May could make out several shiny objects in the black door of the frame. As May approached she saw that the objects were brass buttons on a military uniform, worn by her father. She was surprised to see him there and heard herself inhale quickly. He stood stiff and motionless in the doorway, his eyes closed. May looked to her mother and tried to speak, but her mother put her finger to her lips and smiled. Then she let go of the door and it swung back

to close. Her father opened his eyes and mouth wide, then the door slammed in his face; another dull, muffled sound which somehow carried with it the piercing quality of a moan or a cry.

May sat up slowly and swung her legs out over the edge of the bed. She had heard the noise, not simply dreamed it, she was sure. Something had fallen in the apartment. She reached over to the night-table and turned on the lamp. Her cane wasn't in sight. She steadied herself on the bed-board and got to her feet. She had to face Julia's gift again, which was now burning **1:07** into her eyes. May felt that she didn't need the cane, but if something was really wrong in the apartment she could take a good swipe at somebody's knees. Strain their milk for them, make them think twice . . . . Her heart was beating faster.

She got to the doorway and felt for the hall light switch. None of the pictures had fallen off the walls and the telephone table was intact. She ran her hand along the walls as she stepped through to the living room. Something stopped her from turning on the light on the side-table. Shadows appeared under her front door. There was a light knock, May looked around for her cane but she couldn't see anything. She held her breath for a few moments. The second knock was louder.

"May, are you alright?" It was Joan St-George, her neighbour from across the hall. More knocking.

"Just a minute!" May shouted, the tone of her voice taking her a little by surprise. She was starting to become annoyed by her own timidity. The light in the entranceway revealed her weapon of choice, the cane, propped up against the door handle. May

gripped it tightly and pressed her eye to the peep-hole. There was Joan standing next to her husband Benjamin, both of them in matching housecoats. Joan looked stouter than she usually did face to face, May thought. She opened the door the length of the safety chain and squinted into the hallway.

"What is it, Joan? I'm not dressed."

"What was that banging?"

"I don't know."

"Did something fall? Is it your piano?"

"The piano's fine."

"There was a huge noise. Didn't you hear it?"

"I thought I heard something. I was asleep."

"Maybe next door," Benjamin said.

"Denny's not there," May said. "He'll be back Monday."

"Do you have a key to his place?"

Nosy Joan St-George, May thought. "I'm only looking after his mail," she said.

"Maybe we should call Monsieur Plante," Joan turned to her husband, "Or the police."

"Been watching a lot of TV lately, Joan?" May asked.

Joan smiled insincerely at May and said something equally insincere about her hope for May's well-being. Other tenants were coming out of their apartments now, intrigued by the noise and the chatter in the hall. May had had enough. She pulled her face back inside and shut the door.

May poured herself a brandy and sank into the living-room chesterfield. Joan St-George at her door had made her self-conscious. She thought for a moment that her dreams, thoughts, and memories had woken up the whole nineteenth floor. The noise had been in her past but somehow everybody could hear it now. She unfolded the quilt that was draped over the arm of the couch and spread it over her legs. The brandy was slowing her down after the late-night activity. What's the mystery for Joan St-George, May wondered. If something fell or broke in Denny's place, it would be cleared up on Monday. *One day . . . Joan would never make it, she thought, she's probably phoning the police* right now.

2

May's seventeenth birthday, a Friday, was a bright, cold Montreal day. She had spent the morning, and her birthday money, at Morgan's, but had come away with a beautiful pair of brown leather ankle boots. It was hard to keep them in the box, however; she couldn't resist putting them on and modeling them for her best friend Bea and Bea's mother, who were treating her to lunch at Ogilvy's.

"May, I'm jealous. They're the absolute limit. They're gorgeous. Mother, I have to have a pair, " Beatrice said, as she bent down to get a good close look.

"You know, I had three older sisters when I was growing up, your Aunt Clare, aunt Marion, and aunt Catherine -- Beatrice, dear, sit up straight -- and, of course I would get their hand-me-down boots to wear. You have sisters, don't you, May dear? Of course you do, but you're the eldest, aren't you? Well, by the time the boots got to me, they were just about finished. My father'd done all he could to stitch them up, but needless to say they were still a mess. I used to stuff them with burlap, it was the closest color --"

"Mother!" Beatrice interrupted.

"They're very nice, May, dear."

"Thank you." May sat down and looked at her menu.

"It's good of you to take me out to lunch, Mrs. Chatham," she said.

"I hear that the watercress salad is very good. It's from a spring in New England. Have you ever been, dear? We used to summer at Deer Isle, Maine, when I was a girl, but, being the youngest, I was splashed all the time in the lake or my sisters would try to pull

off my bathing suit. They were a lot harder to get off in those days, I can tell you. But it wasn't all torture, you know, we could get along sometimes. I remember --"

"What are you going to have, May?" Beatrice glared at her mother.

May smiled politely and ordered the salmon platter. Mrs. Chatham blinked heavily and ordered watercress salads, for herself and her daughter. May was very careful about her table manners. All through the meal Bea would smile at May and roll her eyes while her mother was talking. She began to nudge May's knee with hers periodically, and tilt her head towards the hallway. May wasn't understanding her friend's signals. Finally the waiter brought the bill.

"May we please be excused for a moment, Mother?" Bea pushed her chair back from the table.

Mrs. Chatham squeezed her daughter's arm. "You've had a very full day so far, haven't you May?"

May hesitated, to make sure Mrs. Chatham had really left her an opening.

"Er . . . yes, Ma'am. And there's more to come. I'm off to meet my father at the brokerage. He's taking me to the Windsor and then we're going to a picture together."

"What will you see?"

"Mother, I have to go." Bea started to rise. Her mother's arm was on her arm once more. Bea sat down again, trying not to roll her eyes.

"It's . . . it's a western. My father likes westerns, I think it's called *Cradle Of Courage* . . . I really want to see the comic short, it's a Harold Lloyd, *High and Dizzy*." May looked over at Bea, who was sulking.

"I've never heard of him," said Mrs. Chatham. "But I remember going to see 'The Count Of Monte Christo' when I was about your age as a matter of fact, at the Princess Theatre. That James O'Neill, he played the count, had a booming voice. We all had crushes on him. In those days we had all the best touring companies from the U.S. and Great Britain. I've never been taken with motion pictures, though, the light gives me a headache. Your father loves them. Honestly, that man would rather spend an evening sitting in some dark theatre balcony than at home with his --"

"Mrs. Chatham, I would like to visit the ladies' powder room, may I please be excused?" May smiled her most pleasant smile.

"Of course." As May stood up, Bea stared hard at her mother.

"Be so good as to take Beatrice with you, Dear."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Bea looked back at her mother who was now discreetly removing the complimentary bread rolls and putting them into her handbag. She nudged May with her elbow and the two began to giggle as they rounded the corner into the hallway.

The bathroom was big and empty, their voices echoed outside the marble stalls.

"I am at my wit's end with her, May, . . . every minute of the day. I can't breathe!"

"Is that why your eyes were bulging out of your head at lunch?"

"No. I was dying to get away from her so I could give you this." Bea slid a thin white envelope under the stall.

"You didn't have to, you already took me to lunch."

"It's from him, May, he was waiting for me at the hospital this morning." May's throat and stomach muscles tightened. "Him" meant the Major. She looked at her name on the envelope, she recognized the crude, shaky handwriting from the more recent entries in the Major's diary. She hadn't seen him in over two months. Her mouth felt dry as she opened the letter and read it:

May, *January 14th, 1921*

I found you. Many happy returns on the day. I'd love to read the register of surprise on your face, but unfortunately, I have other business to attend to. I am delinquent on my furlough from Guelph. They're keeping their eye on me, though: I stopped two Guardsmen (dispatched from Guelph, no doubt) from following me and placed them under arrest. I only meant to scare them off but of course they denied everything, even got the police involved. How's your old man? He's hard to pin down. But, I love a challenge. Happy Birthday, dear May,

Ravenlocks and clear blue eyes
Traits of May or a clever disguise?
But seduction's tools fade away
To reveal a soul too long at play
"Unshrouded essence, what have you seen?"
My mantle is no longer sweet sixteen.

May clutched her coat collar closely around her neck as she ran down the slippery sidewalks of St-Jean street. It was sunny but very cold, and the wind was taking the top off the snow drifts and throwing it in her eyes. She heard the big clock at Place D'Armes strike three as she crossed over onto St. Sacrement. She walked briskly past the Board of Trade Building and stopped at the corner of St. Nicholas to let a motor car slide by. Her father had pointed out the streets, buildings and offices of Montreal's financial district to her last summer. May thought that he was grooming her for a job at MacDiarmid Brothers when she finished her secretarial training, but he had yet to say anything about it.

She squeezed the box under her arm tightly. The Major's letter had made her anxious. She reached the Marconi Building and entered the outer offices of Abernathy Insurance, waved quickly to her old school chum, Eleanor Laurendeau, who now worked at the front desk, and hurried through the swing gate that separated the insurance office from MacDiarmid Bros. brokerage.

There was a client in the reception area, scrutinizing the market ticker. May approached the office door with her father's name on it. It was slightly ajar. She swung it open, startling William Markham at his desk. He jerked his pen, upsetting the inkwell and smudging a report. He stared crossly at his daughter, who began to smile in spite of her shortness of breath.

"Sorry, I should've knocked," she said in a gasp.

"Mary . . . Alice . . . Markham . . ." He pronounced each name with exaggeratedly slow, deliberate, menace. May curtsied.

"You wish to say something, sir?" she said coyly.

"Come . . . here."

She approached the desk, lingered for a moment in front of his hard stare. Suddenly, her father stood up, grabbed her shoulders with both hands, leaned over and kissed her on the cheek.

"Happy Birthday, precious."

"Poppa," she frowned.

"Sorry, happy birthday, May."

"Thank you." She sat down in a chair near the wall. "Sorry about the . . . well, whatever that was."

"It's not entirely your fault," he said, "It wasn't a terribly stimulating document to begin with."

"I knew it. I will bring you nothing but good luck today."

Mr. Markham raised an eyebrow, "Good or bad, I will have to clean up this daily before we go to the pictures. I'll be a few minutes."

"I'll have a chat with Eleanor." May rose and left the office.

"Yes, do," said her father as he sat down to a fresh report.

Eleanor liked the new boots.

"Congratulations, I wish I'd remembered it was your birthday."

"That's alright," May said, prancing.

"You're not going to spoil them in the slush, are you?"

"I want to show Poppa, he's finishing up."

Eleanor shook her head with a smile. "Your father's a real caution. You know what he did today?"

Before May could answer, she was distracted by a loud sound from down the hall. The slamming of a door.

"It's the side door, on the alley," Eleanor explained, "It must be windy out."

"It is."

Mr. Cullinane, manager at Abernathy, came out of his office.

"Nobody should be using that door, Eleanor, the alley hasn't been cleared of snow."

"I know it, Mr. Cullinane, I thought we were the only ones here. And Mr. Markham."

"There was a client next door a few minutes ago," May added.

"Hello, May, are you here to take the bear back to the circus, where he belongs?" Mr. Cullinane laughed and went back into his office.

"What?" May looked at Eleanor.

"That's what I was telling you; something got into your father at lunch today; he was growling and roaring, with his arms out and stamping his feet. He kept saying, 'I'm a bear on the market -- Feed me -- Feed me shares!'." Eleanor made a face to go with the description.

"He didn't." May covered her eyes in mock shame.

The client came through the swing gate, buttoned his overcoat, tipped his hat to Eleanor and May and turned toward the door. Another loud noise, a dull popping sound, closer this time, made them all start. Mr. Cullinane was out of his office again.

"What is the bear up to?" he asked, nodding his head at the client, who had turned back to face the direction of the muffled sound.

"Slamming his desk drawer, probably," Eleanor said.

"I made him ruin his daily,"said May sheepishly.

"You'll have to forgive the office antics of a Friday afternoon, Sir," Mr. Cullinane apologized. The client muttered something in agreement and opened the front door. A cold breeze shot into the outer office area, upsetting papers on Eleanor's desk and blowing them about.

"Somebody's left that side door open," Mr. Cullinane shouted among the debris. The client stepped out onto the street and let the door go, another slam followed and the papers settled. Eleanor and May bent down to gather them up, Mr. Cullinane shivered and cursed under his breath. The swing gate opened with a kick and narrowly missed hitting May on the floor beside it. Her father staggered into the outer office.

"Poppa, look out," May said, looking up at him.

"Bill, you know that side door is only for emergencies --"

Mr. Cullinane stared at Bill Markham's face. He was holding the fountain pen in his left hand, his right hand was at his breast, over the heart. His tight grip rumpled the lapel of his suit coat.

"I'm shot," he said blankly. He repeated it.

Mr. Cullinane chuckled, "Somebody hunted down the great stock market bear, did they?" Eleanor laughed, May started to get to her feet.

William Markham fell forward onto a premiums chart, collapsing the easel that supported it. He landed face down on the floor, his right hand tucked under him, his left hand still grasping the pen, which dripped black ink onto the floor.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Forty-five minutes later, a young police detective draped a blanket over May's shoulders. She sat at Eleanor's desk, drinking hot tea and staring ahead to the street. The sun was going down and she thought about tea at the Windsor. The detective spoke. "There's a lot of coming and going, Miss Markham, you'll be wanting to keep the draft away." The constant slamming of the front door recalled the earlier noise that she now knew was the single shot that had killed her father. It was unbearably loud and disturbingly clear and resonant in her memory. She sipped her tea and wrinkled her nose at the mothball smell of the blanket.

Her father was dead before Mr. Cullinane turned him over. There was barely any blood, just a small round hole in his vest. The police arrived, then the coroner, the body was lifted onto a stretcher and carried away. Her brother Wyatt had been notified. He came, but he didn't last long, he broke down and had to be carried out, too. Two or three people had asked May the same questions over and over again. But she hadn't seen anything.

May looked down at her new boots. One of the laces was undone. She left it and turned her attention to the boot box, which had been kicked around, stepped on in all the confusion. She noticed the letter that had been inside it, lying a few inches away from her old pair of boots. Her stomach muscles tightened as she bent down to pick it up. She had wanted to read it again but she had just remembered every word very clearly, "hard to pin down -- I love a challenge." A moment of panic seized her and she froze in her crouched position. She wanted to be asked those same questions again. Her answers would be different.

The front door opened. May, still bent over behind the desk, turned her head to peer around the side of it at the blue coat who had just come in. He spoke to the detective:

"Sir, there's a man just walked in to Station 3 and admitted to shooting Mr. Markham." The policeman blew on his gloved hands. There was a pause.

"What are you gawking at, Sergeant? Do you know him?" asked the detective.

"Yes, sir, we all do." The sergeant took a deep breath. May picked up the letter from the floor and straightened in her chair.

"Well, Sergeant?" The detective put his hands on his hips.

"It's Major Redpath, sir, the Provost-Marshall."

Both men turned to look at May, who had closed her eyes and was crumpling the letter in her hands.

3

"Madame Mark-am?" There was a knock.

"Who's that?" May asked before she opened her eyes.

"Police, Madame. To ask you some question."

The man's voice was coming from the hall, soft but clear. May propped herself up on one arm, reached over to the side table and picked up her glasses. There was still a bit of brandy in the bottom of the snifter and she jostled it leaning on the table to get to her feet.

"I'm not dressed, let me get a dressing gown on," she called to the front door. She dropped the quilt on the chesterfield, picked up her cane and headed for the bedroom. It was very bright. She had left the hall light on and now the sun was coming in through the bedroom window. From the closet door she called again,

"Are you the building security?"

There was no answer. She repeated the question when she got near the front door, pulling her arm through the sleeve of her housecoat.

"No, Madam, M.U.C. Police," said the voice, "Just a few question."

"Yes, alright." May released the safety chain, pulled back on the bolt and opened the door to a man in a beige suit and a young woman in a dark blue uniform. Both were holding identification badges.

"I must have fallen asleep." May let them in. The man glanced around May's small living room. It was difficult to tell how old he was. He had a good head of hair on him but May noticed a little grey in his mustache. Both were unsmiling.

"It's still very early," said the man. "My name is Sergeant Lajoie, this is Constable Bertolli." The woman nodded slightly at May, then removed a notepad and pen from her jacket pocket and looked about the room.

"We want to talk to you about your neighbour, Denis Beauchemin." Sgt. Lajoie mustered a weak grin. "Can we sit down, please?" May motioned to a chair in the corner of the living room and resumed her place on the couch, leaving room for the Constable, but only the Sergeant sat down. The sun filled the small apartment now, but May drew the quilt up to stifle the chill she suddenly felt.

The Sergeant was talking to her. May clutched the quilt around her shoulders and stared at his lips and mustache. They were moving, but May had stopped listening after his third or fourth sentence. His first sentence had told her that Denny was dead. The second had given a short description of the scene: he was on the floor of his bedroom with a bullet in his head, a gun by his side. May swallowed hard as she pictured Denny. She remembered the last time she saw him, the last thing she said to him.

He had asked her to pick up his mail while he was away for a week. As he handed her the small key she told him that his mail would be kept safely atop her piano, her special place for important documents, she joked. They talked about music a little, he admired Chopin, she kidded about Richard Clayderman. She facetiously promised him a lesson

when he got back. He responded quite seriously and enthusiastically, even though he must have known she couldn't even play the thing.

"It was a .38 caliber service revolver . . ." the Sergeant continued as May tuned in again, "Your neighbour was in the G.R.C., Madame, R.C.M.P."

"He worked in a bar downtown," May said without looking at him, "I think he was the manager."

Sergeant Lajoie exchanged a quick look with the Constable. "He was an agent banalisé . . . involved in infiltration . . . narcotics investigation . . . ."

"Undercover," said Constable Bertolli. It was the first time she had spoken. May looked at her.

"Did you know him?" May asked. The Constable shook her head. The Sergeant spoke.

"We need to ask you about last night and we need to take Mr. Beauchemin's mail." May turned to the piano, trying to focus on the lid, but her eyes filled with water. She turned away and reached for the Brandy snifter. With trembling hands she brought it to her lips. There was a pause as she drank the liquid, closing her eyes and breathing out deliberately. She thought about the noise in her dream, the noise that had woken up the whole nineteenth floor, and then some. Something fell in Denny's apartment . . . he'll be back Monday . . .tomorrow morning . . . .

"We're sorry, Madame," the Sergeant said quietly. May smiled weakly through her tears.

"He was a good neighbour."

4

The fourth stair from the bottom of the main staircase in the Markham family home in Pointe Claire was warped. To avoid creaking the whole house awake as she descended, May sat on the handrail, gently slid to the newel post and stepped quietly onto the floor. The clock on the mantel in the front parlor chimed twelve-thirty. She was late to meet the Major. Her mother and father had been up until eleven with the baby. Then she had heard the maid, Adele, walking around upstairs, not half-an-hour later. May had waited a decent interval, fully dressed under her bedclothes, then had risen slowly, crept round the foot of Helen's bed and opened the door quickly so that its dry hinges wouldn't betray her to Muriel, whose bed was nearest the door. Her sister had stirred slightly but did not wake up. She had closed the door as quickly and had proceeded directly to the stairs.

Her stealth made her sensitive to sounds and she felt the twelve-thirty chime must have roused the household, but she quickly remembered that everybody slept through a series of chimes and bongs from the parlor clock all night every night. She smiled to herself as she took her coat from the hook behind the staircase door and put it on. The wind whistled through the front porch and May wrapped her scarf around her neck. She was outside in the late November night, looking up at the moon, then letting her gaze fall to the trees at the end of the walk that lined Lakeshore Road. The river lay just beyond them. She buried her hands in her pockets and headed towards the water.

It was a five-minute walk to the jetty where Major Redpath was waiting for her. She quickened her pace and the wind helped her along. She was nervous about seeing him

again, but the note he had sent her through Tommy Fish sounded urgent and desperate. He pleaded with her to meet him secretly. He said he was taking a chance going out in public, even at night. His anxiety was rampant in the note: he mentioned her father, the council of St-Anne's hospital and the doctors at Guelph Sanatorium as conspirators against their true love. She had hoped to read more coherence and clarity in the sentences, but his condition had obviously worsened. Even the handwriting had deteriorated. As she walked briskly, she recalled the elegant penmanship on the pages of his diary, the passages of tender affection for her. She had been surprised, overwhelmed by his charm, his devotion and sincerity. She was still drawn to him in spite of many things, primarily her fear of what he had become, of what his affliction had reduced him to. The Major had always been vague about his ailment, but May now knew that it was of the unutterable nature that rumour and hearsay had stained him with.

She saw the outline of his form on the rocks in the distance and slowed her gait. Nervousness sprang up in her instantly, but she shook it off just as quickly. She reasoned that pangs and hesitations were too late to deter her. She checked her fear for a chance to see his eyes again. They would tell her what was left of Major Redpath. If he could look back at her and hold the gaze, as he had done before, she would understand that he hadn't completely disappeared, that he was holding on to her. She resolved to look for warmth, even a glimmer, before giving in to her suspicion.

She renewed her stride and stepped out onto the jetty, taking her hands out of her pockets to keep her balance on the uneven rocks. The wind had stirred up some small waves that crashed onto the shore, filling May's ears with their minor roar. The Major

stood looking out at Lac-St-Louis, his back to the approaching May, his greatcoat flapping in the night wind. May paused to take him in. The setting gave him tremendous stature. For a moment, she recalled the nervous excitement that had come over her the first time they had met, nearly eighteen months ago. She was shy and intimidated again in the presence of her father's handsome friend.

Without turning around, the Major spoke her name. Upon hearing his voice, strong but sensitive, her timidity melted instantly. She smiled and opened her mouth to reply.

"You're late" he barked, turning to face her. "That's fifty push-ups to a guardsman," he gave her a stern look. "For starters."

"Why don't you just revoke my mess privileges indefinitely, Major, or put me on show-parade for a week. Or better still, why not come round the house and bend Poppa's ear about how I should be allowed out after midnight to meet clandestinely with my foolish, Grenadier-headed lover." Her nervousness was back in an aggressive form. The Major smiled as he looked away.

"Thank you," he said, "It's lovely to see you again."

"Over here," May said pointedly.

"What I mean by 'see you' has nothing to do with your new frock or some lip rouge." He continued to look away. "I've asked you here for a very important reason, I need your presence inside and out."

"What's my mission, Sir?" May wasn't sure how her obstinacy would be received. She regretted her tack once the Major's expression darkened. He lifted his left hand to his temple and closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," May said, "what is it?"

"Your father will see me die, you know. I can't recall the last time I slept," he looked at her. "He must be sleeping soundly now because my head is throbbing. He's probably dreaming, visions of my demise."

"Major . . . "

"I know how pathetic I must sound to you. I am a victim, but I'm also a soldier and I refuse to play the victim for Bill Markham or anyone." The Major's eyelids flickered and he stroked his temple harder.

"But the trial . . . he promised to stop." May put her hand on his arm. He didn't seem to notice.

"The letters have been dispatched, authorities have been alerted: the police, the Guards, The Knights, that Justice . . . I can't recall his name . . . my family, Dr. Redpath . . . your uncle, Father Dan at Quebec . . . ."

"What did you write him?" May asked.

"God's truth! His brother, in league with Lucifer, has conspired to destroy me by supersensible means . . . I have been betrayed, tricked by my faith, by the trust I put into a soul of pure evil . . . . Father Daniel Markham wears a collar of the Society of our Lord, he is a soldier of God. He will help me fight the devil."

"Is that what you want from me, too?" May tucked her hands inside her coat. "Is that why you asked me here?"

The Major put a hand to his forehead and stepped away from her. May was losing patience as she was losing him. She had hoped for coherence from the Major, but his

delusions were back and with them came her fear. She thought of the wild threats made to her family, the unreasonable conviction the Major had that her father was evil and his irrational determination to take action. "If the mountain won't come to the man, the man must go to the mountain," he had said on more than one occasion. She turned to go but the Major spoke softly,

"I love you, sweet May," he approached her slowly. "The pain is very great but seeing your radiant face gives me hope. I understand your predicament, the man is your father. But he doesn't want our happiness, his spells are designed to keep us apart. But I need you so desperately, May." He held out his arms to her. She looked one last time for the focus in his eyes and found it, a glimmer, finally. They embraced for a long moment.

"You have to call St-Anne's or Guelph. They'll help you." May spoke gently in his ear.

"I'm very tired," he replied, his face buried in her hair.

His tense body slowly loosened in her arms, he put his weight on her. She thought he might have collapsed, his breathing became heavier. May felt his exhaustion. She concentrated on the warmth between them, filling her mind with sweet memories of him. Their secret courtship had been rough, impossible at times. But whenever she thought of him, he was always looking at her, not saying, nor having to say, anything. She understood in a glance what he could not articulate about his feelings. But the way he touched her and the way he held her made past difficulties appear trifling. In moments of clarity she had seen his love for her, she trusted it. May knew that she wanted to help this man, if it was possible.

May's clasped hands behind the Major's back were pulled apart as his body seemed to come to life again. He stiffened and twitched, as though wracked with pain. Stepping back, May saw him repeat the motion of lifting his hand to his temple.

"Damn you, Bill," he said slowly, "What are you doing now? . . . I have her with me . . . cease and de -" The Major sat down quickly on the rocks. He groaned and held his head in both hands, squeezing the temples and bunching up the skin on his forehead. His face contorted with pain and his body began to tremble.

May took a step back. The Major opened his eyes wide and sprang up at her, seizing her by the arms and lifting her up off the rocks.

"Shaman! You hear me!? . . . Stop now or I'll let the river have her." He was staring up at her but his eyes were locked and his grip was tightening. She did not cry out but rather looked down pleadingly upon the Major. She tried to soften her face against the pain he was inflicting on her. For a second, he appeared to actually see her, then the anguish returned and he shook her violently.

"Call to him, May!" he shouted. "Do it!" He held her still again, his strength was flagging.

"Who?" May asked pleadingly.

"Demon!" The Major lowered her slowly back down to the rocks. He closed his eyes again and spoke more softly.

"Call him, May, please. Make him stop . . . ." He held onto her arms and drew her close to him. His breathing was heavy and deliberate, she felt his chin come to rest on her shoulder. He was leaning on her now. His voice no more than an exhausted murmur.

"Please, May, he'll listen to you . . . he's cursed me forever but you have his love --" She felt him let go of every muscle, his knees buckled in the front of her coat. As he sank before her he revealed the moon once again. It shone in her eyes and she made a pledge on it. She put her left hand on Major Redpath's head, her right over her heart. To the clear moon she whispered,

"Poppa."

5

Julia drove slowly along Sherbrooke Street, the windshield wipers working frantically to keep the wet snow out of her immediate horizon. May sat quietly in the passenger seat, listening to her friend lecture her on the dangers of getting too close to strangers. Julia gripped the steering wheel tightly and pressed her nose up to the glass, squinting, cursing the inclement weather.

"We ought to have our heads examined, going out in this," she complained, "and you know we'll never find a parking space."

May pictured Julia lecturing one of her daughters on the evils of sloth, reprimanding Buster, the collie, for shedding on the living room settee. The picture was several years old: Buster had been put down before the girls moved on to the perils of marriage, and Douglas left when he realized that he was going to be alone in the house with her again after twenty-five years. Now all she had was May to perorate to; on the phone most days, in person during their Sunday night pilgrimage to Murray's Restaurant.

"I'm sorry to put you through this, Julia, but I've had a rather difficult day and I thought it would do me good to get out for a while," May said a little testily. Julia was pulling into a spot in front of the pharmacy across from Murray's.

"Well . . . yes, who wouldn't need -- oops -- need some relief from all that nastiness in your -- am I close enough to the curb? -- in your building." Julia's tongue peeked out from between her lips to indicate that her concentration was mostly on parallel

parking. Julia gave a lecture by rote for every occasion and May could count on getting an extended version of the "neighbours are always up to no good" address over dinner.

They had met nearly fifty years ago, as secretaries at The Grand-Mère Knitting Company, and had worked side by side for twenty-eight years, until May's retirement. Julia cited their being in that little office every day for so long as the reason behind their great friendship. May saw it more as a motive to be civil and to try to put up with her. She had to admit, however, that the woman's presence had grown on her and she was now quite used to Julia. In her more exasperated moments, May likened her friend aloud to an age spot or some other unwanted growth. Julia seemed to take it all in good-natured stride. May figured she was never really listening anyway.

"We had a man, lived behind us for thirteen years, never said 'boo' to any of his neighbours, but he liked their children." Julia helped May off with her coat, pulled her chair out for her and sat down herself, all without missing a note of her speech. "He was always talking to youngsters while he sunbathed in his yard, offering candy and soft drinks to them. I strictly forbade Virginia and Constance to go near him."

The waitress filled their water glasses and took their orders. Julia paused to take a sip then went on. She labeled "Mr. X" a child molester, or so everyone suspected, according to her. He was middle-aged but was always in the company of young men with tans.

"Well, one day, one of these young men bludgeoned him to death in his basement and ran off with his money." Julia closed her eyes and pursed her lips after she said this, a moment of prayer for the lost morals of the chronically evil, May thought.

"Open your eyes, Julia," said May.

The waitress placed a liver special in front of her. May had the lamb chops. Julia opened her eyes widely and said,

"Oh, thank you."

"Welcome," the waitress said, then returned to the kitchen.

"That was quick." Julia looked across the table at May.

"Not really," May placed her napkin in her lap. "Time flies when you're playing judge, jury and executioner."

"Oh, now you . . ."

"He wasn't a child molester."

"What *was* he, then?"

May paused, stared hard at Julia for a long moment, trying to decide if it was worth it to go on with the conversation.

"You can't say because you don't really know, do you? I mean, he might've been a drug dealer, or a smuggler, or a thief --"

"Or a dashing millionaire cat burglar, planning to retire after one last great heist!"

Julia rolled her eyes, "or a sado-masochist, or a gay --"

"Julia!"

"Or an embezzler, a terrorist, a racketeer --"

May picked up her fork, gripped it tightly -- brandishing it like a weapon -- and slowly advanced the business end across the table in a playfully threatening manner.

"What?!" Julia looked startled.

"Eat your dinner." May grinned as madly as she could.

"Well, you don't have Wyatt around any more to take care of you."

May shot her a steely glare. "*I* took care of *him*." she replied with some tetchiness.

"But --"

"For thirty-seven years."

"I'm just saying --"

"Don't!"

* * * * * * * * * *

Monday morning confirmed that what had happened to Denny was true. Sergeant Lajoie called to clear up a few details in her statement. It might not have been apparent to the Sergeant, but May felt impatient with him. Immediately after she hung up the phone, it rang again, startling her. A flash of anger seized her as she picked up the receiver and answered rather sharply.

"Hello?"

"May? . . . something wrong?" It was Brian, from the Home Care service.

"It's you . . . sorry." She rubbed her forehead, inhaled deeply then let it out. "No, there's nothing wrong."

"Listen, I'm gonna smoke a butt before I come up. I've got your booze order, is there anything you need from the dep while I'm down here?"

"The what?" May tried not to sound her age.

"The *dépanneur*. Da little shop dat gets you out of trouble, Madame." He affected an exagerated Quebecois accent. There was a silence at May's end.

"Convenience Store," Brian said slowly. She had reduced them to the roles of 'old lady' and 'young man'. Oh well, she thought, she didn't feel particularly 'with it' that morning.

"Butter," she said.

"You mean margarine."

"No, I mean butter, doctor, thank you."

Brian laughed and said good-bye. May tightened the belt of her dressing gown and opened the front door to get her paper. She couldn't resist looking over at Denny's door. There was a yellow police sticker near the lock, something in French about the scene of the crime. She turned away, braced herself against the door jamb and bent down slowly to pick up *The Gazette*. Her knees complained but she managed to scoop the paper up without spilling a section. She went back inside and sat at the kitchen table.

There was a little blurb in Section B, in the news-in-brief column, about Denny's death, without much detail. The R.C.M.P were cooperating with the Montreal Police on an investigation but the probable cause was suicide. May put the paper down and rose from the table to get a glass of juice. She was out of grapefruit, but she hadn't thought to remind Brian to get some at the "dep." She stood there, staring at the top shelf of the refrigerator, reading the Kids' Helpline number on the side of her carton of 2% fat milk, over and over. She tried to picture Denny standing in his living room Saturday night, trembling, holding a revolver to his head. She couldn't. Chopin's "Prelude in E Minor"

eased him down in his recliner. His eyes were closed but he was smiling broadly as the notes soothed him, the gentle melody spoke to him. It spoke to her, too, she heard it. It was a risky number, overplayed and oversentimentalized in the movies and on TV. But it played on in her head, and she turned off the rest for a moment. She caught a glimpse of her smiling, reclining neighbour again and saw that he was reassured by the simplicity of the piece, the strength of it, as she knew he would be. He was breathing. His hand, resting on his chest, moved up and down in time. The piece was coming to an end but there was a promise of more. After all, preludes are designed to encourage the listener to hang on.

Brian rapped "Shave and a Haircut" into May's front door. She looked down at her slippers and tightened the belt of her dressing gown again. She closed the refrigerator door and went to let him in.

6

The Montreal Court House on Notre Dame Street had a golden, grand, ornate vestibule, stately first-floor corridors and beautifully appointed hearing chambers where the city's justice was carried out. Its basement had a low ceiling and dark, drab, greyish walls. The dim, winding, subterranean halls were lined with doors all similarly nondescript, identified only by a small number on the frame. May walked slowly, her arms at her side, her hands tilted slightly outwards as if for balance, or perhaps to anticipate some surprise lurking around the corner or behind a door in the maze. Her shoes fell loudly on the floor and the corridors picked up the echo. She shifted her weight until she was on tiptoe. The loud footfall was gone now, but her shoes started squeaking.

She saw a sign indicating the registry, another "Archives." There were arrows pointing in several directions. May stopped and listened. Muffled voices moved her again, guiding her to a door marked, "Claims-Revendications." The door wasn't quite pulled to, and she could hear one man's voice speaking within. She stood still and harkened. A clamour of voices arose, followed by a pounding or hammering. May pushed the door gently, entered the small courtroom, and slid unobtrusively into a pew at the back. The man next to her picked up his hat from the bench and put it in his lap. May smiled at the gentleman as the judge replaced his gavel and resumed speaking.

"The defendant asked that we waive the hearing and proceed directly to trial. The plaintiff agreed. The defense will be presented by Mr. Cormier. Major Redpath will prosecute solus. Those in attendance will refrain from comment until such time as I have

vacated the bench, either for adjournment or for a short recess. Failure to maintain order will result in the clearing of the courtroom. Proceed, Major."

Major Redpath rose and approached the judge's bench. He turned around and surveyed the room. May ducked behind the head and shoulders of the man sitting directly in front of her. She wasn't supposed to know about these proceedings and wanted to remain out of sight at the back of the room.

"My Lord Justice, learned colleagues, ladies and gentlemen of the court," the Major spoke in severe tones. "I have chosen to represent myself in this matter due to time constraints and the rather daunting task of explaining the intricacies of this most bizarre offense to outside legal counsel. The infraction, from the beginning, has been of an intimate nature. You will see how the defendant, William Markham, manager at MacDiarmid Bros. Brokerage, father of ten, Knight of Columbus, seemingly a friend to many, acquired and developed diabolical skills and did balefully wield them against me. With malice aforethought, he induced fits of insomnia into my brain, plagued me with nightmares and temptations until I cried out for peace."

"He's off his head, poor fellah," the man next to May whispered. May didn't look at him but furrowed her brow in concentration. The Major continued.

"You will see how this man heard my cries and did nothing, nothing but turn to the black forces and augment the torture both in intensity and in frequency. You will hear Mr. Markham deny that charge of maleficence, you will hear him deny any wrongdoing on his part, just as he did when I pleaded with him to desist. But I have witnesses who will testify to the evil with which I have been so ruthlessly attacked. These witnesses will attest to a

marked difference in my comportment and demeanor, my character and temperament since Mr. Markham began to exert his influence over me. William Markham has left me no choice but to charge him with sinful behaviour, before his peers in His Majesty's Court. I thank you."

The Major resumed his seat. The judge looked over to the defense table. May couldn't see very clearly who was sitting there, for a column stood in the way, but she knew that her father would also be in this odd scene. May leaned as far as she could into the pew in front of her and caught sight of her father and her Uncle Stuart as they rose in unison.

"Mr. Cormier will give the opening statement for the defense," said the judge. May remembered Uncle Stuart's black robe from visits, but she had never seen him in his white wig. She couldn't quite see but it looked as though he winked at the judge before saying,

"The defense would like to waive opening remarks and proceed to questioning, my lord, but there is still the matter of the plea?"

"Oh yes, that's correct, Mr. Cormier, my fault . . . er, William Markham, you have been charged with the malicious crime of . . . of, er, supernatural influence exercised on the plaintiff. What is your plea?"

"Innocent, m'lord." William Markham said quickly and sat down again, followed by Stuart.

"Major, call your first witness," said the judge.

"I call Lieutenant Thomas Andrew Fish, m'lord."

Three rows directly in front of May, Tommy Fish, the Major's friend, stood up and walked to the stand. As he swore oath May observed his nervous face. His upper lip twitched in time to his rapid blinking. Once seated again he kept his gaze low, avoiding the eyes in the courtroom. This was the first time May had seen him out of uniform, he looked much smaller and acted in a more volatile manner. He wrung his hands in his lap as the Major spoke,

"Lieutenant Fish, do you know me?"

"Yes, sir."

"For how long have we been aquainted?"

"Since I first joined the regiment, sir. About eight years, sir." Tommy Fish still didn't look up.

"How would you characterize our relationship, Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"Would you say that we were close friends?"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Would it be fair to state that you know me quite well personally as well as professionally?

"Yes, sir, it would."

"Good." The Major paused, closing his eyes. The courtroom waited. The pause endured. Tommy Fish stopped wringing his hands and ventured a direct look at Major Redpath. The judge cleared his throat.

"Change!?" shouted the Major, startling everyone in the room, including his uneasy witness. "Have you noticed any significant change in my personality?"

"Yes, sir, as a matter of fact I have." A low murmur erupted, followed by a few chuckles. The judge raised and lowered his gavel and the room was silent. The Major leaned on the side railing of the witness stand.

"Please explain," he said.

"About a year ago, I observed a significant transformation in the personality of Major Robert Redpath. A change that, no doubt, those of you acquainted with him will have noticed. His demeanor had so been altered that he became almost unrecognizable to family and friends alike."

Tommy Fish hesitated as he tried to remember the rest of his prepared speech. His brow was wet and he dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief.

"I -- I believe that sinister influence of a supernatural ess-essence was at work on the Major's brain causing him to suffer from insomnia and spells of unfathomable pain in his head."

Stuart Cormier stood up, "I object, m'lord, the witness has no means of gauging the degrees of the supposed pain in the prosecution's head."

"Overruled, Mr. Cormier, sit down, please." The judge gave him a disapproving look. "Continue, Major."

"Thank you, m'lord. Master Corporal?"

"Eh, you mean, 'Lieutenant'," Tommy puzzled.

"Yes."

"The Major made it clear to me that the source of his disturbance was the defendant, William Markham."

"Is William Markham present here today?"

Tommy Fish nodded.

"Could you point him out to the court, please?" Tommy Fish raised his right index finger slightly and pointed vaguely at the defense table.

"Thank you. No further questions, you may stand down."

Stuart Cormier rose again, very quickly. "Objection, m'lord, the defense hasn't even questioned -"

"Quite right, Mr. Cormier," the judge interrupted, "Major Redpath, I'm sure you never meant to overstep your bounds as prosecutor, however it is my duty as magistrate to dismiss the witness."

"I apologize to you and the court, m'lord." said the Major from his seat.

"Very good. Lieutenant Fish, you may stand down."

"m'lord, might the defense question the witness?" asked Stuart, a little exasperatedly.

"Mr. Cormier, I believe the witness has provided rather a complete testimony. Any further questioning should only serve to badger the Lieutenant and sully the noble pursuit of justice, wouldn't you agree? Furthermore, I would remind you of the charges leveled against your client, and of the grave and bizarre nature of those charges." Here the judge paused, turned his head away from the prosecution table and winked at Stuart.

"And might I suggest that you try to understand *this* process, Mr. Cormier."

"Yes, m'lord," he replied, sounding more than a little confused. He sat down again.

Her father's 'trial' had attracted a large but mixed crowd, May thought. She sensed that many were here for a laugh, to see their colleagues and friends act out of character, trying to keep pace with the Major. Others, including her father and Uncle Stuart, were genuinely concerned for Major Redpath, wanting to set his sore mind to rest about the delusions that had him increasingly out of control. Familiar faces always provided some sort of reassurance to the Major; they brought him back to himself sometimes. But the absurdity of the trial did not register as he called his witnesses and questioned them as if they were the accused. Tommy Fish, the Major's brother, Lloyd, his fellow guardsmen, all failed to impress him by their exaggerated, stilted testimony; by their use of words like, "sorcery," "incantation," "voodoo," and by their marked uneasiness about pointing the finger at Bill Markham. It was the Major's project from beginning to end; he rehearsed the witnesses, he grew accustomed to their faces and performances in this absurd context, and they offered no contradiction. Everyone played along.

* * * * * * * * *

William Markham was on the witness stand, looking anxious. The Major paced before the judge's bench, muttering, staring at the floor. His movements became stiffer, more deliberate, he raised his eyes; he was marching. He began to stamp his feet at the

turns. Titters were heard from the gallery, but May recognized the activity as a means of concentration for the Major, it helped him out of his "spells."

"Steady on, man!" someone called from the pews.

"Right wheel, Major!" guffawed another. There was a uniform "Shhhhhh!" The judge banged his gavel. His presence of mind seemed to return to the Major; he kicked his left foot out and brought his right one up high, then down into a loud stamp. As he called his own halt he was facing the crowd. He smiled self-consciously at his actions.

"It's no secret that monotonous, yet disciplined activity of the body, such as the quick march, leaves the mind free to ruminate and gather thoughts for expression," he said. He stared at the audience. May shifted in her seat so as to tuck her head behind the man in front of her, but she quickly realized that the Major was looking through, and not at, the people. He began to laugh.

"You must be thinking -- especially those who know me -- Bob Redpath is completely off his oats; bringing up charges, marching in court. I can assure you, it's all quite necessary." He turned his head to look at William Markham.

"Every one of you can think and form a thought or sentence in a matter of moments," he continued, " another few seconds and it's gone past your lips -- you've expressed it. It's out there, hanging in the air, or attaching itself to someone's ear . . . I used to enjoy such a luxury, but, as you all know, in order to think clearly, one must rest at regular intervals."

Major Redpath turned the rest of his body to face the witness stand. He approached it slowly. William Markham, looking worried, shifted his gaze to the judge.

"This man!" The Major's arm shot out in front of him, he pointed directly at Markham. " My friend! My colleague! Is guilty of the basest form of envy, ladies and gentlemen of the court!" His outstretched hand came down hard on the edge of the stand. Bill Markham jumped, so did the judge, the Major turned back to face the room, gripping the edge tightly.

"My peace of mind divides William Markham, splits him down the middle with envy . . . he has to interfere with it in the most tortuous manner. Don't be fooled, as I was, by the witness' right hand, extended in warm greeting and retracted in bosomy friendship. The left, the sinister limb, holds daggers of the mind which he did not hesitate to plunge deeply into my brain." The Major pulled out a soiled handkerchief and wiped his brow.

"The attack might not have been physical. Indeed, the defendant undoubtedly hovered over me while I slept under his roof and cast his wicked influence over my peaceful slumber. That was nearly six months ago, friends, I've not slept since. Not without the aid of a substance, and even then it was always fitful. I would roam the city at night, trying vainly to shake off the spell inflicted by this man!" He leaned back against the judge's bench for support. "He sleeps! Don't you, Bill?"

* * * * * * * * *

Major Redpath continued for nearly fifteen minutes. The court was held rapt by the detail of the Major's nightmares, the desperation of his pleas for respite that had gone unheeded by William Markham. This 'court date' was obviously designed to

appease the Major's seemingly unfounded attacks on the man whom he had once called his friend. The cause was, of course, speculated at; no one believed that William Markham was an agent of evil. Most know him as a friend and father. He is well-liked in the business community --

May looked up briefly into the face of the man sitting in front of her, who had closed his notebook and turned around.

"Too cheap to buy the Star?" he whispered.

"I beg your pardon?" It was half question, half apology.

"As well you should," said the man, "it's considered rude to read over people's shoulders."

"I know, I'm sorry," she whispered.

"If you want to read the whole thing, it'll be in this afternoon's edition."

"Thank you."

"Not at all, I'm Charlie Webb."

"May . . . er, Mary."

"Pleased to meetcha, Mary. You a friend of the plaintiff or the defendant?"

"Um, neither. I'm a . . . legal secretary."

"You work upstairs?"

May nodded tentatively. Charlie Webb reached into his coat and pulled out a business card. He handed it to her.

"I could use a good contact upstairs. Give me a call if a big scoop ever comes across your desk . . . please?"

"Al-alright." May put the card in her handbag, hoping her little white lie had not caused her face to redden. As she thought this, she felt the heat rise in her cheeks. The judge pounded his gavel. Charlie Webb turned back towards the bench and opened his book again. May sat back and watched her father on the witness stand. Her Uncle Stuart had stood up when the Major had sat down. He pulled a folded paper from his vest pocket, scratched his head and looked at Bill Markham, who was looking back at him with anticipation. The paper crackled as he unfolded it; some in the crowd cleared their throats and shifted in their seats. Stuart glanced down at the page, absorbed what he read and began, in what sounded like a recitation, his questioning.

"William Markham, are you acquainted with the plaintiff, Major Robert Redpath?"

"Yes, I am."

"How do you answer to his charges?"

Bill Markham hesitated.

"I can no longer avow that they are unfounded."

The audience seemed to take a collective deep breath. Bill Markham continued.

"I . . . I never intended for the incantation to yield such devastating results for such a long time."

The judge interrupted.

"Mr. Markham, are you admitting your guilt in this matter?"

"I am, m'lord." He looked out at the crowd sheepishly. There were a few chuckles to punctuate the ensuing murmurs. Stuart's nose was in the paper again.

"Bill, do you know what you're admitting to?" He said flatly. Bill Markham rose, he was carrying himself stiffly, looking uncomfortable. He took a long look around the room. May ducked further behind Charlie Webb. Bill Markham took a deep breath and faced the Major before he went on.

"I'm sorry, Bob. It started out so innocently, but, I suppose it just escalated, not through malice, but rather through neglect."

"Neglect!" Major Redpath shouted from across the room. The judge's gavel came down hard.

"Bob, this is for your benefit," said the judge. "Hear him out."

Stuart glared up at him. The judge hemmed and hawed then rephrased his admonishment in a more official manner. This seemed to calm the Major, who referred to his notes on the table in front of him while Bill Markham continued his confession.

"Most of the time, Bob, I don't even realise I'm doing anything. It was wrong of me, nonetheless. I swear I'll never do it again." He sat down again, looked up at the judge and nodded slightly. The judge looked over at the Major, who was still rifling through his notes. He banged his gavel and ordered Bill Markham to stand. Everyone looked up.

"William Markham, you have confessed to the serious crime of . . . of . . . er, traumatic influence," The judge ignored the few snorts of derision from the audience. "The sentence is not a light one. However, in view of the fact that you've made a full confession, that you've obviously experienced deep regret over this whole affair and that you've solemly promised to desist in this er, diabolical practice, I'm going to let you go

free. But with the sternest of warnings: if the plaintiff, or anyone else should bring further charges of this nature forth, I shall have no choice but to force you to terminate this offence through incarceration. Has this court made itself absolutely clear to you, Mr. Markham?"

"It has, m'lord."

"Major Redpath, have you anything to add before I adjourn the proceedings?"

Without looking up, the Major smiled broadly, his mustache straightened under his nose. His head began to bob as his laughter grew, he put down his notes and rose from the table. Raising his arms in front of him, he brought his hands together in a loud clap. He repeated the move and the clapping accelerated as he came out from behind the table and walked slowly over to Bill Markham on the witness stand. The applause confronted the ears of the crowd and the echo in the chamber assured it an eerie resonance. He looked directly into Bill Markham's eyes and brought his outstretched, clapping hands close to his face.

Bill Markham looked scared or puzzled, but he did not flinch. In moments, his nervous stare evolved into defiance and he held his ground in front of the Major. The clapping slowed down until the Major held his hands apart, on either side of Bill Markham's head, he was still smiling.

"That's all, m'lord." He said as he backed away from the witness stand.

Before the judge had finished dismissing the court, May was through the door and running down the hallway towards the staircase, the clek-clek of her shoes chasing her quickly up the stairs and hustling her noisily across the lobby floor. Outside, the streets

were wet and the wind was up. She pulled her hat down low over her ears and headed west on Notre Dame Street. She walked for a long time, playing the "trial" over in her head. She didn't know what to feel about seeing her father and the Major squared off that way and couldn't help thinking that it was a mistake for everyone to try to indulge the Major's affliction. It made her angry, and by the time she caught the streetcar at McGill, she also felt worried. On the train home to Pointe Claire, she jumped when the conductor asked for her ticket and her hand trembled slightly as she handed him the stub to punch.

7

Brian was mopping the kitchen floor while May dressed. When she was his age she would never have answered the door in her housecoat, especially not to a young man. The times were so different now; they had become friends, and May often wished that he was not in her employ so as to put things on a strictly social level, but she was glad of the help nevertheless. His good company was a bonus.

May stood in front of her chest of drawers, looking into the round vanity mirror that crowned it. She was annoyed by her hair: its thinness, its lifelessness, its lacklustre approach to flattering her face. She picked up a brush and stroked the back of her head.

"Stay, damn you." she chided the rebellious grey locks as she made her way around the side and over the top with the hairbrush.

"Beg pardon?" Brian called from the kitchen.

"Just talking to my hair!" May called back, "I'm hoping it'll grow like my plants do."

"Uh-huh."

May put the brush down and slowly stepped into a pair of stockings. She tucked a folded handkerchief into the left hose in case her nose ran. Arthritis had made it a sometimes painful chore to fasten her bra or zip her dress closed, but she still managed. She put on the black dress with the pale pink roses on it that Julia had picked out for her at Eaton's. It was a little snug, but May was too embarrassed that her friend would think she'd gotten stout to say anything. It was a small size, after all.

She sat down on the bed and slid into a pair of black shoes, then she clipped on a pair of pearl earrings with a matching necklace. Finally, she went to her dressing table and applied a little rouge to her cheeks. She surveyed the results in the full-length mirror that hung behind the bedroom door. May straightened in defiance of what she dubbed her "compulsive slouching" or "incredible shrinking," but which was really just a slight, gradual curvature of the spine.

"Not bad for an old broad." She said aloud and went out into the hallway. Brian was running the dustmop on the patch of bare floor around the living room carpet, just under the piano bench, when May came up beside him.

"That's a pretty dress." he said.

"Thank you, suh," May attempted the accent of a southern belle, " Might I inquire as to when you'll be all through with your chores?"

"The old cow I work for'll never let me go, Ma'am."

Suh, I'm sure your mistress, to whom you so crassly refer, is every inch a lady."

"Mmmeeuuuuhhhhh! Strictly bovine, Ma'am."

May laughed and squeezed his forearm as she turned to lower the key cover on the piano. Brian pulled the mop to him and rested his hands on top of the handle.

"I understand you had a scare here the other night."

"Did you ever meet Denny?"

Brian shook his head.

"We didn't speak often," May continued, "but there was something very neighbourly about him."

"You mean he minded his own business."

"Exactly."

Brian chuckled.

"You probably think I'm a terrible, crotchety old broad --"

"You're not that old."

"Well, he understood privacy, but he also knew courtesy. He liked music . . . . We joked about me giving him a lesson," May raised her hands up in front of her and stared at the arthritic fingers. "With these," she said with a hint of bitterness.

"I've never heard you play," said Brian. "I've been coming here nearly four years and you've never played for me."

"I can't. Not like before." May glanced down at the floor, paused. "I'd be lucky to tap out 'Happy Birthday' now."

"That's one of my favourites. Wanna give it a try?"

"Some other time."

"C'mon, I know all the words."

May self-consciously rubbed her hands together, then tucked them into the pockets of her dress. She did not look up.

"Would you be a dear and get my mail? The key's on the kitchen counter."

"Then do I get my concert?" Brian smiled and bent down to look into her face.

"I'd really just like my mail, now!" she snapped and walked away from him. As she reached the bathroom door she turned back and said apologetically, "Please."

She locked the door, went to the sink and ran the cold water; partly to get a drink to wash down some Advil, partly to drown out the sobs that she felt rising in her throat. Brian closed the front door loudly enough that she could hear, but she kept the water running despite being alone in the apartment. She looked at herself in the mirror, breathed deeply. The tears wouldn't come. She pulled the white pill bottle from the medicine chest and sat down on the toilet. She tried to open it in her lap because she was afraid of what had happened last time: the cap had snapped off and the bottle had upset into the sink, spilling most of the caplets down the drain. This was a fine example of her obstinacy, she thought; the sensible thing would be to have someone open the bottle for her and place all the pills into an open container. But pride preferred to have her wrestle with child-safety caps. Her fingers ached under the strain but the cap wouldn't give. She threw the bottle to the floor in frustration. It clattered and bounced then rolled across the tiles to her feet. Her hands and head were throbbing and she chided herself for her bad temper. It wasn't Brian's fault she was old, and it certainly wasn't Advil's. "Stupid," she said aloud and bent down to retrieve the bottle. On the way down, the room closed in on her, and she hit the tiles with her knees, her elbow and her forehead.

She opened her eyes right away, waited for the pain to report in from her limbs and skull. She was face down, inhaling the pine fumes of the freshly-washed floor.

"He uses too much cleanser," she muttered as she struggled onto her side. She gripped the edge of the bathtub and pulled herself onto her back. Her breathing accelerated with the effort.

"No, you don't," she told her right elbow when it refused to prop her up into a sitting position. "Don't tell me I can't count on you now."

May sighed and stared at the ceiling, specifically at the light fixture that could use a dusting. She would mention it to Brian when he came to pick her up. Damn! What a useless old broad! She stretched her legs out in the little space between the toilet and bathtub, her knees cracked. There would be a couple of bruises. She tried vainly to sit up again, her legs flailing for leverage. She kicked the pill bottle and it rolled and rattled, then finally settled again. The water continued to flow in the sink up above. Thank God she hadn't stuck the plug in or she'd be drowned by now, May thought.

"Mail call!" Brian announced as he closed the front door.

"In here!" May shouted, "Can you help me?"

"Oh shit!" she heard him say, followed by a muffled noise and his footsteps bounding up to the door.

"I fell! I'm on the floor!"

The knob rattled.

"I know! I locked the door. I feel stupid enough as it is."

"Can you reach it?"

"Not quite, I hurt my arm." She was about half an inch shy of the hook and eye lock above the door handle, with her left arm fully extended. It was the fingers that wouldn't straighten out.

"Anything else?"

"My knees. I bumped my head . . . got a little dizzy."

"Sit tight, I've got just the thing,"

"There's a hammer in the drawer in the kitchen -"

"I don't wanna mark up your door unless I have to. I'll try my video membership card first."

May watched as the thin, white, plastic card inched through the crack in the door jamb just above the knob, then slid up to trip the hook out of its hole. Brian opened the door slowly and walked in, holding her cane. He turned off the faucet and knelt down to get a grip under her shoulders. He lifted her gingerly, effortlessly, putting more weight behind her as she stood. She gripped the sink counter and looked at herself in the mirror, Brian standing behind her. She stared at his reflection, sought out his eyes.

"It's hell gettin' old," she said.

8

The final fortnight of October had seen the leaves of the five maple trees in the yard at 215 Lakeshore Road go from green, to bright red, to bright yellow. They always seemed to hold out longer than any other foliage, but on this, the first Sunday of November, 1920, most had succumbed to gravity's pull. The Markham children were out in number to clear the lawn and play in the dead leaves. Wyatt and Murray had dodged the chore by going down to the village field, which had been converted to a rugby pitch for the day, to watch MacDonald College take on McGill in exhibition play. Betty and Ruth were down for a nap, so the four remaining children had amassed four large heaps of leaves, each sculpted, attended and defended like strongholds. It was understood that your neighbour's fort was fair game.

Muriel stood shakily on the shoulders of her big sister, Dorrie, who was trying to balance her and walk towards Paul's misshapen big pile of leaves at the same time. He had foolishly left it unattended. Dorrie sidestepped a discarded rake and nearly dropped Muriel.

"You're getting too big for this," she grumbled as she staggered up to the pile.

"One . . . two . . . three!" Muriel jumped and was almost buried in the stack.

"Ow! What are you doing!?" It was Paul's voice. He had been hiding under the leaves, and was now sitting up, rocking back and forth, nursing his leg. Muriel rolled out of the pile. Dorrie was laughing.

"That'll learn ya ta lie down on the job," she mocked. Paul got to his feet, set his sights on Muriel, and started limping after her, menacingly. Muriel ran away screaming. May called to Dorrie from across the yard,

"Better pick up that rake and put that pile back together before Mother sees it!"

"Says you!" Dorrie shot back.

"Don't make me come over there, Dorrie!"

"You're not my boss!"

May knew her sister was deliberately being childish, trying to provoke her into a play-fight. It must be the freedom of being outside on a beautiful Fall afternoon, she reasoned. May felt it too. She made a few tentative steps towards Dorrie, then burst into a run. Dorrie yelped a laugh and took off in the opposite direction; towards the Dawsons' back yard. May caught her before she could reach the hedge and swung her by the arm into the closest pile. She opened her mouth to laugh at her sister, but received a faceful of leaves before any sound could emerge. She pounced on Dorrie, rolling through the stack, flattening and scattering the afternoon's work. Paul chased Muriel into the very same stack and both piled on their siblings. The three girls soon turned on Paul: May and Dorrie pinned him to the ground while Muriel stuffed his sweater full of leaves.

"Not fair!" He yelled through the laughter. "I'll get you!"

But it was no use, the girls wouldn't let him up. He eventually tired of the struggle and all four were soon on their backs, breathing heavily, staring up at the sky. Clouds had moved in to pepper the mid-afternoon sunshine and May put her hand up to warm her

cold nose. The other three held their noses in imitation and started talking in nasal voices. May joined in, giving her impression of her mother chastising the children.

"Your father works very hard all week! I can't trust you to do a little yard work once in a while --"

"If you keep that up, your voices will stay that way, you know."

May looked up at the tall shadow standing over them.

"Yes, Poppa," she said, still clutching her nose. The other three giggled as Bill Markham doffed his cap and bent down to swat them on their behinds with it. They scurried up out of the pile and went running in all directions. May stood up and brushed the leaves off her coat.

"I want you to put these piles back, now!" he called to them. They each giggled a reply. Dorrie stopped running and walked back to her duty. May picked up a rake but her father put his hand on it.

"Your mother wants to see you," he said. "You've been invited to tea."

"Really? Where?"

"You'll have to ask her." He handed the rake to Dorrie. "I want the rest of you to stay in the yard for awhile, or you can play at the Dawsons'. I've got a meeting this afternoon at the house and I don't want you underfoot." He gave May a quick look; not long enough for her to glean what it meant but sufficient for her to take notice that her father wasn't himself today.

After leaving Ruth and Betty in the maid's care, Alice Markham walked briskly with her daughter up Lakeshore Road. May sensed she was being rushed, then it dawned

on her where they were going. She stopped. Alice went on a few steps, then turned around.

"What's the matter?"

"We're going to the Morrises, aren't we?" May frowned.

"Don't pull a face, it's just Mr. and Mrs. Leo won't be there." She made a "hurry-up" gesture with her gloved hand and they were off again, but May kept her face. The Morrises were nice, polite people, but dull as oatmeal.

Most of the houses lined the lakeshore in Pointe Claire, some were on farms, most were summer homes and cottages. The Morrises lived in a red-shingled farmhouse not more than a fifteen-minute walk from the Markhams. They were greeted warmly by Mrs Morris on the porch. She had just finished sweeping the stairs and made some jovial remark about it being the maid's day off. Mr. Morris took their coats and made a joke about May and her mother having to pay to get them back. Once their forced laughter had died, they sat down to tea. The conversation hovered at the superficial level: local gossip, the development of the West Island, the business climate in town, the rugby match in the village.

May's mind wandered in no time. Why were they there? They had never been asked to tea by the Morrises before, not even when May was on friendlier terms with Leo. She was sure they thought their only son was too good for the oldest girl of the Markham brood. "She has some gall, jilting a fine boy like our Leo," she imagined them thinking, but they kept smiling and talking and making weak jokes aimed at nothing or no one in particular. Oatmeal. May began to wonder if her mother had orchestrated this whole

awkward social outing. Her father had said he wanted the house empty for his meeting. What could he be meeting about on a Sunday, in the country? His clients had never trekked out here before. Stepping into the role of Sherlock Holmes, she began to scan the room for clues. Her eyes settled on a family portrait taken some years ago, she gathered, as it featured baby Leo wearing a dress in his mother's arms. May sniggered, audibly. The conversation halted.

"Leo was an adorable baby," May said after a weighty moment.

"Thank you, dear," was the quiet reply from Mrs. Morris.

Alice glared at her daughter. The Morrises looked at each other. May smiled and took a bite of shortbread. Mr. Morris offered a refill of weak tea and another weak joke. May was off again in no time.

She was thinking about children: her brothers and sisters. Dorrie had just turned fourteen, and Paul was ten. That meant that Helen was nine because her mother always said that Helen was "on Paul's heels." Muriel was seven, Ruth and Betty were babies; and that left Murray, who was twelve, she guessed, and Wyatt, (who was sixteen months her senior) eighteen. May looked at her mother sitting across from her, nodding her head to the chatter. She observed her face, tracing the lines and the wrinkles with her eyes. She stopped on the heavy bags that had formed where the tops of her cheeks used to be. May pondered all the pregnancies over nearly twenty years, all the nursing, the rearing, the worry. The values of a Catholic mother had been taught her, but May remained unconvinced of the celestial rewards of nurturing. Her mother was haggard of late, short-tempered at times, and nearly always tired. May figured that it was only natural for her to

have less patience for Murray's adolescent whining than she did for Betty's cries for food and attention, but she could be just as cross with her husband if he tried to show her some affection in front of others. Mind you, his advances were often in the form of a pinch or a hug around her middle and she was very sensitive about her girth.

May wanted to give her mother a hug right there but she was in Leo Morris' house, not listening to his parents making small talk of a Sunday afternoon's tea. Leo had spoken about children that night when she had told him no. The thought of being pregnant did not sit well with May, nor did the idea of raising children, especially with Leo as their father. There seemed to be too many stages for children to go through before they became tolerable and human: noisy, emotional, wicked, weak, unpleasant stages. Certainly her brothers and sisters, and even May herself had run the gamut of stages. But her girlfriends at Victoria School all had their eyes on boys, giggling about their husband-potential. Very few of them talked of going on to study at college, they were mostly preoccupied with starting a family as soon as they could. May's enthusiasm for and participation in such conversations was minimal, so she was "on the outs" with the popular clique by the time she graduated. Bea stuck by her though, probably because her own family didn't offer an attractive example. "If you're so dissatisfied, Beatrice dear, you can do better when you have your own family," Mrs. Chatham would say condescendingly, in mid-stream of sundry separate and unrelated thoughts.

"Let me show you the solarium, Mrs. Markham." Mrs. Morris was on her feet. gesturing toward a door at the back of the sitting room.

"I'd love to see it," May's mother said weakly as she rose.

"Be jonquil with her, my little sunflower, keep her away from the pistil!" Mr. Morris called after them, laughing.

"We'll leaf you two alone, Poppy," Mrs. Morris countered as May was starting to get out of her chair. She smiled at Mr. Morris and slowly lowered herself back down. Mr. Morris took a brown leather pouch from his jacket pocket, unfastened it and removed a pipe.

"Have some more hi-biscuits, May." His laughter struck her ears like squeaky chalk on a blackboard. May fought the urge to cringe and roll her eyes at the same time. He dipped the pipe into the pouch and packed down the tobacco with his thumb.

"You have a rosy sense of humour, sir." May forced a smile.

His face immediately darkened and he sprang forward in his chair.

"What the hell did you say to my son, you little snipe?!" he demanded.

May couldn't speak. Mr. Morris repeated the demand. He didn't raise his voice; what emerged from deep in his throat was in the form of a hiss.

"W-when?" May stammered. "I- Mr.Morris - I haven't seen Leo for months -"

"Neither have we! We just know that he was very serious about you. But you must've filled his head with some of your Jezebel tripe, 'cause he's completely turned around. Mother 'n I don't recognize him! He was a little mopey before, but he's taken to smashing things lately -- namely my Buick into our fence -- no less!"

"Was he hurt?"

"That's why I want to know what the devil you did to him! Of course he wasn't hurt, the boy's thick as a plank but he's got his mother's sensitive feelings . . ." Mr.

Morris drew back a little, his face showed concern. "What'd the damn fool do, ask you to marry him?"

"Yes," May said quietly.

"And that offended you? My poor Leo's just a rube, I suppose?"

"I'm sixteen, Mr. Morris."

"What's that got to do with it? You holding out for better offers? My son is well-meanin', May Markham --"

"I know --"

"He could provide for you, better than --"

"I don't want to get married!"

"Keep your voice down!"

May stood up. "Mr. Morris, I'm very uncomfortable talking to you about this, just as I was uncomfortable turning Leo down. He's a nice fellow and I wish to God he hadn't asked me that infernal question, but he did. I think I knew he was going to, but sometimes I liked his attentions and I didn't want to spoil anything by getting too serious. But he was serious, Mr. Morris, your boy summoned all his courage and proposed to me. I'm sorry I disappointed him, but if moping around, destroying things -- crashing your car -- is how he handles disappointment, then that shows me I did the right thing by refusing him. I can understand your desire to protect your property from --"

"He's missing!"

"Sorry?"

"We put him on the Canadian Pacific to his uncle's stables up in Brockville about ten days ago. He never got there."

Alice Markham came back into the room just then, followed by a red-eyed Mrs. Morris. May sensed that her mother was uncomfortable as well, and was not surprised when she made excuses for their immediate departure. Both Mr. and Mrs. Morris apologized for being on edge.

"We have a lot of impatiens, lately." Mr. Morris said glumly. Nobody laughed.

At the door, May turned back to the couple.

"Did Leo ever mention a career in the military to you?" She asked. They shook their heads.

"I think he said he admired the Navy," she continued. The Morrises looked puzzled.

"Yes, he definitely felt the sea was calling him." May smiled as she closed the door behind her.

Alice was walking briskly again, but May finally caught up to her.

"Why is Poppa doing business on a Sunday?" She wondered.

"He didn't want the children to know, but it wasn't a MacDiarmid Brothers meeting."

"No?"

"No. He and your Uncle Stuart and some of the men from the club, and, I think Dr. Redpath, are meeting to decide what to do about the Major."

May turned her head away sharply. "'Do' about him?"

"Well, it seems he's only gotten worse since he left us, and you know how --"

She bolted and ran up Lakeshore Road as fast as she could. Her mother's protests of "Mary Markham!" faded with each stride she took and every big breath she drew.

She reached the circular driveway just as the men were getting into a large sedan. Her Uncle Stuart waved to her as he sat down. Dr. Redpath, the Major's brother, was at the window in the back seat. He tipped his hat slightly to reveal a less-than-comforting look in her direction. May stood there, breathing hard, as the car pulled out onto the road.

"How was your tea?" It was her father, standing on the front porch, his hands in his pockets, looking off in the direction from which his wife was approaching hurriedly. When he didn't get an answer, he shrugged and went back inside.

9

"This ring has a diamond in it." May held out her hand to Brian across the coffee table, the ring between her finger tips. The bruises on her arm complained. "Give it to your girlfriend."

"I couldn't take it," Brian said shyly, "besides it's just an informal anniversary, we're not even engaged."

"Well, I can't get it on my finger any more, it's no good to me."

"What about sentimental value?"

"None. The fellow who gave it to me was nice enough, but he just wanted to get married and have kids." May wrinkled her nose when she pronounced "kids."

"You didn't want a family?"

"I didn't want him. Go on, take it."

"But this was an engagement ring?"

"Sort of. I held onto the ring but finagled my way out of the engagement. I don't want it any more, please, take it."

Brian leaned forward in his chair, stretched out his arm and took the ring. May let her arm fall to the table. "I wasn't sure how long I could hold it."

"Thanks, May."

"Sure." She lifted her arm delicately back into her lap, nursing the elbow, then picked up the makeshift ice pack Brian had made for her and applied it to the bruised area.

It had been nearly an hour since her fall and she had finally lost that jittery, nervous feeling it had left her with. Talking with Brian always helped. She ran through every ailment, mishap and breakdown she'd had in the past ten years, including her alternator-as-metaphor-for-death story for what she imagined was the tenth time. She joked that the telling of it could somehow stave off the inevitable, because it was such a perfect understanding of the mechanics of failure. It gave her pride and satisfaction every time; the details were unchanged and she had managed to put nearly ten years of distance and perspective on the episode. Brian, as usual, was a polite, indulgent listener.

The last car May had owned was a Reliant, grey, 1980. She drove it, generally without incident, for six and a half years. Her reflexes were good enough for The Société De L'Assurance Automobile Du Québec; she had had a spotless record since 1946 (when she had been in a fender-bender with an accountant named Leblanc on the Jacques Cartier Bridge). She used the car for emergencies and the occasional cross-border shopping trip (The Ben Franklin in St. Albans had terrific specials in those days.). Christmas 1986, May's first without Wyatt, she had visited her sister Muriel and her family in Kingston. She had four great-nieces and one great-nephew to buy presents for that year. Two days after Christmas however, she had had her fill of family, the kids were wearing her out. She would leave the next day, Sunday. She met her sister's protests with a few of her own; mainly she used the argument that her houseplants would die if she didn't get back to them as soon as possible. The next morning she was off down the 401.

The snow started falling around Mallorytown, and increased in intensity with every passing mile. At Brockville it was a blizzard, but by the time she determined that she might

not be up for such an adventure, she had already missed the exit. The storm forced her to go slowly: the shoulders, guardrails and partitions showed her what could happen if she didn't -- they were peppered with the carcasses of spun-out vehicles, an overturned van in one case. May pressed on with hesitation, covering half the ground in twice the time. She had to use the bathroom, badly. The next off-ramp was barely visible, and at the intersection she went left towards Domville instead of to the larger, nearer town of Prescott. She told the man (at least, she thought it was a man in the heavy, hooded parka) at the Texaco to fill it up and she plowed her way to the ladies room. Filthy, of course. She felt guilty that the total was less than five dollars (she had left Muriel's with a full tank) so she bought some windshield-wiper fluid as well.

When she started the engine, the red "Charge" light on the dash lit up, as it always did, but by the time she slid back onto the highway, she noticed that it hadn't extinguished after a few minutes' acceleration. She applied a "wait and see" logic to the situation, but as it persisted, she grew more and more distracted. Exit 738 approached. She decided to take it when she saw a sign for a gas station. There were many cars huddled around the pump island, drivers bracing against the wind and snow, cursing the self-serve policy. May left the car running and entered the cashier's cubicle. The young man behind the register smiled as she explained her situation to him. He condescended to her in voicing his suspicion that it was a failed alternator, in which case she could find herself stranded in a blizzard.

"Yer best bet's to try to make the 13 clicks, that's kilometers er - a kilometer is three fifths of a mile, ma'am - to Morrisburg. They've got the Upper Canada Motel there,

you can spend the night, call a tow truck in the morning. If you're lucky, they'll send one from Cornwall that same day." He was trying to sound serious, but May felt that smile of his creeping back.

"Cornwall?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's the only place to get parts around here."

"Well, I think I'll drive there directly."

"How long's the little red light been on?"

"About half-an-hour."

"And yer drivin' a K car?" The smile was fully extended, a few yellow, uneven teeth came up behind it. "You'll be lucky to make it to the end of the on-ramp."

"Thanks for your advice." May tightened her scarf and pulled the door open. Snow blew in violently as she stood holding the door for three motorists coming in to pay. She could hear the cashier cursing as she stepped out and let the door go, wishing she could bury his grin, teach him some respect for his elders. He was forgotten in the next moment however, as she climbed back into the driver's seat. May patted the dashboard and mouthed some encouragements to her Reliant. At the top of the on-ramp she turned on the radio to get a weather forecast. She heard a singer tunefully announce the station's call letters, then the radio went dead. Immediately, she thought of other ways to conserve power: she turned off the headlights and lowered the heat. It was 11:58 according to the digital clock above the glove compartment; Cornwall was no more than half-an-hour away in more clement weather. The storm was showing no signs of relenting as she plowed on; ignoring the exit sign for Morrisburg and using the wipers sparingly.

At Aultsville Road, the heater failed. The vents were closed but there was a cold breeze getting through to May's feet and legs. She tried to think warm thoughts, about her summers spent in Aultsville, at her grandparents' on her mother's side. If you were under twelve and were related to Gramma and Grampa Barclay, that's where you went for July and August. There was a pond and the river to swim in (although the current ran fast near their farm). Grampa Barclay had two horses, Delilah and Ol' Grey (whose real name was Earl Grey, but he was pretty old) and a mule, Rufus, who would let you sit on him, but wouldn't give you a ride. She remembered being tanned all the time and playing in the water with her brothers and sisters and cousins. Of course, it wasn't all games, the girls had to help Gramma in her garden and the boys had chores: washing, painting, raking, and trekking into town for odds and sundries. There were only two bedrooms, so sometimes there were as many as ten girls sharing four beds. The boys had it worse in terms of numbers, but they were allowed to sleep outside in the yard or on the verandah when it got hot enough.

May had hoped her family would forget about her twelfth birthday when it came, but naturally they didn't. She wasn't excited about it because it meant that the following summer would be spent at Girl Guide camp, and she would only get to visit Gramma and Grampa Barclay's Labour Day weekend, when all the kids had gone. Although she enjoyed camp the next few summers, for her it marked the end of her childhood. She hadn't known real change or responsibility until that birthday.

Years later, she went back to lament another change as she watched what had been Aultsville sink beneath the waters of the swollen river to make way for the Saint-Lawrence

Seaway. The entire town had been bought out, then razed, even the gravesites had been relocated; but May could still see everything, bright as the first weekend in July when the cream of the Markham brood bounced off the train from Montreal and into Grampa's wagon, led by Delilah and Ol' Grey. For one panicked moment, as she witnessed the flooding that day, May felt like she was going down with everything else, physically stuck to the bumpy landscape of her youth. She recovered and laughed aloud when she realized that her feet had become clogged in the muddy marshland where she stood. Afterwards, she would tell people that her heart sank with Aultsville, but that didn't begin to convey the sentiment.

She shivered behind the wheel, warm thoughts escaped her. There were new distractions: the wipers no longer functioned. Visions filled her mind of a woman, on the wrong side of eighty, alone, stranded in a highway ditch in Eastern Ontario during a blizzard, with only the clothes on her back and an old horseblanket wrapped around her. As she trundled on past another exit for another ghost town, these were replaced by visions of death: her car was dying. She could not help but liken it to her own deterioration, or the aging process in general: the first thing to go is your appreciation for the finer things in life, art, entertainment etc. This is represented by losing the radio. Your eyesight goes -- the headlights -- objects, once in full-focus, become barely discernible shapes. You squint constantly. She was enjoying the symbiotic tone of her analogy, yet in the back of her mind she felt that the car was about to shut down completely. Distractions were a must if she was going to make it to Cornwall.

Next, the heat -- your body's ability to keep itself warm -- degenerates. The non-functioning wipers are your inability to clean yourself. The comparison was getting more thorough, but something else was happening; May could see the outline of trees, the sky, even the pavement in front of her. The snow was lifting, like night into day, the storm cleared. Suddenly, on her right, was an exit for Downtown Cornwall, she couldn't signal but made the lane change smoothly, just ahead of the car behind her. At the bottom of the off-ramp was a stop sign. She applied the brake gently, but that triggered the light and sucked the last bit of energy out of the battery, which immediately caused the Reliant to stall. She pulled the wheel hard to the left and came to rest in a small snowbank, at the foot of the big red octagon.

She thought the chain of events mirrored one's death nicely and after she put the car in park and popped the hood, she glanced over at the clock which was midway through the rotation from 12:59 to 1:00 when it died.

"Never went back, huh?" Brian leaned forward in his chair.

"No, after one night in beautiful downtown Cornwall, I drove home and sold the car to my nephew, Tony, new alternator 'n everything." May realized that she had assumed her wise-old-woman-of-the-hills tone of voice, a predictable occurrence after the telling of this story. Brian smiled at her and raised an eyebrow. He stood up and went to get his jacket in the hall closet.

"No sir, never got behind the wheel of a car again. Besides, the parking in this building is very dear." May made motions towards getting up, but Brian, one arm already in the sleeve of his jacket, motioned for her to sit.

"I can show myself out, you stay put."

"How much do I owe you?"

"May . . ."

"Now come on, they don't pay you to sit around listening to some broken-down old woman telling stories about her broken-down old car." May frowned.

"But they do," Brian said.

"Bring me my purse, will you?"

"Next time, May. I've gotta run. Thanks again for the ring." He was at the door, a clean getaway, she thought. She called his name. He was in the hallway, still clutching the handle, he swung the door back open.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for picking me up."

"Said the actress to the bishop." He left her with that.

May sat on the settee for a while, watching the twilight slowly turn to dusk. She didn't reach over to turn on the table lamp, and left the curtains undrawn. The living room was filling with darkness and May let it come. The apartment was too big for her; cluttered with too many objects. She must've tripped over all of them at one time or another and not once did her coffee table offer to help her up again, nor would she have faith in her umbrella stand to call for assistance. For the first time, she felt grateful to Julia

for sending in that application on May's behalf to the Maison Argyle, a seniors' residence adjacent to Westmount Park. The two had bickered about it for a long time before it was sent, but May had been on a waiting list for five months now and decided she would wait and see what developed before kicking up more dust about her dwindling independence.

"Listen to the old woman," she said aloud, "falls on her face the one time, and she wants to be put into a home. Bruises heal, you know."

She leaned over and turned on the lamp, then slowly got up, went to the window and pulled the curtain drawstring. She limped into the kitchen, got a frying pan from the cupboard, set it on the stove and turned on the element underneath it.

"Grilled cheese for supper *ce soir*, I think." She lifted the roll-top bread box cover. "With heels." She should have checked her bread supply before Brian's visit. But she brought out the butter and cheddar anyway. There was a knocking, she thought, but very faint. The butter in the pan began to crackle away when the knocking came again, slightly louder. May shifted the pan to another element and went to the door. They hadn't used the buzzer, which implied it could be a neighbour or a salesman that someone had foolishly let in the building. She was in no mood to deal with a pushy-door-to-door type. Or worse, if it was Joan St-George and her nose. Through the peep-hole, she saw a young woman standing in the yellow hall light.

10

Two shorts and a double feature were what you got for your matinee quarter at the Lumière Theatre on St-Lawrence Street. Max Linder, Buster Keaton, and Theda Bara were on the marquee, but the main feature was a German *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. You wouldn't have known it walking into the lobby, immediately confronted by a majestic black and white poster for Bara's *The Forbidden Path.* There stood the Devil at the far end of the primrose path, mustachioed, sinister-looking, a wildflower corsage in his right hand. The other beckoned a forlorn-looking Theda, who was stuck at the garden gate, fraught with anguish and indecision. The caption read:

Suppose the devil was at the end of the forbidden path

Would you follow him?

Suppose your betrayer drove you to the depths –

Would you make him pay?

Bea thought it was horrible. May asked the usher if it was for sale. It wasn't, but it didn't matter once she had sat through the mediocre picture. *A Theda Bara Superproduction* "Indeed," May thought, as the main feature got underway. She leaned over to Bea.

"I like the way they mix things up at this theatre,"

"Am I going to be scared? Am I going to have nightmares about this?"

"Of course you are," May laughed, "and I'm going to steal that big poster for you too."

"You wouldn't!"

"Shhhh!" It came from the piano player who was trying to maintain his allegro for a horse-and-carriage scene. May's mind was not on the film, she was distracted by the theatre, by the people around her. She loved the atmosphere and was excited to watch anything there in the dark. She remembered the first time her father had taken Wyatt and her to a picture show. The feature was *Daniel* and May was nine years old. It was an "American Biograph Biblical Masterpiece." Her father worried she would be frightened by the lions, but May thought they were fascinating; "and cuddly too," she had said. The fright that she took home with her was from another lobby poster, similar to the one that had upset Bea, for another American Biograph Masterpiece, *The Battle of Elderbush Gulch.* The poster was in full colour, depicting a pioneer woman struck down and splayed in a field. A giant, demonic, maniacal-looking red Indian knelt over her, brandishing her small child in his hands held above his head, about to pitch the poor thing to its death. William Markham was reprimanded by his wife for the three sleepless nights suffered by May, who was plagued by nightmares of torture at the hands of Indians. But that was seven years ago. Now she quite liked Westerns.

Bea looked a little spooked after the pictures. She wanted to have dinner at home. The girls walked over to Sherbrooke Street to catch the streetcar. May was staying the night at the Chathams' on Oxford Avenue.

"Still paying student fare?" Bea asked, looking down her nose a little.

"Ten rides for a dollar, can't go wrong." May said. Bea said nothing further until they transferred to the 1292 car at Victoria Avenue. Even then, she only remarked that May hadn't been a student since June, and that the transit system might not take it well that she was abusing the rules. May reasoned that this was probably something that had concerned Bea's mother, who then decided to pass it on to her impressionable daughter. They got off at Girouard and cut through the park, trampling the leaves noisily.

"So, who'd'you fancy, Max or Buster?" May asked jokingly. "I think Buster's sweet, but Max has that French moustache . . . ."

"I prefer real people," said Bea.

"They are real people. Real movie people."

"Who fly to the moon or have houses fall in on them?"

"Sounds very romantic to me."

"Not to me. I'll take some sweet candy or a bouquet of roses any day."

"Is that being sensible or just plain fussy?" May teased.

"Just plain real," Bea said haughtily. They walked on in silence while May puzzled over why Bea seemed to be so out-of-sorts. She hadn't seen her in more than a month, not since that night with the Major. They hadn't really spoken either. The one time May had telephoned, a Friday night, she was told that Bea had "a social call." It dawned on her.

"Beatrice Chatham, you have a beau and didn't tell me! I don't know why I didn't think of it before."

"Because you're too wrapped up in your own secret love affairs to care a whit about me and my George."

"That's not true!"

"It is! You used me that night to be with your Major, and that was more than a month ago! Not one word of tattle has left your lips since then. You've kept me completely in the dark, your best friend."

May was silent again as they turned onto Oxford. The late-afternoon clouds had dusked the street and a gusty wind was blowing the dried leaves into swirls along the side of the road. They passed the house, a few doors south of the Chathams', where the Markhams used to live, where she met Bea as a child. An elderly couple lived there now, and the house seemed smaller, darker. May turned to Bea to make the observation aloud but lost the thought to something more striking. Despite her tender years, May was overcome by nostalgia: for her childhood, for the simplicity of Oxford Avenue, and for Bea. She was no longer playful; she couldn't mask her feelings from Bea because her friend had felt slighted and spoken up about it. The confidence that she had shared with her, and relied on so heavily, was being shaken. She knew she was about to sit down to dinner with Mrs. Chatham, so there wouldn't be room to talk until later that night. As they reached the front walk, May put her hand on Bea's arm.

"It's not 'tattle', Bea, it's . . . difficult."

"Really?" She folded her arms across her chest.

"I haven't told a soul, I swear to you. It's very serious."

Bea pondered the seriousness for a few moments, then dropped the hard stance and leaned in inquisitively.

"Are we going to have something to talk about later?"

"Plenty. I want to hear all about 'your' George."

Bea smiled warmly for the first time that day.

"I'm so glad, I hate being cross with you."

"Me too,"said May. Bea turned quickly and bounded up the front steps.

"Sorry, Bea, about all this!" She called after her.

"Me too! Me too!" Bea giggled as she stuck her hands out behind her back and waved them at May.

* * * * * * * * * *

The pillow was airborne before May could yell out a protest and it hit her in the face before she could get her arms up for protection. She stood there blowing the tousled hair out of her eyes while Bea laughed uproariously.

"You know, I came here to get away from things like this. My *baby* sisters are always starting fights."

Bea made a face after May pronounced the word "baby." At that moment, May decided to wipe off that face with a return volley of the pillow, but Bea ducked and it hit the wall behind her, rocking a heavy painting whose frame made a loud scratching noise.

"Beatrice!?" It was her mother from the hallway.

"Damn you, Aunt Imogen!" Bea cursed the painting and leaped into bed. May followed her, tucking her feet swiftly under the covers as Mrs. Chatham opened the bedroom door.

"How can there be such a commotion when two girls are getting ready for bed?!"

"Sorry, Mother. I was getting a book when the shoulder of my nightgown got caught on the corner of Aunt Imogen."

Mrs. Chatham entered the room to inspect the portrait. She straightened it, stepped back, stooped to pick up the pillow and brought it over to the bed. She sat down on the edge and gave her daughter a stern look. Bea raised her head and Mrs. Chatham slipped the pillow underneath it.

Here it comes, May thought, sixteen years old and about to get a chiding fit for a bratty child of eight. Mrs. Chatham's speechcraft had shaped the girls' timing; most often they would both sense when their conversation or behaviour was about to inspire a sermon from Bea's mother. This ranged from a trickle of righteous examples in the form of a micro-lecture, to a tangled deluge of reminiscences and non-sequiturs, usually relying on haphazard interruption for its cessation. May feared there would be no rap at the door or telephone call at this late hour, so she slumped deeper into her side of the bed and readied her attentive face for the onslaught.

But Mrs. Chatham did a remarkable thing: she didn't speak. Instead, she looked into Bea's eyes for a long moment, time enough for her expression to soften, for her lips to lift into a smile and for her hand to brush the hair tenderly from her daughter's cheek. She craned her neck and slowly lowered her face to Bea's forehead. She passed a hand over her eyes and Bea kept them closed. Her mother sealed her slumber with a soft kiss on each eyelid and whispered, "Goodnight, Angel."

She reached over, and put her hand lightly on May's arm, and gave it a warm squeeze. May closed her eyes dutifully, listened to the springs creak slightly, felt the bed jostle as Mrs. Chatham got up and left the room, pausing at the door to turn off the light.

"Who was that?" said May after a safe interval of time had passed.

"And what has she done with my mother?" countered Bea.

The girls chatted on in the dark, giggling and joking in hushed tones until the conversation was steered onto more sober ground by Bea.

"So . . . what happened with your Major?"

May tensed, "Why don't you tell me about George first?"

"He works in Daddy's office, he's nineteen and he's got red hair. Now, what happened with *him*?"

"God, you're persistent! Alright." May hesitated a long time. "Well, you know how we'd always promised to tell each other every detail about . . . it's just that when you're actually faced with the situation, you . . . sometimes people share things that . . . don't . . . ."

"You're not going to tell me, are you?" Bea asked and answered with her question.

"Bea . . ."

"You sound like my mother telling me why I can't have a new dress or lecturing me about kissing boys."

"Sorry."

"I'm not mad. I think I even understand. It must be very personal."

"It is."

"And even painful?"

May didn't answer. She felt a light pressure begin behind her eyes. Bea reached over and gave her hand a light squeeze. May sniffed, tried hard not to let any tears come.

"We're still friends, right?" Bea asked.

May squeezed back.

11

"Yes?"

May couldn't hear the response, the woman was whispering.

"Yes, what is it?" She looked through the peep-hole again, the woman was holding up a business card. May put the chain on and opened the door a crack.

"Bonsoir, Madame, G.R.C." She retrieved an identification badge from her handbag.

"I'm sorry, my French isn't very good."

"Yes, excuse me. I'm with the police," she said quietly, folding her badge.

"Again?"

"It won't take long."

"You don't have to whisper, you know, it's only 7:30." She unlatched the chain and let the officer in.

"I lost my voice, a bit." She grinned slightly and forced a cough.

"Is this about the other night?"

"Exactly, Madame. I just want to ask about a few things."

May and the policewoman walked into the light of the living room. The officer was in plain clothes: jeans, a neat white blouse underneath a brown, Western-style fringed jacket. She wore black suede ankle boots and had a matching handbag slung over her shoulder. Her hair was very dark, a little too long, but her slender face was attractive, with piercing eyes and full lips, which hung on a sad mouth. Her frame was tall and slim, even

skinny, but her comportment suggested physical ability and strength. A former tomboy, perhaps. May had taken the business card from her and was holding it at arm's length, squinting.

"Inspecteur . . .Lacourse?" She attempted an unaccented French pronunciation.

"That's right."

"Please, sit down."

Inspector Lacourse perched, a little tensely, May thought, on the edge of the sofa. No sooner had May settled into her own seat when she remembered that she'd left the stove on. She excused herself, placed the card on the coffee table, then, cursing under her breath, lifted herself slowly off the sunken cushion and made her way to the kitchen. Her footing was still a little unsure after the fall, so she made sure there was always something nearby to hold on to. She was starting to get more than a little bothered by all this police business. For her, it was aggravating a state of mind she had tried for years to be rid of. The events of the past three days had done more than stir up a few unpleasant memories; May found herself re-living the anxiety and revisiting the confusion that had plagued her more than seventy years previously. For a moment, she entertained the idea of telling this woman where to go with her questions, but she settled on the strategy of being polite and letting her do her job. That was surely the quickest way to conclusion. She called from the kitchen:

"Can I offer you some tea or coffee?"

"Could I trouble you for some water?" The inspector called back.

May turned on the tap and filled a large glass with cold water. She spotted her cane hooked on the edge of the counter and took it up for the trip back. She proudly handed the inspector the glass without having spilled any of its contents and sat back down. Inspector Lacourse took a small sip and cradled the glass in her hands. She started tapping on it with her long, painted fingernails, which prompted May to directness:

"What do you want to ask me?"

"S-sorry?" The inspector was startled by the question.

"I've already told your colleagues everything. I gave them all of Denny's -- officer Beauchemin's -- mail, his box key. What else is there?" You want to know what we talked about? Chopin! Sheet music, recordings, lessons. How nosey Joan St-George is! How the city isn't what it used to be! How this building isn't what it used to be! Blah blah blah."

May looked away from the inspector.

"His mail would occasionally get put in my box and mine in his. We'd sometimes meet outside our doors when we picked up our morning papers and we compared the headlines in *La Presse* with those in *The Gazette.* And we'd laugh and shake our heads. We'd complain whenever some fool would let those Jehovah's Witnesses into the building. Sundays, I'd smell his coffee brewing next door and he'd smell my lemon cake. Once, we even got together and shared the two; it was just before he . . . went away."

May turned back. The inspector had stopped tapping the glass. Her head was slightly bowed, staring intently at the water, as if she were looking for something in it.

"I've upset you," the inspector said without looking up.

"Hell, you're like the capper to the day I've had. Don't take it personally."

"But I do, Madame. Denis was --"

The phone rang, May reached for it.

"Excuse me . . . . Hello? . . . Julia, just a minute --" she placed her hand over the mouthpiece, looked at the inspector, who had reached into her bag and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. The inspector noticed her stare.

"Do you mind?" she asked.

"I do," May shot back.

"Of course," said the inspector sheepishly, and replaced the pack.

May could see how rude she was being through the inspector's eyes. She relented and motioned towards the balcony with her nose.

"I force the young man who helps me with my shopping to have his fix out there. I have to be consistent."

"No problem at all," said the inspector as she rose and slid open the balcony door. She only closed the screen, however, so May felt the cool air on her neck and heard the night traffic as she resumed with Julia.

"Congratulations!"

"Thank you. What for?"

"For being accepted, silly. Why didn't you phone me?"

"Julia, what are you talking about?"

" I called Maison Argyle this afternoon, to see how your case was coming and they told me the good news."

There was a silence at May's end, except for the inspector's pacing heels on the balcony floor. May got a whiff of smoke on the breeze.

"That you were *accepted*, dear. They sent the letter out last week."

"I haven't got it." May took a second to think about whether she had already received it and just forgotten. The process annoyed her instantly. Of course she hadn't received it!

"It'll come tomorrow, no doubt."

"No doubt."

"It's a fair-sized room on the ground floor, they told me, right opposite the reception desk," Julia's over-excitement was palpable, and grating, to May. "The bathroom will be equipped with an elevated toilet seat - because you know how you've come to depend on the one I gave you - and a shower chair for the bathtub!"

"I'm sure you'll be very happy there," May quipped.

"I-I was just about to say that to you!"

"Really," she deadpanned.

"Silly!"

"Silly. Listen, Julia, can I call you tomorrow, I've got company right now." She looked at the inspector, who was looking back at her.

"Who's there?"

"Thanks for calling, that's great news, bye now." May hung up on her friend's protest and grabbed a shawl from the back of the sofa to drape around her neck. The inspector observed this and stamped out her cigarette. As she came back in she said:

"I'm sorry. I forget that others might not enjoy the cold as much as I do. You should have said something." She slid the door closed and dropped the butt into the waste basket next to the piano.

"No, no, it's fine. I just started to feel it this second."

"I've intruded too much. Excuse me, I should go."

"Wait, you were asking about . . . or you were telling me . . . I'm sorry, I'm pretty useless, I'm afraid."

The inspector smiled and lightly touched May's arm.

"Goodnight, Madame."

With that little gesture she had exposed and deflated May's obstinacy, her crotchetiness and her old-lady antics. It was all May could do to muster a smile in kind.

She stood in the doorway and watched the inspector get on the elevator. She turned and caught a glimpse of Denny's apartment door; it seemed different from the other day. May looked closely and saw that there were two yellow police stickers now, one almost directly on top of the other. The one underneath appeared to have had its seal broken.

"If you fuss with a thing too much, it's liable to break on you," May thought. She went back inside, closed the door and found herself leaning against it. She was tired. Too tired. For police work, for Julia, for thinking her thoughts any more that day. She walked a little and leaned a little more, against the door jamb to the kitchen. As she surveyed the mess, she allowed herself one more thought before she went to bed: she was too tired for grilled cheese.

12

May stumbled down the stairs of the rooming-house in the darkness, trying to fasten her dress and keep her balance at the same time. The stairs were narrow and the wood creaked and complained under her heavy feet, waking the whole house and half of The Point, she thought. She stopped and tried to do up her buttons. The dress was torn at the back and several of the buttons were off. She bent down to tie the laces of her shoes. A door opened above her, at the top of the staircase, the same door she'd just come through. She straightened against the wall to avoid the light from the hallway. She drew in her breath and listened as the door creaked shut again.

His breathing was loud, wheezy, as he shuffled to the edge of the landing. Then he too held his breath.

"May?" Major Redpath whispered. He listened. She listened back. He called again, louder this time. Silence. He had to breathe. She slid down a step. He moved quickly, paused, listened again.

"Wait!" came the dark cry from above. May sprang forward, charged down the few remaining steps and threw open the back door to Fitz's bar on the ground floor. There was a handful of patrons remaining and all immediately lifted their gazes from their beer mugs at the sight. May stood in the middle of the room, her hair dishevelled, her clothes torn, breathing hard, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I have my holiday, Calvary," said Fitz, behind the bar. The Major's noisy arrival behind her caused the patrons to crane their already-extended necks in the next instant. He

stood gripping the door frame, bleeding from the temple, his undershirt sweatsoaked, his braces hanging off his waist. Fitz came around behind and grabbed them as the Major tried to move forward.

"Whoa, Cowboy," he had time to say before the Major swung around and planted his fist under Fitz's nose. The portly man flew back against a row of barstools but kept his grip on the braces, pulling the Major to the floor with him. May bolted for the front door. The Major stood up, so did the men in the bar.

"Do you know what the charge is for striking a superior officer?!" He screamed at Fitz.

"*You* hit *me*, Bob, Host of Tabernacle!" said Fitz indignantly from the floor, nursing his split lip and waving his free hand at the men to sit down.

"See that it never happens again!" The Major's battle-stance slackened and he teetered towards the front entrance. May was gone.

She had run out onto Wellington Street, into the warm, late-summer air. But she kept moving: disoriented, she headed east towards Sebastopol Street and the Canadian National railyard. As she stepped over a low barrier that separated the yard from the workers' houses, she heard the bar door slam shut. May dropped down behind the barrier, her hands dug into the soft dirt. She was trying to control the violence of her trembling, her eyes leaked and her nose ran, but she dared not sniffle. Her back heaved with the convulsions of repressed, involuntary sobs. She tried to listen beyond the blood in her ears; two men had followed the Major out of the bar and were trying unsuccessfully to coax him back inside. Major Redpath pulled away from them and staggered towards a big

black sedan parked on the opposite side of Wellington. Just before he got to it, the Major was seized by a spasm and his hands flew to his head. He fell forward and hit the roof of the car with a loud bang. The men started across the street but stopped when they saw the Major slide down into a sitting position on the running board. He let out a painful moan and cradled his heavy head in his hands.

"He's soused is what he is," said one of the men.

"Needs to sleep it off," said the other as they headed back to the bar.

With the Major still moaning and the door opening and closing, May took the opportunity to get further out of sight. She ran across the yard, over three sets of tracks and slid behind a row of boxcars. She inched her way along the cold metal sides of the cars until she found one whose rusted door was slightly open. She held her breath, turned her body sideways and squeezed through. Did the rotatory hinge squeal under the pressure? May didn't know, she greyed-out before she was through the opening and crumpled into a heap on the boxcar floor.

The grey was soft, though, and when she opened her eyes again she was half-submerged in it; her head and neck, as well as her knees and legs protruded. It was not fog, it was a much thicker grey and the rest of her body completely disappeared below its surface; like murky water, but without texture. The sky was the same colour, and it was so close that when she stood up (she had decided to test the grey beneath her) and extended her arm above her, the tips of her fingers disappeared too. At this proximity, it was more of a ceiling than the heavens but as she rotated on her spot, she could see the Markham house in the distance. The horizon, however, masked no part of it; she could see every

step, make out every gable. It was the size of the doll house which sat in the corner of her younger sisters' room.

The grey supported her steps as she walked towards the house, although her legs felt heavier and her stride was much like knee-deep wading. The house didn't seem to be floating, but it was not any nearer after what she felt to be several minutes of walking. A figure sprang up from below, directly in front of her. It was quickly followed by another, right beside it. Her mother and father. They were in church clothes, her mother in a bonnet, her father in a bow-tie. Mrs. Markham threaded her arm through her husband's as they both joined May in the slog towards the little house. Along the way, Murray, Paul and Wyatt popped up, followed by Dorrie, Helen, Muriel and Ruth, who was barely tall enough to see over the grey and had to be carried most of the way by Dorrie. They were all neatly-dressed and as May looked down, she too was in one of her Sunday dresses, a wool one, cream colour, with a daisy brooch at the collar.

May turned to her mother. "We're not getting any closer."

Mrs. Markham and the family were already far behind her. They were no longer walking, yet were moving further away.

"Come to mass, May." Her father held out his hand.

May quickened her pace but made no progress; the grey had grown in thickness, it was holding her in place. As her family slipped below the horizon, she saw her father's lips move, "Lift your knees!"

It was not his voice, but the Major's. May whirled around. The house was gone, the grey had dissipated. Walls had sprung up - green ones - all around her. There was a

circular window in the middle of one of them, covered by vertical iron bars. The hardwood floor below her was painted with multi-colored lines, which formed a basketball key. Gymnasium.

"Higher!" shouted the Major. He stood beside her now, inches from her left ear. "Left right left right left right left! Swing those arms, soldier . . . higher!"

She was doing the quick march, in place, alone, in her Sunday dress and shoes. She hazarded a peripheral glance at Major Redpath. She snapped her eyes front again almost immediately. She felt shock and nausea in an instant, but couldn't stop herself from looking again. He was stripped to the waist, hatless, wearing blue army trousers and black boots. His face and torso were covered in welts and open sores; gaping red holes that seemed to breathe along with him. They followed his arms down to the base of his hand where he showed two deep, circular cuts, like the ones on the Christ-figure that hung on the altar at St-Patrick's Church.

"What are you staring at, soldier?!"

Eyes front again. The echoes of her own marching, the fear of the Major's wrath, his embarassment were with her. The shock remained with her as well as he promenaded around to face her, his sores now heaving. He warned her that he was going to call a halt, and placed his hands on the top of his trousers, on either side of his middle, where his braces hung down. With the preliminary, "Di-vi-sion -" past his lips, he jerked his arms outward and tore open his trousers. Buttons bounced and rolled on the floor as he pulled them down around his ankles, exposing even more wounds. May halted her marching, her

mouth fell open. The Major bled from his groin, a stream of red trickled down his thigh and dripped into the rumpled trousers.

"Look to it," he said. May was transfixed. He lifted his arm and pointed between her legs. "Look to it," he repeated. May glanced down and saw where a crimson stain had soaked through the cream-coloured wool at the front of her dress. She fumbled to raise the hem, and used it to wipe the blood from her legs.

"You see how we're all sinners," he said quietly.

The boxcar door was wide open. He was on top of her when she opened her eyes again. Startled, she pulled away and he let her. After a few moments -- the time it took her to shake off the hallucination and rise to a sitting position -- he crawled slowly towards her, his head bowed. May pulled her knees up under her dress and folded her arms across them. The Major bumped her forearms with his head, rubbed it gently on her bent leg, one animal to another, until she relented. With her legs now straightened and the skirt of her dress pulled down for a pillow, the Major nestled his troubled head on her right thigh and curled his frame up on the cold metal floor beside her. There was little light but May sensed that his eyes were closed, that this spell had spent itself and that his body was shutting down. She put her hand out and touched the damp hair on his head, stroking it softly and patting it gently. With equal sensitivity, he reached up and put his hand on hers.

"We're all sinners," he whispered into her lap.

After more than an hour, she left him sleeping and made the long walk to Bea's house under the cover of darkness. She didn't encounter anyone along the way, for which

she was grateful. At sunrise, she couldn't bring herself to tell Bea about any of it, so she borrowed some clothes and caught the earliest train from Westmount Station.

13

The Markham family plot afforded a fine view of the high-rise apartments on Ridgewood Avenue, where many of May's friends and acquaintances had lived and died. The University of Montreal Tower, its golden-yellow exterior looking a little soot-stained on an overcast morning, stood slightly to the left. The slope in front was a sea of stone monuments bisected by a tree-lined path that meandered all the way down to the gate on Cote-Des-Neiges. Dead Catholics and Protestants ruled the entire Northern and Western faces of Mount Royal, in the form of two massive cemeteries.

The Markhams had got in when the gettin' was good, thought May. It was a handsome, tasteful stone, its face covered with names, dates and a decorous engraving of a row of poppies. Her parents were there, Murray and his wife, Wyatt, and Paul, whose ashes had been interred just a few months previously -- his final date had not yet been inscribed. Paul's wife, Mathilde, and their son, Etienne, who died of cancer in middle-age, were represented by a small brass plaque near the bottom. The girls had been buried with their husbands: Betty in a hamlet churchyard in the Eastern Townships, Dorrie in California, and Ruth, who had married a Protestant, was next-door at the Mount Royal Cemetery, in a cozy little niche in the mausoleum, row C.

Helen and Muriel were all she had left. Muriel had been putting in an annual appearance every Christmas but was getting too feeble to make the trip from Kingston. Helen had "gone" a few years ago when she'd lost her marbles. She rarely recognized May

any more, but May still got out to the retirement community in Pierrefonds once a month to hold her sister's hand and watch television with her.

"Here you are, dear, I'll be back for you in half-an-hour or so," said Julia as she handed May a small bouquet of carnations and forget-me-nots.

"Alright."

"And do up your top button, it's cold." Julia stood braced between the open door and the driver's side of her car, nagging.

"Get off my back, woman!" May affected her best gruff, male voice.

"That's enough of that, thank you, Douglas," Julia smiled and lowered herself into the seat. She was off to get her prescriptions filled and buy a *Chatelaine* to leaf through while May paid her respects to departed family. Julia was her "wheels" and although she sometimes couldn't stand her company, May knew that she was a good soul and that the use May got out of her vehicle was a reasonable trade-off.

It *was* cold. Without the sun, and with a late-autumn wind dancing around the top of the mountain, May soon reached for that top button. She put on her gloves too, then bent down slowly to place the bouquet at the foot of the stone. She said hello to her parents first, then worked her way down the list; imparting her news and her opinions about that news. She told her mother she hadn't been sleeping well but didn't go into detail about her dreams; she even mentioned to her father what had happened to Denny. May complained about Julia and Joan St-George to Wyatt and related the falling-down-in-the-bathroom story to Paul without embarrassment, but with a measure of weariness and fatigue that she identified as such.

"I'm just so very tired," she told the Markhams. May felt superstitious whenever she found herself envying the dead -- usually when she was telling them all her problems -- as if admitting to it would kill her on the spot. Some people, Julia in particular, would find her especially hard if she ever let her real feelings about death be known. The truth was, she had watched her mother and siblings die over the years as a simple matter of course; she was rarely moved by news of anyone's demise, and, at her age, there had been many such announcements. Since that first, explosive killing of her father, she had been numb; then, gradually she had become indifferent, especially to natural causes. It seemed likely to her that death brought peace, although her faith in the Catholic paradise had waned long ago. But she held on to her superstition, in the half-hope that by showing up at the gravesite periodically to whine about how much she'd love to be done with it all, she might finally be embraced by her departed family and slip quietly and imperceptibly into something else.

There had been silences, unbearable at times, from her mother, and what seemed to May to have been a concerted effort on the part of her younger brothers and sisters to exclude her from activities and amusements. Her protests and complaints had been invariably met with the defensive reply: "You're too old for such things."

From conversation to correspondence, May had felt somewhat apart from the other Markhams; it was a feeling she had grown used to, but she had never been entirely comfortable with it. Indeed, it had almost been forgotten about, until this past week. Now, she stood on the ground that contained her dead and shivered with disconnectedness. Her palpable heartbeat reminded her that she was just shy of the threshold; the sting on her

face from a very solid raindrop further confirmed her place among the living. The confirmation came again and again with increasing violence -- ice pellets -- as she found herself under a shower of them. No good standing there like an easy target; she made a bee-line for the nearest shelter.

May's legs felt the strain of negotiating the slope which led to the mausoleum, but they soldiered on once the ground evened out. She was being pelted by the freezing rain: little nuggets slipped down her collar, bounced off the side of her face and rolled around within the semi-circular stitching on the tops of her shoes. The lot next to the building contained a few limousines and police cars. When she got to the heavy door, a uniformed man opened it from the inside and let her through. She thanked him and walked as quietly and steadily as she could through the large, arched vestibule, and found a pew to rest on, outside the door to the chapel. Her breath was short and she closed her eyes to keep the room from spinning. She sensed other people around her, but needed to keep her eyes off them until she recovered.

"Ça va, Madame?"

"Oui, ça va, merci."

"Is everything alright?"

"Are you okay?"

"Do you need any help?"

"Just catching my breath, thank you."

After a few minutes, her regular breathing returned and the dizziness subsided. May opened her eyes and squinted slightly as they adjusted to the bright white marble on

the walls and floors. It was an impressive building: from where she sat May could see a beautiful fountain, surrounded by wreaths and flower arrangements and with what seemed like little bugs bouncing all over them. May looked to the ceiling to discover artificial sunshine, courtesy of a rooftop floodlight aimed at the huge skylight which deflected the ice pellets, but let their shadows through. She craned her neck around the door frame to look into the chapel. There was a ceremony taking place. A man in a dark suit was folding a pall while the priest poured sand into the shape of a cross on the lid of a light brown casket. The man draped the folded pall over his left arm and walked over to a panel on the wall. After a nod from the priest, the man pushed a button and the casket was lowered through the floor on an elevator. The people in attendance began to shuffle and mill about, producing sounds of consolation and sorrow.

To her left, May saw a large party of police officers and a few civilians gathered at a shoulder-high niche. The inurnment rite was in French but May recognized the holy words: *Saint-Esprit, Seigneur, évangile, rédempteur*. She shivered. It certainly wasn't a warm place. And she was damp from the storm.

"Take my coat, Madame Markham."

May looked up at a young female officer with a familiar face.

"Inspector Lacourse?"

"No one recognizes me when I'm in uniform," she smiled as she bent down to drape a navy-blue wool overcoat, with gold stripes on the epaulettes, over May.

"With your hair pulled back, it changes your face. Thank you," she said, bunching the coat around her neck. She noticed that the inspector's eyes were red and that her mouth was signalling a more dour expression than she'd had the night before.

"It was nice of you to come. I didn't realise you were so devoted to him."

"To whom?" May almost asked, but it suddenly dawned on her that this was Denny's inurnment - the R.C.M.P. saying goodbye to one of their own - and she had still been picturing him as a bar manager.

"Well, I would be here anyway. Our family plot is close by."

The inspector nodded and they both listened to the closing remarks of the priest as an attendant sealed the modest urn in the niche with a thin, square sheet of wood and replaced the heavy marble slab over it. May looked up at the inspector. The woman's lip was quivering, her eyes filled with moisture. May took the inspector's hand, squeezed it gently.

"H-he was my partner," the inspector whispered to her. "We worked together for a year and a half. *Banalisé*. Under cover . . ."

"It must be very difficult, I'm sorry."

The inspector waved her free hand vaguely at May and took a few moments to collect herself. At length she said,

"Madame, you knew him only a little bit, but I can't understand . . . this, this conclusion."

"Suicide?"

The inspector looked at her sharply; her eyes flared with a mixture of incredulity, hurt and rage. But she recovered her demeanor almost immediately. May looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry, Madame, I don't mean to scare you. I'm too close to this case. They won't tell me anything about Denis. They go outside the force for the investigation. I've already been interrogated twice by the Montreal police."

"Me, too."

The inspector smiled at May, "Not a good feeling, is it?"

"Oh, no. I was like an open book; I wanted to tell them everything, like when I didn't declare seven dollars on my income tax return in 1971."

Inspector Lacourse adopted a serious face and feigned making notes in an imaginary sketch pad. They both chuckled quietly.

"I'm sorry for my intrusion last night, Madame . . . this whole thing with Denis, is very stressful, I don't think of others . . ."

"You must have been wondering who threw meat in my cage."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I wasn't very hospitable to you. I could've been more helpful."

The inspector frowned and shook her head, "I just want to try to make sense of . . . " She stared at the floor. She was getting choked-up again.

"You can call again tomorrow, if you like," May said.

The inspector looked at May.

"You are not too busy?"

May rolled her eyes, "I'll pencil you in. As long as you don't ask me, 'When was the last time you saw the victim?' or 'Did you happen to notice any suspicious characters in the building?' for the umpteenth time."

The inspector smiled, "It's not very pleasant --"

"But it's necessary, I know."

"Thank you. I am glad to see you, Madame," she said warmly.

"It's May. Not April or June, just call me May."

"I will. And you'll call me Monique."

May nodded.

"And use the buzzer next time, there are lots of undesirables about and I'm an old woman."

The party of officers and other mourners was filing out through the vestibule. Monique and May let go of each other's hand. May handed the coat back to Monique, who smiled and put two fingers to her lips to indicate that she was dying for a cigarette, then backed up slowly to rejoin the others. May waved goodbye. Twenty minutes later Julia found her in the mausoleum and helped her out to the car.

14

The room was on the third or fourth floor, May guessed -- her eyes were still closed -- by the amount of time spent on the stairs. The Major struggled with her in the hallway, awkwardly transferring her weight from the cradle of his arms to his shoulder as she heard him fumble with the key, panting and weaving. The shifting was knocking May's insides about, she felt, and the added pressure on her abdomen from the Major's shoulder, coupled with her head being upside down caused a distressing stirring in her stomach. This was further confirmed after the Major got the door open and dropped her emphatically on the bed. She opened her eyes and tried to focus on the dim ceiling-light fixture, which was a mistake, as it immediately began to spin uncontrollably.

"WC?" She slurred.

The Major mumbled from the chair next to the bed, where he had slumped,

"In the hall, first door on the right."

May rose, then bolted as sure-footedly as she could towards the door, knocking her shoulder against the jamb. She teetered towards the little room, pushed open the door and fell straight to her knees. From her huddled position over the toilet she brought up everything she'd had that day and with her right leg stretched behind her, she pushed the door closed to try to mask the indelicate wretching noises she was making. She pulled the flush-chain three times before her stomach was done, and even then, she mistrusted it. "Keep your head down," it said. The porcelain floor tiles cooled her cheek as she settled

into a fetal position, curled around the bowl. She soon fell asleep with the soothing effort of sending calming signals to her spent insides.

* * * * * * * * * *

She woke up what seemed like a moment later, in a bathtub, covered with a green blanket, a towel under her head. She sat up slowly, her head throbbed. The room was brightly lit, the walls were peach-colour and had thick cracks starting from the baseboards and branching into smaller, thinner estuaries towards the ceiling and corners. The floor was the same, octagon-shaped porcelain tiles, as in the toilet-room, which, she surmised, was next door. She quickly assessed the need to go back to that room, concluded that her stomach was steady for the time being, and gingerly began lifting herself out of the tub. The pounding in her head was less intense when she held it at an angle so, slightly hunched, she hobbled over to the door, pulled it open and peeked out into the hall. It was dark and her eyes were immediately drawn to a candle, low in its stick, at Major Redpath's feet. He had dragged the bedside chair out of the room and had been keeping vigil (or sentry duty, as he would undoubtedly call it) over his patient in the bathtub. He rose when he saw her, put his arms out to catch her should she fall.

"Still feeling grim?"

"Yes . . . no, not in that way. I think I'm done. I must lie down, though."

"Right this way, Madame." He led her cautiously back into their room and eased her gently onto the bed. She had already removed her shoes (or he had) and the Major

helped her pull the bed covers up to her chin. The ceiling-light fixture was once more in her line of sight and while it had stopped spinning, she suspected it might start up again if she continued to encourage it with her stare. Turning onto her side, she heard the Major dragging the chair back into the room and felt his hands touch her lightly as he spread the retrieved green blanket over the bed.

"You're not tired?" she mumbled in a half-sleep.

"I'm exhausted, child. But as long as your wicked father is in my head, I'll not have any peace."

"Hmm . . ." May trailed off again.

* * * * * * * * * *

Her chest tickled, then pained her. Something pricked her skin and was continuing to do so. She writhed and pushed her hands down there. They jumped at the touch of the Major's hair. She opened her eyes suddenly to find his mouth on her bare breast, kissing the nipple, his moustache brushing the sensitive skin. He was moaning. May pushed his head away violently and screamed. He leapt on top of her instantly, his hand covering her mouth with a smack. His other arm was at her throat, applying pressure to her windpipe. May's eyes bulged as Major Redpath's weight sank on her, the mattress springs pressing into her back and legs.

"Let us not forget ourselves, mistress," he seethed, "you are in my gainful employ and as such, should not protest your role too much. It might bode ill for your reputation."

May was quelling her rising panic as she desperately tried to determine whether this was one of the Major's "black spells" or drunkenness, for he was breathing a powerful odour of alcohol into her face. She couldn't tell, but decided it would be best not to struggle.

"Blink your eyes twice if we understand each other."

She did. The Major considered this a moment, then slowly he removed his hand from her mouth, his arm from her throat and his body from on top of hers. He stared disdainfully at her naked torso.

"Cover your shame, little whore," he sneered.

The words stung her, but she proceeded as if it were a spell, and pulled her slip and dress back up. She felt around for the brassiere. The Major sat at the foot of the bed and dangled the undergarment from his little finger.

"I admire the decolletage this apparatus provides, but you don't need it," he said.

"What do you mean?" She tried to ask as neutrally as possible, but the Major sensed the fear in her. Suddenly, he grabbed the brassiere in his fist and threw it in her face.

"You think you can bait me with that?" He snapped, "you invest so much in your inveiglement and it's all for nought! I see through the dirty whore wiles."

"But --"

"But here we are, correct? I must have a lot of gullibility to find myself trapped here again, no?" He brought his knees up on the bed, got into a crawling position, and slowly moved towards her. She looked hard into his face, but there was only anger and

coldness in his eyes. He came very close to May and hovered, not touching, but looking intently at her.

"I'm not the animal who's trapped this time." He inched closer. May's head pressed back into the pillow, she trembled slightly.

"You don't remember who I am, do you?"

May opened her mouth to speak, but she still held his unknown and unknowable eyes in hers, and decided against it. She shook her head. He pounced on her, straddling her waist and holding her arms down with his.

"You were so good to me, all those years ago. So generous, Melanie."

He must have seen a reaction in her face, for he continued, "Didn't you think I'd remember the name of the woman who gave me this?"

With that he swooped his face down to hers and kissed her forcefully on the mouth. May wriggled but the Major pressed harder, opening her lips with his and sliding his tongue in between them. She was repulsed but utterly helpless to do anything but indulge him. He suddenly withdrew his offending mouth and sat back on her legs, still pinned beneath his weight. With his left hand, he pulled on his lower lip, exposing a bright red chancre.

"Did you feel that? That one's been there for years, since the night you first gave it to me. Remember that night, trollop?"

May shook her head.

"Come now, Melanie, I imagine you've received an army's number of men's kisses in your . . . profession. Surely you can recall my singular ulcerated buss?"

He waited. May again shook her head.

"Oh, perhaps not. I'm confused now." He let go of her arm with his other hand and began unbuttoning his shirt. May didn't make any sudden gestures. He removed the shirt and continued with his trouser buttons.

"Was it the army of cock's tails you recollect better than the kisses, dear?" He leaned forward to brace himself as he sprang onto his haunches. From there, he stood up on the bed and, lowering his suspenders, he dropped his trousers to his ankles. With his left hand he pulled down the top of his shorts and exposed himself to her, limp, covered with scabs, while the right hand lifted his undershirt to reveal even more sores dotting his gaunt midsection. May brought her hands up to shield her eyes and whimpered.

"That's it, Melanie, there's the lass I remember."

"P-please," said May, not wanting to look.

"It's not something to fear. Our Father in heaven has given me welts is all. One for each of my sins with you, girl." May peeked through her fingers. Major Redpath stood beside her on the bed, leaning over, smiling at her. May drew in her breath and kicked him firmly behind the knee with her right leg. The Major cried out immediately, nursing his leg as he crumpled to the bed. May figured she must have hit one of his wounds for, while the blow had been the hardest she could muster, it still should not have reduced him so thoroughly. She contemplated this in the seconds it took her to roll off the bed and stumble towards the door. It wouldn't open. She pulled harder, then noticed it was bolted. She reached up and was drawing the bolt across when he hit her from behind, slapping her hand away and clutching her tightly around the middle. He spun her around violently and

pushed her face-down on the bed. He landed on May with force and winded her. As she wheezed and struggled to regain her breath, he spoke menacingly but quietly into her ear.

"Damn you, Melanie. Does this resemble a game to you? You think that hazard or chance rules this encounter? Your mistake will cost you and I'll be doling out the punishment presently." He was breathing heavily to match hers. May was panicking, her body writhing, her limbs flailing. The Major had begun hiking up her dress and slip. He tore at her garter, slipped his hand beneath her underpants, gripped her rigidly between her thighs. May had recovered her breathing enough to try to scream. The Major muffled it as he shoved her face into the green blanket with his other hand on the back of her head. Her own hands were still free: one pulled desperately on the bed covers while the other hung over the edge of the bed, swinging wildly. Something brushed the back of it, she quickly went back for the object, groping along the floor. She found one of her shoes, then the other, placed neatly by the bed. She pinched the lace between her thumb and forefinger and flung her arm back as far as she could. The heavy-heeled shoe hit the door with a loud knock. The Major jerked up and whirled around towards the noise, temporarily relinquishing his hold on her. He turned back when he felt May flip over beneath him. He barely had time to catch the sole and heel of the other shoe in his periphery before they connected with his temple.

Major Redpath was still. Blood trickled down his cheek and onto the floor. May collected herself, then her things. By the door, she stepped into her shoes. His body stirred. She pulled the bolt back. He opened his eyes. She turned the handle. He sat up abruptly. She pulled the door open.

"May?"

She stepped out into the hallway.

"May, I'm bleeding . . . what happened to me, sweetheart?" May heard genuine bewilderment in his voice. She inhaled deeply and closed the door behind her.

15

The bottle of Gilbey's Dry Gin looked to have two drinks worth left in it. It was balanced precariously near the edge of the piano-top, surrounded by several dark-green plastic, one-litre bottles of Canada Dry Ginger Ale. All empty. Dead Soldiers. May sputtered at that expression, one of her favourites. No more mixer for the elixir. Had to be ginger ale too. No 7-Up, tonic was too bland. Ginger ale goes with everything and you can drink it alone. May sputtered again as she caught the double meaning of her last thought. On to the next. She was tight, but she hadn't been drinking alone. Today had been one of the bi-annual visits from her opportunistic second-cousin, Andrew, from Fort Erie, Ontario. He had popped in early that afternoon, straightened a few picture frames, made himself a sandwich, and cracked open the booze with May. In short, he was there to make sure he would be remembered in her will. Muriel and poor Helen received similar visits from Andrew, she knew. He was making his rounds.

Still, he wasn't bad company after the first couple of drinks. His life was anything but dull what with the break-up of his third marriage underway.

"You know what she says to me?" he had asked, "she says, 'Andrew I want you to say you're sorry. Not 'I'm sorry you feel that way' or 'I'm sorry that's just the way I am,' but really say you're sorry. And mean it!' Can you believe her?" He had made sure his third wife was further reduced by being extra-whiney with his imitation of her voice.

"Amazing." May had smiled into her tumbler.

He had been driving a taxi since losing his job as an ambulance dispatcher and had regaled May with stories of drunken cross-border escapades with businessmen from Buffalo, and strip clubs, and snow storms, and the scandals of a small town. He had failed to say much about his two grown children, who lived in Toronto. May guessed that they'd had it with their Dad. And she could understand why. A few hours with Andrew and she felt like she was recovering from surgery. It had been very near to that at one point, when Andrew grilled her incessantly about her health, and about Muriel's and Helen's as well. She had toyed with him mercilessly, using her own tales of mysterious pains in her body and impending lab results to keep him guessing. After repeated, belaboured, "so-great-to-see-yous" and "if-there's-ever-anything-you-needs," she had finally got him out the door. Until next Spring. Good fun, tiring fun.

But he had poised that bottle so perilously near the edge . . . she didn't like it. From the chair next to the piano and using the blunt end of her cane, she tried to push the Gilbey's back to safety, but missed, knocking down a ginger-ale bottle instead. It bounced onto the piano bench, then onto the floor and rolled up to the fringe of the living-room carpet.

"Ooops," she giggled, retracting her cane. She asked herself why she didn't just get up and move it and the answer came back immediately: effort. She was fine where she was and besides, the circumstances presented her with an unique challenge. She turned the cane on its end and shakily extended it to try and hook the bottle and draw it carefully across the piano top to within arm's reach. She had decided it wasn't enough to save the gin, but she would celebrate her ingenuity and resourcefulness with a drink. Straight up,

no ice, no commingling carbonated consort. She smiled at her alliterative ability and was about to applaud her manual dexterity when the bottle took a dive off the end of the piano and shattered on the little no-man's-land patch of bare floor between the chair and the instrument.

"Dammit!" She threw her cane as far as she could across the room. It glanced off the floor and settled near the entrance-way closet. She picked up the tumbler off the arm-rest and tossed it hard after the bottle. It too shattered and mixed particles with the previous casualty. May stroked her forehead. Had she not noticed the extremity of the piano? No, she had been proceeding with steady caution. What could have gone wrong? Was she shaking too much? She felt pretty steadfast.

The smell of juniper berries had begun to permeate her small corner of the room, when there was a knock at the front door. May looked up. Effort. There were two more knocks before she got to her feet, a total of five by the time she teetered to the door, banging and rocking various pieces of furniture for support. Her vision was slightly blurred so she didn't bother squinting through the peep hole. She undid the lock and pulled the door open a crack, leaving the chain on. Regret pinched her face when she saw who it was. Effort.

"Oh, hello, Joan," she muttered, "what brings you out of your cave?"

"Did you have a fall? Is everything alright?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard noises, banging noises, sounded like glass breaking."

"TV."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Television, my dear Joan, a twentieth-century invention."

"I know what a television is." Joan lifted her hands to her hips. May noticed that her neighbour was once again wearing that unflattering housecoat. It must've been later than May thought.

"Good. You must've heard mine. Sorry. I've turned it down."

"I don't hear anything." Joan brought her nosey ear up to the door crack.

"Exactly." May was weaving a little, she braced herself against the sliding closet door.

"What show were you watching?" Joan St-George persisted.

"Mute!"

"Mute?"

May stuck her arm through the crack and mimed depressing a button on a remote-control channel-changer pointed in Joan's direction.

"Why doesn't the "mute" work?" May cackled. Joan stepped back and emitted a sound of displeasure. May was amused.

"There've been strange people in the building," Joan huffed.

"You mean apart from the tenants?"

"Mrs. Webster on twelve heard noises in the emergency stairwell and in the parking garage."

"So?" May sighed heavily.

"So, you don't find that odd?"

"No more than finding my prying neighbour with her ear pressed up to my door at all hours of the day and night."

"You know, I was only concerned for your well-being."

"Yes, Joan, thanks, Joan, goodnight, Joan," she said mechanically, closing the door.

"Hello to Ben. Poor man." She leaned back on the door, laughing to herself. She lifted her arm and repeated the remote-control mime to her empty apartment.

"Brightness? Contrast? Colour?" She pointed into the kitchen, the living-room, and down the hall towards the bedroom respectively. She picked up her cane with her other hand and hobbled squarely into the hall, pointing the imaginary remote at the adjoining wall between her apartment and Denny's.

"Power off," she said, dropping her arm to her side. Time for bed. She circled the room as sure-footedly as she could, turning off the lights. When she set eyes on the pile of glass between the chair and piano again, she determined that it was Brian's fault. If she knew he was too liberal with the bathroom cleanser, then it stood to reason that he'd over-Pledged the piano top as well.

She got into bed with all her clothes on, she was that tired and that drunk. But she could take comfort in the development that her body didn't believe in hangovers anymore. Strong drink just scared away her ailments for a few blessed hours now, something she had come to depend on more and more. This made Brian the golden delivery boy whenever he made a "booze run" for her. Usually two big bottles of Gilbey's and a bottle of Cheminaud Brandy (to settle her stomach, of course) every week. But due to tonight's

unfortunate occurrence -- Andrew's visit, not the broken bottle -- she would have to call Brian to top up her stash. She never knew when people were going to just drop in like that. It's better to always be prepared for company, she told herself, as she had done since stocking her first liquor cabinet in her first apartment, seventy years ago.

As she drifted off, she wondered briefly why the inspector -- why Monique -- hadn't come by.

16

Bea was her accomplice, but in order for the plan to work May divulged as few details to her friend as she could get away with, for Bea liked to live vicariously through others (and lately, especially through May) but did not always remember to be discreet. They had hatched the scheme a week ago and now the wheels were in motion, the specifics were in place and being acted upon. The Chathams were in Hamilton for a week and Bea was under the not-so-watchful eye of their Scottish maid, Morag, who had a penchant for sloth when "the master and mistress were not about," but scrubbed, dusted and polished like a whirling dynamo in their presence. Morag and Bea had an understanding while her parents were out of town: Bea would ignore the male voice she sometimes heard through the door of the maid's quarters while Morag tolerated the breaches of curfew and the slumber parties, even going so far as to field telephone calls from concerned parents about the chaperoning of such events.

Mrs. Markham had not been concerned enough to call the Chathams when May had mentioned that she was attending yet another sleep-over at Bea's that night. But May had her alibi, and Bea promised to make up a credible excuse for why May couldn't come to the telephone, in the event that someone did call for her. That was the extent of the plan as far as Bea was concerned, but May had entrusted the rest of it to the Major. She knew that part of it would take her to her first ever drinking-house and through parts of the city she'd never been to, but the Major had grown more unpredictable lately and she mixed her excitement with apprehension.

May rode the early-evening train from Pointe Claire, clad in a blue, floral-print dress, stockings and shoes with a slightly-raised heel, to make her appear taller and, she supposed, older. She had left the house with an overnight bag but had checked it with the station-master until her return the following day. All she had with her was a small change purse, containing eight dollars and sixty-seven cents in bills and coins, which she flipped back and forth between her palms as she counted the stops: Dorval, Grove Hill, Montreal West, Westmount. She was to meet Major Redpath at the south-east exit of Windsor Station, where Peel and St-Antoine Streets intersect. The Station was crowded and May had to push her way through the gates and across the expansive floor to take momentary refuge at a newsstand. *The Montreal Star* contained a front-page headline about a local military parade and May considered buying it for the Major, but reconsidered when she realised it would be just another thing to carry, and she wanted them both to be unencumbered for the evening.

Major Redpath looked smart in a tan suit and an olive-green fedora as he stood on the sidewalk with his arms folded. He had been to the barber and his moustache was trim. May didn't dare kiss him with so many other people around, but she hung on his arm as they headed south down Peel Street to Griffintown. He was in an ebullient mood and it was further fuelled by the greetings he received from passers-by, who all called him Bob. He was courteous in his replies but he never stopped to chat, May presumed, to avoid the awkwardness of having to introduce her. They did stop, however, at the tobacconist's on Shannon Street, for cigarettes, then they cut through an alley off Ottawa Street and went in the back way to Tommy Fish's room in a first floor flat on Young Street.

It was a dark apartment, sparsely furnished, and not very clean. Tommy's room was at the back. The first thing May noticed was how hot it was. The one window was held open with a two-by-four and the grimy green curtains hung limply on either side of the sill, waiting patiently, like the room's tenant, for a breeze.

"Hello," said Tommy, swinging his legs off the bed as he sat up.

"Hello, Tommy," said May. The Major tapped him lightly on the arm.

"Tommy, come for a drink," he said, "you'll melt away to nothing in here."

"It's awfully hot," May added.

"Where're you off to?" Tommy asked.

"We're heading over to Fitz's. It's going to be a fine night."

"If you say so, Bob. I'll only stay for one or two though, I've got a meeting later."

"A card game's more like it," said the Major with a wry smile, "which hovel's it in tonight?"

"Foreman's office on Basin Street."

"What's that fellow's name who runs it?"

"Trotter, I think. You want in?"

The Major looked at May, who tried not to give any indication of her leanings. His face darkened suddenly, he knit his brow and seemed to swallow his bottom lip. She had been fidgeting with her change purse, opening and shutting the clasps. Now the Major was fixed on it.

"It's just change," she said weakly. He took a moment, looked up at her and his face brightened again. He whirled around in a military-style about-face until he was facing Tommy. He stamped his foot. The walls shook a little.

"Bob --"

"Not tonight, Tommy, I'm afraid. We have other plans. But you'll join us for that one drink, yes?"

"Sure, let me just put my shoes on."

On the foot bridge over the Lachine Canal, they passed another man whom Major Redpath knew.

"Evening, Bob, Tommy, Miss," he said, tipping his hat. Tommy waved, May smiled, the Major said nothing but stopped in his tracks. May and Tommy continued on a few steps then turned around. The Major was looking over his shoulder at the man, who kept walking away. He turned back and stared at Tommy.

"Davie," he said.

"That's right, Hugo Davie."

"Master Corporal Davie. He was out of uniform."

"But, Bob, he's been out of the service for --"

"I didn't grant him leave!" The Major turned to Hugo Davie walking away in the distance.

"Bob --" Tommy took a step forward.

"Insubordination!" the Major shouted, "you failed to salute an officer!"

Hugo Davie looked back at the Major just as Tommy stepped in front of him.

"Bob,"

"That's what *he* said!" his voice still raised, "he called me by my Christian name!"

"Major!" Tommy barked back, "it is my duty to inform you that Master Corporal Davie has been formally discharged from service, sir!"

Major Redpath stared blankly at Tommy for a few seconds, then craned his head to catch a glimpse of Hugo Davie continuing on his way. A smile came to his lips.

"Thirsty, Tommy?"

"Yes, Major!"

"At ease, Tommy. I've got the first round."

It was getting dark as they reached Fitz's Saloon on Wellington Street, in Point St-Charles. May had never walked the streets of The Point before, and she was glad of the male company. Tenement flats, railroad-workers' shanties, children playing in the middle of the road, sooty faces, dirty necks. Streets like Mullins, St-Patrick and Dublin told you who its inhabitants were as clearly as Reading and Grand Trunk told you what they did. But if Montreal's working-class Irish had a reputation for being tough, they didn't seem to wear it on their shirtsleeves: the Major continued to be greeted warmly wherever the three ventured. By the time they got to the Saloon, May's fear of the unknown had been allayed and she had put the Major's brief episode behind her too. She began to enjoy herself again.

Fitz's was a modest-sized bar on the ground floor of a four-storey rooming house. It was made of brown brick and had three windows on each floor, facing the street. The Saloon was modeled after a Klondike watering-hole; complete with swing-gate,

chandelier, spitoons and a player-piano in the corner which had, Tommy said, never worked. The stout man behind the bar, Liam Fitzsimon, owned and operated both the Saloon and the rooming house. When he spotted the Major, he threw open his arms and beamed.

"Well, ho-ly eucharist, I can't come back to myself! Robert Redpath, you are the cats whiskers! And Thomas Fish, you're still a horse's godfather! Christ in Moses! Who's this charming creature?"

"Fitz, I'd like you to meet May Markham," the Major said.

"Enchanted, my dear, enchanted." Fitz held out his pudgy palm. May gave him her hand.

"It's nice to meet you, too," said May as Fitz kissed the air over her knuckles, never putting his lips to her skin. He gave her back her hand and leaned on the bar, grinning.

"Cha-lice, you haven't darkened my door in months, Bob, it's good to see you. What're you drinking? Bell's?"

"Sure, Fitz. With a trickle of soda."

"Tommy?"

"Ah, pilsener, please, Fitz."

"Comin' up. And for the lady?"

May looked at the Major who pointed with his gaze to the shelves of bottles on the mirrored wall behind Fitz. May was a little overwhelmed.

"I'll have a Bell's with soda too, please," she said. Fitz gave a chuckle.

"She knows what she wants. I'll say that for her, my soft saviour."

The Major took May's arm and led her away from the bar. He looked at Tommy and told Fitz they'd be at a table. The room was almost full; there were some patrons playing cards, others talked and smoked. Major Redpath held a seat out for May at a table at the rear of the Saloon, next to a large door that led to the back stairs of the rooming house, May was told. Tommy sat down with them. Fitz brought the drinks.

"Have I still got a tab, Fitzer?" asked the Major.

"It's not a gift, ciborium," Fitz mumbled, then winked at May and strode over to the next table to collect the empty glasses.

"Why does he talk that way?" May asked.

Tommy and the Major exchanged glances. The Major spoke.

"Marie-Chantal."

"Who?"

"Fitz's wife," said Tommy, "a French girl. She's got him so hen-pecked that she won't allow him to curse in English. But, of course, she can let tear a blue streak in her native tongue without reproach from him."

"She claims that blaspheming in French is somehow loftier because all the words revolve around the church, while in English, curse words are derived from defecation and fornication. The baseness of humanity," added the Major.

"So, Fitz, who was prone to cursing even before he started running this place, translated Marie-Chantal's oaths into English whenever he felt like using profanity in her presence. After a while, those words and expressions stuck with him."

"He's part of the local colour now, our fenian blasphemer." The Major raised his glass. Tommy and May followed suit.

"Here's looking up your ancestors," he toasted, and clinked glasses with his companions. Tommy laughed, May smiled and took a sip. Tommy and the Major were looking at each other again, about to burst with laughter. May didn't disappoint. The whiskey burned her throat: almost immediately she began choking, coughing and reddening from the neck up.

"We're going to need a bit more soda, Fitz," the Major joked. Fitz approached the table, his hands on his hips.

"How old is this filly, Bob?" He scrutinized May as she was recovering.

"Not to worry, Old Fitzer. She's the age of Christ," said the Major through howls and guffaws. Tommy was doubled over. Fitz raised an eyebrow.

"You sure you're not trying to pass me a pine tree?"

May cleared her throat as best she could.

"No sir," she rasped, "I just have a bad cold."

"Blarney."

"Leave her alone, Fitz," said Tommy, "she's got the grippe."

"Sure she does. And I was just born yesterday." His expression darkened. Fitz looked at May, Tommy looked at the Major, the Major looked at Fitz, May looked at her Bell's and soda. When she could stand the suspense no longer, she said quietly:

"It's true, Christ of tabernacle!"

Fitz released a huge, wheezy belly laugh and clapped both the Major and May on the shoulder, everyone joined in. May was laughing to cover her own surprise at what had come out of her mouth.

"That deserves another round," said Fitz and he was off again.

"That's some translatin'," Tommy commented.

"We've got a French-Canadian maid," she said with a combination of caprice and relief.

It wasn't long before May felt the warmth of the whiskey, which helped her through the first glass and into the second. The third was just a matter of when, while the fourth had been and gone before they had time to get acquainted. The men at her table were talking, May was nodding, laughing, rolling her glass between her hands, losing track of so many things: time, atmosphere, company (Tommy had left for his card game somewhere between the third and fourth Bell's-and-soda and was replaced by another fellow whose name she didn't catch.). She held the cool glass to her forehead, then lowered it, with her forehead, to the table. Her eyes closed, all she could hear was the sputtering sound she was making with her lips. She continued to make it as the Major lifted her and carried her upstairs.

17

"In Spain, the best upper sets do it . . . Lithuanians and Letts do it . . ." May sang to Hubert, the diminutive doorman, as he held the front door open for her. She had decided earlier that morning to take advantage of the sun - a rarity in late Fall - to walk over to Greene Avenue to do a few errands.

"Can't you read, Madame?" he joked, pointing to the rectangular plastic sign that hung on the plate glass of the adjoining door. The sign read, "Pas de colporteurs," and it was an old joke between them. It simply meant, "no peddlers." May, who read and understood French well enough, was often reluctant to speak it in front of others, shy about her accent. Hubert, who was French-Canadian, constantly urged her to practice with him, but she would customarily reply in English whenever he spoke to her in French. One day, to prove her point, she read the sign aloud to him, which came out, "Pas de Cole Porters." The gag evolved from there. Every time she would leave or return, May would serenade Hubert with one of Porter's cheeky lyrics, and he would pretend to be all gruff with her about that particular building policy. For the last month, she had been working her way through the verses of "Let's Do It" in random order.

"You want me to call a taxi, Madame?"

"I'm just going a few blocks, do a little shopping."

"Where is your young man?"

"Well now, I can't be bothering him for every little thing."

"Au contraire, votre garcon est la exclusivement pour votre plaisir." Hubert bounced his eyebrows in a suggestive manner. May didn't flinch.

"Honi soit qui mal y pense," she replied playfully. Hubert laughed and let the door close. May watched him slide in behind his little desk between the doors, then walked down the drive. The sun was strong and the wind was down, perfect strolling conditions. There were few people about in the mid-morning, it was a business day and most would undoubtedly be nestled at their work stations. Good, May thought, fewer people meant fewer line-ups.

Her first stop was the post office, for stamps, then over to Young's florist to order flowers to send to Helen on her birthday the following week. She stopped in at the Double Hook Book Shop next door, to browse and to chat with Rebecca, a young salesperson whom May had become friendly with.

"So, what's new in Canadian Literature?" she regularly asked. Rebecca's usual response was to groan and say, "Don't ask," but today she pointed to the hardcover shelf and said,

"Margaret Atwood's got a new one."

"Any good?"

"Don't know, haven't read it yet. It's based on a real murder case though."

"Oh, one of *those*." May put a snooty spin on her pronunciation of "those," for effect. Rebecca smiled and started to speak further when the phone rang. May grazed in the fiction section while Rebecca talked. There was always a certain amount of guilt associated with trips to The Double Hook, as if these purveyors of home-grown talent

could see her book shelves at home and were passing judgement on the Harlequins, the Barbara Cartlands, the Maeve Binchys, and the Danielle Steels. May's argument was that these books were easier to read but she would have felt peculiar defending their merits because she also liked to be challenged from time to time. And the popular novels presented anything but that. It was a weak argument.

"Is that woman waiting for you?" Rebecca was off the phone, pointing through the front window to the sidewalk. May glanced over but from where she stood there was a blinding glare off the windshield of a parked car.

"She's been walking up and down, looking at you through the window periodically."

May put her hand above her eyes to act as a visor, and could make out the profile of a slim woman, pacing, smoking a cigarette. She recognized the fringe jacket. Monique Lacourse. May waved. Monique didn't look up but continued to pace. May said goodbye to Rebecca and walked out to the sidewalk.The glare was still in her face. Monique looked up, attempted to smile, then cast her eyes down again. She dropped the cigarette on the pavement and stepped over it. She was jittery, unsure of what to do with her hands.

"Am I being followed?" May asked with a smile.

"No, no, I saw you go into the store . . . but I had this . . ." Monique pointed to the crushed butt at her feet. She looked sheepishly at May, "I'm sorry I couldn't come yesterday, May," she said meekly, "they were interrogating me all day. Today too, it's the same thing. A mountain of questions. I have to go back in a few minutes."

"Where?"

"Station 23. It's over on Stanton Street."

"This is your coffee break?"

"In a way, I had some things to do at my office. Are you walking in this direction?" Monique pointed north up Greene Avenue. May followed her finger and thought for a moment.

"Well, I've done all I came to do, I guess I could take the long way home. It's such a beautiful day."

They proceeded slowly, side by side, towards Sherbrooke Street. They walked in silence for most of the way, May appreciated the sun on her face and the damp leaf smells of Fall. It seemed that Monique was merely extending her pacing, keeping her eye on the ground, brooding about something. May stopped to look in the window of Alexander's, at a display of Wedgwood porcelain figurines and dishware decorated with characters and quotations from Beatrix Potter's children's books.

"I used to read her books when I was a girl. I begged my parents to buy me a rabbit. But they quite rightly wouldn't, so I settled for a stuffed toy one, named Peter, of course."

"It's very cute," added Monique.

May pressed her hand to her heart. With the other, she pointed to a soap dish painted with the likeness of Peter Rabbit in his little blue coat and a caption which read: "Now run along and don't get into mischief."

"Oh, my mother used to say that to us all the time," May smiled and stared, "that's just darling."

Monique was smiling too, she started to laugh. May turned to her.

"You're laughing at a silly old woman."

"I don't see an old woman. You're a little girl today."

"I suppose so." May followed her companion across the street. They resumed the silence until they had to part company in front of Ascension of our Lord Church, just up the street from where May lived. She wished Monique luck with her testimony.

"If they go easy on me tomorrow," Monique replied wearily, "I'll come to your place for tea." She produced a half-smile and turned to cross the street. May watched her walk up Côte St-Antoine until she disappeared behind Westmount City Hall.

Whatever little-girl exuberance and energy there had been in May, was gone as she approached the front door of her building. She felt tired, too much sun perhaps. Hubert put down the magazine he was looking at and opened the door for her. She collected her wits enough to warble under her breath: "When the little blue clerk, in the middle of his work . . . starts to tune to the moon up above . . ."

"If you keep this up, Madame, I'm going to have to call the police," Hubert admonished.

This stopped her, for some reason, and she turned to him.

"No," she said seriously, "don't."

"But you have violated the sign," said Hubert, still playing. May waited for his demeanor to change before she spoke again.

"Hubert, did you hear any reports of strange people in the building?"

He pushed his cap back a little on his head.

"Well, there was a complaint night before last from Mrs Webster, noises on the fire stairs, but I suppose it's those kids in 10C playing around."

"Anything else?"

"Of course Mrs. St-George is always hearing things, or noticing when a lightbulb is burnt out, or if the pool is too hot, or if the elevator is slow, the hallway is dusty, the windows are smudged, the garbage smells . . . ."

"I get the picture," May smiled and waved, then turned and disappeared into the little nook off the lobby referred to as the mail room. She turned her key in the lock of one of the stainless-steel boxes in a row on the wall. Phone bill. Post card from Andrew from Crystal Beach, near Fort Erie, warning her of his impending visit, mailed over ten days ago. Glad you could count on the post office for speed as well as efficiency . . . She closed the cover and noticed the scratch marks on the adjacent box. Its lid was loose and dented. She flipped it up. Empty. Denny's mail box had been pried open.

She informed Hubert. He replied that it had already been reported (Joan St-George strikes again) but that he had figured it was the police, in their bulldozing way, looking for clues.

"But I gave them his mail key," May said.

Hubert fiddled with the brim of his cap, shook his head thoughtfully.

"Surely you or whoever was on duty would have heard something," she persisted.

"Well, sometimes we have to be away from the desk. to carry someone's bags, do a security check, answer a call of nature."

"Of course." May was feeling like an interrogator.

"Maybe the police lost the key you gave them."

May pondered this for a moment, it made her uneasy. She was likely more tired than she realized.

"Sure," she pushed the button for the elevator, "that's probably it."

18

"You know, Mr. Buick used to make bathtubs before he turned his energies to motorcars," Leo said as he made a shaky left from Cedar Avenue onto the Public Road in Pointe Claire. May had one hand on the dashboard of Mr. Morris's burgundy Buick 6 and the other clutched the passenger-side door handle tightly. Leo couldn't really talk and drive at the same time, so May had suggested they park somewhere for their conversation, to which Leo had agreed, though he didn't have enough sense to forego the small talk until they got there.

"Big ones too, very roomy, you can swim in the amount of water they hold. My grandparents had one. I nearly drowned in it when I was a kid. What kind of tub do you have?"

"W-white," said May, vibrating, as her side of the car ventured onto the grassy roadside embankment.

"Whoops, she pulls to the right a little." Leo attempted to correct his alignment.

"No, I mean, who makes it? What brand of tub?"

"I have no idea."

"Does it have paws?"

"Feet?"

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Oh." Leo was silent for a moment. The car drifted left.

"Does that make it a Buick?"

"Not necessarily. Could be a Crane. Or a Mannard."

"Take care, I think he's turning." May pointed to a car coming the opposite way whose driver had his arm out the window. He honked his horn as he passed closely by them.

"I think he was waving us off, she pulls a little to the left sometimes too."

Leo turned right onto Claremont Avenue and drove to the end of the street. He parked the car facing the water; a small fleet of moored sailboats in the foreground. Beyond them, the lights in the village were becoming perceptible as the sun sank lower below the horizon. All the windows in the big car had been rolled down and the breeze brought the odour of grass and lilac as well as the smell of the river in to them. The crickets piped up as Leo cut the engine, croaking over the faint sound of small waves hitting the shores of Valois Bay. May relaxed her grip on the door handle and the dash and settled her hands in her lap. She leaned back on the front seat and breathed deeply. Leo followed suit. They sat there for some time, not a word between them.

"May I hold your hand?" Leo broke the silence. May didn't look at him.

"I don't think that would be wise, Leo."

There was more silence but May couldn't relax and enjoy the surroundings anymore. She felt something was coming from him. Something was coming and she'd have to answer to it. It came.

"Mary Constance Markham, will you be my wife?" He had turned to her and lowered his left leg off the seat so that his knee touched the floor. He bumped the stick-

shift as he spoke and it wobbled. Since she had refused him her hand to hold he was wringing both of his nervously, looking wide-eyed at her in the dusk.

"No, I will not, Leonard George Morris," she replied quickly, laughing. For an instant, she thought he might have been kidding around, being deliberately sappy to amuse her. But then she remembered that he usually took his cue from her whenever she got in the mood to tease. His initiative signified that he meant it. She forced her laughter, trying to play down the heaviness of the moment. To no avail, his face darkened and his eyes immediately betrayed his hurt. He bowed his head, raised himself back into a sitting position behind the wheel and folded his arms across his chest. He said nothing further but sat in a deep sulk. May sighed heavily to mark a change in tack.

"You're serious, aren't you?"

"Of course I am."

"Why, Leo?"

"That's a foolish question. Because I love you, of course."

"You've never said that before. How was I supposed to know?"

He thought about that for a moment, looked at her, softened his expression.

"I was afraid to tell you because, well, we've been friends a long time and I didn't want to spoil that but . . . at the same time, I think you're the cat's whiskers --"

"Speak plainly, Leo, unless you're kidding around," May interrupted.

"No, no, I'm not. It's just that my father always says that to my mother, and I don't have much practice with saying how I feel . . . but that expression sums it up, or rather, not just the saying, but the relationship that allows for it to be said. From a husband

to a wife. That's what I want, May. I was on my knees to you a minute ago, asking you to marry me because . . . I love you and I want to be with you. I want to have a home with you and lots of children, boys and girls, I don't care. Just lots of them."

May was getting flushed, and her nerves bristled as he went on. He painted the picture of the country house with the big yard and all the grubby-faced babies that would come bouncing out of her while she cooked for them and cleaned for him. He poured on the bumpkin charm, spoke optimistically, glowingly, of their future together. He referred constantly to his mother and father, what exemplary parents they were. But May wasn't really listening to him, she wasn't giving him a chance. As soon as he'd mentioned children, *his* children, he might've been talking to the steering wheel. By the end of his pitch, her face showed nothing.

"Am I being plain?" He seemed to be asking himself as well as her.

May nodded.

"Now that you know that I'm serious, what's your serious answer?" he tried again. May practically jumped out of the car and walked towards the water's edge. What was he doing? Why was he doing it? She was asking the dirt path, talking to the reeds, although not actually deigning to speak, for Leo was coming up fast behind her. He seized her arm forcefully and turned her towards him. May jerked it out of his grip. They spoke simultaneously: his words said something about her disrespecting him, hers was a rebuke. Without hesitation, she walked on to the river bank, leaving him standing there.

She could see how the rest of it was going to play out. She felt like Anne Shirley, the feisty heroine of the L.M. Montgomery series, spurning a suitor with audacious

dreams of exploration, experimentation, adventure and independence, and how all these related to a sixteen-year-old girl from Pointe Claire. She could picture just how well the decision not to have children would go over too. What a waste of breath, she thought. Of course, Leo would have to know everything; it was obvious that he hadn't guessed any of it. And she was sure that he couldn't let go of such a momentous proposal without a complete dissection of the reasons why not. Just as he hadn't supposed them, she knew that he'd have trouble accepting them. There goes the friendship. And for nothing.

May felt very alone. Not a single one of her girlfriends held similar notions and she couldn't very well talk to Anne Shirley. Indeed, she was struck by the ludicrousness of her own comparison. She was relating to a fictional character the way she yearned to interract with her mother, her sisters, with Bea and Eleanor. But they were not unlike Leo in their view of things, although they indulged her "fancies" a little more. The role she desired to fill was not society's role. If she wanted to "get on," she would have to make a categorical choice: wife and mother, or working-woman and spinster. The implications were stifling to her. She had been bullied by his proposal, cornered by the question.

Angry and resentful, May marched back towards the Buick to have it out with Leo. On the foot-path, she thought fleetingly of the Major, who, despite his erratic behaviour, had never tried to corral her. He offered no resistance to her ideas (although she couldn't recall if she'd ever voiced one clearly and articulately in his presence) and was not a man given to limiting himself. Leo was sitting half-in, half-out of the car, his feet resting on the running board when she approached. Her fists were clenched and her brow furrowed. She was preparing to spit out an entire rant filled with the scattered thoughts

and arguments swimming in her consciousness when Leo, without looking up, simply lifted his hand in a "halt" gesture and said quietly,

"Get in. I'll take you home."

May tried hard not to look flabbergasted on the way back, but suspected that her eyes displayed her puzzlement, and her lips, a slight pout. Leo never looked at her though. He kept his eyes on the road and, as a result of not talking, he was pulling into the Markham driveway in no time and without further incident. He got out of the car and came around to open the passenger door for her. He stood there, holding the handle, looking off into space. May reached into the back seat to retrieve her handbag. Leo made some impatient breathing sounds. She put her hand on his arm as she stepped down.

"Leo --"

"Forget it, May. Let's just forget about it." He slammed the door closed and started back around. "You won't mind if I don't see you to the door," he muttered.

He was behind the wheel again, but he didn't put the car in gear. He just sat on his hands, hunched forward slightly, whispering to himself. May leaned in the passenger-door window.

"I'm sorry, Leo, I just --"

"It's because I don't wear a uniform, isn't it?!" He snapped.

"What?"

"I'm just as good as he is!"

"Leo -"

"Infantry's for fruits," he sneered, "the real action's in the navy."

May nearly laughed at this outburst. She put a hand to her lips.

"You're being ridiculous. This has nothing to do --"

He yanked hard on the gear-shift and the car jerked forward. May barely got her head clear of the frame. He sped down to the end of the driveway and made a preoccupied turn onto Lakeshore road, throwing up a spray of dust and gravel. Flying stones and pebbles stung her calves as she retreated up the front steps. She heard him blow his horn in the distance, out of sight, and the roar of his speeding engine was still audible as it strained under his heavy foot and fully-extended leg.

She turned her key in the front door, shaking her head. The parlor light was on. May felt rooms lighting up all over the neighbourhood. Difficult to keep secrets in a small town. There would be questions about this noisy exit, to be sure; a scandal if Leo has a crack-up with the car. Mustn't think about that.

"Is that Leo making all that racket?" It was her father, from the parlor, speaking through a pipe in his teeth.

"He's just showing off for me." She put her hand on the newell post, climbed the first stair.

"That boy's in love."

"You think so?"

"I do. But he just might be in love with that car."

"It's a bathtub." May smiled.

"What's that?"

She looked towards the parlor. Through the semi-closed door, all she could see of her father were his crossed legs and a wisp of smoke floating out and away from them. She eased up the second stair.

"I said I think you're right. G'night, Poppa."

"'Night, precious."

May unpacked the contents of her bag onto her dresser in the moonlight, so as not to wake her sisters with the lamp. Among them was a brown velvet ring box. Inside was a simple silver band with a modest stone in its crown.

19

Billy,

You old Mesmer, still up to nothing good I see. Your latest onslaught had me over the ropes, I must say, with the civilian faction fast encroaching on the proverbial jig, as it were, but once again, and much to your consternation I'm sure, I've held my own. Contrary to what you may know or believe, man is capable of going for long periods of time without sleep. And in the daytime, during your fleeting moments of distraction, I have stolen away for a much-needed kip. Thus, I have the presence of mind today to compose this warning to you: renounce your power, or there will be consequences suffered.

Since you have virtually ignored the verdict of your peers, and it is painfully clear that your repentance was a hollow gesture, a plate of cold justice shall be served up by yours truly. You have been spared thus far only because of a precious family jewel, who dutifully defends you, only because she too has fallen prey to your manipulations. My regard for her may be seen as a weakness, yes, but I have succesfully negotiated every offensive launched from your demonic mind and will continue in this fashion until I have worn you down or until I force an opportunity to undo your influence. Either way, you will be stopped.

In addition to the cessation of all counter-somnambulic manipulations, I shall be satisfied with nothing less than a full confession to these malevolent acts.

Furthermore, a public denunciation of said acts will embark you on the arduous journey towards putting things right. The venue and time may be of your choosing but make no mistake, any deviation from outright self-castigation will be viewed as a blatant sign of aggression and shall be dealt with accordingly. (See warning above)

Finally, Billy, should you fail to comply with any of these quite reasonable demands, I shall have no recourse but to expose all atrocities inflicted by you, by proving my mind's superior strength and its nimble command of the elements of force.

Bob

May had been digging in the box. Her lap was buried under its contents, which she had strewn over the course of the afternoon: photographs, letters, articles and other keepsakes she had accumulated over the years. The box had originally contained a wool sweater from Ogilvy's -- a present from Dorrie years ago -- and its blackwatch-tartan cardboard exterior was tattered, creased and well-faded. It was held together by two versatile yards of twine that May had woven into increasingly imaginative patterns over the years; to accomodate a tear here, a bulge there. The box was her time-capsule and it lived under the rust-stained towels and frayed face-cloths on the top shelf of her linen closet. She had brought the box into the living room late that morning, looking for the letter, her guilty secret. May had salvaged it from the waste-basket in her father's office in

the confusing moments after he'd been shot and before the police had arrived. Mechanically, almost apart from her body, she had gone in search of the Major's calling card. She had calmly lifted the blotter, carefully and deliberately rummaged through his desk drawers, until she spotted the letter, torn in half, in the bin. Its envelope was intact so she had scooped the two halves into it and tucked it into her coat, then transferred it to her purse back in the outer office. At the time, this action was a matter of course to May: an intuitive, defensive move to protect her conscience and her person from further implication, while simultaneously intensifying the surreal aspect of what had occurred. She could not explain how she knew to look for a trace of the Major, or why she withheld the letter from the police.

A shudder had come upon her as she re-read it, the memory of him: the military pomposity, the paranoid and bombastic language (all those sleepless nights buried in books, soaking up vocabulary), the baldness of his threats. The disease. There, on the severed page. Of course, this was only the troubled half of the Major. She had known (as others had) his sensitivity, his self-deprecating humour, his astuteness and his kindness. The teenaged, first-time-in-love May had championed that side of the man; the beleaguered side, the losing side. That's perhaps why she had recovered the letter in that frantic moment and kept it, she told herself. It ultimately proved to be an inconsequential piece of evidence: there had been other written threats that the family knew about and, of course, Major Redpath had confessed to the crime within forty-five minutes of committing it. But there was a weird, personal bearing attached to knowing (and not really knowing)

the Major, which had brought a measure of shame upon May and, unreasonably or not, that she associated strongly with the loss of her father.

She shook her head slightly to emerge from her reverie, replaced the letter in its envelope -- postmarked January 10th, 1921, no return address -- and put it back in the box. A large, tattered, black and white family photograph caught her eye: "Markhams, back garden, St-John's Road, P. C. - June, 1920" it said in white letters at the bottom of the photo. There they were, in all shapes and sizes, smiling broadly and squinting in the summer sun; the children dressed in holiday whites, the parents standing proudly behind them. Her father's sturdy shoulders, however, supported no head. It had been cut out and close-cropped for a newspaper article about the killing, featured in *The Montreal Star* at the time. May was looking for that article, in a black, ringed folder dedicated to literature about the murder of her father, compiled by an enthusiastic great-nephew -- Murray's grandson, also named Murray. Copies had been distributed to the family at large at the last Markham reunion four years previously.

Most of the family had nothing but praise and admiration for young Murray and his endeavor. It was well-researched and nicely presented, with microfilm photocopies from old newspapers alongside excerpts from psychological and legal textbooks, selected presumably to give a weighty, documentary-type feel to the forensic detail of the case. Upon being presented with her copy, May had thanked young Murray in a way she would have thanked a transient who handed her a flyer for a men's suit sale on a crowded street corner. Her memory needed no prodding on this particular subject, thank you very much, you can keep your gory particulars to yourself. She knew that he was proceeding with

youthful, full-of-beans, do-a-good-deed-for-the-old-folks-at-home intentions, but she didn't appreciate the package, nor the very public way in which it was dispensed. Everyone present wanted her opinion of young Murray's enterprise. Mostly, she got away with nodding stiffly as others waxed complimentary about chronicles and legacies and ironies and tragedies and yak yak yak, but there were a few who wanted a direct reply. She said that she was simply too tired to look at it and that the reunion was over for her.

She had glanced at it in the taxi on the way home, decided she hadn't the heart to throw it away, and dropped it in the box that night. She hadn't opened it since. Now, she found herself leafing through it, scanning the pages, cursing young Murray's zeal and letting her eyes fall on photographs and fragments of text. There was the shot of her father's head, cut from the group photo: his moustache upturned in a smile but his eyes completely shadowed by a broad-brimmed cap. May found this regrettable, as it made him appear less human alongside a smaller, but much clearer picture of the Major, which had been taken professionally, in uniform, while posing in statuesque fashion.The heading read: "Financial Man Shot Dead."

Browsing further, she came upon a courtroom composite drawing of herself giving testimony as Major Redpath looked on from the prisoner's dock. She recalled not being taken with the artist's embellishment at the time: a very pronounced scowl had been drawn onto her face, one which cast daggers in the Major's direction. In fact, she couldn't bring herself to look at him and she had kept her declarations simple and matter-of-fact. She had heard what she later knew was the fatal shot, but she hadn't seen anything beyond her stricken father as he stumbled from the next room. The prosecution, mercifully, had

allowed her to stand down after only a few questions and called Wyatt to the stand to fill in the details of the Major's relationship and history with the Markhams. This was, of course, why she had avoided looking at the folder for so long. It told only a fraction of the story and what was there was distorted. She noticed that her grip had tightened on the flimsy cardboard cover, wrinkling the edges. Again, she had to shake her head to rouse herself from the mind-wandering spell that the box had inflicted on her.

"No good getting riled about this little chronicle," she thought, "young Murray can wet his pants all he likes, I was there. It was *my* event."

It was past time to put things away, she knew. Monique would be by soon for tea. She thumbed quickly through to the back page of the folder. It seemed thicker than the rest. She sliced her thumb open running it along the top edge. The action made her shiver reflexively and she nursed the wounded digit between her lips. She had painfully discovered that there were actually two pages stuck together, joined at the plumb edge; undoubtedly a printing irregularity. May pried them apart at the top, peered down between them and saw that there was something written on the concealed page. She felt for the letter-opener in the small, side-table drawer. She separated the pages carefully and began to read what was there: a tiny obituary, dated May 18th, 1929.

> *Redpath, Robert Patrick, suddenly on May 15th, at the Homewood Sanatorium at Guelph, aged 47 years. Former Montreal Provost Marshall, Robert Redpath distinguished himself in administrative duty during wartime, attaining the rank of Major. He is survived by a brother, Dr. Lloyd Redpath of Montreal. Private*

ceremony. Flowers may be sent care of Jos. C. Wray, & Co, funeral directors, 290 Mountain Street.

Below that, a clipping from a medical textbook:

Syphilis is a chronic systemic infection caused by ***Treponema Pallidum*** *subspecies* ***pallidum****, is usually sexually transmitted, and is characterized by episodes of active disease interrupted by periods of latency. Following an incubation period averaging 3 weeks, a primary lesion appears and is often associated with regional lymphadenopathy; a secondary bacteremic stage is associated with generalized mucocutaneous lesions and generalized lymphadenopathy, followed by a latent period of subclinical infection lasting many years. In about one-third of untreated cases, the tertiary stage is characterized by progressive destructive mucocutaneous, musculoskeletal or parenchymal lesions, aortitis, or symptomatic central nervous system disease.*

Somewhere in that mire of technical chatter, the buzzer had buzzed. Monique. May shook her head one last time and tried to put the folder back into the box. It wouldn't go. She was stuck to it. It dangled open until May gently pulled her sticky thumb from the bottom corner of the concluding page. She left behind a reddish-brown adhesive print that would effectively re-seal the information as it had been.

20

"Eggs!" Muriel held the basket above her head with both hands.

"Thank you," said May, relieving her of it.

"Flour!" said Helen, who held a sack that was almost as big as she was.

"Thank you. Over there." May pointed to the floor next to the oven. Muriel was back from the larder.

"Sugar!" She giggled as she dragged another sack over beside the flour. And so the sisters continued their rotating deliveries with increasing giddiness, sing-songing the names of the goods they conveyed: Buh-Terr! Saa-aalt! Milka, milka, milka! Muss-turd!

"Put that back," said May with mock-crossness, "You don't want that in your birthday cake, silly."

"No-o," sang Muriel, "Si-llee! Back to the pan-tree!" She goose-stepped a retreat with the jar.

"Bring me the vanilla, Muriel."

"Yess, Mahsster."

May was mixing the ingredients for the fifth birthday cake she had baked in the six months since becoming the designated cake-baker of the family. Her first creation, a three-tiered, cherry-vanilla, heart-shaped torte, in honour of Murray's twelfth birthday, (which also happened to be St-Valentine's Day) had been a runaway success. Each subsequent creation had been, according to the ever-appreciative devourers, an improvement on the last. May knew there was a certain amount of familial embellishment at work (it was

considered a duty among the Markhams to encourage, support and indulge one's siblings whenever warranted) but she delighted in the compliments: hearing people ask for second helpings and patting their stomachs with satiety.

The girls had offered to help her that morning, hoping some of that success, and attention, would rub off on them. But, their initial duties as runners and labourers done with, they quickly became bored with the whole baking affair and wandered away from the kitchen into the yard to play and perhaps exaggerate the indispensability of their cake-making roles to the boys. May didn't mind. Let them enjoy the day, she thought. It was sunny and warm, even for July, and they were still getting used to being out of school. The boys took no time at all to adjust: baseball. They could play pitch-and-catch from sunrise to dusk, and often did. Muriel and Helen would wend their way into the action somehow, she knew, proposing boys-against-girls running bases and playing until somebody bumped their head or skinned their knee, or worse, until the girls won. Dorrie was in Ste-Agathe, her first summer as a counsellor at the camp sponsored by the Lion's Club. Her father and Wyatt were at work, and her mother was upstairs with Ruth and the baby. Adele had the day off, hence the free rein May enjoyed in the kitchen.

She gleefully slaved over the mixing-bowl and greased the baking pan. When it was all ready for baking, she realised she'd forgotten to pre-heat the oven. She turned on the gas, grabbed the box of Eddy matches and knelt before the oven door. It squeaked loudly as she pulled it open, with a sudden, piercing scream which startled her. She fumbled with the matches, breaking the heads off two sticks before successfully igniting a third. She caught a whiff of gas, which sickened her, then lowered the lit match to one of

the pores. Little blue and gold flames rose in a neat row along the oven floor. May stared at them as she flicked her wrist to extinguish the match. The heat ascended to her face and she closed the door, fully prepared for the squeak this time.

He was in the room as she stood up. May sensed him immediately, whirled around and backed into the oven, jostling the utensils on the stove. She put her hand to her mouth to stifle an outcry, but a sharp gasp managed to escape. Major Redpath stood silently in the kitchen, his fedora in one hand by his side. He was wearing a blue summer suit which hadn't been pressed in a while and was darkened in places by dust from the road. He was haggard-looking -- May noticed a few shaving nicks around his throat -- and appeared to sway slightly in his stance. As she lowered her hand he raised his, and placed his index finger over his lips. With a subtle nod of his head he indicated the little bedroom off the kitchen, beneath the hall stairs. His old room. May led the way, slowly, quietly. The Major followed, closing the door behind him.

She started to speak but he repeated his gesture until they were both seated, side by side, on the bed. After a moment, Major Redpath turned to her and raised the back of his hand to her face. It was not an abrupt movement, yet she flinched in anticipation of his touch. He appeared not to notice and gently stroked her cheek.

"Flour?" he smiled.

"You gave me such a start! Why did you scare --"

"Powdered sugar?"

"What are you doing here?! If anyone --"

"You're covered in it." He placed a finger on her chin and rotated her face towards him. He reached up and rubbed a streak of white powder from the tip of her nose. May relented.

"It's flour," she said, beginning to smile back, "I'm making a birthday cake for Muriel. She'll be seven tomorrow."

He was playing with her hair now, smoothing the strands between his thumb and forefinger, looking for powder.

"Did you get any in the cake?" he joked.

"Hey, I'm very well respected for my baked goods, I'll have you know."

"Oh sure, around here, but . . ."

"But what?" May said with lighthearted indignance.

"But have you got what it takes to bake it in the real world?"

She started to laugh, but suppressed it to a giggle when she thought it might be overheard. He kissed her. She welcomed the touch, let go of her nervousness and relieved it with a warmer excitement. He pulled her gently to him. His moustache scratched. She pressed her lips harder against his to arrest the offending hairs. With a timid, hesitant motion, his hand travelled from her shoulder to the back of her neck, to her ear, down to her bare forearm and finally settled in her hand. He squeezed it tightly and she returned the pressure, her blood coursing beneath every point of contact, until she felt flushed from head to toe. With her eyes closed, her other senses were swimming: she smelled lotion and hair tonic and sweaty cotton; she heard breathing and humming; she tasted sweet alcohol and tobacco and touched muscle and rib and collars and seams. She opened her eyes to

find him staring back at her. She wondered if something was wrong. He noticed her change of expression and pulled away from her. She tried to recover the moment by craning in towards him. He deftly guided her into a clinch.

"It's good to see you, May," he said over her shoulder.

"I'm glad you're here, but --"

"But, indeed, and alas, fair maiden, my impetus for trespassing is twofold." The Major held her at arm's length as he said this, then stood up. May's spirits sank with her expression. The moment was gone; he was beginning to talk like a character again. May tended to shrink from this persona; at sea in a storm of vocabulary and a whirlpool of language. It wasn't that she didn't understand his words (although that problem did arise on occasion), but that she recognized them as a defence against close contact. She had thrilled to his openness, his vulnerability, his humour and his touch, but these were rationed, it seemed, in favour of the distancing and disposable diet of affectation. In the past, she had been patient because it appeared that he had no control over these changes. Frankness usually returned to him if she waited, but the problem was time. He had been banished from the premises, ejected by her father and brother. How long until he would be discovered? Her nervousness was back.

Major Redpath went to the closet and opened the door. The bare hangers chimed as he rummaged, indeed, the closet seemed vacant, but he pulled a tattered, brown valise from the corner of the top shelf and set it down on top of the dresser, opposite the bed.

"Come Desdemona, I have but an hour of love, of worldly matter, and direction to spend with thee. We must obey the time," he said, unfastening the straps. He lifted the

cover to reveal a suitcase full of books, thrown together haphazardly. He began emptying its contents onto the dresser and, what he couldn't fit there, he threw onto the bed. He moved quickly. May scanned the covers and spines to find a collection of mostly 19th Century Literature: Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell, Eliot, Collins, an anthology of Sherlock Holmes stories, plays by Ibsen and Wilde and a frayed, yellowed pile of papers, coverless, bound together by the thinnest threads. The title was handwritten on the top page, "Oroonoko." There were textbooks too: *Exploits in the Far East*, *A Guide for the Equestrian*, *The Boer War*, *Tribes of the Congo*, *Mesmer*, *The Oxford English Dictionary*. May even recognized the black ledger that the Major used for a journal.

"Of course, it's at the bottom of the pile!" He said a little loudly. May glanced reflexively up to the ceiling. She thought she heard footsteps at the top of the stairs. He whirled around and handed her a slim volume with a dark green cover. May stared at it blankly, opened it to the title page. *Othello*.

"A present from your blackamoor general, my pretty, " he beamed. May looked puzzled, then alarmed. Someone, her mother no doubt, was definitely coming downstairs.

"Thank you," she said quickly, then stood up. The Major continued to smile, oblivious to the sound of the heavy heels slowly descending on the other side of the sloping wall. May went to the bedroom door. Her mother was now moving down the hallway. Her pace was slow because she had the baby with her -- May heard gurgling through the door as they passed it on their way to the kitchen -- with little Ruth trailing behind, dragging her feet, the way she always did.

"The jig is up," said the Major with a laugh. May frowned and shushed him with a finger to her lips.

"May!" Her mother called from the kitchen, "May!"

May took a moment to look at the Major imploringly and mouth the word "please" before she opened the door and slipped out. Alice Markham was standing in the kitchen, near the cluttered counter-top, holding Betty. Ruth sat on the floor beside her, imitating the posture of the rag doll sitting next to her.

"What were you doing in there?"

"I was looking for a book."

"What book?" Her mother sounded irritable.

"This one." May showed her the play.

"I presumed. What is it?"

"Shakespeare. *Othello*."

"Did you get it from *him*?"

"From *whom*, Mother?"

They stared at each other for a long moment, not speaking. Alice Markham heaved a sigh.

"You left the oven on."

"I'm sorry, I must've fallen asleep."

"Hmm," intoned her mother and stepped over to the bassinet atop the breakfast table to lay Betty down.

"Hmmm," repeated Ruth, imitating her mother's action with the rag-doll. May slid the cake pan into the oven, then watched with alarm as her mother walked over to the room beneath the stairs. But before Alice could open the door, she was distracted by Ruth's outburst of: "May's got a boyfriend! May's got a boyfriend!" The little girl picked up the doll and danced her around to the schoolyard rhythm.

"May's got a boyfriend! May's got a boyyyyfrieeennnd!"

Alice Markham turned to Ruth and smiled. May's fists and jaw clenched as she fixed her gaze on her baby sister.

"And who's that, Ruth?" Alice asked.

Ruth swivelled her torso around to look at May. She pointed a stubby finger in her direction, then let out a hearty giggle.

"It's Leo! It's Leo! It's Leee-oohhh!"

"Oh, it is not!" May said with a mixture of relief and exasperation. She looked up to see her mother step into the room. A cringe seized her entire body. Ruth was dancing the doll again.

"Is too! Is too! Is too, too, toooo!"

May turned away, looked out the back door window at the pitch-and-catch game, told herself this wasn't happening.

"May," Alice called, "could you come in here a minute, please?"

As she went, she tried to decipher her mother's tone of voice, tried to imagine what she'd seen, what she might be looking at right now.

Nothing. He was gone. the suitcase was gone. The closet door was closed. May breathed out and leaned against the dresser. Alice Markham looked concerned, she irritably told May to stand up straight, then, more gently, asked her to sit down and listen carefully. May obeyed every instruction but the last one, but she covered nicely. What followed was her mother's awkward attempt to explain "the nature of love between a man and a woman." May nodded and blushed in the right places but her mind was racing with details and questions about the Major's visit, and stealthy exit. Alice deftly sidestepped all the technical terms and street-talk in favour of loftier, more abstract turns of phrase, like: "uniting in God to create his children." May already had a more basic idea about sex, but she knew her mother was only trying to prevent further escapades with the wrong type of suitor.

"Pre-nuptial, er, extra-marital . . . well . . . anything, is the Devil's work."

"Yes, mother."

"We believe that what happens . . . between a man and a woman -- after they're married properly in church, of course -- is sacred . . . of course.

"Of course."

Betty started to cry. Just in time too, May thought, her mother was about to wring the skin off her hands.

It was only after the cake was made and the younger children were playing party games that May was able to read the Major's gift, upstairs in her room. It was slow-going as she guessed at the meaning of some of the words. The pages were frayed and rippled by moisture and the binding smelled moldy, but she pressed on. She finished late in the

afternoon, and was re-reading a passage that the Major had underlined when she was called down to the supper table:

Judge me the world, if 'tis not gross in sense,

That thou hast practis'd on her with foul charms;

Abus'd her delicate youth with drugs, or minerals

That weaken motion. -- I'll have't disputed on;

Tis probable, and palpable to thinking .

I therefore apprehend and do attach thee,

For an abuser of the world, a practiser

Of arts inhibited and out of warrant. --

Lay hold upon him: if he do resist,

Subdue him at his peril.

21

Satan's Crew was in trouble. For nearly two decades, they had participated in a power-struggle, vying -- along with two rival biker gangs: Hell's Angels and The Rock Machine -- for central and East-end drug-trade territory. The wars were terrorist, and the battles were fought block by block. Violence exploded in garages, bar fronts, underneath Camaros and all-terrain vehicles. It produced widows and orphans, refugees and adolescent criminals, crippled victims and scarred survivors. In the eighties, it was cocaine; the nineties had heroin. The rumor was that a discreet Lebanese cartel pulled the bikers' strings, and profited greatly from their conflict. There was brown and there was white. "Smack" poured into the city through all available channels: road, rail, air, water. Lined in thick fabrics, stuffed into electronic devices, buried under coffee to throw drug-sniffing dogs off the scent. Sometimes drug busts were orchestrated by the smugglers themselves; a token crate seized at the port would act as a decoy for a larger operation at the airport. Despite concerted efforts by the provincial and municipal police forces and the R.C.M.P., the strife persisted, so that by the mid-1990s, it seemed that the city was losing.

The Crew was losing as well. Its empire had peaked in 1992, when the controlled territory ran North from Viger Square to Rachel Steet and East from The Main to De Lorimier Avenue, which included two key dealing grounds: Lafontaine Park and Carré St-Louis. But overextension had made The Crew vulnerable, and a slow but steady decline had already begun by the time Monique infiltrated the gang in the Spring of 1993. After the reluctant introduction by a nervous, easily-intimidated informant, Monique had

become involved with Gaëtan "Bill" Bilodeau, a general in The Crew command, then serving two years in Bordeaux Prison for trafficking. Upon his release in January 1994, he immediately moved in with Monique, whose clandestine name was Julie Corriveau, into a large apartment over L'Aigle Noir, a Crew watering hole and hangout on Ontario Street East.

It was her first undercover job after only six years on the force, and she soon found the intimacy, the near-complete surrender of her identity and the duration of the work to be extremely demanding. It was on-the-job training of a frightening intensity: the job became her life. She played the part so comprehensively that she could only shake off "Julie Corriveau" in the privacy of slumber. But she tried to stop doing even that after Gaëtan teased her about talking incoherently in her sleep. Her secret, balanced by her instinct and wits, would be imperilled instantly should she slip up or become lazy, careless, forgetful.

After eighteen months of covert police work, Monique was feeling cut off: her R.C.M.P. colleagues, who always had to keep their distance, were losing her to Gaëtan's influence. Her field reports, which were encoded in letters to her "sister" in Rivière-du-Loup, began to drop off; she seemed never to leave her boyfriend's side; and she all but abandoned her field journal, making sporadic, patchy entries. As The Crew closed in around her and she despaired of ever knowing anything else, she met "Dusty" Duhaime, the new bartender and manager at L'Aigle Noir, who had come up from Sherbrooke, in the Eastern Townships, where he'd been running the Crew clubhouse. Dusty was atypical for his milieu: he was clean-shaven, wore his hair short, always sported ironed dress or

denim shirts, kept the establishment relatively clean and never tolerated any drug abuse on the premises. He didn't drink or smoke, drove a green Chevrolet Caprice, rented an apartment in Westmount and was called Dusty because of his greying temples. He had a subtle but deadly sense of humour and displayed an approachable, sensitive quality that made him a good listener. At the same time, he showed strength and intelligence when dealing with encroaching outside forces, especially cops who targeted the bar for occasional raids and shake-downs. He came highly recommended by the Sherbrooke chapter. Everybody got along with Dusty, and Monique was no exception.

Their relationship soon changed, however, as he began to carefully reveal to her who he was: Detective Denis Beauchemin of the R.C.M.P. anti-drug division. He had been *banalisé* to pull her back from the brink, to restore her sense of purpose and to support her from within the organization. Monique was amazed and relieved to secure his help, and with it she rediscovered drive, focus, and passion in her work. With Denis, there was a link, perhaps even an end in sight, which allowed her to push further in the investigation: detailed reports, surveillance devices, risks that she would have retreated from in the past. They were a team.

Recently, the Mounties had caught a break: two anonymous phone tips led to a raid on a bungalow in Anjou. A modest cache -- a few keys of brown -- was seized. Not exactly record-breaking but, among the people arrested in the house and charged, was a low-level runner known as "Eightball" (because of his former career as a coke peddler, but also because of his black-sheep status in the Hanna family). Eightball was the unrefined first cousin of Nabil Hanna, the head of the Lebanese cartel. Nabil was an excellent judge

of character, which is why Eightball was ostracized from his circle, but he also had a weakness for family, which is why he allowed his cousin to perform a function, albeit at street-level, within the organization.

Eightball had a considerable fear of Bordeaux Prison. He had burned quite a few couriers and dealers in his ham-fisted attempts to recover territory over the years, most of whom were now in lock-up. Not only would he have an impossible time setting up shop in prison, he suspected that before long he would be on the receiving-end of an "accident" in the showers, the cafeteria, the laundry room, the courtyard, his cell . . . . Eightball wanted to deal. In exchange for a transfer to a facility up-province and a token sentence, he coughed-up names and locations, dates and times, stashes and shipments. He wasn't foolish enough to give away his cousin or any of his kinsmen, but more than a dozen well-placed bikers from all three gangs were picked up as a result. The arrests stopped just shy of the executive, however, but suspicions turned to retaliations and in the ensuing melee, Monique lost her boyfriend.

One morning, he blew through the plate-glass window of L'Aigle Noir, a half-second after depressing the accelerator of his Pathfinder parked on the street. Dusty was in the walk-in fridge, marking inventory, when the blast blew the door shut. By the time he got the heavy door open from the inside, he could hear Julie's terrified screams from the bar. She stood over Gaëtan, who was not dead but had had both legs severed at the knee. He was crawling over broken glass, dragging the bucket-seat he was still strapped to, away from the direction of the explosion. Dusty freed him from the seat and shredded a table cloth to bind his hemorrhaging stumps while Julie poured whisky down his throat,

and tended to his other wounds. He was conscious until the emergency vehicles arrived. The fire truck got there first and immediately set to work. By the time the paramedics were lifting Gaëtan onto a stretcher, the flames in the Pathfinder skeleton had been doused.

Dusty/Denis had been exchanging knowing glances with Julie/Monique all through the trauma, and comforted her with an embrace while Gaëtan slipped in and out of consciousness. Before they carried him away, he caught both of them in a considered stare: he shifted his gaze calmly, slowly, with mustered deliberation, from Dusty's eyes to Julie's, then back again. Denis appeared not to notice, but Monique was struck by it. Her apprehension turned to worry when Gaëtan summoned strength to his charred hand, lifting it into a shaky, halting gesture -- effectively preventing her from boarding the ambulance with him -- just before passing out one last time. Later that same day, she was blocked from seeing him at St-Luc Hospital, not by the newly-appointed police guard posted outside his room, but by two Crew henchmen who intercepted her in the waiting room. Monique didn't recognize either of them. The one who spoke lifted his sunglasses from the bridge of his nose and sneered,

"Y'a pas envie de t'voir, Pitoune. Pas p'en toute."

His partner laughed, smacked his chewing gum. Monique tried to look tough.

"Comprends-tu, là? Fais d'l'air, Plotte," he raised a thick, tatooed arm and pointed to the front door with a stubby, grease-stained finger.

She couldn't go home anymore so she started walking West along Viger street, towards the Old Port. Before she got very far, an R.C.M.P. cruiser picked her up and

brought her to headquarters on Dorchester Street. She caught sight of Denis in the ground-floor corridor, being led into an unmarked room. He looked at her in the same way Gaëtan had looked at both of them that morning, then shook his head and entered the room. Monique and Denis were debriefed separately, even though they had been working side by side for nearly a year. Monique was told by her superiors that even though the operation had taken a different turn, they were going to proceed with a case against Gaëtan and several other Crew executives, as soon as "Bill" had recovered enough to stand trial. Her testimony would be required, of course, and she would be provided with police protection in the meantime, if she wanted it. She waived the offer saying,

"Denis and I have gotten very good at watching each other's back."

She was ordered not to go near Detective Beauchemin. For security reasons, you understand. She didn't. But she was whisked off to more debriefing before her protests could amount to anything. She'd been in the dark, more or less, living at a fellow police woman's apartment in Côte-des-Neiges, until she heard about Denis' death. She had to overcome the devastation she felt through action, and since her colleagues weren't going to let her help, she was conducting her own investigation. But because she wasn't privy to the first-hand evidence, she hadn't come up with much so far.

"Just a sympathetic ear and a new friend," she smiled, and patted May on the arm as she rose. "Well, that's my story." Monique stretched her arms, stifled a yawn.

"Some story," said May.

"You must've read about it in the paper. About the biker wars."

"Nah, I only get it for Ann Landers. Real news depresses me."

Monique laughed and walked over to the balcony door.

"I think even *I* need a cigarette after that," May joked. Monique tilted the pack as if to offer her one but May shook her head. Monique stepped out and slid the door closed.

It was after seven, and their tea had started around three. May had been transfixed by the tale, but had a strong suspicion that this was very much Monique's version of events. She delivered her narrative in a slightly argumentative tone, as if checking periodically to see if May was on her side. The R.C.M.P. sounded questionable, Denny too. The bikers were definitely questionable. She had obviously been through a lot, and her mild paranoia was understandable, hell, she was no worse than Julia ranting about Douglas. She didn't know how to make sense of what happened to Denny any better than May did. She was scared. And she had spoken with fear and mistrust of the things she had once counted on. May understood that.

"May I use your phone?" Monique had stepped back in.

"Be my guest," May gestured to the phone on the end table next to the couch. Monique hesitated.

"I'm sorry, it's kind of private."

May didn't catch on at first, but then told her she could use the phone in the bedroom. Monique went in and closed the door behind her. Very private. May scooped up the loose papers and photographs on the table beside her and placed them in "the box." She tied a sailor's knot in the faithful twine that held it together, then took the whole package back to the linen closet. She teetered a bit, hoisting the box up to the top shelf, but she put it back successfully and closed the door. From there, she tiptoed over to the

bedroom and listened. No talking. Not a sound. Silence for two, maybe three minutes. May knocked. The door opened quickly and Monique flew past her down the hall.

"Sorry, I've got to go. I phoned a cab and he'll be waiting downstairs by now. Thanks for the tea. I can let myself out."

"Uh-huh."

"I'll call you tomorrow, bye."

"Bye."

May followed Monique's path to the front door, drew the chain across and slid it into the groove of the lock.

22

On an early evening in late June, nine-year-old Paul took a shot at the Dawsons' cat, Pajamas, using the Major's service revolver. He stood in the Markham back yard and pointed the gun over the hedge towards the Dawson's patio. He used both hands to cradle the weapon and squinted through the sight the way the Major had shown him. His arms strained in their extended position and the gun began to shake a little. He required two fingers to squeeze the trigger, being careful not to pull or jerk it, traits the Major had identified as belonging to a bad marksman. The report shattered the summer evening calm: Pajamas, mercifully unscathed, led the charge, bolting under the Dawsons' back porch; dogs barked, birds launched themselves in all directions and Mrs. Dawson's maid, Gabriella, screamed, dropped the dish she was wiping and ran to the back door to see what had happened. The bullet had missed the cat by a few feet, ricocheted off the Dawsons' house -- taking a chunk of brick with it -- and lodged itself in the grey metal hull of their wheel-barrow. As for Paul, the recoil action had sprung the revolver back towards his face. He had cut his chin open on the hammer and he began to wail, dropping the gun into the hedge.

Wyatt was first on the scene: he held a handkerchief to Paul's wound and nodded quickly in response to Gabriella's exclamations. As he led his brother back to the house, Wyatt encountered his mother and their maid, Adele. The women scooped the frightened boy up and carried him inside. Wyatt, who had started to piece things together somewhat, went back for the gun.

Major Redpath and May were clinched in a very tight, very passionate embrace -- her first -- when they heard the shot. He pulled away instantly because he knew what it was. May, who had never heard gunfire, figured the noise had come from a passing car, or else her little brothers were busy with firecrackers. They were in her bedroom, leaning back on the narrow bed -- one foot each on the floor, it had occurred to her. Her heart was racing: he had kissed her, he had held her, and after the first few seconds, it did not seem strange. The moments preceding it had been strange, however: he had come upon her as she was putting away her clean clothes, walked right up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, holding her in place. Her first impulse had been to turn, but instead she offered no resistance for he was not being rough. She began to tremble lightly when he lifted his palm to her face.

"I won't hurt you," he had whispered, spreading his fingers so that his hand touched from her forehead to her lips. She believed him, but his sudden appearance had caused her to swallow her breath, which was then escaping in short volleys from her throat.

"You're afraid. Don't be."

"I-I'm not," she had said unconvincingly. She remembered the next moments as progressing from apprehensive and unsure, to sweet and willing. He touched her. Not crudely, but in places he suspected were ticklish: the inside of her arm at the elbow, the nape of her neck. She laughed and wriggled instinctively away. She faced him. He looked confused, hurt. She smiled a nervous and worried smile, looked down at her feet.

After a moment, he touched her again. He cupped her cheek gently and ran his fingers down to her chin, which he lifted up slowly until their eyes met. He held this gaze for a deep, long while, and she returned it every second. He glanced briefly at her lips before leaning in with his own. The first kiss melted into many more as they sank back into the bed smoothly. May was excited and relaxed at the same time, and it seemed they could not get close enough to each other. Though it was fun to try.

Wyatt scrounged in the grass before the hedge and picked up a shell casing. Further scrounging led him to discover the revolver among the roots, its chamber still warm, its barrel plugged with dirt. He cleaned it off, unloaded it, placing the bullets in the breast pocket of his shirt, and tucked the gun into the front of his trousers, covering the handle with his waistcoat. He walked to the house and climbed the stairs to the back verandah. Paul was sitting, rocking in the porch-swing next to his mother. He had stopped crying but Alice Markham comforted him, and held a damp face-cloth to his chin. Wyatt looked stern.

"Where did you get it?"

Paul was wide-eyed with worry. He shook his head.

"Where?"

Paul looked down at his feet.

"Where!?" Wyatt shouted.

"Wyatt, dear, don't yell at the boy," Alice said, "he's had a scare -"

But Wyatt was already through the back door. His first stop was the Major's room under the stairs. He saw the empty holster lying in the opened cigar box atop the dresser,

next to a small oil can wrapped in a dirty rag. He went to the closet and dragged one of the Major's suitcases out, hoisting it onto the bed. He pulled open drawers and threw their contents into the valise, he yanked shirts and jackets from hangers and stuffed them in too. After cramming the cigar box in on top, he closed up the suitcase and carried it to the front door. A room-to-room search was next, beginning in the parlour, then on to his father's study and the dining room. When these yielded nothing, Wyatt took the stairs two-at-a-time to the second floor.

Major Redpath had hoped to straighten himself and meet whatever commotion was on the other side of May's bedroom door with a ready, dignified air. But her young charms proved to be overwhelming to him and he had slipped easily back into her embrace. They rolled around on the little bed, their breathing and the blood pounding in his ears obscured the sound of the door being flung open. May had heard it though, as evidenced by her expression of alarm as the Major opened his eyes. Wyatt forcefully "helped" the Major off of his sister and slammed him against the nearest wall. The room shook, picture frames rattled, and May called out her brother's name. Wyatt jammed his forearm into the Major's windpipe and slapped him across the face.

"Filthy Son Of A Bitch!!" he spat at him. Wyatt was taller, broader than the Major, but he showed quickly that he hadn't much experience at fighting. He left his entire mid-section exposed and the Major made short work of taking him down. He punched him in the ribs first, followed by a jab to his stomach. Wyatt doubled over, stumbled backwards down the aisle between two beds, and crashed into a dressing table. The Major moved in closer. May got up and stood between them.

"Please," she implored, seeking to calm the Major's eyes with hers. At first, he wouldn't look at her, but he eventually found her pleading gaze and relaxed his aggressive stance.

"He might've killed Paulie," Wyatt moaned behind her, "he gave him this." He pulled the gun from his waist. May turned and started. The Major replied matter-of-factly,

"Nonsense, the lad happened to interrupt me while I was cleaning it. I gave him a few pointers, that is all."

May took the weapon from her brother, practically covering it with both hands.

"He's only nine."

"He must have gone through my things and pilfered it. I'll have a word with him."

The Major turned, and nearly made it to the doorway when Wyatt bounded over the bed and tackled him from behind. They both spilled out into the hall. The Major got to his feet first and lifted Wyatt to his knees by his shirt collar. He hauled him over to the top of the stairs and pushed him down the short flight to the landing. Mrs. Markham had come in from the verandah and stood at the foot of the stairs with Adele. Murray had stepped in the front door with his father, who had returned early from his after-dinner constitutional when he heard the noise of the shot.

"Wyatt, what on earth --"

They all watched as the Major escorted Wyatt coarsely down the stairs, his hand a vise-like clamp on the back of his neck. Bill Markham stepped forward, raised his hand.

"Bob," he spoke softly, reasonably.

"Hello, Bill. I was just having a few words with young Wyatt."

May, still holding the gun, had followed them to the top stair and was inching her way down to the landing. Wyatt grimaced in pain, tried to struggle. A cut on his forehead was bleeding into his left eye. Major Redpath thrust his arm forward, tossing Wyatt into his father's arms. Wyatt spun around immediately but Bill Markham restrained him.

"Seems that little Paul borrowed my firearm." He was at the bottom of the stairs now and everyone parted to let him through.

"Where is the lad?"

Paul stood half-shielded behind Adele.

"Ah. Young man, another sign of a good marksman is to own responsibility for his handywork."

"He's not a marksman. He's a nine-year-old boy who doesn't know any better." Wyatt hissed through clenched teeth.

"He'll learn quickly, I'll wager," the Major said pleasantly. Then he noticed his suitcase standing in the vestibule. His expression darkened. He looked to all eyes, including May's. She was wending her way down the stairs, stopping at the newell post when she too spotted the suitcase.

"Am I going somewhere, Bill?"

Bill Markham did not appear fazed by this question. He seemed to be giving it careful consideration. His children and his wife were frightened, his eldest and youngest sons were bleeding, his daughter held a revolver in her hands. Wyatt spoke.

"I found him in May's room. They were --"

"That's enough!" Bill Markham said firmly and stepped away from his son to face the Major.

"I'm sorry, Bob. I think you'd better."

The long silence that followed his words was checked only by the shuffling of feet as the Markhams and Adele cleared a path to the vestibule for the Major. His walk was swift and considered. He reached into the closet for his coat, which he folded neatly over his arm, and his hat, which he dropped onto his head, pulling the brim down over his brow. Before taking up his heavy bag, he walked over to May and held out his hand.

"You won't be needing that, will you, m'dear?"

She knew her eyes would betray the blend of trepidation and remorse she felt if she could bring herself to look at him. Instead, she stared down at the gun and watched his hand glide over it and close around it. He included her hand in his grip and gave it a light, affectionate squeeze before he lifted the revolver away. When she did look up he was levelling the gun at Wyatt. Everybody drew a collective, quick breath.

"It's not --" Wyatt began.

"Loaded." The Major concluded. He manipulated the weapon in one hand, causing it to whir and click and snap and clack until he was satisfied with the inspection. He slid it into his coat pocket, smiled briefly at Wyatt then looked directly at Bill.

"Clever boy," he shifted his gaze pointedly to May. "He saved us all."

Major Redpath executed an immaculate about-face and stamp, a short quick-march followed by an à-l'épaule-armes of his suitcase, and saluted all present before leaving the Markham home.

23

May stayed in the room with Helen while Muriel and her granddaughter, Ruby, ate lunch in the hospital cafeteria. She held her sister's hand and nodded -- or shook her head, depending on the intonation -- at her incoherence. Helen had been admitted to Lakeshore General the night before because the nurse at the Pierrefonds Retirement Community had diagnosed her dizziness and inability to rise from the dinner table under her own power as a stroke; her third in as many years. Lakeshore General Hospital resembled an old airport from far, a large paint can and two oversized ice-cube trays up close. Erected in the mid-1960s, in anticipation of the architecturally vapid '70s, it sat in its rust-and-yellow brick splendour amid a waste-land of low-rent apartments, parking lots and the occasional strip-mall, where, in May's youth, there had stood expansive, green-and-gold farmer's fields. The nearest green space was only a stone's throw away (over a parking lot), but The Beaconsfield Golf Club required exclusive membership, as did, in a way, the Eternal Gardens Cemetery next door.

Room 4030 was at the end of a curved corridor in the geriatric wing of the northernmost ice-cube tray. It was semi-private, May observed, not because of its double-occupancy, but because of its extreme distance from the nursing station -- semi-remote would be more accurate. Hospitals made her testy. Any time she'd had to stay in one, no matter how briefly, it always left her trying to wash off the antiseptic applied and shake off the depression incurred. Short visits were palatable, because she knew fresh air would be waiting for her afterwards. She didn't even mind waiting for the seldom-seen 203 bus back

to Dorval, where she could get a connecting bus into town. For once, Julia's taxi was not available, the news of Helen's hospitalization was too short notice for her friend to cancel bridge, but maybe Ruby would run her back if she played her cards right.

Helen didn't seem any different from when May would visit her in the home, a little more disoriented, maybe, but relatively free from facial paralysis. The nurse had said, through Muriel, that Helen's left side had been affected by the attack: her leg was useless, and as far as the physiotherapist could determine she had no feeling in her arm. May performed the mental manoeuvre of putting herself in Helen's position to figure out which was the afflicted side and then switched to holding her right hand. Helen instantly stopped babbling and looked at her.

"Who's that?"

"It's May, Helen."

"Maymaymaymaymaymaymaymay . . ."

"That's right."

"Who's that?" She let go of May and pointed to the two figures in the doorway.

"That's Muriel and Ruby, Helen." They were back from lunch: Ruby, a small, sunny girl of twenty-five, helped Muriel, who could still get around almost as well as May, into a bedside chair. Ruby sat next to her grandmother, across the bed from May. Helen was looking and pointing.

"May," she said as a matter of instruction.

"I know, dear," said Muriel, "I know."

"We had a nice lunch, didn't we?" Ruby said. Muriel nodded.

"Salisbury steak with mashed potatoes and peas." It was May's turn to nod.

"Well, we had a nice visit while you were gone."

"Did you want to get some lunch, Auntie M?" As a child, Ruby had had a fondness bordering on obsession with The Wizard of Oz, ever since her mother had told her she was named after the colour of Dorothy's slippers. Her moniker for May was a habit from those days. May wondered if her great-niece knew how much she resembled a pretty little munchkin now, with her petite frame, bobbed haircut and big smile. She decided to keep it to herself.

"No, thank you, dear. I had a big breakfast before I left."

"May's got a boyfriend! May's got a boyfriend!" Helen sang and pointed. Muriel and Ruby laughed. May caught Helen's finger in her hand and lowered it to the bed.

"Helen, for goodness sake -"

"Your great aunt Ruth used to torment us with that chant when she was a baby," Muriel explained.

"All of you?"

"Well, it began with May, but then Dorrie started going out with boys. And she was still doing it when Helen started dating. She even teased me with Lionel, your grandfather, when she was nearly a teenager."

"Did you ever get her back?" Ruby asked. Muriel looked at May, they each suppressed a smile.

"We were above that sort of thing," Muriel deadpanned, "older sisters, you know."

"Right." Ruby chuckled, "Who was your boyfriend, Auntie M?"

"Well," May felt herself blush, "there was a chap named Leo, who -"

"Major Bob!" Helen blurted out. "Major Bob!"

They all looked at her. Ruby laughed harder but May and Muriel were visibly stricken by what she'd said. Helen laughed along with Ruby until Ruby noticed it wasn't funny to Muriel or to May.

"Who's he? . . . Who's Major Bob?"

"Major Bob," parrotted Helen. Muriel stared intently at her sister across the bed. May was searching for the right words to identify, to explain, to situate.

"H-he knew . . . our father."

"Did your cousin Murray give you a copy of those newspaper clippings at the reunion?" Muriel added quickly.

"You mean about the -- I mean, about what happened to Great-Grampa Markham?"

Muriel nodded. Ruby nodded back. Then, she realised.

"Is he the one --"

"It's not something we talk about." Muriel said firmly, still looking at May, who had lowered her gaze to Helen's outstretched arm on the bed. Helen was muttering,

"Bobobobobobobobobobobobob." May squeezed her hand gently and Helen fell silent. They all remained that way until Ruby said something cheerful on another subject, and the sisters gradually took up the conversation again. The rest of the visit was friendly, but May felt awkward. For more than seventy years, unspoken commands had hovered around the family taboo: never mention the Major, never talk about the murder, don't

speak the unspeakable. Ridiculous, May thought, that her surviving siblings were now old like she was, at death's door practically, and still dumb about an ancient pain. *It's not something we talk about*. Muriel had pronounced that with a stoicism that verged on haughtiness, and May had coloured not with anger, but with embarrassment at Ruby having to hear and try to comprehend this closed chapter of the past. Still, *she* hadn't said anything either, but for different reasons. May had never been able to successfully articulate the experience to anyone. The contradictions seemed too vast, the emotions too close to relate to another who had not lived through what she had, the way she had. Wyatt had come close to understanding, but all those years together in the duplex on Grey Avenue, never produced more than a few short-lived, monosyllabic conversations on the subject. Ultimately, she knew her reticence was not unlike Muriel's, and she felt ashamed. And poor Helen, who wasn't right in her head, was the only Markham to have cast off the inhibitions of the old family secret with her unselfconscious, seemingly involuntary monologue.

Helen's bad days were now outnumbering the good ones, and the stroke, while not fatal, had mostly confounded her moments of lucidity. Occasionally, and perhaps due to a random fluctuation of brain cells, she was able to gain brief control of her faculties, which happened just as May and the others were leaving. Ruby and Muriel had said goodbye and were on their way to the elevator. May straightened things a bit: she removed Helen's lunch tray and poured her some fresh water, then tucked the sheet in at the foot of the bed. When she leaned in to give Helen a kiss, she couldn't get her hand back. Helen looked at her imploringly.

"I should die soon," it sounded desperate, "I want to."

May sat down on the edge of the bed and smoothed Helen's hair with her free hand.

"I can't do anything any more. I'm tired all the time. I forget everything, I get so mad when I can't remember.

"You remember some things," May said pointedly, thinking of the "Major Bob" outburst earlier. "My memory isn't what it was either."

"I'm no good. I should go." Helen stated bitterly.

May didn't know what to reply. She didn't want to leave on that sad note. At length she said,

"But you're my *little* sister."

Helen pressed her hand, then let go of it. She seemed to wink at May, but in her condition, one couldn't be sure.

"But I know when to quit," she smiled.

May took up her cane, her coat and her purse and paused in the doorway to look at Helen. She was gone again, seemingly, pointing at the vase of flowers on the bed-stand and mumbling.

"Rubyrubyrubyrubyrubyruby . . ." May heard laughter in her droning, decided her sister was being sly, and crept from the room.

She did get a lift to her apartment, before Ruby and Muriel made the two-and-a-half-hour trip back to Kingston, but she hadn't said much in the car. She responded pleasantly if distractedly, in monosyllables, to Ruby's small talk, while she let the seed of

Muriel's offending sentence grow from mild discomfiture to full-blown grudge. Usually, she got along famously with Muriel; she could take her in large doses, but this invocation of the outmoded family pact had soured her on her sister. It was the longest 20-minute ride that she'd taken in a while. But she made a good show of parting (she genuinely wanted to see Ruby again soon), teased Hubert goodnaturedly with a saucy line from *Love For Sale* on her way through the entrance and hummed the tune to herself on the elevator. She gripped the handle and bent down to pick up a piece of paper that had been pushed under her door.

Dear May,

Sorry I missed you today. I really needed to talk.

I'll get in touch with you very soon.

Monique

There was a smiling face drawn into the 'o' of the signature, and the note was scribbled on some R.C.M.P. stationery; a tiny troop of distinguished-looking Mounties posed next to the official seal in the lower-left corner. Her new friend was certainly attentive, perhaps even becoming a little dependent, May thought. Understandable after her undercover ordeal. Who else did she have to turn to?

May had always been told she was a good listener, but she also possessed a niggling reflex that gave rise to tension and sometimes trepidation whenever strong acquaintances precipitated the intimacy of the relationship. She had begun that way with Julia, and had grudgingly fallen into tolerance and unsteady camaraderie through her growing reliance on her friend. She relied on Brian too, but that affinity was aided by the fact that he was a good-looking young man who did her housework. But Monique was odd: up-front and engaging, moody and withdrawn. She had made inroads with May without the benefit of time, but rather through an extraordinary circumstance. May found she wasn't applying her usual suspicions to this woman, but strangely, it didn't worry her. There was something comfortingly familiar about Monique that was almost like being with an old friend, or looking in a mirror. Even if the friend was occasionally irksome or you disliked part of what you saw in the reflection, the power of recognition created a reassurance so strong that it obscured the fringe details. Why waste time at her age circling endlessly around a bird of a feather? Hesitation was alright for people in their eighties.

24

Bea was scheduled to graduate from The Congregation Notre Dame Secretarial School with May the following year, but at the beginning of the summer of 1920, she was hired as a file clerk in the Patients' Records office at The Royal Victoria Hospital on Pine Avenue. May had received the news that Bea wouldn't be returning for their final year with the same disappointment, she imagined, as her friend had felt when she had been told, six years earlier, that the Markhams would be moving out of Oxford Avenue to Pointe Claire. To counter this unwelcome development, Bea had invited May to the Chatham home for the weekend following her first week at her new job. May took the afternoon train from Pointe Claire and walked up Peel Street from Windsor Station. She had arranged to meet outside, rain or shine, because if she could avoid stepping through the doors of a hospital, she would. The humidity made the hill tough going, so she parked herself on a bench near the main entrance to catch her breath and wait for her friend. McGill University sat just below the hospital, and May passed the time imagining the young men in dark suits and academic robes, passing by her bench, hazarding a second glance at this fresh filly, untamed and unescorted, reclining leisurely in the summer breeze. But alas, there were no classes in June, no breeze either, so she fanned herself with her open hand.

"He's here!" Bea had run up behind her and exclaimed.

"Who's 'he'?"

"The Major!"

"What?"

"Your Major. He's here. Or, he was here. I saw him talking to one of the doctors in the hallway near Admissions, but I don't think he saw me. But then he wouldn't really recognize me because we haven't met, I mean you pointed him out to me that time my parents drove me out to pick you up for that party, but we barely said hello and --"

"Thank you, Mother Chatham," May interrupted.

"Well, isn't it the most curious thing?"

"Not really."

"Do you think it's because of that disease he's got?"

"Beatrice Chatham, listen to yourself. I have no idea. And even if I did, it isn't polite to speculate about it."

"But aren't you just dying to find out?"

"No . . . Poppa says he's doing better than he was when he first met him."

Bea had forced her way onto the bench, nudging her friend over. She leaned emphatically towards May, her eyes were wide and her hands were rubbing together beneath a dainty pair of white summer gloves.

"What's he like? He looked quite dashing when I saw him. Very dapper too."

"Aren't they the same thing?"

"Well then I must've meant debonair."

May made a face. Bea slapped her hand lightly.

"Stop correcting me and spill the beans. What's it like living with him?"

"It's fine." May said decisively, with no indication that she was going to elaborate.

Bea slapped her hand again. May relented.

"The best thing is, he makes Wyatt nervous. You know how Wyatt likes to boss all the kids because he's the oldest? Well, I don't know how the Major does it but it's as if he casts a spell on him whenever he's around. I think Wyatt is trying to impress him, or at least trying to stand his ground. But it all comes out garbled and weak-sounding. The other night, Wyatt was trying to tell Paul to wash his hands for supper. But Paul was playing checkers with the Major, so it came out as, 'Wash, time to paul up for supper.'"

Bea giggled.

"Oh yes, Wyatt gets laughed at daily, and he grumbles all the time . . . . My sisters flirt with Major Redpath shamelessly, even little Ruth. Especially Ruth. They call him 'Major Bob', and he's got a pet name for each of them: Dot, Root, Batty (that's what he calls the baby), Hellion and Mulberry."

"That's Muriel?"

"Yes, from the French, 'mûre'. Cute, n'est-ce pas?"

"What's his name for you?"

"I think he thinks I'm a little old for that. He was calling me 'Miss May', but I asked him to drop the 'Miss'. It made me feel like a schoolmarm."

"And the boys?"

"He uses their Christian names, treats them both like young men. They're always in his room or outdoors together. And he shows them things, you know, in his books. He gave Paul a canteen and Murray a spying glass. Wyatt told me he thinks they're being corrupted but, well, there's that tension. I think Poppa gets tense around the Major too,

but he's always polite to him. They were probably better friends before the Major came to stay with us."

"How long has it been?"

"Almost three months. It was the Sunday after Easter when he moved in."

"I'll bet he charms your mother off her feet." Bea smiled.

"He does at that: he compliments her on her cooking, and how well she keeps house, which would drive Adele mad if it weren't for the fact that he's even better at charming her."

Bea looked slyly at her friend. "And you? As the most eligible female in the house, are you charmed by the dapper, dashing, debonair Major?"

May formed a close-lipped smile, shook her head at Bea, and stood up.

"Let's hop on a streetcar, shall we?"

The girls started down the slope in front of the hospital, arm in arm. The sun was setting later at that time of year, and the early evening was still very bright and warm. Major Redpath stood on the northwest corner of Pine Avenue and University Street, his back to the approaching May and Bea. They startled each other when he turned around. May laughed nervously, Bea followed her lead, the Major smiled and tipped his hat.

"Good evening, ladies."

"Good evening, Major Bob." The first three words were spoken in unison, Bea added the 'Bob' mischievously. May glared at her. The Major took it as a matter of course. He inquired after their health and their plans for the evening. He complimented them on their attire and worried exaggeratedly about the unwanted attentions they must be

fending off from every cad loose in the city. He enthused about the fine weather and entreated them to join him for a stroll on Mount-Royal. The girls were flattered and more than a little charmed, so they accepted, once again responding in unison. All three set off up University Street, where they left the pavement and joined a foot passage just beyond the hospital. They climbed in silence for a few minutes, until they reached a bridle path which hugged the mountain and afforded a view of Park Avenue and the rooftops of the Mile-End district. There were other pedestrians about, and people on horseback enjoying the pleasant Friday evening.

"Were you at the hospital for business or pleasure, or pain?" Bea asked boldly, for which she received a second glare from May. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all, my dear," replied the Major jovially, "personal business actually: I was discussing a joint venture with my brother, Lloyd, who happens to be an attending physician at The Royal Victoria. But I'm afraid there was more pain than pleasure involved."

"Oh, I see," Bea affected concern, "Is there some further ailment?"

May nearly slapped her. The Major paused, shot Bea a puzzled look.

"No. The pain was in reference to the personal business with my brother," The Major resumed slowly, "we've lost a fair bit of money recently on the markets, you see. Your father might have mentioned it to you." He looked at May. She shook her head quickly.

"No, I suppose he hasn't," the Major said a little crossly, then he lowered his voice to a murmur, "Denn alle Schuld rächt sich auf Erden."

The girls looked at each other, then to him. He did not look back, but stopped in his tracks and scanned the horizon. The sun was sinking behind the mountain and a dimness fell on the city below. Bea was still feeling bold.

"Was that German?"

"Goethe says that all guilt is punished on earth." With that he descended a steep grade towards the street. Bea shrugged at May.

"He's an odd one, isn't he?" she whispered.

"Stop asking so many foolish questions!" May hissed back.

"Follow me! I want to show you something," Major Redpath called up to them. He was pointing to a trail that would allow them a gentler decline. They took it and met up with him again near the Jacques Cartier monument. The Major led them across Park Avenue and helped them down onto another path which bisected the park on the opposite side. It was dark by the time they reached Esplanade Street and stood in front of a two-storey red-brick building at the corner of Rachel Street. There was a lamp over the door, illuminating an engraving: "Regiment of the Canadian Grenadier Guards: Georgius V. Rex."

"This used to be my home," said the Major as he bounded up the steps. He put one hand on the wooden door and made an "after you" gesture with the other. The girls just stared at him.

"It's an armoury," said Bea.

"Ladies aren't welcome," added May.

"Nonsense. I'm merely bringing a couple of friends home to see my old stomping ground, so to speak. Where's the harm in that?" He smiled and opened the door for his reluctant guests. The girls stepped cautiously through two sets of doors and into a small lobby. The off-white walls were covered with bronze plaques featuring ranks, names, places and dates. In one corner, a Union Jack hung limply from a stand, next to a wooden bench. In the opposite corner, at the far end of the lobby, was a door through which a clacking noise could be heard. The Major steered the girls towards the sound. They found themselves at the end of a small corridor lined with two office doors on either side, looking forward through an archway into a large, open room, high-ceilinged and echoic, like a gymnasium.

The sound was the quick-march, being executed by a division of twenty, two ranks of ten men, clad in heavy boots, black pants, scarlet tunics and olive-green berets. They each held a rifle, adorned with a taut, bright white sling, at their sides. Another uniformed man stood apart from them, barking commands.

"Di-Vi-sionnn . . . halt!" They stamped their feet simultaneously and froze.

"Di-Vi-sionnn . . . au pied-arms!" They struck their rifle stocks with their free hands, lowered the weapons, then struck them again at the trigger handle and returned to attention.

"Stand aaatt-ease!" Legs apart, rifles forward.

"Stand easy." Relaxed stance.

The commanding soldier had noticed the Major, and more importantly, he had noticed the two women. He marched over to them and saluted Major Redpath.

"Major."

"Colour-Sergeant. Fine evening, isn't it. Your boys look pretty sharp."

"With all due respect, sir, what do you think you're doing?"

"I don't *think* I'm doing anything, Colour-Sergeant. I was just about to show these young ladies around our fine establishment."

"Sir, the regulations clearly state --"

"I am well acquainted with the rules, Colour-Sergeant. But let me assure you that these ladies are about as far removed from the slatterns who linger outside the junior ranks mess as you can imagine." He leaned in closely to the Colour-Sergeant. "Haven't you been getting any lately, Colour-Sergeant? Is that why you're out to spoil my frolic?"

The Colour-Sergeant looked at the girls. May looked at the floor. Bea smiled modestly. The division was starting to shuffle and mutter. Another uniformed man emerged from an office behind them and walked over to where the two men were standing.

"Hello, Tommy," the Major clasped him on the arm.

"Hello, Bob," he looked quickly to the other man. "I'll take care of this, Colour-Sergeant. Carry on with the drill."

"Sir!" The Colour-Sergeant saluted and marched back to resume the exercises.

"You shouldn't be here, Bob."

"Show some manners, Tommy, meet the ladies. Miss May Markham, and Miss Beatrice, er, I'm sorry I don't know your surname."

"Chatham." Bea held out her hand to Tommy.

"Lieutenant Thomas Fish, a dear old friend." The Major smiled constantly. May felt embarrassed. Lieutenant Fish was somewhere in age between Wyatt and the Major, with close-cropped blonde hair and sunken cheeks. He was quite tall and had a tired, almost defeated expression.

"Pleased to meet you."

"Di-Vi-sion . . . atten-shun!" *Stamp.*

"Likewise," said Bea.

"Riiiight-Dress!" *Shuffle, shuffle, shuffle.*

"I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave."

"Aw, Tommy, not you too. Doesn't anybody care about a good time any more?"

"The Colour-Sergeant was only doing his duty, and he was showing you respect above and beyond the call."

"À l'épauuule-arms!" *Snap, twop-thrip, cut.*

"What do you mean?" The Major fixed a hard stare at him.

"You're not a Guardsman any more, Bob." Tommy sounded uncomfortable. "Everybody's glad to see you at the mess every week, you put in good years and a lot of hard work." He was avoiding the Major's eyes. "You really left your mark on this place and these men, but --"

"By the left! Quiiick-Mahch! Leff, right, leff, right, leff, right, leff."

"But what?"

"But women aren't allowed in here at any time, under any circumstances. Just look at the division. They're tripping all over themselves." The two ranks were having

difficulty keeping in step and the Colour-Sergeant had to yell "eyes front!" twice. Major Redpath looked over the stumbling Guardsmen, then looked back at Tommy for a moment, then addressed the girls.

"You know, when the regiment was formed, all Grenadiers had to be tall fellows like Tommy, because the grenades they lobbed weighed sixty pounds!"

"Bob --" Tommy sighed exasperatedly.

May put her hand on the Major's arm, "Can we go now, please?" she asked kindly, without urgency in her voice. She sought out his eyes, lingered a moment with her gaze. At length, the Major smiled and put his hand on hers.

"Sorry Tommy, we'd love to stay and chat all night. But when a pretty lady says, 'jump' all I can do is ask, 'how high?'"

"I understand," Tommy said with relief and walked them to the front door.He thanked May discreetly and made a date to play snooker with the Major the following afternoon.

Major Redpath waited until the girls boarded a streetcar, then he tipped his hat politely and stepped off into the night. His mood had remained positive, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. The ride home and most of the weekend at Bea's were devoted to a dissection of the events of that night and the Major's peculiar behaviour. They were not put off by his momentary disregard for convention for they had already begun cultivating an air of allure and mystery around this unpredictable man, who seemed comparatively normal and subdued at the Markham home upon May's return Sunday night.

25

"The floor's all sticky here!" Brian was running the dust mop between the piano and the chair. May came out of the kitchen and stood in the doorway of the living room.

"Watch out, there may still be a few shards around. I broke a bottle the other day. Did the best I could to clean up, but you know me . . . ." She tapped her knee for emphasis. "If I get down, I can't get back up again."

"What did you spill?"

"Just some ginger-ale."

Brian raised an eyebrow at her. "You broke a plastic ginger-ale bottle?"

"Alright, Holmes. It was a gin bottle. I just meant there was ginger-ale in the glass also, that's why it's sticky."

"Wait a second, you broke a glass too?"

"I might've even broken a fingernail, I was in a destructive mood that day."

"I'll say." Brian snorted playfully.

"Look, you're partly to blame. You over-Pledged the piano-top," she countered.

"Uh-huh. Mea maxima culpa."

He followed her back into the kitchen to get the whisk broom and dustpan. At the same time, he filled the plastic bucket with hot, soapy water and grabbed a sponge from under the sink. May returned to her tea and newspaper at the kitchen table. The biker gangs were in the headlines again, and May thought she'd read about them this time because now she was acquainted with a few of the names.

"Woops!" Brian exclaimed from the living room.

"What now?" She heard some shuffling and he presently appeared in the kitchen doorway holding a stack of envelopes. He placed it in front of her on the table.

"They were wedged in behind the piano. It's the mail from last week. You sent me to fetch it just before you fell."

"I remember."

"Well, when I came back, you were on the floor. I guess I just chucked it on top of the piano and ran."

"And it fell behind."

"Sorry."

"Whatever for? It wasn't your fault. I'd still be on the bathroom floor if it wasn't for you. It's probably just a load of junk-mail anyway . . . oh, here's that acceptance letter that Julia was getting her skirt in a twist about."

Brian leaned over to look at the return address. "You're moving to the Maison Argyle? Very posh, madame."

"Oh, please. It's an old folks' home, no matter how fancy it sounds, and it's not my idea."

"Maybe it's not a bad one."

She lifted her eyes slowly to his.

"Don't look at me like that, I've got a few clients in that place, and they really like it. There'd be a lot less to worry about."

May considered hauling out her arguments for staying independent, but checked that reflex when she realised that she was already reconciled to the idea. It had probably slipped her mind because it was Julia who had been pushing for it. But Brian was a trustworthy young man and he was good at his job. He spoke matter-of-factly about the Maison, not like a salesman or a desperate relative, and it made sense to May.

"You're probably right. I hope they haven't already gone to the next person on the list --" There was a faint beeping sound in the apartment, maybe the alarm-clock in the next room. "Do you hear that?"

"It's me. I mean, it's mine," Brian patted his breast pocket with one hand, his rear pants pocket with the other, "They gave us pagers at work, I haven't got used to wearing mine yet." He scanned the floor. "Have you seen my knapsack?"

May shrugged her shoulders. He followed the noise to the living room.

"Got it! Can I use your phone?"

"Be my guest!" May opened the letter from the Maison. She had another ten days in which to accept. The next item was a Canadian Tire flyer. She thought she could do with some 60-watt lightbulbs. Then, she opened a Hydro bill. For the lightbulbs, she thought. That could wait. A postcard reminder from the vet, to get a feline leukemia booster for her cat, Apathy (misspelled "Apothy" on the card), who'd been dead for six years. Ah, computers, they had an enviable knack for ignoring bad news. Finally, a large manila envelope with no return address. It was heavy; probably contained brochures from the Maison Argyle. Brian popped his head in the kitchen.

"Gotta run: Mr. Roussel's had a heart attack."

"Oh no."

"Or, at least, he *thinks* he has. He's taking a taxi to the General. I told him I'd meet him there. I shouldn't be more than an hour. Sorry."

"It's not a problem. The dirt will still be here when you get back, myself included."

"Thanks, bye." He closed the apartment door behind him. May tore open the envelope and slid out a black ledger, it's cover unmarked; the sole content of the envelope. She opened the book and saw Denny's name and what she presumed was his badge number on the first page. She flipped through it: his handwriting covered every page, and the book was full. The first entry was dated four months previously, the last, a little over two weeks ago. It was a field report, Denny's last. What the police had been looking for. What Monique had been looking for. It had been in the apartment all along. She felt stupid. An important piece of evidence, lying behind her piano for more than a week. She felt ashamed for having lost patience with the investigators, with Monique. But she didn't have the package then, or did she? She couldn't remember. When was the fall? Stupid, silly old woman! Her thoughts were rushing through her brain. She looked at the book in her hands and was abashed. She carried it into the living room and placed it on the piano bench while she looked in the end-table drawer for Monique's business card. She couldn't find it. She could have sworn Monique had given her one. Think. Phone Book. R.C.M.P. She found the number, lifted the phone from on top of the television and put it down in front of her on the coffee table. She dialed hurriedly.

"G.R.C. Bonjour, Sergeant Boivin à l'appareil."

"Bonjour, er, Inspecteur Monique Lacourse, s'il-vous plait."

"Un instant, s'il vous plait," an extension was ringing.

"Bonjour, vous avez rejoint la boîte vocale de l'Inspecteur Monique Lacourse, veuillez laisser un message au timbre sonore." The voice was different, thought May; older, deeper. "Hello, you have reached the voice mail of Inspector Monique Lacourse, please leave a message after the tone." The accent was much thicker too. The tone sounded instantly.

"H-hello, Monique? It's May . . . I've found something, I think it's important. Call me back." She hesitated a moment, the receiver in mid-air, before replacing it. She became conscious of her nerves and decided to pour herself a brandy. She retrieved the ledger from the piano bench and removed Brian's knapsack from the chair to the floor so she could sit down, taking care not to spill its components, as the main compartment had been left open. May stared at the closed book in her lap for a long time. Now that she'd discovered what it was, she wasn't quite certain what to do with it, other than hand it over as evidence. It must surely provide some clue to Denny's death, a suicide note perhaps. Why had he mailed it to her? It wasn't a mix-up; her name and address appeared on the envelope. If it was a sign of trust, then that implied that he didn't feel secure handing it over to his colleagues. What had she done? Her first impulse had been to call the R.C.M.P. No, it was Monique whom she had called. The other half of the team. She knew Denny best, she seemed to have a healthy scepticism of her superiors, of the police process. But it might have been dangerous leaving a message for her like that . . . .

She couldn't think. She didn't know enough about any of it. After a swig of brandy, she decided to open the book again. This time she noticed a piece of pink paper

that had been tucked into the flap on the inside cover. She pulled it out and unfolded it. It was a carbon copy of a hospital form, from The Royal Victoria, dated nearly three months previously. In the top, right-hand corner, just above Denny's name, address and date of birth, was printed: "Microbiology (HIV) Requisition" in bold, red letters. Other words were highlighted: serology, blood specimen, STD screening. Results: Positive. A small box was checked-off, "final." Denny's signature and one belonging to a Dr.Christopher, were scrawled across the bottom of the page. Three women's names were handwritten in blue ink on the back: "Marie-Eve, Claire, Manon." The first two had a line drawn through them, while "Manon" was circled. May quickly leafed through the journal to see if any of the later entries offered an indication of this development. His penmanship was messy and she was doing a rough translation into English in her head, but May believed that she could comprehend the essence of Denny's account, if not every detail.

The names were recognizable from Monique's story: Gaëtan, Eightball, Julie, he even referred to himself as "Dusty." Sometimes he wrote the names out in full, other times, just the first initial, there was no obvious pattern. The penultimate installment, from a week before his death, contained a single paragraph and a name she did not recognize:

> *Manon still refuses to be tested, even though she herself has been alarmed at how much weight she continues to lose. Of course, that and the lesions on her body could be caused by her heroin abuse. Either way, we can't continue in this situation, this relationship, this job anymore. She doesn't understand how she can no longer be effective. And she threatens me with violence when I try to reason*

with her. She's not thinking straight at this point, hasn't been for a long time. Gaëtan suspects something between us. I don't think he realises she's probably infected him too. I regret deeply that our personal involvement has jeopardized the operation, but I cannot regret loving her, as I still do.

The final entry contained only two sentences:

I swear that the information and events recorded above are true. The compromising nature of said information became known to me only after I had begun this, my ninth field-report.

Denis Beauchemin, G.R.C.

The phone rang. It cut through the silence like a scream and expelled May's contemplations with a jolt. She rested the book on top of the knapsack and went to answer it.

"Hello?" There was no reply. May thought she heard street sounds, a distant car horn, in the second before whoever it was hung up. The dial-tone was ominous. The front door. It wasn't double-locked. She put the phone down and it rang again instantly. She picked it up quickly but didn't say anything. There was an office at the other end: voices, printers, telephones.

"Allo? . . . Est-ce-qu'il y à quelqu'un?" The woman from the voice-mail.

"Hello," May answered.

"Yes, you called me?"

"But I didn't leave a number."

"But you called the police, Madame. We can trace the call."

"Well . . . I wanted to speak to Monique Lacourse."

"That's me."

May hung up, waited three seconds, and unhooked the receiver. She downed the rest of her drink, placed the snifter on top of the piano and went to the door as quickly as she could. Somebody was already turning the knob. May threw her weight against the door and scrambled with shaky hands for the bolt.

"Hey!" It sounded like Brian on the other side. She drew the chain instead and looked through the peephole. May opened the door the length of the chain. Brian looked puzzled.

"May? What's going on?"

"Nothing. I thought you were someone else."

"Who? Joan St-George?" He chuckled. "I'm afraid it's pretty serious with Mr. Roussel. He really did have a heart attack. He wants me to stay with him. I just came for my bag . . . I have to go right back."

May thought of the scene in the living room: the phone off the hook, the brandy bottle out, the glass perched in that precarious spot atop the piano. She was determined to keep up appearances and spare Brian the contamination of her restiveness.

"I'll get it," she said and quickly stepped back from the door.

"It's pretty heavy."

"I can manage!" She called from the living room. The knapsack was heavy, but she dragged it by one of its nylon straps into the hallway. When she finally opened the door to Brian, he asked her if she was alright.

"I'm not sure," she said, "I'm a bit confused."

"Do you want me to call someone?"

May looked at him, his concern was heartening. "Nah, it's just old lady stuff," she smiled, "paranoia, you know? Nothing to worry your pretty little head about, suh."

"I'm not bothered, Ma'am." He doffed an imaginary hat.

"Get along, little dogie." May laughed. She felt silly for her antics at the door. She watched Brian lift the bag over his shoulder and turn towards the elevator.

"I'll finish up my chores tomorrow, Ma'am."

"I'll be here," she closed the door and pulled the chain across, then twisted the handle to draw the bolt. May felt like she needed a little steadying from all her activity but her cane wasn't in sight. She slid the closet door open and searched in behind the coats, but straightened at the happy rhythm of four knocks being rapped into her front door. May sighed audibly and asked, "What did you forget this time?" as she turned the handle that pulled the bolt back. Her hand moved to the knob and had just completed the rotation when the chain snapped out of the jamb, and the door flew open with great force, striking her in the head and throwing her back into the closet. She slid to the floor, taking coats with her, coming to rest on a bed of boots and shoes. Almost immediately, there was another force at work: it seized her feet and climbed her legs; it wrapped itself around her

middle and inched up her neck. As it blackened her periphery she saw a familiar pair of ankle boots kick the door shut.

26

Father Dan Markham, S.J., Bill's older brother, stood at the head of the dinner table cradling his Holy Bible. The Markhams had just finished eating their Easter Sunday meal: glazed ham with mustard sauce, mashed potatoes and turnip, steamed wax beans, mincemeat pie and chocolate cake. Alice's brother, Stuart Cormier, was also in attendance: he had joined them for dessert and tea after dinner, with a lady friend. Bill Markham silenced the younger children and nodded to Father Dan, who began to read, he announced, from the first book of Corinthians:

"*And I point out to you a yet more excellent way. If I should speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have charity, I have become as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal. And if I have prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, yet do not have charity, I am nothing. And if I distribute all my goods to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, yet do not have charity, it profits me nothing* --"

"What's charity?" Ruth asked from her mother's lap.

"Shhh," said Alice Markham quietly, "I'll tell you afterwards."

Father Dan smiled, "I can answer her right now," and cleared his throat to continue. "*Charity is patient, is kind: charity does not envy, is not pretentious, is not puffed up, is not ambitious, is not self-seeking, is not provoked; thinks no evil, does not rejoice over wickedness, but rejoices with the truth: bears with all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Charity never fails.*"

"A-Men!" Ruth shouted, clapping her hands. There were chuckles from around the table. Father Dan was less amused this time. Bill stood up and thanked him quickly, then gestured for the family to be quiet again. Father Dan sat down and Bill had the floor.

"Now, before you go running off in nine different directions, I have a family announcement to make. I asked your Uncle Dan to read the passage about charity for a reason: we, as a family, are about to assume a charitable responsibility."

The children looked at each other.

"Do you remember when I went up to Ste-Agathe last summer with the Knights of Columbus?"

The children nodded. Stuart glanced at his sister, then at Father Dan.

"Well, the work we did was in a sanatorium there, that's a place for sick people," he made an aside to Ruth. "We would spend time with the patients: talking to them, reading to them, feeding them if they couldn't help themselves. For two weeks in July we did that, and every other weekend until Labour Day. Well, I met a man there, or rather he met me. I thought he was there to help but it turned out that he was one of the patients. His name is Robert Redpath. I call him Bob --"

"What's wrong with him?" Paul asked. "What's he got?"

"Mind the cheek, young man. I believe he's *got*, or, at least he had some sort of advanced grippe . . . pneumonia, I think. But he's recovered now. In fact, they'll release him next week, which brings me to my point: he'll be coming to stay with us for a while. He doesn't have anywhere else to go." Bill let that sink in for a moment.

"Does he hafta stay in our room?" Murray whined.

"No, Adele will be making up the room under the stairs. The guest room," added Alice.

"But he doesn't have a job," said Wyatt.

"He's been sick, Wyatt," said Dorrie.

"He was a Guardsman during the war -- Provost-Marshall, I believe," said Stuart.

"That's right," Bill agreed, "He was a Major. Most people still call him that. Now, I want you all to welcome him into this family, and treat him with politeness and respect, understand?"

There came a reluctantly unanimous, "Yes, Poppa," followed by varied pitches of "May I be excused?" Bill Markham dismissed the children and sat down to finish his tea with Father Dan, Stuart, Wyatt and May. Alice carried the baby upstairs to bed, with Ruth in tow. Adele cleared the dessert plates and brought in a second pot of tea. The conversation at the table revolved around business and sporting events, so May excused herself politely after emptying her cup. As she was replacing the chair, she asked her father when Major Redpath would arrive.

"He's to meet me after the second mass at St-Pat's next Sunday. I'll give him a lift back after my meeting. Do you want to come along, precious?"

"We'll see."

* * * * * * * * * *

For the Markham family, attendance at Sunday mass was a must. One might be spontaneously questioned about the homily by one or both parents. Ruth, Helen, Murray, Dorrie, Paul and Muriel usually went to the French Church in Pointe Claire Village with Adele and, since the baby was born, their mother and Betty. On the weekends she spent at Bea's, May would go to the makeshift church of St-Augustine Parish, temporarily located in the basement of the fire-hall on Botrel Street. The sermons were mercifully short and the women's auxiliary served cake and lemonade after mass during the summer months. *Although she had been at home the first weekend after Easter, May decided to drive in to* town with her father for mass at St-Patrick's Church, where he would attend his Knights of Columbus meeting afterwards. Wyatt, who accom-panied him most Sundays, was at home alone, stoically fighting the flu.

Father Derrane, the pastor, was long-winded, but May had planned to be successfully discreet at letting her eyes (and mind) wander around the elaborate Gothic structure. May and her father sat in the first pew of the first aisle of the nave, below the crossing, adjacent to the western-transept, or, "in God's right hand," Bill Markham would say. Joyous organ music and voices singing, "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," emanated from the choir loft and echoed loudly throughout the church as the procession started down the center aisle. May's eyes started on the circular stained-glass window, partly covered by the towering organ pipes, and lowered to the late-comers shuffling into the gallery below. Father Derrane and his acolytes reached the apse, and climbed the stairs to the altar. The hymn concluded.

"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti. Amen."

May was already off, lost in the oak wainscotting lining the walls, which contained paintings of 150 saints. The shamrock and fleur-de-lys-shaped mouldings caught her attention next and led her to the six-foot high paintings of the stations of the Way of the Cross. She could spend a lot of time on those. In fact, she had walked the road to Calvary many times in her daydreams.

"Gloria in excelsis Deo et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis. Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te. Glorificamus te . . . ."

She disapproved of the confessionals. They were beautiful, but too open. There was an even chance of being overheard by lay people. They would be easily improved by the addition of a door or a draw-curtain to the frames. Of the three gold murals behind the altars of the sanctuary, May preferred the one that housed Mary. It wasn't the largest, or the most elaborate, but she was captivated by the image of Mary's bare feet crushing a snake beneath them. Everybody rose. It was time to recite:

"Credo in unum Deum Patrem omnipotentem, factorem caeli et terrae, visibilium omnium et invisibilium . . . ."

Maker of all things visible and invisible. That certainly covers all the bases, the boys would say, May thought. She listened while she spoke, wondered about the sincerity of the droning around her. Why did it have to be so grey and impersonal? Look at this church. It is grand and colourful and sculpted and brilliant, and its parishioners should reflect that. She wanted to get the most out of her church-going experience but feared she hadn't matured enough to avoid feeling a child-like boredom with the way things were; the

way they had been for centuries. Father Derrane was climbing into the pulpit. Maybe he had some enlightening words of celebration to impart.

"Temperance. The perils of strong drink . . ."

No, thank you. Uncle Dan was over last weekend and "the Devil's Brew" was his personal crusade. May hoped she might have been offered a glass of sherry before Easter Supper, but not with Father Dan present. She looked heavenward for further distraction, following the nearest column up to where it met the painted, groined vaults of the ceiling. She imagined they were upside down, and she could slide into their centres like playing in the fountain in Westmount Park. She stayed aloft through the Pater Noster and focused on the light shining through the stained glass on the spire, complemented beautifully by the Agnus Dei the choir offered shortly thereafter. She soared again at Communion: swinging from the massive lamps, decorated with tiny angels, that hung from the seams of the vaults. Afterwards, she simply floated, to the strains of Panis Angelicus. But her father soon noticed her unconscious fidgeting and wandering eyes, and with a gentle nudging, she came down from the rafters. Father Derrane turned around to face the congregation.

"Dominus vobiscum," He raised his arms.

"Et cum spiritu tuo," replied the congregation.

"Ite missa est."

"Deo gratias," May chimed in a little ahead of the others.

Leo Morris was standing at the back of the church with his parents, and they chatted with May and her father after mass. May had known Leo from Victoria School when they were children, and they had become down-the-road neighbours when the

Markhams had moved to Pointe Claire in 1914. In the past year, however, Leo had developed a rather conspicuous crush on May, and she found herself lately having to dodge social invitations from him. They were friends, as far as she was concerned. She liked his company on occasion, that was all. Buoyed by the presence of witnesses, Leo pounced: asking her for a date for the pictures the following Friday. In the same breath he asked Mr. Morris if he could borrow the Buick. There was agreement all around, as May bit back her resentment at being corraled and said, "of course." The Morrises bade them good morning and dragged the gushing Leo outside with them. May frowned with frustration. Her father smiled and winked at her, then bowed-out to his meeting downstairs.

It was the first sunny day of Spring and May stood outside, on the church steps, to wait for her father. It was a long meeting, and she passed the time by watching the comings and goings down the hill, on the streets of the city. She counted horses, then automobiles, and finally pedestrians. More bored than she had been at mass, May was about to wander off when a man's voice called to her.

"Excuse me, is your surname Markham?" The man was of medium build but solid-looking, wearing a slightly-faded gray suit and dusty black shoes. He carried two suitcases, the larger one in his right hand. A dark-gray overcoat was slung over his left arm.

"Yes, it is," May pulled the brim of her hat lower to better shield her eyes against the early-afternoon sun. The man put the big suitcase on the ground and tipped his hat.

"You must be Miss May. I'm Major Robert Redpath." His moustache stretched when he smiled, which May found instantly charming.

"How do you do?" She smiled back.

"Well, thank you . . . I'm afraid I'm a bit late."

"That's alright, Poppa, -- my father is still at his K of C meeting."

"I see."

"He shouldn't be much longer."

The Major nodded,"these bags are heavy." He took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow.

"The car is parked on Dorchester. He has the key."

"Of course."

There was a silence, but it didn't make either of them uncomfortable. The Major put his other bag down and sat on the steps.

"How do you feel about having a houseguest for a little while?"

"We're glad to have you," May said enthusiastically.

"But you don't speak for everyone."

"Everyone that counts. Except maybe Wyatt. But he's just grumpy because he's got the flu . . . oh, is that going to be a problem? I hope you don't catch it."

"I've had worse," he smiled. May laughed at the stretching moustache. There was more silence. It was May's turn to break it.

"My father tells me you've been friends since last summer --"

"Is that what he calls it?"

"Well -"

"Your father and I have a . . . relationship. But it's not what you'd call a friend --" The Major's face contorted suddenly and he raised a hand to his temple.

"Are you alright?" May leaned in closer.

"Just give me a moment!" Major Redpath ordered. May immediately retreated to a comfortable distance. She could hear him muttering something as he rubbed his head.

"When to the new eyes of thee, all things by immortal power, near or far, hiddenly to each other linked are, that thou canst not stir a flower without troubling of a star." He stopped rubbing, and opened his eyes to her. She took a step towards him.

"Did you write that?" She ventured.

"No, someone named Thompson. It's from *The Mistress of Vision*. Do you like it?"

"It's lovely, but I'm not sure what it means."

The Major got abruptly to his feet.

"Here comes your father," he said coldly. May looked around but couldn't see anyone. She was about to ask "where?" when the church door opened and Bill Markham stepped out into the sunshine.

27

May woke up face-down on the living room carpet. She inhaled mold and lilac deodorizer odors, which caused her to wrinkle her nose. She lifted her head slightly and immediately felt nauseous. The blood which had flowed from the cut on her forehead had already blended with the burgundy and crimson patterns in the rug, but from her proximity, the fresh stain caught her eye at once. She couldn't use her arms to prop herself up for they were bound behind her, tingling from lost circulation. It felt like electrical tape around her wrists. The woman she had known as Monique was on the floor too, tearing a hole in the bottom of the overturned sofa with a small knife. The place was a mess: the coffee table and piano bench had been toppled; sheet music and books littered the floor; stuffing was torn out of the furniture; the contents of drawers were dumped everywhere. May ran a quick inventory of her teeth with her tongue before she ventured to speak.

"I don't think we've met. My name is May Markham, what's yours?"

The woman whirled and leaped on her, sliding the knife closely under her chin.

"Where is it?!" She seethed.

"Manon? Oh, that's nice. Manon what?" May tried to keep her voice steady.

"This is amusing to you?" She pressed the blade more tightly against her skin.

"I always like meeting new people. I'm sorry, I didn't catch your last name."

"Sacrement!" She withdrew the knife and dropped it into the pocket of her fringe jacket. She lifted May by the collar of her dress and shook her wildly. May was definitely nauseous, and very dizzy; she thought she might black out again. Manon dragged her over

to the corner chair, which had lost its cushion, and dropped her at its feet. May tried to focus on her attacker's face, but the lines and colours were blurred.

"Pleased to meet you, Manon Sacrement --"

The slap came directly across her left cheek and her head snapped violently to the right. Manon had her by the collar again, lifting her to a standing position.

"Where is it, Collice!?"

May went limp for a moment, couldn't speak. Manon shoved her into the chair. May winced as she fell heavily on her hands, bending back a couple of arthritic fingers. She doubled over in pain but didn't cry out; instead, she listened to her own strained breathing and tried hard not to hyperventilate. A series of metallic clicks came and went without her noticing, but she couldn't escape the feel of cold steel being pressed to her forehead, raising her into a sitting position. In the foreground, May watched Manon's index finger retreat from trigger-guard, to trigger, and saw her knuckles whiten as she gripped the gun-handle firmly.

"This is a Springfield Armoury, 10 millimetre, linkless, single-action, semi-automatic handgun. 5-inch barrel, modified Browning locking system, linkless camming barrel with recoil guide-rod. 7-shot, single-column magazine," Manon spoke through an edgy, crooked smile, "with one in the pipe."

"H-how do you do . . ."

Manon drove harder with the barrel until May's head touched the chair-back.

"And where did you lovebirds meet?" May pushed back a little on the gun. "At the police academy?"

Manon spat out a short, tense laugh. "Gaëtan had a side-business: Berrettas, Glocks, Walthers, Browning, Heckler & Kochs, you name it. In bulk and at reduced rates."

"Sort of a gun Price Club."

"You like to talk? Tell me where that report is!"

May kept silent. She stared defiantly at Manon.

"Just what part of this picture do you not understand?" Manon twisted the Springfield's nose into May's brow. May grimaced momentarily as she was forced back on her throbbing hands, but maintained her silent gaze. Manon cocked the hammer with her thumb.

"What are you waiting for?" May challenged.

"I'll blow your goddamn head off!" Manon braced the gun with her other hand, adjusted her stance to steady herself. Beads of perspiration formed on her temples and upper lip.

"I'm not afraid," May lied. "If I go now, I can leave a bit of cash to my family and friends; a few antiques for my cousin to hock."

"Where is it?!!"

"But if you don't 'blow my goddamn head off', that retirement home is going to eat away at my savings. In a year or two, there won't be much left."

"Shut up!!"

"Then again, if you do, I'll miss the millenium party in a few years --"

"What are you doing?!" Manon looked perplexed.

"Were those Denny's last words to you?"

"W-what?!" Her eyes widened with incredulity.

"Did he beg for his life?" May persisted, "did that make you feel powerful?"

"Stop it!"

"Or were you too high to feel anything? My guess is that you felt nothing --"

Manon withdrew the gun briskly with her left hand and covered May's throat with her right. "Feel this, you old bitch!" She yelled in a shaky voice as she squeezed May's windpipe. May's head snapped back and she arched her body under the strain. The tape twisted and rubbed and burned into the skin around her wrists. She looked frantically down the length of Manon's arm to find her attacker's eyes. They were fixed intently on her neck. Her own eyes were about to close as she was losing the struggle for breath. On the faintest trickle of oxygen, she choked out:

"He . . . he . . . loved you."

Manon let go. A mass of air dove rapidly down May's throat. Her lungs swelled with it and forced her to cough her way back to regular breathing. She turned her head to the right when she felt something coming up: gagged twice but it was dry. May took several minutes to recover; her body drained, her head drooped over the arm-rest. Manon had collapsed as well, face-down in May's lap. She had been matching May's convulsions with heaving sobs. The gun lay loosely in her hand, by her side.

May felt like crying too, but she fought back the tears and ceded to her mounting anger. She wanted to kick her assailant across the room.

"Please . . ." Manon pleaded, "where is it?"

"Not here!" May rasped at her. "You're too late!"

Manon sniffed and leaned back on her haunches, freeing May's legs. She lifted her head to look imploringly at May and wiped the tear-tracks from her cheeks with her free hand.

"I gave it to Monique Lacourse," said May.

The next second hung on the air as their eyes locked. But after that, there were no hesitations: May brought her legs up as high as she could as Manon lifted the gun. The heel of May's right shoe connected with Manon's jaw, knocking her back onto the floor. But Manon held on to the gun. May released a laugh involuntarily, but it sounded defiant. She reclined carefully on her arms and watched Manon scramble to her knees. She closed her eyes, listened and waited. The familiar series of clicks came again and she decided it was time for some last thoughts. May couldn't think of anything. She opened her eyes. Manon was on her knees in the middle of the living room, both hands on the gun, which was nuzzled under her own chin, pointing upwards. Her stare was focused on the blank television screen.

"Looks like I'm praying, doesn't it?" She asked in a trembling voice.

"Manon . . ." May sat up slowly in the chair.

"It's deceptive, this reflection," she turned to look at May, "it doesn't give you the whole story."

"No?"

"No, but *you've* got the whole story right in front of you. In the flesh."

"I don't see everything," May tried to sound calm, "all you've shown me today is that junk you shoot into yourself."

"I took my last hit at 2 o'clock this morning," Manon snorted, "I'm coming down and there's nothing left . . . and you know where I stand with my local pusher."

A small signal, a tiny alarm went off in May, suddenly clarifying her perception of the situation. The momentum of force and brutality had just peaked and there were no fatalities. Manon had run out of ideas when she had run out of drugs; there was no contingency plan. There was only heroin's desperation pitching her coarsely and unsuccessfully from one ploy to another. Manon didn't want to kill herself, she wanted to talk.

"I thought about it a lot but I was too stupid and selfish, and too late to O.D. on smack," Manon continued, "I'll bet you wish I had."

"Carpet's already ruined."

"What?"

"Do your worst."

"You think I won't?" She furrowed her brow, firmed her grip on the gun. May shrugged her shoulders.

"You haven't yet," May said plainly, "My guess is you need more junk to pull the trigger."

For an instant, Manon looked surprised, worried, frightened by May's words. She exhaled audibly through her nostrils and clenched her jaw, but the gun didn't move. She stared hard at May but it seemed that her eyes were holding up a front. Her gaze slowly

turned blank. For now, Manon appeared to be stopped. May's mind raced. She hoped there had been a fleeting moment of recognition between the two women, in that surprised half-second before Manon had retreated into her head.

May's parry had been bold, uncalculated, but they were both still alive. Yet she couldn't feel confident that she had successfully called Manon's bluff either. The gun was still held rigidly under her chin. It occurred to her to pray for Manon, but she dismissed the inducement immediately. It smacked of helplessness and surrender. May needed to focus on self-control. Instead, she locked eyes again with Manon, and waited for her to return. The pose was still held, the eyes still lost. May was reminded strongly and unmistakably of the Major. His "black spells" had produced the same vacant expression, followed, she knew, by an often violent unpredictability. Manon could come back to face May and a reality unravelling around her, or she could pull the trigger . . .

The eyes snapped back to life and left May's instantly. They darted around the room, surveying the damage, settling again on the likeness in the TV screen. This time it made Manon laugh. It grew rapidly from a titter to a roar; it was not a merry sound, but sneering, contemptuous, mocking, absurd. Tears ensued. Exhausted tears. Manon uncocked the handgun, easing the hammer gently to a safer position, and turned to May.

"I need it just to feel normal," she said sadly. She lowered the gun and placed it on the carpet in front of her.

"You can go into hospital," said May.

"They can't cure everything."

"They can help you live comfortably."

"In a cell," Manon countered.

"You killed someone." May said firmly. The anguish in Manon's face increased with the thought and she covered it with her hands.

"Yes," she sobbed, rocking back and forth on her knees, "I'm so sorry . . . so sorry, Denis . . . ." She repeated the word "sorry" and gradually began to moan. Suddenly, she cried out, uncovered her face and clutched at her ribcage and stomach, then keeled over onto her side. She had resumed rocking and moaning again in the fetal position when May heard the knock on the door. Manon made a slow, instinctive grab for the gun but flinched in pain as she tried to sit up.

"Police, Madame," announced Inspector Monique Lacourse.

"She probably wants her business cards back," May whispered to Manon, who had finally seized the handgun and was struggling to cock it a third time, but her hands were trembling.

"Just a minute!" May called. She stared until she got Manon's attention away from the gun and her fumbling, unsteady hands.

"I wish you could see your reflection now," May said softly, "but you can't lift your head high enough off the floor, can you?" Manon's entire body was shaking now, her eyes bulged as they darted from the gun to May.

"I need a hit!" She wheezed. It was a statement more than a supplication and May shook her head in conclusion more than in refusal. Manon could no longer keep her arms away from her aching sides. She dropped the gun and tried to calm the unintentional quivering.

"Madame?" A male voice called through the door. There was no question of either of them getting up to open it. May was about to summon them in when Manon spoke.

"Duclos," she said feebly, "Manon Duclos."

May nodded bluntly in salutation.

"Come in!"

EPILOGUE

Inspector Monique Lacourse was a small woman of about fifty, dressed in a cream business suit and sensible flat shoes. Two uniformed R.C.M.P. officers accompanied her into the apartment. They eventually left with the paramedics, who, after examining May and bandaging her forehead (she insisted on not going to the hospital), escorted Manon downstairs to a waiting ambulance. Inspector Lacourse stayed on to question May. She spoke a heavily-accented English but seemed to comprehend everything that was recounted to her. May explained that she could locate Denis' final field-report in a pouch of Brian's knapsack at the Montreal General. The inspector helped clean up and asked May a few times if there was anyone she could call, and was she sure she ought to be alone. May thought about how much more tired a little of Julia's mothering would make her and thanked the inspector anyway. As they were saying goodnight, the inspector warned of further interrogations by either the Montreal or the Provincial police. May replied politely that she was now familiar with the procedure.

As she got ready for bed, she noticed how bruised and sore she was: the dressing covered half her forehead, her left cheek was red and swollen, her arms were black and blue and her posterior felt a little sensitive as she sat down on the bed. She swung her legs up gingerly, pulled the covers to her chin and turned out the light. The clock from Julia radiated **10:43**. She rolled over carefully and closed her eyes.

She was still awake at **11:58**, running through the day in her mind. At **12:22**, she got up to use the bathroom. The last sequence of blazing numerals she saw was **1:08**,

before she finally drifted off. May's various busy dreams that night were intensely populated, although all the faces were obscured. Their action was lively, but distant and confounded. By morning, she could not remember a single one.